

Ármann Jakobsson. *Í leit að konungi: Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997. 377 pages.

As its subtitle suggests, *Í leit að konungi* surveys the kings' sagas to determine their view of kings and kingship. Ármann Jakobsson is most interested in the kings' sagas written before 1262, before the Icelanders became subject to a king themselves, and thus draws the bulk of his evidence from *Sverris saga*, *Skjöldunga saga*, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Knýtlinga saga*. The sagas of holy kings such as Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Olaf are nominally excluded, as the focus is to be on "ordinary" kings (8), but in fact St. Olaf is frequently invoked as the greatest example of this or that royal quality. Moreover, Jakobsson so often emphasizes the medieval understanding of a close relationship between king and God that he would probably be the first to admit that the notion of an "ordinary king" does not bear scrutiny. His effort to establish the contemporary (i.e., twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian and European) context for the Icelandic image of the king is one of the strengths of this book.

Ármann Jakobsson's thesis is that the image of the king in the kings' sagas conforms to the medieval European conception of kingship. He argues that the kings' sagas have far more in common than they have to set them apart, with even *Heimskringla* subscribing to basically the same view of kingship as the others. He draws attention to the implications of Iceland being part of the medieval European cultural community, not just for the kings' sagas, but for all Icelandic literature of the period. He warns against assuming that the church and the court are opposing influences on Icelandic literature, especially where a man of the cloth who is the son of a chieftain is writing for a king. The church is a controlling force in Icelandic literature, but on the other hand, the church in Iceland was controlled by chieftains such as the Oddaverjar and the Haukðœlir (45).

Ármann Jakobsson begins with an overview of Icelandic saga genres before 1262

and a brief survey of the kings' sagas of the twelfth century. He then gives short descriptions of the Norwegian synoptics and the six kings' sagas listed above. He continues the introductory material with a summary of the scholarship on the kings' sagas and ends it with a lengthy (but necessarily sketchy) overview of kingship from ancient Egypt to medieval Scandinavia (sec. 1, "Inngangur," 11–88).

The body of the book consists of an extensive analysis that identifies numerous elements of medieval kingship and discusses how each one is manifested in the kings' sagas. Section 2, "Konungur á jörðu og himni" (89–154), starts by examining what it means to be called a king, and then considers the appearance of kings, their powers of healing, their conduct and liberality, and their interaction with each other. This part of the analysis closes with discussions of sole and shared power, the origin of royal power, and the relationship between kings and God. The third section, "Stoðir konungvalds" (155–75), describes the foundations on which royal power rests; it focuses on the issues of inheritance and family claims and touches on the support of the law and the people. These topics are examined in more detail in the fourth section, "Hlutverk konungs" (177–89), which covers the role of the king as the defender of the land and people, judge and reformer of the law, and the promoter of peace within the realm. The fifth section, "Hinar konunglegu dyggðir" (191–239), discusses the cardinal virtues of wisdom, strength, temperance, and justice as the attributes of the ideal king. The last section of the analysis, "Konungur og veldi hans" (241–64), describes the relationships between king and realm, land, and subjects.

The conclusion is tripartite (sec. 7, "Konungsímynd íslenskra konungasagna," 265–303). Having argued for the overwhelming similarities in his sagas' images of kings, Ármann Jakobsson surveys them again (this time including *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum*) to note the respects in which they differ. Next he discusses the other works that are relevant to our understanding of the kings' sagas, focusing on *Íslendingabók*, *Hungrvaka*, the sagas of the Icelandic bishops Páll Jónsson and Þorlákr Þórhallsson,

Egils saga, and *Laxdæla saga*. Finally, he considers the paradox of the kings' sagas, namely, how it was that Scandinavian writing about kings originated with the one people in Europe who did not have a king. A list of the Norwegian and Danish kings (to 1280 and 1259, respectively) and an English summary (309–20) round off the work.

