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The image of the Norwegian monarch in Laxdæla saga. Historical and philological remarks

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is that of exploring one of the most valuable sources from Iceland's golden age of sagas, the Saga of the People of Laxárdalr through the lenses of historical as well as literary criticism in order to provide an account of the ways in which Norwegian kings or queens were portrayed. The research methodology includes primary and secondary source analysis and qualitative analysis, as well as the comparative method, as the results are compared with similar findings from secondary literature. The edition of Laxdæla Saga that was used in the analysis is Muriel A. C. Press's translation from 1999 and the main secondary sources used include works such as those of Ármann Jakobsson and William Ian Miller. The main findings are that, like in many other similar sources, the Norwegian monarchy is represented either in an either extremely positively or extremely negatively fashion by the author of the saga.

Rezumat

Scopul acestui articol este acela de a explora una dintre cele mai valoroase surse din epoca de aur a saga a Islandei, Saga poporului din Laxárdalr, prin prisma criticii istorice și literare, pentru a oferi o relatare a modalităților în care au fost înfățișați regii sau reginele norvegiene. Metodologia cercetării include analiza surselor primare și secundare și analiza calitativă, precum și metoda comparativă, deoarece rezultatele sunt comparate cu constatări similare din literatura secundară. Ediția Laxdæla saga care a fost folosită în analiză este traducerea lui Muriel A. C. Press din 1999 și principalele surse secundare utilizate includ lucrări precum cele ale lui Ármann Jakobsson și William Ian Miller. Principalele constatări sunt că, la fel ca în multe alte surse similare, monarhia norvegiană este reprezentată fie într-un mod extrem de pozitiv, fie extrem de negativ de către autorul sagăi.

Keywords: Laxdæla Saga, Norway, Iceland, ideology and power, monarchy

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Introduction

Laxdæla saga[1] or *The Saga of the People of Laxárdalr* was written in Western Iceland by an unknown author during the period from 1230-1260[2]. The manuscripts where the saga is preserved are numerous, the oldest ones being AM 132 fol or *Möðruvallabók* (*Laxdæla saga* is included from pages 156r to 198r) from the middle of the 14th century, which resides in the Arnamagnæan Manuscript Collection in Copenhagen from 1690 until 1974 when it was returned to Iceland [3].

It has been speculated that the author of *Laxdæla saga* may have been a woman because the saga's protagonist is a woman, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir[4]. It is therefore beneficial to include this source into our analysis of the ideology of power in Icelandic sagas from the 12th and 13th centuries in order to offer a more complete view of the representations of different aspects of kingship and chieftainship.

The saga follows the story of the descendants of Ketill flatneft's (Flatnoose's) family through eight generations. One decade before the turn of the millennium Ketill went to Scotland, where he and his family lived for a quarter of a century before moving to Iceland[5]. Unnr, daughter of Ketill, succeeded in gaining control over the Breiðafjǫrðr district with the help of her family. Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson, the great-grandson of Unnr, and his

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[1] The translation used here is the one of Muriel A. C. Press, *Laxdaela saga*, Old Norse Series (Cambridge, Ontario: In parantheses Publications, 1999).

[2] Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Laxdœla saga,* Íslenzk fornrit V (Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), xxv; The saga is available in many translated editions into English: Margaret Arent (transl.), *The Laxdoela Saga* (University of Washington Press, 1964); Guðbrandur Vigfússon (transl.), *Sturlunga saga* (Clarendon Press, 1878); Keneva Kunza, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason's Tale* (Penguin Books, 2008); Thorstein Veblen, *The Laxdoela Saga* (University of Washington Press, 1964); For a critical view see Ármann Jakobsson, "*Laxdæla* Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life" *Leeds Studies in English*, XXXIX (2008): 33-51; Daniel Sävborg, "Kärleken i Laxdœla saga--höviskt och sagatypiskt" *Alvíssmál* 11 (2004): 75-104.

[3] Sarah M. Anderson, "Introduction: 'og eru köld kvenna ráð'", in *Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, eds. Sarah M Anderson, Karen Swenson (New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2000), xi-xiv.

[4] See Ármann Jakobsson, „Konungasagan Laxdæla," *Skírnir* 172 (1998): 357–383.

[5] Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 528.

son, Óláfr Pái (Peacock), are important characters in the first chapters. Eventually, Óláfr Pái married Þorgerðr, daughter of Egill Skalla-Grímsson[6].

Most of the action of the saga is placed during the seventh generation of descendants of Ketill flatneft when the protagonists were Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and her childhood friends, Kjartan Óláfsson and Bolli Þorleiksson. All three of them later formed a love triangle as Guðrún was left undecided whom to marry. Guðrún would have preferred to marry Kjartan but, believing that he was betrothed to another woman (no other than Ingibjörg, sister of King Óláfr Tryggvason), chose Bolli[7]. The love affair resembles that of the *Nibelungenlied*, namely the fate of the Sigurd-Brynhild-Gunnar love triangle. Eventually, Bolli was slain in an act of revenge of Guðrún's son[8].

What makes *Laxdæla saga* different from the other sagas and what recommends it for our research purpose? As mentioned earlier, the fact that the author may have been an educated woman adds to the diversity of our study material. The approach of providing a feminist reading of this source, or other, shall be left aside as, given the multitude of important contributions in this matter, it could easily make the subject of an entire dissertation. Other peculiarities of *Laxdæla saga* are that it does not include as many skaldic verses as, for example, *Egils saga*. Discussing *Laxdæla saga* on a thematic level reveals a focus on bloody feud and retribution, as is common to all feud sagas. The fact that the work evinces detailed descriptions of clothing and comportment has been thought to indicate that the author, whether it was a he or a she, was familiar to the style of continental romances[9], which often celebrated an idealized, noble, code of behaviour and dress[10]. Similarly, the importance of women and marital endeavour is remarkable extensive in this source, which a fact which further supports female authorship. *Laxdæla saga*

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[6] *Laxdœla saga*, chapter 22.
[7] Joseph R. Strayer 1987, 528.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] See, for example, Angela Jane Weisl, „How to be a Man, Though Female: Changing Sex in Medieval Romance" *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 45, 1 (2009): 110–137.

has been considered by some "one of the first secular women's biographies in European medieval literature"[11]. At the end of her life, the hero Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir comments on her own life: "*þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest*" ("To him I was worst, whom I loved most"), thus sparking a dilemma that saga scholars have yet to settle[12].

The Image of Norwegian Monarchs

Laxdæla saga contains descriptions of King Haraldr gráfeldr ("Grey-cloak", regnant 961–970), who ruled Norway together with his mother, Queen Gunnhildr konungamóðir ("Mother-of-kings", floruit 931-934). In most sagas, Queen Gunnhildur was described in a negative manner, both dreaded and venerated for her: "power and cruelty admired for her beauty and generosity, and feared for her magic, cunning, sexual insatiability, and her goading"[13]. However, in *Laxdæla saga,* both the king and her mother seem respectable and commendable leaders, which is surprising given the rather negative reputation of Queen Gunnhildur for most saga-writers. Again, this may be considered an argument towards female authorship of the saga, as a female writer – of relatively good standing in Icelandic society – would have probably been more considerate towards Queen Gunnhildr, whose role in other sources is that of a scapegoat, considered guilty for the evils of Haraldr gráfeldr's rule (especially in *Egils saga*).

The Queen and King Haraldr greet the protagonist of the first chapters, Óláfr Pái (Peacock), with very kind words and appeared as the best lords an adventurer would have wished for. At the departure of the protagonist towards Ireland, both the King and Queen Gunnhildr lead him to the ship to say farewell and to bless him with their good fortune (*hæmingja*) in his exploits. On his return voyage, the hero stopped in Norway and was invited by the King to become part of his court (*hirð*), after which he was

[11] Joseph R. Strayer 1987, 528.
[12] Phillip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993): 388.
[13] Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women. (Cornell University Press, 1995), 180.*

richly gifted with scarlet garments (worthy of people of notability) and equipment for his sojourn[14].

