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## Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas

### 1. Kings and courtiers

The Icelandic Family Sagas take place in Iceland and concern themselves primarily with the fortunes of prominent Icelandic families.<sup>1</sup> Iceland had no king and foreign kings appear only as secondary figures in most Icelandic family sagas, although this varies from saga to saga. There was a tradition of young noble Icelanders entering the service of kings, often as court poets. In fact, the earliest Icelandic literature, the scaldic court poetry (*dróttkvæði*), was a part of the service to foreign kings. Most of the prominent court poets of Norwegian kings were Icelanders from the late tenth century onwards, and later they became royal biographers as well.

The Icelandic Family Sagas had a precursor in the Kings' Sagas (see Jónas Kristjánsson 1977, 1990), which originated in the 12th century. While the first Kings' Sagas probably were dry and factual, in the early 13th century this had changed. The 1220's saw the emergence of *Morkin-skinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, three voluminous sagas in which the narrative art of the genre reached its peak, amplifying the dry facts of the dates and main exploits of each king with anecdotes and detailed depictions of the main characters. This new vitality in saga composition coincided with the emergence of new saga genres, not only the Family Sagas but the translated romances as well and perhaps also the Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*).

A new feature of the invigorated Kings' Saga genre was a focus on the king's subjects. In the oldest Kings' Sagas there are very few characters, apart from the kings themselves. However, the Kings' Sagas of the 1220's are replete with narratives of kings dealing both with each other and

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the term commonly used in English, "Family Sagas," is more revealing than the Icelandic idiom, *Íslendingasögur* ("Sagas of Icelanders"), which makes the nationality of the main characters the central issue. On the history of the term, see Andersson 2000.

with their subjects, Icelanders and Norwegians. A variety of people, common as well as noble, share the limelight with the king. The Family Sagas bear witness to a similar tendency. They are a new kind of history, one which deals with less exalted people and is thus in a way less public.

As this vitality of the Kings' Sagas coincided with the emergence of the Family Sagas, it is not surprising that kings have a central role in some of the earliest Family Sagas, although they are not quite the centre of attention as in the Kings' Sagas which can be said to revolve around the institution of kingship (Ármann Jakobsson 1997). The earliest Family Sagas are now believed to have been composed at much the same time as the three large collections of Kings' Sagas mentioned above. Even if Sigurður Nordal's influential theory of the evolution of the genre and his dating of the sagas (1953: 235–69) has been undermined by other scholars (Jónas Kristjánsson 1972, 1990; Bjarni Guðnason 1993, 1994), at least three Family Sagas have not been redated and are still assumed to have been composed in the 1220's: *Kormáks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Egils saga*. In the latter two, the relationship of the Icelandic protagonist to the Norwegian king is of pivotal importance.

One of *Egils saga's* main themes is the feud between the kings of Norway and the Icelandic Mýramenn family. In this quarrel, the saga author obviously sides with the noble family who escape the anger of the king to become settlers in Iceland. In the first part of the saga, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson is killed as a result of King Haraldr Finehair's treachery and folly. Later, his nephew Egill runs into trouble in his dealings with King Eiríkr Bloodaxe. The saga's portrayal of the feud has often been interpreted as a hostile portrayal of Icelandic-Norse relations or as a negative comment on kingship in general, the author of the saga siding with the nobles who are suspicious of kings and their tyranny (Sandvik 1955; Baldur Hafstað 1990; Vésteinn Ólason 1991; Meulengracht Sørensen 1993; Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir 1997; Byock 1997).<sup>2</sup> But is this really the case?

King Haraldr is indubitably the villain of the first part of the story, and King Eiríkr is also a less than attractive character in the saga. However, Egill Skalla-Grímsson himself is by no means an unblemished hero. In fact, his behaviour is often grossly wilful and impertinent, bordering on

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<sup>2</sup> In all those interpretations, the authorship of *Egils saga* is important, as all of the authors discuss the saga in view of Snorri Sturluson's life and other works. The view that *Egils saga* was composed by Snorri Sturluson gained popularity after having been argued by Sigurður Nordal (1933: lxx–xcv). Even if studies by Vésteinn Ólason (1968), Hallberg (1962) and West (1980) have buttressed Sigurður Nordal's arguments, the authorship of *Egils saga* remains spurious, and further weighing of the evidence would seem to be needed.