It is difficult to take exception to most of Ármann Jakobsson's arguments. No one who has been exposed to the "sapientia et fortitudo" reading of *Beowulf* or a course on medieval exegesis would disagree that in the Middle Ages, the ideal king was strong, wise, and just, merciful to his subjects, and harsh to his enemies. Nor does it take much to demonstrate convincingly that Haraldr harðráði and Sverrir were renowned for their wisdom and Magnús góði for upholding his father's laws. And the so-called new historicism has been around for long enough that most of us have no problem with the notion that the kings' sagas are to be understood in the context of contemporary European historiography, theology, and literature. The author's convictions on this point lead him to express himself perhaps a little too strongly, as in this description of *Knýtlinga saga*: "Það sem var satt í Róm var líka satt á Íslandi, sá sannleikur varð ekki ómerkari fyrir að vera ritaður á þjóðtungu og þeim íslensku lesendum sem Knýtlingasaga er ætluð er hann ekki síður skiljanlegur en páfanum í Róm" [What was true in Rome was just as true in Iceland; this truth was no less important for having been written in the vernacular, and it was just as intelligible to the Icelandic readers for whom *Knýtlinga saga* was intended as to the pope in Rome] (287). Given Iceland's distance from the cultural centers of Europe and the Latin texts that comprise so much of the medieval theorizing about kingship, a more extensive discussion of how the Icelandic saga authors came by their knowledge of this subject would not have been amiss. However, as he points out, most of the kings' sagas were written by men connected with the church, and in any case all the authors of the kings' saga were from precisely that class of society that was most highly traveled and educated. Considering what any Icelander of the time would have absorbed from a lifetime of

churchgoing, the question of cultural transmission must be one of degree, rather than kind.

Some cautions must be raised concerning Ármann Jakobsson's methodology. In his central analysis, his tendency is to refer back to the survey of medieval European kingship, remind the reader of some characteristic of the Carolingians or some incident in the Investiture Contest, cite portions of the kings' sagas, and conclude that in this respect, the kings' sagas are truly European. As long as he is in essence saying "Here is an illustration of medieval European kingship in action, here is something from the kings' sagas, see how similar they are, agree with me that the same culture gave rise to both," all is well. However, problems arise when he seems to forget that his topic is the image of the king in the kings' sagas, and he starts speaking of the kings directly, as though he were writing a political history of Scandinavia and the saga texts were transparent windows onto the realities of the past. Because he compares the Icelandic texts with "real" people and institutions (i.e., whose natures have been "established objectively" through modern historical study), he sometimes treats the characters in the kings' sagas as though they were real, too, losing sight of the fact that the texts that purport to describe Norwegian kings are influenced not only by their author's individual perspectives and predilections but also by the literary conventions of the genre. For example, his obliviousness to the literary aspects of the sagas results in an elaborate explanation of why King Jarisleifr of Garðaríki acknowledges that Óláfr Haraldsson is a greater one than he. (The issue is raised when Jarisleifr is fostering Olaf's son and his queen observes that he who fosters is the lesser man.) Without providing a source, he asserts that there is a ranking among kings based on their holiness, and because Olaf has died by this time and is thus nearer to God than Jarisleifr, Jarisleifr is only showing his wisdom in recognizing that Olaf has moved up in this hierarchy (134–35). I would suggest that the explanation is much simpler: Jarisleifr's speech is merely a rhetorical device on the part of the saga author to emphasize the importance of St. Olaf. The further away a

king is from Scandinavia, the easier it is to put words in his mouth or manipulate his behavior in other ways. It might strain the credulity of the saga audience to hear of a Swedish king singing the praises of a Norwegian king, but it was evidently quite plausible for the king of Garðaríki to declare himself honored to be the foster father of St. Olaf's son, or for the queen of Byzantium to be depicted as being extremely impressed by Haraldr harðráði.

Similarly, he treats two incidents in Morkinskinna (in which men who have served under more than one king tell Magnús góði what constitutes kingly behavior) as though the narrators were historical people reporting their actual experiences ("Eins og gamli maðurinn hefur Þorkell þjónað mörgum konungum og getur því kveðið upp úr um hvaða konungar séu sannir konungar og hverjir ekki" [Like the old man, Þorkell has served under many kings and thus can pass judgment on which kings are true kings and which aren't], 136). It is far more likely that these are fictional characters written into the saga to serve as spokesmen for the saga author. The question that begs to be discussed here, is whether the saga account of kingly behavior is prescriptive or descriptive. That is, is the saga author trying to encourage this kind of behavior on the part of rulers and anyone else looking for a model to follow, or is the saga author merely repeating that which he believes to be true of kings? (This unasked question also haunts the discussion of the negative view that the kings' sagas hold of kings who do not enjoy the people's loyalty, 173–74). It is a relief to read a few pages later that the system that Haraldr hárfagri uses to determine which of his descendants were eligible for the kingship and which for a jarldom is "in all likelihood" a product of the author of *Heimskringla* and not of Haraldr himself (139).

