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Resumo

O presente estudo explora o modo como o usurpador norueguês, o rei Sverre (1184-1202), fez uso do enterro de três príncipes para provocar a queda do monarca reinante e estabelecer a sua dinastia. Em 1179 e 1184 o rei Sverre aproveitou as suas vitórias militares para conquistar o apoio popular às suas pretensões ao trono, transformando o funeral dos seus mais destacados inimigos, mortos nos campos de batalha, no palco da sua propaganda política, através de discursos e de encenações rituais. A própria agonia de Sverre, bem como os seus funerais, foram meticulosamente encenados com o objetivo de alinhar a sua sucessão e defender os seus direitos perante as acusações de excomunhão. Este estudo analisa os desafios enfrentados por um usurpador no seu caminho ao poder régio e, em particular, a coexistência do combate militar com o esforço de persuasão política.

Palavras-chave: Usurpador, rituais, enterramentos, propaganda, discursos

Abstract

The present study explores how the Norwegian usurper, King Sverre (1184-1202) exploited three princely burials to overthrow the ruling king and establish his dynasty. Both in 1179 and 1184, King Sverre took full advantage of his military victories to gain popular support for his claims to the throne, in transforming the burial of his most prominent enemies felt on the battlefield into a rostrum for his political propaganda, through speeches and ritual staging. Sverre's own agony and funerals were also meticulously staged in order to defend his rule from accusations of excommunication and pave the way for his succession. The study provides insights on the challenges met by a usurper on his way to royal power and, in particular, on the concomitant relationship between military combat and the work of political persuasion.

Keywords: Usurper, rituals, burials, propaganda, speeches



Staging deaths: King Sverre or a usurper's path to the throne

David Brégaint

In 1177, the defrocked priest Sverre Sigurdsson left the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic for the shores of Norway with the resolute intention of claiming the throne of Norway¹. According to the *Sverris saga*², soon after landing in Norway, Sverre took command of a rebel faction, the Birchlegs, whom he subsequently led to numerous victories. Eventually, Sverre became the sole king and went on to “enjoy” 18 long, yet troubled years in power. His rise to royal power was troubled likewise, as the Norwegian throne was already occupied by King Magnus V Erlingsson (1161-1184), who needed to be driven out.

Like any usurper with royal ambitions, Sverre faced two main challenges: to gain support for his cause and, in turn, eliminate his enemies. However, Sverre suffered from several handicaps. These are summed up perfectly in the prologue of a late 14th-century version of the *Sverris saga*: “But neither goods nor kin supported Sverre and no friends either, as one should know, as he came in the country young and alone and unknown to any”³. No one in Norway was waiting for him or ready and willing to support his cause. The latter challenge proved particularly troublesome and would remain a stumbling block until his death in 1202. His claim to the throne rested upon a dubious assertion of royal descent, as he declared he was an illegitimate son of the late King Sigurd II Munn (1133-1155). His kinship with that monarch could not be legally proven, nor was there

¹ This article was originally a paper presented at the international conference, *Debuerit habere Regnum. – Deposing and Proclaiming Kings in the Middle Ages*, Lisbon 12th -14th October 2016.

² The English translation of the *Sverris saga* used in this article is *THE SAGA of King Sverri of Norway*. Ed. J. Sephton. Somerset: Llanerch Press, 1899 (Later abbreviated SvS).

³ SvS, prologue.

anyone in Norway ready to acknowledge it⁴. Furthermore, his intention of asserting his claim by force seemed incredible, for Sverre neither commanded armies nor possessed the resources needed to finance or attract military backing. Claiming the Norwegian throne with so little political, legal and military support looked like it must be a stillborn enterprise.

Yet Sverre's unlikely schemes profited from favorable circumstances. First, the ruling king, Magnus Erlingsson, was challenged on both political and military fronts. His election to the throne in 1161 and his coronation in 1163, the first of its kind in Scandinavia, also rested upon questionable foundations. He was made king based on his kinship with a queen, which according to the traditional lines of succession should not have qualified him for kingship. Moreover, Snorre Sturlusson's main political saga, *Heimskringla*, depicts the crowning of Magnus Erlingsson as the outcome of an improvised compromise between the king's father, Earl Erling Skakke, and the archbishop of Norway⁵. In this respect, Sverre faced a ruler who was himself a usurper of sorts. For this reason, other pretenders to the throne and their parties regularly contested Magnus Erlingsson's power by military means. Although Magnus and his father were generally successful in quelling these threats, Sverre reckoned that he could potentially channel these resistance movements in his favor, pledging to champion and, in turn, profit from existing military and political opposition forces.

