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Prosperity and Peace: Glorification of Rulers in Medieval Scandinavia

Simon Lebouteiller

In 1130, Sigurd the Crusader died from illness after a long reign that was generally perceived by medieval authors as beneficial. Snorri Sturluson thus summarizes his rule: “Sigurd was king over Norway seven and twenty winters. He was forty years of age. And his time was good for the people of the country: there were then both prosperity and peace (*ár ok friðr*).”¹ In *Heimskringla*, Sigurd is the last king to be characterized in such a way. By underlining this, Snorri thus introduced a rupture between Sigurd’s reign and the troubled period that followed, marked by internal strife and what has traditionally been described as “civil war.”²

In the documents on the lives and careers of the Scandinavian rulers from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, the theme of their effect on “prosperity and peace” is often used to depict their rule as positive or negative and, consequently, has a strong ideological connotation for authors. In short, a ruler whose power and personality are perceived as favorable brings order and justice in the realm and even affects the cosmological balance through good weather and abundance. On the contrary, a harmful rule and disorder cause natural disasters, calamities and shortage. Most of the time, authors also provide a religious interpretation of these phenomena and present them as God’s reaction to the earthly situation or a manifestation of the ruler’s sanctity. In that sense, common representations imply that the elites have responsibilities towards economic prosperity and social peace through their effect on cosmological order, which comes into play in the process of legitimation of their leading status. This ability thus shows and justifies that they deserve to rule. In addition, this power gives them a specific aura that elevates their charismatic and particular position over the people. Conversely, a ruler who fails to bring prosperity and peace loses this charisma and his right to rule.

In modern historiography, the question of the effect of kings on “prosperity and peace” in pagan Scandinavia has been broadly investigated, especially when specialists have attempted to reconstruct the components of a hypothetical “sacral kingship” during the pre-Christian period and its possible persistence and evolution after the conversion.³ For instance, the fact that St Olav, as an intercessor, was said in the skaldic poem *Glælognskeviða* to obtain prosperity and peace from God for all people after his martyrdom, led scholars to consider that the model of the saintly king that became popular in Scandinavia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the result of an

¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 277. Translation by Finlay and Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 169

² Compare Theodoricus Monachus, who closes his work with Sigurd’s death because he prefers not to mention the difficult times that followed: Theodoricus Monachus, “Historia,” 67.

³ The notion of “sacral kingship” defines the supposed basis of kings’ legitimacy according to the ideology of pagan societies. The discussions on this subject have long been animated and intensive, mainly because of the problematic reliability of late sources or the arduousness of defining the concept of sacrality. These reflections were firstly based on rulers’ apparent abilities to establish prosperity and peace, notably through their participation in ceremonies, sacrifice, and the sacral dimension they may have had themselves. For a general introduction to this topic, see for example: McTurk, “Sacral Kingship”; Sundqvist, *Freyr’s Offspring*, 18-38; Erkens, ed. *Die Sakralität von Herrschaft*; Sundqvist, *An arena for higher powers*, 7-14.

adaptation of ancient beliefs and ideologies to the new religious context.⁴ However, the specific treatment of this motif in the Christian context has received less attention, probably because the Scandinavians seemed to have adopted a general European model of “prosperity and peace” provided by kings, which makes it less noteworthy. In this chapter, we thus propose to examine the use of this theme in the representation of the Scandinavian rulers between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries: what are the characteristics of this motif? What does it reveal about the ideological orientation of authors and the strategies to glorify and legitimize kings or, on the contrary, to weaken their position? Moreover, these representations are often inserted in a religious discourse formulated and supported by ecclesiastics, so that we must wonder how they used them as an instrument to form and reform kingship in ways that served the interests of the Church. After a general presentation of the motif in European and Scandinavian sources, we will focus on several examples and examine how it was integrated into political and ideological discourses.

The ideological background of the theme of “Prosperity and Peace” in Scandinavian literature

The association of cosmological phenomena with the quality of a rule is not a specifically Scandinavian practice and appears in many regions throughout the Middle Ages. *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, written around 650 by an Irish author traditionally named Pseudo-Cyprianus, was one of the most important documents for the expansion of this motif in Europe⁵. This treaty on social and political morality contains a list of abuses committed by twelve categories of people and, in contradiction, expresses the qualities expected from them. Among them, the sixth and the ninth abuse on the *dominus sine virtute* and the unjust king had important echoes in medieval literature and political thought. For instance, the chapter on the ninth abuse states that a just king should behold justice, protect Christianity, administer his kingdom properly and defend it against adversaries.⁶ If he fulfills these obligations, he will then bring order and affect positively the cosmological balance and the fertility of his realm:

Of [the righteousness of a good king] comes the tranquility of the peoples, the defense of the country, the protection of his subjects, the bulwark of the whole nation, the remedy of all sorrows and ailments, the rejoicing of men, the temperateness of the weather, the stillness of the sea, the fruitfulness of the earth, the comfort and solace of the poor, the sure inheritance of his children and to himself the hope of eternal felicity in the world to come.⁷

If he doesn't meet his duties, he will on the contrary provoke disorder, natural disasters and infertility.

⁴ Þórarinn loftunga, “Glælognskviða,” 875-6.

⁵ For a general presentation of the *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, see in particular: Breen, “*De XII abusivis*”; Grigg, “The Just King.”

⁶ Pseudo-Cyprianus, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, 51-53.