the grotesque and bestial (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1977; Jón Karl Helgason 1992). The author of the saga does not try to hide his protagonist's faults and even exposes his moral shortcomings (cf. Torfi H. Tulinius 1994). In fact, Egill is throughout the saga depicted with a great deal of irony. In most of his clashes with King Eiríkr, the king has been severely provoked by Egill and furthermore, he is egged on by a formidable wife. He might thus enjoy some sympathy from an audience well aware of Egill's faults. Also, and importantly, Egill makes up with the king in the end, and King Eiríkr emerges from the saga with honour, having shown mercy to his enemy. In addition, King Athelstan of England and King Hákon, his fosterson and Eiríkr's brother, appear in the saga and are shown in more positive light. King Hákon is depicted as a just and good king, even though he does not lend his support to Egill's claims (197–99, 214–16). Although he has fought with his brother Eiríkr, he agrees with him in this matter. This suggests that Egill's claims may not be just.

As a matter of fact, most of the leading characters, with the exception of Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr, seek honour in the service of foreign kings. King Eiríkr, although a formidable enemy of Egill, has a loyal courtier in Egill's friend, Arinbjörn, who manages skilfully to be faithful to his friend as well as to his king. In fact, Arinbjörn is an ideal courtier, and even if the first part of the saga seems to result in a victory of the mentality of the farmer (Skalla-Grímr) over the mentality of the courtier (Þórólfr), the courtier mentality keeps surfacing. Egill ends up as a farmer, but he is no farmer by nature, and although far too independent in spirit (some might say bloody-minded) to be a successful courtier like Arinbjörn, service to a king is nevertheless an important part of his career. Far from refusing to serve kings in the vein of his father, Egill eagerly covets their gifts.

*Hallfredar saga* centers to an even greater degree on service to a king, Óláfr Tryggvason. Hallfredr's love life leads him repeatedly into trouble in rural Iceland, but he manages to find his true vocation in Norway, serving King Óláfr, who seems to be far more important to the troublesome poet than his Icelandic girlfriend, Kolfinna; she recedes quietly into the background after Hallfredr's initial meeting with the king. When Hallfredr has parted with his king, he renews his courtship of Kolfinna, angering her husband to the point where a duel is imminent. But then Hallfredr hears of his king's death, and loses all interest in fighting for Kolfinna's love (192). This narrative of a king and his servant/poet is reminiscent of an overblown *báttur*, a narrative which would

fit well into a Kings' Saga. Indeed, in its early textual history *Hallfredar saga* exists both as a *þáttr* in *Flateyjarbók*, and as an independent saga. At the same time this saga has many of the typical ingredients of a Family Saga: two generations, a settlement narrative, repeated feuds and a love story. Nevertheless, the *raison d'être* of the saga is the service of an Icelandic poet to his king.

Other kings besides King Óláfr also appear in *Hallfredar saga*. At the beginning of the saga, Hallfreðr's father flees the wrath of Queen Gunnhildr, Egill Skalla-Grimsson's arch-enemy. After the death of King Óláfr, Hallfreðr wishes to slay Earl Eiríkr, the late king's successor, but King Óláfr approaches him in a dream and asks him to compose a praise poem about the earl instead (194–95). Thus, the ideal king seems to indicate that the function of the courtier is to be loyal to the king of Norway, whoever he may be. Even if Hallfreðr does not gain the earl's confidence, he is not executed for having wounded a courtier. He is thus not harmed in any way by his relations to Norwegian kings, but seems to reap moral or even spiritual benefits (cf. Kalinke 1997).

This is also the case in *Kormáks saga*, although Kormákr's relations with kings are of secondary interest to his love for Steingerðr. King Haraldr Grey-cloak appears as Kormákr's friend and benefactor who is ready to forgive him bad behaviour, perhaps because Kormákr's manner and poetical skills endear him to the king (267–68, 270, 293). Yet there does not exist a special relationship between the King and Kormákr, in contrast to the affection which characterises the relations of King Óláfr and Hallfreðr. In fact, Kormákr first enters the service of King Hákon the Good when arriving in Norway (266–67). When Hákon has been killed, Kormákr seems to transfer his loyalties to his successor without reservations. Thus, service to the king seems to be unproblematic, and both kings are worthy of service. However, it is revealed early in the saga that Kormákr's father did not have friendly relations with King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr (204). Icelanders do have a choice but as often as not they choose to serve the king of Norway.

In *Egils saga* and *Hallfredar saga*, service to a king is of paramount importance. Whereas *Hallfredar saga* portrays an affectionate and mutually beneficent relationship, *Egils saga* reveals the problems posed by the wilfulness of Icelanders, backbiting courtiers, and the treachery of kings. Even if Egill is the protagonist of the saga, King Eiríkr nevertheless has some points in his favour. He emerges from the saga as a merciful king whose appreciation of elegant poetry makes his parting with Egill less hostile than their previous relations.

## 2. Different genres, different images

In view of the sinister role played by King Haraldr Finehair in *Egils saga*, it is interesting to compare King Haraldr's image in the Kings' Sagas and in the Family Sagas. In the Kings' Sagas, his main role is as the supposed unifier of Norway and ancestor of all later kings. Consequently, he commands the respect due to a founding father. Even if not a Christian, in some sagas he is portrayed as the opponent of sorcerers and other heathen menaces.

By and large, King Haraldr emerges as a good king from the Kings' Sagas (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 160, 198, 203). In the Icelandic Family Sagas, King Haraldr acquires a different role. In the earliest historical sources, he had no special role in the settlement of Iceland, apart from the fact that it began during his reign (Sverrir Jakobsson 1999). Later, the Icelandic Family Sagas cast him as an indirect 'father' of Iceland, maintaining that it was his oppression which drove most of the settlers to Iceland. The earliest known source for this version of history is *Egils saga*. There King Haraldr is depicted in terms of a 13th-century monarch who holds the whole of his kingdom as his personal property, allocating it to his servants as fiefs. He collects taxes from all of his population, and declares himself the owner of all lakes and the sea. Scholars have tended to take this at face value, perhaps owing to an inclination to believe everything written by the presumed author of *Egils saga*, Snorri Sturluson (see Sigurður Nordal 1933: 11–12 note). The power attributed to King Haraldr in *Egils saga* is, however, far beyond credibility for any viking ruler of the 9th century. Contemporary evidence offers in fact no firm proof that King Haraldr ever even existed (see Sverrir Jakobsson 1999).

This foundation myth probably originated in the 13th century, and certainly flourished during the following centuries (Kreutzer 1994). Most Family Sagas are not very explicit, but nevertheless appear to take their cue from *Egils saga* and depict King Haraldr as a ruler on a grand scale, who permits no opposition and drives kings, earls and magnates from his realm. *Laxdæla saga* (4), *Eyrbyggja saga* (3–5), and *Gisla saga* (3, 16–19) all give the same version of history, probably influenced by *Egils saga* (11–12). In *Laxdæla saga*, though, the emigration of the Laxdælir is not due to the king's excessive harshness, but rather to the fact that he wanted to be the sole ruler of his state and control all honours (4). In younger sagas, such as *Svarfdæla saga* (210), *Harðar saga* (3), *Bárðar saga* (106–7) and *Grettis saga* (4–19), the myth is perpetuated.

*Vatnsdæla saga*, however, stresses the importance of the Vatnsdælir's relationship with King Haraldr. Ingimundr the Old decides to join forces with King Haraldr Finehair in the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, and earns the King's gratitude and respect. His partner, Sæmundr, opts for staying neutral and consequently has to flee Norway. Ingimundr enjoys prosperity and good fortune, which is partly credited to his happy relations with the king. His descendants, the Vatnsdælir, remain friends and retainers of the kings of Norway, but independent rulers of their own region in Iceland at the same time (see Ármann Jakobsson 1999b). Haraldr is not depicted as a tyrant, but as a powerful and successful king whose retainers benefit handsomely from their support, while those who have sinned against him are punished.

King Haraldr is portrayed rather negatively in *Kjalnesinga saga*, and especially in *Víglundar saga*. The latter *saga* is chivalric in style, not least when describing King Haraldr. Nevertheless it sustains the myth of the tyrannous king who banishes all who oppose him and even betrays loyal subjects. The late date of *Víglundar saga*, perhaps even 15th century, indicates the persistence of the settlement myth of Iceland, where King Haraldr was permanently cast as a villainous king. It is interesting to note that one of the oldest of the Family Sagas, *Egils saga* and one of the youngest, *Víglundar saga*, both depict King Haraldr in strongly negative tonalities. Though he receives milder treatment elsewhere, King Haraldr Finehair definitely has a more sinister air in the Family Sagas than in the Kings' Sagas.

