

King Knútr the Great in the Early Scandinavian Histories

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Abstract

This article explores the portrayal of Knútr inn ríki (Cnut the Great), king of Denmark and England (1016/19-1035), in the Scandinavian historical narrative from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. More specifically, it offers a broad survey of how Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic writers chose to present this most powerful of medieval Scandinavian kings. The article identifies three principal strands of writings on Knútr. One includes Danish works, including the *Roskilde Chronicle* and the works of Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus. The second consists of the early Norse sagas about Óláfr Haraldsson and the so-called 'Norwegian synoptics' of the late twelfth century. The third comprises the thirteenth-century kings' saga compilations *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Knýtlinga saga*. The article both highlights how these strands differ in their take on Knútr's persona and career, and places their portrayal within the relevant literary and historical contexts.

Keywords

Kings' sagas, historiography, Knútr inn ríki, Óláfr Haraldsson, chronicles

King Knútr inn ríki Sveinsson holds a peculiar place in both Norse and English history. In England, his reign ruptured the rule of an Anglo-Saxon royal dynasty which, in any case, had not long to run. Whatever the reality of Knútr's character and kingship, by the twelfth century English historians could present him as a 'good king' whose justice offered a lesson to a troubled present, although this was hardly a unanimous view.¹ The Scandinavian picture was similarly graded. In Denmark, one might expect Knútr to have been considered with pride; after all, he had ruled an 'empire' of unprecedented glory. Judging from early writings, however, Knútr's imprint on Danish historical memory may seem surprisingly weak. There was, of course, the issue of Knútr's less-than-firm link with the reigning Danish royal dynasty. Knútr's sons, Haraldr and Hǫrðaknútr, had died in 1040 and 1042 respectively, and with them effectively ended the line of the 'Jelling Dynasty'. It was Sveinn, Knútr's nephew, the son of his sister Ástríðr, who became king in 1047 and he, in turn, was succeeded by his five sons (1076-1134). Moreover, by the late twelfth century power had become the preserve of a dynastic branch that upheld Knútr láravörðr (St Knud Lavard) (d. 1134) as its patron saint and historical exemplar (see for example Riis 2015). But Knútr inn ríki was by no means forgotten and, as we shall see, the memory of his achievements still served a purpose.

In his lifetime Knútr was celebrated by prominent skaldic poets of the period who, at his court, praised the king's munificence and martial valour. How this corpus reflects Knútr and his rule has been finely analysed elsewhere and this subject will not be addressed here (Frank 1994; Townend 2001). Rather, my concern is with the portrayal of Knútr in Norwegian and Icelandic Old Norse and Latin prose accounts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This article examines how these texts offer different perspectives on Knútr inn ríki. The focus is therefore on representation rather than the historical reality of my chosen subject. Although a detailed examination of the relevant sources cannot be undertaken in a single article, it is still possible to establish broader patterns from the frequently discordant treatment of Knútr's character, achievements and legacy.

The Danish Histories

The *Roskilde Chronicle* (*Chronicon Roskildense*, hereafter *RC*) is one of the earliest preserved Scandinavian works of history (Gertz 1917-18: 1-33). In its original form the chronicle relates the history of Denmark from the ninth century to the late 1130s. This short text - composed by a churchman partial to the bishopric of Roskilde - is especially interesting because of the unusual connection it makes between the careers of Knútr inn ríki and St Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway.² *RC* recounts that both men participated in Sveinn tjúguskegg (Forkbeard) Haraldsson's defeat of King Æthelred of England, and thus also in England's conquest. But when Sveinn died, after only three months on the throne, Edmund Ironside, Æthelred's son, had them imprisoned. Together, Knútr and Óláfr escaped to Bremen, where they were baptised by the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Subsequently, they travelled to Denmark and from there Óláfr went to Norway to convert his compatriots to Christianity. *RC* fleetingly notes that Óláfr died a martyr at the hands of unidentified individuals and that he continues to perform miracles at his shrine in Trondheim. Following the death of Edmund Ironside, Knútr returned to England and became king.

RC's principal source for Denmark's early history is Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, composed around 1070. The chronicle's portrayal of Knútr's career owes little, however, to the German account. For instance, nothing in Adam's work parallels *RC*'s portrayal of Knútr and Óláfr as forming, effectively, a bond of blood-brotherhood as they fight, flee and receive baptism together. As we shall see, the West Norse sources above all highlight the antagonistic relationship between the two future kings. Conversely, *RC* shows them as allies as each eventually attains greatness: Knútr in the forging of his empire and Óláfr Haraldsson with his martyrdom and sanctity. This early Danish account ignores entirely Knútr's role in Óláfr's downfall.

The brief 'Knútr section' in *RC* concludes with the death of Earl Úlfr Þorgilsson who, contrary to the king's wishes, had married Knútr's sister, Ástríðr. This soured their relationship and Knútr orchestrated Úlfr's slaying at a feast in Roskilde. The inclusion of the story reflects Úlfr's status as the father of King Sveinn (1047-1076), who in the 1130s may have been considered the founder of the Danish royal dynasty.

But the story also chimes with *RC*'s broader interest in the fortunes of the Roskilde bishopric. We are informed that Ástriðr commemorated her husband first by establishing and subsequently donating gifts to a stone church in Roskilde. The killing of Úlfr is therefore a fateful event in Roskilde's early history and a prefiguration of the bishopric's future glory. As with Knútr's association with St Óláfr, we observe here the chronicler's positive spin on a potentially problematic history, one which manifestly aligns with his church-centred view.

Composed some half a century later than the *RC*, Sven Aggesen's *Compendiosa regum danie historiae* (Short History of the Kings of Denmark, hereafter referred to as *CRDH*), also traces the history of the Danish kings from the pre-Christian period down to the time of its writing (Gertz 1917-18: 94-121). The work concludes in 1185, early in the reign of Knútr VI Valdimarsson (1182-1202). Little is known about Aggesen, apart from his membership of a prestigious family and (likely) the clerical community at Lund Cathedral. Aggesen's purpose in writing *CRDH* is nevertheless clear: the work offers the Danish kings a distinguished history comparable to that which his contemporaries were writing for Norway's rulers (Mortensen 2011).