A secondary concern is that of audience. *Í leit að konungi* is the published form of the author's MA thesis (University of Iceland, 1996), and the work seems little changed from its original academic form. He assumes that his readers are acquainted with the previous research, can read medieval Latin and unnormalized Old Norse, and

know what he is referring to when he mentions the "Christian poems . . . *Widsith* and *Genesis*" in passing (249). However, such an audience can certainly dispense with the forty-page survey of medieval European kingship mentioned above. At the start of this section, the author apologizes both to those who will think it too long and those who will think it too short (47). I can well believe that he (or his publishers) hoped that this book might be of interest to the general Icelandic reading public, but if this audience's knowledge of medieval history is in need of supplementation, then probably its knowledge of medieval Latin is also.

For the academic readership, the body of *Í leit að konungi* serves to confirm our ideas about the Christian and European nature of the kingship illustrated in the kings' sagas, rather than proposing startling new interpretations or presenting significant new evidence. There is little to disagree with, but little to be surprised by, either. Those in search of the most engaging, informative, and original material should turn to the conclusion, especially the last subsection, "Íslendingar ok konungar á 13. öld" (288–303). This discusses the figures who came closest to being the kings of Iceland during the Commonwealth period, particularly Gizurr Ísleifsson and Jón Loftsson. Here Ármann Jakobsson's application of institutional history to saga texts appears to its best advantage, providing both a better understanding of Icelandic society and an enhanced appreciation of the importance of the genre of the bishops' sagas. He addresses the issue of the Icelanders' relationship to the Norwegian monarchy, although not at length; his view is that Icelanders wrote kings' sagas as a means of understanding royal power and forming opinions about it. He asserts that the Icelanders knew what step they were taking when they chose to become subjects of King Hákon, and with their society disintegrating around them, it was a choice they made freely (305). What is interesting is that, as presented in *Í leit að konungi*, the representations of monarchs found in the kings' sagas are so similar. The implications of such a totalizing view need to be explored. On one hand, why should it be surprising that a homogeneous group of authors shared a

belief in one of the dominant cultural paradigms of their day? On the other hand, if any medieval country was capable of developing an alternative view of kingship, it was Iceland, which for several centuries governed itself without a monarch. Resistance to Norwegian rule had been important at other times in Iceland's history (e.g., when the Icelanders declined to grant King Olaf Haraldsson's request for the island of Grímsey and a poll tax) and in other genres of its literature (e.g., the plot of *Egils saga* revolves around the hostility that Egill feels towards the sons of Haraldr hárfagri). The complex and changing nature of Icelandic attitudes towards the Norwegian parent society has been the subject of much research in recent years, and Ármann Jakobsson's reconstruction of the ideas about kings and kingship that underlie the individual sagas' representation of individual rulers is a valuable contribution to a discussion that naturally tends to emphasize difference over similarity.

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Bjarne Fidjestøl. *Selected Papers*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. Peter Foote. The Viking Collection 9. Odense: Odense University Press, 1997. 406 pages.

These seventeen essays by the late and much missed Bjarne Fidjestøl are, like his longer studies, characterized by intellectual courage and originality, methodological elegance, and interpretive sensitivity. Their skillful Englishing by Peter Foote was a labour of love, extending the knowledge and appreciation of the author's work to readers outside Scandinavia. Fourteen of the articles originally appeared in Norwegian (*nynorsk*), in journals and volumes not easily accessible; two are translated from German, and one, originally published in English, has here been rendered into a graceful, idiomatic form of that language. Bjarne Fidjestøl's prose, supple, personal, understated, and suffused with gentle humour, is a treat even in translation.

The papers, selected from the large number he published, are arranged in five groups: skaldic studies, saga studies, prose and poetry, literary history, and "in lighter vein." The first section includes five articles: "The Kenning System: An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis" (16–67); "The King's Skald from Kvinesdal and his Poetry" (68–92); "Arnórr Þórðarson: Skald of the Orkney Jarls" (93–116); "'Have You Heard a Poem Worth More?': A Note on the Economic Background of Early Skaldic Praise-Poetry" (117–32); and "Skaldic Poetry and the Conversion, with Some Reflections on Literary Form As a Source of Historical Information" (133–50). The next group contains: "Algirdas Julien Greimas and Hrafnkell Freysgoði: Semiological Models Applied to an Icelandic Saga" (151–67); "The Legend of Þórir hundr" (168–83); "European and Native Tradition in *Óláfs saga helga*" (184–200); and "Óláfr Tryggvason the Missionary: A Literary Portrait from the Middle Ages" (201–27). Four papers make up the third section: "Icelandic Sagas and Poems on Princes: Literature and Society in Archaic West Norse Culture" (228–54); "Skaldic Stanzas in Saga-Prose: