

Discovering Erling Skakke

*A historical study on Erling Skakke's
depiction in Orkneyinga saga, Heimskringla
and Sverris saga*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Norwegian historians of the Middle Ages have shown great interest in the Norwegian civil war of the 12th and 13th century.¹ The political actors of this period were crucial for initiating a new stage in Norwegian history that would see a shift in social norms and a realignment of royal legitimacy. Erling Skakke was one of the engines of this breakthrough, however, perhaps due to his ultimate defeat, Erling has been largely overshadowed by his counterpart, Sverre Sigurdsson, in the historiography.

Sverre Bagge and Hans-Jacob Orning, though they ultimately disagree on why they transpired, emphasize the fundamental changes in the conduct of conflict which occurred from about 1160 in Norway.² In this endeavor, Orning writes that Erling was a more ruthless individual, than his predecessors, emphasizing how his character was decisive for these structural changes.³ Also Bagge writes that Erling's way of treating his enemies was a drastic change in the contemporary context.⁴ However, he seemingly thinks that this was caused more by structural changes in the contemporary society, than by Erling's character being particularly distinct from earlier actors.⁵

I will not explicitly enter this debate, or tread into the space of political history, however I believe that there is a need for a comprehensive study of Erling's character. I also wish to note that a study of Erling's character in his contemporary society is not the same as a study of character in the more "modern" understanding. By looking at the depiction of his character we do not necessarily find his private character. In this society, the private and public sphere were intrinsically linked, meaning that Erling's character is largely viewed through his appearance in the public sphere, consequently meaning that it is difficult to know whether the Erling we find belongs to the private or public sphere.

¹ See below

² Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling", Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold* (København: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010),

Bagge, «Borgerkrig og statsutvikling: svar til Hans Jacob». Orning, «Borgerkrig og statsutvikling» and Orning, «Hvorfor vant kongene?».

³ Orning, «Borgerkrig og statsutvikling», 208-209.

⁴ Bagge, *Borgerkrig og statsutvikling: svar til Hans Jacob*, s. 101-102.

⁵ Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling", 107

Furthermore, the sagas are the primary source of information on this period, and as uttered by Koht, already in 1921, “(sagaene) er ikke lenger slike hellige skrifter som de var den gang de først blev draget fram av glemselen». ⁶ We should not expect to find a completely analogous depiction of Erling in the different sagas. Finding Erling thus requires us to wade through the muddied water of saga literature. Highlighting Erling’s depiction, both similarities and differences, can consequently also help us un-muddy the waters of the saga literature, and find particularities of the different sagas.

1.1 Thesis statement

In this thesis I will use *Orkneyinga saga*, *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga* to examine how Erling is depicted in the saga literature and discover distinct facets of different sagas. I wish to examine what is common among the sagas, what is different, and lastly discuss why we find these differences in his portrayal.

This thesis will examine how Erling wry-neck is depicted in the saga literature, and discuss some possible reasons for why his portrayal differs.

1.2 Historiography

Methodological approaches using the sagas as the primary source for analysis has a particularly lengthy history. Early historiography, even up to as far as the 20th century, considered most sagas as more or less accurate and unbiased in their retellings of past events and depictions of people and societies. They increasingly came under more scrutiny, as the field of history was exposed to the teachings of historians like Leopold Von Ranke, whose teachings stipulated that objective history could be found through rigorous examination of a material’s sources. The lack of what was regarded as appropriate sources meant that the sagas lost their claim to objectivity and were thus largely abandoned by many historians for some time. ⁷ The sagas stayed in the conscience of Icelandic historians, however, and in the late 19th

⁶ Koht, *innhogg og utsyn* (Kristiania, Aschehoug, 1921) 76

⁷ This is obviously a simplification, as can be seen by the continued research on the sagas in Norwegian historiography. However, as noted by several historians, the sagas did in fact lose their claim to objectivity at this time, as the sagas now had to be regarded as biased, which ultimately changed the way in which the sagas were studied. See Koht, *innhogg og utsyn* (Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1921), 76.

and early 20th century, a theory referred to as Free-prose theory was developed, which maintained the objectivity of the sagas. They believed that the various sagas were composed contemporary to the events they described and were later transmitted and transcribed word for word into writing, in the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.⁸ As a response to both this theory and the sentiment around the historical veracity of the sagas, Icelandic historians in the early and mid-20th century put forth the so-called Book-prose theory. Icelandic historian Sigurður Nordal were among the pioneers who opened this frontier, insisting on the sagas as literary fiction, as opposed to being historical in nature. The contributions of these perspectives are still visible today, as one of their main points of contention was on whether the sagas should be considered “fiction” or “history. However, today, historians recognize the sagas as *both* “fiction” and “history, abandoning the false dichotomy of earlier historiography.⁹

First, we should look at what is meant by “the sagas as history” in the historiography, and how historians have emphasized this affects studying them.

Diana Whaley (1991) points out that there are certain features, especially concerning, “details of lexical and syntactic usage within the smaller linguistic units of phrases and sentence”, which are analogous in most sagas.¹⁰ She especially emphasizes that the saga-style is, “concise, essentially unpretentious in vocabulary and syntax, and sparing with descriptive and evaluative epithets and rhetorical devices.”¹¹ Ultimately then, the author of the sagas attempts to present the sagas as entrenched in reality.

In 2007, Ralph O’Connor highlighted and examined the so-called *apologiaes* he had found in a plethora of different sagas.¹² *Apologiae* are segments where the author explicitly enters the narrative and addresses the audience by commenting on the veracity of either a scene or the text in general.¹³ The existence of such segments means that the author of the sagas wishes to establish the appearance of objectivity. O’Connor explains his findings by stating that, “in the absence of a fully-fledged theory of fiction, an untrue story was liable to

⁸ Bibire, «On Reading the Icelandic Sagas”, 11.

⁹ Byock, “the sagas and the twenty first Century”, 78-82.

¹⁰ Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991), 83.

¹¹ Ibid. 83

¹² O’Connor, “History or fiction?”.

¹³ Ibid.

be dismissed or condemned as a lygi ('lie')."¹⁴ This means that due to the "lack" of an awareness towards what we today understand as literature, "history" was the only form of literature that existed, and if it was perceived as otherwise, the audience condemned it.

Sørensen (1993), in his aptly named "some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas", writes that, "like the kings' sagas, the family sagas maintain that they are dealing with events that actually happened".¹⁵ Furthermore, he explains that the information in the sagas is "rooted in the background that was common to the authors and their public".¹⁶ He is here primarily speaking about the Icelandic family sagas, but this is just as, if not truer, for a study on the sagas used in this thesis, as they are all written only a few decades after the fact, meaning that both the stories and the social and political culture featured in the narrative is seemingly more known to both the audience and author of the sagas.

Bibire (2007) points out that some still argue that the "objectivity" of the saga is simply a literary convention, but that this seems rather absurd. As, this would mean that "for several centuries within medieval Iceland, there was one group of people, the saga-authors, who knew that what they were writing was invention, and another group, the audiences, who believed that the sagas were true."¹⁷

So, in total, the sagas incorporate a retelling of past events that is shared, more or less, by the audience of the sagas. This means that the portrayal of Erling found in one of the sagas should largely mirror those found in the others.

Historians such as the German Gerd Althoff, rising to prominence around the early 1980s, emphasized how implicit rules and ambiguous rituals-maintained order in a society that the historiography had long considered burdened by arbitrary violence. Althoff writes that these implicit rules were of particular importance during the Middle Ages, as "opposed to now, there existed no comprehensive legal basis in written form whose claim of validity surpassed all other norms and rules by being armoured with sanctions of the state."¹⁸ He explains that, even though the exact rights and duties involved in these rituals remain

¹⁴ Ibid, 133.

¹⁵ Sørensen, "Some methodological considerations", 31

¹⁶ Ibid, 34. A similar sentiment was also shared by Marianne Kalinke (Kalinke, "Norse Romance", 323.)

¹⁷ Ibid, 13.

¹⁸ Althoff, *Rules and Rituals* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 4.

ambiguous, “everybody knew which rights and duties a feudal relationship involved. Everybody knew which rights and duties resulted from a peace-treaty... but this knowledge existed in people’s mind as custom”.¹⁹ This new perspective on the distinctive nature of Middle Age society spread, and it soon became applied to societies all around Europe. The French “Feudal Revolution” has for a long time been a topic under much scrutiny, as historians discussed whether post-Carolingian France was a society dominated by power hungry aristocrats, who dealt out arbitrary violence towards any and all laymen, or whether *Spielregelnn* limited the use of violence and maintained public order.²⁰

William Ian Miller (1990) was part of the vanguard among social anthropologists who moved along a similar strand.²¹ He, however, focused on the sagas and emphasized *how* one should go about discovering the social and cultural setting of the sagas. He writes that the sagas themselves are extraordinary sources for recovering Icelandic society, at least the society close to when it was itself written.²² We can reconstruct this society from the sagas itself as, it is just not reasonable to assume that the “social and cultural setting in which these characters moved about” is invented.²³ The social and cultural setting “were the given of his story, provided him by the world he lived in or heard tell about.”²⁴ So, it is possible to find lenses through which we can view and interpret people and events, something which is particularly important to note for this study.

Byock (1990) shares a similar sentiment, when he emphasizes that the sagas are not only literature, but that they are the “indigenous social documentation of medieval people”, which thus can tell us a lot about the contemporary culture.²⁵

Though Gisle Sigurdsson (2001) focuses on oral societies, that is those societies with an oral rather than written culture, his methodology on how to grasp this culture is transferable to the sagas and shows a more developed and defined methodology. He has emphasized how it is possible to find a culture, only available in the text, through the comparative method. He

¹⁹ Althoff, “Symbolic communication and medieval order”, 70-71.

²⁰ See f. ex the discussion on the “Feudal Revolution” in the 1990s. Barthélemy and White, “The “Feudal Revolution””, Bisson, “The “Feudal Revolution”” and Reuther and Wickham, “The “Feudal Revolution””.

²² Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 45-46.

²³ Ibid. 46.

²⁴ Ibid. 46.

²⁵ Byock, *Medieval Iceland* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 49-50.

writes that, “The saga should be treated as if they were some kind of field report from an alien society, as sources that can be used to construct a picture of the social reality of the social reality of the 12th and 13th centuries, and we can forget about looted to them for direct evidence of specific people and events of the 10th century.”²⁶ If you examine one saga, it does not tell you a lot about the contemporary culture, however if you take several contemporary texts, they can tell you a lot about the culture of a past society. Consequently, one can find a shared culture for the period I am studying, and one should view Erling’s depiction through these.

These perspectives have spread to Norwegian historiography on the saga period.

Hans-Jacob Orning (2014) agrees with the idea of *Spielregeln*, and his articles on Bagge’s theory on the Norwegian civil war and the evolution of the Norwegian state, highlights that he in fact does not believe that historian Sverre Bagge goes far enough in his confidence in such implicit rules.²⁷

Some historians, such as Knut Helle (2009), have rejected the idea of a pre-state society, and argued that, though the medieval Norwegian society was different from a capitalist society, it was not as different as some have implied.²⁸

Orning (2010), in an article responding to Helle, emphasizes that the goal of so-called “primitivists” is not to separate “primitivistic” practices from modern, but rather that the sources we have access to only gives us a fraction of the full picture. And as the society these sources portray is so different from contemporary society, we need different models to accurately interpret and explain this society.²⁹

²⁶ Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic saga and oral tradition* (Cambridge, Harvard university press, 2004), 42.

²⁷ While Sverre Bagge concludes that a monarchy with one king is most stable, Orning argues that, during, Norway, though it might be an exaggeration to claim that an a monarchy with one king, where the king would be strong, potentially would be more unstable than a dual monarchy, where the king would be weak, had social norms which ensured that conflicts did not inevitable result in vengeance and feuds, thus maintaining order, despite allowing for multiple kings at once. (Orning, “Hvorfor vant kongene?”, 299.) (Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsuikling”)

²⁸ Helle, “Den primitivistiske vendingen”. This article is aptly named “Den primitivistiske vendingen I norsk historisk middelalderforskning» and is seemingly a reaction to this perceived overemphasis on the distinctness of past societies.

²⁹ Orning, «Norsk middelalder i et antropologisk perspektiv».

Sverre Bagge (1991), in his book *society and politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, put such theories into action, and found a society with distinct, though implicit, expectations and rules which affected dimensions such as honor and feuds.³⁰

He is ultimately part of a number of historians who have ventured out to establish a culture of social norms. These are largely thought to be shared social norms in the communities of the Norse countries. I will henceforth refer to this culture as Old Norse. For the sake of brevity and clarification, I will further define the culture when it is directly applied in the analysis part of this thesis.

We next have to examine what is sometimes, as noted above, referred to as the “fictional” elements of the saga in the historiography. As with most, if not all, narratives, the author of a text has a role in manipulating the narrative.³¹ Sørensen (1992) writes that, the fact that many sagas feel the need to distinguish themselves from “fiction” through means such as apologiae, proves that both the author and audience was aware of the “fictional” nature of narratives.³² This means that we must consider authorial intent, and consequently bias, when we examine the sagas and their narrative. This is the “fictional” element of the saga. This means that we should expect to find *some* differences in Erling’s depiction in the different sagas.

Furthermore, as the historian Bibire emphasizes, merely understanding the characteristics of the “main” societal culture, in which the saga’s actors act, the Old Norse culture in the case of the sagas, is not enough. Instead, the saga, as literature tends to do, shifts between several different *modes*, something which creates an ambivalence that necessitates that we consider each saga as an individual textual universe.³³

These *modes* can be discovered in the same way as we discover the societies in the sagas. One text might not give us much definite information, however by combining this text with other texts, we might find the skeleton of a larger framework of understanding. The discovery of these different *modes* in the culture of the sagas is similar to Barbara H. Rosenwein’s discovery and focus on the “emotional communities” of past societies. She

³⁰ Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

³¹ Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991), 127.

³² Sørensen, “Some methodological considerations”, 32.

³³ Bibire, «Old Norse literature», 237. Bibire, «On Reading the Icelandic Sagas”, 5-6. See also Sørensen, “Some methodological considerations”, 30.

emphasies that it is naïve to merely arrange emotional contexts into such categories as “medieval” or “modern”, as she writes that more than one emotional community may, and normally do, exist at the same time.³⁴

As noted above, I will primarily interpret Erling’s portrayal through the Old Norse model. However, I also believe that certain other modes, which will be further emphasized below, strongly color his ultimate depiction.

1.3 Primary sources

The objective of this text is to examine Erling’s depiction in the saga literature. To do so I have selected three sagas as the primary sources for this thesis, *Orkneyinga saga*, *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*. I specifically chose these three as they all feature Erling rather extensively. Furthermore, though some sources overlap, especially *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga saga*, they do not overlap to the degree of f. ex Fagrskinna and Morkinskinna and *Heimskringla*, who at times are used as almost direct sources.³⁵

The sagas used in this thesis are not the original versions. They are all based on one of several manuscript versions, written a long time after they were originally composed. Regardless, as noted by several historians, the sagas especially remain rather constant between manuscript versions.³⁶ (source) I will thus interpret the saga versions I have access to as if they convey the original message and contain the original wording. Furthermore, I should also mention that the versions I am basing my analysis on is not written in the original language. I have used Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edward’s version of *Orkneyinga saga*, Kjell Aril Pollestad’s version of *Heimskringla* and Anne Holtsmark’s version of *Sverris saga*.³⁷ I will refer to the relevant chapter, for both *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, as they follow a standardized pattern, while I will refer to the relevant pages for my version of *Sverris saga*.

As noted above, the audience of the sagas expect the sagas to be “history”, consequently leading to the sagas being based on a retelling of past events that is largely shared by the audience. Due to the closeness in time between the writing of the saga and the

³⁴ Rosenwein, *Emotional communities*. (New York: Cornell University Press) 2

³⁵ See Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991). Chapter 4, “sources and influences”

³⁶ See Bibire, «Old Norse Literature”.

³⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*. Translated by Pálsson and Edward (London: Hogarth Press, 1978). Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, translated by Pollestad (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2017). *Sverris saga*. Translated by Holtsmark (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1961).

occurrence of the events, I believe that a question on the veracity on the sagas is largely obsolete when considering these three sagas.

Orkneyinga saga tells the story of Orkney and the actions of the Orkneyinga jarls, from their heroic and mythological past up until about 1200. The author of the saga is unknown, though we know that it was written around the year 1200, most likely in Iceland. Historians typically split the saga into six component parts, where three are dated to the period 1192-1206, often combined to form what's known as the original saga. The other three component parts are dated to the first half of the 13th century.³⁸ The section this thesis will examine belongs to the original saga and encompasses the reign of Rognvald Kalli (d. 1158), or more specifically the period just prior to- and during Rognvald's crusade, which Erling accompanied.

Despite it presumably being written in Iceland, both the author and patron remain elusive. Regardless of who the author was, however, Judith Jesch goes as far as to say that, "This is a saga which lays bare its skeleton more clearly than most, and in which it is possible to study the processes by which a variety of source materials were turned into saga."³⁹ For example, it is the generally agreed upon theory that the skaldic poems, written by Rognvald and/or his skalds during the crusade, was an important source for the section on Rognvald's crusade.⁴⁰ This dominant use of skaldic verses makes it reasonable to assume that the saga expresses a rather biased portrayal of Rognvald, as a primary function of these poems was to praise its patron.⁴¹ This bias is also likely to have transferred to the saga as skaldic poems tended to see few adjustments when they were used as material for other texts, as the strict metric rules of Norse poetry could cause the meaning of the poem to collapse.⁴² The prominent use of skaldic poems thus implies that the saga would bias towards Rognvald. Furthermore, a number of historians have emphasized that the saga is likely to have been written in close cooperation

³⁸ Taylor, "Orkneyinga saga: Patronage and authorship", 396.

³⁹ Jesch, «presenting traditions in *Orkneyinga saga*», 70.

⁴⁰ Bibire, "The poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's court", 211 in Jesch, «presenting traditions in *Orkneyinga saga*», 79. Bandlien, *å finne den rette* (Fagernes: Valdres Trykkeri, 2001), 101.

⁴¹ Bibire, «Old Norse literature», 232.

⁴² Bergsveinn, «*Inn i skaldens sinn*» in Svenungsen, "the saint and the wry-neck", 107.

with Ragnvald's friend and relative, Bjarne Kolbeinsson.⁴³ This further makes a bias towards Rognvald and his interests likely.

Interestingly, some historians have also pointed to the influence of other *modes* in *Orkneyinga saga*, past the Old Norse culture.⁴⁴ This is primarily the so-called "courtly", or in Norwegian historiography "høviske", model, associated with Western-European courts, and will be further explored below.

Heimskringla tells the story of Norwegian and Swedish kings. In this thesis, I will also *only* use the chapter now referred to as *Magnus Erlingsson's saga* in *Heimskringla*, though I am aware that Erling also makes his appearance in other sections of the saga. The saga was written by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson on Iceland, who began writing the book around 1230.⁴⁵

The bias in *Heimskringla* might be particularly difficult to spot due to its concise writing style and lack of overt value-judgements, "moral or partisan – on the part of the narrator", even more so than the other sagas examined.⁴⁶ Still, paradoxically this concise and neutral writing style, can simultaneously make finding Snorri's perspective easier, as each word is meticulously inserted into the narrative. Diana Whaley points out that due to the scarcity of both figurative language and assigning of attributes in the narrative, their emphasis is that much accentuated.⁴⁷ Meaning that whenever a statement is included, Snorri emphatically stands behind it. Furthermore, whenever a outwardly superfluous or out-of-context sentence is included, its presence should be that much more thoroughly explored.

Sverris saga tells the story of Sverre's (r. 1177-1202) unlikely rise to power. It was written in two separate periods. The first part, often referred to as *Gryla*, was created between 1185 and 1188 and focuses on Sverre's establishment of a party, and subsequently the strengthening of this party, ending in 1179, between chapter 31 and chapter 32, before any of Sverre's great victories.⁴⁸ The second part was created between Sverre's death in 1202 and

⁴³ See Bandlien's discussion on this (Bandlien, *å finne den rette* (Fagernes: Valdres Trykkeri, 2001). 105)

⁴⁴ See Svenungsen, *Norge og korstogene*, Bandlien, *å finne den rette* (Fagernes: Valdres Trykkeri, 2001), Jakobsson, *Í Leit Að Konungi* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), Guvernich. "From saga to personality".82-84 and Jakobsson, "the Individual and the Ideal", 74.

⁴⁵ Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991), 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 87-88.

⁴⁸ See Sverre Bagge on the evolution of this debate (1995, 15). See also Ludvig Holm-Olsen (1953, 30-56) on earlier perspectives. See also Nygaard, B, E. 1958

around 1230.⁴⁹ Sverre is usually attributed as the patron of *Gryla*, while the second part of the saga is viewed as being commissioned by his descendants.

In contrast with the stories around Erling in the other sagas, it should be noted that the saga also features events that are either fantastical or impossible to confirm. Sequences that cannot be confirmed are especially those that feature dreams, f. ex when we are told that Sverre, before coming to Norway, dreamed that he was given St. Olav's banner by St. Olav himself.⁵⁰ One of the more fantastical events in the saga is when Sverre's ships are about to be caught up to by Magnus Erlingsson's ships. Sverre here starts praying to St. Olav, which is followed by the sudden appearance of a thick fog which descends upon the sea, allowing Sverre to escape.⁵¹

As noted above, scholars generally agree that both versions were commissioned by patrons who wished to depict Sverre favorably, the first version typically being viewed as commissioned by Sverre himself. This has naturally led to the conclusion that the saga is biased towards Sverre.⁵² Bagge (1993) writes that, "the picture of *Sverris saga* as propoganda is above all based on the first part... both the statement in the prologue and the actual content... strongly suggests that it was intended to present the king in a favorable light."⁵³ As Erling was Sverre's main opponent for several years, it also seems natural to assume that Erling's depiction is warped in some way. Interestingly, Bagge writes that Erling and his son are described as popular rulers, with strong support from the people, and Sverre and his men as thus depicted as disturbers of the peace.⁵⁴ He writes that this depiction is due to the "David and Goliath" – pattern of the saga, which aims to aggrandize Sverre's ultimate success.⁵⁵ This motive will be returned to below. On the other hand, many have also claimed that the saga aims to present Sverre as the rightful king, through a contemporary religious framework.⁵⁶ This would seemingly imply that Erling is *not* a rightful king, something which would clearly affect his depiction, and will be returned to below.

⁴⁹ Bagge, from gang leader to the Lord's anointed (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996)16

⁵⁰ *Sverris saga*. 22

⁵¹ *Sverris saga*. 59

⁵² Koht, H. 1921. 164, Brekke, E, N. 1958. 166

⁵³ Bagge, «ideology and propaganda» 2

⁵⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 3. Bagge, Bagge, *from gang leader to the Lord's anointed* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996)

⁵⁶ Johnsen, A, O. 1948. Ljungqvist, "Kristen Kristen Kungaideologi I *Sverris saga*».

1.4 Methodology

To examine Erling's depiction in the sagas, I have selected three sagas, *Orkneyinga saga*, *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*. I will examine the sagas in the above order and outline the different sagas' depiction of Erling.

To discover how he is depicted, I have chosen to first focus on his political and military power in the sagas. These will reveal the kind of resources the different sagas attribute to his character.

Secondly, I will examine how the different sagas depict how he exercises his power. Here, I will mainly analyze his actions, as they can indicate whether he used his resources in a way that weakened, maintained, or even aggrandized his position.

Thirdly, I will examine a third category of his portrayal in the sagas. However, in contrast to the groupings above, this category varies wildly, and ultimately produces three distinct renditions of Erling, corroborating Koht's statement.

I will finally attempt to answer why Erling's portrayal is so different in the individual sagas. I will examine two potential interpretations to explain why the depiction of Erling differs in the sagas. Firstly, I will examine whether the differences in his depiction could be attributed to a question of the narrative's setting, as perhaps the different sagas depict him at various points in his life. Secondly, I will examine whether the differences could be attributed to the author of the text, that is whether they had an agenda, or a difference in opinion, thus applying their bias to the saga.

As noted above, interpreting the sagas requires us to understand the contemporary culture of the featured society. This culture will predominantly be the Old Norse culture, which will be defined and applied simultaneously, below, as to create cohesion. Both the assessment of his character when it pertains to power and his employment of resources will be viewed through this model. This is firstly because this is the most natural model to apply to the interpretation of Erling, as it constitutes, as noted above, the general social and cultural context of the society in the sagas.

Despite my conviction that the Old Norse model is pervasive in the sagas, I will not only view the sagas through this model. As noted above, the sagas, and literature in general, can, and often do, employ many different models simultaneously. Again, as noted above, historians have highlighted the existence of a "courtly" culture when it pertains to *Orkneyinga*

saga. *Sverris saga* has similarly been attributed another model, one that emphasizes the existence of a “rightful king”, through a contemporary religious framework. This model will be juxtaposed to a model which emphasizes success above all else, in line with the Old Norse model. All these frameworks will, similar to the Old Norse model, will be proactively defined and applied.

Additionally, I will simply interpret the translated versions as if they are the original version, as explained in the section above. I will also not delve into questions pertaining to the veracity of the sagas. That concerns both the general truth-value of the texts and Erling’s ultimate depiction in the sagas. This is because my objective is to first find Erling’s depiction, and then explain why I believe it is not ultimately consistent between the sagas.

Chapter 2: Erling’s depiction in *Orkneyinga saga*

2.1 Powerful

Several factors point towards the depiction of Erling’s as a powerful man in *Orkneyinga saga* through the lens of the Old Norse model

Most modern historians have moved away from interpreting this Old-Norse society as a society driven by kin.⁵⁷ Instead, power manifested in the “friends” you possessed. The more friends a person had, the more power he held. The meaning of a friendship in this society, however, was much different from the modern concept of friendship. Jon Vidar Sigurdsson remarks that the modern concept of friendship belongs to the private sphere, while it in the Middle Ages belonged distinctly to the public sphere.⁵⁸ Friendship was a contract between two parties, with clear reciprocal obligations.⁵⁹ When one party gave a gift or a service to the other party, the other party was expected to provide either a repayment in the form of a gift or service.

In *Orkneyinga saga*, we first encounter Erling accompanied by his brothers as the, “landholders who mostly shared powers with (king Inge), ”.⁶⁰ As power manifested through the friends you possessed, and friends could be gained by establishing contracts of reciprocal

⁵⁷ Still, historians, such as Bente Opheim, highlight that kin *could* be a central element in forming networks in Norse societies. See Brathetland, *Nettverksmakt*

⁵⁸ Sigurðsson, *Den Vennlige Viking (Oslo: Pax, 2010)*, 12.

⁵⁹ Ibid 12-13.

⁶⁰ *Orkneyinga saga*. Chapter 85

obligations through gifts, agricultural revenue *could* be a means to power. Erling and his brother's description as the "landholders who mostly shared powers with (Inge)." therefore implies that Erling had the resources to compete for friends, build a network and participate in the political game of the old Norse society. Still, being in possession of such wealth does not necessarily mean that Erling spent it on improving his social standing, and thus was considered powerful by contemporary standards. However, several other factors point towards this conclusion.

In a sequence following the introduction of Erling to the narrative, we are introduced to, though not for the first time, the current earl of Orkney, Rognvald.⁶¹ Here, Inge, king of Norway (r. 1136-1161), encouraged by Erling and his brother, Ogmund, has invited Rognvald to Norway, to become closer friends. During one of the many feasts throughout his visit, Rognvald converses with the Norwegian chieftain Eindridi the Young. We are told that Eindridi had been to Constantinople, and often talked with Rognvald about his journey. One night, however, the conversation takes a less amicable turn, when Eindridi suddenly admonishes Rognvald for "(not) wanting to go to the holy land" and being "content to listen to people's reports about it".⁶² Eindridi goes on to comment that Rognvald is a man of ability and is thus just the right man to go there.⁶³ Lastly, he points out that "It would bring you great respect if you were to mix with people from the noblest families." Additionally, "After Eindridi had spoken, there were plenty of others to back up his words and urge the Earl to be their leader on the expedition."⁶⁴ Rognvald is still undecided, and this is when Erling enters the scene. We then read that, "Erling had a lot to say on the subject and promised to join in as long as the Earl would take charge."⁶⁵ Which is followed immediately by "With so many of the most respected men persuading him, the Earl agreed to the expedition".⁶⁶

At this point, it is fruitful to examine how this sequence can be interpreted through the Old Norse model, and how it might have impacted Rognvald's disposition towards organizing the crusade. Eindridi first seemingly tries to shame Rognvald into going by calling attention to the fact that he likes to listen to the stories of the Holy land but has no interest in going

⁶¹ At the time, there was two earls on Orkney, Rognvald Kali Kolsson (d. 1158) and Harald Maddadsson (d. 1206), though Rognvald was the older of the two, and had deep ties to Norway.

⁶² *Orkneyinga saga*. Chapter 85

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

himself.⁶⁷ We are made aware that this is clearly not a private conversation when we later learn that many people agree with Rognvald, implying that they had listened in on the conversation.

The fact that this conversation has an audience is particularly important when we consider the setting of an Old Norse society. Honor is the fundamental value of this society, and what decides whether an action will grant or seize honor is whether other people regard it as the proper action. As put by Bagge, “one's value as a person depends on other men's esteem, but not in the sense that the man who goes to the most extreme length in revenging insults, taking risks, and so forth is also the most highly esteemed.”⁶⁸ No inherent value is found in any one action, but when the saga moves the conversation from the private sphere to the public sphere, it simultaneously increases the potential loss or gain of honor for Rognvald. And, as the public sentiment is shown to support Eindridi, his admonishment of Rognvald carries much pressure.

Secondly, Eindridi tries to encourage Rognvald to go by complimenting his person. Again, the public setting should also be recognized, as his comments emphasizes that it would be a waste for Rognvald *not* to go, due to how relevant his qualities would be on a crusade.

Thirdly, he points to the aspect of network, when he says that, “It would bring you great respect if you were to mix with people from the noblest families.”⁶⁹ As noted above, friendships were the foundation of political power in pre-state society, and Eindridi thus suggests that a journey like this would potentially attract other mighty people and increase the size of Rognvald's network.

Finally, we are told that a lot of people agree with Eindridi's sentiment and urged him to be the leader of a crusade. Again, the public aspect should be emphasized. Not only are these people praising Rognvald's person, but they are also putting a lot of public pressure on him. Organizing the crusade becomes the only correct option and he could face much shame if he decided not to organize the crusade, but contrary, could also achieve much honor by deciding to organize it. And despite all these aspects, Rognvald's answer is still not revealed, and we are thus left to believe that he remained undecided or opposed to organizing a crusade.

⁶⁸ Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 165.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

This, however, is when Erling enters the scene. Erling says that he will join the voyage if Rognvald agrees to lead it, which is immediately followed by Rognvald's consent to organize the crusade. Seemingly, it is not before Erling agrees to join the expedition, that Rognvald decides to organize it. Erling's interjection should not be read as purely a harmless and/or supportive comment. Just as with the other people putting their support behind the idea of a crusade led by Rognvald, Erling, by saying that he would like to accompany the crusade, explicitly enters the public sphere, and puts pressure on Rognvald. However, contrary to the support of the unknown mass referred to as, "plenty of others", Erling's support is immediately followed by Rognvald's assent. This can possibly be explained by Erling's principal status. Powerful men did not only hold much personal sway, they were the head of a large network of people, which meant that their sentiment carried not only the pressure of one man/woman, but that of their extended network. If we read the saga as such it seems as if it suggests that Rognvald's decision is ultimately influenced by Erling's support, which suggests that the saga depicts Erling as a powerful man in accordance with Old Norse society.

Erling's support of the crusade, however, did not only affect Rognvald, as his endorsement of the crusade seemingly attracted other participants. If we return to the events following the decision to arrange a crusade, we read that, "a number of men from the very best families wanted to join too".⁷⁰ This is clearly a consequence of Rognvald and Erling being involved, as it states that, "*once* the Earl and Erling had made their decision" these powerful men wanted to join.⁷¹ Again, as with the reason for why Rognvald ultimately decided to arrange the crusade, why is Erling mentioned explicitly if his support was not of any particular importance. It can therefore be claimed that the saga portrays Erling as crucial for having people want to join the crusade.

One possibility for why Erling accompanying the crusade led more people to join, is that they wished to get closer to Erling, in order to gain access to his friendship. In a society that lacked a central government, ties to powerful people were a necessity. The lack of laws meant that conflict resolution depended on powerful actors to initiate and guarantee the outcome. In f. ex Iceland, a society the Old Norse model often is applied to, almost all major disputes in the Free State period (ca. 930-1262) were settled by arbitration."⁷² Sigurdsson explains that when a conflict had broken out, the people involved would go to a powerful

⁷⁰ *Orkneyinga saga*, kap. 85

⁷¹ *Ibid*

⁷² Sigurðsson, "*The Role of Arbitration*", 132.

man. A refusal to accept a case, would be a signal to all, that the powerful man was not willing to give aid, and could thus lead to him losing adherents. And, on the other hand, a powerful man that agreed to take the case would signal that he was willing to aid his friends.⁷³ A chieftain that was perceived as “successful” in conflict resolution showed that he could promote the interests of his adherents, and thus attracted further adherents.⁷⁴ So, Erling seemingly attracting participants to the crusade, potentially in hopes of establishing ties to Erling, indicates that Erling was a successful chieftain, one who was likely to have a large network and thus power.

We observe that the men accompanying Erling on this crusade remains close allies also long after the crusade, suggesting that the journey both established new, and galvanized old, friendships. In Pål Berg Svenugen’s 2016 doctoral thesis on the Norwegian crusades, he analyses the networks visible in *Orkneyinga saga*.⁷⁵ Though only a few of the crusade’s participants are referred to by name, Svenugen finds and highlights a network around Erling and king Inge. He finds that Aslak Erlendsson of Hernøy, one of the leaders of the expedition, also emerges as a participant in the murder on Sigurd Munn in both *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna*.⁷⁶ Sigurd Munn was one of Inge’s brothers, and later battled Inge for the Norwegian throne. Furthermore, Svenugen highlights a second leading participant, that of Guttorm from Meløy. In *Sverris saga* he is encountered as a member of the Bagli party during their conflict against Sverre Sigurdsson.⁷⁷ The Bagli party took up the fight against Sverre Sigurdsson, around 10 years after Erling’s and Magnus Erlingsson’s demise at his hands. It thus seems appropriate to assume that Guttorm remained a close friend of Erling also after this journey. These cases indicates that the journey created and/or galvanized friendship ties between the participating members.

However, Svenungsen attributes their participation mainly to another factor than wanting to establish friendships. Rather, he points out that people during the Middle Ages, no matter their rank, lacked complete personal autonomy, and instead belonged to a “societal hierarchy based on networks, family – and power relations.”⁷⁸ This can be attributed to the obligation of reciprocity between friends found in the Old Norse society. This line of thinking

⁷³ Ibid, 125.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Svenungsen, Norge og korstogene.

⁷⁶ *Heimskringla*, Haraldssons saga, kap 28. Morkinskinna, kap. 100. in Svenungsen, Norge og korstogene, 94.

⁷⁷ *Sverris saga*, kap 154, i Svenungsen, 2016, 94.

⁷⁸ Min oversettelse, Svenungsen, Norge og korstogene, 85.

should make us assume that both Erling and Rognvald had an extensive network of adherents prior to their crusade, which were expected to lend a hand in times of need. This is exemplified by Jon Peterson. Peterson had held the position of lensman during the reign of Harald Gille, Inge's father, and presumably occupied the same position under Inge.⁷⁹ As a person closely associated with the king, he could be expected to fulfill his obligations by f. ex participating in a crusade supported by Inge, something which could also have been true for Erling's adherents. So, the interest for participating in the crusade following Erling's decision to accompany it could therefore be viewed in the context of Erling activating preexisting networks, thus implying that Erling *had* an extensive preexisting network.

To summarize, Erling's explicit role as a landholder makes it natural that he had access to a large number of resources, which could be invested into establishing friendships, the manifestation of power in Old Norse society. Secondly, Rognvald's decision to join following, or due to, Erling's appearance in the saga suggests that his presence carried much public pressure, which implied power in Nordic societies. Thirdly, Erling's affirmation that he would join the crusade immediately caused others to want to join, possibly to establish or galvanize friendships, or fulfill obligations. This either suggests that becoming or maintaining a friendship with Erling was advantageous or that Erling already had established an extensive network of friends. Still, regardless of the reason, the fact that Erling's commitment to join seemingly was the source of more participants, highlights that Erling is portrayed as a powerful man through the lens of the Old Norse society.

2.2 Shrewd

In *Orkneyinga* saga, Erling uses his resources in a manner that ensures that he maintains power and magnifies his current position.

Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, in "The appearance and personal abilities of godar, jarlar, and konungar: Iceland, Orkney and Norway" categorizes shrewdness as the foremost characteristic of a chieftain.⁸⁰ *Orkneyinga* saga, when describing Rognvald's co-earl, Harald Maddadardson, writes that he, "(had a) shrewd character, and people thought him likely to make a good chieftain». This characteristic gets contrasted with his "ugly face", which further

⁷⁹ Svenungsen, Norge og korstogene, 93.

⁸⁰ Sigurðsson, "The Appearance and Personal Abilities", 97-98.

emphasizes shrewdness as a beneficial quality.⁸¹ The importance of shrewdness is highlighted by Bagge who writes that, “the analysis of the game of politics... gave a fairly clear picture of the kind of person who was most likely to survive in this game, namely the astute, careful, and rather cynical politician.”⁸²

As seen above, honor, the fundamental measurement of esteem in this society, is granted through performing actions judged appropriate by the public sphere. This means that being able to which actions were likely to be considered appropriate by the public was crucial. However, as there was generally a rather loose definition for the proper action in any select situation, it also meant that the honorable action often was the same as the one that led to success. Bagge thus writes that honor should be seen as both a reward for success and a means toward success.⁸³ Success arguably became the most important measure for honor, as a successful action improves one’s esteem in the eyes of others and thus rewards the actor with honor, and simultaneously, improving one’s esteem makes people likely to follow you, thus increasing the chance of success, and consequently further honor. Success thus becomes the most important factor for being able to maintain or further one’s own power. Shrewdness will thus be used as a designation for a person that is successful in using their resources in a manner that maintains or furthers their own power.

One of the areas where actors could display their shrewdness was on the battlefield.

As noted by Bagge, and clear in the sagas examined in this thesis, warfare was in fact the preeminent arena for the confrontation of Snorre’s actors.⁸⁴ Here, powerful men used resources, that is their armies recruited from their own networks, to compete for further adherents and thus further success.⁸⁵ Erling is one of the main actors of Snorre’s narrative actors, and Bagge thus emphasizes the advantage inherent in military aptitude. This, interestingly, is further emphasized by the violence of the period, a period which saw considerably more military engagements and blood shed than both the preceding and

⁸¹ *Orkneyinga saga*, kap 85

⁸² Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 153

⁸³ Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 166

⁸⁴ Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 92

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 95

following period.⁸⁶ Additionally, victory or defeat in war could obviously have much impact on the transfer of various resources, which consequently could be used to maintain and/or further one's power, increasing the chance of success. In total, Shrewdness can thus be displayed through warfare, and was a skill that could allow individuals vying for powers to employ the resources available to them as powerful individuals in a manner that ensured that they could maintain and/or further their own power, in a period of Norwegian history when armed conflicts were particularly pervasive.

In *Orkneyinga saga*, Erling's military capabilities are most evident during the two major military engagements of Rognvald's crusade.

The first incident is initiated when Rognvald and Erling arrive in Galicia and ask to buy food from the locals. In response, the locals request that they remove "a foreign chieftain (that) had occupied a nearby castle and was making the people suffer badly under his tyranny."⁸⁷ In return, Rognvald's party was promised all the money found in the castle and would be allowed to purchase food from the locals. Rognvald asks his men for their opinion, and they answer that they are in favor of attacking the castle, "as they expected plenty of loot». However, it is clear that defeating the "foreign chieftain" is not a swift endeavor as Rognvald says that, "We've been here for some time now, ... but we've done nothing about the castle-dwellers".⁸⁸ Rognvald proceeds to gather his men "for a talk", before he describes Erling as "the cleverest tactician here ", and asks him for advice on how to attack the castle. It should also be noted that Rognvald also says that he wants the advice of the others if they have any ideas that they think might get results. Erling then suggests that they maintain small fires below the ramparts of the castle to weaken the foundation. This turns out to be successful as the ramparts started crumbling during the assault of the castle, which forced the castle's defenders to move off the walls. Soon after this, they seize the castle and "took a great deal of loot".⁸⁹

Erling's military excellence is here apparent. Firstly, it is implied that the other members of the crusade, or perhaps, at this point, mainly Rognvald, struggle to devise a plan to attack the castle, as they stay in the area for a long time without attacking the castle, despite

⁸⁶ Orning, *Dei Norske Borgarkrigane* (Oslo: Samlaget, 2021), 15, Johnsen, *Fra ættesamfunn* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1948), 305. Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling", 157-158 and Helle, *Norge blir en stat* (Bergen: universitetsforlaget, 1964). 44-47.

⁸⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*, kap. 86

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, kap. 86

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, kap. 87

the party clearly favoring an attack. This indicates that taking the castle was no easy feat, emphasizing Erling's military capabilities when his plan ultimately succeeds. Rognvald then gathers his men and asks Erling for advice because he is, in Rognvald's eyes, the best tactician present. This is a particularly apparent suggestion that Erling possesses skills suited for warfare in the saga. This is further emphasized when none of the other participants present a plan, despite Rognvald explicitly asking them to do so. Finally, Erling's plan succeeds, which again points to his aptitude for warfare.

The second major engagement of the saga is an attack on a large dromond.⁹⁰ After defeating the foreign chieftain and looting the surrounding pagan area, the party continues into the Mediterranean. Here, they encounter what they first think is a large island, which on closer inspection turns out to be a dromond. Rognvald then gathers the bishop and the captains of the accompanying ships, Erling being one of them. He proceeds to ask whether the bishop and Erling can think of any "trick or tactics by which we might overcome the crew of that dromond?"⁹¹ The bishop, answers that, "A shrewd man like you (Rognvald), sir must see that it would be sheer madness to risk yourself and your men like that".⁹² Erling interjects and explains that an attack by their ships most likely won't succeed, but that if they manage to get under the ship, the ship's weapons and crew won't be able to reach them.⁹³ Rognvald agrees to attempt Erling's plan, which works precisely as intended, as they manage to lay their ships broadside to the dromond and, just as Erling predicted, the attacks of the people aboard the ship fail as they can't reach Rognvald and Erling's ships.⁹⁴ Rognvald then has his men hack at the hull of the dromond, something the other crews imitates. They eventually board the ship, defeat the crew, and obtain plenty of money and other valuable items.⁹⁵

Erling displays military aptitude also during this engagement. Firstly, the fact that Rognvald only asks the bishop and Erling for advice in attacking the dromond, despite having gathered all the captains, implies that Rognvald is considered one of the more skilled tacticians on the journey. Both the bishop's comment, that it would be sheer madness to attack the ship, and Erling's comment that his plan most likely won't succeed indicates that a successful attack on the dromond was perceived as difficult. The difficulty of this task is also

⁹⁰ A dromond is a type of ship.

⁹¹ Ibid. 87

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 88

⁹⁵ Ibid. 88

further emphasized when the bishop, who himself is implied to be a skilled tactician, says that it would be “sheer madness” to attempt it. This magnifies Erling’s ultimate success further. Finally, his military aptitude is apparent as the battles transpire exactly as he had predicted.

Though Erling in these instances does not exclusively use his own resources, that is his troops, to gain wealth, the saga depicts Erling as a man that excelled in the theater of war. So, despite him, here, not mobilizing and leading his own armies, it implies that Erling is depicted as shrewd, as his military aptitude makes it reasonable to assume that he would be able to maintain and/or further his own power through war effectively, in a period of Norwegian history with much strife.

Shrewdness in warfare, however, was not the only manifestation of this trait, and Erling displays an understanding of the society he was a part of and recognizes the potential of the resources he possesses, which he applies to further his own position. When Eindridi first suggests that Rognvald should organize a crusade, several people seem to agree with him.⁹⁶ Still, it is not until he has, «so many of the most respected men persuading him”, that he finally relents.⁹⁷ However, the only one «respected man» that is revealed to us, that is not Eindridi, is Erling.⁹⁸ The saga therefore seems to indicate that Erling’s presence was *the* primary factor in leading Rognvald to agree to organize the crusade. As seen above, public opinion had much impact on people’s honor, which in turn related to attracting adherents and thus power. It thus ultimately determined what the honorable, and consequently correct, decision, was. And as Erling’s sentiment, as the head of a large network of people, carried much public pressure, his support of the crusade greatly impacted the potential reward for organizing the crusade, and risk for not organizing it. And, as not only a member of this Old Norse society, but one that was highly successful, Erling would presumably be aware of the pressure he put on Rognvald. I would therefore argue that Erling, aware of the societal pressure he possessed, consciously pressures Rognvald into organizing the crusade. This implies that Erling was able to employ his resources as a powerful man, that is his extensive network, successfully, to accomplish an objective he set out to realize, thus demonstrating shrewdness.

As for why Erling might have wanted to use his resources in this way, and pressure Rognvald into organizing the crusade, the crusade could in itself bring much honor to its

⁹⁶ See above

⁹⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*, kap. 85

⁹⁸ See above

participants. The crusade clearly turned out to be a beneficial venture, “as everyone who made it was considered all the greater”.⁹⁹ Furthermore, it could be argued that the crusade earned Erling enough social capital to marry Kristin Sigurdsdatter, a legitimate daughter of a king.¹⁰⁰ What his exact intentions and expectations were, we will never know for sure. However, the outcome suggests that Erling was aware of the benefits it might bring to his honor and social standing and explains why he should be regarded as shrewd for facilitating such an endeavor.

Orkneyinga saga depicts Erling as skilled in warfare, a quality that would allow him to use his resources as a powerful chieftain effectively, and thus preserve and/or enhance his own power. He is shown to be aware of the public pressure his extensive network afforded him and applies it in a way that expands his own prestige and thus highlights his shrewdness.

2.3 Humble

In *Orkneyinga saga*, Erling displays humility

The 10th century saw a proliferation of cathedral schools in Europe, which fostered a large group of educated clerics. This group came to permeate and dominate the central bureaucracy of courts across Europe, and thus spread a “Christian-humanist ethic”, which resulted in the introduction of new ideals.¹⁰¹ These ideals were thus partially based on Christian ideals, but also had, at least originally, practical application for success at court. Historian Stephen Jaeger explains that *ex* humility was an important trait to possess at court, because it was a place where ambitious, talented and proud men were thrown together in direct competition with each other for favor.¹⁰² Humility could therefore potentially decrease the chance of conflicts within court and ensured a productive atmosphere.

These ideals which had first developed around the court, later emerged as more general ideals under the label of courtliness.¹⁰³ These so-called “courtly ideals” diffused rapidly and eventually came to permeate Europe. These ideals also later evolved into the ideals we often associate with the Middle Ages, namely the chivalric ideals.¹⁰⁴ So, in total, the

⁹⁹ *Orkneyinga saga*, kap. 89

¹⁰⁰ Svenungsen, Norge og korstogene. 91

¹⁰¹ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 101.

¹⁰² Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 38.

¹⁰³ In Norwegian historiography “courtliness” is often referred to as “høviskhet”

¹⁰⁴ See Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 259 and 6. See also (Bumke, *The Concept of Knighthood* (New York: AMS Press, 1982, 78.

courtly model brought a set of ideals and was pervasive in Europe during the High Middle Ages.

Though historians disagree on the extent of the influence of courtly culture from Europe, it is generally agreed upon that Western Europe *did* have an influence on Norse literature.¹⁰⁵ Bandlien emphasizes that Rognvald mimics the European Troubadour poems, particularly when he writes about the queen of Narbonne, Ermengarde, whom he met during his journey to the Holy land.¹⁰⁶ Svenungsen writes that courtly honor is most clear in association with Rognvald's crusade and the stay in Narbonne during the crusade.¹⁰⁷ This was, as noted above, related to displaying behavior that was thought suitable at court.¹⁰⁸ The Norse crusaders attempted to appropriate these new impulses and impression from the meeting at the court in Narbonne, and that this was expressed through attempts to imitate the troubadour poems in the skaldic poems, perhaps to impress their native audience.¹⁰⁹ Ian Beuermann writes that, "*Orkneyinga saga* shows him as one of the Orkney earls most closely in contact with this outside world."¹¹⁰ His writing was not limited to the conventions of skaldic poetry, as is shown by the influence of Troubadour poetry on his writing. It thus seems plausible that this courtly model influenced Rognvald's skaldic kvads, and by extension, *Orkneyinga saga*. As noted above, Rognvald's skaldic poems seemingly played a large role as material for Rognvald's crusade in the composition of *Orkneyinga saga*.¹¹¹ If this is the case, the quality of humility should be regarded as not only a meaningful quality, but one that depicts Erling positively.

The first major scene that highlights Erling's humility is the lead-up to the attack on the castle held by the foreign chieftain. When they plan an attack on the castle held by the foreign chieftain, Rognvald says to Erling, "as the cleverest tactician here, you're to work out a scheme for taking the castle."¹¹² Erling answers by first noting that he is, "no master tactician". This scene clearly features an Erling that is underplaying his abilities. Jager examined courtly literature and finds that such underplaying not only displays humility, but

¹⁰⁵ Bandlien, *å finne den rette* (Fagernes: Valdres Trykkeri, 2001), 98.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 103

¹⁰⁷ Svenungsen, *Norge og korstogene*. 90

¹⁰⁸ Nedkvitne, «Hvorfor dro Middelalderens skandinaver på korstog», 120-124. 2002. in Svenungsen, *Norge og korstogene*. 90

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Beuermann, «Chapter Three», 150.

¹¹¹ See 1.4 Primary sources

¹¹² *Orkneyinga saga*. 86

by, “bagatellizing great talents, he¹¹³ magnifies them and multiplies the harvest of honor he collects from the wondering court.”¹¹⁴ Erling does relent to Rognvald’s request of working out a scheme, but he answers by saying he might as well try to make a suggestion and see what it leads to, as he might get lucky.¹¹⁵ Again, we see him underplay his abilities, by implying that luck, rather than skill would be what decided whether it would be successful or not. Erling ends up having Rognvald follow through with his plan, and Erling’s humble bearing in presenting his plan, might have aided him in asserting himself, without risk. As Jager puts it, humility allowed the men at court, to, “display the talents and skills that win him the favor of the ruler without arousing envy among his competitors.”¹¹⁶

During the episode with the Dromond, Erling’s humility is again present, though not necessarily as explicit. Firstly, Erling does not offer any advice until he is explicitly solicited to provide it. In fact, it is not before Rognvald explicitly asks him to share his opinion, and “the bishop” advises *against* attacking the dromond, that we hear Erling’s opinion. This is again a sign of humility.

Furthermore, seemingly as not to offend the bishop, who has previously suggested that an attack would be impossible, Erling makes sure to compliment his abilities, before he counters his opinion.¹¹⁷ He also never explicitly states that he disagrees with the bishop, he instead says, “as I see it”, presenting the two opinions as equals, perhaps suggesting that they are not competing to give the best advice, but instead working to further the group. Again, he displays humility, which in this case seems especially appropriate for the setting of a court.¹¹⁸

Erling displays humility as he underplays his own qualities, that are later proven to be especially impressive. Erling waits until he is addressed before he presents his plan. Furthermore, he stays humble when confronting his “equals”, seemingly mirroring the humble demeanor expected at court, when discussing opposing perspectives.

¹¹³ Jager examines the actions of Tristan in *Tristan and Isolde*, who, like Erling, underplays his abilities.

¹¹⁴ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 41.

¹¹⁵ *Orkneyinga saga*. 86

¹¹⁶ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 38.

¹¹⁷ *Orkneyinga saga*. 87

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 87

Chapter 3: Erling's depiction in *Heimskringla*

3.1 Powerful

Similar to *Orkneyinga saga*, Erling is portrayed as powerful, through his extensive network in *Heimskringla*.

In Magnus Erlingsson's saga, in *Heimskringla*, we primarily find Erling *after* he has accompanied the crusade featured in *Orkneyinga saga*.

Not only does Erling retain the network of friends he had previously built, but he massively expands it through various means following Inge's death. Firstly, and most importantly, Inge's adherents are transferred to Erling. When Inge died, we are told that Erling sent an invitation to, all those who had been his (Inge's) loyal friends, those that belonged to his *hird*, Gregorius Dagssons huscarls and Inge's other supporters that still were alive.¹¹⁹ At the following meeting they are to decide on a new king, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a new leader of the faction. Though Erling is not the first candidate proposed, he is the one that ends up accepting the offer. When Erling is asked to lead the faction, he explains that they have a difficult and dangerous task ahead of them, in vying for the throne, and that it might ultimately end, as it has with so many leaders before him, with his death.¹²⁰ Therefore, he explains, the leader of such a venture, requires an assurance that his allies will remain loyal. The other participants accept this explanation and swear total allegiance to Erling, which now means that all those that were present and had previously served Inge, now served Erling. Sigurdsson examined this phenomenon, that he names *flokkr*, and emphasizes how this oath of allegiance kept the *flokkr* united, through an unspecified period of time.¹²¹ This, of course secured Erling a large and powerful network of adherents. Furthermore, it ensured that these members would stay particularly loyal. This kind of oath was especially meaningful in this society and breaking it would result in a harsh toll to their honor. Still, breaking such an oath might not have a crucial political impact in itself. However, as the oath was made in a public setting, Erling's adherents risked immense political damage if they broke it. This ensured that Erling's adherents remained especially

¹¹⁹ *Heimskringla*. 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Sigurdsson, "unpublished". 36-37

loyal to him, which guaranteed that Erling maintained a large networks of friends, the manifestation of power in this society.

The importance of this transfer of power becomes clear when we hear that he consequently got control of a network that stretched across most of Viken, which he shortly afterwards extended to the entirety of Viken.¹²² Furthermore, *Heimskringla* later emphasizes that Erling was great friends with the people of Viken, largely as a consequence of their old friendship with Inge, again highlighting the centrality of Inge's faction in Erling's overall power.¹²³

3. 2 Shrewd

Shrewdness manifested in several different ways, as it simply denotes that one is able to deploy one's resources in a manner which leads to success, ensuring that one maintains and/or furthers one's power.

Shrewdness can manifest in warfare, and as noted above, skill in warfare allowed one to prudently use of one's resources, something which Erling displays in *Heimskringla*.

The first engagement we are presented with in the saga of Magnus Erlingsson, in *Heimskringla*, is the attack on the well defended city of Tønsberg, occupied by Haakon Herdebrei. We are first told that he waits outside the town for some days. When he finally attacks, he first sets fire to a ship loaded with wood and straw, presumably gathered in the preceding days, spent waiting outside the town.¹²⁴ The ship loaded with cargo is attached to two smaller ships by rope and sent ahead of his fleet. The smoke from the fire filled the streets and the dock, where Haakon's army was positioned, and effectively blinded them. We are then told that Erling's fleet moved into the cover of the wind, and shot through the smoke onto Haakon men, standing on the docks. This battle is a decisive victory for Erling, and we are told that many of Haakon's men were wounded, while the rest fled towards Trøndelag.¹²⁵

The battle highlights his strategic guile and intelligent planning. Not only is the plan a massive success, suggesting that it was indeed a good strategy, but the saga also highlights the elements which led to his ultimate success. Snorre first tells us that Erling waits a few days

¹²² *Heimskringla*. 4.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 10

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid*

before he attacks. This might be unimportant to the outcome; however, I would argue that it instead highlights the intelligent planning of Erling. By mentioning that Erling waits a few days before he attacks, Snorre implicitly suggests that Erling used the preceding days to prepare the attack. This also seems logical as his plan seemingly required extensive preparations. He must first gather wood and straw to load the cargo ship with. He had to find a thick rope and tie the ship loaded with cargo to two other ships. Furthermore, we are told that Erling and his fleet was able to position themselves opposite to the wind, while the smoke blew into the city. This suggests that Erling had waited for the wind to blow in the right direction before he attacked. I would therefore argue that *Heimskringla* suggests that Erling made sure to make use of his troops in a prudent manner, meaning that he used his resources in a way that was likely to lead to success, thus portraying him as rather shrewd.

After the decisive victory against Haakon, Erling stays in Bergen with a large army over the winter.¹²⁶ We are told that in order to hide his future plans, he bans any merchant ship from embarking north across the coast, because if there was trade between the cities Haakon would quickly learn about his plans.¹²⁷ Secondly, he had his friends put out the rumor that he intended to wait and defend himself where he was.¹²⁸ He finally allows the merchant ships to leave, and they quickly reach Møre, where Haakon's army is now situated. We are then told that no one in Møre had heard from Bergen in a long time, but that this fleet of merchant ships all brought the same news, that Erling had put his ships on land in Bergen; and that Haakon could confront him there, but that he had a large army. When Haakon hears this, he quickly splits off from his forces in Bergen, to personally gather further support in the nearby area. We then return to Erling, and his army, two days after the merchant ships are allowed to leave. Erling gathers his army and the people of the town. He then explains his plan, appoints shipmasters and presents a list over those who are selected for the king's ship. Additionally, we are also told that he asked all men to prepare themselves in their rooms.¹²⁹ Before even the next morning's morning prayer, Erling sets out from port.¹³⁰ King Haakon's fleet only consists of fourteen smaller ships when he spots Erling heading for him. Haakon and his army are clearly not prepared for such an engagement, not only are we earlier told that his army was split up in order to gather allies. but we are given an explicit description of the

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 4

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 5

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 5

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 5

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 6

disorder among the remaining men. We are told that all the men streamed down towards the ships, but each and every one ran to the nearest ship, and thus the crew became unevenly distributed among the vessels. Furthermore, we are told that, some seized the oars, some raised the mats and others set the course north towards Veøy, whose inhabitants they hoped could help.¹³¹ This confusion leads certain ships to become undermanned. This happens to the ship of Eindridi the young, the chieftain who earlier accompanied Rognvald and Erling on their crusade, who is now part of Håkon's faction.¹³² Erling's fleet manages to engage Håkon's fleet, and a short and one-sided battle ends with Haakon's defeat.

Just as with the previous engagement, Erling displays an impressive amount of skill in his planning and strategy. By withholding the merchant ships Erling first attempts to make Haakon wary, which seems to work, as Haakon begins preparing for an attack by gathering men and equipment in Møre, because "no one had heard anything from Bergen in a long time".¹³³ By withholding the merchant ships Erling also ensured that when they finally got released, Haakon became particularly interested in their information. And when the merchant ships are finally allowed to sail northward, they all repeat the same information, that Erling's ships were put on land, which made it seem likely that Erling was not preparing for an attack anytime soon. Haakon's wariness causes him to diligently check most of the ships, and as "they now got the same news from all the ships that came from the south.", Haakon becomes quite relieved.¹³⁴ Furthermore, to further put Haakon at ease, Erling had also spread the rumor that he intended to wait and defend the position he is currently holding. Erling succeeds in convincing Haakon that he is not planning an attack any time soon, which is apparent when he Haakon stops his preparations in Møre. Furthermore, it also causes Haakon to move parts off his army away from Trøndelag, in order to gather more support, in preparation for a more extended conflict. Furthermore, the fact that he explains his plan only after the merchant ships have left, suggests that he is even wary of his own men, and again, ensures that Haakon remains oblivious of Erling's intentions. When Erling finally prepares to execute the attack, he quickly gathers both the citizens and his army. He explains the plan, announces the already appointed shipmasters, and selects soldiers to man his own ship. This intelligent planning materializes in how quickly he manages to get his fleet on the water and prepared for battle. His intelligent planning is further emphasized by the contrast of Haakon's disorganized army.

¹³¹ Ibid. 6

¹³² Ibid. 7

¹³³ See above.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 5. My translation.

When Haakon's fleet finally spots Erling's fleet, the men in Haakon's army simply run into the closest ships, rather than any designated ship, and the men on Haakon's ships simply fill the positions that are closest at hand. When Erling finally catches and manages to engage Haakon's fleet, it is partially due to the disorder in Haakon's army, as the ship of one of his allies is falling behind, as the ship lacked men to fill the required positions. Similar to the sequence described above, Erling shows that he is able to use his army in a particularly successful manner.

There are also plenty of other examples of Erling's skill in warfare in *Heimskringla*, however I believe that I've showcased it thoroughly enough as it is. Still, As with *Orkneyinga saga*, shrewdness does not only manifest in warfare.

Erling's establishment of this *Flokkr* in the first place, and the way in which he managed to secure the loyalty of its members displays both an awareness of the societal norms and the potential of his resources. it. As noted in the section above, it was Erling who initiated the process of establishing a *flokkr* around his person, when he calls for a meeting among Inge's surviving supporters. *Heimskringla* thus highlights how Erling established an extensive network built not on reciprocal obligation, but personal loyalty to an individual and his cause. Sigurdsson finds that this was the first time a *flokkr* was founded, a watershed moment in the civil wars in Norway, as this form of organization now became the key to Norwegian politics.¹³⁵ So, Erling should be recognized for his foresight to use his position as a segment in a powerful network to establish not only a party that would aid him in his own struggle for power, but one that would remain the fundamental structure of organization during the Norwegian civil war period. Furthermore, not only did this *flokkr* constitute a large network, granting Erling immense power, a network based on personally loyalty would potentially also come at a lesser cost than the standard network of reciprocal obligation. Furthermore, we should emphasize the way in which Erling ensured that the members of the faction remained loyal to him. He has them swear an oath in a setting that involves a large audience, assuring that there would be a huge social and political cost associated with breaking it. This suggests that Erling was aware of the social dynamics of the society he was a part of and used his sound judgement in interacting with it. So, in total Erling used his position to assemble a network that enhanced his network greatly, furthermore, not only was this a new way of gaining power, but it was potentially also a network with lower associated costs.

¹³⁵ Sigurdsson, "unpublished". 38

Heimskringla, like *Orkneyinga saga*, depicts Erling as highly adept at warfare, a quality which was essential for managing one's resources effectively, in a period where war was especially pervasive. He is also able to enhance his own network by using his position to organize a meeting among his allies, though not necessarily friends, and establish himself as the predominant leader. He then guarantees the loyalty of this network by constructing a setting which assures that there are massive social and political costs associated with breaking away from it.

3.3 Ruthless

As noted above, success was often the crucial factor in deciding whether an action *ultimately* led to honor and/or a better position. However, this does not take away from the fact that public opinion was what determined whether an action was deemed appropriate and thus *directly* impacted honor. This also means that we can view the public opinion as the expectations of society. Furthermore, through the lens of the Old Norse model, where society lacked such things as a strong central government and enforceable laws, there was no one to enforce that certain decisions were not made. However, different *spielregln* ensured that society thrived, as they manifested through societal expectations. For example, *spielregln* ensured that conflicts were usually resolved, as you were incentivized to engage in arbitration, as it was both expected and would net you a new ally, a measure of more power.¹³⁶ Furthermore, you could practically be certain that your friendships, an "institution" which was imperative in this society, were guaranteed, as long as both parties maintained it, as breaking it, without reason, would cause massive public backlash, and thus loss of honor.¹³⁷ So, the Old Norse model brought certain expectations, through both societal pressure and *spielregln* and this thesis views ruthlessness as acting contrary to these expectations.

In chapter 11, while Erling is attempting to confront the chieftain Sigurd jarl, we are told that there were several members of his *flokkr* who secretly asked for Grid. Instead of immediately granting grid, or applying other forms of conflict resolution, Erling answers that he will let anyone who asks for grid survive, but that only those that had not committed

¹³⁶ Sigurðsson, *Den Vennlige Viking (Oslo: Pax, 2010)*, 51-52.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

“serious crimes” would be allowed to stay in the country.¹³⁸ In a society where public esteem carried honor, the more common forms of conflict resolution, primarily arbitration, often ensured that the parties involved in a conflict preserved their honor (by having both parties part of the final decision). In arbitration, a chieftain could certainly gain more adherents, and thus power, if the outcome of the arbitration was deemed beneficial.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, the system preserved both parties honor, as it was primarily a face-saving mechanism, where the verdict was supposed to make both parties look like/perceived as active and aggressive participants.¹⁴⁰ So, Erling not only potentially demands an especially harsh punishment, but he also bypasses the norms of conflict resolution, again emphasizing Erling’s ruthlessness.

These actions were not only restricted to other chieftains and/or hirdmen, however. We are told that he raises a charge against the peasants of Hisingen, as they participated in his enemy’s army during a battle. He finally charges them with having to pay a hefty figure, which they are very dissatisfied with.¹⁴¹ Of course, we might see this as fair, as they participated in the army of Erling’s enemy. However, the fee doubly aggravates the peasants as they not only have to pay a fee. But as the saga also explicitly describes them as “dissatisfied” with the verdict, something which implies a one-sided affair, this would, as seen in the example of arbitration, harshly impacts their honor. This, again, ensures that his enemies, the peasants in this case, remain enemies. And when the peasants later withhold their payments, potentially partially because of the loss in honor that would be associated with complying to a verdict they did not agree with, he not only kills their leader, burns his farm, and have the peasants pay the fee, he also kills 100 men, and burns down a further three farms. Again, rather than attempting reconciliation, Erling maintains hostile relations

How he treats his enemies, however, is not the only way in which his ruthless nature manifests, as both allies and neutral bystanders become victims of his ruthlessness. During the battle with Håkon Herdebrei, we are told that Nikolas, the son of Simon scalp was killed.¹⁴² He was the daughter son to Harald Gille and was during the meeting that established Erling’s *flokkr* the first candidate proposed as heir to the Norwegian throne.¹⁴³ Nikolas was therefore a potential pretender to the Norwegian throne, which was now held by Magnus, Erling’s son,

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 11

¹³⁹ Sigurðsson, “*The Role of Arbitration*”, 6.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* 19.

¹⁴² *Heimskringla*. 7.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

and thus a possible enemy. We are crucially told that, “it was Erling’s own men that got the blame for this murder.”¹⁴⁴ This highlights that Erling was the culprit to the murder of one of his allies and paints a picture of Erling as a man that would go so far as to kill his own friends, thus disregarding ties of friendship that had already been established, again emphasizing his ruthlessness.

Erling does very much the same thing when he has Harald caught and brought to him by one of his lensmen. We are told that people said that he was the son of king Sigurd Haraldsson and Kristin kingsdaughter, and thus, just like Nikolas above, had a claim to the Norwegian throne.¹⁴⁵ While Erling holds Harald in captivity, “people” ask Magnus to pray intercession for Harald, but Erling instead says, “such an advice your friends give you, but you will not for long rule this kingdom in peace if you always follow your good heart,” and proceeds to kill Harald.¹⁴⁶ Erling, aware of what the people regard as the correct action, decides to act against the opinion of the people. Here, *Heimskringla* shows that Erling acts contrary to the wants of the people, and does it knowingly and willingly, in fact he sees it as the correct course of action. Here, Erling not only kills a neutral party without motive, but he explicitly disregards public sentiment, which further emphasizes his ruthlessness.

In conclusion, Erling is depicted as ruthless in *Heimskringla*. He acts contrary to the expectation of the society he takes part in. He does not offer grid and/or enter into arbitration with his enemies, thus contradicting the public sentiment. He disregards the sanctity of friendships when he has his own allies killed. He does not pay proper respect to public sentiment and consequently loses honor.

Chapter 4: Erling’s depiction in *Sverris saga*

4.1 Powerful

Sverris saga also depicts Erling also highlights the strength of his extensive network.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 35.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 35.

The first description given of Erling is that he had great support from both the most powerful men in the country and the common people.¹⁴⁷ Viewed through the Old Norse model this is particularly important, as, again, friendships was the sign of power, and Erling has managed to form ties with both the other powerful men of society, and the people below him. This power is primarily made visible in the context of warfare, where he's shown to have access to an extensive network.

Erling is able to raise an army, ensure that it mobilizes quickly and supply it over an extended period of time when required.

When Erling hears that Sverre has defeated the army of one of his allies, he gathers men from all over Viken, and "they got so many men that it was a large army".¹⁴⁸ This indicates that Erling had established extensive ties with the people of Viken. When Sverre heard about the size of this army, he "realized that it would not be prudent to stay there and wait for such a dangerously large force",¹⁴⁹ which further emphasizes the strength of Erling's network.