The opposite is true of King Haraldr Grey-cloak, who ruled Norway along with his mother, Queen Gunnhildur. In the Kings' Sagas, he is usually portrayed as an ineffective and unpopular king (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 192, 268, Ármann Jakobsson 1999a: 50). This is not the case in the Family Sagas. In *Kormáks saga*, as we have seen, he is portrayed very positively. In *Laxdæla saga*, he first appears during Óláfr Peacock's journey to Ireland. First Óláfr arrives in Norway and easily wins the favour of the king, who has never met such a promising youth from Iceland. He and Queen Gunnhildr are eloquent in declaring their admiration for Óláfr and are such friends and patrons to him that they escort him to his ship to send their good fortune (*hamingja*) with him to Ireland, along with their friendship. On his way home, he again stops in Norway, the king gives him scarlet clothes and invites him to become his courtier, and when Óláfr wants to leave insists on equipping him for the journey. They part in great amity (52–3, 60–1).

Furthermore, King Haraldr seems very amiable in *Floamanna saga*

(253–54), where he favours Þorgils, the protagonist, even after Þorgils has offended Queen Gunnhildr. In another of the later Family Sagas, *Harðar saga*, King Haraldr, although angry with Geir for killing one of his men, accepts money for his life, but warns Geir that his mother might not be so forgiving (37, 49).

The benign portrayal of King Haraldr Grey-cloak in the Family Sagas seems to disprove the notion that they are more hostile towards king and kingship than the Kings' Sagas. It is, however, an agreed upon fact in the Family Sagas that Queen Gunnhildr is the difficult one of the pair. The widow of King Eiríkr Bloodaxe, she appears as the king's consort in *Egils saga*. There she is clearly the worse villain of the royal couple, in accordance with the negative attitude towards her in the Kings' Sagas (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 118, 205, 220). In *Laxdæla saga*, however, Queen Gunnhildr is just as benevolent as her son, and her admiration for Óláfr Peacock seems to know no bounds. Her maleficence is totally absent, and she is portrayed as a distinguished queen who (like all royals) quickly takes a fancy to a male member of the Laxdælir family. In the saga, it is also stated that when Hrútr, Óláfr's uncle, was in Norway, he became her special favourite, and that the queen became cross when others were likened to him (44).

This excessive favouritism towards Hrútr takes on a different colour in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where Queen Gunnhildr lusts after him and makes him her sex slave. This is a mixed blessing. While it guarantees Hrútr's place at the Norwegian court, it bodes ill for Hrútr's future. The queen lays a curse on him when he departs, angry because he did not tell her that he had a fiancée in Iceland (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: 13–21). This is, of course, evidence of the Queen's skills in sorcery; yet she hardly seems very witch-like or even villainous in the saga, but is portrayed rather as an attractive and powerful middle-aged woman, who uses magic to avenge herself on a faithless lover (Ármann Jakobsson 2000: 21–4).

In the Kings' Sagas, Queen Gunnhildr is portrayed most unflatteringly, either as an evil woman or a witch, although in *Heimskringla* (I: 135–46, 204–05) condemnation seems to be mixed with admiration (cf. Sigurður Nordal 1941; Jochens 1987: 116–19; Jochens 1996: 180–82). In *Egils saga* this picture is largely sustained, but in *Njáls saga* she is a more complex character, and in *Laxdæla saga* she is a good and generous queen.

King Haraldr and Gunnhildr were succeeded by Earl Hákon, who is customarily hailed as a successful ruler of Norway in the Kings' Sagas. Yet the Kings' Sagas' portrayal of him is far from flattering. He was

heathen and criticized for his unmoral sex life. Although his rule began successfully, it took a turn for the worse in the last years of his life. In some sources, mainly the *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason, Earl Hákon is presented as a wicked and heathen ruler, in much the same vein as Queen Gunnhildr (*Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar*: 14–19, 60–63, 71). In the Family Sagas his depiction is also mixed, but on the whole less hostile. In some sagas he is simply the king, a noble patron of all Icelanders who come into his realm, among them Vigfús Glúmsson in *Viga-Glúms saga* (57), Hallfreðr in *Hallfreðar saga* (151), and of course Óláfr Peacock in *Laxdæla saga* (78). These promising and noble Icelanders receive handsome gifts and are considered the earl's friends, and there is no mention of any conflict arising.

