

**The Bonds of Power: Women's Political  
Participation in the Sagas of Norwegian Kings,  
c. 950-1200**

Markus Eldegard Mindrebø

Royal Holloway, University of London

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## Declaration of Authorship

I, Markus Eldegard Mindrebø, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:  Date: 05/10/2021

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## Abstract

The Old Norse-Icelandic *konungasögur* (kings' sagas), written primarily during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, are centred on the lives of early medieval Norwegian (and occasionally Danish and Swedish) kings. These texts have been thoroughly studied for centuries, but most of these studies, as the texts themselves for the most part, have largely excluded women. This thesis presents the argument that aristocratic and royal women in the kings' saga presentation of early Norwegian history are portrayed as able to participate in politics at a similar level to men, but only within certain social parameters. Women are structurally enabled to enter male-dominated political spaces and positions through their participation in, interaction with, and manipulation of, multifaceted aristocratic networks based around interpersonal bonds of kinship, friendship, and lordship. Following advancements made within studies of medieval networks and aristocratic group behaviour as well as of medieval women's social agency, the thesis presents a framework enabling the reading of elite women as utilising the same network strategies as men and potentially exercising similar levels of political power as a consequence, while being excluded from the institutionalised roles of kingship, chieftaincy, and military and judicial leadership.

After an introduction to the 'language of networks' as a conceptual framework, the thesis is divided in two parts, each containing case studies examining and defining the integration of kings' saga women in socio-political network structures. The first part establishes the role of female 'network organisers', individuals dominating the political scene through their management of network bonds, and further discusses how women's kings' saga speech is rooted in agency through network bonds. The second part tests the boundaries of this network model by investigating the applicability of network structures to the sagas' descriptions of women outside the Scandinavian kingdoms, and to women of the sagas' immediate past.

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## Preface

The primary source editions cited are the ones from the *Íslenzk fornrit (ÍF)* series where available. As such, Old Norse-Icelandic spelling and linguistic structure follows these editions. In cases where the name of an individual or otherwise differs between specific *ÍF* editions, I follow the spelling used in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's 2002 *Heimskringla* editions. An exception occurs with citations of skaldic poetry, where I have cited directly from the *Skaldic Project* collection as per more recent convention. In instances where a term or title originates in modern Icelandic rather than Old Norse, the Icelandic spelling has been used. In terms of linguistic terminology in the main body of text, I use 'Old Norse' for the saga society and surrounding historiographical-literary culture, 'Old Norse-Icelandic' when specifically referring to the language, and 'Scandinavian' when referring to the geographical context of, and individual characters from, the kingdoms of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Regnal years and/or birth years for individual persons have only been given in cases where these have been established with reasonable approximation.

Frequently referenced primary source texts and dictionaries are cited with abbreviated titles immediately followed by page numbers, rather than the standard author-date form used for all other references. A list of abbreviations is included at the end for the reader's ease, while each abbreviation is also connected in the bibliography to the edition it directly references. Primary sources are cited with page numbers in the editions used, and chapter numbers have only been used supplementally in the appendices.

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

# Introduction

## a) General introduction

In the Old Norse *konungasögur* (kings' sagas), medieval histories of the earliest Scandinavian kings, most influential characters are men. Kings, vikings and regional chieftains vying for geopolitical control dominate the narratives, and there are overall fewer words spent on anyone unable to hold a sword and charismatically lead warriors into battle. The exceptions to this rule are in most cases wise old men whose warring days are over, but who still play powerful roles in councils, assemblies, and legal matters - another sphere nominally exclusive to men.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in this context, particularly in the saga description of the period between c. 950-1040 (and to some extent again in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century), a handful of aristocratic women are able to stand at the forefront of Scandinavian politics and play central roles in the development of the early Scandinavian kingdoms. In these sections of the historiography, the saga reader encounters a relatively broad spectrum of women engaged in power politics on the kingdom level; their systematic participation in masculine spheres, it will be argued, cannot be read as exceptions, but as structurally enabled social trends.<sup>2</sup> These women influence the political course of a medieval male-dominated society over a concentrated sequence of decades, a historiographical rarity which deserves considerable examination.

Prior to an examination of the source material and a subsequent outlining of the theoretical framework, I will briefly describe the key debates surrounding saga women, gender and power to which this thesis will respond. There is to date no full-length work examining women in the kings' sagas specifically, with most scholarship tending to emphasise other saga genres, or include the *konungasögur* only as part of a wider analysis of saga literature as a whole.<sup>3</sup> However, scholars have long been fascinated with studying women both in the Viking Age and the subsequent Scandinavian Middle Ages, and in Old Norse sagas. This academic

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include Þorleifr inn spaki, advisor to three Norwegian kings, and Þorgnýr *lögmaðr* in *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga*.

<sup>2</sup> A resilient trend in historical scholarship has been the reading of powerful medieval women as individual exceptions only found in unique circumstances; this 'exceptionalism' has been challenged in recent years; see Tanner et al. 2019: 1ff.; Wærdahl 2019: 96.

<sup>3</sup> Studies of women in Old Norse society tend to focus more broadly, and typically emphasise material evidence, Norse myths, and the *Íslendingasögur*; see for instance Jesch (1991: 202), who addresses this specifically. Other examples include Jochens (1996a), Auður Magnúsdóttir (2001), Andersson & Swenson (2002) Ricketts (2010), and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013 and 2020). A variety of shorter work exists on specific instances of women in the *konungasögur*; see for instance Jochens 1987a; Jesch 1994; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2013.



fascination can be traced back at least to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when Swiss historian Paul-Henri Mallet was commissioned to write a history of Denmark using the sagas as his sources. Mallet became the first to claim that medieval Scandinavian women enjoyed the same liberty as men, simultaneously establishing their role as mediators of masculine honour.<sup>4</sup> Debates about the extent of this liberty, and about women's social power, followed through the subsequent two centuries, until Rolf Heller published a scathing critique of the historicity of female saga characters, effectively doing away with all saga statements as evidence for women's historical situation.<sup>5</sup> The powerful saga heroine, whether a sorceress, a female warrior, or just a strong-willed woman, had according to Heller no historical basis. While most scholars now do not go as far, Heller's contribution was groundbreaking by ensuring that no future study of saga women would take the historical accuracy of the written sources for granted, thus inspiring a more critical outlook. Most of the scholarship on saga women has since followed a combination of these approaches: the view of the strong, independent woman is still clearly witnessed in the work of modern scholars,<sup>6</sup> but most have tended to either set the sagas aside in favour of less extensive but simultaneously more reliable evidence, or approach them as literary relics.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously to the debates about women and historicity, focus shifted to the internal dynamics of the texts, and the inception of gender studies saw its way into saga scholarship. This thesis is indebted to the considerable body of resulting research conducted on the topic of gender, gender roles and gender transgression in the saga paradigm. The trend arguably began with Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and his analyses of gender and honour in the sagas, finding that masculinity could be lost, and that women could participate in masculine circles where men were unable or unwilling to:<sup>8</sup> “*En mand var kun en mand, så længe han havde kraft, mod og manddom til at være det.*”<sup>9</sup> (A man was only a man so long as he had the strength, courage and manliness to be.) This gender hierarchy, Sørensen asserted, is of considerably older origin than the writing of the sagas.<sup>10</sup> Carol Clover subsequently expanded upon Sørensen's points, and argued that both sexes could transcend gender boundaries

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<sup>4</sup> Mallet 1756: 187-92; see also Jochens 1996a: 234-9 for a longer assessment of Mallet's contribution.

<sup>5</sup> Heller 1958

<sup>6</sup> Among the most steadfast defenders of the social reality of the strong saga woman is Mundal (1994: 3-11), who argues that strong-willed women were considered desirable marriage partners because children were believed to inherit such traits. Cf. Mundal 1982.

<sup>7</sup> An example of the first approach is found in Jesch 1991, and the second in Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013. Cf. Jochens (1995; 1996a), and the articles in Andersson & Swenson 2002. More on sagas as sources below.

<sup>8</sup> Sørensen 1993: 237-8

<sup>9</sup> Sørensen 1980: 108; cf. similar arguments in Kress 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Sørensen 1980: 106

through their social behaviour. According to Clover (and Sørensen), strong and independent women described by the sagas are not merely embodiments of a literary motif, but rather integrated members of the social infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> These theories have redefined social agency in the saga context. Instead of a binary division between man and woman, Clover suggests a division in the saga paradigm between able-bodied men and exceptional women on one side, and a “rainbow coalition” of everyone else (all other women, children, the elderly, and so forth) on the other, separated by the adjectives *hvatr*, ‘bold’, ‘active’ or ‘masculine’, and *blauðr*, ‘soft’, ‘weak’ or ‘feminine’.<sup>12</sup> Sørensen and Clover sparked a blossoming of saga gender scholarship in recent years, inspiring further examination of the versatility of gender and social opportunity in the *Íslendingasögur* (Icelandic family sagas),<sup>13</sup> and to a lesser extent the *konungasögur*.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, similar avenues have been pursued in investigations into Old Norse myth and material culture.<sup>15</sup> The result has been the view of women’s lives through the lens of the source material as neither opposed to, nor incompatible with, social masculinity and the filling of male-dominated functions.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the borderlands between sexes, Clover’s ‘permeable membrane’, opens for considerable negotiation and an understanding that whatever rules existed surrounding gender roles could be both bent and broken without the transgressor necessarily facing serious consequences. This plays straight into the political field.