Given these political premises, Sverre had no other option than to establish his claim by force of arms. However, while Sverre's way to power was largely dependent on his military victories, he also needed to address another necessary element that could secure him the throne: popular and political support. Popular support was decisive, because once his authority over the population and its elite was accepted, Sverre could draw

⁴ The sole 'proof' of his kingly descent is concealed in the *Sverris saga*, a text of propaganda aimed at legitimizing Sverre's seizure of royal power. According to the saga, in his childhood, Sverre heard from his mother that he was son of King Sigurd II Munn (SvS Ch. 4); a state that, according to the traditional system of succession, qualified him for the royal title. Scholars have questioned Sverre's alleged kinship with King Sigurd. Indeed, many contemporaries seriously doubted Sverre's paternal claims. Sverre himself very seldom put forward his royal origin as the criterion legitimizing his claims to the throne, like in Ch. 59, preferring to stress his personal achievements. See in KRAG, Claus – *Norges historie fram til 1319*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000, pp. 241-242.

⁵ SNORRE STURLASON – *Saga of Magnus Erlingsson*. Ed. Samuel Laing. *Heimskringla: A history of the Norse Kings*. London: Norroena Society, 1907, Ch. 21.

resources, whether in the form of taxes or recruits to his army, to wage his war against King Magnus. Indeed, economic stakes were crucial to the war, in particular concerning the possession of a fleet. In the particular Norwegian context, no contender could mount a serious military challenge to King Magnus without boats, which ensured a swifter transportation of troops than on land. For Sverre's strategy, this meant abandoning guerrilla warfare for large-scale encounters⁶. However, the mobilizing of vessels or their construction needed the population to be willing to contribute. In addition, the possession of fleet was in itself a mark of power. As we will see, an armada conferred upon its leader a prestige that could be instrumentalised for propaganda purposes. Sverre's challenge lay precisely in winning victories on the battlefields as well as in the minds of the people. A series of propitious episodes allowed Sverre to combine his military victories with a persuasion campaign: the burial ceremonies of Erling Skakke in 1179 after the battle of Kalvskinnet, and of King Magnus Erlingsson in 1184 following his death in the naval battle of Fimreiti.

The aim of this article is to explore Sverre's skillful exploitation of these burial ceremonies for his own political benefit by creating a rostrum for his political arguments. The following analysis will shed light on Sverre's use of orality, the medium of speech, and ritual staging to heighten the impact of his defeat of the incumbent monarch, thus obtaining royal authority for himself. In addition, it will emphasize how the constantly changing balance of power shaped the very foundations for Sverre's propaganda: Sverre adapted his speeches and staging to each particular situation. The aforementioned burials are well known to scholars treating about the Civil war and King Sverre's march to power. However, in a general manner, these episodes have simply counted for pivotal successive steps in Sverre's conquest of power⁷. In addition, Sverre's burial orations have only been treated whether as eminent examples of the king's rhetorical skills or as a source for his royal ideology⁸. Yet, earlier scholarship has

⁶ KRAG, Claus – “Sverre vinner kongedømmet”. in OLSEN, Per E. (red.) – *Norges kriger. Fra Hafrsford til Afghanistan*. Norge: Vega Forlag, 2011, pp. 104-109.

⁷ BAGGE, Sverre – *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. København: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010, pp. 40-52.

⁸ BAGGE, Sverre – *From gang leader to the Lord's anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1996, pp. 31 and 68; KNIRK, James E. – *Oratory in the king's sagas*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981, pp. 99-126; KRAG, Claus – *Sverre. Norges største middelalderkonge*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005, pp. 72-77.

largely failed to examine their meanings in the changing context of Sverre's assertion of power and in connection to his military victories. Finally, the staging of death in order to gain royal power was not restricted to the deaths of his enemies. Once he had gained the throne, Sverre's last challenge was to secure his succession. Thus, as an eminent example of Sverre's political opportunism and propaganda, we will lastly explore Sverre's efforts to stage his own agony and death in 1202 in an attempt to render his authority more enduring. The case of King Sverre, a usurper in the peripheral kingdom of Norway, will enrich our understanding of royal usurpers, the pressing challenges they faced, and the strategies they devised in within the medieval monarchic context.