Two central themes run through *CRDH*. One is the conflict within the Danish dynasty, lasting from the death of Sveinn Úlfsson (d. 1076) until the reigns of King Valdimar I and Knútr VI (1182-1202), at which point peace is restored. Another guiding theme is the threat of German power and influence, which Aggesen seems to consider a constant in the kingdom's history. Knútr inn ríki is related to both these themes. Furthermore, it is telling that Aggesen pays no attention to Danish entanglements in Norway; his kings perform on the grander stage of Christian Europe. Sven Aggesen in fact hardly bothers to highlight Knútr's conquest of England, but rather refers to it along with other lands that constitute the great empire:

Mortuo Svenone filius eius Kanutus in regno successit; quem et Senem cognominabant. Hic regni sui terminos mire uirtutis potentia dilatauit. Nam ab ultima Tyle usque ad Grecorum ferme imperium uirtute multiplici circumiacentia regna suo aggregauit imperio. Quippe Hyberniam, Angliam, Galliam,

Italiam, Longobardiam, Teotoniam, Noruagiam, Slauiam cum Samia satis eleganter subiugauit. (Gertz 1917-1918: 121-122)
(When Sven died, his son Knut succeeded to the kingdom, and they also surnamed him the Old. He widened the boundaries of his kingdom by the amazing force of his valour. By his manifold prowess he added to his own empire the neighbouring kingdoms from farthest Thule almost to the empire of the Greeks. Yes indeed, with not inconsiderable gallantry he subjugated Ireland, England, France, Italy, Lombardy, Germany, Norway, Slavia, and Samland too.) (Christiansen 1992: 63)

What should we make of this extraordinary description? It may remind us of Geoffrey of Monmouth's claim that King Arthur conquered not only Britain but also Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Gaul (Reeve and Wright 2007: 201). But Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing about a distant, legendary past which unlocked his (considerable) imagination. That Sven Aggesen is merely engaging here in an ironic exaggeration (for some unknown effect) seems contradicted by a similar passage in his other surviving text, the so-called 'Law of the Retainers' (*Lex Castrensis*) from around 1181. This curious law code, which Sven spuriously attributes to Knútr inn ríki, stipulates the punishment and fines for transgressions at court. The 'Laws of the Retainers' says the following about Knútr's magnificent conquests:

Canutus, Suenonis regis Tygeskeg filius, tanquam leo frendens auitis potitus successibus, cum ab ultima Tyle usque ad Grecorum imperium inuicto quodam conamine imperii sui terminos magnifice dilatasset <et>, uirtutis potentia Gerionem precellens Hesperium, magno ferme <par> Alexandro, Angliam, Noruegiam, Sclauiam cum Semlandia proprio regno aggregasset, magnitudinis potentiam magnifice satis sublimauit. (Gertz 1917-18: 66)

(Knut, the son of King Sven Forkbeard, came into his ancestral inheritance like a raging lion, and by his undefeated endeavour he nobly enlarged the boundaries of his empire from the

farthest Thule to the empire of the Greeks, outdoing Geryon of Hesperus by the force of his valour and almost equalling the great Alexander for he had annexed England, Norway, Slavia, and Finland to his own kingdom, and so increased his might and power with ample splendour.) (Christiansen 1992: 32)

‘Empire’ is the key concept here. In Knútr a Danish king had ruled, albeit but briefly, an empire that compared favourably with the greatest of such polities of Antiquity. In *CRDH* Sven Aggesen explains how Knútr’s conquests came about. Rebellion drove Emperor Henry II (1014-1024) from power, and this prompted Knútr, Henry’s father-in-law, to invade Gaul and then Italy, where ‘multimoda uirtute compulit Romanos ciuitatem sibi resignare’ (Gertz 1917-18, 123) (he forced the Romans to yield their city to his manifold valour) (Christiansen 1992, 64). Manifestly this episode is, as others have observed, ‘an imaginary exaggeration’ of Knútr’s famous visit to Rome for the coronation of Conrad II (Christiansen 1992: 123). Sven Aggesen transforms a pilgrimage and diplomatic venture into a glorious conquest of the Holy Roman Empire, and more.

Here, Aggesen throws the theme of Danish-German relations into stark relief. In particular, the creation of Knútr’s empire links with an earlier account that constitutes *CRDH*’s longest episode. This story concerns Queen Thyriwi, surnamed the ‘Ornament of the Realm’ (Christiansen 1992, 56) (*Regni Decus est cognominata*) (Gertz 1917-18: 108). Aggesen quotes here, it seems, from the Older Jelling Stone. Thyriwi’s husband, King Gormr, is a licentious drunk, whereas the fair Thyriwi would have been accepted as a queen of Sheba had she not been pagan (Gertz 1917-18, 108). Emperor Otto wishes to marry Thyriwi, who deceives him so as to buy time for the building of Danevirke, the great border fortification. The queen finally reveals the ruse to the emperor’s ambassadors, who return disheartened, and, of course, Danevirke prevents Otto from invading Denmark (Gertz 1917-18: 116). The story explains how the Danes threw off the shackles of vassalage and secured their borders against German aggression. Knútr’s conquest of Gaul, Lombardy and Italy goes much further, however: the emperors are now beholden to a Danish ruler whose

glory extends far beyond the borders of Denmark. This time, a German emperor *does* marry a Christian Danish princess, whereas his realm is only saved by a powerful Danish king.

Typologically, the qualities apparent in the characters of Queen Thyrwi and Knútr inn ríki are fulfilled in Valdimar and his son. A similar idea, or amplification and fulfilment, features in Aggesen's description of the only women mentioned in *CRDH*. Both are extraordinarily beautiful. Thyrwi is described thus: 'et rosa lilio maritata purpureum genis colorem inpinxerat' (Gertz 1917-1918, 108) (she was so fair that it seems 'the rose and the lily had been wedded to paint the pinkness of her face') (Christiansen 1992: 56). Sophia is presented in the following way: '[cuius] eximie pulchritudinis formam omni uenustatis artificio natura elaborauit' (Gertz 1917-18: 141) (nature 'strove immoderately to enhance the utter loveliness of Sophia, Valdimar's queen') (Christiansen 1992, 73). Now, however, the fair Queen is not guided by Gormr, a pathetic and useless pagan, but rather the most Christian, victorious and popular Valdimar (Gertz 1917-18, 138). Sven observes, and not coincidentally, that Valdimar re-fortified the Danevirke that had been erected in Thyrwi's time.