The main scholarly debate to which this thesis acts as a response is primarily a methodological one, but it is closely related to both of the scholarly trends related above. Drawing on questions of both historicity and gender, recent discussions of saga women have centred on how scholarship should treat and interact with the recurring tropes surrounding female agency in the sagas. In the vein of Heller, many scholars have opted for an intensely critical approach, viewing female saga characters as pure constructions simply operating according to the purposes of the men writing them. The most influential proponent of this method is historian Jenny Jochens, who considers the presentation of the majority of saga women to be little more than a collection of archetypal roles, “figments of the male imagination”, invented by kings’ saga author Snorri Sturluson and his contemporaries to

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<sup>11</sup> Clover 1993: 366; Sørensen 1993: 236-8

<sup>12</sup> Clover 1993: 368, 380; the translations of the adjectives are not direct, but rather based on Clover’s analysis.

<sup>13</sup> Significant contributions include Ármann Jakobsson 2007; Phelpstead 2007 (particularly pp. 433-4); Evans 2019 (particularly pp. 11-15 for a revisionist assessment of Clover).

<sup>14</sup> Phelpstead 2013: 5-6

<sup>15</sup> Hedeager 2011: 134; Bandlien 2016: 187-9. The latter has also written an influential study of love and marriage; see Bandlien 2005. Cf. the section on marriage below.

<sup>16</sup> See also the significant recent work on masculinities in this context, particularly by Clark (2009) and Evans (2019).

function as literary scapegoats or negative examples of gender transgression.<sup>17</sup> For instance the inciter, a woman using goading words to instigate violence, has been held up as a scapegoated female role without basis in reality favoured by male authors such as Snorri and Oddr Snorrason, and the motifs are generally seen as literary techniques shared between saga authors in order to preserve social boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Although there have been some exceptions considering certain motifs' potentially historical roots,<sup>19</sup> views similar to Jochens' dominated the field in the 1990s and early 2000s, shared at least partially by other critical scholars.<sup>20</sup> These views simultaneously involved a reading of 'real' saga women as victims of patriarchal oppression, often mere tools for forced marriage and reproduction, and emphasis was placed on restrictions rather than opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

These views have more recently been contested by, among others, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, whose work has sought to reclaim saga women as reflecting considerable female agency in a male-dominated context, as opposed to only the exaggerated imaginations of male writers or pawns in the games of men.<sup>22</sup> In this reading, what has previously been considered formulaic instances of archetypal female roles instead become individual reflections of women's real or imagined behaviour. Centred around the literary construction of the connection between women and power throughout all saga genres, Jóhanna's 2013 monograph, alongside other vital contributions, has set the stage for further examination of the societal mechanics allowing such power.<sup>23</sup> By suggesting that there is no universal stigmatization of women exercising power in the sagas, and that in some cases there is instead social sanction, the more recent work has opened up the opportunity to investigate more deeply the question of female power and exactly how it interacts with political structures found in more specific texts.<sup>24</sup> The question that now continues to resurface is if medieval Nordic women, in Auður Magnúsdóttir's words, "neither had the formal rights nor the social

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<sup>17</sup> Jochens 1996a; particularly p. 87 and pp. 174-80, but the whole volume discusses these archetypes. Cf. Jochens 1987a, for the inciter role specifically.

<sup>18</sup> Jochens 1996a: 178

<sup>19</sup> This is particularly true for the inciter motif; see Miller 1990: 212-3; Clover 2002: 39-40. Further consideration of the inciter, and scholarship surrounding the role, is also brought up in chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> Examples of similar views include Jesch (1991: 191) and Kress (2002: 91).

<sup>21</sup> Jochens 1986; Jochens 1987b

<sup>22</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 1-2

<sup>23</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 8; cf. Clark (2012: 38-42) for similar views on female agency, although Clark's focus is on gender more widely. Auður Magnúsdóttir (2001) is another author who has called attention to women's agency within male-dominated structures.

<sup>24</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 105, 138

and economic position to take action in the field of politics”,<sup>25</sup> why and how are the kings’ sagas filled with so many who are able to circumvent these restrictions?

### **Statement of argument**

Building from these key developments, the aim of this thesis is to provide a deeper understanding of the roots of political agency in the period c. 950-1200 as it is presented in later medieval historiography, by examining the role of women and their gender in the described political culture. While women will be at the forefront throughout, I aim to build a coherent framework for understanding the political system of the kings’ sagas’ depiction as a whole through investigating their opportunities, actions and portrayal. In this way, I hope to move the research beyond mere women’s narrative roles and personal power on an individual basis, and into an examination of their participation in the political scene as a social system, involving ideas and ideologies of power, aristocratic networks and group identities.

The main argument of the analysis is as follows: in the reconstruction of Norwegian history presented by the *konungasögur*, high-ranking women are able to exercise political power on the same level as men and using methods similar to men, when acting within and on behalf of wider aristocratic networks, and they would often have to cross gendered boundaries to achieve political goals.<sup>26</sup> However, the degree of political opportunity, and social acceptance, is dependent on factors related to their ancestry, gendered behaviour, and relationships with successful kings. This is a social and political matter rather than a legal or institutional one. With no evidence that women are officially allowed access to formal political institutions,<sup>27</sup> such as kingship, chieftaincies, legal proceedings, or even most assemblies,<sup>28</sup> the question thus becomes why and how these women are allowed extensive structural interaction with the political process even when technically excluded from its formal expressions. It is here that networks are vital to our understanding; women, I will show, do not access the process as individuals, but rather as members of social groups, exercising political influence through, on behalf of, or alongside with, male connections. Their political opportunity is determined entirely by the strength of their connections, and their willingness and ability to build and use them.

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<sup>25</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 41; cf. Jochens 1995: 163.

<sup>26</sup> An observation which can be applied to medieval women more widely; see Wærdahl 2019: 106.

<sup>27</sup> Sørensen 1993: 231

<sup>28</sup> See Sanmark 2014: 85ff. for women’s limited participation at assemblies.

In terms of the analytical structure, a full overview of the source material will be followed by a section on the language of networks, building a political framework to study women in kings' saga politics. It outlines anthropological and sociological methods of network analysis combined with existing saga-centred political theory, setting up for an understanding of the predominantly aristocratic society depicted in the kings' sagas as a scene dominated and run by and through network politics. Women's societally determined position in various group associations and political functions are established in order for the remainder of the analysis to delve further into women's individual interactions with these structures. The introductory chapter is then followed by four case study chapters divided in two parts. The first part forms the core of the thesis, examining the portrayal of key women in the sagas focusing on c. 950-1040, what I shall refer to as the distant past. Emphasising establishment and manipulation of interpersonal bonds, and political speech respectively, it is based around the argument that women's political access overwhelmingly occurs through active network involvement. The second part then tests the boundaries of this network model by investigating the applicability of network structures to the sagas' descriptions of women outside the Scandinavian kingdoms, and to women of the sagas' immediate past, c. 1136-1200.

### **The sources, their historicity, and their inclusion of women**

The primary sources in focus, the *konungasögur*, were written predominantly in Old Norse-Icelandic in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-13<sup>th</sup> centuries in Norway and Iceland.<sup>29</sup> First and foremost I have focused on those kings' sagas describing Norwegian politics up to c. 1200, works engaging with the period prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century consolidation of the Norwegian monarchy and loss of Icelandic independence (completed c. 1264). Due to the nature of the source material as retrospective histories looking back across multiple centuries, comment is required on their usefulness as sources. I will here assess the relevant texts divided by language and chronology into three categories: the three 'Norwegian synoptics', a series of individual royal biographies, and the more extensive 13<sup>th</sup> century compendia *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. It should also be pointed out that there is a small group of similar sagas centred around kings of Denmark, such as the mostly lost *\*Skjöldunga saga* and the later *Knýtlinga saga*, but the focus here is primarily on the Norwegian-centric sagas. All of these were preceded by, and appear to draw on earlier histories of Sæmundr Sigfússon (in Latin) and Ari Þorgilsson (in Old Norse-Icelandic), both Icelandic priests born in the mid-

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<sup>29</sup> For the traditional system of classifying the sagas, see Bappi 2017: 4-5. Cf. a discussion of the term 'kings' saga' in Andersson 2016: 155-6.

11th century whose texts, the earliest known contributions to the Icelandic-Norwegian historiographical tradition, are unfortunately now lost.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, they all to varying extent rely on centuries of oral tradition and commemorative skaldic poetry, the full extent and accuracy of which is for obvious reasons impossible to gauge today.<sup>31</sup> Finally, many of the texts draw on each other, and the textual relationships will be outlined as part of the source assessment.<sup>32</sup> All these texts belong to the same historiographical discourse, shaped by shared characteristics, social ideologies, and a mostly concurrent reconstruction of the past, but there are also considerable individual differences.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Norwegian synoptics*

The three so-called Norwegian synoptics, the *Historia Norvegiæ*, the *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* and *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum*, together constitute an early component of the historiographical tradition. While the first two are written in Latin, they are typically considered part of the kings' saga tradition due to shared content and characteristics.<sup>34</sup> All three texts begin with the semi-mythical founding of Norway in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but their end dates differ.<sup>35</sup> They were probably written in Norway itself, most likely in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, and all three appear to be connected to the recently created (1152-3) archbishopric of Niðaróss and its clerical milieu.<sup>36</sup> As such, the synoptics were written before the high point of the saga literature in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and were to a large extent inspired by continental European historiography, but remain integral to the development of later sagas. Their overall brevity makes them less useful as direct sources, but they are highly relevant both as supporting material and through their role as sources for the more extensive works which I reference directly to a greater extent.