⁷ “Pax populorum est, tutamen patriae, unitas plebis, munimentum gentis, cura languorum, gaudium hominum, temperies aeris, serenitas maris, terrae fecunditas, solacium pauperum, hereditas filiorum et sibi met ipsi spes futurae beatitudinis”. *Ibid.*, 53. Translation: Breen, *Towards a Critical Edition of De XII Abusivis*, 409.

De duodecim abusivis saeculi had a considerable influence on the political writings of the following centuries. For example, its impact is particularly visible in the Carolingian world and in Anglo-Saxon England through correspondence, political treatises, sermons, royal rituals and, most notably, mirrors of princes, thereby contributing to defining a model of ideal rulership.⁸ In medieval Scandinavia, *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* seems to have been directly known at an early date. The first material proof takes us back to the first third of the thirteenth century and appears in the Icelandic manuscript AM677 4to which contains a collection of liturgical texts. Among them, an old Icelandic translation of the end of Pseudo-Cyprianus' work is preserved, which suggests that an entire version circulated at this moment and, possibly, as early as the twelfth century.⁹ As a consequence, Pseudo-Cyprianus' discourse on good and bad kings was already known when the first royal *compendia* were composed in Scandinavia and may have been a direct or indirect example for the description of kings' effect on "prosperity and peace."

Beyond royal biographies, this influence is also visible in the Norwegian mirror of princes, *Konungs skuggsjá*, from around 1250. The text itself borrows many themes and representation techniques that were usual in European mirrors and develops a definition of the *rex iustus* comparable to the one in *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*.¹⁰ Moreover, the text draws a parallel between disorder in nature and in society by comparing the internal struggles and the moral dissolution of a kingdom with the dearth affecting a farm.¹¹ Troubles in society are then presented as God's punishment for men's sins through the division of the kingdom among several petty kings, the weakening of law and obedience, and conflicts between groups.¹² In this case, the king is not explicitly responsible for the fertility of his realm, but we can suppose that older conceptions concerning this royal implication were a source for the comparison between natural and political troubles. In any event, this image of dearth was meaningful enough to be used as a warning against joint rule and a defense of the system of public justice.¹³

All these definitions of kings' responsibility for prosperity and peace fall within a Christian reading of natural and political phenomena and find their origins in biblical literature itself.¹⁴ For instance, the Old Testament implicitly associates the welfare of the land with the king's ability to carry out justice and even envisages a divine punishment meted out to the people for his misdeeds, such as when God enjoins David to choose between seven years of famine in his land, fleeing from his foes for three months or enduring a plague in the land for three days in order to expiate his own sins.¹⁵ Elsewhere, similar repercussions are more specifically inflicted on the Jewish people in response to their obedience or disobedience. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses presents the dangers the Israelites will face if they don't follow God's commandments: famine, pestilence, sickness, infertility, conquest and oppression. On the contrary, if they obey, they will be granted prosperity, fertility of land and animals, good weather and victory over enemies.¹⁶ In this case, the fate of the

⁸ Anton, "Pseudo-Cyprian"; Clayton, "*De Duodecim Abusivis*."

⁹ *The Arna-Magnaean manuscript 677, 4to*.

¹⁰ Bagge, *The Political Thought of The Kings's Mirror*, 177.

¹¹ On the image of nature in *Konungs skuggsjá*, see: Bagge, "Nature and Society."

¹² *Konungs skuggsjá*, 51-55.

¹³ Bagge, "Nature and Society," 21.

¹⁴ Breen, "Pseudo-Cyprian"; Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible."

¹⁵ II Samuel 24. 13.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 28.

people rests on their own conduct and not specifically on the king's justice and individual qualities, but this dimension was more clearly emphasized by later texts.¹⁷

As mentioned in the introduction, the belief that kings could influence the cosmological order has not been affiliated with Christian representations alone. Some elements may indeed indicate that this idea already existed in pagan Scandinavia, so that its manifestation in later sources could be interpreted as a continuation of ancient definitions of kings' power. In the case of *Glælognskviða*, it is noteworthy that St Olav was still directly implicated in the provision of prosperity and peace after his death. There are, however, also significant differences between the St Olav of the *Glælognskviða* and images of sacral kingship during the pre-Christian period, such as the post-mortem recognition of his sanctity, or the fact that he only appears as an intermediary between people and God and is not divine himself, while the sacralty of pagan kings and their ability to bring prosperity may have been inherent. The influence of kings on the cosmological order according to Pseudo-Cyprianus and later Christian authors also slightly differs from these models. Here, the death of the ruler is not specifically the condition for the establishment of prosperity and peace, and this phenomenon is in the first instance a reaction to the quality of a reign. But these configurations are not necessarily incompatible, and we will see some possible cases of combinations in the examples below. We are not going to focus further on the filiation between older and younger representations here, but we can formulate the hypothesis that representations from the pagan period concerning kings' abilities and their adaptation may have facilitated the introduction of Christian models in Scandinavia.