The Christian Valdimar exceeds the pagan Thyrwi in glory and significance. Not only did he defend his kingdom from the Germans but also, as did Knútr inn ríki before him, extended Danish power beyond the homeland. Like Knútr, but unlike all the other Danish kings, Valdimar is shown to be a ruler on a European scale: 'Adeo denique illustris regis Valdemari diuina famam ampliavit gratia, ut ei quasi debita circumiacentes reges et principes certatim impenderent obsequia' (Gertz 1917-18: 140) (And in the end God's grace increased the reputation of the illustrious King Valdimar so widely that surrounding kings and princes strove to pay him honours as if they were his due) (Christiansen 1992: 73). There is yet another correspondence between the two empire builders. This relates to the striking way in which Sven Aggesen describes the Danish succession after Knútr's death. Knútr had delegated his authority to his two sons: Hqrðaknutr and Sveinn assumed power in Denmark and Norway, respectively. But both soon died and, realising he could not rule several kingdoms, Knútr raised Sveinn Úlfsson (Sven Estridsen) to royal rank in Denmark (Gertz 1917-18: 124).

Here Sven Aggesen depicts an orderly succession, but one that had been significantly less so in reality. He offers clear continuity between Knútr and the kings that follow him. Furthermore, the unproblematic bestowal of power to Sveinn Úlfsson foreshadows the equally straightforward succession of his namesake, Knútr Valdimarson: ‘Qui dum debitum Ade persoluisse, filius eius Canutus iure succedens hereditario patri in regno successit, a patria uirtute <haut> degenerans’ (Gertz 1917-18: 140) (And when he [Valdimar] paid the debt of Adam, his son Knut followed by hereditary right and succeeded his father’s kingdom without degenerating from his father’s virtue) (Christiansen 1992: 73). In other words, two successions – Knútr-Sveinn and Valdimar-Knútr – bookend periods of strife when the kingdom is vulnerable to outside forces and thus incapable of foreign conquests. In this way, Knútr and his reign serve a Janus-like purpose of looking back to the beginning of Danish relations with the German Emperor, and forward to the glories of King Valdimar I and Knútr VI.

The techniques of foreshadowing and fulfilment feature in Saxo Grammaticus’s construction of the *Gesta Danorum* (hereafter *GD*).³ That Aggesen resorted to a comparable stylistic device in his *CRDH* is therefore hardly surprising. Sven Aggesen refers to Saxo Grammaticus’s history, and it seems likely that the two mingled in the same ecclesiastical and/or courtly circles. Indeed, their writings have been seen as representing a concerted effort, overseen by Archbishop Absalon of Lund, to memorialise the Danish past and inscribe this ‘national narrative into the greater and eternal book of universal Christian history’ (Mortensen 2011: 70).

GD is a work that operates on a different scale to either Sven Aggesen’s short history or to *RC*. In the modern edition Saxo dedicates some fifty pages of his tenth Book to Knútr’s reign (Friis-Jensen 2015: 729-777). Saxo Grammaticus describes him in the following manner:

Hunc Kanutus exitum habuit, quo nemo nostrorum regum, tametsi plura alii uictoriis illustrauerint, splendidior fuit. Adeo enim operum eius magnitudinem propitiae fame fides auxerat, ut quos rerum gestarum gloria pares habuerat, amplitudine claritatis excellat. Cumque aliorum splendorem ignorantie

obscuritas ac uetustatis rubigo perederit, huius decus longa fame usurpatione subnixum perpetuis memorie fructibus reuirescit. (Friis-Jensen 2015: 772)

(Such was the end of Cnut, a ruler whom none of our kings surpassed in brilliance even though others won more dazzling victories. The trustworthiness of his gracious reputation had so much augmented his great deeds that, though there were some who had equalled him in their glorious exploits, he excels them all in the extent of his renown. And though lack of information, uncertainty, and the rust of antiquity have impaired the splendour of those others, Cnut's prestige, supported by the enjoyment of a long-lasting fame, revives continually through the undying fruits of memory.) (Friis-Jensen 2015: 773)

This depiction is akin to Sven Aggesen's imperial portrayal of Knútr and, indeed, to Saxo's own presentation in Book 5 of King Frothi, a legendary king who ruled a vast empire around the time of Christ's birth. But Saxo's high praise is undercut by his otherwise ambiguous description of Knútr, who comes across less as a heroic character and more as a crafty, even Machiavellian, one. On his father's death Knútr inherits only Denmark, whereas the English and the Norwegians choose Óláfr Haraldsson and Edmund Ironside respectively as their rulers. From the outset, Knútr's ambition is to reclaim the two kingdoms he considers to be rightfully his. Knútr realises, however, that an early confrontation with either king is risky. Biding his time, Knútr chooses an easier option and he wages war against the pagan Wends in the Baltic, where, the king believes, his father had also left him an unfulfilled inheritance. Thereafter Knútr entices Óláfr to ally against Edmund and invade England. Their ensuing military success leads to a peace-treaty between Knútr and Edmund which stipulates that, should one of the men die, the other will inherit his half of England. This agreement, however, betrays Óláfr, who is excluded from any share of England. Saxo also implies that Knútr later orchestrated the murder of Edmund Ironside. Indeed, he even leaves open the possibility that Knútr executed Edmund's killer, Eadric Streona, to cover up his own

part in the crime. Saxo Grammaticus comments: 'Ea tamen res primum regis apud domesticos fauorem quassauit' (it was this action that first shook his subjects' regard for their lord) (Friis-Jensen 2015: 734-35).

Saxo then presents a characteristically episodic account of Knútr's reign, the detail of which need not concern us here. There is special focus on Knútr's military prowess at the Battle of Helgeå and, more generally, his firm and competent command of the empire. The 'Knútr section' is interspersed with incidents of a moral nature that illustrate the virtues and vices that occupy Saxo elsewhere throughout the *GD*. In this respect, one should take note of Kurt Johanneson's argument that Knútr fulfils the virtues - especially *fortitudo* (valour) and *prudencia* (wisdom) - that his predecessors, Sveinn tjúguskegg and Haraldr blátǫnn (Bluetooth) Gormsson, only partially possessed (Johanneson 1978: 212-216).

As seen above, in Sven Aggesen's *Brevis Historia* the greatness of Knútr's empire foreshadows the glories of Valdimar I and his immediate successors. From Saxo's perspective, however, Knútr's rule of his empire, as well as his conduct at court, manifestly offered lessons to the kings of his own day. This tendency is most pronounced in Saxo's transposition of Sven Aggesen's 'Law of the Retainers' into a historical setting, namely the court of Knútr inn ríki. Here Knútr is shown to be a fine king who sets firm but fair rules for his courtiers.⁴ The point here is not that the court of Saxo's day exceeds the example set by Knútr inn ríki, but rather that Knútr VI (or Valdimar II) may learn from the example set by their empire-building predecessor.