The *Historia Norvegiæ* (hereafter *HN*) is the most difficult to narrow down temporally, but it is commonly considered the oldest of the synoptics.<sup>37</sup> Inger Ekrem argues that it could have

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<sup>30</sup> Andersson 2016: 26. Although Ari's *Íslendingabok*, from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, remains, and references the author's relationship with Sæmundr; for a full assessment of the impact of Sæmundr and Ari, see Andersson 1985; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: ix-xi.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance Fidjestøl 1982; Jesch 2006; Jesch 2013; Goeres 2015: 5ff.

<sup>32</sup> Given the nature of the discussion and the status of several sagas as predominantly single-manuscript texts, I have not delved into the manuscript history of each saga except where particularly relevant, but I refer the reader to the introductions in Bjarni Einarsson (1985), Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (2002a), and Andersson & Gade (2012) for thorough surveys.

<sup>33</sup> Similar views of the genre are made in Andersson 1994: 77.

<sup>34</sup> Bagge 1991: 15; Ghosh 2011: 13

<sup>35</sup> On the historicity of the founding, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016a.

<sup>36</sup> Andersson 2016: 28-9

<sup>37</sup> For all the sources, I have followed the dating of Bagge (1991) and Ghosh (2011), unless otherwise stated. For a discussion on the various suggestions regarding dating and authorship of the *Historia Norvegiæ* specifically, see the introductory survey in Phelpstead 2001.

been written before rather than after the establishment of the Archbishopric of Niðaróss, placing it before 1152, but this is uncertain.<sup>38</sup> It is short in both page count and scope, ending in the 1020s, either because of it not being completed or of any continuation later being lost.<sup>39</sup> Out of all the Norwegian sources, the *HN* is likely most strongly based on a written tradition of Latin histories from outside Scandinavia,<sup>40</sup> but it does simultaneously appear to situate itself firmly within the Icelandic-Norwegian historiographical tradition by using similar material and common sources.<sup>41</sup> The women in focus here only make brief appearances, but the text does contain certain episodes also mentioned in the longer sagas, thus useful for comparative purposes.<sup>42</sup>

More solidly grounded than the *HN*, Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (hereafter *HARN*) was written in Norway in approximately 1180.<sup>43</sup> It is a distinctly clerical work, in all likelihood written by a Benedictine monk around Niðaróss and the island monastery of Niðarhólmr,<sup>44</sup> with a dedication to Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (r. 1161-88) contributing to the assumption that it was written in proximity to the archbishopric.<sup>45</sup> It is possibly based on an older lost Norwegian history, the *\*Catalogus regum Norwagiensium*, which is referenced in the text and may have influenced all three synoptics along with the aforementioned works of Sæmundr and Ari.<sup>46</sup> Theodoricus also shows appreciation for skaldic poetry as a source of information, but does not cite it like the Old Norse sagas do. As with the details of its origin, we also can glean more information about the motives and trends found in Theodoricus' work. Aside from the clerical point of view, judging subject individuals based on their adherence to Christian ideals, the text clearly shows certain early signs of the Norwegian bias and respect for royal authority later found in *Fagrskinna* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, but with a clear ecclesiastical bent.<sup>47</sup> The narrative's ending in 1130 on the eve of the civil war period appears a deliberate choice, as Theodoricus sees the civil wars as a shameful deviation from the proper norm of a single

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<sup>38</sup> Ekrem 2006: 211; cf. pp. 158-60 where the author discusses the previous dating she argues against.

<sup>39</sup> Phelpstead 2001: xvii-xviii

<sup>40</sup> Phelpstead 2001: xiii; Ekrem & Mortensen 2006: 9-17

<sup>41</sup> E.g. Sæmundr and Ari; see Ekrem & Mortensen 2006: 16.

<sup>42</sup> Particularly its statements about Gunnhildr, which I will return to in chapter 1; see *HN*: 84.

<sup>43</sup> It is usually assumed that Theodoricus Monachus is a Latinisation of Þórir munkr, but for clarity, I will be using Theodoricus to describe the author of the *Historia*; see for instance Bagge 1989: 115; Foote 1998: ix.

<sup>44</sup> Sverre Bagge refers to Theodoricus' history as a prime example of European clerical historiography distinct from the style of the classical saga; see Bagge 1989: 113ff.

<sup>45</sup> Bagge 1989: 115

<sup>46</sup> *HARN*: 44; Theodoricus cites the *Catalogus* for the length of kings' reigns and gives the impression it is an older regnal chronology.

<sup>47</sup> Foote 1998: xxix-xxx; cf. Bagge (1989), who discusses both Theodoricus' clerical roots (p. 123) and his political ideology (p. 129).

monarchical ruler grounded in clerical support and Christian peace.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps due to these monastic values, it is difficult to describe the *HARN* as anything but exceptionally misogynist. Theodoricus attributes the flaws of female politicians to the nature of women in general, and the whole work seeps with the mistrust of the female sex which is common in a number of clerical histories.<sup>49</sup> However, the author largely keeps his personal opinion separate and distinguishable from his descriptions of individuals, which do not significantly deviate from the histories in Old Norse-Icelandic.

The earliest remaining comprehensive history written in the vernacular is *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum* (hereafter *Ágrip*) from around 1190.<sup>50</sup> It spans from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century until 1136, and may have originally continued to 1177.<sup>51</sup> It seems to have made direct use of Theodoricus and possibly also of the *HN*, but it is also the first of the *konungasögur* to directly cite skaldic poetry.<sup>52</sup> As much of the work takes place in and around Niðaróss and displays familiarity with the area, it is typically assumed that the author, like Theodoricus, was in some way associated with the archbishopric.<sup>53</sup> That being said, the work reveals considerably less of a clerical voice than the two Latin synoptics. While both the *HN* and *HARN* emphasise moral Christian significance in history, *Ágrip* is closer to presenting a secular historiographical narrative,<sup>54</sup> although still contrasting and favouring Christian individuals over pagan ones.<sup>55</sup> This has potentially impacted its inclusion of women as well, as one can identify a clear increase in the appearance of female characters, although the descriptions remain brief.

### *Royal biographies*

Contemporary to the Norwegian synoptics are early kings' sagas written by Icelanders tied to the Þingeyrar monastery, more precise in scope and functioning as individual biographies rather than broader surveys. Of somewhat uncertain dating is *Sverris saga*, centred on the career of King Sverrir Sigurðarson (r. 1177-1202). Difficulties in this case arise from the fact that it is written in multiple parts, possibly by different authors. The first part of the saga was

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<sup>48</sup> *HARN*: 68; see also Bagge 1991: 142.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance the description of Gunnhildr in *HARN*: 12. The treatment of women is overall similar to the one found in the contemporary Danish *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, which is even more closely tied to church agenda; see Strand 1981: 157-63, 260.

<sup>50</sup> For a brief summary on dating, see Driscoll 2008: xii-xiii.

<sup>51</sup> The main indication is that *Ágrip* and *Morkinskinna* are practically identical where the former breaks off and the latter continues.

<sup>52</sup> On the sources of *Ágrip*, see Driscoll 2008: xiii-xviii.

<sup>53</sup> Driscoll 2008: xii

<sup>54</sup> Bagge 1991: 16

<sup>55</sup> Andersson 2016: 29



written in the 1180s, most likely by the abbot of Þingeyrar Karl Jónsson.<sup>56</sup> The dating of the second part, however, is debated, but it must have been written after Sverrir's death in 1202.<sup>57</sup> It is, nevertheless, the single kings' saga closest to the events it describes, and contains a prologue establishing the author's access to eyewitness sources, and close communications with Sverrir himself, although this latter point has simultaneously led to bias in his favour.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, *Sverris saga* occupies an important position in the historiographical development, providing inspiration for the later compendia discussed below, and also for other sagas with a later focus, including *Boglunga saga*, which exists in an older, shorter version and a younger, longer version both describing events following the end of the *Sverris saga* narrative.<sup>59</sup>

Around the same time as *Sverris saga*, monks at Þingeyrar produced biographies of King Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995-1000). Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, as well as the lost version of his presumed colleague Gunnlaugr Leifsson, are, like *Sverris saga*, centred on a single king, and are considered, like *Ágrip*, to date from c. 1190.<sup>60</sup> Oddr's saga was written in Latin, but only exists in an Old Norse-Icelandic translation, and is thought to have relied on Theodoricus' *HARN* as a central source.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, it introduces many new elements to the genre, providing considerable detail to events and trends previously only described in passing. Many women appear for the first time in Oddr's saga, or at least simultaneously with *Ágrip*, but Oddr often provides more depth than the synoptic work due to the less concise nature of his saga, and he is more inclusive of female political participation than his probable source Theodoricus. Oddr, like many of his contemporaries, writes from what is evidently a clerical, hagiographic angle,<sup>62</sup> but he is simultaneously reliant on popular legend and the interest of a secular audience,<sup>63</sup> rendering him particularly similar to the 13<sup>th</sup> century sagas.

Finally, there are the biographies of Óláfr Haraldsson 'inn helgi' (r. 1015-30), the royal martyr who was defeated and killed in the battle of Stiklarstaðir. The development is thought to have started with the so-called \**Oldest saga* of Óláfr (c. 1200), but this work is lost.<sup>64</sup> The subsequent *Legendary saga* is based on the \**Oldest saga*, and potentially written in the early

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<sup>56</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: xiii; Andersson 2016: 105

<sup>57</sup> For a summary of this debate, see Orning 2008: 40-1.

