

REPRESENTATIONS OF ENGLISH HISTORY IN ICELANDIC KINGS'
SAGA: HARALDSSAGA HARDRADA AND KNYTLINGA SAGA

A Master's Thesis

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Abstract

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The Icelandic sagas are one of the most important historical sources for Viking studies. Although there are many different types of saga, only the kings' sagas and family sagas are generally considered historically accurate to some extent. Unfortunately, because they were composed centuries after the Viking age, even these sagas contain a number of historical inaccuracies. In this research, I will try to discuss this problem by focusing on the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's saga and the *Knyttlinga saga*, and how English history is represented in them. After discussing the nature of the sagas and the problems of the Icelandic sources, I will consider the saga accounts of certain events that occurred in England during the reigns of Harald Hardrada and Cnut the Great. In order to show the possible mistakes in these sagas, primary sources from outside of Scandinavia and Iceland, notably the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, as well as modern studies, will be used to assess these possible errors in the *Heimskringla* and *Knyttlinga saga*.

Keywords: Vikings, England, Saga, Cnut the Great, Harald Hardrada, *Knyttlinga saga*, *Heimskringla*.

ÖZET

İNGİLİZ TARİHİ'NİN İZLANDA KRAL SAGALARINDA TEMSİLİ: HARALDSSAGA HARDADA VE KNYTLİNGASAGA

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İzlanda sagaları Viking çalışmaları için en önemli tarihsel kaynaklardan biridir. Her ne kadar pek çok farklı türde saga olsa da, aralarından sadece kral sagaları ve aile sagaları bir ölçüde tarihsel olarak doğru kabul edilir. Maalesef, Viking çağından yüzyıllar sonra yazıldıkları için, bu tür sagalar bile bazı tarihsel hatalar barındırır. Bu araştırmada, Kral Harald'ın *Heimskringla* versiyonu sagası ve *Knýtlinga saga* üzerinden bu tarihsel hataları tartışacağım ve İngiliz tarihinin bu sagalarda nasıl anlatıldığını inceleyeceğim. Sagaların doğasından ve İzlandaca kaynakların sıkıntılılarından bahsettikten sonra, sagaların Büyük Knud ve III. Harald döneminde İngiltere'de yaşanmış olan olayları nasıl tasvir ettiklerini anlatacağım. Sagalardaki olası tarihsel hataları göstermek için, İzlanda ve İskandinavya dışındaki birinci el kaynaklar, temel olarak Anglo-Sakson Kronolojisi ve bu konu üzerindeki modern çalışmalar kullanılacak.

Anahtar kelimeler; Vikingler, İngiltere, Büyük Knud, III. Harald, *Knýtlinga saga*, *Heimskringla*.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Vikings are among the most ambiguous figures in history. Throughout the Early Middle Ages they were very influential and changed the course of European history with their military activities, explorations and commercial ventures. Once Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea were not enough for them, they started to raid what would become Russia and became more adventurous. It is possible to see the Viking settlements in Britain, northern Germany, France and the American continent. During the eleventh century descendants of Vikings gained footholds even in southern Italy.

Although these naval and military accomplishments brought development and success in the same areas, it is hard to see any progression in the Viking literature. As in many pagan societies, for Vikings literature was a tool to praise and show the supremacy of their heroes. Other than runestones there are no contemporary written documents from Scandinavia and sadly these runestones offer us little detailed information. However, this does not mean that there are not any available written Viking sources since there are the Icelandic sagas. The Norse Sagas discuss ancient Nordic history including battles, explorations and migration to other places, mainly to Iceland. They were written in Old Norse by Icelandic authors around the thirteenth century. The texts are mixtures of prose and verse, and it is possible to find a saga on any important name from the Viking Age. Unfortunately, there are some historical inaccuracies in them. Even though some of the sagas were composed with the intention of contributing to history, the lack of sources and time period caused many problems which are the main concerns of this research.

This study will focus on two sagas, on the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's saga and the *Knýtlinga saga*, and will try to evaluate their historical reliability regarding the events that happened in England.

Historical Background

The two main subjects of this study are Cnut the Great and Harald Hardrada.¹ Cnut was king of Denmark, England, Norway and even some parts of Sweden. He was the first king who managed to form an empire in Scandinavia. Furthermore, since he also acquired England, his empire is usually called the North Sea Empire by the scholars.² Unfortunately, what we know about his early years is close to nothing, because there is little information about when or where he was born. However, what we know about his birth is that Sweyn Forkbeard was his father and according to some Anglo-Saxon sources, his mother was daughter of Mieszko I of Poland.³ What is known about Cnut begins with the Danish invasion of England in 1013. The sources suggest that he went to England with his father, Sweyn Forkbeard and his army. Sweyn was to become king. However, a few months later King Sweyn died due to unknown reason and his sons succeeded him, Harald as the king of Denmark and Cnut as the king of Danelaw.⁴ However, Cnut's authority was challenged by the English nobility and he had to return to Denmark.

Once Cnut organized a new army, he returned to England in 1015. Even though the English forces resisted him, they were defeated by the Danish army. In 1016, Cnut managed to capture London and became joint ruler with King Edmund II, usually known as Edmund Ironside. Within weeks of their agreement, Edmund died and Cnut became the sole king for nineteen years. During his time as king, he was very active. He rebuilt ruined parts of England

¹ In this research, important characters (Cnut the Great, Harald Hardrada or Sweyn Forkbeard) will be written in the English language. For other names (Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson) the Icelandic language was used. The main reason of this is to distinguish similar names that could cause problems (like Harold Godwinson and Harald Hardrada)

² Laurence Marcellus Larson, *Canute the Great, 995 (Circ-1035, and the Rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age)* (New York: Putnam, 1912), 257.

³ Although there is no way to be certain about the authenticity of this claim, both the *Encomium Emmæ Reginæ* and the *Chronicon* of Thietmar of Merseburg suggest this.

⁴ Ian Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England, 991-1017* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 162.

because of Viking raids, became the king of Denmark when his brother died, and used his resources in England to establish control of Norway and southern parts of Sweden.

Although he was Christian even before he was king, his Viking origin and quite harsh treatment of his enemies caused some unhappiness within the Church.⁵ Although it is hard to be certain about his opinion on Christianity, it is believed that his ecumenical gifts and journey to Rome in 1027 are signs of his devotion. However, it is difficult to be certain of Cnut's personal attitude towards the Church since no documents remain regarding his thoughts.

The situation concerning King Harald Hardrada is a more little complicated than Cnut. Like Cnut, we know little about Harald's birth and his early years other than his possibly birth year (1015-1016) since there are no records of this. In 1030, Harald had to leave Scandinavia because at the Battle of Stiklestad he was supporting his half-brother, Olaf II, and they were defeated by Kálfr Árnason.⁶ For fifteen years, Harald lived in exile and joined the Varangian Guard in Constantinople. According to Icelandic sagas, he spent most of his time raiding, organizing expeditions and gaining allies.⁷ Once he gained enough gold to find sufficient supporters in Scandinavia, he left Constantinople and travelled to the west.

When he learned that Magnus the Good managed to defeat Sweyn Estridsson and became king, Harald decided to go Norway since he was related to Magnus and could pursue his rights on throne. Although Magnus was not very enthusiastic about seeing him, they agreed to rule Norway together. Before his death, Magnus designated Harald as king of Norway and Sweyn Estridsson as king of Denmark thus starting a series of wars between these kingdoms. During his reign, Sweyn was Harald's major rival and they fought several

⁵ Michael K. Lawson, *Cnut- England's Viking King* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), 121.

⁶ Kálfr Árnason was a Norwegian chieftain and supported by farmers as well as people who were loyal to Cnut the Great. Although Cnut was already the king of England, he also wanted to conquer Norway. Once he had bought the loyalty of Norwegian chieftains, with the help of peasants Norwegian chieftains organized a rebellion and successfully defeated Olaf.

⁷ More detail explanation can be found in Chapter 3.

times, though neither could gain any significant advantage. Harald also had to deal with domestic opposition, mainly from farmers in Northern Norway, and the Norwegian aristocracy who were the supporters of uprisings. Although he gained control over his lands after these uprisings, it was the end of 1065 before all opposition had been killed or exiled by Harald.

Harald believed that because of the agreement between Magnus and Cnut's son, Harthacnut, he should be crowned as king of England when Harthacnut died.⁸ However, he was not in a position where he could enforce his claim. Therefore first Edward the Confessor in 1042 and later in 1066 Harold Godwinson were crowned as king. Harald quickly raised an army and sailed to England. Following some minor battles, he encountered the English forces at Stamford Bridge. During the battle, it is believed that Harald was struck in the throat by an arrow and died fairly early in the battle. The Norwegian forces were defeated and only a few soldiers survived. Even though Harald's campaign failed drastically, it had a huge impact on English history. Less than three weeks later, William the Conqueror sailed to England from Normandy and defeated Harold's exhausted army. The Battle of Stamford Bridge has been seen as one of the primary factors in William's victory at Hastings.⁹

One might ask why this research focuses on these two kings instead of other Scandinavian rulers or military leaders. Fortunately, the answer is rather simple. Historically, Cnut and Harald were very important for both Scandinavia and England. Even though Sweyn Forkbeard commenced and succeeded in his invasion of England, it was ultimately Cnut who managed to gain control over England and ruled for 19 years. We cannot ignore Sweyn's success, but Cnut's reign should mark him as the first Scandinavian origin king of England. For Harald things are different. As mentioned above, Harald's campaign was a failure but this

⁸ Both Magnus and Harthacnut believed that they should be the king of Norway, and they were ready to fight. However the noblemen of Denmark and Norway urged them to make peace. Both parties agreed that the first of them to die would be succeeded by the other. Since Harald was the successor of Magnus, he believed that he should also be the king of Harthacnut's kingdoms (Denmark and England).

⁹ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 592.

campaign also changed the history of England. If it were not for his military actions, it is possible that William the Conqueror may not have achieved victory and defeated Harold Godwinson in the Battle of Hastings. Furthermore, it has been argued by scholars that the death of Harald Hardrada ended the Viking Age since he is accepted as the last ruler who represented Viking culture and traditions.¹⁰

Literature Review

Although studies about the Icelandic sagas of Cnut the Great and Harald Hardrada are not unknown, current literature does not offer any comparison between the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and kings' sagas.

One of the early studies in English on the Icelandic saga was composed by William Paton Ker.¹¹ His chapter "The Icelandic Sagas" should be seen as the pioneering study on this topic. Although Ker did not focus on the methodological problems of sagas, his chapter offers us the historical development and forms of the Icelandic sagas. However, in a modern sense, his ideas on sagas are not very informative. In the part where Ker discusses the art of saga narrative, he says "Everything in the Sagas tends to the same end; the preservation of the balance and completeness of the history, as far as it goes; the impartiality of the record".¹² Peter Hallberg is the author of another early study on the Icelandic saga.¹³ Hallberg discusses many important aspects of the saga literature. Although it is possible to find chapters on the characteristics of the Sturlung Era or the decline of saga literature, any mention on the kings' saga or their relationship with England was not presented by him.¹⁴

¹⁰ Angelo Forte, Richard Oram and Frederik Richard. *Viking Empires*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

¹¹ William Paton Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1908).

¹² Ker, *Essays on Medieval Literature*, 279.

¹³ Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga* (Austin: University of Nebraska Press, 1962).

¹⁴ Sturlunga Era was a mid 13th century time period in Iceland because the Sturlung family was the most powerful family clan in Iceland at that time.

Saga-Book journals are other important studies about saga literature and some of them are relatively more recent than Ker's and Hallberg's publications. The Society was founded as the Orkney, Shetland and Northern Society (or Viking Club) in order to promote interest in the Scandinavian North and its literature. Shortly after its foundation, *Saga-Book* became the annual journal of the Society. Also it became one of the world's leading publications in terms of medieval Scandinavian studies. Unfortunately, discussions on the representation of English history are almost absent. Another recent publication, by Katheleen Kuiper, focuses on the concept of prose and is a significant contribution to the literature.¹⁵ Although the chapter related with saga literature offers much (translations, types of sagas and even the Vikings), it does not offer any information about the Scandinavian rulers of England.

When the issue comes to the origins and the problems with the kings' sagas, Shami Ghosh's study has been crucial to this research.¹⁶ While his book is one of the newest and most inquisitorial, it is also directly related with this research topic. In his book, Ghosh provides several examples from the saga genre and discusses several key elements of sagas. For instance, before discussing the situation of skaldic verse or the kings' sagas, the book starts with a brief explanation about medieval Norwegian history and the problem of sources from there. He then moves on to the relationship between skaldic verse and saga prose. After discussing them separately, he shows their correlation and ends it with the historical value of the kings' sagas. Although Ghosh's main focus is the sagas, he also discusses the value of non-native sources and their background regarding with Scandinavia. In this research, in order to explain and underline the problems of the kings' sagas, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History, Problems and Perspectives* is used for the introductory material. With it, fundamental problems of this thesis are constructed and elaborated during the second chapter.

¹⁵ Katheleen Kuiper, edited, *Prose: Literary Terms and Concepts* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2012).

¹⁶ Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History, Problems and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

The value of Heather O'Donoghue's and Margaret Clunies Ross' studies cannot be underlined enough for this research.¹⁷ Heather O'Donoghue is one of the leading figures of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and she has published several books and articles on the poetry and prose of medieval Iceland and Norway. Unlike Ghosh's study, her book immediately starts with a discussion of the role of verse in Norse historical works where O'Donoghue considers the impact of verses in kings' sagas including *Ágrip*, *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*. *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* focuses on the interplay between skaldic verse and saga prose as used by saga authors when they composed.

On the other hand, for any advanced research on the issues of Old Norse poetry, one can use the works of Margaret Clunies Ross.¹⁸ She has published a number of journal articles and since her main focus is Old Norse-Icelandic poetry (especially skaldic verse) it would be unwise not to use her studies for this research. Unlike Heather O'Donoghue's work, Ross' books are much more focused on the skaldic verse and it is hard to find any information that can be related with this thesis in terms of the kings' sagas. However, this does not mean that it should be ignored. Especially valuable are the parts where she discusses the origins of Old Norse poetry and "Circumstances of Recording and Transmission: Poetry as Quotation".

While these are all significant works and have contributed to this thesis, since the main focus of this thesis is the kings' sagas, the most important sources for this research belong to Paul Edwards, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson.¹⁹ Their studies were used during the discussions on the matter of historical inaccuracies and explanations of the saga accounts of the events. Both Edwards and Pálsson have published several books about medieval Icelandic literature as well as translated many of the kings' sagas into English. Unlike them, Magnusson did not come from a scholarly background but his studies on the Vikings and

¹⁷ Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2005).

¹⁹ Edwards, Magnusson and Pálsson translated several kings' sagas sometimes jointly sometimes alone (including King Harald's Saga and *Knýtlinga saga*).

sagas cannot be ignored by anyone, especially his contributions to the translation of King Harald's Saga are very important. Because there will be more detailed discussions about individual kings' sagas (the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's saga and *Knýtlinga saga*) it is best to move on to the Anglo-Saxon context.

In terms of King Harald Hardrada and *Heimskringla*, there are some important books that need to be mentioned. Lee M. Hollander is one of the first names that we need to appreciate, not only because he translated *Heimskringla*, but it is also possible to find a lot of information about Snorri Sturluson and historical background of this saga collection.²⁰ The *Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066* is one of the works that we need to be informed of.²¹ In this book, DeVries discusses several topics that this research focuses on as well. He examines every important character in Harald's campaign in England and even explains the conflict between the current king of England, Harold Godwinson, and his brother, Tostig Godwinson. Although it is a remarkable work, DeVries' main focus is warfare in history. His works are always about warfare of the Middle Ages since that topic is his speciality. For a study about Harald, John Marsden's book is a good source as well.²² However, although the author shows a detailed knowledge of the subject, the books does not offer much from the English perspective. The main focus of this study is Harald's journeys. While it is a great source to learn about his life, his journeys and his fights, Marsden does not offer any noticeable difference than DeVries' study.

Although studies of Cnut the Great are scarce, there are some prominent works about him. For instance: *Cnut: England's Viking King* is meticulously researched and focuses on many aspects of Cnut and our understanding of him.²³ Lawson offers a great historical introduction by discussing Cnut's father, Sweyn Forkbeard as well as his struggle with

²⁰ Hollander, Lee M., trans, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

²¹ Kelly DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1999).

²² John Marsden, *Harald Hardrada: the warrior's way* (Stroud: The History Press, 2007).

²³ Michael K. Lawson, *Cnut: England's Viking King* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011).

Æthelred the Unready and Edmund Ironside. Lawson does not hesitate to use and criticise any historical documents related with Cnut while he prepares readers to post-Conquest era. However, Lawson's focus is not Cnut as a Scandinavian figure or the comparison of what *Knýtlinga saga* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle offer. *Cnut: England's Viking King* represents Cnut as an English king and Lawson argues that he was one of the most efficient kings of England pre-1066. If someone wants to learn about Cnut's life in England, this is one of the first books he should read since there are a lot of information about his reign, coins and laws. Like Lawson, Timothy Bolton discusses several topics related with Cnut and he demonstrates changes in England, and Scandinavia while discussing the nature his hegemony on these countries.²⁴ However, like Lawson's study, Bolton does not offer any comparison of the saga and the Chronicle. Surely he recognises the importance of *Knýtlinga saga* and uses it as one of his sources yet analytic approach towards it, is missing.

Even though there are several books about Icelandic literature, sagas, lives of Cnut the Great and Harald Hardrada, none of them directly addresses the topic of this thesis. It is possible to find articles or books on Harald Hardrada's life as well as the Battle of Stamford Bridge. However, it is unlikely to find a study which discusses them and then demonstrates the relative historical accuracy or the differences in the *Heimskringla* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It is similar for studies on Cnut as well. Although the sources about Cnut are scarce, there are some important studies around his reign but these studies do not offer a comparison between *Knýtlinga saga* and possibly the single most important source for history of the medieval England. The comparison of Icelandic sagas and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and demonstration of their differences in terms of what happened in 1016 and 1066 is an important topic and it has been ignored for too long.²⁵

²⁴ Timothy Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great- Conquest and the Consolidation of Power in Northern Europe in the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

²⁵ There are other studies that need to be mentioned here. The nature of several primary sources will be discussed on the following chapters (*Saxo Grammaticus* and *Enconium Emmæ Regiæ*), however the context of the

Methodology

The Icelandic sagas seem to be inaccurate when we compare them with other sources. This is because of their focus and interpretations of the events that they describe are closer to praise and glorify rather than historical events. Furthermore, their explanations of the events are quite biased in favour of the Norwegians, Danish or mainly Vikings. Although this is acceptable and understandable for most of the sagas, it is surprising for the kings' sagas. Unlike other type of sagas, kings' sagas were meant to be historically accurate. Other than the early parts of the kings' sagas which they offer origins of their societies, we do not see any elements of the Nordic myth in most of them. However, even kings' sagas are historically inaccurate in terms of events that happened outside of Scandinavia (England, Byzantine and today's Russia). The reasons of these problems can be categorized into two: the factual inaccuracies in the sagas and, the differences between sagas and the English source. Although these two may seem different, it is best to keep in mind that both are related with and affected each other. This means, without the factual inaccuracies in the sagas, possibly there would be no differences between them and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

The Icelandic literary tradition is one of the main reasons of the problems in the kings' sagas. In almost every saga related with a ruler, if there is an established opinion in the literature, traditionally authors continued this understanding of that person. This is why every document from either Iceland or Scandinavia does not suggest any weak point or a failure of the ruler and they describe that person in similar ways. Since the main focus of this study will be *Knyttlinga saga* and the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's saga, it is best to explain

literature review does not offer a place for additional secondary sources. If any researcher who would like to study about Norse myth, the Viking culture or Icelandic literature has to read the work of Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (*Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopaedias* (London: Routledge, 1993)). Also, Judith Jesch's *Encyclopedia of the Viking World* is another important and most recent publication about the Vikings. Lastly, If the researcher wants to read more about the Anglo-Saxon perspective of the events that will be discussed, Frank Stenton's classic work is a must (*Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks; 3rd edition, 2001)). Even today, his work is accepted as one of the most valuable contribution to the English history.

this claim with some examples from these documents. For instance: when Sweyn Forkbeard died in 1014 in England, his son Cnut became king and the commander of the Danish army. However, he did not have any experience on how to rule or lead an army and he had to retreat to Denmark. *Knýtlinga saga* does not discuss this situation at all.²⁶ The same issue can be seen in *Heimskringla* as well. It is believed that the author of *Heimskringla* used prior Icelandic sources, *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*. Although there are a lot of information about King Harald Hardrada and his actions in England, neither represents any perspective other than the Icelandic and Scandinavian, and all of them share the same mistakes either accidentally or deliberately.

The lack of vernacular sources, inaccessibility of the contemporary Latin sources and the nature of the sources that saga authors used is another reason of these problems. The literature of the Vikings did not contain any historically accurate manuscripts the future generations. This situation mostly did not change in the following years and what remained from the Viking Age in Scandinavia is very suspicious in terms of accuracy. This created an unfortunate situation for the saga authors because in terms of vernacular sources the only materials they could benefit from were nothing but Norse myth and writings about supernatural concepts. Although many of the sagas were based on these remained materials, the authors of the kings' sagas could not use them since their main goal to record historical events. For that, they had to use Latin sources but in Scandinavia, the amount of Latin sources was limited. Other than the *Saxo Grammaticus* and the *Historia Norwegiæ* there was not any reliable sources that saga-authors could use. For other sources, they had to travel England, but it was not easy. The authors sometimes had chance to travel abroad but these travels were mainly to elsewhere in Scandinavia and courts of the kings. Even though it has been argued that some saga writers travelled with their kings to battlefields, the general assumption is that

²⁶ A more detailed explanation will be discussed on the fifth chapter.

they were not saga writers but skalds. Furthermore, there is no historical document which suggests that any saga writer travelled to England. Because of this, they had to use the limited amount of materials and even less in terms of Latin. Unfortunately, Latin sources that they could obtain were not very historically accurate either. Although it is almost impossible to prove that, once we compare them, it is rather easy to understand the author of *Knyttlinga saga* used a Latin text which was the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*.²⁷ The *Encomium* was ordered by Queen Emma of Normandy (wife of Cnut) when opposition against her children commenced.²⁸ The text suggests that Cnut was an example of a good Christian and his children should be crown as king while it mostly ignores Cnut's father, Sweyn Forkbeard, his campaign and Cnut's military failures during his conquest. Even though *Knyttlinga saga* does not discuss Cnut's religious manners, like the *Encomium*, the saga suggests very little about King Sweyn. Furthermore, although Cnut had some failures in England, his military struggles are not in the saga as well. Furthermore, both the saga and the *Encomium* do not talk about Cnut's life in Scandinavia which is another indicator of how the sources that saga authors used (even in Latin) caused problems.

It is possible for one to argue that the issue of historical accuracies could be explained as the deliberate omission or changing of facts since it was possible to compose those events when they happened or shortly after. Authors might want to eliminate any reference to defeats since the Vikings were seen as greatest warriors of their time. Unfortunately, there is not an overall accepted answer for this suggestion because the answer can be both yes and no. The saga literature developed quite after the Viking Age. Even *Ágrip* was composed in the twelfth century.²⁹ Because the saga literature is occurred later in date and for the events that happened in England were not local, the errors that can be seen in sagas were introduced over time, and there is no way to verify the authenticity of these events. This situation is also related with the

²⁷ An 11th century Latin encomium in honour of Queen Emma of Normandy.

²⁸ Lawson, *Cnut*, 57.

²⁹ *Ágrip* is the first document which can be call as kings' saga.

geographic limitations. The errors in the sagas happened not because the saga authors were too lazy to find sufficient materials or did not want to travel abroad. As it has been suggested above, saga authors were dedicated people and they travelled to Scandinavia. Unfortunately, materials that Scandinavia offered to them were not very historical and because they could not visit England or read any of the chronicles, several historical inaccuracies in the sagas occurred.

It is easy to assume that the Icelandic sagas, even the kings' sagas, are historically inaccurate because of the nature of the Vikings. Viking culture was based on myths, glory and praise, and what was left from them was based on these themes. Therefore, it is possible to assume that their descendants continued this tradition and composed manuscripts like they did. However, this assumption is not correct, especially for the kings' sagas. The authors of these sagas focused on history itself instead of the Norse myth. Unfortunately, there were a lot of limitations which caused several historical inaccuracies when we compare them with more a historically accurate source, like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The differences between these sources and the factual inaccuracies in the sagas are the outcome of these limitations.

Thesis Summary

In the first chapter, a detailed analysis of the nature of Icelandic sagas, and *Heimskringla* and *Knyttlinga saga* specifically will be done. The aim of this chapter will not be to show the differences between sagas and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle but to discuss situation of these materials and introduce the readers to the topic, and familiarise them with the sources. The final aim of this chapter will be to arouse interest and prepare the readers to the following discussions.

In the second chapter, the problems of the Icelandic sources will be discussed. After a brief introduction to this chapter, the main focus will be on the relationship between the

skaldic verse, prose and saga culture. This part will start with the importance and the development of the skaldic, and will demonstrate how the verse can be misleading for historians. Since the historical development of skaldic verse and its correlation with prose is an important topic, there will be a discussion of how verse and prose merged, and why sagas are rather hard to follow as primary sources for historical studies.

In the third chapter, the main focus will be on the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's Saga. There will be discussions about the author (Snorri Sturluson), summary of the events that saga describes with respect to England and representations of Earl Tostig of Northumbria and the Battle of Stamford Bridge in the saga. The final focus of this chapter will be the comparison of the certain events described in the saga and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to show the differences between these sources.

The following chapter will share similar themes with the previous one but will focus on *Knyttlinga saga*. The aim of this chapter will be to demonstrate how the Danish Conquest of England was represented in the saga. The discussions of this chapter will be quite similar to the previous chapter: the authorship of the saga, parts related with Sweyn Forkbeard and Cnut the Great, and comparison of these events with the English sources, mainly the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. However, because of the limited number of sources about the era of Cnut the Great, there will be additional discussion of the primary sources on Cnut the Great and their historical consistency. Both the third and fourth chapter's conclusions will focus on the reasons for these differences (or as they will be called "historical inaccuracies").

CHAPTER II: NATURE OF SAGAS

Icelandic sagas are one of the most important historical sources for historians of medieval Scandinavia. Due to the complexity of Viking culture, life conditions and styles as well as long term life goal, Vikings did not work on written documents which make sagas vital in order to understand them. Unfortunately, it is quite impossible to call these sagas true primary sources for historical studies because of their nature. They were composed centuries after Viking age or successors of Viking figures. However, this does not mean that these sources are irrelevant since the authors of these sagas were either Icelanders or Scandinavian and used every possible written or oral source before they even tried to write any saga. Thanks to authors like Snorri Sturluson, Óláfr Þórðarson and many others, we can look at historical events partly from Scandinavian perspective. Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson are the authors of King Harald's Saga and *Knyttlinga saga* which are the main sources of this research. Without their works, we would have very limited information about the times Harald Hardrada and Cnut spent in Scandinavia before their campaign in England. Before we go in detail about these two kings and their stories, I believe we need to first look at the term "saga" and understand what it means.

Basically, sagas are historical stories about early Scandinavian figures which focus on the early Viking voyages, the battles that took place during the voyages, and the migration period from Norway to Iceland and relationship (feuds, trade agreements, marriages, disputes) between Icelandic families and it is believed that most of them were composed in the Old Norse language, mainly in Iceland.³⁰ Sagas are stories, histories of people who lived in Scandinavia or Iceland. They form the most important native historiography of that

³⁰ O'Donoghue, *Old Norse Literature*, 22.

geography. More specifically, the term saga is confined to legendary and historical events in which the author has tried to reconstruct the past and organized them by using many possible sources as he could find.³¹ There are different types of sagas and are usually categorized under four titles according to their subject and matters: kings' sagas, legendary sagas the sagas of Icelanders, and lastly, family sagas. As it can be understood from their names, each saga was related with specific events or people but written after their death.

Kings' sagas commenced with Sæmundr Sigfússon. Sæmundr was an Icelandic scholar from eleventh century who composed the first kings' saga which served as primary work for later authors. After his death, we see an increasing number of writings in Norway and Iceland about the history of Scandinavia in terms of Viking or Scandinavian rulers and families. While some of these works are in Latin, most of them were written in Old Norse. The kings' sagas are divided into two groups: biographies of medieval rulers and histories of remoter periods. The first group started around mid-late twelfth century by an Icelander called Eiríkr Oddsson with *Hryggjarstykki* (like Sæmundr's work, *Hryggjarstykki* is one of the lost kings' saga).³² Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about this lost kings' saga and if we did not have Snorri Sturluson's citation in *Heimskringla*, Oddson's work would be cease to exist. As little as we know, *Hryggjarstykki* was about the twelfth century kings of Norway. After that, the number of sagas about kings increased drastically. *Sverris saga* was one of the earliest and was composed by Abbot Karl Jónsson of the Thingeyrar monastery under the supervision of King Sverrir himself. Logically, it was finished after king's death by Karl after he moved to Iceland. The Icelander Sturla Þórðarson wrote two important biographies: *Hákonar saga* on King Haakon Haakonsson and *Magnús saga* on his son and successor, Magnus the Law-Mender. Unfortunately, only a few fragments of these sagas have survived. During the writing of these sagas, both Sturla and Eiríkr used contemporary written

³¹ Kuiper, *Prose*, 120.

³² Kuiper, *Prose*, 122.

documents as well as oral history, especially the memories of eyewitnesses around kings. Sagas about the earlier kings of Norway have two Latin chronicles which were written in Norway and two native language sagas. The Icelandic manuscript *Morkinskinna*, composed around 1220, it describes the rulers of Norway in between 1047 to 1177. It is somehow unique than other texts thanks to parts and stories about Icelandic poets and travelers who had been in the royal courts of Scandinavia.³³ The kings' sagas reached their peak with the *Heimskringla* (History of the Kings of Norway) written by Snorri Sturluson. He was a thirteenth century Icelandic historian, poet, and politician who contributed the most to the Scandinavian history. In *Heimskringla*, he discussed the history of ruling dynasty of Norway from the times of the legendary Swedish dynasty of the Ynglings to 1177. As his sources, he used all the court records from the ninth century onward that were available for him. Not only that, he also used every possible written sources from earlier histories about the kings of Norway. Even today, *Heimskringla* is recognized as the leading literacy source for Scandinavian history. Instead of dividing event by event, Snorri focused on individuals and their personalities. Although several sagas were created around the same years as *Heimskringla*, it includes many of them. For instance; only some fragments of St. Olaf's Saga (written by Styrmir Kárason) survived, but it is possible to find some parts in *Heimskringla*. There are some other sources that composed in other parts of the Nordic world though they are not directly related with Norway, such as: *Færeyinga saga*. Although the *Færeyinga saga* is only related with kings of Norway, because it describes resistance of Faroe Islands against Norwegian influence, we can still find some useful information about kings of Norway. Another example is the *Orkneyinga saga*. It deals with the earldom of Orkney from 900 to the late twelfth century and with the level of the relationship between rulers of Orkney and their ancestors in Norway.

³³ Kuiper, *Prose*, 123.

Legendary sagas are almost completely different from kings' sagas in terms of their usage and creation. In medieval Iceland, the learned men paid attention to their pagan history and tried to adjust some of these traditions into their life, traditional poems about mythology and legendary themes were favourite ones. In time, these poems and themes developed tradition for history. Even Snorri Sturluson, creator of *Heimskringla*, studied these themes and composed the *Eddas*, which tells stories about ancient mythological creatures and old gods of Scandinavia, including Thor's adventures and the death of Balder (god of light and purity). Snorri Sturluson even wrote about Germanic myth and included *Nibelungen* cycle into his work.³⁴ Other than the *Eddas* several other legendary sagas composed by Icelanders during the thirteenth century. The term legendary saga also includes a lot of stories from early Viking age. These sagas are created under the beauty of what we can term the legendary or heroic age of Vikings. Locations of these sagas were not only Scandinavia, Iceland (or Russia) it is possible to see the world of fantasy and myth, for instance; descriptions of Valhalla and stories in there can be seen in several legendary sagas. The usual way to understand the personality of the hero is to look at his actions. Although authors tried to express their individualities, there were some similarities between sagas and heroes from early Scandinavian figures. The character is in fact represents good parts of ideal Viking figure: warrior, chivalry and loyal to the codes of his society. In the end, legendary sagas are romantic literatures rather than history.

The Sagas of Icelanders are not very related with legendary warriors or rulers. As we can understand from the name of this type, they are about stories of people who lived in Iceland. In the late twelfth century, Icelandic authors started to fictionalize their history (especially tenth and eleventh centuries) and created a new genre. While the kings' sagas and legendary sagas are aristocratic and focused on figures like kings, heroes or war leaders, the

³⁴ Kuiper, *Prose*, 124.

Sagas of Icelanders paid attention to usually farmers, their son, people who were not at an especially high social level and settlers from Scandinavia.³⁵ Generally, characters were chosen by authors and people who were close to their social level. It is believed that authors tried to be accurate when they described geography, society and culture because they believed it was their job to describe and immortalize the life in Iceland as they live and imagined the past. Although their main sources based on oral tradition (and history), the best products of this genre are largely fictional. One of the most important aims of this literature was to encourage people to attain an easier and better understanding of social environment as well as a simple yet correct knowledge of themselves. Unfortunately, our knowledge about the authorship of the Sagas of Icelanders is close to nothing. It is impossible to even put a date on their creation due to lack of any type of evidence that might identify the author himself.³⁶ However, it is safe to assume that these people were not completely made up. When we compare the Sagas of Icelanders with *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), we see same names with similar backgrounds. The Blood Brothers, description of Iceland, Kveld-Ulf and many other names can be seen in these books. Since the golden age of saga writing was between 1230 and 1290, we can only assume that the Sagas of Icelanders created in that period as well. Many masterpieces such as: *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga* were products of this period. Other than *Grettis saga*, it is very difficult to find a saga as good as products of thirteenth century which makes it more possible to assume the Sagas of Icelanders belong to that period. It is possible to divide this genre into several sub-categories due to social and ethnic status of the main heroes. In some chapters, we may find that the hero is a poet who leaves his home for fame and becomes the retainer of the king of Norway while in the following chapter the hero can be a fearless warrior. However, most of them share one similar theme: love. In several sagas, the hero becomes an outlaw fighting for his society even though

³⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90-91.

³⁶ Kuiper, *Prose*, 125.

the society had already rejected him.³⁷ *Gísla saga Súrssons* is a great example for this type. The hero constantly fights against superior opponents only to be slain by a heartless enemy. However, we have to bear in mind that most of the Sagas of Icelanders are about ordinary people and concerned with the people who are part of their society as an ordinary farmer or as a farmer who is also the chieftain. In *Hrafnkels saga*, the main character is a corrupted chieftain who kills his shepherd, receives his punishment as torture and dies only after takes his revenge on one of his tormentors. In these sagas, instead of courage authors decided to encourage a different virtue: justice.

The last type of saga is the family saga. Although these are important, studies about this genre is limited because of the uncertainty about them. Scholars still discuss whether or not they are medieval novels or chronicles of past.³⁸ Mainly, they are stories about people who migrated to Iceland and they describe their lives which make them different than other types of sagas. They represents several generations of one family with interactions between family members. Although it can be seen as one of the kings' sagas, because of its nature *Knýtlinga saga* (composed by Óláfr Þórðarson) is an excellent example of this type. Instead of focusing just a single name, it discusses several Danish kings from 940 to 1187. Even though the family sagas are very similar to kings' saga and the Sagas of Icelanders, the main difference between them and other sagas is that the concept and the nature of these writings, in terms of their focus. For instance, Harald Hardrada's saga is about King Harald himself. It is possible to find some parts about his advisors and enemies yet the main focus is his life and we do not learn much about other characters. On the other hand, *Knýtlinga saga* is about a dynasty itself. It is possible to see chapters about the Cnut the Great as well as Harald Bluetooth yet the main focus is Cnut and his descendants. Family sagas do not focus on a single ruler which makes them different than *Heimskringla* and other kings' sagas. For the

³⁷ Kuiper, *Prose*, 126.

³⁸ Heather O'Donoghue. *Old Norse Icelandic Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 24-36.

Sagas of Icelanders, although both of them introduce many different characters and have different chapters for them, they cannot be seen as same. As I have already mention, a family saga is about a dynasty or rulers of a kingdom while in the Sagas of Icelanders, there are a lot of heroes which do not have any family bond between them. Unfortunately, because of the limited number of this type of sagas, it is quite hard to compare them with others. Now that we have enough information to discuss the main sagas of this research (a sub-saga under *Heimskringla*, King Harald's Saga and *Knýtlinga saga*) it is best to move on them.

Heimskringla

Heimskringla is one of the most important collections of kings' sagas. This collection is separated into three sections. It survives in several medieval manuscripts while some of which are fragmentary. Sadly, most of the copies which survived the chaos of Middle-Ages were destroyed in 1728 during the Great Fire of Copenhagen. Fortunately, King Harald's saga was not one of them. This saga is the biography of one of the most remarkable and maybe the last Viking alike king of Norway.³⁹ It is crucial not to forget that because it was composed 170 years after the death of Harald by Snorri Sturluson (the great Icelandic historian and saga writer), there are some contradictions and stories that may or may not be true in this saga. However, it is the closes document that we can call as a primary source for the history of kings of Norway. *Heimskringla* is a very efficient work, nothing more nor less than a complete history of Norwegian kings up to 1177. It tells series of stories about all the kings who ruled and sit on the throne of Norway.

It commences with the mythology of Scandinavia, talks about Odin and Norse gods as well as the royal families of Sweden and Norway, a part which is known as *Ynglinga saga*. Mainly, the saga is about the arrival of the Norse gods to Scandinavia and how *Freyr* (god of

³⁹ Angelo Forte, Richard Oram and Frederik Pedersen, *Viking Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

sacral kingship) founded the Swedish and Norwegian dynasties. It is quite hard to call this part of *Heimskringla* as a true kings' saga because of the supernatural elements in it. However it is very common to start history of ruling dynasty with unnatural powers since we can see this type of stories in almost every culture, for instance: The Grey Wolf Legend is created by first Turkic empire (Göktürks) and explains how a she-wolf help an injured boy to survive and mates with him to create superior Turkic race. The more historical part begins with King Harald Fairhair's reign when he succeeds his father. Snorri describes every momentous event that we know in Harald's reign without missing any of them: coronation of Harald at the age of, the discovery and colonization of Iceland, subjugation of all independent chieftains under his authority and unification of all Norway under Harald's banner are all available in this part of *Heimskringla*. Because of Snorri's detailed writing, we have surprisingly amount of knowledge of the early history of medieval Norway.

After Harald, Snorri continued his writings and moved on King Olaf Tryggvason's reign and ended the first section of his work with him which is quite logical because of his religious policies, Christianization. King Olaf also referred as the iron king of Norway after he forced many pagan Scandinavians to abandon their beliefs so that they had to recognize and adopt Christianity which makes it a perfect ending for a chapter that begins with several gods and myths. The second section is almost as big as the total of sections one and three. Most of the writings are here because this section is about King Olaf Haraldsson (or as referred King Olaf the Saint) and his saga, Saga of St. Olaf (*Helgisaga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar*). At first, Snorri intended to write King Olaf's saga as an independent saga from *Heimskringla* but the outcome of his work was too important to leave it out.⁴⁰ It became a summary of introduction and appendix for the history of Norway before and after St. Olaf's

⁴⁰ Jacqueline Simpson, trans., *Heimskringla, Part One: The Olaf Sagas* (London: Dent, 1964), 23.

reign. The saga is without any doubt considered as the greatest saga in *Heimskringla* and it became the model that Snorri Sturluson used for his following writings.

With the death of Saint Olaf in 1030, the second section ends and the last section commences which deals the period from 1030 to 1177. In the third section, we see sagas of famous kings including: King Magnus the illegitimate son of St. Olaf, Harald Hardrada as the last Viking alike ruler and Magnus Erlingsson. While it is possible to find some stories about kings between Harald and Magnus, somehow he did not focus on those names like he did for others.