Nevertheless, Earl Hákon's portrayal in the Family Sagas is mixed. Vermundr in *Eyrbyggja saga* receives a warm welcome from the earl on account of his good family. Then he asks for two berserks as a present, and the earl gives them to him, but warns Vermundr that they will not be of any use to him (60–62, cf. *Heiðarvíga saga*: 216–17). Earl Hákon is thus beyond reproach in this tale, but nevertheless linked to heathen elements and "forneskja", i.e. berserks.

In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Earl Hákon first appears during Gunnar's stay in Norway. He is totally fascinated by this Icelandic golden boy, and appears ready to let him marry his sister, whom Gunnar frequents (83). He is reluctant to let Gunnar depart. Later, Þráinn Sigfússon goes to Norway and enjoys the earl's favour both on account of his nephew Gunnar and his dignified and handsome appearance (198). The earl goads Þráinn to capture an outlaw viking for him, and subsequently keeps him by his side as a favourite, perhaps as a replacement for the now deceased Gunnar. Then, Þráinn throws away the earl's friendship at a stroke by shielding the villainous Hrappr from the earl's wrath. This causes the earl to take harsh reciprocal action against innocent bystanders, the sons of Njáll, and he is indeed chastised for that. However, the real villain of the piece is Þráinn and his subsequent ill fate is linked to his betrayal of his earl (198–228).

Earl Hákon is a benevolent patron in the episode of Gunnar, and a just ruler who is let down by an unworthy subject in the Þráinn episode. But his potency in sorcery is also remarked upon, and he performs so much injustice against the sons of Njáll that they refuse to have any more dealings with him and accept pardon only from his sons.

Some of the youngest Family Sagas portray kings, perhaps surprisingly, in a more negative manner. Earl Hákon and King Haraldr Finehair



in particular begin to resemble wicked fairy tale kings. In *Flóamanna saga*, the protagonist Þorgils goes to Norway to claim some property, but is warned that the avaricious Earl Hákon will claim it as his. This is indeed the case but the earl nevertheless wishes to see Þorgils, takes an instant liking to him, and commands him to collect taxes for him for a while in order to get his property back. This Þorgils manages to do successfully, is given his property, and the Icelander and the earl part as friends (257, 261, 264). A similar motif connected with Earl Hákon is found in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* and *Finnboga saga ramma*. The earl is from the outset hostile towards an Icelandic newcomer at court, and forces him to pit his forces against a hideous *blámaðr* (a black man, lit. 'blue man').<sup>3</sup> The Icelander emerges as a winner, and the earl is snubbed but eventually accepts the Icelander in his *entourage* (*Gunnars saga*: 364–73; *Finnboga saga*: 281–91).

In *Finnboga saga*, the Earl Hákon's behaviour is more rash and extreme. He first becomes furious with Finnbogi for killing one of his courtiers and states that even though the courtier was a wicked man, he resembled the earl himself! Then he pits Finnbogi against a troll-like *blámaðr* (this seems to be a habit of the earl), and his anger is in no way diminished when Finnbogi has triumphed. It is not until after Finnbogi has killed the earl's talking bear in a swimming contest that the earl changes his mood dramatically, praising Finnbogi extravagantly and promising to honour him above all others. This promise is made good by the earl who marries his grand niece to him, and they part as the greatest of friends, everyone finding it remarkable that the earl should thus favour Finnbogi. Earl Hákon is thus full of contradictions, extreme both in wickedness and benevolence. He realizes himself that he is considered a harsh and treacherous ruler by other kings, and sends Finnbogi on a mission to make him more popular among them (286). This Finnbogi manages to do, in spite of the fact that the Byzantine king remarks at first that he has indeed heard of Earl Hákon, but nothing favourable (288).

King Haraldr Finehair has a significant role in the *Víglundar saga* (63–74), one of the youngest Family Sagas (see e.g. Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959: xxxii, Vésteinn Ólason 1993: 42). It intertwines the settlement myth, complete with the king's tyranny and the nobles who yield to no man, with a depiction in the chivalric vein of a faithful noble who welcomes the king to his home. His dearest wish is that the king will accept his son in his entourage. But the son is later banished on account of a

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<sup>3</sup> This same motif is connected with King Harold Finehair in *Kjalnesinga saga*.