<sup>58</sup> Ljungqvist 2006: 80; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 109; Andersson 2016: 105-6

<sup>59</sup> For the dating of both saga versions, see Þorleifur Hauksson et al. 2013: xvii-xxii.

<sup>60</sup> Bagge 2006: 476; cf. p. 474n.

<sup>61</sup> Andersson 2000: 6-7; cf. Bagge 2006: 492-3.

<sup>62</sup> Bagge 2006: 476

<sup>63</sup> Andersson 2000: 25-6

<sup>64</sup> Bagge 2010b: 285; a handful of brief fragments do exist, but the text is lost.

13<sup>th</sup> century, but it is typically found lacking compared to the later narratives of Óláfr in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, a version by Styrmir Káráson is mostly lost except for fragments preserved in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*.<sup>66</sup> It is possible the later sagas relied on the *Legendary saga* and on Styrmir's saga, but it has also been suggested that they relied on the \**Oldest saga* or another version of it, rendering them and the *Legendary saga* different redactions of the same original.<sup>67</sup>

### *The three compendia*

A few decades after the Norwegian synoptics and the individual biographies comes what is perhaps the apex of the secular Old Norse historiographical tradition, and the works from which most of my material is drawn. Unlike the previously mentioned works primarily written by clerical authors, the early 13<sup>th</sup> century compendia are grounded in relative secularity.<sup>68</sup> Following in the vein of *Ágrip*, they also begin using skaldic verse more extensively. Similarly, they seem to all rely on a number of lost written sources, such as the accounts of Sæmundr and Ari, the lost \**Hryggjarstykki* (c. 1150), which likely used contemporary witnesses instead of older sources, and \**Hlaðajarla saga*, of which traces have been preserved in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*.<sup>69</sup> They do, however, all seem to rely on similar, but different, combinations of earlier sources, which is part of the reason why it is important to read them in conjunction for a study of this scope. All three conclude around the battle of Ré (1177), tailoring their endings to the beginning of *Sverris saga*.<sup>70</sup>

The earliest of these works is *Morkinskinna*. The present consensus is that it was written in Iceland around 1220, and it follows Norwegian affairs from the accession of Magnús Ólafsson (r. 1035-47) in 1035 to the midst of the civil war era, having been employed by the other two compendia as their main source for a considerable part of this period.<sup>71</sup> Little is known about the author of *Morkinskinna* aside from his Icelandic origins, but those origins are important to understanding the text. *Morkinskinna* reveals a distinctly Icelandic perspective, more so than the other two compendia, and an authorial view solidly rooted in Iceland rather than Norway.<sup>72</sup> However, it constantly keeps the Norwegian court at the

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<sup>65</sup> Andersson 2016: 34-6

<sup>66</sup> Bagge 2010b: 285

<sup>67</sup> Bagge 2010b: 287; Andersson 2016: 68-9

<sup>68</sup> Andersson 2016: 156; Bagge 2016: 36

<sup>69</sup> Clover 1982: 161; Andersson 1985: 185; Bagge 1991: 17; Andersson 1998: 155ff.; Ghosh 2011: 9-10

<sup>70</sup> Andersson 2016: 105. The existing version of *Morkinskinna* breaks off in 1157, but it is commonly believed that it continued to 1177 as well; see for instance Andersson & Gade 2012: 1 and Finlay 2004: 11.

<sup>71</sup> Andersson & Gade 2012: 66-7; Ármann Jakobsson 2014: 12

<sup>72</sup> This is the key argument of Ármann Jakobsson (2014), but it is generally accepted; cf. Andersson 2016: 161-2.

forefront, and Ármann Jakobsson considers it to have been part of, or at least connected to, the emerging cultural renaissance taking place under Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217-63), which included *Fagrskinna* and later also *Hákonar saga*.<sup>73</sup> While ties to Icelandic identity are mostly undisputed, the relevance of the text to the Norwegian context has also been defended by Norwegian historians, arguing that Iceland and Norway were closely enough related for *Morkinskinna* to be a source for Norwegian history, as the author could not have invented the whole socio-political framework.<sup>74</sup> The text furthermore shows signs of a more complex attitude to Norwegian politics, more closely tied to political leanings regarding individual kings and factions than any generalised view of kingship.<sup>75</sup>

*Morkinskinna* is a key source despite its overwhelming focus on male aristocratic protagonists, as women are increasingly visible.<sup>76</sup> This particular saga often lends its voice to details of court and family politics, in which women are unavoidable.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, there is a tendency to rely on *þættir*, anecdotal stories of interpersonal relationships dispersed within the overall narrative.<sup>78</sup> These often distract from the overall political narrative (and in some cases border on the fantastical), and have frequently been considered interpolations by a transcriber.<sup>79</sup> However, it has also been argued that the *þættir* are vital to the *Morkinskinna* author's presentation, providing deeper glimpses into political ideologies, and sharpening readers' understanding of individuals.<sup>80</sup> A more considerable disadvantage is the fact that these *þættir* rarely include women.<sup>81</sup> The scope of the text, further, is unfortunate with this purpose in mind. While the text provides valuable testimony on the women of the later kings' saga period, there is no material here on their prominence in pre-1030 politics.

*Fagrskinna* (c. 1225) similarly spans from the death of Hálfðan svarti until the battle of Ré. It is somewhat shorter and more concise, and is believed to have been compiled from earlier texts (including *Ágrip*, Oddr's *Óláfs saga* and *Morkinskinna*, as well as the aforementioned lost sources) with only occasional reliance on oral tradition.<sup>82</sup> Although similar to the Icelandic compilations, the consensus is that it was likely produced at the Norwegian court of

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<sup>73</sup> For the comments on Hákon's court, see Ármann Jakobsson 2014: 321.

<sup>74</sup> Orning 2013: 47-8

<sup>75</sup> See particularly Ármann Jakobsson (1999; 2000), Andersson (1999) and Andersson & Gade (2012: 15ff.)

<sup>76</sup> Ármann Jakobsson (1999: 86) refers to *Morkinskinna* as "masculine literature"; cf. Auður Magnúsdóttir 2013: 84.

<sup>77</sup> Ármann Jakobsson 1999: 87

<sup>78</sup> Andersson & Gade 2012: 13; cf. a longer discussion of the *þættir* in Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011a: xl-l.

<sup>79</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1937; Indrebø 1917: 11ff.; Andersson & Gade 2012: 13-4

<sup>80</sup> The main argument of Ármann Jakobsson 1999 (particularly pp. 72-3, 87-8).

<sup>81</sup> Ármann Jakobsson 1999: 86; cf. Harris 1991: 43ff.

<sup>82</sup> Andersson 2016: 65-6; cf. Indrebø's (1917) influential work on *Fagrskinna*.

Hákon Hákonarson.<sup>83</sup> Possibly as a result of this association, it shows clearer signs of Norwegian bias, anti-Danish sentiment and an endorsement of monarchical ideology than its Icelandic contemporaries.<sup>84</sup> *Fagrskinna* was written at a point where, in Sverre Bagge's words, "monarchy took historiography into its service."<sup>85</sup> In contrast to its predecessors, particularly *Morkinskinna*, it includes few anecdotal stories, presenting a restrictively focused history of the Norwegian kingdom. Its focus, however, lies on battles. *Fagrskinna* is indisputably the most battle-heavy of the sagas, and as such, its treatment of women is limited.<sup>86</sup> The presentation of the battles is also performed differently, with the *Fagrskinna* depiction of the battle of Svǫldr (c. 1000) for instance lacking the prefacing political manoeuvring that dominates the corresponding narratives in Oddr and *Heimskringla*. This does not mean that the former is negligible as a source for my work, as it does include quite a few female participants and certain episodes unique to it, but it contains considerably less relevant material than other sagas. As such, *Fagrskinna* usually ends up as a supporting document where a corresponding *Heimskringla* account exists, although exceptions occur.

Undoubtedly the most central source for this study, *Heimskringla* was in all likelihood written around 1230 by Snorri Sturluson,<sup>87</sup> who earlier wrote a *Separate saga of St. Óláfr* (c. 1225).<sup>88</sup> While it relies heavily on *Ágrip*, Oddr, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and a variety of other sources of its own, *Heimskringla* adds much information and description, and it also relies heavily on sources that are now lost.<sup>89</sup> It follows the same timeline as *Fagrskinna*, but the history is prefaced by a mythological addition, *Ynglinga saga*, explaining the mythic roots of the Norwegian royal lineage. Of all the main sources used here, it is the most extensive work, and as such is typically seen as an apogee of the development of the kings' saga genre.<sup>90</sup> It has even been suggested that *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* were all written by Snorri at various points in his career.<sup>91</sup> While this is a radical hypothesis with little evidence behind it, one can at least assert that through its active use of earlier sources, *Heimskringla* is

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<sup>83</sup> Clover 1982: 170; Bagge 1991: 143; Finlay 2004: 1-2; Ghosh 2011: 15. The nationality of the author is less clear; see Finlay 2004: 16; Andersson 2016: 65-6.

<sup>84</sup> Indrebø 1917: 148

<sup>85</sup> Bagge 1991: 204; cf. Andersson 2016: 142.

<sup>86</sup> It has been referred to as an *orostusaga*, or 'battle saga'; see Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: xvii-iii.