Essentially the numerous concepts, the date range and the scopes of *Heimskringla* make it different and more important than the rest of the many Icelandic sagas. Before Snorri and *Heimskringla*, there had already been kings' sagas and some individual sagas as well as after Snorri's death. Icelandic authors composed summaries of reigns or short stories about rulers. However, no one else attempted to do something on such a large scale. They were all about individuals, Snorri's creation was very unique.

Snorri Sturluson was an important historian for his time. He was not intimidated by the fact that what he decided to create was close to impossible due to lack of sources and the inaccessibility of them. Where he was stuck or his sources ended, he tried to complete them by rationalism and deduction. Instead of skipping the parts where he failed to explain, he used works of previous historians and added sources of his own to those studies.⁴¹ His purpose was not to challenge earlier works of historians. He did not record the history, he wanted to explain and show the past. However, whether or not it is a work of history is open to discussion and there are some arguments about its place as a historical work:

And yet *Heimskringla* is not a work of history at all, in the modern sense of the term. It is a series of saga-histories, and the distinction is a vital one. Snorri Sturluson saw history as a continual flow, and in *Heimskringla* he tried to convey this to his readers;

⁴¹ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *King Harald's Saga*, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 13.

but it was not so much a matter of historical evolution as a long chain of event, and these events he saw in terms, almost exclusively, of individual personalities.⁴²

Denying its importance or attempting to degenerate its value should not be taken into consideration by anyone. Moreover, judging historical materials with modern view is something that we cannot do. However we need to understand the relationship between *Heimskringla* and Snorri Sturluson. Snorri saw history as a continual collection of events based on person. Individual personalities and human beings were the main themes of his writings. He regarded politics as the reflection of humanity itself. Throughout *Heimskringla*, every event is somehow related with the king and his ideas. The Saga of Harald Hardrada is an excellent example of this situation. Snorri represents Harald as someone fascinating, convincing and a true leader but it is possible that he was different from this picture. When we compare Harald's saga with other sources, especially passages about England, we see some differences with other sources even though Snorri is always more plausible. While we are moving on Harald's saga, I believe we need to think or at least not to forget this critic towards *Heimskringla* so that we can eventually see the problems about Icelandic sagas.

The correlation between the *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* is worth mentioning. *Heimskringla* was not the first kings' saga and it is known that Snorri Sturluson used both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* as his sources. Although we do not know exact dates, it is believed that all of them were written in Iceland at the same time (1220-1230) and most scholars argue that *Morkinskinna* was written first, followed by *Fagrskinna*.⁴³ It starts in 1030 with Magnus the Good and ends after the death of King Sigurd of Norway in 1157. The prose in *Morkinskinna* is closely connected with the poetry and for most cases derives from the stanzas and unlike Snorri's work, it is not a surveyable series of royal biographies.⁴⁴ The saga is one of the first almost full-length chronicle of kings of Norway and it basis on the

⁴² Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 13-14.

⁴³ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 78.

⁴⁴ Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Morkinskinna* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), ix-2.

Icelandic tradition. Unfortunately, like many other sagas, the author of *Morkinskinna* is unknown. It discusses seven kings and represents a lot of dialogues between kings, and their advisors. Out of these seven kings, Harald Hardrada is one of them as well. Although *Morkinskinna* is a valuable source for the Norwegian history and the Icelandic literature, it is not as historical as *Heimskringla*. One of the main reasons of this situation is that the amount of dialogues in it. The author of *Morkinskinna* lived centuries later than Magnus the Good and King Sigurd therefore it is quite illogical that he could compose these dialogues. Although it can be argued that he had several written sources, *Morkinskinna* does not mention any of them. Of course this situation (invented speech) is not unique to *Morkinskinna*. Invented speech is very common in both Ancient and Medieval historiography.⁴⁵

Even though *Fagrskinna* is not very different than *Morkinskinna*, it can be considered as a more historical version of *Morkinskinna*. Furthermore, the author of *Fagrskinna* made an important contribution to the Icelandic literature. It is usually accepted that the author was a conservative arranger of earlier written sources and instead of relying on oral history, he used many previous written works of the Icelandic historians.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, other than *Ágrip*, all the manuscripts or texts that had been used by the author are now missing.⁴⁷ The correlation between *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna* can be seen in its last part since both of them offer same information about King Sigmund of Norway. Even though it is more historical, there are some problems in *Fagrskinna* as well. For instance, like the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald' saga, the *Fagrskinna* version of the saga also suggests that after the Battle of Stiklestad, Harald went to today's Russia (possibly Novgorod) and became the captain of Varangians. However without any background or further detail, *Fagrskinna* indicates that Harald fought often during his stay in Russia. It is not given who was the enemy

⁴⁵ Unlike sagas, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle does not have any dialogues which makes it different and interesting since authors of the Chronicle did not follow the contemporary writing.

⁴⁶ Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2-3.

⁴⁷ *Ágrip* is not in its possible full form, what we know about it is more than rest of vernacular sources that *Fagrskinna* benefited of.

or where Harald did these battles. Unfortunately, although *Fagrskinna* increased the historical value of the kings' sagas, there are some claims that no contemporary work refers or can be used as the sources of them.⁴⁸

Although *Heimskringla* is not completely historically accurate, one of the reasons of this situation can be argued as Snorri's decision on including earlier kings' sagas (both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* are immediate sources for it). Whether or not Snorri wanted to maintain the Icelandic literature in them is unknown. However, there are several differences in these manuscripts and the events that *Heimskringla* describe can be verified in other primary sources from England.

King Harald's Saga

Now that we know enough about concepts like saga, kings' saga and *Heimskringla*, it is time to move on and examine the first saga that I will discuss in this research.⁴⁹ The life of Harald Hardrada is a fluent, exciting and important story. Even without Snorri's writings, someone would have composed his saga due to the events and ending of it. King Harald's Saga commences with the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030 where Harald tried to help King Olaf to regain his throne. Harald was 15 years old and unfortunately this is the earliest date we have about him. It is illogical to blame Snorri about these missing 15 years since most probably he had no sources about Harald's life as a child. This battle is also the first part of the three sections of this saga which we can name as exile in east, king of Norway and Invasion of England.

After his defeat in the Battle of Stiklestad, Rognvald Brusason (Earl of Orkney) helped Harald escape from the battle area to the Kjolen Mountains where Harald decided to travel to Russia. Harald was welcomed in Novgorod and King Jaroslav helped him to regain his

⁴⁸ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 151.

⁴⁹ This part of the research will focus on the chronological part of the saga. An analytic analysis will be presented on the following chapters in terms of the events that occurred in England.

strengthen and plan for future. After a brief stay in there, Harald decided to travel to Constantinople around 1034. He presented himself to the Empress Zoe and joined her army as a mercenary with the men who have companied him from Norway.⁵⁰ During the following autumn, he became very popular among other Varangians and became their leader.⁵¹ According to the saga, he organized raids to Africa, Sicily and even to Jerusalem. He spent several years in Africa where he gained a lot of money and sent them to King Jaroslav to keep his plunders in safe. However, we need to think twice about that. Although his actions in Sicily can be proven by other sources, as like Jerusalem, Snorri might be either wrong or unclear what he meant by Africa.⁵² With the beginning of the winter of 1035, it is known that in the western parts of Asia Minor, Varangians were heavily engaged with the area. Therefore, Harald was in Asia Minor, not in Africa though he did collect a lot of gold which he sent to Russia and later used it in his campaigns in Scandinavia. Although he faced some problems in Sicily, he managed to take control of four towns. Even when he went to Jerusalem, all the towns and castles surrendered to him without any fight according to poet Stuf Thordarson and Snorri Sturluson. The end of first section begins when Harald came back to Constantinople and learnt that his nephew, Magnus Olafsson had become king of Norway and Denmark. Unfortunately for young Harald, Empress Zoe did not allow him to leave Constantinople and he was imprisoned. Although his men and Varangians were accused too, they managed to help Harald and smuggled him into Russian lands through the Black Sea where he married with the daughter of King Jaroslav, Elizabeth.

The second section of Harald's saga commences with the meeting between Harald and Svein Ulfsson (Svein was the son of regent of Denmark and later became Earl of Denmark. However, he had claims on the Danish throne and decided to pursue his claim. Harald's nephew Magnus the Good did not allow him and defeated his armies three times in Denmark.

⁵⁰ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 48.

⁵¹ Varangians were Scandinavian warriors who served as bodyguards to the Byzantine rulers.

⁵² DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1999), 30.

Svein ran to Sweden and hide in there). They agreed on joining their forces and attacked Denmark to plunder and conquer. Because King Magnus learnt rather late, they managed to plunder some towns in Denmark.⁵³ Magnus's counsellors advised him to be friendly towards Harald since they were relatives. Magnus agreed with them and offered Harald half share in the Norwegian kingdom. Even though Svein tried to dissuade and assassinate Harald, Harald made peace with Magnus and became joint ruler of Norway.⁵⁴ Only after the death of Magnus in 1047, Harald did become the sole ruler of Norway, while Magnus appointed Svein as his successor for Denmark. Harald was not happy about this, he assembled his forces and marched on Denmark. He regarded Denmark as his lawful inheritance and thought Svein had no right to the throne. However, his counsellors made him to stop because Harald first needed to secure his own kingdom and sailed back to Norway. Their dispute over Denmark did continue after the following summer. When Svein challenged Harald to meet his army at Gota River, Harald hoped to destroy Svein's forces and became the king of Denmark. However, Svein's army had doubled Harald's army and he had to run away. While raids and looting continued, both sides did not actually manage to win any war and eventually in 1064 they made unconditional peace agreement.⁵⁵ Although Harald seen as a great king and a warrior, he did not fulfill his promises throughout his reign which made things worse for him. Haakon Ivarsson and Fill Arnason were Harald's important advisors respectively. Harald promised those titles and lands after their enormous help yet none of them received any title. Both left Harald, joined Svein and caused many troubles.⁵⁶ Especially Haakon, when he organized a rebellion in Uplands of Norway with farmers. Even after Haakon's defeat, farmers continued to disobey Harald and only when Harald started to use harsh measures (burning farms, small

⁵³ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 68.

⁵⁴ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 45.

⁵⁵ Peter Fisher, trans., *Saxo Grammaticus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 797.

⁵⁶ Both Hakon Ivarsson and Fill Arnason caused several domestic problems. Especially the aristocracy and peasants were not fond of Harald because of his violent policies. According to Halvor Tjønn, the nickname "Hardrada" was given to him during the power-struggle between him and the aristocracy.

villages, embargoing their lands and increasing taxes) the farmers surrendered and Harald could move back to Oslo.

The last section deals with Harald's campaign on England.⁵⁷ Snorri claims that after Svein refused to help Tostig Godwinson (Earl of Northumbria) in his plan to invade England, Tostig moved to Norway and asked help from Harald. Harald was not very enthusiastic about invading England or helping an English man, but he had a dream and two unlikely omens made him re-think his attitude about England.⁵⁸ In 1066, they organized their armies and sailed to England. At first, Tostig and Harald managed to win some small battles. However, at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, Harold Godwinson defeated invasion army due to Harald's poor decision making.⁵⁹ Instead of retreating from the battle area, Harald asked his messengers to run back to their ships and inform them about upcoming battle. Although his army managed to arrive battle area, they were tired and Harald was already dead. The saga continues a few more passages after Harald's death. Snorri concluded what Harald started in England with the Norman Conquest and he also wrote about Harald's successors and their political situations.

Once again, I must say that King Harald's Saga is a very important source for historians. However, from the beginning to end, it is possible to find some chronological errors as well as historical mistakes. Snorri's claims about Harald's adventures in Constantinople are mostly wrong. From his raids to his escape, it is possible to see that Snorri tried to rationalize what happened in there with limited amount of sources which created some disorder. Other than his saga, we do not have source which shows us Harald's conquest of Jerusalem and even if he did go there, it was before Sicily not after. Also, although Snorri used the word Africa twice, Varangians had nothing to do with Africa at that time. The following chapters have some questionable parts too. Snorri talks about dreams and miracles

⁵⁷ Chapter four will focus on this part of the saga and more detailed explanations can be find there.

⁵⁸ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 137.

⁵⁹ Michael Swanton, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 198.

more than once while it is very hard to prove what Harald or King Magnus dreamed of in the mid-eleventh century. Other than that, his more important mistakes are in parts related with England. His descriptions of geography (where Norwegian naval forces were and where the Battle of Stamford Bridge happened), who died in where and when, number of soldiers and which type of soldiers were used by Harold are the first mistakes Snorri made that I can think of. Fortunately, even with all these errors, Snorri managed to describe events and attitudes rather good. We should not and cannot disregard *Heimskringla*, but we must be cautious while reading sagas in it.

Knýtlinga Saga

Before we start to examine *Knýtlinga Saga*, we need to remember that although it looks quite similar to King Harald's Saga and *Heimskringla*, they were products of different genres.⁶⁰ We may even say that *Knýtlinga Saga* is a shorter and more family based version of *Heimskringla*. However, it is not same with kings' saga and the direct translation of it would be the history of Cnut's descendants. It tells us the stories of Danish kings who ruled Denmark from 940 to 1241 by focusing on Cnut. When we look *Heimskringla*, it is collection of several sagas about kings of Norway. They are all unique, mostly independent from each other and do not serve as elements of continuity.⁶¹

Knýtlinga Saga is a medieval chronicle of the Kings of Denmark from the tenth to the late twelfth century. It was probably composed by Óláfr Þórðarson who was an Icelandic scholar and nephew of our previous author; Snorri Sturluson.⁶² It starts with the reign of Harald Bluetooth who fought the Saxons, Norwegians and Swedes in order to become King of Denmark. Harald Bluetooth was also the first Danish king to be buried in consecrated soil

⁶⁰ Like King Harald's saga, there will be more detailed analysis of this one as well (chapter 5).

⁶¹ In *Heimskringla* neither the sagas nor the main characters of them are their successors.

⁶² The authorship of the saga will be discussed in the following chapters.

because of his attempts to Christianize Denmark. However, out of the twenty rulers of which Óláfr wrote, Harald is the least documented one.

By the time of King Cnut Valdimarsson (who ruled between 1182-1202), the cultural and political atmosphere in Denmark had changed drastically. Denmark was no longer dominated by the Viking culture, the unsophisticated situation around the tenth century replaced itself something more European. Especially, the establishment of the Church and its influence on society is the main theme of this change in *Knýtlinga Saga*. However the battles, conquests and campaigns still form an important part of this chronicle due to traditional Viking attitude and life style. The kings of Denmark rarely enjoyed peace and they were not very enthusiastic about these periods. Also, internal battles were quite popular too: after only three chapters in *Knýtlinga Saga*, Harald Bluetooth dies in the battle against his son, Sweyn Forkbeard, for the Danish throne. Unfortunately, Óláfr Þórðarson did paid little attention to chronological order of rulers. Actually, he was not really interested in chronology, rather, it was the events that were important in this saga. With the help of other sources which provide enough information, we have the correct lists of Danish rulers from late tenth to the mid thirteenth century. All the kings of Denmark from the tenth to thirteenth centuries belonged to the same family, except for Magnus Olafsson who ruled in Denmark for a brief time (1042-1047).

Like *Heimskringla*, *Knýtlinga Saga* can also be divided into three sections based on the life and death of Cnut Sveinsson “the Saint” (1080-1086). Even though this Cnut only ruled for six years and there were far more influential kings in the saga. In terms of literary and cultural convention, expecting something else would not be logical. Hagiography is an important element for sagas and that part of this saga starts and ends with Saint Cnut’s part which makes it the center piece of the whole work⁶³.

⁶³ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Knýtlinga saga*, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 12.

For this thesis, the first section is the most important section of this saga because Cnut the Great is the leading figure.⁶⁴ Throughout the saga, while Sweyn is described as a great man of war, the strongest of rulers and plundered widely in the Baltic and in England, Cnut the Great is described in very different and powerful words. In Óláfr's words "everyone agrees that no king in Scandinavia was ever so powerful or ruled over a more wide-ranging kingdom". Cnut was not an ordinary leader. He was a great warrior; he improved himself and eventually became an European statesman. He created a Viking empire, incorporated Scandinavia into the European market and was recognized by the Holy Roman Empire, which was the first Danish king to be. He was born as a Viking yet he died as a member of European society. However, the parts related with him in *Knyttlinga Saga* are about his wars and success in England.

With the death of King Cnut, the saga suggests that a new and powerful era commenced for the kings of Denmark. Cnut's passing was sad but in terms of money and prestige, Denmark would never to be that rich and powerful again.⁶⁵ When the brief and rather insignificant reign of Harthacnut had come to an end in 1042, the Danish throne was occupied by a foreigner Magnus Olafsson of Norway. Magnus is the only ruler who was not a member of the dynasty and his status as an outsider made him very unpopular in this saga. There is only one chapter which is related with him and even in there, his successor and Cnut's nephew Sweyn, is the dominant figure. Sweyn's reign was longer than the combined reigns of Harthacnut and Magnus Olafsson. The saga suggests that he was the definition of a good leader both in the battlefield and at court. He was bold and stronger than most yet he was also friendly and wise ruler. According to Óláfr, the only problem with Sweyn's reign was his death because he left two sons (Cnut and Harald) and both had a legitimate claim on the throne. Even though he had designated Cnut as his successor, the nobles and landed men did

⁶⁴ Cnut the Great used the foothold gained by his father, Sweyn Forkbeard, in his campaign and established himself as ruler of England

⁶⁵ Pálsson and Edwards, *Knyttlinga saga*, 15.

not favor him and Harald became the king. Cnut was not happy about this but the saga suggests that he believed that God would deal with this situation and (surprisingly) Harald only managed to reign for four years. He was weak, easily manipulated and passed away without any heir, leaving the throne to Cnut. Maybe the only important part of Harald's reign was his death since the first section of *Knýtlinga Saga* ends with his death.

The second section of the saga is about Cnut the Saint and his reign. This section commences with the events immediately after he became king of Denmark. Cnut increased the power of royal authority, established firm control over Denmark by surprising any opposition, including the farmers in Halland and Skaane. He was quite unpopular and feared among nobles due to what Óláfr Þórðarson called a strict yet fair law and order program.⁶⁶ Unlike another successful Cnut (the Great), Cnut the Saint's policies and Denmark at that time were very different. Óláfr's description of Cnut the Great is as a ruler who focused his attention on England and to some extent ignored Denmark. The Danish expansion and the establishment over England are main concerns of his chapters. For Cnut the Saint, he had to deal with problems in Scandinavia and tried to regain the English throne but the saga represents the Danish part a lot more than England.⁶⁷ Denmark needed to be put in order and Óláfr used the relationship between Cnut and Blood-Egil as well as the formation of farmer's army and the rebellion which killed him. A major difference between the two sections is that during the first section, the narrative was factual and pedestrian while in the second section individual personalities became much more important, as in *Heimskringla*. The numbers of dialogues are drastically increased in the second section as well as influence of God.

Unfortunately, the last section is quite uneventful in comparison of other sections. Óláfr did not leave any king out of his chronology but it is clear that he focused on Cnut the Great and the Saint more. The third section is the part which relates the reigns of eleven kings,

⁶⁶ Pálsson and Edwards, *Knýtlinga saga*, 14.

⁶⁷ David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (Stroud: The History Press, 2004), 197.

but it is less than 1/3 of the saga. The saga discusses mostly internal conflicts, throne struggles and Christianization of Denmark by using mostly narrative language instead of personal based story telling.

I believe *Knýtlinga Saga* is an adequate text about kings of Denmark in terms of understanding what was happening in medieval Denmark. There are many narratives about them and, even though it mainly focuses on Cnut the Saint, we have much information about Cnut the Great and his campaign in England. However, like King Harald's saga, we cannot follow these stories blindfold. In order to make any research about Cnut historically accurate, the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* and the charters from his reign should be examined carefully. Lastly, we have to bear in mind that although *Knýtlinga Saga* is similar yet somehow a different version of *Heimskringla*, it is not a kings' saga and it's not as detailed as Snorri Sturluson's text.

