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Multiple Spaces, Multiple Selves? The Case of King Sverrir of Norway

Abstract: This article discusses the ways King Sverrir Sigurðarson of Norway (r. 1177–1202) perceived and represented himself. It seeks to move beyond the debate on whether he was mainly a leader of warriors who sought recognition for martial honor and success at the battlefield, or whether he consciously used Biblical and hagiographic references to imitate King David and St. Óláfr, the patron saint of Norway. Instead, by taking departure from the concepts of social spaces (Bourdieu) and cultural hybridity (Bakhtin and Young), it is argued that King Sverrir moved between various discourses of the self. This is mostly based on the main sources to Sverrir's life, *Sverris saga*, but also the seal of Sverrir is analysed. The seal is seen as a multivocal expression of the royal self, speaking to several audiences.

Keywords: social spaces, seals, political culture, cultural hybridity, Sverrir Sigurðarson

The life of Sverrir, self-proclaimed son of King Sigurðr *munnr* Haraldsson (r. 1136–1155) and king of Norway from 1177 until his death in 1202, was truly worthy of a saga. *Sverris saga* is wholly devoted to the life and turbulent career of Sverrir, emphasizing his many battles and conflicts with numerous, and seemingly superior, opponents. The saga states that he grew up in the Faroe Isles as the son of a combmaker and his Norwegian wife. Being raised and educated by his uncle Hrói, bishop of the Faroes, he had possibly been ordained a priest by his early twenties. His mother, however, had concealed who his real father was, and during a pilgrimage to Rome she met the Pope and confessed to him that King Sigurðr *munnr* was Sverrir's real father. By papal command, she revealed to her son his royal ancestry. Sverrir then traveled to Norway and became a leader of a small band of warriors, the Birkibeinar ("Birchlegs"). They had opposed King Magnús Erlingsson under the leadership of Sverrir's cousin, but after some initial success in 1176, they had lost both their leader and most of their men at the Battle of Re in 1177.

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Seven years after this seemingly crushing defeat, the Birkibeinar, under Sverrir's leadership, had defeated and killed both King Magnús and his powerful father Erlingr *skakki*. As king, Sverrir managed to defend himself against the excommunications of the archbishops of Nidaros, a papal interdict, and several new pretenders backed by a network of magnates who had lost family members, property, and positions after Sverrir's takeover. In 1202, King Sverrir died peacefully in his bed after having laid the foundations of a royal dynasty that survived well into the fourteenth century.

His turbulent life made him both sworn enemies as well as loyal followers. While his opponents would often call him a coward, impostor, and even an apostate and a servant of the Devil, on his memorial plaque he was remembered as “a model and ornament of faith and manhood” (*dœmi trúar, prýði ok drengskapar*).¹ In modern historiography, his legacy has been no less contested than during his lifetime. Some historians have hailed him as one who defied foreign, papal authority in protecting national interests. Others have dismissed him as an impostor who conned his way to the throne and disrupted the development of Norwegian kingship, while more recent historians have regarded him as one of many pretenders, but who was simply more skilled in military strategy, political rhetoric, and building alliances than his rivals (Krag 2005, 236–54).

This article does not aim to settle whether Sverrir was the son of a king or a combmaker, but rather analyze how he performed and communicated his royal self and shaped others' perceptions of himself during his contested rule. Several scholars have discussed the performative self, maybe most famously by Stephen Greenblatt who saw the Renaissance as the period when people began to fashion individual identities self-consciously. This they did by developing a “consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (Greenblatt 2005, 2) in the creation of oneself according to a set of socially acceptable standards. The self-fashioning in the English Renaissance was, however, not only yet another example of how culture fixed a role or script for the individual, but rather enabled the individual to conceive themselves as being able to enter into and out of malleable roles in life no less than literature. Greenblatt thus contrasts the Renaissance to medieval culture, when, on the one hand, the court disciplined the nobility into strict roles, and, on the other hand, the institution of confession and penitential practices formed a technology of the self: the sinner's inward look, the creation of a strict language of inner life, and the institutional framework that

1 *Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 182. All translations into English from this edition of *Sverris saga* are my own.

created links between narratives and experiences of a self that was constantly under scrutiny (Greenblatt 2005, xiii–xiv).

Several studies have modified such images of medieval conceptions and performances of the self, for instance, Susan Crane, who has argued that people in the fourteenth century used communicative behavior through visual, rhetorical, and material resources to display socially engaged selves during ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and spectacles (Crane 2002). Still, the medieval self has most often been discussed in relation to a religious discourse in which the development of the self was related to God, or to the path to salvation. For scholars like Brian Stock and Suzanne Verderber, the learned humanists and authors of romances may have explored a self-awareness beyond religious circles, but then either as a result of the withdrawal from the world towards inward reflectiveness (Stock 1995, 725), or by the transfer of the institutionalization of private confession and its reflexivity of inner life, separating the inside and outside of individual into other fields, including the courtly context (Verderber 2013, 11).