<sup>87</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: viii-ix; Margaret Cormack (2001: 61-8) has presented several alternative theories, including Snorri as head of a network of scribes rather than author. As author identity is relatively unimportant to the argument here, I have opted to follow the convention of accepting Snorri's authorship.

<sup>88</sup> The *Separate saga* in revised form was later incorporated into *Heimskringla*, and the (relatively few) divergences are included in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's *Heimskringla* edition. As such, I have generally treated the two versions in conjunction.

<sup>89</sup> See Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (2002a: ix-xix) for a full summary of *Heimskringla's* place in the historiographical tradition.

<sup>90</sup> Andersson 2016: 72-3, 105-6; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: xxxi

<sup>91</sup> Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 2012: 235ff.

a continuation of *Morkinskinna*'s and *Fagrskinna*'s attempts to bridge the gap between Norwegian formation stories, the hagiographic biographies of the Óláfrs, and *Sverris saga*.<sup>92</sup>

Snorri is often singled out for his skill as a writer of history. While the author of *Morkinskinna* has been called the Herodotus of Old Norse historiography, in his focus on anecdotes and imagined scenes of the historical past, Snorri is the Thucydides: academically analytical, and employing scientific methods.<sup>93</sup> Snorri's work is often seen as more politically neutral than its predecessors.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Bagge has argued that while all the sagas provide evidence helpful in reconstructing the historical past, *Heimskringla* is itself a superior attempt at historical reconstruction.<sup>95</sup> Its primary strength as a source lies in its considerably more detailed descriptions of personal motives and ambitions, as well as vivid depictions of social norms, allowing greater room for interpretations of the underlying social system.<sup>96</sup> The attempts of a critical historian can be observed through an examination of the work's prologue: detailing his intended usage of a combination of earlier written sources such as Ari, skaldic poetry, eyewitnesses, and older regnal lists, the author outlines a method of source interpretation and assessment.<sup>97</sup> Ari's history is described as having relied significantly on a variety of eyewitness sources, some of whom were alive as early as the tenth century. The skaldic poetry, introduced as the work of contemporary poets, is treated with analytical caution,<sup>98</sup> which has led many scholars to accept it as corroborating evidence for the saga texts it is included in.<sup>99</sup> While Snorri probably is far too trusting in certain of his sources, it is evident from this methodological introduction that at least the declared goal of *Heimskringla* was to write a work of history as close to actual fact as possible.

The treatment of women and their roles is generally similar across the kings' saga genre, as we shall see. However, *Heimskringla* stands out amongst the *konungasögur* in the exceptional attention given to the Norwegian political scene, on which women are major actors.<sup>100</sup> Female characters more frequently come to the fore in *Heimskringla* than in any of its predecessors, and the text prominently includes women who do not appear in earlier texts,<sup>101</sup> but

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<sup>92</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: xxix-xxxi

<sup>93</sup> Andersson & Gade 2012: 83

<sup>94</sup> See particularly Andersson 1994. Similar views are found in Bagge 1991.

<sup>95</sup> Bagge 1991: 57-60

<sup>96</sup> Bagge 1991: 236

<sup>97</sup> Although he occasionally strays from it; see Ghosh 2011: 53-7.

<sup>98</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 3-7

<sup>99</sup> Considerable scholarship has focused on the nature of in-text skaldic poetry as separate sources; see Whaley 2003: 252-4; Clunies Ross 2014: 59ff.; Goeres 2015: 5-7. Cf. Fidjestøl 1982: 212ff.

<sup>100</sup> Bagge 1991: 82-7; cf. further discussions of the 'political game' as a structural theme in chapter 1.

<sup>101</sup> See Appendix I.

simultaneously expands and sharpens the accounts of those who do. These women play an immense variety of socially important roles, and for the most part they do so with minimal explicitly negative judgment. The nature of their interaction with political and social structures is part of the shared characteristics spanning most of the *konungasögur*, but *Heimskringla* often highlights their participation most clearly.

It is not the final kings' saga, as the tradition continues with previously mentioned works such as the Denmark-centric *Knýtlinga saga* and the royally commissioned biography *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (1263-5), both possibly written by Snorri's nephews, but these were likely produced decades after the works at the centre of this investigation,<sup>102</sup> and their inclusion of women is limited. As such, they will only be used briefly where relevant as supporting material. The same will be the case for the material in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, which contains several of the aforementioned kings' sagas, and including material not found elsewhere, such as the excerpts from Styrmir Kárason mentioned above. Finally, although neither Norwegian-focused nor a saga, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, commissioned by the archbishop in Lund and written sometime between 1190 and 1208, will similarly be useful for comparative perspectives as Saxo, too, relies heavily on Old Norse-Icelandic sources.<sup>103</sup> The text's scope is overall similar to that of *Heimskringla*, building from the legendary past to the writer's present, but it emphasises Denmark rather than Norway. Although it has been considered clerical-monarchical propaganda, new views about Saxo's opinions and allegiances have come forward in recent decades.<sup>104</sup> Lars Hermanson, for instance, sees Saxo as defending friendship between kings and elites and favouring collective leadership rather than pure monarchical rule, thus again placing the work close to the sagas.<sup>105</sup> Strong similarities with *Knýtlinga saga* implies an older common source, or that the latter used Saxo's work.<sup>106</sup> Saxo's overall view of women appears quite similar to his contemporary Theodoricus, with most women either ignored or scrutinised, but he nevertheless provides valuable supporting evidence.<sup>107</sup> As such, the *Gesta* is often closely connected to the *konungasögur*, and it, along with the other texts referenced here, will be

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<sup>102</sup> For the dating and authorship of *Knýtlinga saga*, see Bjarni Guðnason 1982: clxxix-clxxx; Phelpstead 2005: 164. *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* was written by Snorri's nephew Sturla Þórðarson under strict royal control; see Andersson 2016: 119-21, 133ff. for a detailed survey.

<sup>103</sup> Friis-Jensen 2015a: xlix-l

<sup>104</sup> The main proponent of the theory of Saxo as a propagandist is Weibull 1915. For rebuttals of the theory, see Sawyer 1985b: 685; Hermanson 2000: 190-1; also Hermanson 2005.

<sup>105</sup> Hermanson 2005: 262

<sup>106</sup> Friis-Jensen 2015a: xlix-l; cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1981.

<sup>107</sup> For a comprehensive historiographical analysis of Saxo's use of female characters, reading them primarily as literary vehicles meant to advance the work's agenda, see Strand 1981: 157-63, 260; cf. Damsholt 1985: 150-3.

occasionally used where they can complement the central sources, as will more context-specific contemporary sources where available.

### **The *konungasögur* as sources**

Consensus remains that studying the political history of the medieval Scandinavian kingdoms is impossible without following the sagas, but views on their trustworthiness and usefulness as sources have changed dramatically.<sup>108</sup> For centuries, their historicity was practically taken for granted, with early scholars such as P. E. Müller and P. A. Munch claiming that the kings' sagas were based on a rigid Norwegian historiographical tradition.<sup>109</sup> Even when cracks began to appear, Finnur Jónsson memorably declared that he would defend the historicity of the sagas until his pen was taken from him.<sup>110</sup> However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a turn towards scepticism, particularly when Lauritz Weibull harshly criticised the use of sagas as historical sources for early Nordic history, and rejected mostly all the information in them as historical evidence for the period.<sup>111</sup> This view gradually garnered support among other scholars, and even *Heimskringla*'s historicity was soon dubbed an 'illusion'.<sup>112</sup> Eventually, Weibull's position turned from radical theory into established academic consensus, to the point where Theodore Andersson in 1964 observed that "today the historical content of the sagas is valued at not much above nil."<sup>113</sup> The new doctrine inspired new ways of reading, and critical approaches were developed by inventionist scholars such as Walter Baetke and Rolf Heller, with the general consensus being to partially or entirely reject the value of the sagas as historical evidence.<sup>114</sup> The result was a new movement melding truth and fiction together in all the saga literature, epitomised by Mikhail Steblin-Kamenskij's conception of 'syncretic truth'. Steblin-Kamenskij claimed that all the sagas were part truth and part fiction, that the word saga was used for any form of narrative, whether literary or historical, and that there was no real distinction between these two.<sup>115</sup> The *konungasögur* were recognised to be more historically oriented, but still placed well within the realm of syncretic truth. More recently, views critical to the historical value of the sagas have remained prevalent among many scholars, but they have largely evolved into methodological questions of how to interpret the

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<sup>108</sup> Bagge 1991: 2-6; Ghosh 2011: 99

<sup>109</sup> These views are central to Müller's *Sagabibliothek* (1820: 1-37). A useful assessment of early debates on saga historicity, although primarily focusing on the *Íslendingasögur*, can be found in Andersson 1964.

<sup>110</sup> Finnur Jónsson 1921: 141

<sup>111</sup> Weibull 1948: 245

<sup>112</sup> Bull 1931: 9

<sup>113</sup> Andersson 1964: 55

<sup>114</sup> Baetke 1973: 301ff.; cf. Heller 1958.