CHAPTER III: THE PROBLEMS OF THE ICELANDIC SOURCES

Unlike other medieval European states, such as: England and France, the medieval Scandinavian kingdoms produced very few written sources for their history, especially before the thirteenth century. Runes were the main materials for writing. However those being on stones did not protect them and most of these runes either vanished or turned into dust. A historian who wants to study the earlier history of Scandinavian kingdoms (Norway, Denmark and Sweden) must use archaeological data to succeed in a detailed research. With the surviving written documents from Iceland, we can learn the history of Scandinavia from pre-historic times right up to their authors' time. Although there are some materials to compare products of those authors, these texts cannot be checked whether or not they are completely historical. Another potential problem is that documents related with Scandinavia were not created by people from those lands but were largely recorded by Icelanders. Iceland was quite independent from its ancestors, though authors from this little island did visit Scandinavian kings and their courts. These people wrote their observations; luckily some of them composed more than their journeys and created sagas about Scandinavian rulers. Using these texts creates a problem because when we read sagas we see history of Scandinavia through an Icelandic eye as well as everything related with Scandinavia.

The most detailed studies about the histories of the Nordic kingdoms are provided in the vernacular Old Norse texts known collectively as the kings' sagas which were composed around thirteenth century by poets or historians from Iceland.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the existing sagas do largely cover the same types of events which limit our knowledge about life in Scandinavia and their perspectives or opinions towards other kingdoms. Sæmundur Sigfússon

⁶⁸ Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 2.

(Icelandic priest/scholar, lived in between 1056-1133) and Ari Þorgilsson (Icelandic medieval chronicler, lived in between 1067-1148) were the first people who created a kings' saga which influenced later writers like Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson. As I have already talked about these two names in the first chapter where I discussed about the term saga, we know their importance for the history of Scandinavia and this research. However, I did not discuss in detail one of the most important characteristics of the sagas: Skaldic verse.

Although the Golden Age of saga writing is accepted as the thirteenth century,⁶⁹ sagas have an important poetic element and most of the events that sagas present are supported by poems which composed by poets who were with the kings and can be seen as eyewitnesses of those events. The principal source for the history of Scandinavia was skaldic verse. This genre was complicated in terms of style and metre. While these poems can cover a lot of diverse topics, usually the poems cited in the kings' saga are about praising the main character and recording the past. Some of the verses also remain within the narrative and represent the discussions between two parties and their dialogues in more simple way. These poems are used by famous saga writers: Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson (author of the *Hakonar saga Hakonarsonar*). Unfortunately, what we know about authors of these poems or how poems were protected and survived to the thirteenth century is limited. The general assumption and studies about skaldic verse are: these poems should be seen as independent historical materials. Although it is true, they are used within the kings' sagas and are crucial parts of those writings. Because the sagas themselves were often composed centuries after the events they describe, they do not have many historical claims and they can only be verified after comparing them with records from Anglo-Saxon England and Byzantium which makes these poems a lot more important. Researchers also should not forget that these poems are

⁶⁹ Matthew Driscoll, "Late Prose Fiction" in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 190.

important because other than them and sagas, we do not have any written sources related with people of Scandinavia.

Skaldic verse, Prose and Saga Culture

As in saga prose, in verses we can see the relative lack of information. When someone examines the poems within the sagas, the image of the stability of the source can change in terms of Scandinavian history and historical knowledge of authors of poems and sagas. It has been argued often that the poems were originally transmitted along with an annotation which explained the poem itself.⁷⁰ However by the time saga writing became popular, prose were created in order to support poems and although they were perhaps quite beyond the truth, most of their parts were reliable. The differences between *Ynglingatal* and *Ynglinga saga* can be seen as the perfect examples for this. These writings are about House of Ynglings and explain how the Norse gods came to Scandinavia as well as how *Freyr*, one of the most important gods of the Norse belief, founded to Swedish Yngling dynasty at Uppsala. While the saga gives a lot more information, it had originated from the poem in order to provide more background information about the story. The verse has less information than its counterpart. For instance, *Ynglingatal* only discusses how Visburr's sons locked their father and burnt him without any background context; on the other hand the saga talks about their motivation and death of the all court.⁷¹ Even though this theory has not been accepted entirely, studies about the Icelandic sagas are based on the assumption that some explanatory proses were indeed attached to the verse. However, this situation caused some troubles for saga writings and their accuracy. We can agree that if saga writers used any form of written primary source, they were skaldic verses from earlier centuries. Unfortunately, there were some unauthentic

⁷⁰ Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 71.

⁷¹ According to the *Historia Norwegie* and *Heimskringla*, Visburr's sons believed that if they kill their father and his court, they could inherit the crown and the kingdom sooner. Inger Ekrem, Lars Boje Mortensen and Peter Fisher, trans. and edit., *Historia Norwegie* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 75.

poems and it was quite impossible to distinguish them from the original or what we may describe as genuine historical materials for the saga writers.

The sagas related with Harald Hardrada suffered from this problem significantly. *Fagrskinna*, *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* are important manuscripts which deal with kings' saga. The story of Harald Hardrada can be found in all of these writings, unfortunately there are some mistakes in all of them. The first problem any research can encounter of Harald's life in Constantinople. The poems related with this period are not historically accurate and were misunderstood by the authors of these sagas. We may assume that the reason for this problem is the lack of non-vernacular sources and their usage during the writing process. When the verse claims that Harald fought against a prince from Africa, authors of both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* thought that he fought in Africa, while in *Heimskringla* there are no mention to any African prince, Snorri Sturluson believed that Harald went to Africa and fought in there. Sadly, all these sagas followed the same verse and made similar mistakes. For *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, when the verse mention about a prince from Africa, Harald was actually in battle against a Saracen king from Africa in Sicily.⁷² In the case of *Heimskringla*, Snorri managed to understand the differences between African prince and Harald's actions in Sicily, but he also made a mistake and claimed that Harald went to Africa with his army while he actually went to Asia Minor. It is known that in 1034-35, a lot of the Varangians were in Anatolia and were heavily engaged on the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire, in Caucasus.⁷³ Another problem which is caused by the unauthentic verse is that when Harald went to Longobardia in southern Italy and the French Normans. Once again *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* misinterpreted this and claimed French Normans as French as well as mixed Longobardia with the Lombards in the northern Italy. The verses about Harald's time in the east are problematic on their own too. Normally these

⁷² Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 72.

⁷³ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 51.

poems were composed by poets who were with the leading figure and were the eyewitnesses of the events they wrote about. However, when Harald was in Constantinople, people around him were either Varangians or soldiers of the Empire, he did not have any luxury to travel with a poet and the fact that author of these verses were not an eyewitness yet someone who received information from most probably the main character is more than enough to doubt about the reliability of the source. If we were talking about Harald's time in Scandinavia, things might have been different because skaldic poet was not necessary seen as a regular job. Some skalds were also warriors and travelled with their kings: Kormákr Ögmundarson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson and Gunnlaugr Ormstunga were members of this group.⁷⁴ These problems are great examples of how a verse can change value of a saga. Because the verse was intended to praise and based on information which received from the praised person as well as other characters of the events, the saga cannot be trusted completely. If the poets actually learnt what happened in Byzantium from Harald, he would most probably did not hesitate to portray himself as a great warrior or conqueror of the Holy Land and it is not surprising that the verse composed in his memory should not be trustable source.⁷⁵

Now that we know some examples of different interpretations of the same verse in different sagas where the verse supposed to be historical, we need to focus on another problem. In some cases, it is possible to check with other sources to see authenticity. Saga writers might use historically matching poems and prose for the events they wrote about, however because they create a narrative to explain the verse in a very convincing way, we should be careful about their situation. Furthermore, we need to note that a saga in which both verse and plaintext seem to fit together could also be fallacious. The story of Olaf II of Norway's last battle is a great example for this. Olaf died in the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030

⁷⁴ Diana Whaley, *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London: Penguin Classic, 2002).

⁷⁵ In *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson claims that after Harald spent some time in Sicily he went Jerusalem and conquered the city. There is no actual proof of this conquest and even he actually had been in there, it is most probably something related with diplomacy or religion.

after he had received three wounds from Thorir Hund according to the *Heimskringla*. The previous sources about Olaf or his last battle are quite unclear which increases value of Snorri's work. The verse and prose are mixed in a very harmonic way while Snorri stresses that Olaf asked poets to join them and witness this great battle to record history as well as his success. However there is one problem with Olaf's saga; the author of all the verses Snorri used when he described the battle were composed by Sigvatr Þórðarson (an Icelandic skald, poet of Olaf's court) and Sigvatr was in Rome when the battle happened.⁷⁶ Therefore, Sigvatr's poems used by Snorri to authenticate his saga were based on not eye witnessing but on hearsay from participants of the war. The verse and prose are in harmony, and the verse supports Snorri's writing. However since Sigvatr was not at the Stiklestad, once again the verses led the saga away from actual reality.

Situation of poets during 1000 ad also brings other questions. Between the tenth and eleventh century, most of poets were Icelanders who either lived in Norway or were in the service of the king. These people did not remain in Norway until they died: most of them decided to return to Iceland and many of the stories were composed about their lives and deeds in Iceland.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, after the death of Harald Hardrada in England, information about poets started to diminish. In this period the number of Icelandic poets increased and as did their dominance in terms of contributions to literature. Although the kings kept court poets we do not know much about their situations. Sadly, there are no historical documents about Iceland for this period. The Book of Settlements and the Book of Icelanders do not cover this period while *Sturlunga saga* which covers the history of Iceland between 1117 and 1264 commences after the period. However, there are some poems and prose texts about the kings of Norway which were composed in this period. Poems of these sagas are composed by Icelanders, especially the authors of the *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* heavily used their

⁷⁶ Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 496.

⁷⁷ Kari Ellen Gade, trans., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 78.

works whereas *Fagrskinna* is based on Norwegian. It had been suggested that because little is known about any poets in this period, poems might have not left any blueprints about their work in Iceland due to they spent their lives in Norway unlike earlier poets and ancestors.⁷⁸ Furthermore, our knowledge about their training to become a poet is almost none exist for both Norway and Iceland. We also do not know about transmission and preservation of poems in this period. We may suggest that poems transmitted into written materials in the twelfth century since it is quite unlikely that it was written before this century. These elements bring some questions about the situation in Iceland and verse culture.

Most of the skalds lived in Norway and spent most of their lives in Scandinavia. They worked, composed poems in Norway, and traveled around Scandinavia with the Norwegian kings and their armies. We need to ask a crucial question here: where did the skalds learn to compose verse? Poetic tradition was preserved and encouraged in Norway yet poems of the Icelanders are much more valuable in terms of historical accuracy and value. Even one of the first kings' saga is not in Old Norwegian, but composed in Old Icelandic and there are a lot of verses in it (*Sverris saga*). Much of the first works composed by Icelanders, but many of them spent their lives in Norway, how their works and legacies reached Iceland, and inspired next generation of Icelandic poets are a mystery. *Fagrskinna* is one of the earliest major products of kings' sagas and most probably its authorship belongs to Norwegians.⁷⁹ The fact that it has a lot of verses and simple prose are uncharacteristic of an Icelandic product, and this problem shows that poems were actually preserved in Norway. The development of prose occurred in Iceland when the Icelanders started to write sagas about skalds in Norway at the kings' courts, only then did historical values of Norwegian prose increase. Sadly, there is no way to determine how or when these poems reached to Iceland or through whom, since there are no historical sources from Norway in this early period. It is possible that Norwegian authors

⁷⁸ Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 84.

⁷⁹ Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 80.

might have been involved in the transmission of these verses by writing about their kings and ancestors. These poems were the foundations of their works. The main argument about this theory lies in the fact that during the eleventh century, Norwegians regarded skaldic verse as a royal occupation because all known skalds were either member of royalty or from the aristocracy.⁸⁰ If this was really the case and the Norwegian upper class actually handed over poems to Icelanders, we must think twice about royal family related verses especially if they were composed by Norwegian poets since it would be easy for them to intervene and make changes.

As we can see, what we know about the transmission and preservation of the verse is very problematic. It also raises questions about on whether or not these verses and prose are historically reliable. What we know is that the Icelanders were famous for writing poems and, by using them with prose they created a new tradition. However, the sources indicate that the numbers of Norwegian poets cannot be ignored since there were so many of them. Which can mean: during the twelfth century poets of Iceland were also storytellers and saga authors as well. If this is true, the prose genre developed to support verse and the possibility of prose as something as old as verse itself is no longer valid or acceptable.⁸¹ It seems the Icelanders inherited poetry from their ancestors and they also had opportunity to study and learn more about it from skalds of Norway. Since the Norwegian stories and poems mostly contained heroic acts or praise, we should bear in mind that Icelandic verse could have been based on pure stories (real life events) without any additions and was transformed into kings' sagas only after their interaction with Norwegian culture. When they became familiar with this new culture, they might have commenced to write sagas related with Icelandic court poems by combining plaintexts and poems. *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* and *Morkinskinna* can be

⁸⁰ Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*.

⁸¹ Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 84-85.

used as examples to support this theory.⁸² Both contain many verses, and we do not know how their authors managed to access and used skaldic verse since there is limited information about them. However, we may assume that at some point, old skalds decided to return and taught next generation of poets about verse. When these young people went to Norway, they were already familiar with skaldic verse and prose so they continued the Icelandic tradition which developed the relationship between prose and verse. If this were the situation, the lack of sources on these returning poets during the late eleventh century is a problem because in theory they should have been popular. They lived around kings and worked in their courts, they would have earned quite a reputation and wealth which means there should be remaining materials from their belonging.⁸³ Furthermore, the prosimetrical saga genre seems to belong to Icelandic tradition rather than Norwegian culture. Surely the verse was about the kings of Norway yet it is not entirely possible that there would have been no composed materials in Norway in any form.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, all our ideas are assumptions due to the lack of historical sources from Scandinavia. Not only their preservation, but also the background of skalds and how they had learnt poetry remains a mystery as well. This situation creates suspicion about the quality of sagas.

Another element which we need to think about is oral sagas. Oral sources can be useful in some cases, for instance; if this research was about Ottoman prisoners in the Russian Empire during the First World War or memories about the Second World War I could have talked with my great-grandfather and learned a lot of things. However when we start to study about further past, oral sources become unreliable. Especially for the Medieval Ages where praise and aggrandize were crucial. Some Icelandic sagas contain material derived originally

⁸² *Ágrip* is the first Old-Norse synoptic about Norwegian kings. It was composed around 1190, unfortunately we do not have full version of it and with the remaining documents we cannot guess its author. *Ágrip* is also the first document which used skaldic poetry and can be call as kings' saga - Matthew Driscoll, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: A Twelfth Century Synoptic History Of The Kings Of Norway* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1995).

⁸³ Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 82.

⁸⁴ Sverre Bagge, "The Middle Ages", in *Making a Historical Culture: Historiography in Norway* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1995), 111-31.

from oral tradition. *Morkinskinna* is one of them. The author of this saga vividly describes a discussion between an Icelander and Harald Hardrada.⁸⁵ Its author claims that an Icelander visits Harald in his court and tells him one saga after another. When Harald demands more, he has only one story left to tell which is about Harald himself. King Harald likes his saga and asks where he learnt it. The Icelander tells of an Icelandic tradition where he learnt part by part with his tribe when they visited Halldór Snorrason every summer at their annual meeting. Even if this story is true, it is possible that Halldór exaggerated some events so that his audience and eventually King Harald would like this saga. Furthermore, *Egil's saga* is known to be based on oral tradition as well. *Egil's saga* is an Icelandic saga and is about the outlaw and poet Egill Skallagrímsson and his family. Although the author of this saga is unknown, because of the similarities of style with *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson has been accepted as its composer.⁸⁶ Before Snorri decided to research Egill, his life was well-known in oral tradition and a waiting its author. The estimated date for Egill's life span is tenth century, and it seems Egill outlived many of his friends and people of tenth century. On the other hand the extant saga was composed in the thirteenth century, and so we must ask a familiar question: other than a few verses without any written materials and generations of storytelling, how historically accurate is Snorri's account? Like Harald's case, before oral sagas and verses met their prose, there were a lot of versions of same story. Many stories became fixed and documented as historical materials only after some author decided to work on those stories. Egill was not a king but this idea can also be apply into kings' sagas as well since they were on the same situation. This means that before saga authors worked on them, the prose and the verse were flexible on content. Basically they were variables and informal stories without any strict limits. The correlation between stories based on informal prose and heroic legends was already suggested. Discussions about this topic almost exclusively ends with the

⁸⁵ Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 200.

⁸⁶ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Egil's Saga* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 7.

same outcome: researchers must be wary of using sagas because, whether they were converted from an oral story or based on harmony between verse and prose, information of sagas might have been altered by their authors. In fact, some oral sagas probably were relatively long and written sagas were later based on these stories.⁸⁷ Although there are differences of opinion on their focus, the oral sagas affected a wide range of historical materials. Sadly, with what we have, it is once again hard to be sure about what these stories were about as well as their historical accuracy and value. Although they are not the perfect sources to begin with, we have to accept the importance of oral sagas. One way or another they are connected with verses. This does not mean that these stories were actually happened or did not change from their original forms. Since we cannot easily notice what actually happened or added by authors of verse and prose, we must be careful about using them.

Another point I would like to talk about is the usage of verse as a tool of conversation. When saga authors commenced writing their works, verses were accepted as a primary source. They had been composed by their ancestors and were the only accessible historical source from the past. Some authors decided to use the verses in dialogues. Most of the time the verses were used as the proof checks of the prose which helped the development of prosimetrical stories. However, in some cases they used as some parts of dialogues which required changes in the prose as well. Other than *Morkinskinna*, numbers of these types of writings are very limited for kings' sagas.⁸⁸ The kings' sagas base on prose which explains historical events. The verse should be seen as their proofs. In the case of these verses, the prose and verse are usually linked to each other to function as a dialogue. It is hard to find a pattern in this type of saga since they were not really a part of the saga tradition,⁸⁹ though these types of writings share one similarity: verses of these sagas are mostly about morality

⁸⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 20.

⁸⁸ Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History*, 88.

⁸⁹ O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 11.

instead of real events. This enabled authors to write their prose in a way to fit with verses which means we must be cautious to value them as historical evidence. Sagas about Olaf Haraldsson are an excellent example for this problem.

Olaf Haraldsson, or St. Olaf, was one of the most important Scandinavian rulers. Unfortunately, there are three different versions of Olaf's saga and their contents are different. Two of these versions are sub-sagas under *Heimskringla* and the Icelanders' sagas while the Saga of St. Olaf is an independent work. *Heimskringla* version is the Saga of St. Olaf (*Helgisaga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar*) composed in thirteenth century, the author of the Icelanders' sagas named it as the Saga of the Sworn Brothers (*Fóstbræðra saga*) (composed around 1200) and the last one is: Saga of St. Olaf (*Óláfs saga Helga*) wrote about 1180. All of them are about St. Olaf and all narrate his life, especially his last battle (the Battle of Stiklestad) differently. The common point is the dialogue between Tormod Kolbrunarskald and woman who tries to help wounded soldiers after the battle. In *Heimskringla*, Tormod goes to a barn and explains why he was the best fighter in the field. Then he moves on and meets with nurse woman and talks with her. Other than his last words, it has been argued that rest of the verse was composed by Snorri because Tormod was about to die and for someone like in his position, it would be hard to be poetic. Furthermore, Snorri needed some form of primary source for the dialogue. By using previous sagas, most probably he interpreted the events and composed rest of the verse. Also, in comparison with other sagas in *Heimskringla* version, Tormod's verses are less cited than others by Snorri which shows us his talent as a storyteller. It seems either other authors managed to find some extra sources or they changed contexts of possible sources so they could fit to their writing. The situation is quite different in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Óláfs saga Helga*. In these sagas, the verses are not from one-side. Instead of being declarations of Tormod, the verses represent a dialogue between him and the nurse. While the questions are in prose form, Tormod's answers are poems. Another

difference is that, in the *Heimskringla* version of Olaf's saga, the dialogue between the two parties is presented as prose instead of verse and their story is developed within plaintexts. On the other hand, in *Fóstbræðra* and *Óláfs saga* the amount of prose is very limited, in fact other than questions the last part of these sagas is composed almost entirely with verse.⁹⁰ They are quite similar to *Les Misérables*; important things and development of story represented as songs (in these cases by poem) while other sentences are regular sentence. As like many other comparisons, Snorri's work is more suitable for historical research than other two sagas. Although they share similar events and all end with same ending, Snorri managed to tell this story better than others. At least he succeeded in writing proper dialogues between Tormod and the nurse instead of decorating their conversation with verses which is the main reason of it. In all three versions of Olaf's story, the poems themselves do not require any explanations and can be presented without any prose, but *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Óláfs saga* are carried by the verse. On the contrary, *Heimskringla* has a lot less verse than the other two. There is rather more intervening prose and the story can easily understand by reading prose only. This difference shows us Snorri's passion and work ethic since, instead of just copying existing records, he created something much more meaningful. We can also see some errors in *Fóstbræðra saga*. The dialogue between Tormod and the nurse shifts from Tormod's wound to events of battle without any continuity.⁹¹ Fortunately, *Óláfs saga* and *Heimskringla* do not include the same mistake. Although in the last chapters of these sagas there are a lot of verses when compared to other chapters, none of those verses actually help to the development of their respective chapters. If the authors decided to do some changes, prose could be regard perfectly capable of explaining the battle and afterwards. Moreover, even the verses looks like they are actually part of prose, it seems that saga authors changed their context so that they would act as historical sources and proof of their writings. We also should not forget that not

⁹⁰ O'Donoghue. *Skaldic Verse*. p.11.

⁹¹ Martin S. Regal, trans., *The Complete sagas of Icelanders* (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 329–402.

every piece of prose is dependent on a verse. Some poems were either composed or shaped during the creation of the relevant sagas. The historical value of these verses and their contexts are questionable as well. For instance, in *Fóstbræðra* and *Óláfs saga* the skald dies right after he composed his last words. Also, the dialogue between Tormod and the nurse brings some questions about credibility.⁹² It is highly unlikely that any injured warrior could remember or record their dialogue since their main focus was to survive. Another problem is that if the poet was about to die, how did he manage to write their dialogue or composed the events around him? When we compare these three different versions of the same saga, it seems that the proses and verses were most probably composed sometime after the battle of Stiklestad, by the authors of sagas. The meeting between King Magnus and Sigvatr which was about popular discontent towards Magnus is quite similar to our previous example. Once again, there are three different versions of this event, presented in *Ágrip*, *Heimskringla* and *Fóstbræðra saga* and although all of their authors used same verse, there are a few dissimilarities. In *Heimskringla* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, this event starts with an organized assembly by the men to discuss about King Magnus and select a leader to speak for their problems, and Sigvatr becomes the leader. Eventually, Magnus sees the necessity of the change after constant advice from Sigvatr, which is more plausible when we compare sagas with *Ágrip*.⁹³ However in *Ágrip*, this chapter is slightly different and develops through; Sigvatr's meeting with the King to explain why people are unhappy with him, their ideas deposing him and how King Magnus agrees to change his attitude after this meeting. We also see some geographic inaccuracies about the location of the discontented element in society. While *Fóstbræðra* does not mention any place, *Heimskringla* claims that it was the people of Sogn from southern Norway who were unhappy, whereas *Ágrip* gives Niðarós (northern Norway) as the place. These two examples show that how tricky sagas truly are. The verse

⁹² O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 74.

⁹³ O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, 41.

could easily be manipulated into prose to make sense or became tool of justification for authors' study.

Conclusion

If this chapter has taught us one thing it is that we cannot completely trust the Icelandic sagas. It is possible that the verse was composed as a momentary writing near to battle area after it happened by a skald or a warrior which embedded into a prose, or alternatively that it was written years later by a saga author in order to introduce some historical elements and authenticate his work. We have also seen it is possible either verse or prose might composed to fit its counterpart, even could be based on oral history. We can only guess when they were brought together or under what circumstances these writings are created. Historians need to try to follow the saga writers' footsteps in order to see historical values of sagas. Questions about the historical value of the sagas (mainly kings' sagas since they are the most "historical" writings) for the time that they narrate are hard to explain. Although it has been argued that studying the Icelandic sagas is the most reliable and easiest way to understand Viking culture, most of the time they are not historically accurate because of the relationship between the verse and prose. If the verses that had been used by the author were composed either by an eyewitness or at least at the time of the event described, we may hope the best and work with them. Furthermore, many sagas were evidently based on historically inaccurate poems. Even in *Heimskringla* there are some problems which force us to question its historical value. Although these problems should not be disregarded or ignored, these materials are one the last remaining sources from Viking age and we have to take them into consideration for our research. Whether or not they are historically accurate, to some extent, can be proven by foreign sources which makes problematic areas, like the Vikings, more interesting to study.

CHAPTER IV: KING HARALD' SAGA

Now that we know about the Icelandic sagas and the issues that we can encounter when we study them, it is time to move on one of our main topics: the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's Saga, composed by Snorri Sturluson. I have already discussed about content of the saga so I will not bother you once again with that. However, in this chapter I will look into two important subjects related with the saga's content: the Battle of Stamford Bridge and the role of Tostig Godwinson (Earl of Northumbria from 1055 to 1065). From Snorri's perspective, Earl Tostig is the main reason why King Harald organized his army and sailed to England where he met his end during the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Since I am trying to compare descriptions of the events in the Icelandic sagas with what other historical sources suggest, chapters related with these names will be examined carefully. The reason why I will discuss the comparison about Harald is first because even though Cnut the Great was born thirty or forty years before Harald, the *Heimskringla* was composed earlier than *Knýtlinga saga* and because Snorri inspired saga-writers, most probably including Óláfr Þórðarson, we will start with his work.⁹⁴ In this chapter, other than Tostig's influence on Harald and description of the Battle of Stamford Bridge, I discuss about Snorri Sturluson and briefly examine King Harald's Saga before I move on to explain chapters related with them in the saga and other opinions about Harald's attempt to invade England.

⁹⁴ Unfortunately unlike Harald, we do not have any historical source to show us Cnut's birth year. *Knútsdrápa* and *Flatexjarbók* mention about his childhood yet they do not show any exact dates.

Snorri Sturluson

If Snorri Sturluson had lived in an earlier century, without any doubt there would be a saga written about him, instead of being a saga-writer himself. He lived at a critical time in the history of Iceland. It was the time when the unique Icelandic parliamentary system which established in 930 was disintegrating due to the power struggle between royal families and increasing influence of Norwegian crown on Iceland. Snorri was one of the leading political figures in this disintegration process until 1262 when the Norwegian and Danish kings established their power over Iceland. In terms of drama and excitement, his life was not very different than the kings he described in his works. He fought and did all he could to become a powerful chieftain in Iceland and somehow, he still managed to find enough time to compose one of the most important historical pieces of Scandinavian history: *Heimskringla*. At the end of his life wealth, knowledge and several documents were only some parts of his legacy.

Snorri was born in 1179 at Hvamm in the western side of Iceland and was descended from some of the most important figures in Iceland's history. Snorri the Priest, Gudmund the Powerful, Markus Skeggjason and Egil Skalla-Grimson are some of these names. It is not known whether or not his family forced him to follow his ancestors' footsteps but he ended up achieving more than they accomplished. In 1181, when he was two years old, Snorri was sent to Oddi to be fostered.⁹⁵ At that time, Oddi was the center of culture and learning and more importantly, it was the home of Jón Loftsson (1124-1197). He was one of the most popular chieftains and politicians, and thanks to him Snorri encountered the history writing because Jón's grandfather was Sæmundur Sigfússon (1056-1133) the first Icelandic historian who had been educated in France and had composed the now lost Latin history of the kings of Norway. Unlike Snorri, Jón had not grown up in Iceland. He had been fostered in Norway and

⁹⁵ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans. *King Harald's Saga* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 16.

experienced many state occasions in there. Snorri Sturluson grew with constant learning and scholarship with several references to the house of Norway from Jón. Luckily during his time at Oddi, he had access to the Icelandic sagas and other historical literature materials. He was also gaining a lot of experience regarding the royal courts of Scandinavia which he benefited throughout his life. When Jón Loftsson died in 1197, Snorri decided to pursue political power and position. He married with the daughter of a rich family and inherited the estate of Borg, and a chieftainship through this marriage. A few years later, he moved without his wife to Reykholt which was another of learning center.

During the early thirteenth century, Snorri became a leading political figure on the national life in Iceland. He gained a lot of power and wealth, and he easily acquired vast estates by taking over the old chieftains. However, political life was not easy and he was forced to make several alliances with other chiefs. In 1215 he reaped the harvest of his efforts by becoming the Law-Speaker of the Althing (the national parliament of Iceland) for three years. In this period, Snorri was also becoming known as a poet. He imitated the style used by all the Icelanders who had been professional court poets at the Scandinavian royal courts. Other than writings poems, he was also collecting them and, when he started to write sagas, this extraordinary collection became Snorri's primary source of historical information and helped him a lot. When his duty ended in the Althing, Snorri went to Scandinavia for the first time in 1218. He stayed at the court of King Hákon Hákonsson (1204-1263), a shrewd and wily king who eventually succeeded in annexing Iceland to the Norwegian throne in 1262, and died in the following year during his campaign against Scotland.⁹⁶ Snorri also visited Sweden where he was given an honoured reception by the widow at the court of the Earl Hákon the Mad.

⁹⁶ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Harald's Saga*, 17-18.

Snorri's first visit to Scandinavia can be described as nothing but victory for him. He was greeted with respect at the Norwegian court and was also appointed a gentleman in waiting. Not only King Håkon but even his regents and mentor, Duke Skuli, liked him a lot, and helped him during his stay. On his return to Iceland, he thanked them by composing a poem in their honour (the *Háttatal*) which is also the final section of the prose *Edda*. This was Snorri's first major work and is a textbook for Scandinavian historians since it contains much information about early Norse mythology and legendary sagas.

Snorri did not return to Norway for the next fifteen years. During this period, he was engaged in all types of different events for power, and he even sometimes faced against members of his own family. The Icelandic republic was not in a good state and was now in decline. Snorri's family was the dominant political figure in this period, which is why it is called as the Sturlung Age.⁹⁷ Unfortunately these were dark times for Iceland, an age of lawlessness, cruelty and civil war among chieftains with their supporters left their trace on this period more than the Sturlung family. While Iceland was dying politically, King Håkon in Norway watched and waited for the right time. He pushed one chieftain against another and created his opportunity to step in for decisive victory when Iceland had become tired and defenseless because of civil strife. Like other leading figures on the island, Snorri was drawn into this political chaos.

However, during this challenging period for Iceland, Snorri managed to find enough time to study and compose many sagas. Sadly, we cannot be sure what he wrote exactly since many of the original manuscripts are now lost. Even his family members worked on several important sagas and books in this period, for instance: Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284) wrote *Islendinga Saga*, Snorri's other nephew Sturla Sighvatsson spent a long time at Reykholt and organized what Snorri had composed. This family cooperation ended when Sturla Sighvatsson

⁹⁷ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (California: University of California Press, 1990). The Sturlung Era continued for forty years in mid thirteenth century. Although the Sturlunga Saga commences in 1117, it deals with this period as well.

decided to follow a different path and joined King Håkon for political power and wealth, even at Snorri's expense. In order to save his life, Snorri left Iceland and went to Norway but this time he was not welcomed by Håkon. He asked help from Håkon's former mentor; Duke Skuli and he took refuge with him.

While Snorri was in Norway, the chaos in Iceland continued. Even Sturla Sighvatsson's death did not lower the tone. Gissur Þorvaldsson became the dominant power among chieftains which did not change anything for Snorri since Gissur was Håkon's agent. Although it was forbidden for all Icelanders to leave Norway, in 1239 Snorri decided to return his home with the jarl title bestowed him by Earl Skuli. At that time, Snorri did not have any efficient political power or influence on anyone in Iceland. He was also powerless against Gissur Þorvaldsson and could not provide any remotely salient opposition. However, Gissur was determined to defeat every member of Sturlung family in order to suppress possible opposition towards him before it could. When King Håkon learned the fact that Snorri had managed to escape to Iceland he demanded his return to Norway on pain of death.⁹⁸ In September 1241, Gissur and his forces arrived at Reykolt to arrest Snorri. Although Snorri tried to run away, he was found and killed by Gissur's followers at sixty two years old.

It is arguable that if Snorri had not been involved in politics, he would never have composed his sagas. If Snorri Sturluson had failed to seize power and become a chieftain, would he become the author of sagas? Throughout his political life, Snorri experienced several events and thanks to his position, he could easily access historical materials in Iceland and Norway. As one of the first Icelandic history writers, Ari Þorgilsson's works inspired Snorri and probably led him to follow his path. In the introduction to the *Heimskringla*, Snorri praises Ari's attitude and writing style. It is known that Ari did not accept any historical material that he could not prove its authenticity. Without his time at Oddi, Snorri could not

⁹⁸ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Harald's Saga*, 20.

have encountered sagas and therefore, even if at some point in his life he decided to be a saga author, his style would have been remarkably different and neither the *Heimskringla* nor *Edda* would be as historically accurate and valuable as they are today. We must be grateful that Snorri decided to follow Ari's path especially for this research. For King Harald's Saga, Snorri used three written sources: *Ágrip*, *Morkinskinna* and *Fagurskinna*. Although all of them represent and discuss almost at the same time period, instead of just copying what they suggest, Snorri scrutinized these materials and created historically most accurate written document about Harald Hardrada.

King Harald's Saga

I have already discussed about the King Harald's Saga and the story it represents with both historical and methodological problems in it. What we will focus from now is the third section of the saga which starts with Earl Tostig Godwinson and his quest.

According to the Icelandic literature tradition, Earl Tostig believed that he had a legitimate right to the English throne after the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066. He tried to find some supporters but failed to achieve this in England and moved to Scandinavia. He first met with the King of Denmark, Svein Ulfsson. Unfortunately for him, Svein rejected his offer which made Harald Hardrada the only possible ally for Tostig. According to Snorri, Harald did not have any plans related with England. However, after some events (his meeting with Tostig, a dream and an omen) Harald agreed to join the former Earl to attack England.

When Harald and Tostig's forces arrived in England, they anchored near York. After some preparations, the invaders started to attack nearby towns and gained some control over the area. Until King Harold Godwinson and his forces organized themselves and marched to

North, Harald's army continued thus. Two armies met at the Stamford Bridge, a village in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

Snorri suggests that Norwegian army had the upper hand and with the right strategy they could defeat Harold's forces. However, instead of waiting for their reserve forces, Harald sent messengers to them and moved to the battle area before they had arrived. After some back and forth actions, English forces managed to break the Viking shield-wall and rode down on them. Harald decided to lead a charge into the battle and killed many enemies. However he was surrounded by Harold's forces and was struck in the throat by an arrow which was his death wound. Shortly after, Eystein Orri (Harald's daughter's fiancée and leader of the reserve forces) arrived at the battlefield but most of them were too tired and unable to fight. Most of them were killed and this ended the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

We need to keep in mind that this summary is based on Snorri's work and although this is almost historical, there are some inaccuracies that we need to focus on. Chapters related with Harald's life in Norway are as historical as we can know. They match with other historical materials and Snorri supported his prose with verses that were written by famous skalds. However, both Harald's time before he returned to Scandinavia and the time he spent in England show some historical inaccuracies. Since this research is about England, we will start with Earl Tostig and his life.

Earl Tostig

Up until Earl Tostig is introduced to the story, there is no information about the political situation in England or Harald's possible campaign in England. When Snorri starts to discuss about Tostig, we have our first encounter with England in the King Harald's Saga. Snorri Sturluson discusses Harold Godwinson's coronation and his visit to Normandy, but the

connection between England and Scandinavia start with Earl Tostig. Unfortunately, it is also this part of the story which commences historical inaccuracies about England. To understand what these mistakes are, I will try to illustrate how Snorri portrayed Tostig Godwinson. It all starts with the coronation of Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England.

According to the Snorri, Tostig was one of the most powerful men in England during the time of Earl Godwin of Wessex (1020 to 1053). He had been assigned as the commander of the English army as well as he became the first commander when the king, Edward the Confessor, was ill. Tostig was more respected than any other earl and even his brother, Harold, was under his authority.⁹⁹ Under these circumstances, Earl Tostig was the first candidate for the throne but King Edward appointed Harold as the next king. After a brief meeting between the eyewitnesses, Harold was made king and crowned in no time.

When Tostig learned this he was nothing but displeased. He believed that because he was the commander and most respected among the other earls, he should be the next king. Although he and Harold exchanged messages, Harold did not surrender his kingship and ignored Tostig. He had a lot of support and he was in charge of royal treasury which strengthened his position against Tostig. When Harold realized that his brother wanted to dethrone him, he deprived Earl Tostig of the army command and took his titles with the authority he had over the other earls in the kingdom.

However, Snorri suggests that Earl Tostig was a very shrewd man and had a lot of influential friends among the leaders of other countries. He could not endure this situation and decided to take action against his brother. He went to Flanders, Frisia and lastly to Denmark to see his cousin, King Svein Ulfsson. In Denmark, he asked help for his cause but King Svein rejected his proposal and offered him an earldom which would make him a chieftain.

⁹⁹ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 133.

Tostig was not very enthusiastic about this offer and tried to convince Svein but in the end he left Denmark not on very friendly terms.

Tostig's next stop was Norway where he met King Harald.¹⁰⁰ After Tostig explained his plan and reasons Harald was not very eager to join his cause. For him, the Norwegians would not be too keen to join Tostig and fight in England. One of the main reasons is that they would not be happy with an English commander since they believed that the English are not entirely to be trusted. In the end, Tostig managed to convince Harald since Harald already had some plans about England although they were not very primary. Harald sent word throughout Norway and raised an army to help Tostig. In order to meet Harald and his forces, Tostig sailed west to Flanders and was welcomed there with the men who accompanied him from England, and also the troops who had gathered for him since he was in Scandinavia.

After this meeting and his departure from Harald's court, we do not see Tostig as an independent character. He becomes part of chapters related with Harald and invasion of England where he serves as a supporting character. In the chapter where he is alone and Snorri discusses his actions around Stamford Bridge is the only remaining part where Tostig acts alone but even in there he is under Harald's banner.

Unfortunately there are several shortcomings about Tostig's timeline in England. Snorri's materials were either missing or he used Icelandic sources which were not written by eyewitnesses from England. His description of Earl Tostig includes a number of errors from the beginning and, although they do not change outcome of the saga, it is necessary to focus on these errors since this research is about them.

The Godwin family was one of the most powerful families in the eleventh century of England. Godwin was a powerful earl from the reign of Cnut the Great until the end of Harthacnut's reign (1040-1042). When Edward the Confessor became the king, Godwin

¹⁰⁰ Snorri only wrote approximately one page about Tostig's stay in Denmark. The chapter about his initial meeting with Harald and their discussion are more detailed.

started to lose his influence over the throne and to regain power he disobeyed Edward, and refused to do what he asked.¹⁰¹ In 1051, he and his son, Tostig, were banished from England because of their attitude toward the king. After spending some time in Flanders to raise an army against Edward, they managed to return in 1052. Their return can only be described as a military operation against the English crown.¹⁰² This situation did not please many earls or even peasants but, as the defeated side, Edward honoured Godwin and only three years later Tostig became Earl of Northumbria after the death of Earl Siward. Sadly because of his past, he faced a lot of challenges and governed the earldom with some difficulty. He was never popular among the ruling class of Northumbria. They were a mix of Viking invaders and Anglo-Saxon survivors of the last Norse invasion. After his forceful return he was not popular among Anglo-Saxons and people of the Viking origin were always distant to him. In order to gain control over his lands, Tostig pushed up resistant families around and even killed them. For instance either late in 1063, after the Welsh campaign, or early in 1064, Tostig had Gamal, son of Orm, and Ulf, son of Dolfin, assassinated in his own chamber at York while they visited him under safe conduct.¹⁰³ Furthermore, Tostig was constantly absent at the King Edward's court and was quite inadequate against Scottish raiding. Earl Tostig was friendly with their leaders and harsh levies made it almost impossible to organize an armed force in York to fight back. He tried to work with mercenaries from Denmark for protection but they were expensive and it was a resented policy. Eventually Tostig would choose a more diplomatic but equally successful way towards peace with Scotland.¹⁰⁴ His popularity increased with the increasing number of Danes. In 1063, many of the inhabitants were not Anglo-Saxon and tax amounts were lesser than most parts of England. Sadly his popularity

¹⁰¹ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 178.

¹⁰² DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 105.

¹⁰³ Ian Walker, *Harold, The Last Anglo-Saxon King* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), 179. Tostig's cruelty can be also seen in the *Vita Edwardi* (Life of King Edward). The author claimed that Tostig had repressed the Northumbrians with the heavy yoke of his rule.

¹⁰⁴ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 174.

was once again challenged during the wars in Wales. With his brother, Harold, Tostig defeated forces in Wales but he had to pay a lot of coins to his soldiers which meant heavy taxes and more work to do.

In October 1065, Earl Tostig faced the end of his political life in England with the Northumbrian Revolt. The thegns of York, with the rest of Yorkshire, rose against him and occupied the city quickly. After killing his supporters and officials, they declared him an outlaw for his actions and started to march south in order to meet King Edward. Tostig's brother, Earl Harold, was sent by the king to meet them. On behalf of the king, Harold tried to negotiate with the rebels, yet his only choices were either to accept their demands or to use the king's army to attack them. Harold returned to Oxford and persuaded King Edward to agree with their demands. While Tostig refused to give up his positions, Edward too declared him an outlaw. Although Harold was not a part of this rebellion, his pro-rebel actions led Tostig to believe otherwise; in fact Harold was in fear of the threat from William of Normandy.¹⁰⁵

Without any choice, Tostig left England with some loyal thegns and sailed to Flanders where he greeted by Count Baldwin after he failed to make an agreement with William of Normandy. Baldwin gave him a fleet and Tostig started to raid eastern coasts of England. After he faced some defeats Tostig sailed to Norway and met with King Harald. When both parties agreed on the invasion, Tostig sailed to England and landed near Scarborough, where he waited to meet his forces from Flanders and Harald with his army.

As we can see there are few differences between King Harald's Saga and what probably happened on Tostig's life. Although the outcome of the saga and other sources are same, in Snorri's work Tostig is quite different than what other materials claim.

¹⁰⁵ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 192.

First of all, in the saga Tostig is pictured as someone who had great power and authority over other earls because he was King Edward's favourite. Although Tostig might actually have been the favourite of King Edward, there is no evidence from any historical materials to show us that Tostig had greater authority over other earls in England, especially his elder brother Harold. As it is known after his return to England, Tostig had been appointed as the Earl of Northumbria in 1055. His main duty was organizing the kingdom's northern defense against the Scots and possibly Vikings. During his time as an earl, he helped Harold in the prolonged and hard won campaign against King Gruffudd which established Harold Godwinson as the greatest military leader in England.¹⁰⁶ However even this victory did not transform Tostig into someone people's favourite and in 1065, Tostig was expelled by the Northumbrian Revolt and outlawed by the king himself from England. Another mistake that Snorri inherited is the explanations of Tostig's travel to respectively Flanders and Scandinavia.

The Saga of Harald Hardrada claims that the main reason Tostig left England is because of the disagreement between two brothers. When Harold noticed that his brother tried to dethrone him, he lost his faith in him and took all his titles as well as ordered him to step down as army commander.¹⁰⁷ Tostig was not happy about this smothering from his brother. In order to regain his power and authority he went to Flanders and later to Denmark, and Norway. However thanks to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle we know that this was not the answer why Tostig left England.¹⁰⁸ In actual fact, Tostig left England because he had been exiled by King Edward from England which happened months before Harold became the king. After the Northumbrian Revolt, he was expelled from his earldom by rebels in 1065 and went to Flanders as a refuge where he raised an invasion force against his brother. Unfortunately,

¹⁰⁶ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Harald's saga*, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Harald's saga*, 135.

¹⁰⁸ The Worcester Chronicle, which may have been composed by Archbishop Wulfstan, has some sections about the situation between Harold and Tostig Godwinson. Dorothy Whitelock, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961).

other than the Icelandic saga which suggests Tostig actually went to Denmark. It seems once again Snorri continued the Icelandic tradition. It might have been in order to increase dramatic value of Harald's help.

We must also be careful about the meeting between Harald and Tostig. Other than the Icelandic sagas, there are no historical materials which can prove Tostig actually went to Norway and met with Harald. In fact, William of Malmesbury (1095-1143), one of the most important English historians of the twelfth century, claims that Tostig and Harald met in England, at the Humber.¹⁰⁹ It is almost impossible to figure out whether or not Tostig and Harald met in Norway. It is also not possible to use the rest of the important kings' sagas (*Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Flateyjarbok*) to compare with Snorri's work since he was using them as his source. Furthermore we also need to be careful the about outcome of Tostig's journey. After his visit to Flanders, Tostig went to Norway and according to the saga, convinced Harald to invade England with him.

Harald did not need any convincing to invade England. He already had plans to do that since he believed that he was the legal heir to the English throne because of the treaty between King Magnus and King Harda-Knut.¹¹⁰ Even Welsh (*Annales Cambriae*) and Irish (*Annals of Tigernach*) sources claim that in 1058, Magnus Hardrada, Harald's son tried to conquer England with a fleet he organized by the helps from Norway, Orkney and Ireland. The inconstancies between the saga and other sources from Tostig's involvement to story end with this. As we can see, the Hardrada Saga and other historical sources offer quite different pictures in terms of Tostig. His position in England, travels to Scandinavia and dialogue with King Harald were composed quite wrong. Sadly this situation continues with Harald and his involvement to England as well.

¹⁰⁹ R.M. Thomson, R.A.B. Mynors and Michael Winterbottom, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum, The History of the English Kings: Volume I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 420-421.

¹¹⁰ Lee M Hollander, trans., *Saga of Magnus the Good* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), Chapter 7.

The Battle of Stamford Bridge

As like previous section where I discussed about Tostig, I will start with how Snorri described events related with Harald. While Snorri's story telling is amazing, we encounter some historical inaccuracies after Harald reached to England. Furthermore, there is a methodological issue as well in this section of the *Hardrada Saga* which I will discuss briefly. What Snorri composed for us and then once again what most probably happened in England is the main theme of this part as well.

As we now know, from the saga's perspective Harald was not completely sure about this military campaign. However, because he had promised Tostig, he assembled his army in the Southern Isles. When he was ready to leave, he visited St Olaf's shrine in Trondheim and opened it for the blessing of St. Olaf. After this visit, he sailed to south in order to meet with his forces which were over two hundreds war ships. While they were at the Southern Isles, Gyrdir a man who was on board at Harald's ship had a dream.¹¹¹ A huge ogress was standing and chanting:

Norway's warrior sea-king
Has been enticed westwards
To fill England's graveyards;
It's all to my advantage.
Birds of carrion follow
To feast on valiant seaman;
They know where will be plenty,
And I'll be there to help them.¹¹²

This dream increased Harald's faith on this conquest. However he truly believed what he was doing was right when another omen occurred. Thord was on board a vessel which was close to king's ship and claimed that he also saw a dream similar to Gyrdir's. According to Snorri, after these two dreams, Harald had no doubts, but after he himself dreamed of talking to St.

¹¹¹ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 139 - Bjarni Adalbjarnarson, edit., *Heimskringla* (Reykjavík: HID Íslenzka Fornritafelag, 2002, vol. III), 176.

¹¹² Tim Severin, *Viking: King's Man* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2006), 281.

Olaf about invasion of England, Harald met with a warning about this campaign. Olaf suggested he should stay in Norway. Otherwise he would be killed and “*God is not to blame*”.¹¹³

According to Snorri, Harald and his fleet sailed to the British Isles when the wind was favourable. Some of his forces went directly to Orkney and awaited their leader because Harald needed to go Shetland so that he could gather a greater force and met with Earl Paul and Earl Erlend. After Harald and his forces arrived to Orkney, they started to sail to England and landed at Cleveland. Without any resistance from the locals, Harald started to plunder and subjugate the whole area. His next target was Scarborough. The town showed some resistance and only after the Norwegians burnt down their houses and destroyed the town completely did the remaining locals surrender. Until Holderness (an area of the East Riding of Yorkshire), the Norwegian army did not encounter any English troops. There, they had to engage a battle with English forces only to defeat and continue their campaign to south.

After that, King Harald went to the Humber and anchored his fleet to the river bank. At the same time Earl Morcar with his brother, Earl Waltheof, was at York with a huge army. When Harald’s army began to leave their ships, the English earls brought their armies to attack Harald hoping that because they were not ready, the Norwegians would flee. However when King Harald saw the upcoming enemy forces, he urged his men forward and started the Battle of Fulford. Unfortunately for the English earls, their forces were slaughtered by the invaders. The English forces broke into flight and tried run away to save their lives. Earl Waltheof escaped to York while Earl Morcar lost his life during the battle.

Meanwhile Earl Tostig had travelled north from Flanders while King Harald arrived in England and took part in all battles from the beginning. As Tostig promised earlier, a large number of Englishmen joined their forces which increased power of Harald’s army. After the

¹¹³ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald’s Saga*, 141.

Battle of Fulford, although some people managed to flee, most of the people submitted to King Harald. Harald's next target was the town of York. He assembled his army at Stamford Bridge and they did not encounter any problem because of their latest victories. The people of York were too frightened to act against Harald so they offered unconditional surrender. Harald marched to York and all townspeople gave their allegiance to him as well as gave sons of leading men to him. So far, events had turned out positive for Harald but shortly after the Norwegians left York, the English army arrived at the city and all the townspeople greeted them.¹¹⁴

Snorri suggests that without knowing the fact that their enemy had come to York, Harald and Tostig organized their forces to march on York. As they approached to the town they saw a large force riding to meet them. Harald summoned Tostig to learn about this force which turned out to be King Harold and his army. Even though Tostig recommended to Harald that they return to their ships and meet with the rest of their forces, Harald decided to send three messengers to their ships and stayed, instead of taking advice from his ally.

King Harald and Earl Tostig drew up their forces hoping to stop a cavalry attack from the English army. Their archers were behind the defensive line in order to shoot as many horsemen as they could. Harold Godwinson did not want to fight against this army. He believed that any amount of soldiers he would lose here, would give William of Normandy more advantage that he already had. To avoid any conflict, Harold sent his representatives and offered Tostig the whole of Northumbria as well as one third of his entire kingdom. However Tostig rejected this offer because of the hostility and humiliation Harold had offered him previously.¹¹⁵ He also stated that he would not abandon King Harald since he came west to fight in England with him.

¹¹⁴ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 146.

¹¹⁵ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 150.

The saga claims that, the Battle of Stamford Bridge commenced as the Norwegians expected. The English cavalries charged towards them but because Harald's army placement, this did not cause much trouble for the Norwegians. When Harald saw that the English army had no other strategy, he ordered to attack on the retreating cavalry. Sadly, this was a trap and as soon as they had broken their defensive line, Harold's forces rode down on them and killed many of them. Harald led a charge into the battle hoping that this surprise attack would help his army. However this did not help them and shortly after Harald was struck in the throat by an arrow and died. Although Harold offered peace to Tostig and remaining soldiers, they rejected his offer and continued to fight.

Meanwhile Eystein Orri arrived on the battle scene with the reserve forces but they had run from the ships so they were almost too tired to fight. They tried to help the remaining of the Norwegian army but they either collapsed from exhaustion or were easily killed by the English forces. Nearly all the members of Harald's army were killed there. The battle ended late in the afternoon and the carnage after it had grown dark.

Snorri Sturluson's account of the Battle of the Stamford Bridge ends here. Although there are some problems, it is remarkable how he managed to compose something as detailed as this saga account. Unfortunately there are still some inaccuracies and, once again we need to check other sources to see what happened in this battle from the beginning because there are some crucial mistakes that we cannot neglect.

Descriptions of events by using other sources

We need to keep in mind that it is possible to see some historical inaccuracies in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as well. For instance, after the political changes in England after the Danish Conquest of 1016, the entries about Cnut the Great started to change to show him more

positively. Before the conquest, Cnut had been described as a barbaric figure, but when he became king and managed to assert himself in England, the attitude towards him starts to change in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. However, because Harald Hardrada's campaign failed, the entries about him do not show any change of tone. It is possible that scribes were not very objective in their views of foreign invaders. Since the beginning of the Viking raids in England (the final decade of the eighth century), Vikings were nothing but trouble for England, especially for monasteries. Christian monasteries had precious materials which attracted many Viking raiders. The first impressions of these raiders were not very friendly and the continuous attacks of Vikings did not change this.

By the beginning of September 1066, the Norwegian army was ready for the invasion. The plans were ready and Tostig Godwinson gave a great reason to Harald for this long desired invasion.¹¹⁶ He landed in Shetland first and moved to Orkney in order to increase strength of his army. In these places, earls of Orkney and many important chieftains joined him.

Tostig and Harald met at Tynemouth, and they landed at the River Tees. After plundering the coast, they encountered the first resistance at Scarborough. The invaders easily defeated the opposition and continued their raiding. After some time, they sailed down the Humber and landed at Riccall (North Yorks.). Earls Edwin of Mercia and Morcar of Northumbria were close to Harald's army, and they tried to stop him at Fulford. However the battle ended as a decisive victory for Harald which led York to surrender without any further fight which happened to be the last Scandinavian victory throughout this campaign. Because Harald and Tostig did not leave any force in York, when Harold came to York he easily spotted the Norwegians and decided a surprise attack on them. To do so, he moved his army to Stamford Bridge.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 230.

¹¹⁷ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 267.

Neither Harald nor Tostig noticed this development and when they decided to move on York they encountered with Harold's army. Unfortunately for them, they have left some of their forces at Riccall and brought only light armoured soldiers as they did not expect to meet any resistance. Although Harold's army was heavily armed and outnumbered Harald's forces, the Norwegians decided to stay and fight which turned out to be a huge mistake. The Norwegians were at a huge disadvantage and, once their army was divided in two, the English forces managed to beat and push them back. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Harald's army managed to flee thanks to a Norwegian who stood up against the English army and prevented them from crossing the bridge, and clinching their victory. Even after he got shot an arrow, he continued to fight. Only when an English soldier went under the bridge and stabbed him Harold's army pursued their chase and slaughtered both Norwegians and Flemings.¹¹⁸ The shield-wall formation did not save Harald because he tried to rally his forces and march into the enemy army but was struck by an arrow in the throat.

At the end of the battle, Eystein Orri and the reserve forces from Riccall arrived at Stamford Bridge but they were too exhausted to fight. Although they did some damage, in the end they were also annihilated by Harold's army as well. Harold did not execute any prisoners of war. Even Harald's son, Olaf, was allowed to return his home peacefully by the king.¹¹⁹

There are some differences between the Icelandic saga and other historical sources. As like the first comparison where I focused on Tostig's life, the outcome of the described events is the same. However, Snorri Sturluson seems to add a few things into his work, most probably because of the lack of sources in Scandinavia and Iceland. Before we start to make our comparison, I would to mention the omens and Harald's dream.

Comparison

¹¹⁸ G.N. Garmonsway, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1990).

¹¹⁹ DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion*, 296.

As like *Heimskringla*, both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* are important historical materials. Without them, it is possible that Snorri might not have enough materials to compose *Heimskringla*. However, there are some differences between these three works for parts related with Harald. For instance, the omens and dreams before Harald's campaign on England are one of the salient differences between them. Snorri really focused on these events and wrote significant amount of verses about them without showing any proof. None of the other sagas describe those events or fragments about these omens. Harald's dream where he speaks with St. Olaf is unique to Snorri's work as well. There are not any historical materials which can prove these things actually happened, both in Scandinavia and Iceland. As I have discussed earlier, saga-authors tended to add a few things in order to create continuity within their works. These almost unprovable events can be Snorri's addition to Harald's life. They are great additions for studies about the Icelandic poetry but we cannot take them into consideration since even other Icelandic sagas do not mention them.

The first inconsistencies between the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Snorri's work show up just before the Battle of Fulford. First of all, the saga is not certain about where Harald anchored his fleet. Snorri states that Harald and his fleet went to the Humber, sailed up and anchored close to the river bank. Here they met with Earl Morcar and his brother Earl Waltheof. When Harald and his army landed, they were at a wide swamp. However, the English sources are more certain and according to these sources, Harald and his forces landed at Riccall, on the left bank of the Ouse and on southern side of York. Furthermore, they did not meet Earl Morcar and Earl Waltheof because they were not brothers. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that Earl Edwin of Mercia was the brother of Earl Morcar and they were the leaders of the English army at York, not Earl Waltheof.¹²⁰ Earl Waltheof was the son of Siward, Earl of Northumbria (reigned from 1041 to 1055). When his father died, Waltheof

¹²⁰ William M. Aird, 'Morcar, earl of Northumbria (fl. 1065–1087)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19160>, accessed 20 July 2015]

was too young to succeed and his earldom was taken over by Earl Tostig. Once he was old enough, King Edward the Confessor appointed him as an earl in the Midlands.¹²¹ Moreover, the Battle of Fulford did not happen in a wide swamp as Snorri claimed. Thanks to English sources we know that when Harald landed at Riccall, he immediately moved to York and the army of York came out of the city in order to stop his march. They met at the Gate of Fulford which was very close to York.

The following possible historical error that we see is in the part where Snorri describes the Battle of Fulford which is about Earl Morcar's fate. The saga claims that Morcar lost his life during this battle but the saga is mistaken here because Earl Morcar survived the battle as well as his brother, Earl Edwin. Both of them made peace with King Harald and Earl Tostig. However, most of their forces were annihilated during the battle and when William of Normandy attacked England, they could not support Harold's army. When William became the king, both brothers swore their allegiance to him but with the Rebellion of 1069 in the north, they declared their independence to fight against him only to lose their lives in the end.¹²²

Another problem that we see in Snorri's work is about Tostig and when he joined Harald. The Saga of Harald Hardrada claims that Tostig was at Flanders and had travelled north when Harald came to England. However, according to the English sources, Earl Tostig was already in England. He came to England early in May and caused many troubles to locals of Sandwich (county of Kent, south-east England). When his brother, King Harold, learned this, he believed Tostig might be helping William of Normandy and saw this as the forerunner of an invasion.¹²³ He organized one of the largest military forces of current English history and marched to Sandwich. Without any choice, Tostig abandoned the town and fled north but when he tried to land at the Humber, Earl Morcar and Earl Edwin defeated him. This time

¹²¹ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 142.

¹²² Mike Ibeji, "The Conquest and its Aftermath" *BBC History*, February 17, 2011.

¹²³ Magnusson and Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga*, 145.

instead of wasting his forces, Tostig went to Scotland and waited for King Harald to join his forces and reacquire his earldom.

One of the other mistakes that we encounter is when we look at Snorri's description of Harold's army in the Battle of Stamford Bridge. The saga claims that Harold had a huge army and it also suggests that the English army had cavalry forces as well. However, there is no information in the English sources that Harold's army had any cavalry in Stamford Bridge. Also, his army was not very huge because he marched with the housecarls. They were highly disciplined soldiers who defended their king during the battle. It is known that Harold had approximately 3000 housecarls and on his way to York, he reinforced his army with local militia.¹²⁴ Therefore, it is not very possible that Harold had a vast army when he arrived at Stamford Bridge.

The meeting between Harald and people of York, and Harold's plan about the Norwegian army described both wrong and it has some missing. The saga claims that town people and Harald agreed that early in the morning he would be back to York in order to appoint new officials to rule the town for him. However the meeting did not plan to be held in York, Stamford Bridge was the place where they decided. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, York surrendered on the same day as the Battle of Fulford. However, instead of occupying the city, King Harald took hostages and supplies for his army before heading back to Riccall. The townfolk and Harald arranged a treaty in which people of York would join the invaders and march south with them. Next morning, Harald and some of his forces marched to Stamford Bridge to meet people of York but instead he encountered Harold's army.¹²⁵ Moreover, the saga fails to mention about Harold's unawareness of the Norwegian invasion before Harald landed at Riccall. From saga's perspective it seems that Harold knew there would be an invasion from Norsemen and he was ready to fight against them. However

¹²⁴ Terence Wise, *Saxon, Viking and Norman* (Oxford: Osprey, 1979), 9.

¹²⁵ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 197.

Harold did not have any plans to counter a Norwegian invasion because up until they landed at Riccall, he had no idea of this invasion. He had plans about a possible Norman invasion so when he learned the Norwegian invaders, he forced march to York and gathered as much reinforcement as he could on his way to north. So when they arrived at the city, it was not the night when locals surrendered to Harald, it was almost noon of the following day. Harold and his army managed to reach Stamford Bridge just before Harald appointed new officials to York.