Before proceeding to the analysis, we must first address two central issues: the ambivalent character of Sverre as a usurper, and the challenging source situation. First, Sverre's situation with respect to the ruling king was ambiguous as his royal ambitions were not entirely those of a usurper. Although Magnus Erlingsson's crowning and anointment in 1163 was followed by a rule of succession that established the Norwegian monarchy, the traditional system of joint kingship and agnatic succession was not obsolete and still had ardent supporters, especially among the families of royal descent⁹. At the very start of his journey to royal power, Sverre only aimed to claim a share of the kingdom¹⁰. However, this was unthinkable for King Magnus and the Church, and King Sverre would never have been acknowledged as anything other than a usurper. Finally, the different episodes addressed in this study stem from a single source, the *Sverris saga*, a situation that raises source-critical questions, which we can only address briefly here¹¹. The eponymous saga recounts the life of King Sverre from his arrival to Norway to his death in 1202. It was written, in part, during the king's own lifetime and later completed a decade after his death¹². It is unquestionably a masterful work of

⁹ The first Law of Succession was issued following Magnus Erlingsson's crowning in 1163 in Bergen. The Law established sole kingship in Norway for the first time and invalidated the earlier formal right of any sons of kings to the throne. Royal succession was based on the principles of male primogeniture and legitimate birth. See BAGGE, Sverre – *From Viking Stronghold*, pp. 166 ff.

¹⁰ For instance, as late as the summer of 1182, King Sverre met King Magnus Erlingsson in Bergen to discuss a truce. During the meeting, King Sverre offered to Magnus to split the kingdom in two halves, leaving him the choice of the part he preferred to rule. King Magnus refused and told Sverre to leave the country or to die on the battlefield. SvS Ch. 60.

¹¹ For a deeper investigation of the historical accuracy of *Sverris saga*'s speeches, see KNIRK, James E. – *Oratory*, pp. 114-118, and BAGGE, Sverre – *From gang leader*, pp. 1-18.

¹² It is commonly acknowledged that the beginning of the *Sverris saga* (whose extent is still not clearly defined), also known as *Gryla*, was written by the Icelandic abbot Karl Jonsson during a stay in Norway

propaganda aiming at legitimizing Sverre's path to royal power and discrediting the rebels against Sverre's successors in the context of the Civil War (1130-1240). For this reason, we should approach these episodes with caution, bearing in mind their function in the legitimization and glorification of Sverre's kingship. In particular, the different speeches upon which this analysis is based may not reflect Sverre's orations word for word. They may have been based upon the testimony of witnesses who were still alive when the saga was completed. But they also may have sprung from the author's imagination. However, it is my contention that political propaganda necessarily must enjoy a certain degree of credibility in order to be successful¹³. The saga addressed an audience that was most probably composed of the still living protagonists of these staged burials, necessarily limiting the author's textual manipulations. In other words, although we cannot take every piece of information for granted, it is reasonable to assume that there is some truth in the events narrated in the saga.

Feasting on the Earl's grave

The battle of Kalvskinnet near Nidaros (now known as Trondheim) in the summer of 1179 was crucial to Sverre's path to power in Norway. Until then, he and his men had been successful in leading skirmishes and guerilla-like warfare against King Magnus Erlingsson. The encounter in Nidaros, where he fell unexpectedly on Magnus and his father Earl Erling, was the first large-scale battle he fought¹⁴. Sverre won his first major victory, killing several of the king's hirdmen¹⁵, putting the king to flight and seizing his fleet, but the battle had also had a further crucial outcome: Erling Skakke, the royal vanguard and father of the incumbent king, lay slain upon the battlefield. Erling's death was a serious blow to Magnus and his partisans. Earl Erling had been the real military leader of the royal troops and his death left the young and unexperienced king alone to face a military strategist on the rise: King Sverre. Symbolically, too, the defeat was a

between 1185 and 1188. The final and probably larger part of the saga was probably completed by Karl during the first decade of the 13th century after Sverre's death in 1202. See BAGGE, Sverre – *From Gang Leader*, pp. 15-19; HOLM-OLSEN, L. – “Sverris saga”. in OLSEN, O. *et alii* (ed.) – *Kultur historisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformasjonstid*. København: Rosenkilde og Bagger 1978, Vol. XVII, pp. 551-558.

¹³ ELLUL, Jacques – *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. London: Vintage Books Edition, 1973 (1965), pp. 294 ff.

¹⁴ SvS Ch. 37

¹⁵ 'Hirdmen' is the name given to the retainers of Norwegian princes.

disaster for Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1157-1188), Magnus's most steadfast supporter, as it took place in Nidaros, the head of the archbishopric and the very home of the archbishop. The death of the earl in Nidaros provided Sverre not only with control over the region around Nidaros, but also with an unhoped for opportunity to leave an impression and reverse the power relations. The saga recounts that after the battle, the earl's body was carried into town and prepared for burial at Christ Church¹⁶. The staging of the burial is not described in much detail; it is only mentioned that King Sverre stood in the open, outside the walls of the Nidaros cathedral, over Erling's grave. However, the brevity of the text does not detract from the dramaturgy of Sverre's posture. Indeed, the saga narrates several similar situations in which Sverre addressed the public, standing and waiting for the proper moment to speak, building up an atmosphere of suspense and expectations. The saga also mentions liturgical chants and a "beautiful service" from the clerics present, attesting that the burial ceremony had thus followed the regular pattern for solemn burials¹⁷. Thus, for the one who stood to give the eulogy was none other than Sverre, whose aims were rather political than sentimental: in paying his tribute, he hoped to elaborate upon the significance of his military victory by delivering a propaganda speech.