St Magnus Erlendsson

The combination of models is notably visible in the sagas recording the life and career of the jarl of Orkney Magnus Erlendsson (c.1105-1117), namely *Orkneyinga saga*, *Magnúss saga skemmri* and *Magnúss saga lengri*, the two latter being based on the first one. Magnus, who died a martyr, was recognized as a saint, and his cult quickly spread in the North Atlantic region.¹⁸ Intended to glorify Magnus and to justify his sanctity, these texts drew extensively on hagiographical material, most notably the now mainly lost **Vita sancti Magni* by “Meistari Roðbert.”¹⁹ Phelpstead thus describes the representation of Magnus as “an intriguing combination of viking, ideal ruler, married virgin, and (political) martyr.”²⁰ However, the genesis of this corpus is complex and makes it hard to identify the precise context in which the motifs that interest us were formulated. The *Orkneyinga saga* that we know today dates from around 1230 and is actually a revision of a lost saga composed between the late twelfth century and the early thirteenth century, perhaps in the intellectual milieu of Oddi in southern Iceland. To what extent the part about Magnus was affected by this revision is probably impossible to reconstruct, but it is suggested that the miracles attributed to the saint were added at the later stage.²¹

Magnus' particular aura manifests itself through his effect on fertility and peace on two occasions in the corpus. Shortly after his execution on a mossy and stony site by the men of his

¹⁷ Clayton, “*De Duodecim Abusiis*,” 147.

¹⁸ On Magnus' cult, see most notably: Haki Antonsson, *St. Magnús of Orkney*.

¹⁹ For a presentation of the corpus on Magnus' life, see: *ibid.*, 5-17.

²⁰ Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, 88, and 77-91 for the hagiographic treatment of Magnus' life.

²¹ Chesnutt, “*Orkneyinga saga*,” 456-7; *Orkneyinga saga*, vii-ix, xc-cviii.

rival Haakon Paulsson in 1117, it is said in *Orkneyinga saga* that “earl Magnus’ merits before God were so bright that the place where he was slain became a green field, and God showed that he was slain for righteousness’ sake and inherited the beauty and greenness of Paradise.”²² This phenomenon is clearly inserted in a hagiographic perspective on Magnus’ murder and reminds to some extent of the pattern of the martyr-king, especially the model of St Olav, whose death is also associated with miraculous luxuriance.

Earlier in Magnus’ sagas, his effect on prosperity and fertility is more clearly associated with his action as a peacemaker and seems to be more in line with the Pseudo-Cyprian model of the good king. After coming back to Orkney c.1105 in order to claim his father’s inheritance, Magnus came into conflict with the jarl Haakon Paulsson, who already controlled the region. Friends mediated between them, and it was agreed c.1108 that Magnus could get half of the earldom if the Norwegian kings consented to it. While king Sigurd the Crusader was in Jerusalem, Magnus went east to meet Øystein Magnusson and was finally able to get his father’s inheritance. *Orkneyinga saga* adds that both jarls had friendly relations for several years, which led to order in the realm: “There was then prosperity and good peace in Orkney while their friendship lasted.”²³ Afterwards, Magnus is portrayed as an idealized Christian ruler with a long list of virtues: he is wise; generous towards the poor; kind to wise and good men, but hard and unsparing against robbers and sea-rovers; he rules according to God’s will... Some hagiographical elements also appear, such as his chastity despite being married.²⁴

In this case, the convergence with the ruler’s ability to ensure peace and prosperity according to the martyr-model is less obvious. This phenomenon doesn’t occur after his death, but after a mutual agreement. Moreover, it is not solely attributed to Magnus’ own qualities, as it results from the good relationship between both jarls, and rather responds to a beneficial political situation. Even if the “saint” and the “good king” dimensions of this character remain interrelated throughout the text, the relation between prosperity and peace, as well as the list of virtues, thus seem to follow more closely the Pseudo-Cyprian pattern.

In order to understand the function of this motif in *Orkneyinga saga*, it is necessary to invoke the religious and political context around the emergence of St Magnus’ cult and the compilation of *Orkneyinga saga*. The earldom of Orkney had no clear rule of succession, and any male in the ruling dynasty could pretend to power. One method to limit conflicts consisted in dividing the realm between pretenders. The earldom had thus usually been shared from the ninth century onwards, but a new step was taken when Paul and Erlend took power c.1065 after the death of their father, Thorfinn Sigurdsson. As a consequence of the rivalry between their sons, two lines were in competition for power throughout the twelfth century. Haakon Paulsson and Magnus Erlensson were then the leaders of these lines in the conflict leading to the latter’s martyrdom.²⁵

The development of Magnus’ cult was then encouraged by his nephew Rognvald Kale Kolsson (d. 1158) who became the leader of the Erlend-line, notably through the construction of a cathedral in Kirkwall dedicated to him.²⁶ It is tempting to suppose that this promotion might have been an effective tool for Rognvald to legitimize his own claim to power and reinforce the

²² *Orkneyinga saga*, 111. *Magnúss saga skemmri* and *Magnúss saga lengri* give the same indication in a similar formulation: *ibid.*, 322, 369.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103. *Magnúss saga skemmri* and *Magnúss saga lengri* provide the same information: *Ibid.*, 316, 352.

²⁴ On Magnus’ depiction as an ideal ruler, see most notably: Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, 82-5.

²⁵ Haki Antonsson. *St. Magnús of Orkney*, 82.

²⁶ *Orkneyinga saga*, 158-9, 174.

prestige of his line.²⁷ Princely cults in the Scandinavian kingdoms were common and likewise contributed to the affirmation of kingship, especially with figures such as St Olav of Norway, St Knud of Denmark and St Erik of Sweden.²⁸ Furthermore, it is almost certain that St Olav, as the most prestigious saintly king, was an inspiration for Magnus' cult.²⁹ But beyond that, we should remember that Olav's sanctity was characterized in *Glalognskeviða* by his ability to provide "prosperity and peace" by an intercession with God. Interestingly, Magnus is also the only saintly character associated with prosperity in *Orkneyinga saga*, even if it also relates St Rognvald's life. We can thus imagine that the theme of luxuriance was attributed to Magnus among other miracles to emphasize this analogy with the model of the martyr king, perhaps already in the first hagiographic texts that were the sources of the sagas. Consequently, this motif may have been used as part of a strategy of legitimation to reinforce the earl's claims.

