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Ármann Jakobsson

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220

Translated by

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To Jakob Ármannsson (1939–1996)
and Signý Thoroddsen (1940–2011)

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Prologue

I have been studying *Morkinskinna* for the last 20 years, and this is my third book about it. *Staður í nýjum heimi*, my doctoral thesis, appeared in 2002, and my edition of *Morkinskinna* for the *Íslenzk fornrit* series was published in 2011. The present book covers much of the same ground but has been fashioned to suit the needs of an international audience. Furthermore, it also reaps the rewards of both hindsight and further work with the text.

I would like to repeat my thanks to the people who assisted me in the making of the earlier book, in particular my doctoral committee: Bjarni Guðnason, Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Davíð Erlingsson. My opponents at the defence were Sverrir Tómasson and Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, whom I also thank. Among others to whom I owe large or small debts are Sverrir Jakobsson, Erna Erlingsdóttir, Robert Cook, Kari Ellen Gade, Theodore M. Andersson, Stefanie Gropper, Susanne Kramarz-Bein, Birna Bjarnadóttir, Svava Jakobsdóttir, Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, Hulda Egilsdóttir, Kristrún Heimisdóttir, Jóhannes Bjarni Sigtryggsson, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir, Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir, Gunnvör Karlsdóttir, Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon, Alex Speed Kjeldsen, Jóhannes Nordal, Jónas Kristjánsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. In the making of the English version of this book, I received important assistance from Christopher Crocker, Andrew Wawn, Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir and Viðar Pálsson, along with Margaret Clunies Ross, one of the editors of the Viking Collection, and an anonymous reviewer. But above all, I wish to thank my translator, Fredrik Heinemann. My collaboration with him is a saga in its own right and our correspondence, if it were ever to be published by some very unlucky person, would probably fill more pages than the present volume.

I also want to thank the Rannsóknamiðstöð Íslands, the Rannsóknasjóður Háskólans, the Íslenzka fornritafélagið, Den Arnamagnæanske

Kommission, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar and Landsbókasafn Íslands. Each of these institutions has been a source of great support to me, as has been my own employer these last few years, Háskóli Íslands.

My greatest debt, as before, is to Finnur Jónsson who edited Morkinskinna in 1932 and who is truly the giant of Old Norse scholarship on whose shoulders we all stand. I dedicated the Icelandic book to him but I dedicate this version to my parents, neither of whom ever published a book but who indirectly must have the honour or shoulder the blame for my own efforts.

Introduction

Morkinskinna, an Icelandic Kings' saga

Morkinskinna is a thirteenth-century Icelandic saga that portrays the kings who ruled Norway from 1030 to 1157.[1] It emerged during a particularly fertile period of composition of Icelandic kings' sagas, around 1220, and marks a key moment in the genre's development. Most twelfth-century kings' sagas are much shorter than *Morkinskinna*, incorporating Norwegian epitomes in which the deeds of many Norwegian kings are mentioned: *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* 'The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings', *Historia Norvegiae* 'History of Norway' and *Ágrip af Noregs konungasǫgum* 'A Summary of the Sagas of the Kings of Norway'. There are lengthier sagas in which one king is the main narrative concern, such as the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason, Óláfr the Saint and King Sverrir. But *Morkinskinna* is the first extant work in Old Norse in which a saga dealing with many kings is narrated in such detail; it may even be the case that it is the first kings' saga in Old Norse concerned with the lives of more than a single king. And *Morkinskinna* differs considerably from earlier kings' sagas: it is longer and more detailed; it includes more skaldic verse than earlier sagas; and its structure is also idiosyncratic, virtually without parallel among Old Norse kings' sagas. Even *Flateyjarbók*, considerably later in date and in some ways its heir, is a very different kind of work.