When Sverre later, again, manages to defeat one of Erling's allies on the battlefield, he gathers a large army with all his leading men in Viken. This, again, ends with Sverre retreating, emphasizing the strength of Erling's network.¹⁵⁰

Sverre has to escape Erling's armies several more times, ultimately emphasizing Erling's large network and resources to sustain a long period of warfare.¹⁵¹ Bagge emphasizes how the raising of armies, movement of troops and supply of armies were all important factors in contemporary warfare, and it is therefore highly impressive that Erling time and time again was able to both raise and supply large armies for an extended period of time while battling Sverre.¹⁵² Furthermore, Erling's ability to raise an army, implying an extensive network, becomes emphasized when we contrast it to the arduous process Sverre goes through to raise an army to confront Erling. Sverre spends several years moving around Norway and Sweden to build up a force large enough to confront Erling. Before he becomes the leader of his own party, he even says that he did not think there was any man in Norway who he could

¹⁴⁷ *Sverris saga*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 40

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 40 min oversettelse

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 48

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* 55

¹⁵² Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)

hope to get help from, as no one dared to oppose Erling.¹⁵³ It can also be argued that Erling's ultimate defeat to Sverre does not diminish Erling's position. In fact, it might even further imply that Erling's position was strong, as Sverre ultimately spends years raising an army to confront Erling, but still *only* manages to defeat Erling in a surprise attack where Erling's only accompanied by a relatively small force.¹⁵⁴ That this event does not speak less of Erling's power is emphasized by the fact that a short time prior, only a few chapters before, Erling almost manages to catch Sverre's fleet and army, which survives only by a miracle, when Sverre prays to St. Olav and a thick fog suddenly appears around the ships.¹⁵⁵

Still, it should be noted that Erling's power is somewhat exaggerated, as it is clear even in *Sverris saga* that Erling's power and reach in Norway is not without limits. We first hear that Sverre sends a letter to Telemark, as in Telemark, "there was people who were unfriendly towards Erling there."¹⁵⁶ And when Sverre later enters Trondheim in Trøndelag, the saga writes that the people of the city, "welcomed him as was fitting for a king", highlighting Erling's lack of control in the region.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, it is primarily the region of Viken that is mentioned when we hear of Erling raising armies, highlighting that it was here he had his primary powerbase. As noted above Erling emphasizes how this exaggeration should be attributed to the "David and Goliath" pattern of the saga.¹⁵⁸ Where, the evidence of Sverre's just cause is neither his good arguments for his royal origin nor his superior political programme. It is his astonishing success, despite all odds."¹⁵⁹ By depicting Erling as powerful, mirroring the Goliath vs David motif, Sverre's success is magnified. So, it should be noted that Erling's actual power may have been more limited than *Sverris saga* might suggest.

Erling is depicted as a powerful chieftain in *Sverris saga*. His power is based on ties of friendship, which manifests through their compliance to serve in his army. Again, this was a society of reciprocal obligation, and these people would not agree to serve in Erling's army unless they had preexisting ties to Erling. His failure is also ultimately portrayed as unexpected, emphasizing how Erling's failure was not primarily due to his lack of actual power. Still, it should be noted that some of the descriptions emphasizing Erling's power are

¹⁵³ *Sverris saga*, 27

¹⁵⁴ See *Sverris saga*, 62-67.

¹⁵⁵ *Sverris saga*, 58.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁵⁸ See «1.3 Primary sources»

¹⁵⁹ Bagge, «ideology and propaganda», 3.

exaggerated, something which becomes clear even when we examine the saga's events. Ultimately, however, *Sverris saga* depicts Erling as a powerful man.

4.2 Shrewd

Erling displays an ability to use the resources at his disposal in an effective manner. As noted above, the battlefield was an area where powerful men could showcase their abilities in the political game.¹⁶⁰ Due to the focus on Sverre, I'd also argue that this is the main arena where *Sverris saga* allows us to see Erling's prowess, as his thought process, implicit or otherwise, is largely missing from the narrative.¹⁶¹

After Sverre wins an engagement against Orm kingsbrother, an ally of Erling, we are told that Magnus and Erling are informed of this battle, and immediately start gathering people from all over Viken. This army was so great that Sverre, who was in the area, realized the threat of this army, and quickly fled.¹⁶²

The saga provides a rather compressed summary of these events, not much longer than my summary above. Nonetheless, it shows that Erling, after having seen his ally be defeated, concludes that Sverre is a competent enemy that he should treat like a serious threat. With this assessment in mind, he quickly raises an army. The swiftness of this response is emphasized, as the saga simply states that Sverre stayed in the area he had just won a battle, and ultimately left for Bergen once he got word of Erling's army, rather than having Sverre wreak havoc in the neighboring regions.¹⁶³ Also, since Sverre leaves upon hearing about Erling's force we are led to believe that Erling employed his resources with force, rather than underestimating his enemy. The strength of this army is emphasized by the saga as it calls it a "veldig hær".¹⁶⁴ This episode depicts Erling's prudent use of his resources, that is his men, as he employs them both swiftly and forcefully, which ensures that he regains control in the area and thus retains his network.

¹⁶⁰ See Erling – *Heimskringla*, "Shrewd»

¹⁶¹ Ludvig Holm Olsen (65-67) writes that it's even likely that Sverre had taken a direct part in the composition of the first part of the saga, *gryla*, as he was both proven to be eloquent and had a clerical education, which would have given him the foundation to express himself in writing. (Holm-Olsen, *studier i Sverres saga*).

¹⁶² *Sverris saga*, 40.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 40-41.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

Some time after this episode, following an escape by Sverre, Erling, staying in Viken, hears that Sverre is in Værmland.¹⁶⁵ Upon hearing about Sverre's whereabouts, he calls on the *leidang* and sets out to catch Sverre. Sverre manages to escape from the area before Erling's army arrives, but this is only because he chooses to stay at farms close to the entrance of the valley, towards the end of his visit to the region.¹⁶⁶

Again, this event highlights the swift decision making of Erling in response to potential threats. We are told that Erling intended to trap the Birkebeinars, as "sheep are gathered to be sheared".¹⁶⁷ Though this plan failed, it only did so because Sverre saw through Erling's plan and managed to counter it by employing his own plan, that being to stay close to the entrance of the valley, as this allowed him to quickly respond to Erling's arrival in the region. This again implies that Erling was quick in reacting to the information given by his allies, and only failed because Sverre managed to react to Erling's plan in time. It also emphasizes how Erling treated potential threats with force, as the army he gathered to defeat Sverre and his party was large enough to force them to flee, implying a prudent use of his resources.

In the next chapter, we learn that one of Erling's allies, Simon in Skredsvik (Båhuslen), has his farm burned, his possessions looted, and ships stolen.¹⁶⁸ Simon, on his own initiative, decides to gather an army and chase after Sverre. Sverre flees but gathers his army while retreating. He ultimately decides to fight and wins a great and decisive victory against Simon, despite his army "not knowing how many men he (Simon) had."¹⁶⁹ When Erling learns of this, he, again, quickly raises an army from Viken.¹⁷⁰ Erling does not know the exact whereabouts of Sverre's army but moves towards where he thinks he is and ultimately ends up having chosen the correct direction, as we are told that the two armies end up heading directly towards each other.¹⁷¹ We are told that Sverre wanted to "lay traps" in Viken, in hopes of getting a lucky catch.¹⁷² The army of Erling and Sverre end up only ten kilometers apart without noticing each other's presence.¹⁷³ Sverre's army notices Erling's army when they are only about two kilometers apart (one fjerding). Sverre proceeds to

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 47-48.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*.

“immediately” turn around and move towards Værmland.¹⁷⁴ When Sverre arrives in Værmland he assembles the mightiest and wisest people of the area and ask if they will aid him, which they agree to. When Erling learns of this, he “turns around without doing anything more”.¹⁷⁵ Still, Erling decides to send a member of his current army, Orm kingsbrother, to Opplandene, a large area above modern-day Oslo, as he had all his friends there, to engage Sverre if he decided to take that route from Værmland.¹⁷⁶

We learn that Simon underestimates Sverre’s army and military prowess, emphasizing both the strength of Sverre’s army and that even other powerful individuals could underestimate Sverre’s army. The strength of Sverre’s army is emphasized when the saga says that Sverre won despite not knowing how many men his enemies had, implying that Simon had a great army himself. And in spite of this, Erling is able to immediately gather a force powerful enough to have Sverre retreat. We learn that Erling raises an army consisting of *all* the lensmen in Viken, thus drawing on his resources as a powerful man. Again, it is implied that this is a quick process as Sverre, like earlier, does not go on to wreak havoc in the surrounding area before Erling confronts him, despite “again wanting to lay some traps in Viken”. Implying that Sverre initially had planned to advance further into Viken but did not get to enact these plans as Erling reacted too quickly. Furthermore, we also learn that Sverre moves against Erling’s army without realizing it, further emphasizing Erling’s swiftness in his response. And still, Erling manages to predict the right direction to march in order to intercept Sverre’s army, and this with limited information, as implied by the fact that his army was not aware of Sverre’s position even when they were no more than about two kilometers apart. The strength of Erling’s army is highlighted when we learn that Sverre “immediately” turns around upon noticing the presence of Erling’s army. This could, of course, not only be due to the size and strength of Erling’s army, but perhaps also due to the presence of Erling, perhaps implying an aptitude for military prowess. And as noted above, the strength of Sverre’s army must be considerable, as emphasized by Sverre’s defeat of Simon’s army, something which further emphasizes Erling’s military strength.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 48-49.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Erling's prudent use of resources is also displayed when he decides to retreat upon learning that Sverre is aided by powerful people from Värmland.¹⁷⁷ Their help implies that Sverre, by proxy, has access to a large network, and thus likely a militarily strong force.

Despite, in contrast to *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, neglecting many of Erling's victories, not explicitly showcasing his strategy and tactics during engagement nor highlighting his use of a public setting, or his own network, to coerce, *Sverris saga* ultimately portrays Erling as shrewd. *Sverris saga* shows that Erling moves with both swiftness and force when faced by threats to his network of friends. This indicates that Erling, when confronted by events that could potentially weaken his position, wisely employs his resources to ensure that he maintains power, thus highlighting his shrewdness. Furthermore, he seemingly does not overextend his armies, and thus does not waste his resources, again implying shrewdness.

4.3 Proudful

Erling's portrayal as proudful is fundamentally tied to the use of ideology, so I initially wish to explore the use of ideology in *Sverris saga*.

Bagge explains that the civil war period was markedly different from the period both before and after.¹⁷⁸ In this period, "the factions changed into more permanent parties, whose members became more willing to fight to the bitter end. The support of the population in general became increasingly important"¹⁷⁹ He goes on to explain that, "these factors suggest a need for something more than a personal appeal to link people together, in other words: an ideology"¹⁸⁰

As noted above, in *Sverris saga*, though Erling is powerful, his power is also exaggerated. According to Bagge this is to enhance Sverre's ultimate victory and accension, through what he has called the David-Goliath motive. However, according to Bagge, this is not only a minor motive used in the saga, but also a concept that relates to what he regards as the primary ideology of the saga.¹⁸¹ He views the predominant ideology of the saga through the Old Norse model, where the support of an individual depended on his personal charisma

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 48.

¹⁷⁸ Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling" 157-158.

¹⁷⁹ Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling", 189 in Bagge, «ideology and propaganda», 15.

¹⁸⁰ Bagge, «ideology and propaganda», 15.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 17

and success.¹⁸² This theory thus maintains that the saga attempts to build support for Sverre and his dynasty by pointing to Sverre's success, *despite* the strength of Erling.

It is within this scheme that Bagge interprets the role of God in the saga. As noted above, it is fairly clear that God is on Sverre's side in the saga, through scenes which feature his dreams and/or fantastical events which transpire in his favor. Bagge sees this conspicuous support as a way to facilitate the idea that Sverre was successful, where God's favor is simply proof of Sverre's success.¹⁸³ This theory, consequently, would seem to suggest that Erling not being supported by God was simply a result of his lack of success, at least compared to Sverre.

Many historians fundamentally disagree with this theory, as they instead consider God's support of Sverre, and consequently hostility towards Erling, as the saga's main ideology.

Before I continue, I consider it pertinent to explain the core tenets which this ideology is built upon, which will also help explain the role of pridefulness in the narrative. The Christian concept of *rex iustus* is built on the idea that both *regnum* (kingship) and *sacerdotium* (the church) has been established on earth to realize God's will.¹⁸⁴ Despite the concept also being concerned with the role of the church, in this thesis, I will focus on the role of the king in this relationship, as this relates directly to Erling's portrayal. The concept of *rex iustus* has roots as far back as ancient Greece, where it emerged based on the belief that the state, and later king, was to be the source of "the common good", the foundation of a harmonious society.¹⁸⁵ The church adopted this concept around the 5th century, under Augustine of Hippo, who wrote about the responsibilities of the king and the role of the church in his *De civitas Dei*. A number of theologians, like Ambrosiaster (4th century), Gregor the Great (7th century) and Isidore of Seville (7th century), contributed to shaping this concept. The king was believed to be responsible for bringing about *pax*, meaning harmony, the state in which humans realize their true meaning, through his *iustitia*, or justice.¹⁸⁶ *Pax* was thus the state in which all humans should hope to reach and *iustitate* was the means to which society could reach *pax*, and therefore the defining quality of a king.¹⁸⁷ It is thus paramount

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 4-6.

¹⁸⁴ Ljungqvist, "Kristen Kristen Kungaideologi I *Sverris saga*", 81.

¹⁸⁵ Gunnes, kongens ære 25.

¹⁸⁶ Tobiassen, «Tronfølgelov og privilegiebrev» 222.

¹⁸⁷ Jakobsson, "the Individual and the Ideal" 74.

that a king is a *rex iustita*, rather than a *rex tyrannus*. Torfinn Tobiassen explains that the concepts inherent to *rex iustus* are strongly dualistic. He explains that whether the state's or kingdom's goal is reached, that is *pax*, depends on whether the ruler is principally affected by *iustitua* or not.¹⁸⁸ Contrary, if the ruler's constitution is suffused by *superbia*, he will use his subjects as means to realize his own egotistical goals.¹⁸⁹ *Superbia* is also known as pride. So, a good king in *Sverris saga* should be understood as one that wields justice to bring his people to *pax*, while a poor and lacking king would prevent his subjects from reaching *pax* due to his unjust nature, which manifests through his pridefulness.

Historians agree that both Erling and Sverre applied a variant of this concept to establish an ideology which would further their own position.¹⁹⁰ However, though much has been written about the use of such an ideology in the context of *Sverris saga*, historians typically focus on how the saga uses this ideology to portrays Sverre as the rightful king, while disregarding Erling. Consequently, very little has been written about how the model affects the depiction of Erling, and ultimately how Erling is depicted in the saga. Nevertheless, authors such as Ljungqvist have contributed to this discussion by examining how Erling's portrayal in the saga, justifies Sverre's rule. Ljungqvist notes that Sverre's legitimacy is rooted in him deposing a prideful regent, Erling.¹⁹¹ He emphasizes how Sverre in *Sverris saga* says that there is nothing that God loathes as much as pride, and that Erling was guilty of practicing pridefulness when he gave himself the title of jarl and made his son a king, without him being the son of a king.¹⁹² Additionally, Ljungqvist further emphasizes how pride is viewed in *Sverris saga* when he writes that the saga reminds us that God rejected king Saul in favor of king David because of Saul's pridefulness, thus highlighting the detriment of pridefulness.¹⁹³ To Ljungqvist, Erling is thus not simply unsuccessful, which leads to him not

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 226

¹⁸⁹ Tobiassen, «Tronfølgelov og privilegiebrev». 223-226.