rival who has easier access to the ear of the king. In the postclassical *Kjalnesinga saga*, Haraldr resembles a fairy tale king, who has been fostered by the Giant Dovre in the Dovre Mountain of Norway. Some of his men want the king's permission to kill Búi, the protagonist of the saga, but the king claims he does not want to harm any man who has come into his realm. Instead he sends Búi on a mission to the mountains to fetch him a chessboard from his supernatural fosterfather. When this is accomplished, he invents another ordeal for Búi; he is to fight the king's *blámaður*. When Búi has defeated this monstrous character, he is finally able to leave in peace, and the king emerges perhaps not so badly from the saga (*Kjalnesinga saga*: 27–37; cf. *Porskefirdinga saga*: 182).<sup>4</sup>

Even though Earl Hákon and King Haraldr Finehair are presented as villainous and treacherous, the sagas in which they figure usually end on a happy note, with the king befriending the Icelandic protagonist. It is also remarkable that even though the king's faults are clearly outlined, the dearest wish of the Icelander seems nevertheless to be to gain his favour and enter his service. In fact, in these post-1262 sagas, it sometimes does not seem to matter whether the king is just or unjust: entering the king's service is always a good option.

Most Norwegian kings are portrayed favourably in the Family Sagas. The notable exception is King Haraldr Finehair, who is generally favoured by the Kings' Saga authors, but is depicted as a tyrant in many of the Family Sagas. King Haraldr Grey-cloak, on the other hand, seems to enjoy more popularity in the Family Sagas than in the Kings' Sagas. King Eiríkr Bloodaxe is a negative character in both genres; King Hákon the Good and the two saintly Óláfrs are always viewed in a positive light;<sup>5</sup> and Earl Hákon is a mixed character in the Family Sagas, as well as in the Kings' Sagas.

### 3. Major or minor roles:

#### how important are kings in the family sagas?

Kings did not as a rule maintain a central role in the Family Sagas, and in some sagas kings do not figure at all. In the sagas from the eastern quarter of Iceland (*Austfirðingasögur*) there are hardly any kings, except in the

<sup>4</sup> Cook (1994) interprets King Haraldr's role in *Kjalnesinga* as the chief representative of the pagan religion.

<sup>5</sup> On Hákon the Good and his historical image, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998; Kreutzer 1999.

post-classical *Fljótsdæla saga* (257), where Þiðrandi Geitisson is well received at the court of Earl Hákon.<sup>6</sup> These sagas have sometimes been termed primitive or classical feud sagas (see Vésteinn Ólason 1993: 104–24) along with some sagas from other areas of Iceland — *Reykðæla saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, and *Hænsa-Þóris saga* — where kings are also absent from the plot. In other feud sagas, kings have a minor role. In *Ljósvetninga saga*, Earl Hákon appears at the very beginning (6) and King Haraldr Hardruler at the very end (96–99, 103) where he argues the virtue of settlement instead of bloodshed, and appears as a just and useful king.<sup>7</sup> In *Viga-Glúms saga*, King Hákon the Good is described in favourable terms (6) and Earl Hákon is said to be a good friend of Vigfús Glúmsson (57).<sup>8</sup> The kings appear here as distant but friendly, sometimes as patrons of Icelanders and mostly on the side of peace and justice.

The role of kings is on the whole more prominent in Family Sagas that take place in the western part of the country and Húnavatn District than in the sagas from Austfirðir or the North-East. Kings have a prominent role in *Laxdæla saga*, where their main role is to confirm the royal blood of various members of the Laxdælir family (Ármann Jakobsson 1998). Kings also have a substantial role in *Heiðarviga saga* (see Bjarni Guðnason 1993: 45–50) and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. The kings in these sagas seem on the whole to be mainly a source of honour for the Icelanders, who serve them in order to gain recognition. Laxdælir do not have to perform any service for the king; honour is lavished on them simply because they are more noble, more handsome and of better family than anyone else. Other saga protagonists have to make more of an effort to win the favour of the king. As a rule, though, this is not very difficult. Kings normally act kindly and generously towards Icelanders who come to Norway to seek recognition.

The service of Icelanders to kings became an even more prominent

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<sup>6</sup> In *Hrafnkels saga*, King Haraldr Finehair's reign is used to date the settlement of Hallfreðr, Hrafnkell's father (97) but no king appears in the saga.

<sup>7</sup> King Haraldr Hardruler appears in four family sagas, among them *Föstbræðra saga*, and *Grettis saga*, where he helps Þorsteinn drómundr to avenge Grettir and is renowned for his wisdom and good counsel (276, 279, 285). In *Króka-Refs saga* (138–59), King Haraldr has a more substantial role. He is approached by Refr's enemies and takes up their feud with Refr. Later, Refr slays one of Harold's courtiers and then encounters the king, and informs him of the deed in through a riddle, so that he manages to escape while the king unravels the riddle. Yet, in spite of his persecution of Refr, the king admires his skills. And, of course, King Sveinn of Denmark, who is King Harold's arch-enemy according to the Kings' Sagas, thinks highly of Refr.

<sup>8</sup> One version of *Gísla saga* (16–19) includes an account of the struggle between King Hákon the Good and Eiríkr Bloodaxe which is, in the vein of most of the Kings' Sagas, unfavourable to Eiríkr. The other version starts with King Hákon already on the throne of Norway.

theme in some of the sagas which were probably composed later than 1262 (see Ármann Jakobsson 1999b). It is the theme of *Fóstbræðra saga*, which, like *Hallfredar saga*, was later incorporated as a þáttir in *Flateyjarbók*. Also worthy of note is *Vatnsdæla saga*, where the relations of the Vatnsdælir family to the Norwegian kings is very important.

In *Gunnlaugs saga*, Gunnlaugr comes to the court of Earl Eiríkr, the son of Earl Hákon, and at first manages to offend him, but later makes up for this by composing a poem in the earl's praise. Gunnlaugr later enters the earl's service, and they are on friendly terms from then on (68–70, 77–78, 84, 99). In *Bjarnar saga*, Þórðr Kolbeinsson and Björn Hítðelakappi both manage to win Earl Eiríkr's favour, but they are portrayed as scheming opportunists who have no real loyalty to the earl (111–25). Even though Earl Eiríkr is a shadowy figure in these sagas, he seems to be considered a worthy ruler and is useful for Icelanders who wish to gain prominence by serving a king. In *Grettis saga*, which dates from the 14th or even the 15th century (see Örnólfur Thorsson 1994), Earl Eiríkr and his brother Earl Sveinn are presented as masterful rulers who ban all duels and outlaw villains and robbers who create disturbance (61). Grettir falls into disfavour with Earl Sveinn after killing Hjarrandi, and is never forgiven (80–85). The cause of all this is Grettir's bad luck, and even St. Óláfr himself does not wish to keep Grettir at his court on account on this fate (134, cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1993: 48).

On the whole, the role of kings in the Icelandic Family Sagas can vary a great deal. In some sagas, they are very important, while in others they do not appear at all. Kings often figure prominently in the sagas from the West and North-West of Iceland, whereas they do not have an important role in any saga from the East. Kings are especially important in some of the oldest Family Sagas, especially *Egils saga* and *Hallfredar saga*. As the genre progressed, a king or two usually makes an appearance in a Family Saga and their main function would seem to be to bestow recognition on Icelanders at the court. Relations between kings and Icelanders are sometimes relaxed and without confrontation, but in some instances, the Icelander is received with hostility or keeps falling out of grace. The favour of the king is usually coveted. Skalla-Grimr's dismissal of the courtier's life is far from expressing the general attitude to kings and kingship in the Icelandic Family Sagas.

There has perhaps been a tendency to overemphasize the hostility towards Norwegian kings and kingship in general in the Family Sagas. Actual instances of this are in fact rare. Even though King Haraldr Finehair is portrayed rather negatively in the Family Sagas, the opposite

is true of his grandson, King Haraldr Grey-cloak. It seems to be the general tendency in the Family Sagas to regard amiable relations with the king as a source of good fortune, regardless of the virtues of the king in question. The Family Sagas may thus even be said to be less critical of individual kings than the Kings' Sagas.

The Kings' Sagas are concerned with the idea of kingship. This makes their authors critical of individual kings, who clearly fall short of the ideal. The Icelandic Family Sagas as a rule do not judge kings so harshly. There, the kings usually appear as patrons of the Icelandic protagonists, and thus confirm their worth. This is evident in *Laxdæla saga* where the kings welcome all members of the Laxdælir as equals. *Hallfredar saga* may be seen as a large *þáttr* about an Icelander and his service to a noble king. This can also be said of *Föstbræðra saga*, while the protagonists of *Grettis saga* and *Harðar saga* are not favoured enough by fortune to enjoy the respect of the king. This is indeed a harsh fate, as the favours of kings seem to be a coveted prize in the Family Sagas.<sup>9</sup>

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