Thus, for many reasons, *Morkinskinna* offers important material for research. Yet scholars of Icelandic have paid little attention to the saga and indeed detailed research is fraught with difficulties, two of which stand out. Firstly, the origins of *Morkinskinna* are hard to account for, and,

1 As discussed further below, the name *Morkinskinna* was first given to the thirteenth-century manuscript now preserved in the Royal Library in Copenhagen (GKS 1009 fol). Later the name was also applied to the text contained within the manuscript and to the saga contained therein. In this study the whole text of *Morkinskinna* is regarded as a single saga comprising many parts.

secondly, the saga has always been somewhat overshadowed by *Heimskringla*. *Morkinskinna* is the principal source for the final third of that work, even though the treatment of the material is very different and, where the sagas overlap, the texture of *Morkinskinna* is considerably denser and more extended than *Heimskringla*. *Morkinskinna* has attracted analysis because of its connection to other kings' sagas but almost never in its own right. As a result, scholarly attitudes towards the saga have long been mixed. The main objective of the present study is to redress the balance somewhat and to try as far as possible to illuminate the nature and purpose of the work.

The following discussion represents the first attempt to explore the saga as a unified whole. But before we address broader concerns, it may be helpful to analyse a short episode in which several of the saga's leitmotifs can be identified and a sense of its manner and style observed. This episode (*Msk*. II, 134–137)[2] occurs within the story of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari 'the Crusader'[3] and begins when the king goes straight to vespers from a

2 All references to *Morkinskinna* in this book marked simply '*Msk.*' are to the Íslenzk fornrit edition.

Translator's note: all translations of the Old Icelandic are the translator's (FJH). On many occasions I have profited from Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*. Translations of other quotations, namely in the footnotes, are also the translator's unless otherwise noted.

3 King Sigurðr Jórsalafari, though often referred to as Sigurðr the Crusader, is also sometimes called Sigurðr the Jerusalem-Farer. Similarly, King Haraldr harðráði is usually referred to as 'Hardrada', 'Hard-rule' or 'Hard-ruler' but – like 'Jerusalem-farer' – these are not proper English words. Indeed they exist only in connection with these individuals, and the same applies to some other traditional sobriquets originating in the nineteenth-century tradition of translating Old Icelandic that delighted in archaisms and 'Norseisms'. The preference of the present author is to actually translate such epithets, along with many others, as is the custom with most medieval kings. The statement that I wish to make with this action is that Norwegian medieval kings should be treated just like other European rulers, Louis the Pious or Charles the Fat for example, and not as outlandish figures with incomprehensible semi-Icelandic epithets. In the end, 'the Severe' was chosen because it seems more neutral than 'the tyrant' or 'the despot'. As for 'Crusader, while it remains a topic for debate whether Sigurðr's journey constituted a Crusade or an armed pilgrimage – one beyond the scope of the present study – it remains that scholars (Gary B. Doxey, 'Norwegian Crusaders and

drinking session; his men are *drukknir ok kátir* 'intoxicated and merry'. Near the church they happen upon an Icelander named Þórarinn stuttfeldr 'Short-cloak' who is not identified by family. He greets the king, who in turn invites the Icelander to visit him the next day. On his way to the king's court Þórarinn encounters a man named Árni fjǫruskeifr 'Shore-skewed', who tells Þórarinn that the king wishes the Icelander to compose a verse about one Hákon Serksson. Þórarinn is, in addition, instructed to call Hákon mǫrstrútr 'lard-arse', a nickname that should be worked into the verse. The Icelander recites his poem about Hákon, complete with nickname, but it turns out, not unexpectedly perhaps, that Þórarinn is the butt of the joke. Hákon and his retainers take vengeance on Árni later when Þórarinn composes a verse about Árni in which his vulgar nickname occurs. Sigurðr is placated and gives Þórarinn leave to compose a poem about the king himself, the so-called *Stuttfeldardrápa* 'Short-cloak's praise-poem'. Afterwards Þórarinn receives enough money to journey south to Rome, and the king promises him honour upon his return, *En hér greinir eigi um hvárt þeir fundusk síðan* 'But here it is not said whether they ever met again' (*Msk.* II, 137).