¹⁹⁰ Arne Odd Johnsen (1948) writes about Norway's transformation to a state society, and here he highlights the importance of the church and Christian ideology in facilitating this development. He explains that Christian ideology was used to legitimize the reigns of both Sverre and Magnus Erlingsson. Erik Gunnes', aptly named *Kongens Ære: kongemakt og Kirke i «en tale mot biskopene»* (1971) examines Sverre's use of Christian ideology, especially in relation to Sverre's "en tale mot biskopene", a text that condemns the Norwegian clergy, written primarily in response to Sverre's excommunication. Torfinn Tobiassen (1969) examines Magnus Erlingsson's letter of privilege to the Norwegian church and the law of succession of 1163. He highlights both documents' use of fundamental Christian ideas to legitimize Magnus' rule. (p. 242-243 and 275-277). Hans Jacob Orning (2021) emphasizes how both Erling and Magnus made use of this ideology to further their power. (p. 41) He has earlier (2014) also emphasized that this ideology was one of the major factors which contributed to the civil war increasing in both extent and hostility after 1160 (p. 211).

¹⁹¹ Ljungqvist, "Kristen Kristen Kungaideologi I *Sverris saga*", 85.

¹⁹² Ibid, 83.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 83.

being favored by God, instead, Erling, through his pridefulness, is not fit to rule, which ultimately legitimizes Sverre's kingship.

As, the objective of this thesis is to outline the depiction of Erling, I wish to examine whether Erling really *is* portrayed as, not only the opponent of a rightful king, but a prideful king who thus legitimizes Sverre's ascension. To do this, however, I wish to examine his depiction in the two sagas separately

In *Gryla*, the first part of the saga, Erling's pridefulness is largely absent. He appears as the opponent of St. Olav in one of Sverre's dreams, a dream where Sverre raises St. Olav's banner against Erling.¹⁹⁴ Later, Samuel visits Sverre's dream, anoints him and proclaims that he will be king, which implies that God is not on Erling's side.¹⁹⁵ Lastly, several miracles aid Sverre, while none aid Erling.¹⁹⁶ Still, None of these points emphasize *why* Erling is not favored by God, and Erling's depiction is thus largely unaffected. He is portrayed as the enemy of an individual favored by God, though he is not prideful himself, and thus seemingly *not* lacking the qualities for a proper king, through the lens of an ideology based on *rex iustus*.

Nevertheless, I also wish to emphasize that he also displays qualities that *could* be interpreted as prideful in this part of the saga, though I ultimately don't believe that it shifts my opinion on his depiction.

we are told that some of Erling's men inform him that they have heard that there is a great risk that the Birkbeinars soon might attack their camp. They therefore recommend that he calls on his men to have them equip themselves and gather at the nearby castle.¹⁹⁷ He declines and tells his men they are scared for no reason. These comments might not appear as particularly prideful, however due to the fact that Erling will be both attacked and killed the following day, they might be interpreted as such. Later in the conversation he tells his men that they can go to sleep and he will stand watch himself. However, rather than staying watch he goes to bed. This will ultimately backfire, as Erling and his army is caught completely off guard.¹⁹⁸ his men say that First, his men accuse of not being vigilant and thinking more about getting drunk than giving his men orders that they should stick to.¹⁹⁹ These are only *some* of

¹⁹⁴ *Sverris saga*, 22-23.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁹⁶ *Sverris saga*, 32-33, 58-59.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 62-63.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

his actions in this sequence which might be interpreted as prideful, however I will stop here for the sake of brevity.

However, contrary to his depiction in *Gryla*, Erling appears as fundamentally prideful in the second part of the saga, and an ideology in line with *rex iustus*' conception of kingship is explicit. Here, both Erling's character and vocation are emphatically prideful.

Early in the second part of the saga, following Erling's death and consequently Magnus' elevation to leader of the *flokkr*, we are told that Magnus Erlingsson, archbishop Øystein and Orm kingsbror hold an assembly. Here, archbishop Øystein says that Erling was wise and powerful, but that there was many who meant that he was "so prideful that it was difficult to tolerate it." This is response to Magnus' speech, and Øystein ends his response by saying that everyone was willing to sacrifice their life for Magnus to take back what they had lost.²⁰⁰ So, according to the saga, Erling's allies viewed Erling as prideful. His pridefulness, and its detriment, is also emphasized by the juxtaposition with the juxtaposition of Magnus, who "everyone was willing to sacrifice their life for". This also makes it clear that his character is what they view as prideful, not "his" lack of a "legitimate" claim, as his son has the same problem, not being the son of a king. So, the saga clearly characterizes Erling as prideful.

The pridefulness of Erling's vocation is first emphasized during the burial of Erling, following his death at the battle of Kalvskinnet. Here, the saga several times condemns that Erling was, "djerv" enough as a lensman to give his son the title of king.²⁰¹ Erling stepped outside the bounds of his station and bestowed a title he did not have the privilege to bestow, as he lacked the qualifications, being born to a king. Secondly, the saga tells us that Erling raised a flock and went against the rightful kings, which he killed and seized power from. Again, the focus is that neither Erling nor his son had the right to vie for power directly, as they lacked the proper descendancy. Lastly, he attributes to Erling the sin of holding power for king Magnus, but not without greater right than what the audience has just heard. I.e., after unjustly defeating other candidates, he held the throne without the proper qualifications. After listing these sins, Sverre calls the conflict he has had with Erling "this unjust war", explicitly denoting Erling's reign as unjust, the opposite of the ideal kingship, *iustus*.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 70.

²⁰¹ 67-69

²⁰² *Ibid*.

Much later in the saga, Sverre gives a speech after the death of Magnus Erlingsson. It is here he states, as noted by Ljungqvist above, that there is nothing God loathes as much as pride. Sverre also says that it is also the prideful men that God has punished the harshest.²⁰³ He then recounts scenes from the bible where God punished prideful men, such as Adam and Saul.²⁰⁴ This is an explicit application of the *rex iustus* concept, as the saga emphasizes that pridefulness will be punished by God

Erling's sin was to exalt his own position to that of king while lacking a royal descendant, killing those of proper descent, which eventually meant that no one dared to claim the throne, that had a legitimate claim, for fear of being killed. This is seemingly Erling's main sin, which applies pridefulness to his character.²⁰⁵ Sverre then explains that Erling had the best advisors in the country, thus emphasizing Erling's strong position. He says that Erling took the kingdom from the those with the right kin, until God sent a small and low man from the outskirts to defeat them in their pride. Sverre then emphasizes that attempting to take the throne was not even originally his idea, instead it was God merely wanting to show how little was necessary to raze a prideful being. *Sverris saga* here depicts Erling as one that holds all the advantages, as he was strong, while Sverre was weak, held no influence and did not initially hold any convictions towards becoming king, *but* he was sent by God. This suggests that God was the vital component in toppling Erling, a circumstance which occurred *only* because of Erling's own pridefulness.

The saga then *again* emphasizes how wrong Erling had acted, as he had first killed Sigurd, a rightful king, and then fought against Haakon, another rightful king. He then seized two of Sverre's (presumed) brothers, one was "klynget den ene opp som en kråkunge, while the other was behaded. Furthermore, the saga again emphasizes the unliklyhood of Sverre's success, as it has Sverre state that he and his party has been in a difficult situation for a long time, and thus many times wanted to end their attempt to seize the crown, if it was not for the good of the people, who were ruled by men that did not have the proper heritage.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Ljungqvist, "Kristen Kristen Kungaideologi I *Sverris saga*", 83.

²⁰⁴ *Sverris saga*. 146.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Sverris saga*. 146.

I believe that Erling's prideful tendencies in the first part are limited, and ultimately unconvinced that he is supposed to be depicted as prideful. This, however, is not at all the case in the second part of the saga, where both Erling's character and his actions are designated as prideful.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and discussion

In this part of the thesis, I shall summarize both the similarities and differences in Erling's depiction, and finally discuss some of the possible reasons why certain aspects of Erling's character is so different in the various sagas.

5.1 Similarities

All the three sagas portray Erling as a powerful chieftain through the lens of an Old Norse society. In this society, power and resources were tied to your network of "friends", and though it manifests differently in the three sagas, they all paint a picture of Erling as powerful.

In *Orkneyinga saga*, his role as a landholder suggests that he was wealthy, giving him a means to success, as one way of attracting adherents was through gift-giving. His greatness is corroborated with Rognvald's decision to organize a crusade following, or due to, Erling's support of this venture, as it suggests that Erling's presence had much public pressure, implying that he was the leader of a large network. Thirdly, Erling's presence as a participant apparently caused a host of different people to want to join the crusade. This was seemingly to establish or galvanize friendships, or fulfill obligations, implying that Erling was a man whose friendship was especially advantageous, and thus attracted friends, or that he already controlled an extensive network of friends. Both, however, indicate that Erling was regarded as an individual with a web of adherents, which means that the saga depicts him as powerful.

Heimskringla assigns a number of positive qualities to Erling, among them are eloquence and wealth, all being qualities that *could* attract adherents, and thus could generate power. Throughout the saga he upgrades his network from that which he had built himself, to one that encompasses the remains of Inge's party. This massively increases the size of Erling's network and thus clearly expands his power. Furthermore, this network was based on

an oath of allegiance, rather than principally reciprocal obligations, which suggests a lower cost to the patron of the relationship, Erling. Still, however, the saga seems to imply that Erling also potentially limited his power, as he maintained hostile relationship with his enemies, rather than attempting to resolve conflicts, thus averting possible friendships. However, ultimately, it is clear that the saga depicts him as a powerful individual.

Sverris saga is less explicit in highlighting the extents of Erling's network. However, it does state that he has the support of all levels of society, suggesting a substantial and capable network. The extent of his network is revealed through its activation in times of need, primarily in military engagements. Erling is here able to swiftly raise armies that cause Sverre, his primary enemy in the saga, to flee. This would imply that he had access to an extensive network, as both the swiftness of its mobilization and the strength of the armies raised are remarkable. Furthermore, his ultimate defeat is portrayed more like a personal fault, rather than as a sign of a lack of power. Still, it should be noted that the strength of his network is exaggerated. Still, despite these limitations, *Sverris saga's* depiction of Erling as the predominant force in Norway confirms the strength of his network and ultimately leaves us with a portrayal of Erling as a powerful individual.

In a society where public esteem drove honor, being able to accurately assess situations and employ one's resources successfully was a skill that generally ensured that one maintained or furthered one's own power. This skill is in this thesis referred to as shrewdness, and can clearly be attributed to Erling's depiction in the sagas

Orkneyinga saga showcases Erling's propensity for warfare, one of the major arenas for showcasing success and attracting adherents. a quality that would ensure that Erling was able to wisely employ his extensive network in times of war, to maintain or strengthen his own power. He also demonstrates an awareness of the public power a powerful individual possessed during this period and uses it to further his own power. Both contribute to depicting Erling as shrewd.

In *Heimskringla*, like his portrayal in *Orkneyinga saga*, Erling displays adeptness in military matters on several occasions, an important skill for managing one's resources in this period. Furthermore, he uses his exalted position in an extended network to gather potential allies, and ties these people to his own personal network, thus expanding his power. He then

relies on public pressure to guarantee the loyalty of his new network, ultimately accentuating his power.

In *Sverris saga*, unlike *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, due to the focus of the saga, Erling's military tactics and planning are not explicitly on display, and nor is his use of his powerful position to exercise public pressure. Still, the saga shows that Erling, generally, accurately determines the strength of his opponents, and utilizes his powerful network to swiftly deal with threats to his dominion. He thus employs his resources in a prudent manner when encountering threats that could potentially weaken his position, ensuring that he maintains his powerful position.

5. 2 Differences

In *Orkneyinga saga* Erling displays characteristics proper in the courtly context of contemporary Western Europe. He displays humility as he trivializes his skill in warfare, remains silent unless directly addressed and seemingly avoids undermining the authority and reputation of others when he disagrees with their opinions.

On the other hand, in *Heimskringla*, he appears as particularly ruthless. Implicit rules drive societal norms, and Erling repeatedly disregards them. He is averse to granting grid and/or initiating arbitration with both his current enemies and his former enemies. The sanctity of friendships is ignored, and he explicitly acts against public sentiment by ignoring the advice and recommendations of friends. He even goes as far as to disrespect this sanctity by killing his own friend without a legitimate motive.

Sverris saga, contrary to both *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, gives a more ambiguous depiction of Erling. In the first part of the saga, also known as *Gryla*, he, on one hand, appears as a shrewd and powerful man, but on the other he appears as the opponent to a rightful king, and possessing qualities that hint at his pridefulness. However, in this first part of the saga, pridefulness is not explicitly attributed to his character, and his attempts at

establishing a dynasty through his son, thus bypassing the norm of agnatic succession, is not criticized. In the second part of the saga, however, pridefulness is explicitly designated to both his person and his vocation.

It is almost as if Erling appears as three distinct renditions of a character. Some of the qualities ascribed to him in the different sagas are even direct contradiction, such as his humility in *Orkneyinga saga* and his pridefulness in *Sverris saga*. I thus view it as difficult to simply attribute these differences to my imprecise interpretation of the different sagas. These leads me to want to explore the context behind these depictions, in order to possibly reach a credible explanation. I will highlight two potential ways of interpreting the main narrative of the sagas. First I will examine whether I could possibly be attributed to the narrative's temporal focus, i.e. they simply depict him at different periods in his life. Secondly, and lastly, I will examine whether bias serves as a more a persuasive explanation to the difference in depiction.

5.3 Temporal focus

One way of interpreting these different depictions of Erling is to view them as a sort of chronology, where all of the sagas depict Erling at various times in his life. This means that the differences in the sagas can be attributed to actual genuine changes in his character.