When Sverrir arrived in Norway in the late 1170s, Norwegian society was a multifaceted one. Thus, he had to relate to several social fields or spaces, both secular and religious institutions and spaces. In this study, “social space” is related to Bourdieu’s understanding of the concept. A social space exists when a certain group of people and institutions compete for a common set of active properties: that is, properties or capital that are able to confer power on their possessor within this space (Bourdieu 1991, 229–30). Individuals are positioned somewhere in a certain social space, which is defined by the accumulation of different types of the active capital, economic or cultural, s/he possesses. Cultural capital implies that every action or choice in a whole range of diverse domains of practices makes a difference, or distinction, between the agents in the given social field. It is the clustering of certain practices, preferences, and symbolic expressions made into lifestyles that constitute “classes” or groups in the social space. These groups have more in common in relation to cultural or symbolic aspects, than simply being defined by economic resources (Bourdieu 1991, 229–51).

Bourdieu further argued that social space tends to be manifested in physical space. The social positions structure the environment and landscape according to the distinctions people bear in their mind:

each agent may be characterized by the place where he or she is situated more or less permanently, that is, by her place of residence [. . .] and by the relative position that her localizations, temporary . . . and permanent, occupy in relation to the localizations of other agents [. . .] It follows that the locus and the place occupied by an agent in appropriated social space are excellent indicators of his or her position in social space.

(Bourdieu 1996, 10)

These spaces, or social contexts, of the agents, are thus linked to the mental organization of the landscape.

At first glance, twelfth-century Norway would have more in common with the Kabyle society in Algeria as Bourdieu analyzed it in the late 1950s, than the French society he studied in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Bourdieu, the Kabyles lived within a unified social space, where a notion of honor was the prime signifier of habitus and the physical space was largely structured around the households. He termed this kind of society “doxic,” which means that the “established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e., as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned” (Bourdieu 1977, 166). Modern nations, on the other hand, would be more complex, consisting of several “sub-fields,” such as fields related to the academic world, to art, sport, business, and industrial workplaces. Thus, even though Bourdieu was more concerned with social reproduction than change, we can hypothesize that there can be a development from a doxic position of the individual to a more pluralistic, multidimensional, and “heterodoxic” one in transformative periods. This may be applied to twelfth-century Norway, when new social institutions, relations, and practices developed, and agents had to relate to more than one field. Thus, the competition for power and the self-fashioning to acquire a high position as an outsider may have been more complex and contradictory than often assumed.

We might distinguish between at least five different social spaces in twelfth-century Norway. First, medieval Norway was dominated by an agricultural economy, making the farming household a key social unit for individuals. In such a household society, especially in regions and contexts where governmental institutions had less impact, honor was a crucial capital and identity marker. While honor-based behavior can be understood as outward-focused, keeping up a face rather than searching one’s soul and seeking self-knowledge, scholars have pointed out how Old Norse literature, especially the Sagas of Icelanders, not only show the individual’s involvement in self-assessing in accordance to a cultural code, but also negotiates anxieties concerning social performance and inner lives. Furthermore, emotions and self-enacting in the Old Norse sagas evolve around the strategies of revenge at the right moment, with the capacity for a consciousness to see yourself as others see and evaluate you: “To the extent that ‘deep’ inner lives require self-knowledge, self-mockery, self-doubt, and self-assessment these people had the capacity of deep inner lives.” (Miller 1995, 206–7)

Second, the court developed (although far from in a straight line) into a more exclusive space of retainers and clerks surrounding the king. Here, performance through luxurious clothing and consumption was important. At the same time, these men were supposed to perform as brave warriors. However, the

battlefield as a social field that distinguished good from bad warriors also became complex and more multifaceted than before. The purpose, practices, and intention of warfare had become crucial, in addition to bravery, in distinguishing noble warriors from enemies of kingship and Christianity (Bandlien 2019).

Third, with the establishment of the archbishopric at Nidaros in 1152/53, new theological ideas gained hold in Norway. Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1157–1188) had attended the school of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris in the 1140s and strongly promoted the Augustinian order after his return to Norway. Eysteinn must have been intimately familiar with the ideas of Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), who, in his instructions to novices, urged his followers to be constantly self-probing to one's thoughts, speech, and actions and learn from experience. His program for students was marked by a tension between the outer and the inner man, but also by how these ultimately were to harmonize inner and outer behavior (van 't Spijker 2004, 59–128).

While Hugh's teachings would appeal to intellectuals of the newly established cathedral schools in Norway, the more ascetic-minded Benedictines tended to emphasize physical seclusion from the outer world, in the hermit cell or at the margins of society, as a path to sculpt the *homo interior* from a fleshly and hostile material. This is expressed, for example, by Peter Damian (d. 1072): “. . . beaten now by the hammer of discipline, and polished by the file of penitence and holy combat, you may afterwards be put in the order of the fiery stones, without tingling or rustle.” (van 't Spijker 2004, 55).

The Cistercians, the third monastic order introduced in twelfth-century Norway, also had its distinct, and arguably a more complex, legacy of the self as developed by Bernard of Clairvaux. As Caroline Bynum has argued, Bernard did not see the self as either body or soul, or even as both becoming one, but rather a wondrous *mixtura*; a hybrid in constant dialogue. This hybrid was constantly in danger of fragmentation, but was still a necessary doubleness for the self to be part of divinity and in one with God (Bynum 2001, 113–62; see also Engh, this volume).