Reading the *Sverris saga*, it is unsurprising that Sverre felt comfortable with holding a public speech under these circumstances. The saga recounts numerous speeches, both battle speeches to encourage his men and several public orations in assemblies, portraying the king as a clever orator¹⁸. His personal eulogy presents him as "most eloquent in speech; his ideas were lofty, his articulation was distinct, and when he spoke, the ring of his voice was so clear that though he did not appear to speak loudly, all understood him"¹⁹. Although an outstanding military strategist, King Sverre also knew how to manipulate using the weapon of persuasion, which in the proto-literary context of the time made public orations the best instrument for propaganda²⁰.

¹⁶ SvS Ch. 38.

¹⁷ BRÉGAIN, David – *Vox regis. Royal communication in High Medieval Norway*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 109-114.

¹⁸ See KNIRK, James E. – *Oratory*, pp. 99-126; INDREBØ, Gustav – "Innleiding". in JÓNSSON, Karl – *Sverris saga*. Ed. Gustav Indrebø, Historiske Kildeskriftkommission. Münch: Kristiania, 1920, pp. lxxvii-lxxi. For King Sverre's battle speeches, see BAGGE, Sverre – *From gang leader*, pp. 25-33.

¹⁹ SvS Ch. 181.

²⁰ Brégaint, David – *Vox regis*, pp. 103-114.

The context of Erling's burial on the heels of battle dictated the form and the content of Sverre's performance. Sverre had won a military encounter, but had yet to win the war. Combining acerbic attacks with a dash of irony and humor, Sverre's speech aimed to exacerbate the struggle against the king and his party, undermining Magnus's legitimacy and attacking his credibility. He began by ironizing the archbishop's promise that those who fell against Sverre upon the battlefield would go directly to heaven and become saints to worship. Sverre argued these men should not be worshiped for what they could do for the living, but that the audience should rather pray for them and their rest²¹. This humorous argumentation was a skilled rhetorical device establishing a strong premise upon which Sverre could build his speech's line of argument. First, he portrayed the fallen Erling not as a saint, but as a sinner. Sverre declared that Earl Erling bore the helmet of terror (“*ægishjálmr*”), portraying Erling as a *perturbator pacis*, one who brought death and destruction not only to Sverre and his men, but to many more²². Indeed, Erling's fight was rooted in the fallacious initiative of elevating his own son to the rank of king; an outrageous undertaking, argued Sverre, that deprived rightful royal claimants of their titles²³. In stigmatizing Erling, Sverre indirectly addressed the legal foundation of Magnus Erlingsson's rights. This issue was, of course, fundamental for Sverre, as it cast doubts on the king's legitimacy and thus weakened the loyalty of Magnus' partisans. Finally, in stigmatizing Erling as a peacebreaker and his death as the end of tyranny, King Sverre presented himself as the one who had set wrong to right, as a *rex iustus* bringing peace and justice to the realm.

The military victory and the funeral of Erling also served another purpose: to garner support for Sverre's cause, including the support of his own men as well as that of his defeated enemies and supporters. Standing over the body of his enemies' military commander was a splendid opportunity for Sverre to motivate his troops for the upcoming battles. Sverre's speech had begun with praising their triumph, which he interpreted as a divine sign: victory was God's will, which was manifest in Erling's

²¹ SvS Ch. 38.

²² SvS Ch. 38.

²³ “(...) he, a mere baron caused the title of king to be given to his son; and more than that, collected a force and raised his standard against king's sons, King Hakon and King Eystein, both of whom he deprived of their realm, over which he rules with King Magnus without any more rightful title than I now declare to you”. SvS Ch. 38.

defeat and death at the hands of Sverre and his men. In other words, God had found his champion, Sverre, and was thus backing him in his struggle. Divine support would strengthen the faith of Sverre's warriors in his cause and sanction the legitimacy of his claims to the throne.