In *Flóamanna saga*[15] and *Harðar saga*[16] King Haraldr gráfeldr is also generally described as a beneficent king. In the first example, the King favours the protagonist, Þorgils, even after he had wronged Queen Gunnhildr. In the second mentioned saga, King Haraldr becomes angry at Geir when the murder of one of the King's men occurs, but accepts compensation, *wergild*[17], for the crime, at the same time cautioning that his mother, if she were to meet the wrongdoers, would not be as conciliatory as he had been. Other sagas depict her in a negative manner, most notably *Egils saga*, where, as wife of King Eiríkr blóðøx, she is the one causing more harm to the protagonist that her husband [18]. This negative image mixed with some reverence for the Queen consort is maintained in the kings' sagas as well[19]. *Heimskringla* treats Gunnhildr rather fairly, condemnation of her being mixed with admiration of her determination[20].

These observations on the treatment of King Haraldr gráfeldr in *Laxdæla saga* and some other sagas challenge the hypothesis that the Kings of Norway were represented in a negative manner in the family sagas[21]. In *Laxdæla saga*, Queen Gunnhildr appears as distinguished as befits a royal

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[14] Ármann Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas" *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002), 150.

[15] A family saga from the late 13th century which features Þorgils Þórðarson „Örrabeinsstjúpr" (937 – 1022), a famous Viking who goes on raids throughout Scandinavia, the British Isles and Greenland. See Jonathan Grove, "The Place of Greenland in Medieval Icelandic Saga Narrative", Norse Greenland: Selected Papers from the Hvalsey Conference 2008, *Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Volume no. 2, (2008), 34.

[16] Harðar saga ok Hólmverja („Saga of Hǫrðr and of the people of Hólmr") is a late 14th century composition detailing the adventures of the Viking Hǫrðr. It may be considered one of the few „outcasts' saga" (*skógarmanna sögur*). See Sture Hast (ed.), *Harðar saga* (Munksgaard, Copenhagen: Editiones Arnamagæanae, series A, 6), 1960.

[17] See, for example, William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1990.

[18] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 151.

[19] Årmann Jakobsson, *Í leit ad konung,. Konungsmynd islenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavik: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), 118, 205, 220.

[20] Sigurður Nordal, "Gunnhildur konungamóðir", *Samtid og saga* 1 (1941), 135-155; Jenny Jochens 1995, 180-182.

[21] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 151.

person and equally benevolent to the hero as King Haraldr, her son; furthermore, according to her well-known liking of men, the Queen took a fancy to Óláfr Pái and even more to his uncle, Hrútr, who entered the Queen's graces, her majesty even manifesting fits of jealousy when other men were being compared to him[22]. In *Brennu-Njáls saga* ("Saga of Burnt-Njal") the Queen appears as a powerful and, despite her middle-age, beautiful woman who uses magic curses and heathen sorcery (cursing him to be unable to reproduce with his fiancé) to take vengeance upon Hrútr for not revealing to her that he was betrothed to a woman back in Iceland. This truth was revealed after Queen Gunnhildr had appointed Hrútr at the court in exchange for him giving in to her advances and becoming her "sex slave"[23] – something scandalous for Christian ethics but not so much in the context of the ethical norms of the Old Norse society, in which, anyway, women enjoyed more freedom and more consideration of their role[24].

The successor of King Haraldr gráfeldr and Queen Gunnhildr was Earl Hákon (Hákon jarl hinn ríki, "Earl Hákon the Powerful", c. 937 – 995), a warlike character generally described in a positive way in the kings' sagas. In *Laxdæla saga*, the earl received the visit of the ancestor of Guðrún, Óláfr Pái, and bestowed useful gifts upon the visitor, considering him his friend[25]. According to the saga, Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson also met Earl Hákon and had good dealings with him, obtaining timber for house building[26]. Jarl Håkon is described in the same manner in *Viga-Glúms saga*[27] and *Hallfreðar saga*[28]. Still,

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Jenny Jochens 1995, 77-78.