<sup>115</sup> Steblin-Kamenskij 1973: 24-8

texts and what to use them for, rather than questions of historicity. There has consequently been a growing tendency to examine kings' saga characters, including women, as literary constructions, and reflections of the time in which the sagas were written down.<sup>116</sup>

Most scholars now treat the historicity of individual characters and events as presented in the *konungasögur* with scepticism. However, an alternative historical approach has emerged from scholars inspired by Halvdan Koht who, while maintaining caution regarding the kings' sagas' historical reliability, sparked the view of authors like Snorri Sturluson not as inventors of historical fiction, but as something closer to modern historians interpreting and reconstructing the past.<sup>117</sup> Those who have followed in the footsteps of Koht are historians who see the *konungasögur* as invaluable pathways to glean into the societies and ideologies of the period, even if untrustworthy for information about specific details. Sverre Bagge has for instance emphasised Snorri's unreliability as a source for specific events taking place centuries before his time, but also his considerable value for a study of both his own society's view of the past, and of the social characteristics of the societies he is describing.<sup>118</sup> These approaches have received support from several other contemporary historians, who have argued for similar usage of the texts.<sup>119</sup> Bagge has further argued that Steblin-Kamenskij's concept of syncretic truth is not that far removed from modern historical scholarship, in the sense that historians of today also strive to "create a coherent story of a meaningful synthesis out of the events they assemble."<sup>120</sup> The result is a view of kings' saga authors, particularly Snorri, as historians who made honest attempts to reconstruct their past, while inevitably influenced by their own time.

Building from these methods, the main area of focus for this thesis is, methodologically speaking, the place of elite women in the medieval record of the past. My primary goal is to investigate women's power and political participation on a conceptual level, with individual women serving only as examples and case studies from which to observe trends in the historiography. As such, the sagas provide useful assessments when read through a critical lens, but it is important to point out that this is a historiographical analysis rather than a historical one. The primary usefulness of the sagas lies in providing evidence for their writers'

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<sup>116</sup> Jochens (1996a) and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013) follow this approach (although with different conclusions, as shown above); cf. Sverrir Jakobsson 2002.

<sup>117</sup> Koht 1921: 76ff.

<sup>118</sup> Bagge 1991: 3-5

<sup>119</sup> Lunden 2004: 23-4; Orning 2013: 47-8

<sup>120</sup> Bagge 1991: 57-60; cf. p. 24.



conceptions and representation of history.<sup>121</sup> As such, my findings will inevitably relate to how the framework of women's political participation appears in the historiographical reconstruction of early medieval Scandinavia, rather than early medieval Scandinavia itself.

There are four key aspects of the *konungasögur* which make them particularly advantageous. First, while gender research has gained ground across all saga genres in recent years, the kings' saga genre is less studied in terms of gender relative to its counterparts (at least partially due to the genre being overall less preoccupied with matters of gender).<sup>122</sup> Further, the *konungasögur*, most of the major works being dated c. 1180-1230, are centred in a condensed temporal space with considerable mutual influence, and generally thought to be among the oldest surviving saga texts, older than the majority of their counterparts in other genres such as the *Íslendingasögur* (Icelandic family sagas), *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) and *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas).<sup>123</sup> This makes it easier to reconcile inter-textual differences and view the texts as part of the same discourse, albeit with internal disagreement. Third, rooted in the conclusions of Bagge and others, the *konungasögur* were written as historiographical texts, i.e. with the primary goal of preserving accounts of the past.<sup>124</sup> This is shown most explicitly in the tendency of kings' saga authors to describe sources and methods for their work, as well as the occasional statements intended to establish provable historicity, found for instance in the opening sections of *Heimskringla*, Snorri's *Separate saga*, Oddr's *Óláfs saga* and *Sverris saga*, and similarly in the *HN* and *HARN*.<sup>125</sup> Such statements link the genre more closely to earlier historiographical works predating the flourishing of the saga literature, such as Ari's *Íslendingabók* (c. 1125), the prologue of which contains similar assertions.<sup>126</sup> While their historicity remains at best dubious, this establishes them as relics of a medieval society's perception of its own past. Finally, whereas other saga genres explore a variety of literary themes, the *konungasögur* are inherently political. Their focus is primarily on power struggles in early medieval Norway, and on male and female aristocrats striving for advantage in a competitive and volatile world.<sup>127</sup> A study of women, politics and power in the

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<sup>121</sup> The approach is thus close to the ideological one outlined in Bandlien 2005: 14-5.

<sup>122</sup> Jesch 1991: 202

<sup>123</sup> Bappi 2017: 4-5

<sup>124</sup> Although there is internal variation between individual kings' sagas, they are different in this regard from most *Íslendingasögur* and perhaps particularly *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*; see for instance Finlay 2014: 64-7. Cf. the debate between Lönnroth (1975), who questions the separation between these genres, and Harris (1975), who defends it.

<sup>125</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 3-7; *Heimskringla II*: 419-22; Oddr: 125-6; *HARN*: 6

<sup>126</sup> Jakob Benediktsson 1986: 3; cf. pp. xvii-ix for dating. The same is true for *Landnámabók*, thought to date from the same time, but the extant versions of the latter are all later redactions.

<sup>127</sup> Scholars have called attention to such main themes as political leadership and unification (Andersson 2016: 130-1) and the contest for political power (Bagge 1991: 82-7).

*konungasögur* thus has the opportunity to bring new conceptual nuance by studying less used, earlier, more politically oriented sources which, although they share many techniques and concepts with the rest of the saga material, in certain ways provide sharper reflections of a society's historical record. From the historian's perspective, the kings' sagas more than anything grant the possibility of identifying historiographical preservations of social systems as they were thought to have existed in Scandinavia prior to the time of writing.

## **b) The language of networks: methodological and terminological considerations**

The past portrayed by the *konungasögur* is essentially stateless. There is little evidence for any developed bureaucracy or institutional framework,<sup>128</sup> and although the Scandinavian kingdoms at any given time contained major or minor kings with varying degrees of geopolitical control, these kings were simply, in the words of Sverre Bagge, ‘gang leaders’.<sup>129</sup> In place of a state, society and politics are organised around various group relations and interpersonal bonds organised both horizontally and vertically.<sup>130</sup> These bonds make up the concept referred to here as networks.<sup>131</sup> Despite occasional centralising efforts, there is no indication of these proto-state structures changing significantly until the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, after most of the kings’ sagas were completed, meaning saga writers would be well familiar with them.<sup>132</sup> In the small group of women at the highest levels of these networks,<sup>133</sup> there are multiple extensive cases with considerable attention paid to political dealings. To make the most of these, the central method applied by this thesis is close textual analysis of these detailed case studies. I will be tracking key women's political careers and the language and agency surrounding them, the objective being to establish both their individual roles and their common characteristics, and ultimately how they are enabled to perform political functions as a regular occurrence. In this section, I outline the parameters for studying these cases based on network theories, Old Norse-Icelandic terminology, and previous scholarship, in order to establish a framework for women's opportunities within the political language.

### **Concepts of network**

I will be using techniques partially drawn from social network analysis to identify the political structures in which these women operate.<sup>134</sup> This is centred on the idea of investigating the sum of connections between individuals in addition to the individuals themselves. The aim is thus here to identify the properties of networks, how they operate, and how they affect society at large, and then, once this is established in the relevant paradigm (in this case the kings’ sagas), to examine the positions and roles of individuals and social groups within networks.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020a: 40-1

<sup>129</sup> Bagge 1996

<sup>130</sup> Helle 2008: 371; Bandlien 2005: 63; Bagge 2014: 20-1

<sup>131</sup> The term is used similarly by Miller 1990: 187-9.

<sup>132</sup> Orning 2013: 47-8; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 114

<sup>133</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>134</sup> A review of social network analysis and its uses for historians can be found in Morrissey 2015. For a broader survey, see Scott 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Morrissey 2015: 71-2

Accordingly, this introductory section will concentrate on establishing the properties of kings' saga aristocratic networks in themselves before venturing into the territory of women's interaction with, and use of, these networks. The main point of divergence from social network analysis lies in the fact that the sagas are not systematic sources, ill-suited for mapping out complete networks and studying them quantitatively. Rather, the main use for the technique in the saga context lies in the study of how individuals and groups of individuals use their connections and networks to advance their socio-political interests. This is not far from the earliest anthropological attempts at network analysis, for instance J. A. Barnes' article coining the term in a 1954 study which, coincidentally, took place in coastal Norway.<sup>136</sup> Barnes, like myself, was primarily interested in what network bonds meant for the social fabric, and investigated social networks as webs of various equal and unequal bonds and groups in a small coastal community, and (although without much evidence or discussion) emphasised medieval roots.<sup>137</sup>

As the investigation of networks is closely tied to the study of disputes and conflict in pre-state societies, social network methods will here further be supplemented by existing medieval network theories, and legal anthropological theories introduced to medieval history by historians of conflict such as William Ian Miller and Stephen D. White.<sup>138</sup> This has more recently been embraced and developed by a series of Nordic historians, providing a solid understanding of the role of networks in managing and resolving social and political conflict in the saga context.<sup>139</sup> As per Lars Hermanson & Hans Jacob Orning, networks have still received very little attention in Nordic scholarship,<sup>140</sup> but their recent volume, co-edited with Kim Esmark, is one of several new contributions addressing this issue, reading the sagas and other Nordic sources through network methods.<sup>141</sup> Generally, these methods all involve studying networks as the main source of political engagement and conflict resolution prior to (and during the early development of) the state, studying an individual's inclusion in a variety of social bonds and group relations as a way of participating in more than one kind of

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<sup>136</sup> Barnes 1954: 39ff.

<sup>137</sup> Barnes 1954: 54-5

<sup>138</sup> Miller's (1990) foundational study of the Icelandic feud enabled readings of saga conflicts as fought and resolved based on customs and norms in interpersonal and inter-familial relations; cf. White (2005 and 2013) for a similar approach outside Scandinavia.