This narrative contains three stanzas and a couplet in the context of a frame narrative about drinking, poetic composition and competition among retainers. The tale rather peters out, but otherwise is in many respects typical of *Morkinskinna*. Firstly, the narrative material is commonplace, and characteristic of the saga as a whole: it is an *exemplum*, an episode used to illustrate a certain general principle or moral point. Secondly, it contains a portrait of the king that has wider reference to the power of kings and how they conduct their business. Thirdly, neither Þórarinn's identity as an Icelander nor as a poet is coincidental, bearing the mark of a consciously constructed narrative. Fourthly, the episode depicts a community that places importance on people's values and customs. Finally, three archtypical characters dominate the action: the king, the trusty retainer, and the outsider, an Icelander. All of these features are characteristic of *Morkinskinna*.

the Balearic Islands', pp. 156–159 and Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*, p. 132) have offered evidence that it was the former rather than the latter.

The principal elements in this episode are the customs of the king's retinue, the outsider and the king. The plot lacks density and any narrative significance in the saga as a whole. The episode does not occur in a definite year but rather at some unspecified time during the reign of a specific king. Þórarinn is associated with no particular family, farm or region in Iceland. That such seemingly trivial matter is introduced into his narrative by the author of a king's saga, let alone – as attested below – numerous episodes of this kind, is surprising and raises the question as to their function in such a work. In order to explore this point, we need to think about the entire context of *Morkinskinna*, a far from simple undertaking.

Like the example above, it will be shown in this study how the relationship between Icelanders and Norwegian kings is a theme that is frequently addressed in *Morkinskinna*. The saga offers important testimony about how Icelandic identity was defined in the Middle Ages. There is an even more striking exchange about royal power just before the story about Þórarinn Short-cloak. In this incident the kings Eysteinn and Sigurðr compare their respective qualities (*Msk*. II, 131–34). This exchange helps to define in just a few words the complex role of a king in society by comparing a crusade to the building of a harbour (see part IV, chapter 2). The nature of royal power is an important theme in a work that delves more deeply into such issues than do most other medieval sagas, but there are many other elements of interest in *Morkinskinna.*

In this study attention will be focused on those issues that are of particular importance for an overall understanding of *Morkinskinna*. As we have seen in the episode devoted to Þórarinn Short-cloak, kings are not alone in the saga. In the background is *a faire felde ful of folke*, as the narrator of *Piers Plowman* more than a century later puts it. *Morkinskinna* portrays a society that is courtly and densely populated – very different from the one in which the saga author must have grown up. We find trading and other peaceful activities; joyful occasions are frequent; it is a colourful society, while, in the distance, a vast and intriguing world beckons and is occasionally experienced. But despite the splendour and refinement, daily life is also rough and raw, involving a constant struggle for power and influence.

This study primarily constitutes a close reading of a single text and not a comparison of *Morkinskinna* with other sagas. And, of course, in the end the social context of the saga will be examined. Though a truism, it should not be forgotten that all saga writing is a product of its own time and surroundings. Moreover, it cannot be understood without reference to an authorial figure, although his identity will not be sought in this work.

Among the nearly five hundred characters named in *Morkinskinna*, two archetypical roles dominate the action: the king and the retainer, and those roles are filled by a myriad of these characters. More than twenty kings appear in the saga and a host of retainers, but they all fit the mould of these two basic types, and it is the dealings between these two character types that define both them as individuals and their functions. All the kings in the saga are in a sense one king, and the same is true of the retainers. Some retainers though have a special status, and the relationship between these Icelandic retainers and their kings is of great importance.

Morkinskinna is paradoxical. It depicts kings and Icelanders, a new courtly world of stone-built halls and decorative objects, old customs and contemporary sports, distant lands and home pastures, and, always, the omnipresent fellowship of retainers. It is sublime yet commonplace. It is austere yet exuberant and cheerful. It is spiritual yet worldly. Its perspectives are Icelandic; it revels in all things foreign. This kings' saga takes us on a journey to a foreign country and to a new world. In some ways this saga world is close to the daily experience of its thirteenth-century audience, but in others it is quite alien.