Yet the speech was also directed at another audience: Sverre spoke just as much to Erling's surviving supporters – the majority of the people of Nidaros, who originally were loyal to King Magnus, and in particular clerics from the cathedral, who, as the saga suggests, were present at the burial ceremony²⁴. Vanquished and leaderless, these men could be persuaded to rally behind Sverre. As a way of creating doubt in the minds of his enemies and their supporters, Sverre's oration sought first to elevate his victory as the foundational act of a new era, a turning point or 'alda skipti' in the course of time and more particularly in the balance of power:

“Times are greatly changed, as you may see, and have taken a marvelous turn, when one man stands in the place of three – king, earl, or archbishop – and I am that one. Much to be seen and known is occurring here now, of great import.”²⁵

These words were a call to his enemies to reassess their situation. They were now at a crossroads. After that momentous day, on which they had been direct witnesses of a new era beginning, there would be no way back. Still under the shock of Erling's death, they were confronted with a choice between a decisive victor, King Sverre, who was now a major force to be reckoned with, and their allegiance to a 'trinity', now diminished and in disarray. Sverre urged these men to “Let every man among you do now what seems best, and what he thinks meetest for himself”²⁶. Having planted the seeds of doubt, Sverre could proceed to undermine their faith in the king's party. The overall tone and argumentation of the speech then stresses that these men had been lured by false pretenses and empty promises. Those whom they supported, Erling and the archbishop, had proven to be political frauds, and nothing of what they prophesied, such

²⁴ “I see many now present here at this grave sorrowing (...)” SvS Ch. 38.

²⁵ SvS Ch. 38.

²⁶ SvS Ch. 38.

as the fate of the men dying for the king, would come to pass. Sverre's speech aimed to stress how dire their situation was, compelling them to reconsider their loyalties.

King Sverre thus wanted to make his victory in Nidaros and its aftermath a significant turning point in his struggle for power against King Magnus Erlingsson. The saga itself played a part in presenting Sverre's victory and Erling's death as a pivotal event, stating that “[a]fter this battle and the fall of Earl Erling, King Sverri's power grew to such a height that there was no-one in Norway, except King Magnus and his men, who did not call him King” (my emphasis)²⁷. Finally, according to the text the event also marked a significant shift in popular opinion about the Birchlegs. While these owed their rather disparaging name to their poor social origins, their victory in Nidaros meant that their heroism and bravery was now acclaimed throughout the kingdom²⁸.

Feasting on the king's grave

The second speech to be analyzed here developed in very similar fashion to that given at the burial of Earl Erling: an oration held at the burial of King Magnus Erlingsson following his defeat against Sverre at the battle of Fimreiti, near the town of Bergen, in 1184²⁹. The context, however, was quite different. Here, it was not the military commander of the king's faction who was to be buried, but rather the king himself. This was, of course, a major turn in Sverre's quest for royal power. During the five years preceding the battle of Fimreiti, King Sverre's power had grown stronger; he had defeated King Magnus on several occasions, even forcing him and Archbishop Eysteinn to flee the country for some periods of time³⁰. Now King Magnus's death had cleared Sverre's path to the throne, which he could ascend to on more peaceful terms. However, years of war had divided the realm into irreconcilable factions. If Sverre wished to

²⁷ SvS Ch. 40.

²⁸ “Hitherto wherever in market towns or other places great persons were present, if a man was called Birkibein [Birchlegs] it was thought a mark of contempt; henceforth the name was a title of honour, and the bearers of it were highly esteemed.” SvS Ch. 40. The term “Birchleg” was pejorative and originates in King Magnus's propaganda, which portrayed the rebels as so poor that they made their shoes of birch bark.

²⁹ SvS Ch. 93.

³⁰ In 1180, Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson, facing King Sverre's repeated successes after the death of Earl Erling, chose to sail to northern England where he stayed for three years before coming back in 1183 and reconciling with Sverre. In the spring of 1183, King Magnus was ambushed by Sverre's troops in the town of Bergen. Magnus succeeded in escaping and fled to Denmark, leaving his coronation crown and scepter behind him.

establish his rule beyond doubt, he needed to either rally the support of the late king's followers or, at the very least, compel them to abandon their fight. Magnus's burial became the stage upon which Sverre could articulate this new political agenda.

Indeed, for Sverre, the interment of King Magnus was envisioned as a decisive act in the transfer of power. The battle in which Magnus had fallen was a naval engagement. Magnus had drowned and Sverre expended considerable energy in recovering his body, mobilizing every warrior in the search³¹. Once Sverre had the body in his possession, he directed his fleet to Bergen. The arrival of the fleet near the town was the first act in Sverre's persuasion campaign. This arrival could not be discreet; on the contrary, it was staged as a royal entry showing the inhabitants of Bergen, a town long loyal to Magnus, that a powerful victor was coming. As explained in the saga, Sverre orchestrated a grand display of his fleet in an effort to astound the townsmen with his power: "Before he sailed in front of the town the King commanded his men so to arrange the approach that their force might impress to the utmost the eyes of the townsmen."³² When the king docked at the town's wharf, he was received in princely fashion with church bells ringing and a procession³³. Sverre had thus left nothing to chance, and this meticulously prepared show of force was the prelude to the burial that engineered a direct link between the ceremony and the battle from which Sverre had emerged victorious.