For these early Danish writers, Knútr's character and reign represented both an opportunity and a problem. With respect to Knútr's father and grand-father, Haraldr blátǫnn and Sveinn tjúskegg, they were able to follow the example of Adam of Bremen's chronicle, which featured both psychological drama and religious morals. This included Sveinn's rebellion against his father, his subsequent exile with the Slavs, his apostasy and the eventual reformation of his character, culminating in the conquest of England. This was the stuff of the chronicler's dreams. Knútr's career, however, presented something of a conundrum. His was not a story of redemption in which a Danish king gained a glittering prize in a foreign land. Rather, one senses

an underlying unease about the way in which Knútr became king of England as well as Denmark: was it entirely due to his prowess or had he simply ridden on his father's coat-tails? Furthermore, it was difficult to ignore the brevity and ephemerality of Knútr's 'North Sea empire'. It was, nevertheless, arguably this distancing effect that allowed Knútr's achievements both to foreshadow and to offer lessons to later, perhaps greater and (from Saxo's perspective) more durable, accomplishments.

The 'Norwegian Synoptics'

The earliest writings about Knútr Sveinsson from the West Norse region appeared in the second half of the twelfth century. The best preserved of these are the so-called 'Norwegian synoptics', which include Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (History of the Ancient Kings of Norway, hereafter *HARN*) and the anonymous *Historia Norvegie*, both in Latin, as well as the Old Norse *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* (Compendium of the Kings of Norway). The common thread of the 'Norwegian synoptics' is Norway's royal dynasty. These texts trace the history of the royal house from pagan times. Most significantly, the narratives attribute Norway's unification to the dynasty, a feat which had been foreshadowed in the reign of Haraldr inn hárfagri Hálfðanarson, an early-tenth-century king who features as a distant *stammvater*. Of equal importance was the dynasty's central role in Norway's conversion to Christianity, a process which was crowned by King Óláfr Haraldsson's martyrdom at Stiklastaðir (Stiklestad) in 1030. In short, the legitimacy and glory of the ruling house rested on a web of historical associations which, in some respects, were manifestly later constructs.

It is therefore not surprising that the 'Norwegian synoptics' portray Knútr exclusively in relation to Óláfr Haraldsson, whose rule began in 1015, around the time Knútr became England's king. Overall, the texts show the Danish king as a powerful ruler, but also one who is consumed by greed and envy. *HARN* relates that he was someone who desired the possession of others (Gertz 1917-18: 29). Knútr forces Óláfr to leave Norway and then orchestrates his final defeat by bribing the Norwegian chieftains. Theodoricus' contrasting of the two kings is especially noteworthy. In England Knútr gains a kingdom to which he

is not entitled, but in doing so he compromises his eternal soul. Óláfr Haraldsson, on the other hand, attains celestial glory by defending to the death his claim to Norway, his god-given patrimony:

O infelix et inexplebilis cupiditas mortalium! O multum misera humana anima! quae quanto magis sparsit se in visibilia ista et dilatat in figuram hujus mundi quae praeterit, tanto difficilus post hanc vitam recolligitur et a Deo, qui vera sufficientia est, alienatur. Hoc in Kanuto satis superque elucet qui cum duo regna possideret, tertium justissimo regi Olavo, quod illi ex avita successione debebatur, molitur eripere. (Storm 1880: 34)

(O calamitous and insatiable greed of mortal men! O the wretched human soul! The more it has dissipated itself on visible things, and spread over the figure of this world which will pass away, the more difficult it is for it to be made whole again after this life; and it becomes all the estranged from God, who is the true sufficiency. This is abundantly, even overabundantly, clear in the case of Knutr who, although he possessed two kingdoms, still strove to wrest yet the third from the most just king Olaf, one moreover to which Olaf was entitled by ancestral succession.) (McDougall and McDougall 1998: 25)

HARN is a moralistic work that evaluates the rulers' virtues and vices. The text draws on biblical and classical examples for comparative purposes (Bagge 1989). Theodoricus not only highlights Knútr's and Óláfr's bad and good kingships respectively, but also their posthumous fates. To the work's contemporary audience the sanctity of Óláfr Haraldsson was a given fact. But Knútr's fate, Theodoricus suggests, is the reverse of the Norwegian king's: coveting a kingdom that was not his by birthright condemns Knútr to hell. When *tHARN* recounts the drowning of Sveinn, Knútr's son and chosen ruler of Norway, the author can hardly contain his contempt: 'de quo satis dictum est' (Storm 1880: 44) (Knútr about who enough has been said) (McDougall and McDougall 1998: 33).

The monk Theodoricus dedicated his work to Archbishop Eysteinn

of Nidaros (1161-1188), and *HARN* was completed sometime between 1177 and 1188. This was a turbulent period in Norway that saw two armed factions, the so-called Birkibeinar and the Baglar, battle it out to establish their own candidates on the throne. As a clergyman and friend of Archbishop Eysteinn, Theodoricus would have supported the Baglar and their king, Magnús Erlingsson (1163/64-1184). Contemporary sources, such as *Sverris saga Sigurðarsonar* and the so-called *Oratio contra clerum Norvegiae* (Speech against the Bishop of Norway) emphasise that royal legitimacy should be reflected in the claimant's behaviour. His conduct reveals whether the king (or pretender) rules by God's grace or is merely the devil's instrument.⁵ Accordingly, Theodoricus' negative portrayal of Knútr does not centre solely on the king's illegitimate intervention in Norwegian affairs. Rather, Knútr himself is an imposter who undeservedly attains the ultimate earthly prize of kingship whilst seeking to deprive God's chosen candidate of the same. The topicality of this scenario for Sverrir Sigurðarson's extraordinary ascent to power should be apparent.

A comparable perspective on Knútr appears in *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*. The author of this brief Old Norse account from around 1190 was probably a Norwegian cleric. *Ágrip's* introduction to its brief «Knútr section» is telling:

<En> á þessu méli réð Knútr fyr Englandi, er hann hafði unnit með hjólp ok með fulltingi ens helga Óláfs, ok launaði inum helga Óláfi eigi betr en hann bar fé undir hofðingja er í Nóregi vöru - sem síðan reyndisk - at þeir skyldu svíkja landit undan hónum. (Driscoll 2008: 38)

(At this time Knútr ruled England, which he had won with the help and support of St Óláfr, but he rewarded him no better than by bribing the chieftains who were in Norway into betraying the country away from him, as later happened.) (Driscoll 2008: 39)

Here Knútr gains England because of Óláfr's assistance rather than on his own merits. This shows Knútr as an imposter who, for good measure, betrays the very person that secured his kingship.