Here, it is worth noting that the ability to bring "prosperity and peace" is usually attributed to kings in Scandinavian literature. Magnus' sagas are thus the only texts that attach this notion to a non-royal character, which questions the definition of earldom given by the sagas and its relation with kingship.³⁰ The first version of *Orkneyinga saga* was composed shortly after a decisive turn in the relations between Orkney and Norway, namely when Orkney lost its semi-independent status and King Sverre established his overlordship on the archipelago in 1195. The text thus reflected the preoccupation in the North Atlantic region with the expansion of the Norwegian dominion. In his analysis of the ideologies of rulership in the saga, Beuermann noted that the known version expressed "an equal and near-independent polity" of Orkney relative to Norway, a thoroughly Scandinavian identity of the archipelago, close hereditary and identity links to Norway, and a preference for a more traditional aristocratic style of authority based on association with local nobles rather than a monarchic one gathering power around the sole figure of the king.³¹ The fact that an earl was given the ability to provide "prosperity and peace" may certainly be understood in this light: by attributing a characteristic usually associated with kingship, the authors implied that earls had a status comparable to the Norwegian kings', which justified Orkney's specificity – if not its autonomy – in the Norse world. But these authors also praised a particular identity and style of rulership as it might appear in the abundance following the agreement of 1108. We indeed saw that this phenomenon was not solely attributed to Magnus' good politics, but also to the general favorable context arising from the accommodation of both earls. Besides, this perspective differs from the Pseudo-Cyprian model of *rex iustus* which focuses on the effects of individual kings.

In other words, our documentation seems to combine and eventually adapt different models of "prosperity and peace" provided by rulers, which may have been formulated at different stages of the composition of Magnus' corpus. Even though it is impossible to reconstruct the content of the first texts about the earl, we can suppose that the use of the martyr-king model, as well as the rest of the hagiographic matter around Magnus, probably appeared in his early hagiographic texts and was intended to reinforce the claim of the Erlend-line on the islands. On

²⁷ Haki Antonsson. *St. Magnús of Orkney*, 79-84.

²⁸ On this topic, we refer to Carl Phelpstead's chapter in this volume.

²⁹ Haki Antonsson. *St. Magnús of Orkney*, 79-80.

³⁰ On the representation of earldom in this saga and its relations with kingship and chieftaincy, see most notably: Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The appearance and personal abilities of goðar, jarlar, and konungar"; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Kings, Earls and Chieftains."

³¹ Beuermann, "Jarla Sögur Orkneyja."

the contrary, the model closer to Pseudo-Cyprianus’ may respond to later preoccupations concerning Orkney’s autonomy when Norway expanded its influence in the North Atlantic region.

Haakon Haakonsson

Another interesting example figures in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. Written in the first half of the 1260s by the Icelandic skald, author and chieftain Sturla Þórðarson, it was commissioned by the Norwegian king Magnus the Lawmender in order to recount the life of his father, Haakon Haakonsson. *Sturlunga saga*, furthermore, indicates that it was recorded under the supervision of Magnus and the “wisest men.”³² Bagge argued that the representation of Haakon in this saga was strongly influenced by the *rex iustus* ideal,³³ but even though the king was never perceived as a saint, A. Oberlin added that the text borrowed many *topoi* from hagiographic literature, so that Haakon was portrayed as a saintly figure and a great Christian king.³⁴ Once again, the theme of prosperity and peace is included in a general discourse aiming to praise the king. More specifically, it is mentioned after Haakon’s election to kingship in 1217. Sturla then indicates that this event was followed by an extraordinary summer and illustrates this with skaldic poems, one *helmingr* from the *Hrynhenda* composed by his brother Óláfr hvítaskáld, and two stanzas of his own:

When king Haakon was chosen king, there was great prosperity in the land. That summer was so good that far and wide over the land the fruit trees bore two crops and the wild birds had two broods. So told Óláfr hvítaskáld: ‘Illustrious men were gladdened by the great prosperity; trees and birds then produced offspring twice in one summer; the ruler’s circumstances appeared magnificent.’

So said Sturla in *Hákonarkviða*: ‘The fruit tree blossomed twice without deceit in one summer, and wild birds laid eggs twice during the warm beginning of the year, when the fame-eager mighty ruler had received the royal title, and his splendid good fortune could increase at the most opportune time. Every man saw that the chief elements wished to welcome the dignity of the splendid ruler on the wide bottom of the wind-vessel, encircled by the surge.’³⁵

Bagge analyses this passage as an example of God’s intervention in Haakon’s favor, which is in accord with the general presentation of Haakon’s reign as a beneficial one for the people.³⁶ Since Sturla interprets this episode symbolically in his poem as divine tokens, Oberlin more specifically

³² *Sturlunga saga*, vol. 2, 272.

³³ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*.

³⁴ Oberlin, “*Vita Sancti, Vita Regis*.”