As we can see, although the saga version of the battle is very vivid, there are some conflicts with the more historically authentic source: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Apparently King Harald Hardrada did not encounter Harold's army at York, he was surprised by the English army at his camp. The Norwegians tried to react and defend the wooden bridge but even with the legendary giant Norwegian that the Abingdon Chronicle mentions, the English army managed to overwhelm and destroy Harald's army. Both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and different versions of Harald's Saga agree that Harald and Tostig were killed and only there was bloodbath on both sides. It is possible that one of the main reason why Snorri inherited these mistakes is because the Battle of Hastings.

The Saga of Harald Hardrada does not end with the death of Harald. Snorri's work tells us what happened to King Harold as well with the following battle. The Battle of Hastings happened less than a month after the Battle of Stamford Bridge when William of Normandy launched his campaign for the English crown.¹²⁶ When Harold learned that William and his army had landed, he marched to south. However, his army did not have any time to recover which contributed his defeat. He was impatient to deal with William and left London with only half the size of army he could have.¹²⁷ Surprisingly, Snorri's account of this battle is much more accurate than his description of Stamford Bridge. Other than his

¹²⁶ The Battle of Hastings was fought on 14 October 1066, 19 days after the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

¹²⁷ Magnusson and Pálsson, *Harald's Saga*, 157.

suggestion that Earl Waltheof was Harold's brother and fought at Hastings, there are no other historical debates in this part. Unfortunately, there are two instances for Harald's storyline where Snorri probably mixed up his sources and composed wrongly. When Snorri described the meeting between the Norwegian and the English army, he suggested that Harald and Earl Tostig prepared themselves against cavalries. However, other than *Heimskringla*, there is not a source to back up this theory. Harold mostly had the housecarls with him and they were infantry while cavalry forces were part of William's army, at the Battle of Hastings.¹²⁸ A similar error can be seen on the Battle of Stamford Bridge chapter. The saga claims that once the Norwegian believed that they could destroy the English forces, they broke their shield-wall and attack but Harold's army rode down on them to kill. However, the English forces broke their defensive line to pursue after the Norman cavalry and respectively, surrounded and annihilated by their enemy.

Conclusion

The Saga of Harald Hardrada is one of the most well written Icelandic sagas. It contains a lot of historical events and supports them with either skaldic verses or prose about people that Snorri Sturluson mentions in his work. However, as like many other kings' sagas, there are some historical problems in it. Most of these inaccuracies are about Harald's time outside of Scandinavia, when he carried Byzantium flag or tried to invade England. Other than Harald, proses related with Earl Tostig and other English earls are not very historically accurate as well. Therefore, if a researcher used an Icelandic saga as his only primary sources, outcome of the researcher would not be very historical because of all the possible inaccuracies. Fortunately, these errors do not change outcome of the events and we can easily notice them

¹²⁸ Matthew Bennett, *Campaigns of the Norman Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 26.

by using non-Scandinavian sources, mainly the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or other English sources composed by bishops.

CHAPTER V: KNYTLINGA SAGA

As in the previous chapter, I will try to make a comparison between the saga (in this case, *Knýtlinga saga*) and what other historical sources suggest as the main structure of this chapter. Unfortunately, due to the nature of this saga and the limitations that historians have to deal with in terms of Cnut's reign, the comparison and this chapter will be quite different.

As it has been discussed above, *Knýtlinga saga* is quite similar to *Heimskringla* in that it deals with the history of the kings of Denmark. However as I have discussed briefly in the first chapter, it is difficult to regard this saga as a product of kings' saga genre for two reasons. Firstly, it appears like an abbreviated version of the *Heimskringla* and even with that, it is not as detailed as Snorri Sturluson's work. Secondly, although it is about the kings who ruled Denmark, it also deals with the descendants of Cnut the Great which makes it possible to consider it a family saga.

Before I discuss the author of the saga, his description of the Danish invasion of England in 1016 and any possible historical inaccuracies, it is necessary to explain why this chapter will be shorter than the previous one, by looking at the main problem with studies about Cnut and his reign: the lack of sources.

Cnut the Great is one of the most influential historical figures that we know. Unlike some other Viking names (Ragnar, Sigi or Aslaug), he was an actual historical figure and influenced the course of history. However, studies of his reign are relatively few because of the limited number of written materials from both Scandinavia and England. The *Encomium Emmæ*, the *Knýtlinga saga* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are what historians can use as primary sources for their researches. Although they do seem enough at first, Cnut is not their main focus which makes an original study about him quite hard. It is best to look at these

sources in order to understand how they can contribute to this research and, even with these materials why, analyzing the Saga of Harald Hardrada is more straightforward than the *Knyttlinga saga*.

The *Encomium Emmæ* was written in mid-eleventh century by a monk of St Omer in Latin at the request of Queen Emma of Normandy.¹²⁹ The *Encomium* is divided into three parts. It begins with Sweyn Forkbeard and the Danish conquest of England. The second part discusses Cnut the Great, his campaign in England, his marriage to Queen Emma and it ends with the period of rule. The last part deals with the events after Cnut's reign, mainly Emma's problem during the reign of Harold Harefoot as well as how her sons from Cnut and Æthelred the Unready, respectively Harthacnut and Edward the Confessor, became the kings of England. Although it seems as a primary source for history of England and Scandinavian influence during the early eleventh century, the text has some inaccuracies. For examples, the *Encomium* was not composed but it was requested by Queen Emma. It is possible that Emma ordered this document in order to strength her sons' claims of the English throne. The reign of Cnut is described in glowing but not always accurate colors, and the insistence that Cnut intended Harthacnut to succeed to his entire kingdom is also suspicious because of the succession crisis after his death.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the implication that Cnut as a great Christian king who deserved to rule and should be succeeded by someone from his dynasty shows that the *Encomium* was not composed for history's sake, but was rather political propaganda of Emma for her children to succeed. It would be unfair to put the *Encomium* in the same category as the Icelandic sagas in terms of historical accuracy, but before using as a source, it would be wise to consider problems of this text.

Knyttlinga saga is one of the best sources that historians can use for studies on Cnut's reign. Although it does not focus much on him, the saga discusses his campaign and his

¹²⁹ Lawson, *Cnut*, 57.

¹³⁰ Lawson, *Cnut*, 58.

dynasty, which makes it more detailed than any other surviving document. I have already discussed the *Knyttlinga saga* but there is still a lot to say about it. Even though there is almost no information about the relationship between Denmark and Norway (which was quite hostile and important due to occasional political disturbances) the saga provides important historical knowledge about the expansion of the Danish empire into Scandinavia and England. The author of the saga composed fifty nine skaldic verse and most of them are not presented in other sagas which makes *Knyttlinga saga* as a great repository for Old Norse. The saga leans on lost works, many of which were used as sources of other works. Many scholars suggest that due to the similarities, *Knyttlinga saga* is essentially an imitation of *Heimskringla* with Saint Cnut seen as the St. Olaf of this saga.¹³¹ Unlike the *Encomium*, the saga is not a work of political propaganda but what it offers is quite limited in terms of Cnut's life. Although it is easy to use it on a study about the Danish conquest of England, the *Knyttlinga saga* is very limited for other cases which limits studies about Cnut.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is one of the most accurate and important primary source for this research. Especially for most of the pre-conquest era (for 1016), the Chronicle is very useful. Unfortunately, with the beginning of Cnut's reign, this situation changed. After the Danish conquest, the entries for Cnut and his reign are both uninformative and increasingly spare.¹³² Luckily, the main reason of this change is quite understandable. When Cnut was just the head of the Viking army, he was seen and pictured in a negative way because of the trouble he caused. However once he became the king, authors were not in a position to criticize him. Lastly, historians should recall that, although most of the entries were composed early, not all of them had been dated correctly which may cause historical inaccuracies in terms the chronology of Cnut's actions as the king of England.

¹³¹ Phillip Pulsiano and Kristin Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 360.

¹³² Lawson, *Cnut*, 53.

Lastly, the *Gesta Danorum* written by Saxo Grammaticus is worth mentioning. It is believed that Saxo was a canon of Lund Cathedral who lived at the end of twelfth century in Denmark. His work, the *Gesta Danorum*, is the earliest surviving Latin study on the kings of Denmark and it can be translated as the history of Danes. It discusses the period from prehistory to the late twelfth century history of Denmark and divided into sixteen books. For this research, books 10 and 11 are important because there are some information about Cnut and his activities in England, and Denmark. However, the important point is that it is highly possible that *Knyttlinga saga* and the *Gesta Danorum* had a common source.¹³³ We can make this assumption because the narrative in these texts is parallel to each other even though Saxo's work is more detailed.

Although these are the most important primary sources for studies about Cnut, it is necessary to mention briefly other sources. Another group of surviving documents consists of the letters which were written on behalf of Cnut in 1019 and 1027 possibly respectively by Wulfstan II, Archbishop of York and Lyfing of Winchester, Bishop of Worcester. The letter of 1019 is about church rights, Cnut's visit to Denmark and the suppression of danger in England. The other letter is a valuable source on Cnut's dealing with the Pope and his wars in Scandinavia, and it is quite well informed in comparison of Wulfstan's work.¹³⁴ Like these letters, the surviving charters and writs from his reign are important for historians as well. During the Middle Ages, it was not unheard that kings sometimes allowed churchmen to write charters for them and Cnut was no different. These materials have a lot of use. They show when and who received something from the king, important land transactions and they even describe the circumstances as well as events regarding with the transaction. Unfortunately, there are only a limited number of charters and writs surviving from Cnut's reign. Most

¹³³ Karsten Friis-Jensen and Peter Fisher, trans., *Saxo Grammaticus (Volume I): Gesta Danorum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

¹³⁴ Lawson, *Cnut*, 66.

probably, his reign is the least well-represented in between Æthelstan's and Edward the Confessor's reigns which makes studies about Cnut harder than they already are.¹³⁵

The number of surviving documents limits our knowledge of Cnut's reign heavily. Unfortunately, it is highly possible that many things about his life and reign will never be known. Even the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the most adequate historical sources for the period has some insufficiency. However, the surviving documents do offer some knowledge about Cnut and even though they are far less detailed than sources related with Harald Hardrada, it is an interesting experience to study Cnut for this research.

Óláfr Þórðarson

The uncertainties about Cnut continue with the authorship of the *Knyttlinga saga*. What is known about Óláfr is close to nothing and it would be unfair if we try to make a comparison between him and Snorri. Most scholars believe that the author of the *Knyttlinga saga* was Óláfr Þórðarson, the nephew of Snorri Sturluson but this suggestion has been contested by many scholars.¹³⁶ However, these counter arguments do not offer another name for the authorship of this saga. The main reason why Óláfr is recognized as the author of the saga is the similarity between *Heimskringla* and the *Knyttlinga saga*, as well as his appearance in the saga.

Like Snorri, Óláfr was a law speaker, poet and writer. He was born around 1210-12 and was present at many of the most dramatic moments of his age.¹³⁷ He appears in some of the important contemporary sources about his lifetime including *Sturlunga saga* (deals with the Sturlunga Era) and *Hákonar saga* (discusses the life and reign of King Haakon

¹³⁵ Peter H. Sawyer's work (*Anglo-Saxon charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, London: Beekman Books, 1968) shows of these charters. In this study, entries about Cnut starts at year 1017 and his charters represents only small amount of entries (p, 285). Out of 1163 royal charters there are only 43 charters are from his reign. These charters starts with the transaction between Cnut and Fécamp Abbey (Cnut gives *Rammesleah* with its port, Sussex). The last entry about his reign is a writ from 1033-1035 (p, 296).

¹³⁶ Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great*, 211.

¹³⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.

Haakonarson of Norway). With his uncle Snorri, he travelled to perform as a poet at the courts of Scandinavian kingdoms in 1237. In the early 1240s he returned to Iceland and continued his life as a writer, and taught priests in the western part of the island. Around 1250, he was appointed as a law speaker and died in 1259. During his lifetime, it is believed that he composed *Knýtlinga saga* and possibly *Laxdæla saga* (one of the Icelanders' sagas). Furthermore, it has been suggested that, Óláfr wrote his works after he returned from Scandinavia and settled in Stafholt.¹³⁸ Lastly, although it is uncharacteristic to see author of the saga as a character in the saga (at least for Snorri Sturluson's work), Óláfr appears in *Knýtlinga saga*. The saga suggests that Óláfr stayed with king Valdemar the Victorious of Denmark for a while and acquired much learning from him as well as many remarkable stories from him to tell.¹³⁹

Unfortunately this is the only information that historians can be certain of. Whether or not he composed *Laxdæla saga*, Óláfr was an important figure of Iceland and a member of the Sturlunga family. He allegedly composed one of the most important historical documents about medieval history of Denmark and the most detailed version of the Danish invasion of England in 1016.

Knýtlinga Saga and the Danish Conquest

I have already discussed the situation of the *Knýtlinga saga* earlier in this chapter as well as in previous chapters. However, in order to make a comparison between the saga and other historical sources, it would be best to first focus on the saga's parts related with the Danish conquest of England and how Óláfr described these events in his work.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature*, 97.

¹³⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Knýtlinga Saga*, 175.

¹⁴⁰ Although there are some uncertainties on the authorship of the saga, because the general assumption is Óláfr composed it, I will continue this tradition and represent him as the author.

Before Óláfr describes Cnut's military campaign in England, he briefly describes Sweyn Forkbeard, his invasion of England and both the political, and military situation in England after his death. Óláfr suggests that King Sweyn was a great man and a strong ruler. After he plundered southwards in Saxony and eastern Baltic, he led his forces into England. The Danish army plundered several rich areas and fought many battles. Although King Æthelred tried to stop Sweyn and his army, the Danish forces managed to conquer the larger part of England and forced Æthelred to flee.¹⁴¹ However, the saga suggests that according to the English one night King Sweyn suddenly died thanks to King Edmund the Holy which allowed Æthelred to return.¹⁴² Although the Danish chieftains tried to control their newly acquired territories, a new war occurred and they were defeated by the English army. After this brief explanation of Sweyn's campaign, Óláfr describes Cnut.

Cnut was only a ten years old child when King Sweyn died. Because his brother, Harald was already dead, he was made the new king of Denmark. The chieftains in England asked help from Cnut in order to strength their position and protect the Danish extension in England. Unfortunately, Cnut was in no position to sail to west since he was just a child. It had been suggested to him to appoint some generals and let them to act on his behalf. For three years, Cnut remained in Denmark and waited to sail to west.

According to Óláfr, when he felt ready, Cnut gathered an army in Denmark and contacted his brother-in-law, Earl Eirik in Norway so that he could organize an army to join him on his expedition to England. Eirik was a well-known and respected leader in Norway since he had participated two of the most famous battles that had been fought in Scandinavia.¹⁴³ With the help of Eirik, Cnut sailed west with a huge army.¹⁴⁴ Many chieftains went to England with Cnut and the Danish army anchored at the Humber. As soon as they

¹⁴¹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Knýtlinga Saga*, 26.

¹⁴² Edmund the Holy was king of East Anglia, reigned between 855 to 870.

¹⁴³ The first one is the battle where King Sweyn Forkbeard fought at Svold against Olf Tryggvason. The other one is combined forces of Earl Hakon and Earl Eirik against the Jomsvikings.

¹⁴⁴ Ottar the Black's poem (In Praise of Cnut) discusses Cnut and strength of his army.

reached England, Cnut ordered his army to march inland where they looted and burned down every settlement they encountered. The locals raised an army in order to stop them and Cnut fought them at Lindsey. Although there were heavy casualties, the Danish army emerged victorious and conquered Hemmingborough (in North Yorkshire) and Northumbria. After their battles in Northumbria, Cnut led his army to south and defeated any resistance that he met.

After these initial battles, Óláfr briefly discusses Cnut's marriage with Queen Emma. When King Æthelred died, his wife, Emma decided to go France in order to meet his brothers who were earls in there. However, her ship was captured by Cnut's men and they brought her to Cnut. The king and his chieftains agreed that he should marry Queen Emma, and that was done.

After Æthelred's death, his son, Edmund the Strong was chosen to succeed him. He gathered a huge army and marched from Wessex against the Danish forces. The two armies met at Sherston and staged one of the most famous battles of the time. King Edmund charged alone into the Danish army and attacked Cnut. Although he managed to get close to him, Cnut blocked his spear and saved himself. Without the element of surprise, Edmund decided to escape since there were a lot of Danes to deal with. Once he managed to retreat his own ranks, he noticed that most of his army was nowhere to be seen. Unfortunately, Edmund's charge had taken him out of his army's sight and most of his men believed that he was killed by the Danes. With fear, the English army broke their ranks and ran away but they were caught by Cnut's forces and slaughtered. Edmund tried to reorganize his army yet his whole army was caught in between the Danish forces which created a terrible slaughter.

According to Óláfr, Earl Ulf was with King Cnut and pursued the fleeing soldiers further than anyone else.¹⁴⁵ However his passion to find the enemy soldiers led him into a

¹⁴⁵ Ulf was a Danish earl who participated in Cnut's conquest of England as one of his most trusted men and his brother-in-law. – Bjarni Gudnason, *Danakonunga Sogur* (Reykjavik: HID Íslenzka Fornritafelag, 1982), 109.

forest and he lost his way. Ulf tried to find his way out throughout the night but he failed. When the sun came up, he saw a young shepherd named Godwin. Although Godwin was very reluctant at first, he agreed to help him to find the Danish army. Godwin suggested to meet with his father since he knew the forest better than him but they had to be careful because the farmers were not very fond of the invaders. Godwin's father agreed to help Ulf and asked him to keep Godwin with him because if local people discovered him, they would kill him. Godwin managed to find the Danish ships where everyone greeted Ulf with joy. Earl Ulf kept his promise and showed his gratitude by marrying his sister, Gyda to Godwin. Gyda gave birth to the future King Harold of England, and earls Tostig, Morkar and Walthoef.

After this brief episode on Ulf, Óláfr continues to discuss Cnut's campaign. When Ulf was reunited with the Danish army, Cnut marched to Brentford (west London) and won another battle against the sons of Æthelred, and destroyed the stronghold. Cnut's third battle was a major one and again, he faced Æthelred's sons and won the battle at Ashington (a town in Northumbria). Cnut's final battle happened at Norwich. King Edmund and his brothers tried to defend the city but were defeated.

In order to defeat Edmund's last remaining forces, Cnut marched to the Thames, hoping that he would eventually capture King Edmund and his brothers. Around the Thames, he met with Earl Eirik and marched to London. The English forces were ready to face with their enemies and to stop the Danish army; they had built a large fort. Cnut sailed directly to the fort and attacked it but the English forces engaged with them. After they defeated the English army at the Thames, Cnut led his forces to London where they slaughtered the town and almost destroyed it. However, although Cnut won many battles there, the city did not surrender (and he failed to capture London).

According to Óláfr, Earl Eirik and his forces left Cnut's army in order to gain more control around the area. At first, Eirik met with Ulfkel the Skilled at West London and

defeated him without any heavy casualties. Eirik fought another battle at Ringmere (in East Anglia). Once again, Eirik emerged as the commander of the victorious side. After this victory, he returned to London and joined Cnut.

King Cnut continued his siege of London for a while. Eventually, King Edmund and his brothers made an agreement with Cnut, and exchanged hostages as well as agreed on truce. The peace treaty suggested that Cnut and Edmund divide England, and would be joint rulers. If either one of them were die, the other one would inherit rest of England and rule the country. However, Cnut wanted more than that and he bribed a powerful man named Edric Strjona. Although he was Edmund's foster-father and one of his most trusted advisors, Edric assassinated him.¹⁴⁶ After this betrayal, Cnut attacked Edmund's brothers and drove them out of England. Although many resistances and battles occurred because of this, Cnut managed to defeat them all because, without an official king, it was quite hard to organize a strong army to face with the Danish forces. The sons of Æthelred moved to France and spent rest of their days in Normandy. Unfortunately, Earl Eirik died in England due to his battle wounds. Cnut and his new wife, Queen Emma, had three children: Harald, Harthacnut and their only daughter, Gunnhild.

Regarding England and the Danish conquest, the *Knyttlinga saga* does not offer any other information. Although the saga discusses the Danish conquest and Cnut's timeline in England reasonably, it has some shortcomings and questionable parts. For instance, any discussion of Cnut and his reign in Scandinavia are almost nowhere to be found. The main reason for this is probably the lack of vernacular sources and accessibility of those resources for Óláfr. Fortunately, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other historical sources do offer a lot more detailed explanations of the events during the conquest.