<sup>139</sup> Hermanson (2000) explores aristocratic networks in the context of 12<sup>th</sup> century Denmark; Auður Magnúsdóttir (2001) has investigated kinship relations in medieval Iceland; see also similar works by Hermanson (2005), and Esmark & Orning (2013, particularly pp. 5-7).

<sup>140</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 56

<sup>141</sup> Esmark et al. 2020a; other recent contributions include Jón Viðar Sigurðsson & Småberg 2013; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017; Nysether 2019; Opsahl 2019.

network, and how large-scale socio-political events were very often the result of the cooperative efforts of networks.

A useful definition previously applied to saga texts is that “a network is a collection of nodes connected by links.”<sup>142</sup> For my purposes here, a network in historiographical material (or indeed present day) is a collection of individuals connected by various interpersonal ties. These ties can be rooted in any form of social, emotional or political bond, are in most cases voluntary or at least provide both parties with some benefit, and are open to change based on the parties’ circumstances and needs. The higher an individual’s social position, the more accessible the links; a king will inevitably have a higher number of personal ties offered to him than a local chieftain, and a chieftain a higher number than a farm owner.<sup>143</sup> Further, a network can be either personal or factional; it can function as a) a person’s full collection of links, i.e. ‘x’s network’, or as b) an unofficial political entity with multiple members, rooted in shared bonds and common causes, i.e. ‘the network x is part of’.<sup>144</sup>

In studying the various forms of network bond and political organisation, I follow the approach of German medievalist Gerd Althoff. Althoff’s social analysis of the medieval aristocratic network system operates with three distinct forms of social bond around which networks are organised: the three group associations of kinship, friendship and lordship.<sup>145</sup> This same categorisation will be maintained in this analysis of women’s participation. While traditional power bases such as direct military might and legal authority do exist in the world of the kings’ sagas, most political power is reliant on the construction and maintenance of mutually beneficial bonds, including resolving tensions between conflicting bonds so as to not lose gained advantages.<sup>146</sup> Even kingship and other relatively institutionalised political positions are based to a large degree on the building of voluntary support; as such, the political success of a kings’ saga aristocrat is often determined based on their network foundations.<sup>147</sup> Descriptions of aristocrats from the texts reflect this network view of power, particularly those where conflict strategies are central. Furthermore, scholars generally agree on the reading of connections, even connections of kinship and lordship, not as static immutable structures, but rather as socio-cultural tools that aristocrats employ in order to

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<sup>142</sup> Mac Carron & Kenna 2013b: 13

<sup>143</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 131

<sup>144</sup> See a similar distinction in Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 59.

<sup>145</sup> Althoff 2004: 1-3; a similar division is applied by Esmark et al. (2020b) and Hermanson & Orning (2020a & 2020b).

<sup>146</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 62ff.

<sup>147</sup> Helle 2008: 371; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 47ff. Although this power foundation, particularly in the context of kingship, changes from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards; see Orning 2008: 9-10, 51-6.

accomplish their personal and group-based objectives.<sup>148</sup> Every network bond is negotiable and continuously re-negotiated by the parties involved.<sup>149</sup> However, the participation of women in these networks has for the most part been confined to the background.<sup>150</sup> Most aspects of medieval network politics remain read and interpreted as a predominantly male sphere, which may be a relatively accurate reflection, but also hides much of the wider social environment. Throughout this initial overview, I will present the aforementioned categories of bonds in order and show that all can, in the case of the kings' sagas, be relied on and used by aristocratic women as well as men. Both male and female examples will be used to establish a 'language of networks', crafting the framework necessary for the analysis of specific case studies in the following chapters.

### **Kinship bonds**

The most immediately accessible group association to any individual is kinship. The nature of Old Norse kinship has been discussed by many scholars, particularly in the context of law codes, and so this section primarily intends to establish the terms I will be emphasising in my readings of the saga texts, as well as their political use.<sup>151</sup> Recent research has described kinship as egocentrically and bilaterally structured, where each individual has a distinct collection of kinship links and consequently, their own unique version of a kinship network.<sup>152</sup> These links overlap with other close relatives depending on the number of degrees of separation, and can be expanded upon through additional voluntary kinship links such as marriage. However, the kin groups being personal means that kinship bonds are highly mutable. While kinsmen in the sagas most frequently do support each other, they can also be found in conflict. The political use of kinship bonds is thus no less tactically applied than other network associations, but aside from institutions such as marriage, kinship bonds are not originally manufactured, but rather emphasised and activated for this purpose.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> White 2005: vii; cf. Esmark & Orning 2013: 6.

<sup>149</sup> For the fluctuating nature of networks and political factions, see for instance Nysether 2019, particularly p. 148.

<sup>150</sup> The most notable exception is the work of Auður Magnúsdóttir, who has investigated women as network members in medieval Iceland; see Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001; 2008.

<sup>151</sup> For more extensive terminological analyses, see Merrill (1964) and Rich (1976); and more practical/legal assessments by Vestergaard (1988: 160ff.), Miller (1990: 139ff.) and Vogt (2010).

<sup>152</sup> Vestergaard 1988: 161; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 42; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 104

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Lars Ivar Hansen (1999: 23ff.), who has established how legal kinship could be adapted, changed, and used as a tool by governing authorities.

### *The terminology of kinship*

Beyond immediate family units, the saga language of kinship is primarily centred on the term *frændi*, ‘kinsman’, and by extension *frændkona*, ‘kinswoman’, and *frændsemi*, ‘kinship’.<sup>154</sup> These are the primary terms for someone to whom one is related, and the typical form of addressing such a person, in the saga texts. There appears to be no strict limit to how far *frændsemi* goes in the narratives,<sup>155</sup> as it is used on distant cousins with various degrees of removal, and as such, particularly in the *konungasögur*, the term appears to be a connection one refers to when it is politically beneficial to do so.<sup>156</sup> Close or strong kinship can be referred to as *frændsemi mikill*, and often implies that the bond of kinship is particularly powerful between two individuals, but even this can be exaggerated for political purposes.<sup>157</sup> The obligations of kinship bonds are vague, with scholarly arguments having ranged from kin being the primary source of socio-political support, to there being no significant support obligation.<sup>158</sup> Scholarly consensus does establish, however, that support from kinsmen was rarely automatic; it was expected where possible, but not guaranteed, and reliance on kinship bonds was highly variable.<sup>159</sup> However, some indication of kin being seen as reliable political support in the sources themselves does occur in the kinship vocabulary; including numerous instances in the texts of adjectives such as *frændmágr* or *frændstórr*.<sup>160</sup> These define an individual’s power through the power of their kin, referring to having many and influential kinsmen respectively, and present kinship connections as part of a wider stable network structure.

Connected to *frændsemi* is the term *mágr*, corresponding to ‘in-law’.<sup>161</sup> *Frændi* typically refers to a blood relation, whereas *mágr* always refers to an individual related by affinity to another. In the same way as a *frændi*, a *mágr* would be expected, perhaps even obligated, to give support to their counterparts, and the bond between a man and his wife’s kinsmen could often be strong.<sup>162</sup> However, whereas the vocabulary surrounding *frændi* and *frændkona* is

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<sup>154</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 176-7; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 107

<sup>155</sup> Though it is restricted in the laws; see Esmark et al. 2020b: 15.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Miller 1990: 145-6; Esmark et al. 2020b: 15-6.

<sup>157</sup> Óláfr Tryggvason is for instance reluctant to harm his kinsman Hárekr due to *frændsemi mikill* between them; see *Heimskringla I*: 322. Óláfr and Hárekr are second cousins once removed, but possibly their ‘strong kinship’ emphasises joint descent from Haraldr hárfagri.

<sup>158</sup> Miller (1990: 164-66) provides an example of the former position, and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2017: 115) an example of the latter.

<sup>159</sup> Vogt 2010: 24-5; Searle 1988: 160-1

<sup>160</sup> See for instance *Heimskringla I*: 205; *Heimskringla II*: 29.

<sup>161</sup> One would in most cases consider a *mágr* someone with whom one has *frændsemi*; see for instance Miller 1990: 167.

<sup>162</sup> Rich 1976: 6-7; Miller 1990: 167-71

widespread among all saga individuals, *mágr* appears to be virtually male-exclusive. I am unable to find a single instance of a woman described as a *mágr/mágkona* in the *konungasögur* written before 1230, and the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* lists only twelve occurrences of the latter term in the entire saga corpus.<sup>163</sup> However, *mágr*, even if it is in most cases a connection between men, often becomes important in political contexts because it is a connection that only exists through a shared relationship with a woman. In fact, there are indications that anyone who marries any of a man's female relatives, or *frændkonur*, is considered that man's *mágr*; both a brother-in-law, a father-in-law and even a stepfather.<sup>164</sup> While marrying each other's sisters is the most common way in which men become *mágar*, marrying a widowed mother appears to fill the same function, and in both cases *mágar* tend to be among each other's most ardent supporters.<sup>165</sup> This makes the *mágr* relationship important in an analysis of women and their network participation; more often than not, they fill prominent functions in men's relationships, and bonds formed with a woman as a kinship link tends to leave that particular woman in a position of considerable influence in the bond.<sup>166</sup>

Slightly more complicated is the term *ætt*. Family or lineage are the most accurate translations, but they do not convey the full meaning.<sup>167</sup> An *ætt* typically refers to a group of individuals who share a kinship connection deriving from a common ancestor, regardless of whether the individuals have a personal connection, and of whether they are close relatives or from completely separate branches.<sup>168</sup> However, the term can also refer to a particular social group with shared ancestral characteristics.<sup>169</sup> As such, mentions of *ætt* tend to be more ideological in nature, used to justify a person's claim to power, or the need for an alliance between multiple groups rooted in common ancestry.<sup>170</sup> Occasionally calling upon shared *ætt* relations can resolve conflict, but there is no guarantee against members of the same *ætt* engaging in disputes, particularly if they are competing for an area or power base considered to be the ancestral property of the *ætt*. Similarly, *ætt* can be used as a contrasting measure

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<sup>163</sup> "mágkona", n.d.