[25] *Laxdœla saga*, chapter 32.

[26] *Laxdœla saga*, chapters 11-12.

[27] A saga written in the first half of the 13th century. The protagonist, Vigfús Glúmsson, though strong-willed, appears almost like a lawless person. See G. Turville-Petre, *Viga-Glúms Saga*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, Clarendon, 1960, repr. 1967).

[28] The main character of this saga, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld („Troublesome poet"), deals with many dilemmas in his conversion from paganism to Christianity as well as in his relations to Óláfr Tryggvason and some other Norwegian rulers. See „Die Saga von Hallfreð dem Schwierigen / Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds" Klaus Böldl, Andreas Vollmer, Julia Zernack (eds.), *Die Isländersagas in 4 Bänden mit einem Begleitband* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2011).

not all family sagas maintain this positive image[29]. In *Eyrbyggja saga* [30], Vermundr was warmly welcomed by the Earl who appreciated the Icelandic visitor's family and even agreed to his guest's wish that he be gifted with two berserkers. Earl Hákon provided Vermundr with the berserkers he asked for but at the same time counseled him that they would not be of any luck. The association between the Earl and that ferocious archetype of pagan warriors had been noted by Ármann Jakobsson, who likens it to *forneskja* (witchcraft, sorcery)[31]. Again, almost similarly to the case of Queen Gunnhildr, the ruler of Norway is imagined as being able to control supernatural forces, bringing us close to our supposition that the perception of the Icelandic saga-writers of the Norwegian Kings bordered the supernatural as the monarch was perceived as an Outsider, whose power could have had both angelic and demonic influence.

To illustrate this hypothesis with one more example, in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*[32] and *Finnboga saga ramma*[33], the Icelandic hero that arrived at the court of Earl Hákon was forced to battle a *blámaðr* (a "Black man", literally "blue-man"). No reason was given in the sagas for this trial set forth by the King, except his spite of the hero's strength[34]. In Old Norse society, the *blámaðr* can be interpreted in an ethnic way, simply referring to inhabitants from the south, or, as it probably was the case here in the saga, as demonic characters, who are fierce opponents and make loud, terrifying

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[29] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 152.

[30] *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, dating from the middle or later part of the 13th century, tells the story of the people of Þórsnes and Alptafjörðr, focusing on the conflict between the protagonist, Chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson (Snorri goði, or Snorri the priest) and Arnkel Goði. See Paul Schach, *Eyrbyggja saga (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959).*

[31] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 152.

[32] A saga written in a later period (probably the 14th or even the 16th century) in which Greenland was presented as a land of opportunity. See Jóhannes Halldórsson (ed.), *Kjalnesinga saga. Jökuls þáttr Búasonar. Víglundar saga. Króka-Refs saga. Þórðar saga hreðu. Finnboga saga. Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959), 343-379.

[33] *The Saga of Finnbogi the Strong*, recounts the story of a northern Icelander from the 10th century who travels through his country and through Norway and overcomes unfavourable odds in fulfilling his fate. See W. Bryant Bachman, Jr., Guðmundur Erlingsson (transl.), *The saga of Finnbogi the Strong* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990).

[34] Phillip Pulsiano 1993, 250.

noises in battle, have yellow cat eyes and manifest various features of monstrosity or animal-human hybridity identifiable in descriptions of the *Stranger* [35]. The keeping of the *blámaðr* as a sort of the house-pet by Earl Hákon in *Gunnars saga* offers an exotic representation of the King, who is not simply acting evil but is able to do so by exerting control over such fiendish minions.