It is thus necessary to analyze the differences and negotiations within the sources related to Sverrir, first how he positioned himself within various social spaces, and second how the self of Sverrir changed according to spatial shifts. Such a reading will help us evaluate in what way a text such as *Sverris saga* enters into field-related relations, intertextually, politically, and culturally. A high degree of intertextuality can be a sign of contesting discourses of the self, and negotiations of which discourse has hegemony over others (Fairclough 1992, 102–17; Gramsci 1971).

This also suggests that the same text or narrative could be received differently by various audiences, interpreting it within their social fields. At the same time,

individuals would be part of, or at least relate, to various fields. Such Bakhtinian readings of sagas may draw on the concept of “linguistic hybridity,” the fusion of different linguistic systems or genres into different forms of “cultural hybridity” (Young 1995). Most relevant in the context of twelfth-century Norway is “intentional,” or “conscious,” hybridity, that stresses the way in which utterances can be double-voiced:

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological belief systems . . . It frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction – and consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents.

(Bakhtin 1980, 304–5)

Polyphony, or dialogical plurality of voices achieved through narrative reticence, direct speech, shifting styles, and prosimetrum, has been pointed out as characterizing many of the sagas, especially considering the interplay between secular and hagiographic discourses (Phelpstead 2007; see also Grønlie 2012). This implies not only a discussion of the individual or the self in relation to change and distinguished from others (Gurevich 1992), but also allows for a more complex understanding of the self, related to various discursive systems and social spaces.

***Sverris saga* – For Whom, For What?**

Sverris saga is among the earliest Old Norse sagas to have been preserved. The author, Karl Jónsson, was abbot at the Benedictine monastery at Þingeyrar in northern Iceland, and probably began his work during a visit to Norway between 1185 and 1188, shortly after Sverrir had killed his rival King Magnús Erlingsson. According to the introduction of the saga, Sverrir himself dictated the first part of the saga, named *Grýla*. How far *Grýla* extended is disputed (some scholars suggest it ended at chapter 31, others as late as chapter 109), but the saga was probably finished, editing *Grýla* into it, some years after Sverrir’s death in 1202, possibly by Karl Jónsson (d. 1212/13) himself (Bagge 1996, 15–8; Þorleifur Hauksson 2006). This suggests that the first part of the saga was written during the intense and bitter struggle between King Sverrir and Archbishop Eysteinn in the wake Sverrir’s victory over King Magnús, while the latter part was written after a settlement had been made between the

Birkibeinar, supporting the candidacy of the grandson of Sverrir, and their opponents, the Baglar (“Crozier”).

The hagiographic and learned elements of *Sverris saga* have been pointed out by several scholars (Ármann Jakobsson 2015, with references). This has often been linked to its place among the very active and pioneering literary milieu at Þingeyrar monastery (Haki Antonsson 2012; Bandlien 2016). In a recent discussion of *Sverris saga* ideology and description of society, however, Sverre Bagge argues that even though a monk initially wrote the saga, the audience was most probably warriors. Bagge concludes that “the portrait of Sverrir as a great general and leader of men offers a better understanding of Sverrir’s individuality and identity as presented in the saga, than do the idea of God’s vocation and the references to David and sacred history” (Bagge 1996, 65). On the other hand, it could also be argued that it is impossible to understand Sverrir’s identity *without* the many references to sacred history and the support of God. Even though, as Bagge argues, *Sverris saga* “does not set forth the general ideology of sacral kingship” (Bagge 1996, 81), the emphasis on the divine vocation and God’s intervention in Sverrir’s favor is hardly a superficial element of the saga. Karl Jónsson seems to have stressed most of all Sverrir’s legitimation of suitability for audiences belonging to various social spaces. Thus, the intended audience included not only the Birkibeinar themselves, but also other supporters and opponents among the secular and clerical élite, trying to convince them of Sverrir’s superior qualities as a ruler and his support from God.

Sverrir as Transmitter of Divine Terror

The first part of *Sverris saga* is called *Grýla*, a term that elsewhere in Norse literature and tradition refers to a troll-woman. The name is probably deduced from “terror,” proposing the wider meaning of “terror-maker.” It seems strange that this should be connected to Sverrir, but the saga in fact opens with an account of the terror evoked by Sverrir. While pregnant, his mother dreamed that she was in labor and that her servant woman became terrified of the fetus’ nature. It seemed like a big stone with the white, sparkling quality of a glowing piece of iron. Although she tried to wrap it in clothing, terror stood out from it (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 1).

Shortly after, Sverrir dreamed that St. Óláfr, the royal patron saint of Norway, ancestor of the Norwegian kings, and depicted in the twelfth century as an ideal ruler, himself fought against Magnús Erlingsson and Erlingr *skakki* (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 5). St. Óláfr called upon Sverrir and asked him to fight with him. Then

Sverrir was able to put fear into his enemies' minds so that they withdrew. Such terror-striking appearance is also found in another of Sverrir's dreams, where the prophet Samuel himself seemed to anoint Sverrir – in the manner of a new David (Lönnroth 2006). The vision of Samuel made Sverrir tremble, but Samuel himself explained that he came to bring peace (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 10). This combination of bringing both fear and peace is something Sverrir himself said was his purpose as a ruler.