Building upon his military victory at Fimreiti, Sverre claimed a dominant role in the ceremony. He first exploited this control to put a definitive end to the war. As the saga mentions, Magnus was to be interred inside Christ Church, in the space near the altar. King Sverre is then said to have stood over the grave together with Pál, Bishop of Bergen, in front of all the townsmen. Magnus's body, which Sverre had been so anxious to recover, was publicly displayed on his order so that the whole audience could identify the defunct ruler, precluding any potential imposters from continuing the fight under a false identity³⁴. With this display, Sverre aimed to emphasize that the conflict had ceased because one of its protagonists was no more. This device took up the topos of the 'turning point' from Sverre's speech over Erling's grave. His victory and the death of

³¹ SvS Ch. 95.

³² SvS Ch. 97.

³³ SvS Ch. 97.

³⁴ SvS Ch. 97.

the king marked the irremediable end of an era. His speech, laudatory and mild, also aimed to achieve the same goals, albeit in a different manner. Although not as long as the one he held at Erling's grave, this speech was highly informative. While the words employed are interesting, it is those that are left out that are most fascinating. Unlike the earlier speech, this one resembled a standard funeral eulogy. Sverre praised Magnus as a great king, "kind and loving to his friends and kinsmen", mentioning his honor and his royal kinship, "an honorable chief in many respects, and adorned by kingly descent"³⁵. The tone of Sverre's speech was also mild and compassionate³⁶. The struggle in which they had been opponents through many years and battles was reduced to a mere disagreement: "he and I, kinsmen, had not the good fortune to agree. He was hard to me and my men; may God forgive him now all his transgressions"³⁷. The death and destruction that Magnus had inflicted upon Sverre were now forgiven. With the words and tone of Sverre's speech five years earlier in mind, one can hardly believe that Erling and Magnus had belonged to the same faction. Even more remarkable here is Sverre's silence on any potentially problematic issues. He makes no reference to Magnus's illegitimate claim to the throne, nor did he use the speech as a platform from which to put forward his own right or God's supposed support of his cause. Compared to the battle that had taken Earl Erling's life five years earlier, Sverre's military victory over Magnus in Fimreiti presented an equally good opportunity to equate the fate of battle with the will of God. However, none of these motifs is elaborated upon in Sverre's speech. Sverre's funeral oration for King Magnus was meant to be consensual, not to fuel hostilities; to sooth antagonisms, not exacerbate them. It was now time to prepare for his rule, to demonstrate magnanimity, to gather popular support and to rally his previous enemies to his cause. Finally, Sverre's generosity and nobility of mind, so emphatically demonstrated throughout the burial, was also revealed in his particular care for Magnus's grave; the tomb was adorned with coverlets and a balustrade was set up around it. Magnus's grave obviously deserved the greatest honor attached to the

³⁵ SvS Ch. 97.

³⁶ It has been argued that the laudatory character of the speech held over King Magnus's grave can be explained by the fact that it was King Magnus himself who had commissioned the redaction of this part of the saga (BLÖNDAL, Lárus – *Um uppruna Sverrissögu*. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1982). However, there is very little that supports this interpretation and the scholarship has definitively dismissed this hypothesis.

³⁷ SvS Ch. 97.

royal function. Sverre was now entitled to precisely this same function; from now on, he expected the same respect and reverence.

Staging your own death

Like a vulture feasting on corpses, Sverre had unscrupulously exploited the death of his enemies to fuel his royal ambitions. Unfortunately for him, the death of King Magnus did not put an end to the war. The Church and the archbishop of Nidaros, long-time allies of King Magnus, carried on the rebellion, both on the battlefield and in rhetorical terms. In the eyes of the Church, Sverre was the regicide of a crowned king, and his rule could not be accepted. The opposition escalated when the archbishop Eirik Ivarsson (1188-1205) excommunicated Sverre in 1194 or 1196. Soon after the death of King Magnus, a new party, the Baglers³⁸, had appeared around a new pretender, Inge Magnusson. Founded by the bishop of Oslo, Nicholas Arnason, the Baglers threatened Sverre's control over the kingdom. Ecclesiastical opposition, the weight of excommunication, and constant warfare were to plague Sverre until the end of his reign – indeed, until his very last breath. The third and final episode that I wish to explore does not concern the burial of Sverre's enemies, but his own death. When Sverre fell ill and sensed his impending death in 1202, he meticulously prepared his own agony.