³⁵ ”Þá er Hákon var til konungs tekinn var ár mikit í landinu. Sumar þat var svá gott at þat var víða um landit at aldinviðrinn bar tvennan ávöxt ok útifuglar urpu tysvar. Svá kvað Óláfr hvítaskáld: // 4. Mærir glöddusk miklu ári // menn, báru þá ávöxt tvennan, // veglig sýndisk, viðr ok fuglar, // vísa grein, á sumri einu. // Svá kvað Sturla í Hákonarkviðu: // 5. Bar tállost // tvennan blóma // aldinviðr // einu sumri, // ok ókalt // útifuglar // öndvert ár // urpu tysvar ... // 6. ... þá er allvaldr // við jöfurs nafni // tírar gjarn // of tekit hafði, // ok hans gift // hæstrar tírar // veglát // vaxa náði. // 7. Sá hverr maðr // at höfuðskepnur // fylkis tígn // fagna vildu // ok göfugláts // gjálfri kringðum // á vindkers // víðum botni.” Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonar saga*, vol. 1, 203-5. We follow Goetting’s and Gade’s translations of the stanzas: Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, “Hrynhenda,” 658-9; Sturla Þórðarson, “Hákonarkviða,” 702.

³⁶ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, 103.

considers that this episode must be counted among the events related to miracles.³⁷ However, we must wonder if this phenomenon may really be perceived as a concrete illustration of Haakon's symbolic sanctity. We can indeed emphasize significant differences with the model of the saintly king and his effect on prosperity and peace. As previously explained, it is firstly attributed to martyr saints and occurs after their death. Moreover, Haakon is not explicitly presented as the direct "holy source" of this abundance. Instead, Sturla emphasizes its external origin and presents it as a reaction of the elements "wishing to welcome" the new ruler. As a consequence, it is rather generated as the omen of an exceptional king's rule.

More fundamentally, we must understand that the author uses the theme of *ár ok friðr* to increase Haakon's prestige. But it is noteworthy that it is the only time we meet it in the saga. Moreover, it appears at an early stage of Haakon's career, precisely on the occasion of his enthronement and in isolated stanzas, while other authors like Snorri on Sigurd's death use it to characterize kings' reigns in general. In order to summarize Haakon's rule, Sturla rather prefers to focus on other aspects, such as his legislative action or the churches he built.³⁸

Here, it is necessary to investigate the unusual construction of this passage to understand the way prosperity and peace are employed as a means of glorification. The inserted stanzas are extracted from two different poems disseminated in the saga, namely Óláfr hvítaskáld's *Hrynhenda* and Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*, so that we must wonder what relationship they had and what variations between them we can observe. In twelve stanzas, *Hrynhenda* documents Haakon's career and, more specifically, his conflict with the jarl Skule Bárðsson.³⁹ Composed sometime after the latter's death in 1240, the stanzas might originally have been part of a larger poem dedicated to the jarl.⁴⁰ Óláfr was then in Norway after 1237, when the tension between Haakon and Skule was at its height, which may be reflected in the greater immediacy of his stanzas, in comparison with Sturla's, and his higher sympathy for Skule.⁴¹

Besides, Óláfr, as a direct witness of these events, was probably an important source for Sturla's *Hákonarkviða* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. It is thus generally agreed that Sturla directly relied on Óláfr's stanza for the association between Haakon's advent and the prosperity of the land.⁴² *Hákonarkviða* was composed by Sturla shortly after the king's death in 1263 and presents his life from his youth to his dealings with the Swedish jarl Birger Magnusson in 1249.⁴³ The glorification of Haakon is more obvious in this poem, since it highlights the incredible circumstances of his survival when he was chased by the Bagler as a child, his success over his rivals and his ultimate triumph when he becomes the crowned Christian king of Norway.

In a recent publication, Guðrún Nordal underlines Sturla's sensitive and ambivalent position when he recorded Haakon's conflict with Skule. Magnus the Lawmender, who commissioned this work, was Haakon's son and Skule's grandson, so that the author had to contend cautiously with the depiction of both parties. Guðrún Nordal thus considers that Sturla made use of Óláfr's passionate and biased stanzas in order to counterweight his own laudatory

³⁷ Oberlin, "*Vita Sancti, Vita Regis*," 317.

³⁸ Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonar saga*, vol. 2, 265-7.

³⁹ For a complete edition of the poem, see: Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, "*Hrynhenda*."

⁴⁰ Guðrún Nordal. "Sturla," 131.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 128-30.

⁴² Björgo, "Skjaldekvæde i *Hákonar saga*," 43; Hermann Pálsson, "Kveðskapur Sturlu Þórðarsonar," 74; Guðrún Nordal. "Sturla," 125.

⁴³ For a complete edition of the poem, see: Sturla Þórðarson, "*Hákonarkviða*."

verse in *Hákonarkviða*.⁴⁴ In the light of these comments, we can wonder how the theme of prosperity and peace evolved between the poems. In *Hrynþenda*, it is noteworthy that Haakon is not explicitly mentioned in association with the extraordinary abundance in 1217. Considering that the poem is probably incomplete, we can't know for sure about the historical context Óláfr depicts, but it must be recalled that Haakon's position was precarious when he was acclaimed king.⁴⁵ If we admit that the hypothesis on the dedication of Óláfr's poem to Skule is true, it may thus be paradoxical to solely attribute this abundance to Haakon. However, Sturla explicitly presents this phenomenon as a consequence of Haakon's enthronement and ostensibly promotes this character in his verse. We can therefore imagine that the skald oriented his source, Óláfr's stanza, in order to glorify the king, in accordance with the general tone of his poem. Interestingly, Sturla uses an opposite image of Skúli in the tenth stanza mentioning the battle of Låke in 1240, a few months after he proclaimed himself king. Here, he is accused of bringing *ófriðr* ("unrest") to people when he launched an assault on Haakon's troops. The skald thus adds that he "made the prosperity (*ár*) of the wolves and of the company of eagles increase."⁴⁶ He thus contrasts the prosperity of the realm brought by Haakon with the abundance of battle-beasts caused by disorder and battle, which strengthens the rupture between both characters in a way that doesn't seem that obvious in Óláfr's poem. Consequently, this example may give an idea of the sensitivity that represents the transfer of this motif from one source to another.

St Knud, Oluf Hunger and Erik Evergood

This dimension is even more obvious in Danish documentation, where the way the climatological events following the assassination of St Knud in 1086 are presented and explained evolves according to authorial purposes. These orientations were largely determined by the political and ecclesiastical context around the composition of the texts. After several years of competition with the Norwegian kings for control of Denmark, King Svend Estridsen (1047-76) managed to retain power and was succeeded by five of his sons: Harald III (1076-80), Knud IV (1080-86), Oluf (1086-95), Erik I (1095-1103), and Niels (1104-34). The second successor, Knud, ended his life as a martyr and played a particular role in Danish history and historiography as Denmark's first royal saint. As a ruler Knud was eager to assert royal authority, and he specifically took measures to protect and support the still-young Danish Church through lavish gifts, promotion of religious feasts, and an attempt to introduce tithes; but he had to face the discontent of a part of the lay aristocracy and the free peasantry, which in 1086 led to a revolt and Knud's murder in St Alban's Church in Odense. Knud was followed on the throne by Oluf, nicknamed "Hunger," who appears to have been involved in the conspiracy against his kingly brother. His reign was remembered in the sources as a period of crop failures, famines, and epidemics, which were interpreted as divine punishment for the murder of Knud, the Church's royal protector. In 1095, Knud was proclaimed a saint, most likely on the initiative of the Church itself. Oluf's successor, Erik Evergood, was then a strong supporter of Knud's cult and managed to obtain a formal papal authorization of Knud's saintliness in 1101. The growth of the cult went together with the development of Odense as an

⁴⁴ Guðrún Nordal. "Sturla."

⁴⁵ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, 97-100.

⁴⁶ Sturla Þórðarson, "Hákonarkviða," 707.

important episcopal center, and some sources emphasize that Erik's reign was marked by the return of prosperity and peace.⁴⁷

From the late eleventh century to the early thirteenth century, many texts relate these incidents and integrate the cosmological phenomena into the general political and religious history of the Danish kingdom. The natural events were explained in the light of the political upheavals, which implied particular interpretations depending on ideological and partisan orientations of the authors. It is not our intention here to analyze the whole corpus of relevant texts. Rather, we shall focus on three examples that present significantly different interpretations. The oldest one, *Passio Sancti Kanuti Regis et Martiris*, was written shortly after the *elevatio* and *translatio* of St Knud's relics in 1095 and before his official canonization in 1101, most probably by a cleric of St Alban's in Odense. As a primarily hagiographic text, the *Passio* aims to illustrate and justify Knud's sanctity and was probably read during his office.⁴⁸ Beyond the conventional virtues and piety, Knud is primarily depicted as an ideal king chosen by God and comparable to David. He thus appears as the protector of the poor and the weak and the benefactor of the Church; the royal provider of freedom, donations, new foundations and tithes implementation.⁴⁹ His plan to liberate England from the Normans is countered by aristocrats, including his brother Oluf, and an open revolt leads him to flee to Odense, where he dies a martyr's death before the altar of St Alban's Church with his hands outstretched in the shape of a cross.⁵⁰ The text then relates God's anger for the disrespect towards himself and the murder of a king who sought shelter in a church by his own men. Consequently, God inflicts punishment upon almost all of Denmark with rain storms, deadly pestilence, famine and food shortage until Knud's sanctity is revealed and recognized.⁵¹

The divine punishment and its use in the *Passio*, as well as the edification of Knud as a saint, must be understood in the light of the social and political events that the text relates. The shortage that followed Knud's death seems to have been real, as other documents echo difficulties in the surrounding regions.⁵² Moreover, it has been argued that Knud's sanctity was a strategic response to political instability. For instance, Arup suggested that the canonization illustrated the Church's interest in imposing its authority over chieftains and kingship,⁵³ while Koch presented it as an initiative of later kings to reinforce their power, notably against the Church.⁵⁴ But these hypotheses are in contradiction with the social realities of this period, the Church being still too weak at that time in the first case, and kingship still needing ecclesiastical support in the second case. In his important study of the relationship between *regnum* and *sacerdotium* in medieval Denmark, Brengaard proposes the most satisfactory explanation. He rather sees in the canonization a reaction of the Church, especially St. Alban's Church at Odense, to the threat to

⁴⁷ For a summary of the events during this period, see for instance: Gelting, "Two Early Twelfth-Century Views," 34-8; Skovgaard-Petersen, "Early political organisation," 178-80; Wählin, "Oprøret mod Knud den Hellige"; Esmark, "Spinning the Revolt".

⁴⁸ For a general presentation of this text, see: Haki Antonsson, "Sanctus Kanutus rex."

⁴⁹ "Passio sancti kanvti regis et martiris," 64-65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵² Hybel, Poulsen, *The Danish Resources*, 70. However, Hybel and Poulsen argue that a large famine caused by unfavourable climatic conditions is recorded in many regions in Europe several years after Oluf's death in 1095, while Danish sources claim that fertility and abundance were back in Denmark during Erik's time. They thus suggest that either the dating of Erik's succession to the throne may be wrong, or that authors attributed retrospective accounts of famine in Denmark specifically to Oluf's reign, probably to increase the contrast with St Knud: *ibid.*, 71-2.

⁵³ Arup, *Danmarks Historie*, 185.

⁵⁴ Koch, *Danmarks Kirke*, 67.

itself that weakening royal authority and regicide in a church patronized by a king implied. As a consequence, the initiative to canonize Knud can be understood as a condemnation of such violence.⁵⁵ The calamities that followed, as they are explicitly presented in the *Passio*, are thus part of a discourse to warn against new crimes. Moreover, Breengaard adds that the divine punishment may also be a means for the clergy to exonerate itself from the bad climatic situation and to underline the harmfulness of regicide.⁵⁶ This idea can indeed be confirmed by a letter sent by Gregory VII to Harald III in which the Danes' resentment against the Church during shortage periods is mentioned, so that the pope recommends presenting them as a purgation for their sins.⁵⁷

In later texts, the climatological phenomena initially formulated in Odense in reaction against the social and political instability were reused to specifically legitimize and delegitimize the key characters of the time. This is notably the case in *Chronicon Roskildense*. Written by an anonymous clerk of the episcopal see of Roskilde around 1137/1138, it presents a short history of the Danish Church and people. It is particularly focused on the cathedral of Roskilde and thus strongly expresses the interests of the episcopal see. The political positions that infuse the text have, however, been broadly debated and the opinions are sometimes contradictory.⁵⁸ For instance, Weibull perceived the negative depiction of kings such as St Knud and Erik as expressions of a “Gregorian,” anti-monarchic stance in Roskilde.⁵⁹ Breengaard, however, more or less destroyed this interpretation and instead suggested that the chronicle aimed to defend Roskilde's local interests against competing churches, indifferent rulers, and social disorder.⁶⁰

The representations of the calamities following Knud's death can precisely be understood as a means to defend the episcopal see. The motif is thus used in two ways. In the first case, it is intended to glorify Bishop Svend (1073–1087), who is described as an outstanding prelate and the real founder of the cathedral.⁶¹ After mentioning Oluf's enthronement, the chronicler relates the plague during his reign and the consumption of forbidden food. This provides the occasion for mentioning Svend again, as he is said to have predicted this hardship as penance for Knud's death. The events even encourage Svend to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which underlines once more his remarkable figure.⁶²

In the second case, the author strives to analyze the aftermath of the plague according to his judgement of the subsequent kings. The earlier texts such as *Passio Sancti Kanuti* or Ælnoth's *Gesta* associated the period of calamities with the rule of an unlawful king, Oluf, while the reestablishment of prosperity after his death coincided with the assumption of a virtuous king, Erik.⁶³ However, the Roskilde chronicler has a slightly different perspective on these attributions, especially on Erik's: “Might this opulence have occurred because of Erik and this hunger have occurred because of Oluf? Neither of them is worthy of it; this is in the hands of the one who knows all things before they come into being, and who disposes when He wishes and how He wishes.”⁶⁴ He doesn't deny that the plague ended when Erik came to power, but he seems to refuse

⁵⁵ Breengaard, *Muren om Israels Hus*, 158–9. See also: Gelting, “Two Early Twelfth-Century Views,” 36.

⁵⁶ Breengaard, *Muren om Israels Hus*, 160.

⁵⁷ *Diplomatarium Danicum*, 1.2.17.

⁵⁸ For a presentation of the text, see in particular: *Roskilddekroniken*, 39–94; Gelting, “Chronicon Roskildense.”

⁵⁹ Weibull, “Nekrologierna från Lund.”

⁶⁰ Breengaard, *Muren om Israels Hus*, 65–6.

⁶¹ “Chronicon Roskildense,” 23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 24–5.

⁶³ “Passio sancti kanvti regis et martiris,” 70; Ælnoth, “Gesta Swenomagni Regis,” 127.

⁶⁴ “Chronicon Roskildense,” 25.

to give the king credit for it, which puts him in a somewhat uncomfortable position. Besides, he summarizes Erik's reign by attributing "unfair and unjust laws" to him.⁶⁵ This hostility can probably be explained by Erik's ecclesiastical politics, which strongly favored Knud's cult in Odense and the creation of an archdiocese in Lund. His rule thus coincided with a decline of Roskilde's prestige and power, which is fully reflected by the author's resentment in the chronicle.⁶⁶

In *Gesta Danorum*, completed c. 1210, Saxo gives a totally different presentation of these events. In his highly moralizing work, the author endeavors to depict models and counter-models of kings according to their princely virtues, fortune and abilities to rule and to strengthen Christianity. The actors around the calamities are thus presented in pairs through a pattern of *comparatio* in order to emphasize their characteristics: Harald against Knud in book 11, and Oluf against Erik in book 12. The theme of prosperity and peace is thus used as an illustration and a confirmation of their qualities. More specifically, the moral points inculcated in book 11 are *disciplina* and *justitia*.⁶⁷ Harald, as a lenient ruler, is in opposition to these values considering that he concedes to the people's unwise will, weakens the law with ineffective reforms, doesn't promulgate decrees and fails to punish crimes.⁶⁸ Knud is clearly in contrast with this description and is directly compared to his brother: while Knud had "the foremost gifts of Nature heaped upon him by a gracious, kindly disposed Fortune," and heroically protected Denmark against piracy, invoking memories of the glorious figure of King Knud the Great, Harald spent his youth "smothered under a blanket of lethargic inactivity."⁶⁹ Likewise, Knud appears as a great leader: he reaffirms justice and royal power; he supports the Church with reforms, donations and tithes; and he plans to restore Knud the Great's empire by conquering England.⁷⁰ However, this vigorous agenda arouses discontent among the population and the ambition of traitors such as Oluf, which leads to Knud's martyrdom. The calamities that strike the Danes are then presented as God's vengeance for the regicide and for designating Oluf as king in spite of Knud's sanctity.⁷¹ In sum, the theme of plague in Saxo's text is first of all a warning against people who refuse the long-term benefits of strong kingship, especially if it strengthens the realm and the Church.

The same idea is further developed in book 12, which opposes Oluf to Erik. Here, Saxo seems to draw on the Pseudo-Cyprian model of good and bad kings to depict his characters. For instance, Oluf and the Danes have lost fortune and the king is held accountable for bad weather, plague and impoverishment. He is consequently "unable to perform any function that accorded with royal grandeur," until he sacrifices himself to redeem Denmark from starvation.⁷² In contrast, Erik's enthronement brings back prosperity and coincides with a recovery of royal authority. Unsurprisingly, Erik is then credited with eleven of the twelve effects of Pseudo-Cyprianus' just kingship in a summary of his reign.⁷³ The theme of prosperity, according to Saxo, thus goes along with the return of a strong kingship, which enables an effective protection of the realm against Slavic pirates and of the Church as well. Most notably, Saxo, who most likely was a cleric of Lund cathedral, underlines Erik's energetic action for the creation of the archiepiscopal see, a feat which

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Breengaard, *Muren om Israels Hus*, 66.

⁶⁷ Johannesson, *Saxo Grammaticus*, 216-27.

⁶⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 11.10.5-8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.8.1. We follow Fisher's translation in Friis-Jensen's edition of the text.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.11.1-6; 11.12.7-11.13.4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 11.15.3-12.1.2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 12.2.1-3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.3.1-5.

in itself explains his sympathy towards the king, in contrast with the author of *Chronicon Roskildense*.⁷⁴

Conclusion

All these examples show the complexity and the sensitiveness of transferring information from one text to another. As illustrated by the motif of “prosperity and peace,” the strategies to legitimate and glorify the elites necessitate a complex work of adaptation and orientation of perspectives on the reported events. In any case, the theme of prosperity and plague seems to have been an effective method to characterize a reign, to such an extent that certain authors like the chronicler of *Chronicon Roskildense* even felt it was necessary to play down its meaning.

It is always difficult to determine whether the periods of abundance or calamities as they are presented in sources reflect actual climatic events. If the reported hardship in Danish sources seems to be echoed elsewhere in Europe, the cases in Norway and Orkney are more difficult to document. However, all these descriptions fall within coherent and general discourses to illustrate the rulers’ charisma and to legitimize them, or, on the contrary, to delegitimize them. In that sense, authors’ objectives are less likely to explain the cause of natural phenomena than to find arguments in order to characterize rulers according to their ideological and political orientations.

It is interesting to note that the motif is often used in discourses formulated and supported by the Church. Unsurprisingly, cosmological phenomena are interpreted through a religious reading and God’s ultimate intervention, as it was previously formulated in biblical literature and mirrors of princes. The threat of bad harvests arising from the situation of the temporal world was probably a powerful and persuasive tool to condemn inadequate rulers and behaviors and, simultaneously, to encourage a model of kingship that aligned with the Church’s interests. But our research also emphasizes that the claims of the clergy were not monolithic throughout our period. For instance, it underlines the competition between local churches for gaining support from kings, which is reflected by the chroniclers’ point of view on these rulers. Moreover, the treatment of the theme of peace and prosperity also evolved according to the progressive development of the ecclesiastical institutions and their capacity to make their voices on kingship heard. While *Passio sancti Kanuti* and *Chronicon Roskildense* respectively defend the particular interests of the Church in Odense and Roskilde, they both express fear as to the instability of the Danish kingdom and their own security. Several decades later, Saxo seems to express the point of view of a stronger institution whose position is sufficiently assured to explicitly expose its own views on the ideal king.

As a consequence, the theme of “prosperity and peace” is not only intended to glorify or delegitimize kings and jarls. It can also indirectly serve the legitimacy and prestige of the local churches in Denmark or in Orkney. In the case of Odense, we saw that they may ascribe the responsibility for calamities to rulers in order to exonerate themselves from these bad conditions. We saw, too, that the author of *Chronicon Roskildense* takes the opportunity of plague to glorify the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.6.4–6. Evidently, Saxo’s praise of King Erik was also motivated by the fact that Erik was the father of Knud Lavard and grandfather of King Valdemar, foster brother of Saxo’s own patron Archbishop Absalon, who commissioned the *Gesta Danorum*.

founder of the cathedral. But most notably, they justify in this way their own political orientations by supporting their political allies or denouncing those who didn't support them.

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