A similar portrayal of Knútr inn ríki appears in the *Historia Norvegiae* (hereafter *HN*). In its preserved state, this work relates Norway's history until Óláfr Haraldsson's arrival in Norway in 1015, and was most likely composed not long after the middle of the twelfth century. *HN*'s incomplete preservation means that the best part of whatever it said about Knútr is now lost. What is included is less than flattering to the Danish ruler. His father, Sveinn tjúguskegg, invades and eventually conquers England. This achievement is chiefly attributed to Óláfr Haraldsson's martial prowess; Óláfr's participation secures Danish victory in every battle fought against Æthelred and the English. In contrast, Knútr features as an ineffective bystander in the campaign. Following Sveinn's death, Knútr shamefully fled ('inhoneste aufugerat') to Denmark but was nevertheless raised to the kingship (Ekrem and Mortensen 2003: 102-103). At this point *HN* informs us that Knútr and Óláfr became sworn-brothers. Óláfr arrives in Denmark with a great army and, following Æthelred's death, sets out with Knútr to reconquer England.

The capture of London is entirely credited to Óláfr Haraldsson's bravery and sagacity. Knútr's initial attempt to secure London Bridge flounders as he loses the best part of his army. In contrast, Óláfr and his men triumph over the stubborn defenders, an achievement that earns him high praise (Ekrem and Mortensen 2003: 102-103). After further battles Knútr and Edmund agree to share the kingdom, and when the latter dies Knútr becomes England's ruler. At this point, however, Knútr betrays his promise to Óláfr (Ekrem and Mortensen: 104-105). This prompts Óláfr's return to Norway but, as mentioned, at this point the sole existing manuscript witness to *HN* ends.

HN, like the other Norwegian works from the period, highlights Knútr's unmerited elevation to the kingship along with his treacherous and ungrateful nature. It is Óláfr Haraldsson who catapults the Danish prince to power. As in *RC*, we read of Knútr and Óláfr forming a sworn-brotherhood early in their careers. However, in the two works this arrangement plays out very differently. In *RC* Óláfr is martyred by his own people, with no suggestion of Knútr's involvement. From what has gone before it is likely that *HN*'s lost section related Knútr's betrayal of his saintly sworn-brother.

The Legendary Saga of St Óláfr

With some confidence the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ can be attributed to Norwegian authors, although they rely to some extent on Icelandic oral and written sources. The Icelandic input is still more pronounced in *Helgisaga Óláfs Helga* (Legendary Saga of St Óláfr, hereafter *HÓH*), which can be considered a hybrid Icelandic-Norwegian text. *HÓH* is preserved in a Norwegian manuscript from around middle of the thirteenth century. This work, however, is largely based on an Icelandic saga from around 1200, the so-called ‘Oldest saga’ of King Óláfr Haraldsson. It is certainly the case that *HÓH* treats Óláfr’s life in more pronounced hagiographic terms than the better-known kings’ sagas, such as *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. There is, however, scant reason to assume that the Icelandic ‘Oldest saga’ was more ‘secular’ in tone and purpose than *HÓH* (as it has been preserved). In fact, the nature of the two texts appears to have been broadly comparable.⁶

Until relatively recently little attention has been paid to the structure of *HÓH*, which, due to its episodic nature, has commonly been seen to lack overall coherence and unity.⁷ Here I merely wish to mention a hitherto un-noted (to the best of my knowledge) structural feature. This pertains to the relationship between Knútr and Óláfr Haraldsson or, more specifically, to how the former is presented as the latter’s antithesis. This portrayal serves a dual purpose. Firstly, Knútr’s appearances near the saga’s beginning and conclusion contribute to the text’s overall coherence. Secondly, the juxtaposition of the two rulers highlights the nature of divinely ordained kingship. In other words, the binary narrative feature - the feature of contrast - which appears but briefly in the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ extends here to the whole text.

For information about Ólafr’s early career, *HÓH* relies on skaldic poems that recount his adventures across Europe (Heinrichs 1982: 46-52). However, the episode about Óláfr’s dealings with Knútr in London does not correspond to any known source. *HÓH* recounts that, although Knútr had subjected the whole of England to his control, London remained stubbornly undefeated. When Knútr asks Óláfr for advice on how to proceed, the Norwegian agrees to help, but only if Knútr swears never to claim power in Norway. Knútr accepts this

proposal and, through his cunning and military skills, Óláfr proves instrumental in the capture of London (Heinrichs 1982: 44-46).

A scene follows which is set in Knútr's English court (Heinrichs 1982: 54). The king, we are informed, is often late for Mass, which means a delay until his arrival. One day, when Óláfr Haraldsson is in attendance, Knútr is nowhere to be seen. The (unidentified) archbishop present, however, declares that Mass can commence because now a king has arrived. When attention is drawn to Knútr's absence, the prelate answers in the following manner: 'sia er sannr konongr, er nu er ut komenn, firir þui at hann vill hældr þiona love, en guðs log þione hanum' (Heinrichs 1982: 54) (a true king has entered, one who wishes rather to serve God's laws, than have God's laws serve him). This incident enflames Knútr's antipathy towards the Norwegian king, and in the saga the two never meet again. Knútr then asks the archbishop why he called Óláfr a king, considering that he is landless and has not performed any miracles (given the circumstances, the raising of the latter point is somewhat odd). When the archbishop simply restates that Óláfr is a king, Knútr replies that Óláfr is certainly a splendid man who clads himself in fineries and partakes of fine food. The archbishop reveals that Óláfr wore a warrior's garb under his sumptuous clothes and sometimes drank water when Knútr thought it was wine.

Thus, in one episode Óláfr effectively secures Knútr's kingship England, while in another scene the Dane's true royal stature is undermined and the Norwegian's confirmed. But there is more to consider. Just prior to these episodes, *HÓH* explains how Knútr became the sole ruler of England (Heinrichs 1982: 44). After London's capture Knútr and Edmund Ironside agree to divide the kingdom between them. As in the texts discussed above, their treaty stipulates that when one dies the other should inherit the other's half of the country. Edmund is subsequently betrayed and killed by Eadric Streona, who is identified in the saga as Edmund's foster-father. In all this, *HÓH* strays liberally from the historical facts. Of interest, however, is how the narrative questions Knútr's royal legitimacy. Knútr can only conquer England because of Óláfr's superior skills, whereas his rise to sole kingship comes about because of Eadric's betrayal of his relative and lord. Eadric's treachery prefigures Knútr's later betrayal of Óláfr, which leads to Óláfr's death

at Stiklastaðir. This interpretation is supported by the saga's claim that Edmund was considered a saint after his violent death.