Orkneyinga saga portrays Erling in the early stages in his life. Here, he holds some power and prestige prior to the crusade. But his insistence to initiate the crusade, seen in his pressure for Rognvald to organize it, highlights how he wanted more power, thus emphasizing that he still lacked power in this stage of his life. This is made more explicit when we learn that the crusade that everyone who participated in the crusade was considered much greater.²⁰⁷ At this stage in his life, he might perhaps believe that acting in concert courtly expectations is appropriate. This can either be because he genuinely believed that acting courtly was befitting of a man of his status or potentially because he believed that acting in accordance with these ideals would cause others to view him more favorably. Considering Rognvald's supposed courtly inclination and Erling's clear display of shrewdness it is certainly possible that Erling altered his behavior to improve his prestige, meaning that the

²⁰⁷ See Erling - *Orkneyinga saga* «Shrewdness» p. 20.

saga's depiction of his actions during the crusade are true, but that his corporeal character cannot genuinely be described as humble.

Meanwhile, *Heimskringla* describes Erling during the middle portion of his life. He has attained even greater power, through his participation in the crusade, the formation of new ties of friendship and his establishment of a *flokkr*. His shrewdness remains constant, as he displays both in his martial prowess and understanding and manipulation of the contemporary societal norms. However, he has shed the modest courtier and adopted ruthless characteristics. As he attains more power, he realizes that he no longer needs to adhere to the social norms as strictly as before. However, this is not due to circumstances outside Erling's control, as the saga states that, it was "due mostly that he let few of his enemies stay in the country, even if they begged him; therefore, many joined the rebel groups that stood up against him".²⁰⁸ This seems to imply that this reputation was owed to a consistent and conscious behavior. This suggests that Erling changed his stance to believing that acting ruthlessly was the best way to succeed. This is made especially conspicuous when he explains to Magnus why he will not spare Harald, an innocent but potential pretender. He says that "such an advice your friends give you, but you will not for long rule this kingdom in peace if you always follow your good heart," and proceeds to kill Harald.²⁰⁹ We observe that he is aware that he is acting contrary to public sentiment but believes that to "rule this kingdom in peace" requires sometimes acting against this sentiment.

Sverrir's saga depicts Erling during his final years in power. He appears as generally both powerful and shrewd, through his extensive network and military prowess.

However, he has become lazy and arrogant and has begun underestimating his enemies. Even his allies start believing that he might be unfit for kingship. His men tell him that he is more interested in getting drunk than giving proper orders.²¹⁰ Something which is confirmed in the next chapter where he tells his men he will keep watch during the night, but goes to bed instead, to prove a point, putting his pride before his station as ruler.²¹¹ He underestimates his enemies and is killed in the ensuing battle, highlighting how his shrewdness ultimately was superseded by his pridefulness, which ultimately resulted in

²⁰⁸ *Heimskringla*. 37.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 35

²¹⁰ *Sverris saga*.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

failure. It is not until after his death that pridefulness is explicitly attributed to his character, but this is because people are scared off the repercussion, not because he was not prideful. His acquisition of the trait of pride means that he no longer possesses the qualities fit for a ruler.

So, in all, the difference in depiction simply stems from the fact that the difference sagas focus on different periods in Erling's life. With limited power he adopts a courtly manner, appropriate for the context. As he gradually attains more power, he starts acting more ruthless as he believes this is the proper way of acting to win in the political game. In the end, however, despite holding immense power he meets his end as he has become prideful, a major detriment to a ruler.

On the other hand, much in the narratives speaks against being able to simply attribute Erling's differences in depiction to a temporal focus, and I ultimately believe that this is not the correct explanation for the difference in portrayal.

Perhaps most importantly, the sagas overlap quite a bit, especially *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*. This makes a theory depending on a chronology in the sagas quite weak. Firstly, Erling's ruthlessness is both apparent and emphasized throughout the entirety of *Heimskringla*, the same period described in *Sverris saga*, while his ruthlessness is less explicit, apart from one command not to grant grid, prior to a battle in *Sverris saga*.²¹² This makes it more probable that a difference in focus is more likely than a depiction of genuine conditions. Secondly, the second part of *Sverris saga* denotes pridefulness both to Erling's character and vocation. And though it could be argued that the saga only attributes pridefulness to his character at an old age, it certainly attributes pridefulness to Erling at an earlier point, when it depicts his entire vocation as prideful. Lastly, it is difficult to establish a definite counter to *Orkneyinga saga*'s depiction of Erling as modest being attributed to the saga featuring him at an earlier point in his career. Still, I believe there are more convincing and palpable arguments that speak for a different theory.

5.4 Bias

Indeed, I believe the differences in Erling's portrayal should mainly be attributed to the bias of the text. The bias of the saga can be attributed to the material of the saga and/or the author himself.

²¹² *Sverris saga*, 59.

Orkneyinga saga's depiction of Erling as humble can be attributed to the bias of the saga.

Firstly, it should be established that modesty should be considered a positive quality, in the context of this saga. The saga, as mentioned above should be viewed within the context of a courtly culture. Here, certain traits were idealized, and among them was humility. This means that a person who wished to portray Erling positively could do so by emphasizing his courtliness.

And, as highlighted by Brathetland, the families of Rognvald and Erling shared ties of friendship, thus explaining why Rognvald might have wanted to portray Erling positively. The two families were seemingly first connected through their mutual alliance with Harald Gille.²¹³ But they had also established close connections through marriage, and Brathetland explains that we can observe that the two families protect each other's interests.²¹⁴ It thus seems very plausible that it was in Rognvald's interest to provide a positive depiction of Erling.

Finally, as noted above, the story around Rognvald's crusade is thought to be especially biased towards Rognvald, which helps explain why Erling was attributed with the quality of humility, in a context where humility seemingly was regarded as a positive quality.²¹⁵

In *Heimskringla* Erling's ruthlessness can also be explained by the bias in the saga. Though *Heimskringla* is generally thought to be rather objective, Erling's portrayal as ruthless challenges this idea. The emphasis put on highlighting the ruthlessness is particularly apparent, and this, however, should not simply be attributed to narration of "history".

I first want to take a step back and emphasize the literary traits of the saga. In such a narrative the author is supposed to be largely hidden. This does not mean that the author cannot express himself. Instead, as emphasized by Diana Whaley, they can express themselves through the details they choose to include. Diana Whaley explains that "a leading

²¹³ Brathetland, *Nettverksmynd*, 120-122.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 128

²¹⁵ See "1.3 Primary sources"

feature of Snorri's writing is its economy of expression."²¹⁶ This means that Erling limits his narrative to what he considers important. Consequently, this means that the emphasis put on showcasing Erling's disregard for adhering to societal expectations should be recognized and interpreted as important for the overall narrative. This emphasis on making sure to highlight Erling's ruthlessness is particularly apparent at certain points in the saga, F. ex During the battle with Håkon Herdebrei. Here, we are suddenly told that Nikolas, the son of Simon scalp was killed.²¹⁷ The next sentence then reveals that, "it was Erling's own men that got the blame for this murder."²¹⁸ Again, here the opinion of the author lies in the details. The author here breaks up the pacing of the narrative, in a narrative known for its "economy of expressions". This should attract the attention from us as readers and make us recognize that Snorri considers it important to mention that Erling was the culprit to the murder of one of his allies. An incident that creates the image of Erling as an individual that is willing to go as far as to kill his own friends, utterly spitting in the face of his already established friendship with this man, and, without doubt, painting him as a ruthless individual.

It is another incident, however, that explains why Erling acts this way, at least according to the author of *Heimskringla*. The pretender Harald is brought before Erling and ultimately sent to executioner. While he is kept in captivity, we are told that, "people" request that Magnus pray intercession for Harald, in order to attempt to convince Erling not to kill him. Erling, however, says that "such an advice your friends give you, but you will not for long rule this kingdom in peace if you always follow your good heart," and proceeds to have Harald executed.²¹⁹ As noted above, this is dialogue added by Snorre, based on his understanding of Erling, and thus means that this is how Snorre views and how he wishes to portray Erling. Erling is here confronted by the opinion of his people, through his son, something he is also aware of as he says, "such advice your friends give you". Still, he goes through with the execution, regardless of the fact that his actions contradict the desires of the people. He goes on to explain why he acts the way he does and explains that it is simply because he determines that it is the way in which he will "rule this kingdom in peace".²²⁰ So, the depiction given of Erling in *Heimskringla*, is of a man that does not only *not* regret his ruthless actions but believes that it is the way to succeed. Snorre thus makes it especially

²¹⁶ Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991), 84.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 7

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* 7

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

conspicuous that Erling makes a conscious decision, and in fact believes that it ultimately is the path to success, to act contrary to the norms of his society.

The author of *Heimskringla*, however, seems to disagree with this sentiment. As noted above, Snorri writes that a number of his former enemies, currently part of Sigurd Jarl's party, asks for grid.²²¹ Erling, instead of granting grid, or initiating any other form of conflict resolution, answers that he will grant grid, on the condition that those he deems having committed "serious crimes" leave the country.²²² They, perhaps understandably, rejected Erling's offer, and thus remain enemies of Erling, according to Snorri.²²³ Again, Erling seems to believe that remaining enemies, was better than initiating grid or arbitration. This is not, however, where the sequence ends. Instead, Snorri concludes that the threat of exile contributed strongly to galvanizing the *flock*.²²⁴ Here, the author not only includes a detail, in itself revealing something about the author's intentions and thoughts, but, the typically invisible author, explicitly enters the narrative and tells us the consequence of Erling's actions. This is further emphasized by the adverb "strongly", which further reveals the author. In fact, it might be argued that *Heimskringla* seems to suggest that it is in fact this very conduct which is what sustains his conflicts. This sentiment is quite explicit in a later chapter. Here, Snorre tells us that Erling, "was considered rather heartless and cold, but this was probably due mostly that he let few of his enemies stay in the country, even if they begged him; therefore, many joined the rebel groups that stood up against him".²²⁵ Again, the meaning lies in the details, and I believe that the saga's depiction of Erling should be read as an explicit criticism of Erling's conduct, that is his ruthlessness.

I believe that Snorri, himself a participant in the political game, was critical of Erling's ruthlessness. Snorri, instead believed that establishing alliances through mutual obligation, being attentive to public opinion and reconciling with your enemies to solve conflicts was how one succeeded in the political game. Power was typically viewed as dependent on the friends one possessed, and Erling, by making this decision, ensured that the men who originally would have sought grid, and potentially could have become his friends, instead strengthened their ties to his enemy and remained loyal.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 11.

²²² *Ibid*, 11.

²²³ *Ibid*, 11.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 37.

I want to finally suggest that Snorre might have also wanted to depict Erling in this way, precisely because Erling ultimately failed. As noted above, Erling was both powerful and shrewd, both qualities which were ideals in the Old Norse society. And yet, he ultimately failed.

The bias in *Sverris saga* is particularly explicit, and strongly affects how Erling is portrayed. As noted above, there are at least two ways of interpreting the saga's main ideological frameworks. One, championed by Bagge, emphasizing how the saga attempts to legitimize Sverre and his dynasty by pointing to his ultimate success, despite all odds.²²⁶ In this ideology, Erling, the proverbial goliath, appears as the powerful and skilled, though ultimately unsuccessful antagonist. The other ideological framework, championed by several historians, such as Ljungqvist and Jakobsson, emphasizes how Sverre is depicted as the rightful king, using the concept of *rex iustus*.²²⁷ Erling is here portrayed as the illegitimate king, a man whose pridefulness disqualifies him from the office of a king.

I, however, believe that Erling's depiction in *Sverris saga* differs in *Gryla* and the second part of the saga. The first part of the saga, especially, is more ambiguous in its depiction of Erling.

On one hand, it can be argued that it follows the ideology Bagge suggests. Firstly, as noted above, Erling appears as both powerful and shrewd. This can be viewed through the lens of an ideological framework which paints a picture of Erling as a powerful and skilled opponent to Sverre, thus aggrandizing Sverre's ultimate defeat of Erling. Secondly, he lacks an overt characterization as pridefulness. This is in sharp contrast to his depiction in the second part of the saga, where he is depicted as overtly prideful. If the goal was to facilitate a *rex iustus* ideology, depicting Erling as prideful, would be a logical way to do so, as is seen in the second part of the saga. Thirdly, the saga is likely *not* to want to depict him as prideful because pridefulness is associated with negative qualities, as emphasized by both the second part of the saga and Christian ideology, as seen above. It thus seems likely that Erling is *not* meant to be recognized as prideful in *Gryla*. Lastly, as emphasized by Bagge, the role of God

²²⁶ Bagge, «ideology and propaganda», 15 and Bagge, *from gang leader to the Lord's anointed* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996).

²²⁷ Ljungqvist, "Kristen Kristen Kungaideologi I *Sverris saga*." Jakobsson, "the Individual and the Ideal"

in *Gryla* might simply be to emphasize Sverre's success.²²⁸ God's favor could thus be read as sign of Sverre's success, rather than as a sign that he was God's chosen monarch, likewise, Erling is depicted as unsuccessful, but not fated to be unsuccessful as a consequence of his pridefulness

Contrary to *Gryla*, I believe that the second part of the saga is clear in its depiction of Erling. Here he embodies pridefulness. His pridefulness was not an acquired trait, instead it was fundamental to Erling's entire character. The principal role of Erling's depiction in the saga is to legitimize and justify the rule of Sverre and his descendants through the *rex iustus* ideology. Erling is at this point dead and buried, and his power and shrewdness is thus largely missing from the narrative. As noted above, both his actions and his characters are denoted as prideful. Despite seldom being mentioned in the narrative, Erling is several times explicitly described as "prideful", by several different characters. Furthermore, both appointing his son to kingship, and then attempting to fight for the throne, is regarded as prideful, thus highlighting how his vocation was prideful. And, as noted above, *Sverris saga* attributes Sverre's success to God's favor, and portrays God's favor as the result of Erling's pridefulness, emphasizing that Erling's primary trait was his pridefulness. Ultimately, Erling's pridefulness in the second part of *Sverris* can thus clearly be explained by the bias of the saga, as the author attempts to ascribe pridefulness to both his character and actions, in order to enhance the position of the saga's patron(s).

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²²⁸ Bagge, «ideology and propaganda» 4.

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