A propagandist at heart, Sverre viewed his own death as a splendid final opportunity to realize his political dream: to impose his royal rule over the realm of Norway. This time, as a king who had conquered the throne, his ambition was to extend his rule beyond his own death. Sverre had a son, Hákon Sverresson (1182-1204), whom he publicly acknowledged as his true heir on his deathbed³⁹. However, ecclesiastical opposition threatened the political edifice, which Sverre had so patiently erected by continuing to oppose his heir. As part of his recommendations to his son, Sverre thus urged Hákon to make peace with the Church. For his own part, reconciliation with the Church was impossible, and Sverre deployed a last effort to weaken ecclesiastical resistance, staging his own agony and death in a manner that sought to prove the fallacy

³⁸ Their name stems from the Norse word 'bagall' meaning crosier, the bishop's staff.

³⁹ SvS Ch. 180.

of the Church's struggle against his line. The saga tells that King Sverre demanded to be propped upon the throne until his final breath:

“Now before I am anointed, I wish to be set in the high-seat, where I will abide, come better come worse. And if I die here in the high-seat, my friends standing around me, the death and the story of it will be other than Bishop Nicholas Arnason will expect; for he said that I should be smitten down like an ox, and be food for hound and raven. But God be thanked that He has protected me in many struggles from the weapons of my foes.”⁴⁰

The dying king thus wished to disprove an earlier prediction, made by his fiercest rival, Bishop Nicholas Arnason of Oslo that Sverre would die alone in a ditch with scavengers feasting upon his flesh. No, Sverre was dying perched upon the throne, the supreme symbol of royal power, as a king with his loyal subjects around him. This striking demonstration of the prelate's error also allowed Sverre to touch upon the recurring theme of the king's divine legitimacy. Sverre's conquest of power, his success in battles but also in defeating his enemies' propaganda (in this particular case through staging his death) had been God's will all along. Sverre's wish was certainly that God's sanction of his rule would pass on to his son and his right to succeed to his father.

Sverre's excommunication had been the climax of his struggle with the Church. Killing a king, Magnus Erlingsson, whose rule and legitimacy had never been fully accepted was less of a burden than being exposed to the Church's highest punishment. The papal excommunication also had direct consequences for the people of the realm, as the country was most probably placed under ecclesiastical interdict⁴¹. The clergy's temporary refusal to carry out liturgical rites such as mass and baptisms not only exposed Sverre himself to great unpopularity – a serious impediment for a ruler who

⁴⁰ SvS Ch. 180.

⁴¹ We have no explicit proof that the realm, or the parts of the realm under King Sverre's authority, were placed under ecclesiastical interdict. The sole reference to such a penalty is mentioned in a letter from Pope Innocent II to the Norwegian bishops that if Sverre did not comply with the Church's requests, he would bring the punishment upon himself. However, scholars usually admit that the realm was effectively placed under interdict as ecclesiastical interdict usually was *latae sententiae*, automatically following excommunication. See in GUNNES, Erik – *Kongens Ære. Kongemakt og kirke i "En Tale mot biskopene"*. Norge: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1971, pp. 269-295.

strove to win popular support. An even more serious threat was that the interdict released his subjects from their oath of fidelity and obedience. The staging of his death thus also sought to prove the fallacy and injustice of his excommunication.

“Leave my face uncovered when I am dead, that my friends and foes may both see if there is any mark on my body of the ban wherewith my foes have cursed and excommunicated me. If the signs are no better than they say, I shall not then be able to conceal them.”⁴²

Thus, as he had in his display of King Magnus Erlingsson's body, King Sverre intended to exploit his own corpse for his propagandistic aims. The reference to physical marks of excommunication on the body is puzzling, as this phenomenon is not documented in medieval literature. Nor is it known whether these marks belonged to the Norse world of magic⁴³. Be this as it may, the whole staging suggests a popular belief that excommunicated individuals bore signs of their punishment in their flesh. It even implies that Sverre had been victim of some sort of propaganda that spread rumors that he was marked following his excommunication in 1196. Obviously, Sverre's request that his naked body be displayed to the public, allowing witnesses to search for the stigma of his excommunication, aimed at proving that these rumors were wrong. This staging of Sverre's death and agony and the displaying of his corpse were part of his strategy of clearing himself of accusations and false predictions. It was a counterpropaganda meant to prove that Sverre's enemies had sought to undermine his legitimacy with lies and deceit. Clearly, Sverre could not benefit directly from this stratagem himself. Sverre was looking beyond his own death. This macabre staging was a final attempt to discredit those challenging his power and through this to strengthen the legitimacy of his successor, Hákon Sverresson, in freeing his future reign and relationship with the Church from the burden of usurpation.