HÓH continues to juxtapose Knútr and Óláfr. In the saga's second act, so to speak, Knútr and Óláfr interact with a string of visitors, mostly Icelandic skalds such as Þormóðr kolbúnarskáld and Óttarr svarti (Heinrichs 1982: 106-141). These scenes illuminate the different characters of the two rulers. The emphasis is on Knútr's court as a place of prestige and riches, where the king's generosity foreshadows his later use of wealth and power to turn the Norwegian magnates against Óláfr.⁸ Especially noteworthy is the story of Sigurðr Ákason, a rich Dane who contracts a curious state when he is cursed by troll-woman while trading in the Baltic: he is incapable of seeing blood (Heinrich 1982: 120-122). When Sigurðr resides at Knútr's court the king fails to comprehend the situation and Sigurðr is eventually expelled from his realm. On Easter Day Sigurðr arrives before Óláfr who, upon hearing the visitor's story, expresses surprise at Knútr's behaviour. Óláfr then cures Sigurðr of his affliction by holding a cross before him. This prepares for the third act in which Knútr, spurred on by envy and resentment, entices the Norwegian chieftains to betray Óláfr. The overall impression is that it is not only Óláfr's sanctity that sets him apart from Knútr inn ríki, but also his innate 'king-worthiness' compared to his Danish nemesis.

The Thirteenth-Century Kings' saga Compilations and *Knúts saga

A very different presentation of King Knútr appears in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, dating from around 1230. In this text Knútr is also closely linked with King Óláfr Haraldsson. However, unlike *HÓH* (and to a lesser extent the 'Norwegian synoptics'), *Heimskringla* does not compare the two kings from the beginning to the end of their careers. In relation to Knútr, Snorri Sturluson is primarily interested in showing how and why Óláfr was forced to flee his kingdom in 1028, only to return two years later to suffer defeat and death. For this purpose there is no need to parallel Knútr and Óláfr throughout their careers. Although *Heimskringla* briefly refers to Knútr earlier in the text, he is only properly introduced some five years before the Battle of

Stiklastaðir, and then in relation to events leading up to the Battle of Helgeå in 1026 (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941-1951: 2, 221). Thus, Snorri is silent about Knútr and Óláfr meeting in England (whether as friends or enemies) and there is no 'London episode'. As a young viking Óláfr fights loyally for King Æthelred and later with his son, Edmund Ironside. At no point before, during or in the immediate aftermath of the Danish conquest of England is there a meeting or contact between Óláfr and Knútr.

However, in the concluding part of *Heimskringla's Saga of St Óláfr* the spotlight falls on Knútr and his character. Here, the depiction of Knútr is not that of a greedy, treacherous, or even illegitimate ruler who covets a kingdom that is Óláfr's by divine right. True, Knútr is associated with such negative traits, but only through the words of the king's enemies and opponents (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941-1951: 2, 223-224). Similarly, Knútr's camp considers Óláfr Haraldsson to be a usurper, for Norway had traditionally been subject to taxation by the Danish kings (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941-1951: 2, 221). Snorri therefore balances two ideological standpoints: on one hand, the ancient Danish claim to Norway and, on the other, Óláfr's belief in his ancestral right to rule the kingdom. The ensuing showdown was always one that Óláfr was destined to lose. *Heimskringla* makes plain that Knútr possesses far greater resources than Óláfr, not only in military terms but also in wealth, with which he can entice the Norwegian chieftains. Furthermore, although *Heimskringla* presents Óláfr's death as martyrdom, there is no sense of the religiously tinged portrayal of Knútr as his antitheses. The Danish king plays the political game to his advantage, whereas in Snorri's rendering Óláfr is unable to sustain the loyalty of his chieftains. Knútr's role in *Heimskringla* is that of a foreign king who exploits and amplifies already existing fault lines between Óláfr and the Norwegian chieftains. This is in notable contrast to *HÓH*, in which Knútr is clearly the main catalyst for Óláfr's downfall (this essentially the interpretation given in Bagge 2010: 304-15).

Although differing from *Heimskringla* in some details, *Fagrskinna* adopts a broadly comparable approach to Knútr's role in Norway's history. *Fagrskinna*, composed around 1220 and possibly by a Norwegian, does not include an English encounter between the young

Knútr and Óláfr. The saga, which relates Norwegian history from the ninth century to 1177, merely states that Sveinn tjúguskegg had conquered most of England before his death. Knútr then becomes king in Denmark and, a few years later, with the help of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson, he also gains England. Óláfr, we are told, fights against the Danes in the service of King Æthelred. When Óláfr Haraldsson returns to Norway he terminates the rule of Eiríkr's sons, Sveinn and Hákon, but Knútr is unwilling to relinquish his former 'tax-land' (*skattland*). *Fagrskinna* focuses particularly on Knútr's victory over the Norwegian and Swedish kings at the Battle of Helgeå in 1026, and thereafter the saga attributes Óláfr's fall to Knútr's scheming (Bjarni Einarsson 1984: 190-201). *Fagrskinna*, like *Heimskringla*, features a comparatively long description of the killing of Earl Úlfr (Bjarni Einarsson 1984: 202-204). Here, *Fagrskinna* highlights how Knútr seeks to atone for this deed by donating lands to the local monks, who had effectively excommunicated the king. This is followed by a description of Knútr's penitential pilgrimage to Rome (Bjarni Einarsson 1984: 204-206).

The partially lost *Skjöldunga saga*, which traces the history of the Danish kings to Gormr inn gamli, attests to Icelandic interest in the Danish royal dynasty around the turn of the thirteenth century. However, it is the later *Knýtlinga saga* that best compares to the Norwegian kings' sagas compilations. This mid-thirteenth century text narrates the history of the Danish royal dynasty from legendary times down to Knútr VI Valdimarsson (1182-1202). *Knýtlinga saga* centres on the reign and martyrdom of Knútr Sveinsson (1080-1086), who therefore assumes a place in the text somewhat comparable to St Óláfr's in *Heimskringla*. It is generally accepted that the saga's author was influenced by the general structure of *Heimskringla* (Malmros 1993: 360); in other words, in *Knýtlinga saga* King Knútr is just one ruler among several whose reigns are covered somewhat perfunctorily.

In analysing *Knýtlinga saga's* section on Knútr, Bjarni Guðnason divides Norse medieval tradition about the king into four complexes or categories (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: xci-cix). The first and second relate to Knútr's conquest of England and his becoming king in Denmark. The third complex includes his dealings with Óláfr Haraldsson, while the fourth features the king's journey to Rome, his death and the

subsequent problems of succession. Bjarni Guðnason observes that *Knýtlinga saga* neglects the second and third categories, which involve Knútr's accession to the kingship and his subsequent relations with Óláfr of Norway. Further, *Knýtlinga saga* sidesteps the major events that *Heimskringla* had already covered. For instance, nothing is told of the Battle of Helgeå, in which Knútr defeated the joint forces of Óláfr Haraldsson and King Qnundr of Sweden. The saga is also mute about the killing of Earl Úlfr at Roskilde. The latter omission is doubly surprising as the longest and arguably most vivid episode in the 'Knútr section' of *Knýtlinga saga* recounts Úlfr's adventures in the king's service (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 109-111). The earl becomes lost after pursuing a defeated English army but is rescued by a shepherd, who is rewarded with an earldom. The shepherd turns out to be Guðini (or Godwin), the father of the future King Harold of England. From the above it is obvious that, although the author of *Knýtlinga saga* had ample sources for life and reign of Knútr, he opted for selectivity rather than completeness.

The rationale on which the author of *Knýtlinga saga* based his selection is not easy to establish. As mentioned above, the work's focal point is the second Knútr Sveinsson, whose short reign is accorded some sixty pages in the standard modern edition. Compare this to the twenty-seven pages that cover Knútr inn ríki's significantly longer rule. Twenty of these are dedicated to Knútr's conquest of England, whereas the treatment of Óláfr Haraldsson and Norway is cursory in the extreme. One possible reading would be that the saga refrains as much as possible from relating events that feature in *Heimskringla* (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: xci-xcii). Another is that *Knýtlinga saga* prioritises the English conquest because it foreshadows St Knútr's later invasion plans of the same kingdom. It is telling in this respect that St Knútr refers to his namesake's conquest when he proposes a joint invasion of England to Óláfr kyrri Haraldsson, king of Norway (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 163-164). Fundamental to St Knútr's proposal, however, is the idea that *both* kings have a claim this kingdom: his kinsman (*frændi*) and sons had ruled England, whereas Óláfr has 'harma at reka' (much to revenge) against the English (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 163), alluding here to the defeat and death at Stamford Bridge

of Óláfr's father, King Haraldr inn harðráði Sigurðarson. Nothing more is heard about St Knútr's plans, which in any case Óláfr kyrri rejects, and England disappears from the story. Thus, in *Knýtlinga saga* Knútr inn ríki's historical legacy fails to extend beyond the reign of his saintly namesake.

Indeed, *Knýtlinga saga* gives the impression that Sveinn Úlfsson's reign signifies a watershed in the history of the Danish dynasty: from his time onwards the 'real story' begins. This notion is reflected in the saga's epitaph on Knútr Sveinsson in which he, along with the earlier 'Jelling kings' who ruled prior to Sveinn, are described in less than flattering terms:

Knútr var manna mest vexti ok sterkr at afli, manna fríðastr, nema nef hans var þunnt ok eigi lágt ok nokkut bjúgt. Hann var ljóslitaðr, fagrhárr ok mjök hærðr. Hverjum manni var hann betr eygðr, bæði fagreygðr ok snareygð. Hann var qrr maðr, hermaðr mikill ok inn vápndjarfasti, sigrsæll, hamingju maðr mikill um alla hluti, pá er til ríkisdóms heyrði. Ekki var hann stórvitr maðr ok svá Sveinn konungr með sama hætti ok enn áðr Haraldr ok Gormr, at þeir vá engir spekingar at viti. (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 127)

(Knut was exceptionally tall and strong, and the handsomest of men except for his nose which was thin, high-set and rather hooked. He had a fair complexion and a fine, thick head of hair. His eyes were better than those of other men, being more handsome and keener-sighted. He was a generous man, a great warrior, valiant, victorious and the happiest of men in style and grandeur. But he was not a man of great intelligence, and the same could be said of King Svein and Harald and Gorm before him, that none of them was notable for wisdom.) (Hermann Pálsson 1986: 43)

Lastly, the comparatively close focus of *Knýtlinga saga*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* on Úlfr's death and Knútr's pilgrimage to Rome has led some scholars to posit a lost **Knúts saga* (Saga of Knútr).

Bjarni Guðnason has presented the most authoritative reconstruction of this hypothetical work (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: xci-cix; but see also Campbell 1946-53). Bjarni argues that *Fagrskinna*, *Knýtlinga saga* and *Heimskringla* include material about Knútr that is independent of the Icelandic-Norwegian tradition which, as seen, predominantly highlights the king's relations with St Óláfr. Most significantly, Bjarni supposes that an author of a 'Saga of Knútr', writing around 1200, had access to English chronicles in addition to Norse material.

The existence of an early 'Knútr's saga' cannot be meaningfully analysed on this occasion. However, although a hypothetical text can be reconstructed from various Old Norse sagas, this does not show (or even make it likely) that an independent saga about Knútr ever existed. The one seemingly 'hard piece of evidence' for such a saga appears in *Magnúss saga ins góða* (Saga of Magnús the Good) in *Heimskringla*. This is in relation to a reference to Earl Úlfr: 'svá sem ritat er í sögu Knúts ins gamla, at hann lét drepa Úlfr jarl, mág sinn í Hróiskelda' (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941-51: 3, 36) (as is written in the Saga of Knútr the Old where [it says] that the latter had his kinsman by marriage, Jarl Úlfr, killed in Roskilde). But, as Bjarni himself acknowledges, this reference is hardly an unproblematic attestation of a separate **Knúts saga* (Bjarni Guðson 1982: xcii). It is worth highlighting that *Heimskringla* does elsewhere describe Úlfr's slaying. On this occasion Snorri refers to a 'great saga' that was told about Úlfr rather than a written 'Knútr's saga': 'ok er *saga mikil* frá honum *sögð*' (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941-51: 2, 285). Here and in the suspected reference to **Knúts saga* we are, I suggest, dealing with statements along the lines of: 'many things have been said and written about Úlfr/Knútr'. Furthermore, assuming *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* both followed a **Knúts saga* in their rendering of the Roskilde episode, we might then expect them to correspond closely. This can hardly be the case, however, as the accounts differ considerably.

Knútr's journey to Rome is another element that supposedly featured in **Knúts saga*. In *Fagrskinna* the pilgrimage takes place after Óláfr's fall in 1030, but before the appearance of his sanctity and the subsequent Norwegian rebellion against Danish rule (Bjarni Einarsson 1984: 204-206). *Fagrskinna* quotes Sigvatr Þórðarson's

poem *Knútsdrápa*, which was probably composed during Knútr's lifetime (see Townsend 2001: 153-156), and there seems no reason to seek elsewhere for a source. *Knýtlinga saga* also recounts the Roman journey occurring after the Battle of Stiklastaðir. The saga emphasises Knútr's generosity towards his fellow pilgrims, and to the monasteries and churches he visited (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 123). The saga cites the concluding half-stanza of Sigvatr's poem, which highlights Knútr's generosity during his pilgrimage. Again, there appears scant need to look elsewhere for a source that mentions this aspect of Knútr's career. It is interesting, however, that the pilgrimage episode in *Knýtlinga saga* occurs just after the saga mentions Óláfr's martyrdom. One might indeed conclude that *Knýtlinga saga* is influenced not by a separate saga of Knútr, but rather by a lost early saga of Óláfr, in which the Danish king, nearing the end of his life, repents for his part in the killing of the Norwegian saint.⁹ However that may be, we are worlds apart from Sven Aggesen's equation of Knútr's Roman journey with a glorious military conquest, as discussed above.

I have sketched the differences in the portrayal of King Knútr inn ríki in the 'Norwegian synoptics' and *HÓH*, on the one hand, and in *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna* and *Knýtlinga saga* on the other. In the former texts the careers of Knútr and Óláfr are juxtaposed right from the Danish conquest of England until Óláfr's death at Stiklastaðir. Conversely, the latter works show limited interest in comparing and contrasting the two characters: their focus is either on the conquest of England (*Knýtlinga saga*) or the events that led to Óláfr Haraldsson's downfall (*Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*). Therefore, it may be tempting to presuppose a Norwegian tradition about Knútr that emerged in clerical circles during the second half of the twelfth century. This tradition foregrounds notions about Norwegian sovereignty, dynastic legitimacy, resistance and fear of Danish power. These elements then crystalize in Óláfr's saintly persona and Knútr's untrustworthy and less-than-salubrious character. In this, the 'Norwegian tradition' differs from the 'Icelandic tradition', which highlights Knútr's English conquest, his shifting power relations with other Norse rulers and

(a topic only touched on in this essay) his interaction with Icelandic skalds.

This conclusion, however, must be qualified by the difficulty, even undesirability, of distinguishing sharply between Icelandic and Norwegian writings of the period. We have seen how the *HÓH* is preserved in a Norwegian manuscript and, in its present form, was crafted in Norway. As previously noted, much of its content, however, is thought to derive from an earlier Icelandic saga of St Óláfr. In fact, it seems that the early saga about Óláfr followed a broadly similar outline to the one that appears in the ‘Norwegian synoptics’, namely Knútr’s reign featuring in counterpoint to St Óláfr’s. This would certainly make sense if the ‘Oldest saga’, which underlies most of *HÓH*, was also primarily intended for a Norwegian audience, a hypothesis that is supported by its later manifestation as *HÓH*.

Two episodes from the *Flateyjarbók* compilation encapsulate how Norwegian and Icelandic authors approached Knútr and his reign (Sigurður Nordal 1944-45: 2, 263-265). The origin of these episodes is uncertain but they may derive from Styrmir Kárasón’s (ca. 1170-1245) lost saga about St Óláfr, of which a number of episodes appear in *Flateyjarbók*. Two poor boys, a Dane and a Norwegian, arrive at Knútr’s English court. Placed alongside vagrants and beggars, they begin to compare the Danish king with Óláfr, each exclaiming the greater worth of one or the other. Knútr summons the boys and asks them to explain their respective judgments. The Dane describes how Knútr is the richest and finest of kings, whereas the Norwegian can only claim that Óláfr is unlike any other king and that his qualities will be revealed in the fullness of time. For their answers the king rewards them with two cooked roosters. Not overly impressed, the boys consider it prudent to preserve the roosters for their respective homeward journeys. Before they part the Danish boy, observing that his companion’s rooster is significantly fatter, suggests a swap. The Norwegian boy readily accepts this proposal. Later, when he becomes hungry, he prises open his rooster, which turns out to be filled with gold coins. For the rest of his life he remains a prosperous man. In the second episode, Knútr hears of Óláfr’s death and posthumous miracles. In response, Knútr claims that he always thought himself

the great of the two kings, but now understands otherwise. Knútr then donates treasure to Óláfr's shrine.

Like the early Icelandic and Norwegian historical writings, these episodes place the Danish king in opposition to King Óláfr of Norway, the great saint of the northern world. The writers of these works were less interested in Knútr himself and more in how his persona and actions reflected different aspects of Óláfr's kingship. The kings' saga compilations, however, largely eschew this approach and present Knútr as a historical figure in his own right. Both approaches, however, differ from the Danish tradition, in which Knútr and his achievements are shown both to fulfil and conclude the destiny of the Jelling dynasty, while also gesturing forward in time to the later 'Danish empire' of Knútr IV and Valdemar II.

References

1 See, for instance, the opinions of post-conquest authors mentioned in Garmonsway 1964.

2 For a discussion of the author of *RC* and his time, see Gelting 2002, 39-94.

3 See Skovgaard-Petersen 1985, especially 96-178.

4 Perhaps not coincidentally, this part follows from Knútr's ordering the killing of Úlfr in response to the earl's unbecoming behaviour in the king's presence.

5 See, for example, in *Sverris saga* (Þorleifur Hauksson 2007: 278-279).

6 This is the general conclusion in Jónas Kristjánsson 1976.

7 See for example Andersson 2006: 14 and, in response, Bagge 2006: 285-286.

8 See especially his relations with Steinn Skaftason, who had also allied with Óláfr (Heinrichs 1982: 138-139).

9 See, for example, how *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* ends with the Roman pilgrimage of Hrafn's nemesis and (effectively) killer, Þorvaldr Snorrason.

The same applies to Earl Hákon Pálsson, the adversary of Earl Magnús in the separate sagas about the Orkney saint.

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