Even the name *Morkinskinna* is problematical. The name itself involves a certain semantic difficulty since it was first applied to the manuscript that preserves the oldest extant version of the text, and only later has the name has come to refer to the saga itself. Here it will be used as the name of a kings' saga, just as the name *Heimskringla* is used of another kings' saga.[4] The end and perhaps the beginning of the saga are missing,

4 It has been customary to refer to the large kings' sagas such as *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* as 'compilations', dating back to an era when scholars believed that the writing of king' sagas had started with sagas of individual kings. The word 'compilation' describes well the art of writing a large saga, given that a saga is a work of history, where several sources, oral and written, are joined in a single unit. On the other hand, I would not want to suggest that *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* are

and any attempt to interpret it without knowing what once filled these lacunae may be regarded, like the saga itself, as incomplete. The origins of the saga have been much debated, and although many leading scholars have offered solutions to this riddle, it will always remain unsolved in the absence of further evidence.

It remains, however, when dealing with *Morkinskinna*, that the first step is to address the question of its origins. Earlier studies concentrated on this issue in great detail, and merit discussion here before we turn to literary analysis. Every interpretation of a medieval text must be based on a clear view as to its origins. It seems unlikely that it will ever be possible to know for sure when and how *Morkinskinna* came into existence, a condition that applies to most texts from the thirteenth century. For now we have to deal with probabilities rather than certainties. Earlier scholars tended to pick sagas apart and compare them to a conjectured historical reality in order to infer the form and content of long-lost original texts, while recent scholars rather concentrate on extant texts and are reluctant to speculate about lost works without having firm support from comparative analysis. The question of the origins of *Morkinskinna* must be revisited in some detail, as the conjectures formulated eighty or ninety years ago were based on premises that differ from those informing scholarship of Old Norse literature today. While some scholars have recently retreated from older inferences without examining their premises, I will begin by summarising the earlier discussion, explaining the bases behind the conjectures about the saga's origins and then articulate a new position. I will show that earlier ideas about the saga's origins were based on a weak foundation – for the most part those that depend upon an inadequate appreciation of the saga's structure, which, given its complexity, is not surprising. The saga has often been considered peculiar, and its eccentricities have been drawn into the discussion of its origins. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century, little thought was given to *Morkinskinna*'s structure, which, when judged by the aesthetic theories developed in the renaissance, was regarded as de-

fundamentally different from, for example, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Egils saga* or *Grettis saga* in this respect and thus I use 'saga' throughout, meaning a narrative that is in its very nature the joining of diverse source material (including fully fledged smaller narratives) in a single unit.

fective. But in recent decades scholarly understanding of the structure of many medieval works has become more nuanced. Perspectives that have emerged in relation to medieval literatures other than Old Norse can be used to help us to comprehend the structure of *Morkinskinna*. Though this initial attempt cannot hope to solve all the saga's structural problems, the present discussion seeks to initiate a fruitful and on-going debate.