Such notion of kings bringing terror may go back to the conception of “terror-helmets,” mentioned in early panegyric skaldic poems when kings put fear into their opponents' breasts. However, this kind of striking of fear is also mentioned in connection to holy kings with God on their side: for instance, St. Knud of Denmark who was, according to the monk Ælnoth writing in the early twelfth century, shaped into a glorious warrior by God and made other people respect and fear him (Ælnoth 1986, chs. 6, 10). We find the same idea in the late-twelfth-century narratives of St. Óláfr. In the so-called *Legendary Saga of St. Olaf* (ON = *Helgi saga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar*, or *Óláfs saga hins helga*), probably contemporary to the final version of *Sverris saga*, it is stated that, after his death at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030, the king's body had such an intensively bright and frightening appearance that one of his murderers became blind (*Óláfs saga hins helga* 1982, ch. 86). Earlier in the *Legendary Saga*, an angel appeared with supernatural and terror-striking brightness when he warned a heathen chieftain against fighting St. Óláfr (*Óláfs saga hins helga* 1982, ch. 32). These episodes point to the fear that holiness brought on disbelievers or heathens.

Sverrir as a “terror-striking” warrior and ruler arguably provides the best explanation for naming the first part of the saga *Grýla*. It directs the readers' attention to the support he had from Christ and St. Óláfr when facing his unjust and ignorant opponents who refused to acknowledge divine support for his career. In this sense, Sverrir is predestined to be the messenger sent by God to spread terror among the foes of St. Óláfr. The stone depicted as his mother's dream is noteworthy, as it shows that Sverrir was something other than the malleable material that could be shaped by bodily asceticism and distance from the world, as in the quote of Peter Damian cited above. He is, in reference to the Bible, shaped and chosen by God even before his birth.

Imitating St. Óláfr and the Suitability of the King

In the dream where Sverrir saw St. Óláfr fight against Magnús Erlingsson and Erling *skakki*, he saw himself as the saint's standard-bearer (*Sverris saga* 2007,

ch. 5). This is also the first time in the saga that Sverrir is called “Magnús,” a name that not only alluded to Charlemagne (“Karlagnús” in Old Norse), but also indicated that St. Óláfr had taken Sverrir as his new son, recalling that the biological son of Óláfr was the first king named Magnús in Norway.

From then on, there are several analogues between Sverrir’s career and the saint’s life as described in the *Legendary Saga*. Shortly after his dream, Sverrir managed to win the standard from the ignorant peasants of Nidaros. Sverrir follows in the footsteps of St. Óláfr on several occasions. First, when he travels to Selja (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 6), the holy place where Óláfr also first stepped on Norwegian soil as a king (*Óláfs saga hins helga* 1982, ch. 19). Later on, he, in a Gideon-like manner, trims the number of his warriors from 300 to 80, dismissing those who were merely interested in raiding (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 11), thus imitating how St. Óláfr had excluded all those who did not want to be baptized before the battle of Stiklestad (*Óláfs saga hins helga* 1982, chs. 72–3). Before a battle against a great peasant army, he also used the same battle cry that St. Óláfr had allegedly used at Stiklestad: “Forward, forward christmen, crossmen, and the holy king Óláfr’s men!” (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 163).

In this way, Sverrir is shown as God’s and St. Óláfr’s true warrior, an identity that in *Sverris saga* is not only connected with being victorious in battle, but also something that must be shown in his conduct. These new mores can be seen in his willingness to give peace to his enemies, his avoidance of women, and his resistance to drunkenness. The saga stresses repeatedly that Sverrir gave peace (*gríð*) to those of his enemies who would receive it, and forgiveness and a Christian funeral to those who had died. It has previously been noted that to give mercy is a natural political weapon in twelfth-century politics; those who were forgiven would owe the king their lives and thus be loyal to him. This seems like a plausible explanation for several episodes where he bestowed *gríð*. In *Sverris saga*, such bestowal of *gríð* is also religiously motivated. After his first battle in 1177, he thanked God, the Virgin Mary, and St. Óláfr for being victorious, and “showed his gratefulness when he gave *gríð* to all those who asked for it” (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 15). The sparing of the lives of his enemies is here an expression of gratitude to the Lord, a return of favor for his help from God. Still, it was only those who explicitly asked for mercy that received it. According to *Sverris saga*, those who did not ask for forgiveness were fighting against God’s will and St. Óláfr’s peace (chs. 136, 146, 169). The politics and strategy of Sverrir may very well be interpreted as one based on physical power, but was justified in a wider, religious sense in the saga.

In this respect, the last battle in *Sverris saga* is most interesting. Sverrir managed, after a siege for almost five months, to force the Baglar to surrender at Tønsberg in 1202. Among the Birkebeinar, there was a strong consensus for

killing the surviving Baglar because they wanted to avenge their family members killed by the enemy and the many shameful allegations raised against them. Sverrir, however, argued strongly for giving them *gríð*, even if he himself had lost his half-brother during the fighting and had been on the received end of many shameful libels from the Baglar:

. . . enn nú i vetr munu þér heyrt hafa at þeir hafa Sverri kallat bikkju eðr meri ok mǫrgum oðrum illum nofnum. Nú vil ek þat fyrigefa þeim fyrir Guðs sakir ok vænta þar á mót af honum fyrirgefningar þess er ek hefir honum á móti gort. Eigu þér ekki síðr sálur en ek ok eigið þess at minnask. Engi máður mun kalla yðr helldr bleyðimenn firir þessa sök.
(*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 179)

[This winter you may have heard that they [the Baglar] have called Sverrir “bitch” or “mare” and many other bad names. Now I want to forgive them for the sake of God, and in return I hope for forgiveness from Him for all I have done against Him. You [the Birkibeinar] have not any less soul than I have, and you should remember that. And no man will call you soft men because of this.] (My translation)

“Bitch” and “mare” clearly had a biting sting in twelfth-century politics, and elsewhere in the sagas such words alone would legitimate vengeance. Indeed, it was imperative by law to take revenge against the one who uttered such words – if not, the object of such libels should be considered a man without honor. The consequence for not taking revenge would be that he not only lost the respect of the community, but also was not allowed to be a witness and swear oaths at assemblies. Sverrir thus appealed to a different discourse than his warriors were used to, where mercy for the case of God and the care of their souls gained hegemony over the practice of vengeance.

This habit of giving *gríð* to whoever asked for it also works as a contrast to how his opponents wanted to see the dead bodies of the Birkibeinar being eaten by dogs, wolves, and ravens. This recalls the earlier skaldic poetry that praises the ruler for feeding these animals. In *Sverris saga*, this conventional discourse of the battlefield is transformed into a new, Christian significance, as an attribute of the unjust ruler who do not possess Sverrir’s mercy and care for Christian souls.

This does not mean that Sverrir refrained from the discourse of revenge. During an attempt at settlement with King Magnús, Sverrir listed the relatives he had lost due to the rule of Magnús and Erlingr *skakki*; these included his father as well as several uncles, half-brothers, and cousins (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 60). The imperative of vengeance was very much a part of the underlying legitimation of Sverrir’s fight, although the kings disagreed on who had lost the most kindred.

However, Sverrir remains a better imitator of St. Óláfr than King Magnús Erlingsson. This was a crucial element in the conception of kingship from the coronation of Magnús Erlingsson in 1163. In connection with this coronation, a new law on royal succession was sanctioned at an assembly in Nidaros. Here, the principle of primogeniture was introduced for the first time in Norway. Still, this new law of succession had some reservations – if injustice and evilness were to take control of the eldest son, the brother whom the archbishop and the bishops and the twelve best men from each diocese thought best suited should be king. When there is no legitimate son, then the closest male relative should be elected, but only if he is suited to be king – if no suitable relative can be found, the law continues, the one who, according to the elected, is best suited to guard both God’s laws and the law of the land shall be king. When the bishops and the elected disagreed, the candidate supported by the archbishop and bishops was to be elected (*Gulaþingslög* 1994, §2). In this way, the royal self had to be centered on notions of suitability. Among the élite, these notions would have connotations with the narratives of St. Óláfr, especially as they were presented in the *Legendary Saga*.

Asceticism and the Use of Marginal Space

On several occasions, the saga presents Norway as a space similar to the Holy Land itself, and his fights as similar to crusades. First, Sverrir loaded his battles with religious symbols. As mentioned above, he used the battle cry of St. Óláfr. He also showed a high esteem for the Virgin Mary (*Sverris saga* 2007, chs. 15, 18, 20). His great warship, *Maríusúðin*, was dedicated to her, and Sverrir prayed for strength and luck to all those who sailed with it (ch. 80). Relics were built into the ship, and this later helped him in the battle of Fimreite in 1184 (ch. 91). The *Kuflungar*, a group of opponents active in the late 1180s, later burnt it, a sacrilege mentioned along with the breaking of Church peace and other miracles; it was said that the holy cross in the church was sweating as a consequence (ch. 102). This ship may be compared to the legendary sword *Durendal*, used by Roland in the service of Charlemagne. This sword contained a tooth of St. Peter, some blood of St. Basil, hairs of St. Denis, and a piece of Mary’s clothing, and Roland did his outmost to stop the heathens from attainting it. Like that famous sword, *Maríusúðin* was a floating reliquary designed for battle against the enemies of St. Óláfr and his “son”.

However, Sverrir never went to the Holy Land, although he once had the intention to do so (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 9). Instead, he made the Holy Land come

to him. He named a castle outside Nidaros Síon (Zion), a manifestation of the analogue between Sverrir and David. This emphasized that Sverrir indeed was chosen by God to rule Norway. Nearby was the hill called Feginsbrekka (“Hill of Grace”), analogous to the famous Montjoie in the Holy Land, where Sverrir is said to have knelt in prayers (ch. 35). The name was hardly an invention by Sverrir but rather a reflection of the status of St. Óláfr’s church as a main pilgrimage center. By relating the castle Síon to the relics and church of St. Óláfr, Sverrir emphasized his special connection to this center of Christendom.

On the other hand, Sverrir is presented in the early part of the saga like an ascetic in the wilderness. After arriving in Norway, he repeatedly had to walk in deep, unknown woods, suffering from cold and hunger (*Sverris saga* 2007, chs. 7, 12, 18–20). This emphasis on the ascetic virtues of Sverrir and his men in the margins is unique in a king’s saga, and the closest analogue is with traditional hagiography. A traditional vogue in medieval monasticism, from the time when Antony walked into the Egyptian desert c. 270, was to avoid the temptations of courts and urban centers. In this context, the wilderness was understood as an arena for testing spiritual steadfastness and faith in God when facing the evil forces outside civilization. The vagrant life on the edge of death became vitalized through the monastic ideals of renouncing all forms of luxury and splendor and avoiding contact with cities. In later monastic tradition, especially in the Benedictine and Cistercian orders, monks were above all supposed to fight well against their own vices and the enticements of malign spirits in the place of vast wilderness. From this renouncement of the privileges of civilization, they could claim authority in certain contexts, for instance, in calling people to penance.

In *Sverris saga*, the authority based on asceticism and the wilderness is more important in the formation of a royal self than in any other Norwegian text. This is especially evident in an episode when the Birkibeinar encounter the snaring of the Devil. On a hazardous crossing of the mountain area in southern Norway, a terrible snowstorm fell upon Sverrir and his men. They lost 120 horses with golden saddles, along with clothes and weapons. For eight days, they had nothing to eat or drink but snow. The situation was so desperate that a number of them considered suicide. Some men wanted to jump off cliffs to end their suffering, while others thought it more proper to use their weapons against themselves. Sverrir, however, understood that these thoughts were merely the trappings of the Devil. He told his men that suicide was only the deed of men who had gone mad, or committed by someone who did not control himself. His men should instead repent their sins and beg for mercy with piety and humbleness. Then the weather cleared up so that they were able to see their path (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 20). In hagiography, this kind of spiritual

persistence during bodily trials is a clear sign of virtue (Wellendorf 2014 has a different interpretation of this episode).

It is no wonder, then, that Sverrir hailed his men when, at a time they were forced to flee, they left all of their belongings in a way unheard of – thus showing how they were unattached to worldly glory (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 33). Later, he would recall the memory of his first retainers; they did not spend their time drinking and could endure hardship much better than his warriors did later on (chs. 40, 57, 43, 164). In the last chapter of the saga, it was recalled how the king himself continued to eat just one meal a day and never drank too much even after he became king (ch. 181).

How much of this was Sverrir's own rhetoric, and how much was the responsibility of the saga author? Karl Jónsson was himself a Benedictine monk at Þingeyrar, and thus familiar with the rhetoric of virtuous supremacy at the margins of society, as is evident in, for instance, other sagas written at the monastery. He may also have had an interest in depicting Sverrir as an ideal ruler showing power although avoiding worldly pride. However, there is also evidence that indicates that this was Sverrir's own rhetoric, and that he wanted recognition of his masculinity within the Church as much as from his warriors. First, he was most likely educated at the cathedral school in the Faroes during his youth. Thus, Sverrir had at least a basic knowledge of theology and political writings, something that enabled him to form a very strong and effective religious counter-rhetoric, even against his learned opponents. Trained as a cleric, he must have been well aware of the crime of killing an anointing king. He had probably built up a strong rhetorical legitimization of his aspiration to kingship by the early 1180s. In *A Speech against the Bishops*, a pamphlet written by a cleric loyal to Sverrir around 1200, the author attacked the clergy in Norway for their immorality. Instead of being proper limbs on the kingdom's body, they had become dysfunctional. The bishops, who were supposed to be the eyes of the kingdom and leading the people, had become blind (*En tale mot biskopene* 1931, 1–2). This body is the rhetoric of a learned and clerical elite, but cleverly redirected against the clergy and legitimating the claim that Sverrir should be head and chest, both king and archbishop, on the social body.

Sverrir also seems to have had close contact with the Cistercian abbey at Höfuðey outside Oslo. He is said to have heard Mass there (*Sverris saga* 2007, chs. 134, 136), and he trusted the abbey so much as to leave his treasure in the wall of its church. In 1200, the Cistercian General Chapter condemned monks for having Masses for the excommunicated King Sverrir and punished them harshly (three days in *gravi culpa*). Other monks who had exchanged kisses of peace or had conversation with the king should be whipped and should fast for three days.

No less important is that this ascetic discourse was used by Sverrir to elevate himself not only over the immoral clergy, but also over his opponents, King Magnús Erlingsson and his father Erlingr *skakki*. King Magnús is said to have dressed in a fashionable way, was fond of splendor, and was a notorious womanizer (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 98). This is even more relevant to drinking habits. It is said that Sverrir never drank so much that he lost control over himself (ch. 181). Sverrir's exceptional moderation in drinking is used as a sign of self-control and firmness, indicating that Sverrir was superior to his enemies. This is especially clear when the saga writer includes an episode where one of Erlingr's men reproached his leader: "some say, my lord, that you give more attention to getting drunk on ale and wine than to giving your men firm orders they can rely on" (En mæla þat sumir men, herra, at þér gefið meira gaum at gera yðr mjök drukkna af miði eða vini en gera staðfastlig ráð fyrir liði yðru) (ch. 34). Drunkenness made him unreliable and lacking in judgement: in short, unsuitable as a leader. The same is implied in the portrait of his son Magnús, whose men were often weakened in battle because of heavy drinking (chs. 31, 33, 64, 70, 76, 98; Ármann Jakobsson 2015, 120–1).

Again, there are intertextual references here to contemporary texts, most evidently to the new moral standards that St. Óláfr initiated according to the *Legendary Saga*. St. Óláfr drank milk instead of mead because he did not want to lose his senses, and he had his men follow his example (*Óláfs saga hins helga* 1982, ch. 24). More explicit condemnations of drinking are found in the contemporary *Norwegian Book of Homilies*, written in Bergen around 1200, where it is said that where drinking rules over man, there the Devil rules (*Gamal norsk Homiliebok* 1931, 33). This connects Sverrir with the existing ascetic virtues of his day, appropriating monastic rhetoric about authority derived from self-control as a disruption to the communal drinking at court. This means that Sverrir is not only morally superior to his rivals, but also transfers the idea of the congruence of bodily practices and inner self to his retainers, who were in turn supposed to be shaped by the authority of their leader. This brings the king's followers more in line with the teaching of a canonical community, than with a traditional royal *hírð* that shared their drinking while the table setting was highly ranked.

King Sverrir as a New Man in His Seal

In the late 1850s, a seal matrix was found during the construction of a cellar in central Tønsberg, a medieval town on the west side of Oslofjord (Nicolaysen 1862–1866, 769). In the center, a lion rampant is engraved, flanked by twigs

with leaves and flowers, and with a small, lying ‘S’ framed within a square below the right paw. The legend is a verse in pentameter and reads “+ VERVS TESTIS EGO NVNTIA VERA TEGO” (+ true witness I am, true messages I cover). In his edition of Norwegian seals, Christopher Brinchmann suggested that this was the seal of Earl Skúli Bárðarson (d. 1240), co-regent of Norway with King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263). He had stayed in Tønsberg several winters around 1220 and used a seal with a lion rampant in 1225 (Brinchmann 1924, 2). Oluf Kolsrud (1921, 33–4) supported this suggestion, pointing out that the lion was uncrowned, and that the lion rampant had been inspired by the arms of Simon V Montfort, Earl of Leicester (d. 1218).

Odd Fjordholm, however, argued that this was the seal matrix of Sverrir Sigurðarson (r. 1177–1202). He pointed out that the English chronicler William of Newburgh (d. c. 1198) stated that Sverrir’s seal had the legend “Sverus rex Magnus, ferus ut leo, mitis ut agnus” (King Sverre Magnus, fierce as a lion, meek as a lamb) (Fjordholm 1882, III.6, 232). Fjordholm noted that *ferus* alludes to *verus*, and that both may refer to *Sverus*. He suggested that the seal matrix found in Tønsberg may have been the counterseal to the one that William of Newburgh quoted (Fjordholm 1973), and that it might have been lost during Sverrir’s last campaign, his long siege of the Baglar at Tønsberg in 1201–1202.

The legend of the seal is remarkable not only because the suggested provenance makes it the earliest preserved royal seal in Norway, but also because we find no similar legend on any other seal in medieval Norway. Despite – or perhaps because – of a condensed space for expression, not least compared to the



Fig. 1: Drawing based on the impression of the seal matrix of King Sverrir (National Archives, Oslo). The original is in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo (C3203).

saga, it has the potential of encapsulating Sverrir’s agency within the space of a few square centimeters. The importance of medieval seals has been emphasized in several works by Bedos-Rezak. She has shown how they were used as metaphor for semiotic relationships between the subject and the material during the twelfth century (drawing on the prescholastic ontology of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist). In extension of this, she has argued that seals signified its owner and “not only mediated but embodied the real presence of the individuals that affixed them” (Bedos-Rezak 2000, 1527).

In this context, it is noteworthy that the text on the seal matrix of Sverrir speaks as a subject, to some extent claiming authority for itself. It emphasizes the truthfulness of its commandments, making the letter it would have been fixed onto into a monument of authority with legal implications. If indeed lost during the siege of Tønsberg 1201–1202, this would have been used to defy any excommunicative efforts of the Pope; it is a “true witness” of how it, despite papal efforts to the contrary, covers *true* commandments, thus implying that other seals – or individuals – do not cover such truths. From an intertextual perspective, its authority can be related to the ascetic discourse and the suitability of the king, where Erlingr *skakki* and King Magnús Erlingsson failed to make true commands because of their drunkenness and the clerical élite failed due to their blindness.