Returning to the role of Earl Hákon in other sagas, it is much more important in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where he appears in the hypostasis of quest-giver and luck-bearing ruler[36]. In the first position, he sends Þráinn to exercise vengeance for him on a lawless Viking, while in the second position, he receives Gunnar with such extraordinary friendship and admiration that the Earl even offers his sister's hand in marriage to the guest[37]. In many sagas, there is this minor recurring motif of the Icelandic guest to the Norwegian court who is so charismatic that he/she becomes either involved in an affair or in a marriage proposal. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, when Þráinn forsakes the friendship offered by the Early by protecting an enemy of the court, luck leaves him and his fate takes a turn for the worse[38].

To offer a general view of the Kings in the Icelandic saga, in regards to *Laxdœla saga* it may be asserted that monarch did occupy a central role. This is unlike family sagas written in the eastern parts of Iceland[39], where Kings were only briefly mentioned in the sagas[40]. In *Laxdœla saga*, just like in the case of the other family sagas, the role of the Kings was to confirm – in some way – the heroism or the noble lineage of the Icelandic hero. The leaders of Norway appear as sources of great honour for the Icelandic travellers who visit them and offer them their service. *Laxdœla saga* also stands out because its heroes do not have to perform any kind of task or quest for the King (which are usually not hard to achieve in the other sagas).

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[35] Richard Cole, „Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature. The Case of the Blámaðr" *Saga-Book* 39 (2015): 5-24.

[36] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 152.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Such as *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Reykdœla saga*, and *Fljótsdæla saga*.

[40] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 154.

The men and women of *Laxdœla* are showered with honours and gifts by the King simply because of their superior "pedigree"[41]. The importance of the interaction with the Kings of Norway appears significant in *Laxdœla saga*, and in the older *Egils saga* and *Hallfreôar saga* as a general feature of the older family sagas[42]. Although Haraldr hárfagri appears as a tyrannical ruler in many family sagas, where his harsh policies are considered the reason why many families left for Iceland, no general tendency can be identified towards the negative depiction of Norwegian kings. King Haraldr hárfagri's campaign of terror against various chieftains is the exception to this rule, as generally the person of the monarch is an angelic one (with the few exceptions mentioned above), who bestows good fortune and treasures to the intrepid Icelandic adventurer. The King is not subject to critical scrutiny as happens in the Kings' sagas[43]. In the words of Ármann Jakobsson:

> "The Kings' Sagas are concerned with the idea of kingship. This makes their authors critical of individual kings, who clearly fall short of the ideal. The Icelandic Family Sagas, as a rule, do not judge kings so harshly. There, the kings usually appear as patrons of the Icelandic protagonists and thus confirm their worth. This is evident in *Laxdœla saga* where the kings welcome all members of the Laxdælir as equals. *Hallfreðar saga* may be seen as a large *þáttr*[44] about an Icelander and his service to a noble king. This can also be said of *Fóstbrœðra saga*, while the protagonists of *Grettis saga* and *Harðar saga* are not favoured enough by fortune to enjoy the respect of the king. This is indeed a harsh fate, as the favours of kings seem to be a coveted prize in the Family Sagas"[45]

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[41] Ibid., 154-155.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 157.
[44] "Strand" (of rope). The term refers to a short story genre, similar to a saga as subject but different in breadth.
[45] Ármann Jakobsson 2002, 157.

Therefore, the presentation of different icons of kingship in *Laxdœla saga* coupled with references to *Egils saga* and other family sagas has been connected to the hypothesis that in this *genre* the Icelandic authors portray the King either in an extremely positive or in a very negative manner. Arguments and examples have been brought to suggest that this duality in the representation of the monarch stems from the perception of the King of Norway as a *Stranger* or an *Outsider* to the Icelandic society. Some examples have been identified where the deeds of the Kings or of the Icelandic heroes bear similarity with elements from the chivalric culture in mainland Europe[46].

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[46] Ármann Jakobsson, "Royal Pretenders and Faithful Retainers: The Icelandic Vision of Kingship in Transition" *Gardar* 30, (1999), 51.

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