The complexity of *Morkinskinna* is a challenge for any scholar seeking to explore the work. In re-examining both the theories about its origins and their premises, and the aesthetics underpinning *Morkinskinna* it should be easier to address the substance of the overall saga, especially its organising themes: these include courtly society, royal power, the role of Icelandic retainers and the status and function of poetry in that society. This study is first and foremost a literary analysis of *Morkinskinna*, generally a rare undertaking in kings' saga studies. In 1985, Theodore M. Andersson noted the paucity of literary commentary in research on kings' sagas.[5] Despite the fact that much has been done since 1985, particularly in the last twenty years, it remains that the lion's share of the editorial and scholarly work focused upon the kings' sagas has concerned attempts to illuminate political conflicts and historical circumstances rather than conducting literary analysis. This apparent reluctance to treat the kings' sagas as literature may derive, to some degree, from the complex interconnections between several extant narratives of the same events. Scholars have understandably concentrated on these issues, perhaps causing them to lose sight of the sagas themselves. At the same time it may be that the kings' sagas have been deemed inferior to, say, the *Íslendingasögur* 'Sagas of Icelanders', because most of the material in a kings' saga can be found elsewhere, even though this is also the case with some of the Sagas of Icelanders. It should be noted, however, that there is also much material in king's sagas that cannot be found elsewhere. This is certainly true of the material in *Morkinskinna*, a considerable portion of which is unique to that saga. This is not to say that *Morkinskinna* was created out of nothing, without sources. On the other hand, it should not be more difficult to treat the saga as an inde-

5 'Most of the critical effort devoted to the kings' sagas has gone into establishing the sources of a given text. As a consequence, the nonexpert will be surprised at the relative absence of general literary comment' ('King's Sagas [Konungasögur],' p. 197).

pendent work than, say, *Brennu-Njáls saga* or *Grettis saga.* Another cause for the relatively limited interest in kings' sagas, at least in Iceland, could simply be that they deal with foreign kings. The kings' sagas are a co-operative Norwegian-Icelandic project, and thus have never been entirely taken under the wing of either country. Nor has it helped their cause that some kings' sagas (among them *Morkinskinna*) have only recently been edited for the general reading public.

Although the connection between kings' sagas is an important subject, the time is ripe for an examination of the nature and artistic achievement of each individual work. The textual relationships of *Morkinskinna* will, of course, not be ignored, but the main focus in what follows will be on the interpretation of the text. The approach will thus be historical but not to the exclusion of all else. Although other sagas will be referred to briefly, comparison with other sagas is not the main priority of this investigation, which involves a close reading of the *Morkinskinna* text. The saga is interpreted as a work of literary art, in much the same way as scholars approach contemporary narrative texts, but with an awareness of those elements that distinguish medieval texts from more modern ones. It is the saga text itself that matters, though its thirteenth-century origins and the circumstances of its creation will not be ignored.

In the subsequent analysis I will speak of kings and other historical figures appearing in *Morkinskinna* more or less as characters in a story. The narrative is not contemporary with the events depicted and characters in a given narrative do not have a will of their own, except within the artistic illusion of the narrative in question. They rather represent the author of the narrative, in this case the author of *Morkinskinna*, although the concept of saga authorship, in itself, is far from unproblematic. Furthermore, there is considerable uncertainty as to how much of the material in the saga is original, as it is in many cases much more extensive than any older versions of a given narrative. When it comes to historical narrative, there is always a gap of uncertainty between the actual event and the earliest extant narrative in which it is related. In *Morkinskinna*, there is a gap of some hundred years or two between the event and the account, and this gap must have been filled by some kind of narrative tradition. Most of the sources, oral and possibly written, have been lost, although some that remain appear to be closer to the actual events, including the poetry contained within the

narrative, and clearly provide the saga with some of the material of the narrative.[6] All of these poems are purported to be contemporary, but they are mostly attested for the first time in *Morkinskinna*. In some instances, there are also nearly contemporary foreign sources that may be closer to 'what actually happened' but this study is not much concerned with that. And yet the kings of *Morkinskinna* are never only saga characters. It remains that some of their energy must come from the individual that lived a century or two before the narrative was composed, accounts and anecdotes that must have served as the author's material for creating the kings who appear as characters in the saga.

My reading of *Morkinskinna* seeks to draw attention to the elements that matter most for the saga as a whole – to its main point and purpose as revealed throughout the work. The ultimate goal is to identify the heart of the saga and to offer an interpretation of what, in another context, Sir Thomas Malory referred to as 'the hoole book'.

6 The skaldic poetry found in *Morkinskinna* has recently been published in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, ed. Kari Ellen Gade.