The other seal legend, quoted by William of Newburgh, is even more striking. First, it names Sverrir as “Magnus,” the name bestowed on him by St. Óláfr. Furthermore, being fierce as a lion and meek as a lamb resonates with learned literature in the twelfth century (Hermann Pálsson 1991). We find the same statement in *Sverris saga* in speeches made to the people after Sverrir’s had defeated King Magnús Erlingsson. One of Sverrir’s men, Svína-Pétr, talked to the men in Bergen, urging them to receive Sverrir with the ringing of bells and donations to the poor. Sverrir is promoted in the speech as a just king: wise, generous, eloquent, just, peaceful, and ready to protect the land (Charpentier Ljungqvist 2008). He is thus most suitable to rule, something that is used as proof of having been sent to the rule Norway by God. Furthermore, he professes a new kind of rule by him and his men; indeed, Sverrir himself has changed into a “new man”:

Nú er í brotu sá Sverrir er við hernaði fór til margra kaupstaða. Brautu ero nú ok þeir sǫmu Birkibeinar er hér sveimuðu um bæinn ok sópuðu óhreinliga hǫnðum um hirzlor yðrar búanda. En hér munu nú koma með konungi várur mjúkir hirðmenn ok hǫgværir. er vera skal láss ok lykill firir frelsi oc friði þessa kaupstaðar ok annarra.

(*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 96)

[He is gone now, the Sverrir who robbed many cities. Gone now are also those Birkibeinar that swarmed around in the town and grabbed with unclean hands in your treasures.

Now, there will come mild and soft retainers with our king. They will be the lock and key for your freedom and peace in this and other towns.] (My translation)

It was God that has sent Sverrir to them; therefore, the townspeople should welcome him just as “God [. . .] and all God’s holy men” (Guð [. . .] ok allir Guðs helgir menn) did (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 96).

Sverrir himself developed the ideal of the “mild” retainers shortly afterwards. This is shown especially during the king’s speech, also given at Bergen, following reports that several of his own men had been involved in fighting because of heavy drinking, leading to several deaths (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 103). The retainers obviously had trouble being as just and peaceful as Svína-Pétr had promised. Then Sverrir held his famous speech against drunkenness, urging his men to be moderate in drinking (ch. 104). Drunkenness would first lead a man into poverty; next into oblivion; then to lust for what is wrong, especially theft and seducing women; further, to stir up violence without a cause; then to ruin a man’s health and make his body weak; and as a final consequence, by yearning for filthy deeds and forgetting God, men would lose their soul. He then echoes the legend of his seal: “Warriors should be like lambs in peacetime and fierce as lions in war” (Hermenn skyldu vera í friði sem lamb, enn í ófriði ágiarnir sem león) (ch. 104).

Although similar warnings against drunkenness are found in several writings across Europe at the time, the most striking parallel to the rhetoric of the lamb and the lion is Bernard’s praise of the Templars in the early twelfth century, where he discussed the mixed nature of a new knighthood. Indeed, the newness of Sverre and his men consists of the restoration of a fragmentation, or a dialogic doubleness of peace and war, of fierceness and meekness. It is this double nature that made possible the transformation of Sverrir from the “old king,” who robbed cities, into the “new king,” who was just and merciful. The speech furthermore alludes to the monastic and homiletic image of stages or steps, such as the Rule of Benedict’s twelve steps of humility, Bernard’s steps of humility and pride, or Hugh of St. Victor’s heavenly ladder of the Mystic Ark. In his much simpler version of this scheme, Sverrir presents drunkenness as disturbing the mixture of the lion and the lamb, something that one senses would lead him, or rather his retainers and the people, to descend on the ladder, thus reversing the creation of a new ruler. To avoid this reversion, the king needs to remain the likeness of a lion – in an imperfect world such as Norwegian society during the late-twelfth century, this fierceness is indeed a necessity in order to become meek as a lamb.

Conclusion

The career of Sverrir shows how a pretender from the margins of society challenged the ideologies of kingship and sought to shape the perceptions of himself at the end of the twelfth century. The narrative of his life as found in *Sverris saga* indicates a complex intertextual relationship to several genres and discourses. This can be related to the many social spaces, and the audiences within them, that Sverrir had to position himself in following his arrival and career in Norway.

Sverris saga seems to be written with several audiences, within different spaces, in mind. The image of Sverrir as shaped as a terror-striking fetus in his mother's womb indicates that he is already unchangeable from birth, destined to become king. However, his trials in the wilderness place him within a monastic landscape that serves to form his self, distant from the court's dangerous temptations. The ascetic rhetoric, especially related to moderation in drink, integrates bodily discourse of self-control into the performance of royalty. Such a discourse includes the use of the image of the steps of virtue – implying a development of the soul into royal rhetoric of authority. This is also apparent when Sverrir presents himself as a “new man” after his victory against King Magnús in 1184; he is transformed from being a robber to a meek, yet at the same time, fierce and just ruler. In this way, the hegemonic discourse of the court itself, understood as the community of retainers, not only imitates St. Óláfr, a focal point for both kingship and the archiepiscopal church of Norway in the twelfth century, but also challenges, and partly changes, this discourse during his reign.

Partly shaped by Sverrir himself, the narrative of the man who grew up as the son of a combmaker and then became king of Norway carries a polyphonic discourse, wherein the same semiotics and practices carried different meanings for different audiences. For instance, forgiveness might be seen among his warriors as tactically wise to win the loyalty of defeated enemies, while for monks and clergy it was a sign of caring for not only his own soul, but also for the development of the souls of all people in the kingdom. Sverrir's seal develops this theme further, creating a set of doubles: lamb and lion, fierceness and meekness, warrior and monk – a similar dialogic hybridity as found in Bernard of Clairvaux's thinking.

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