⁴² SvS Ch. 180.

⁴³ Stephon's translation of this passage is not literal concerning the word 'mark'. The original version reads "latid þa sia bædi víní mína ok v-uíni huart þa bírtíz *nockut* a líkama mínum (...)" (my emphasis), "that my friends and foes may both see if there is *something* on my body" (my emphasis). The translation of 'nockut' with 'something' is somewhat vague and does not help us to identify what the author is referring to.

According to the saga, his wish was fulfilled, and “His face was left uncovered, as he had commanded. All who were present observed, and all afterwards bore one and the same testimony, that they had never seen a fairer corpse than his”⁴⁴. The impact of Sverre’s act of propaganda remains difficult to gauge. Hákon Sverresson succeeded his father after his death. He also inherited the opposition of the Church. However, he was more successful in dealing with it than Sverre. In the immediate aftermath of Sverre’s burial, King Hákon made a truce with the clergy. The document that bears witness to the agreement, known as King Hákon’s letter of truce with the Church, makes it clear that both the Church and the crown shared responsibility in the conflict⁴⁵. Even though many elements made this reversal possible, Sverre’s last desperate action may have contributed to it. Although he could just as well have chosen to stage his death in such a way as to stress his humility and repentance in order to ease the situation for his son, Sverre instead chose aggressive propaganda. Ultimately, the public display of his body was meant to influence public opinion and to tip the balance of power in his favor, providing his son with a better foundation for a deal with the Church. Thus, Sverre’s death staging and his call to Hákon to seek peace with the clergy must be interpreted as a unified act of propaganda.

Conclusion

So, what does Sverre’s case reveal about usurpers, their campaigns for power and the challenges with which they were confronted? First, it shows that the path to power often involved a long series of conflicts and that not every fight was played out upon battlefield. Some needed to be acted out upon the stage of communication and propaganda. Enemies needed to be discredited, their position weakened, and their support undermined with words in the context of public rituals. Furthermore, words were necessary to motivate partisans, strengthen loyalties and defend claims. These episodes show in particular that these two forms of combat were intimately related. The successful outcome of a battle provided the usurper with the opportunity to maximize and exploit the strategic advantage obtained by arms to conduct propaganda. Sverre’s appropriation of princely burials is symptomatic of the challenges met by outsiders in

⁴⁴ SvS Ch. 181.

⁴⁵ *NORGES GAMLE Love indtil 1387*. Ed. R. Keyser and P.A. Münch: Kristiania, 1846-1895, Vol I, pp. 444-445.

their quest for power. In contrast to the legitimate ruler, who controlled the communication arenas in his kingdom (even if some of these were in an embryonic state at this time) to propagate his legitimizing ideology, the usurper's scope for communication was far more restricted. Often limited to face-to-face communication, the usurper needed to seize each opportunity to reach a local audience. To stick with military metaphors: the usurper needed to conquer public spaces in order to win the war of propaganda.

However, as Sverre's burial speeches eminently illustrate, the link that connected the battlefield to the propaganda enterprise was not limited to providing an opportunity for the victor to publicize his own propaganda. Both Sverre's performance as well as his oratory arguments rested crucially on this proximity to the battlefield. Whether it was the royal entry of his fleet into Bergen or the public display of Magnus Erlingsson's corpse, the staging of Sverre's interventions turned the other actors involved into a powerful reminder of his power and success. The arguments put forward in his speeches also derived directly from the outcome of the battle. The recurring topoi of victory as a landmark event and of God's intervention, or the mocking of the defeated general, locate Sverre's speeches within the framework of his military success.

Finally, these three successive episodes, in spite of their obvious similarities, attest Sverre's ability to adapt his ritual performance to the respective context. Each of his military victories had a different impact and significance. Incisive verbal attacks when the throne was barely in sight in 1179 were followed a tempered and consensual speech when it was at hand in 1184. King Sverre's own burial was both the occasion for power to be transferred from one generation to the next and a source of worry, as there was ambiguity over the succession. In order to face the threat from the Church, Sverre was compelled to take the staging of his death into his own hands, adapting it using brutal and even quasi-sacrilegious means in the holy precinct of the burial church to free his successor from the stigma of usurpation. Sverre's initiative, although in keeping with his character, may also have been a last move to prevent the irony of the Church exploiting Sverre's burial to achieve its political aims.

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