¹⁴⁶ Pálsson and Edwards, *Knyttlinga saga*, 39.

Descriptions of events by using other sources

Although many things about Sweyn's life are uncertain, thanks to the Chronicle of John of Wallingford it is known that his interest in England revealed itself with the raids in 1002. However, it is open to discussion whether or not the Chronicle is reliable though it does offer more information than the saga. Until his final victory against King Æthelred in 1013, Sweyn sailed to England several times. Although his raids were successful, for several reasons (either he did not have any opportunity or an army powerful enough to conquer England or unexpected problems) he could not achieve total victory for some time. For instance, during his campaign in Wessex (1003-1004), the Danish army had to abandon its efforts and return to Denmark because of the famine which described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as 'such that no man could recall one so fierce'.¹⁴⁷ However, Sweyn did not give up his goal and eventually returned to England in the summer of 1013. After some skirmishes, he managed besieged to London. Unlike *Knýtlinga saga*, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle represents these events, in The Peterborough version of the Chronicle there is a vivid entry about these events in a very detailed way:

And in the same year, before the month of August came king Sweyn with his fleet to Sandwich. He went very quickly about East Anglia into the Humber's mouth, and so upward along the Trent till he came to Gainsborough. Earl Uchtred and all Northumbria quickly bowed to him, as did all the people of the Kingdom of Lindsey, then the people of the Five Boroughs. He was given hostages from each shire. When he understood that all the people had submitted to him, he bade that his force should be provisioned and horsed; he went south with the main part of the invasion force, while some of the invasion force, as well as the hostages, were with his son Cnut. After he came over Watling Street, they went to Oxford, and the town-dwellers soon bowed to him, and gave hostages. From there they went to Winchester, and the people did the same, then eastward to London.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Howard, *Swein Forkbeard*, 68.

¹⁴⁸ James Ingram and John Allen Giles, trans., "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" in *The Online Medieval and Classical Library*, accessed 16 May, 2015, <http://omacl.org/Anglo/part3.html>

In London he faced great resistance led by King Æthelred himself and a former Viking leader who joined him, Thorkell the Tall.¹⁴⁹ However, Sweyn managed to defeat their forces and became the king of England. Sweyn wanted to organize his new kingdom but shortly after becoming the king, he died. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggests that because Sweyn's rule was not firmly established, the Danish army were driven from England without any crucial encounter between two sides.¹⁵⁰

After Sweyn's death, Cnut was crowned as the king of England by the Danes.¹⁵¹ However, this coronation was not recognized by the English and first Æthelred, than Edmund became the king of England. Also, the same thing happened in Norway. The Norwegians were not very enthusiastic about another foreign king and they did not recognize Cnut as their king.¹⁵² In the summer of 1015, in order to win his throne back, Cnut organized a huge army and sailed to England, and for the next fourteenth months he fought against the English forces.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggests that early in September 1015, Cnut came to Sandwich and directly sailed to Wessex. The *Encomium Emmae Reginae* claims that the arriving army was as huge as the one left Denmark and it seemed terrifying powerful and Wessex had no chance to stand against Cnut's forces.¹⁵³ Like two years earlier, Wessex surrendered to the Danish army. During early 1016, Cnut marched into Mercia and destroyed Warwickshire without any problem. Prince Edmund's forces were badly outnumbered and his early efforts to stop this invasion had no real impact on the course of campaign. Cnut's constant assaults had devastating effects on Mercia and King Æthelred could not manage to raise an army. However, with his death and the coronation of Edmund as the new king, the

¹⁴⁹ Thorkell was a Jomsviking and son of a chieftain, Strut-Harald. Thorkell fought against Sweyn and Cnut for a while but after Cnut retreated from England, the English turned against him. He returned to Denmark and joined Cnut for his campaign.

¹⁵⁰ Howard, *Swein Forkbeard*, 119.

¹⁵¹ Peter Sawyer, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2001), 171.

¹⁵² Friis-Jensen and Fisher, *Saxo Grammaticus*, 729.

¹⁵³ Alistair Campbell, trans., *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.

English army managed to withstand Cnut. In the summer of 1016, Edmund and Cnut met for the first time as two kings at Sherston. The Battle of Sherston was fierce and although there were heavy casualties, the English forces were victorious.¹⁵⁴ Edmund also won the Battle of Brentford. Unfortunately for Edmund, his success did not last long. He managed to drive the enemy away and stop them before the Danish army could reach to London.¹⁵⁵ The final battle for the English crown fought at Ashingdon on 18 October 1016. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that all their best soldiers died and the Danish army defeated the English. Before offering a peace treaty, Edmund tried to stand out one more time but it is possible that he may already have been suffering due to constant fighting therefore nothing significant happened.

After the Battle of Ashingdon, peace was made. While Cnut added Mercia and Northumbria into his kingdom, Edmund became the king of Wessex. Both parties agreed that when one of them died, the other one would inherit his lands and rule England alone. Shortly after this peace agreement, on November, Edmund died. Unfortunately, there is not an accepted account of his death. It has been suggested that Edmund was either assassinated or the battle wounds grew too much and he got infected. Although Cnut had to do some persuading the English in order to ignore the claims of other royal families, he became the king without any resistance.¹⁵⁶

As we can see, even though Óláfr's study is quite well, there are some inconsistencies between *Knytlinga saga* and mainly the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Comparison

The differences between sources start in the part related with Sweyn Forkbeard and his campaign on England. Óláfr suggests that Sweyn's campaign was an instant success after

¹⁵⁴ John Cannon, "Sherston, battle of.," in *The Oxford Companion to British History*, edited by J. A. Cannon (Ox: OUP, 2009).

¹⁵⁵ Lawson, *Cnut*, 28.

¹⁵⁶ Lawson, *Cnut*, 28.

some battles against Æthelred. However, the Chronicle of John of Wallingford shows that he spent a lot of time in England. According to the Chronicle, Sweyn's involvement in England started at 1002 and continued until 1013 where he finally managed to defeat the English army.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, it is known that other than the raids in between 1002-1013, Sweyn tried to invade England three times and only then, he actually become the king of England for a brief time.¹⁵⁸ During his previous attempts the Danish were either outmatched or had to leave England due to the geographic and climate problems or internal political issues in Scandinavia. Unfortunately, the saga does not mention any of his previous attempts and causes some crucial historical inconsistencies for the timeline.

King Sweyn's death and following events are problematic as well. According to Óláfr, King Edmund the Holy killed Sweyn as Saint Mercury killed Julian the Apostate. It is almost impossible to prove this theory of Óláfr's study because during the Danish conquest of England, Edmund the Holy was already dead. Edmund was the ruler of East Anglia and he lost his life in 869. Here the saga may refer to Edward the Martyr who was the half-brother of King Æthelred. However, this claim is also quite unrealistic because Æthelred was only ten years old when Edward the Martyr assassinated.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, it is impossible that either Edmund or Edward could kill Sweyn Forkbeard. It is uncertain that whether he died because of the battle wounds or actually assassinated by someone but the saga's claim of a holy spirit murdered him is not very realistic.

Another problem about the saga's historical timeline is that of Sweyn's successors and the Danish control over England after his death. Even though Harald II of Denmark and Saint Olaf of Norway succeeded him, the saga claims that Cnut became the king. However, there

¹⁵⁷ The Chronicle of John of Wallingford is a chronicle of English history. It starts with Brutus of Troy (a legendary figure who known as the founder and first king of Britain) and ends with Cnut the Great. Although its origin is more literature than history, it shares many sources with *Flores Historiarum* (Latin chronicles by medieval English historians that were composed during the 13th century).

¹⁵⁸ Howard, *Swein Forkbeard*, 99.

¹⁵⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 372.

are two important historical problems. First of all, Óláfr believed that Harald was already dead and Cnut was the only option as Sweyn's successor. Unfortunately for him, Harald was very much alive in 1014 and he became the ruler of Denmark, and ruled until his death, 1018. Although there is little known about his reign, it is certain that instead of Cnut, he became the king of Denmark. The second inaccuracy is on Cnut's age. According to the saga, Cnut was only ten years old when he became the king and therefore he was too young to do anything as a military leader. Although Cnut's birth year is uncertain, even if we accept the latest suggested date as his birth (995), Cnut was at least nineteen years old when his father died and he was perfectly capable of leading a military campaign on England.¹⁶⁰ It seems that the *Knyttlinga saga* disregards Cnut's initial failure in England. When Sweyn died, Cnut appointed as the king of England but he faced resistance and because the Danish authority over England was not quite firm, Cnut returned to Denmark with so few soldiers who accompanied him and his father. Unfortunately, both the *Encomium Emmæ* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are not very good at explaining this situation. In fact, it seems the *Encomium* tries to disguise this failure and ignores what happened in England.¹⁶¹

The description of the marriage between Cnut and Emma is quite problematic as well. As we recall, the saga claims that Cnut's men kidnapped Emma on her way to France and brought her to his presence. However the latest researches indicate that this was not the case.¹⁶² After King Æthelred's death, Queen Emma stayed in London and tried to defend the capital against the Danish invasion until she married with Cnut, 1017 sometime after the Battle of Ashingdon not before any of that encounter between the Danish and the English forces.¹⁶³ As it can be seen in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Cnut wanted to eliminate any

¹⁶⁰ Howard, *Swein Forkbeard*, 102.

¹⁶¹ Howard, *Swein Forkbeard*, 123.

¹⁶² Friis-Jensen and Fisher, *Saxo Grammaticus*, 735.

¹⁶³ Ian Howard, *Harthacnut: The Last Danish King of England* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 12.

opposition to his reign. In order to strengthen his position, he eliminated survivors of the Wessex dynasty and married the queen so that he would have blood tie to the English throne.

The importance and the outcome of the Battle of Sherston, and the lack of emphasis of the Battle of Ashingdon are the other historical inconsistencies between the saga and other documents. Although *Knyttlinga saga* claims that the Battle of Sherston was the turning point of Cnut's expedition and the Danes won it, both the outcome and the significance were different. Although the English forces suffered a lot of casualties, they managed to defeat Cnut's army and prevented their further advent.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, unlike Óláfr's claim, the turning point of this campaign was the Battle of Ashingdon. The main reason of this is because of the peace treaty signed between two sides. Edmund and his army were defeated badly, and Edmund had to accept the peace offer. According to the treaty, England divided and both claimants (Cnut and Edmund) appointed as kings and it also brought an end to the Danish reconquest of England.

The story about Earl Ulf is very questionable as well. It is possible that Ulf actually pursued the fleeing enemy and got lost in the forest. However, how he managed to find the Danish army seems a bit unusual since it involved Earl Godwin of Wessex, one of the most influential earls during Cnut's reign. For instance, the saga claims that Godwin's father was a regular farmer and Godwin was a shepherd. Although it may be possible that Godwin's father, Wulfnoth Cild became a farmer after his dismissal from Æthelred's fleet, it is highly unlikely.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, neither the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle nor any other historical document can support this story. It is known that Godwin helped Cnut on an expedition but it was to Denmark not England and also this happened in between 1019 and 1023, after Cnut's

¹⁶⁴ Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 148.

¹⁶⁵ Hugh Bibbs, *The Rise of Godwine Earl of Wessex* (British Columbia: Northwest & Pacific Publishing, 1999).

succession to the English throne. Godwin's marriage with Gytha, Ulf's sister also happened after this expedition, not during the English campaign.¹⁶⁶

The death of King Edmund is the last historical problem in terms of events in England. As it has been discussed above, the saga claims that King Edmund was assassinated by one of his most trusted men and his foster-father, Edric Strjona after he had taken a bribe from Cnut.¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately there are no historical documents to prove this argument. While some scholars suggest that Edmund was actually assassinated and the Danes were actually involved this process, it also has been argued that his battle wounds were not treated probably and he got infected.

Conclusion

As with the King Harald's Saga, *Knyttlinga saga* is one of the most well written examples of the Icelandic sagas. It describes most heated times of the Danish conquest and gives a lot of information of the campaign itself. Unfortunately, as like many other sagas it also has some historical inaccuracies when events related with England come up. However, even with these mistakes, because of the lack of historical documents related with Cnut, *Knyttlinga saga* is one of the most important primary sources that a historian can use. Of course one has to use other sources (especially the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the *Encomium Emmæ*) in order to compose something much more historically accurate than this saga yet even as its own, the saga is a great historical document which discusses the Danish involvement on England fairly.

¹⁶⁶ Pauline Stafford, "Edith, Edward's Wife and Queen" in Richard Mortimer ed., *Edward the Confessor: The Man and the Legend* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009), 121.

¹⁶⁷ Edric was the ealdorman of Mercia(1007-1017). Although the saga does not mention about him, Edric was a powerful figure in England. After he joined Cnut, he plundered throughout England until the peace between Cnut and Edmund, and he stayed as Earl. However, Cnut had killed Edric at London in 1017.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

What we know about the Viking Age is quite limited. One of the main reasons of this situation is that sources about the Vikings from the Early Middle Ages and the early High Middle Ages are products of literature more than history. Old Norse literature mainly consists of Icelandic writings. Unfortunately these writings were composed after the events they discuss. Poetry, *Edda* and different types of sagas are some of the most important documents from that period. Even in the case of important names or events, the Old Norse literature does not offer historians variety of sources. Furthermore these documents are somewhat historically problematic and contain a lot of historical inaccuracies. A huge amount of significant Scandinavian names, places and even events are in questionable position because of the nature of these documents. Of course every culture has its own legendary figures but in terms of the Vikings, this number is more than most of the European culture. Even today, for example, Ragnar Lodbrok remains a mystery: it is still unclear whether or not he actually lived and he is labelled as a legendary Norse ruler although his sons avenged him by invading England with the Great Heathen Army from 865 to 878 according to the Tale of Ragnar's Sons and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.¹⁶⁸ However, these do not mean that studies about the medieval history of Scandinavia are doomed and cannot be done. Particularly the Icelandic sagas are worth studying and examining. This was the beginning of our research.

The Icelandic sagas are one of the most important historical sources for the history of medieval Scandinavia and by their nature, most of them are hard to study. Especially the products of legendary sagas and sagas of saints are quite hard to use in a historical research because of their purpose. However, kings' sagas and family sagas are very different, and more historical than other sagas. They were composed with mostly historical aims and they offer a

¹⁶⁸ Holman Katherine, *Historical Dictionary of Vikings* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 220.

significant amount of historical knowledge. The *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's Saga and the *Knýtlinga saga* are examples of these sagas. While *Heimskringla* outlines the Norwegian kings between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, *Knýtlinga saga* does almost the same thing for the kings of Denmark but focuses more on Cnut the Great's descendants and discusses his dynasty.

Unfortunately it is not easy to use any of the Icelandic sagas or any written sources because of the methodological problems in them. Even though some parts of *Heimskringla* and *Knýtlinga saga* are much more historical than products of the other saga genres, there are some methodological problems for the kings' sagas and family sagas as well. The problems of the Icelandic sources lie on two things: the relationship between skaldic verse and prose, and lack of vernacular sources from Scandinavia. For most sagas, the skaldic verses are one of the most important elements in it because they were intended to serve as proofs for the following prose. It is clear to see this correlation in both the *Heimskringla* version of King Harald's saga and *Knýtlinga saga*. Snorri Sturluson and his nephew Óláfr Þórðarson did not hesitate to use skaldic verse in their works. The verses they used in their sagas were presumably composed by eye witnesses of the events that they described. However, there are some ambiguities about the situation of the poets and the development of poetry in Iceland. It is known that most skalds lived in Norway and travelled around Scandinavia if they were members of the royal courts. Poetic tradition was preserved and encouraged in Norway yet poems from Iceland are much more historically accurate. Furthermore, what is known about the transmission and preservation of the verse is close to none which raises questions about the historical reliability of both sagas and poems in them. There are many verses in *Heimskringla* and *Knýtlinga saga* but the sagas themselves were composed centuries after the events they discuss. Our knowledge about Óláfr's life is very limited and how he could have accessed sources about the Danish ruling family is a question on its own. Even Margaret

Clunies Ross, one of the leading figures of the Old Icelandic literature, questions and tries to explain this situation. In terms of Snorri, there is a lot to pay attention to. Although there are some differences, we cannot be certain whether or not he used different sources other than *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*. The main difference between these manuscripts is that the amount of the verse Snorri benefited. While Snorri used both *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* as his main sources, he added a lot of verses in his work. Especially, in the part where he discusses Harald Hardrada's life in Constantinople and England, which raises questions about the authenticity of these verses. Sadly, we cannot trust the Icelandic sagas. It is possible that the verse was composed as a momentary writing after a battle or a meeting between two kings yet there is almost no historical evidence to support poems in sagas. It is even possible that some verses were fabricated later by the author of the saga in order to introduce some historical elements and authenticity into his work.

After these discussions about sagas, we moved on to the main materials of this research and started with King Harald's saga. While it is one of the most historically accurate and reliable source in terms of King Harald's life, the saga suffers from some historical errors in terms of events that happened in England. In order to give a background, Snorri Sturluson starts with Earl Tostig right before Harald sails to England. The saga and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle offer us very different pictures about Tostig. Snorri suggests that Earl Tostig was one of the most powerful men in England at his time and it was believed that he would replace Edward the Confessor. However, Tostig's brother, Harold Godwinson was appointed as the king once Edward died and he banished Tostig from England. Tostig looked for help so that he could take back his titles. King Harald agreed to help him and once they organized their armies, the Norwegian invasion of England started. Although Harald and Tostig had the upper hand, Harald's overconfidence brought their ends at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Sadly, Snorri's account of this campaign is not very consistent and when we compare it with

the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, there are many inaccuracies. Tostig's position in 1066 was not as strong as the saga states and his chances of being the king were already slim. Once his earldom revolted against him, with Harold's approval, Edmund saw this as an opportunity to get rid of him and took his titles away. Tostig sailed to Scandinavia where he might be met with King Harald, although there are some chronicles suggest that this meeting never actually happened. Tostig and Harald tried to invade England yet they utterly failed. Even though the saga version of the battle is very vivid, there are some conflicts with the more historically authentic source. Unfortunately this is not quite surprising since most of the Icelandic sagas are in the same situation.

Knýtlinga saga is not very different than Snorri's work in terms of historical accuracy. Although the author of the saga is not certain, it is assumed that Óláfr Þórðarson composed this saga because he was Snorri's nephew and the similarities between *Heimskringla* and *Knýtlinga saga*. Although the saga is about kings of Medieval Denmark, for this research we focused on the earlier parts of it and looked at Sweyn Forkbeard and his son, Cnut the Great since they were the leading figures of the Danish conquest of England. The saga seems to represent a form of prejudgement in favour of the Danes. However, the reason of this situation is as the same as King Harald' saga: the lack of vernacular sources and the Icelandic literature tradition. In order to compose this saga, it is possible that Óláfr used materials he could find in Iceland and Scandinavia, or even the *Encomium Emmae*. Unfortunately if this is true, it is quite understandable why there are several historical inaccuracies in the saga. For instance, Óláfr completely ignores King Sweyn's previous attempts to defeat the English army and suggests that the Danish forces managed to defeat King Æthelred on their first try or Cnut did not spend any time in England once his father died because he was in Denmark while the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggests that the Danish army could not resist Æthelred's newly organized forces and retreated to Scandinavia.

The Icelandic sagas are truly remarkable and interesting to study. Even though most scholars have long argued that the sagas should be treated as sources for literature instead of history, I believe some of them are still valid historical materials. Surely there are some historical and methodological problems even in the kings' sagas but in terms of the broad narrative of events, sagas are accurate. However, the individual details (minor events, motivators, dialogues) are sometimes inaccurate. Especially, in terms of events that happened in Scandinavia and the relationship between the jarls they are a lot more useful than any other historical manuscript. The main reason of this situation can be categorised into two; the Icelandic literature tradition (where the author of the saga wanted to picture the main character, usually the Viking figure, as a great leader who lured into bad events) and the lack of sources (especially Latin). It is hard to use the sagas as the only primary source for this type of research mainly because most of the events which happened outside of Scandinavia (England, Normandy or even Byzantium) were penned by the skalds and when we compare them with other historical documents, it seems that they either exaggerated or wrote their poems once the army had returned to Scandinavia. Unfortunately, this pattern continued for a while and caused a lot of historical inaccuracies in the sagas.

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