<sup>164</sup> A prominent example is the relationship between Óláfr Haraldsson and his stepfather Sigurðr sýr, who he refers to as *mágr*. Sigurðr is the first magnate Óláfr convinces to join his bid for kingship, and provides vital assistance in persuading others; see *Heimskringla II*: 41-7. A central role in this episode is played by their shared female relative, Óláfr's mother Ásta, whom I shall come back to in chapter 2.

<sup>165</sup> See for instance Miller 1990: 167-71; Sørensen 1993: 176.

<sup>166</sup> More on this below.

<sup>167</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 760

<sup>168</sup> Vestergaard 1988: 179

<sup>169</sup> See particularly Cole (2015), who examines *ætt* and related terms as descriptive of race and ethnicity.

<sup>170</sup> The quality of one's *ætt* is a key signifier of kinship; see Esmark et al. 2020b: 13.



when defining social class; differences in the perceived quality of individuals' *ætt* can preclude or disrupt bonds between them.<sup>171</sup>

Most considerations of *ætt* throughout this thesis will inevitably relate to the one descending from Haraldr Hálfðanarson 'hárfagri', the semi-legendary king allegedly responsible for the unification of Norway (traditionally dated, although with practically no substantial evidence, to the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century). The ideological basis for claims to descent from him is summarised in his mother's prophetic dream of the king as a mighty tree, recounted by *Heimskringla* when describing Haraldr on his deathbed: "Kvistir ok limar tréssins boðaði afkvæmi hans, er um allt land dreifðisk, ok af hans ætt hafa verit jafnan síðan konungar í Nórøgi."<sup>172</sup> (The branches of the tree signified his offspring, who stretched across the land, and all the kings of Norway have since come from his *ætt*.) With the rise of kin-strife and the declaration that any of the king's sons can claim kingship, the Haraldr's death sparks the competition for political power in Norway which then becomes a central theme of the *konungasögur*.<sup>173</sup> In the saga narratives, every single native king of Norway is indeed connected to the mythical founder, either by claiming descent from him themselves, or being descended from another king who does. Real or fabricated connections to Haraldr's *ætt* are frequently used by ambitious individuals and provides a common theme for the genre. Men in pursuit of kingship are quick to use royal descent as legitimate justification for their bids, but it is no less important to women. While women are unable to pursue formal kingship, they too are quick to use ancestral heritage as a political asset in order to advance their interests. Ideological use of the *ætt* to accomplish a political agenda is an integral component of political manoeuvring, regardless of sex.

It has been suggested by Claus Krag that Haraldr's *ætt* was an invention of the early Old Norse historiographical tradition,<sup>174</sup> although this has in turn been disputed by others including Knut Dørum, who finds indications that 11<sup>th</sup> century kings did claim descent from Haraldr.<sup>175</sup> However, even if Óláfr and his predecessors did descend from or claim to descend from Haraldr, this link fades after his death. Regardless of whether one agrees with Krag, the line from Haraldr had almost certainly stopped being politically relevant by the mid-11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> See e.g. Haraldr grenski's comparison of his own *ætt* to that of his wife when intending to set her aside; *Heimskringla I*: 288.

<sup>172</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 148

<sup>173</sup> Bagge 1991: 82-7. *Heimskringla* describes Haraldr's inheritance decree as an attempt to mitigate the infighting between his sons, but instead it becomes a central reason behind centuries of competition for kingship; see *Heimskringla I*: 136-7.

<sup>174</sup> Krag 1989: 288ff.

<sup>175</sup> Dørum 2001: 323ff.; cf. Bagge 2001: 68-9; for a recent agreement with Krag, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016a.

century; after this, the royal *ætt* is instead based around descent from Haraldr Sigurðarson ‘harðráði’ (r. 1042-66).<sup>176</sup> Either way, there appears to be little evidence to suggest any automatic *ætt*-based succession to the crown, but rather, as Sverre Bagge suggests, any form of royal descent functioning as an entrance ticket to the pursuit of kingship.<sup>177</sup> While women are excluded from kingship, they too, I will argue, use royal kinship bonds as justification for their political participation. Being the daughter, wife or mother of a king can allow a woman prestigious titles such as *konungsdóttir*, *dróttning* or *konungsmóðir* respectively, and simultaneously grant her increased possibilities for participating on the political stage.<sup>178</sup> As such, I am ultimately not interested in whether or not this represents a legitimate and historically accurate line of interconnected monarchs, but rather in how the *ætt* and its implications are used by women in the texts. While the term occurs less frequently than *frændsemi*, it is a vital aspect of network language, with various iterations in which it communicates a sense of unity from which to build deeper cooperative bonds, or even an ideological concept to construct a network around.<sup>179</sup> An *ætt* in itself can be a network, in the sense of a coherent entity with internal customs, and is a ‘conscious political construct’.<sup>180</sup> It provides the kinship basis for political opportunity in both sexes, and makes a powerful network tool.

#### *Marriage and motherhood: women as links and nodes*

Certain points must be raised about the gendered nature of kinship, and the kin-based routes to female political participation. Women are essential to network recruitment and for building alliances, a basic anthropological concept established by well-known scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>181</sup> The system of kinship in early medieval Scandinavian law, which appears to be reasonably close to saga accounts, has been defined as elective and alliance-based kinship, with marriage functioning alternately as peace-making and alliance formation.<sup>182</sup> The marriage aspect is thus important as the main institution allowing women to move between and participate in multiple distinct kinship networks, not necessarily aligned with each

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<sup>176</sup> Bagge 2001: 68-70; cf. Krag 1989. *Ágrip* includes a final mention linking Haraldr Sigurðarson to Haraldr hárfagri through a different line, but the link is dubious and not mentioned again; see *Ágrip*: 36-7. Note also the suggestion by Sverrir Jakobsson (2002: 217-18; 2016: 4ff.) that Haraldr hárfagri may have been a mythical figure based on the memory of Haraldr Sigurðarson.

<sup>177</sup> Bagge 1991: 85-90

<sup>178</sup> Although all these titles are selectively used by the sagas, as I shall return to; see Appendix III for lists of instances.

<sup>179</sup> See Appendix III for numbers on *ætt* and *frændsemi* respectively.

<sup>180</sup> A term borrowed from Searle 1988: 96-7.

<sup>181</sup> Exchange of women is a foundational principle for Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory, formulated in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*; see Lévi-Strauss 1969: 45-68.

<sup>182</sup> Vogt 2010: 11-3; Vestergaard 1988: 161-2 191; Esmark et al. 2020b: 17-18

other.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, women's agency in networks based partially or primarily on kinship seems for the most part to be as wives (or concubines), mothers, and objects and organisers of marriage and other voluntary kinship bonds. Generally speaking, they function as ties binding these networks together, another point going back to Lévi-Strauss' notion of women as the supreme gift.<sup>184</sup> Consequently, the women in the networks of the sagas are frequently assessed by virtue of their own kinship,<sup>185</sup> and custom dictated that kings choose wives and concubines carefully.<sup>186</sup> Like marriage, concubinage is often a formalised relationship between the king and the chosen woman's family, not necessarily as permanent,<sup>187</sup> but similarly sparking inter-group bonds.<sup>188</sup> A concubine from an aristocratic family still served as a representative of her own kin, and aristocratic women in early medieval societies were often operating as agents of their families at court.<sup>189</sup>

Women's crucial role in networks of kinship is reflected in the elite marriage politics of the era, about which we can discern a certain amount from the source material. Theodoricus, supported by the sagas, mentions how Óláfr Tryggvason used the marriages of his sisters to build his own network and thus reinforce his rule in Norway, tactically binding network ties with important aristocratic leaders.<sup>190</sup> The same strategy is later pursued by Haraldr 'gilli' (r. 1130-6) with his daughters.<sup>191</sup> In some cases female relatives are mere resources for male network leaders to spend as political coin, whereas in others they could have significant say in their own futures.<sup>192</sup> The common denominator, however, is that women, voluntarily or involuntarily, often end up tying networks together.<sup>193</sup> This notion is closely tied to the *mágr* relationship described above, and further reinforced by the conception of the mother's brother as one of the most important allies a man could have on the political scene, another area of kinship relations described by Lévi-Strauss, who sees him as part of the basic unit of

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<sup>183</sup> Bandlien's (2005: 65-6) study of marriage has emphasised how married women remained part of both kinship groups. While risking (and often causing) conflicting loyalties, this was essential to building wider networks of kinship. A discussion of bonds across conflicting networks is also provided in Nysether 2019: 134ff.

<sup>184</sup> Lévi-Strauss 1969: 65

<sup>185</sup> See for instance the example of Þóra Morströng, whose position as Haraldr hárfagri's concubine is justified with her being of good *ætt*; *Heimskringla I*: 143.

<sup>186</sup> An investigation of distinctions between marriage and concubinage was undertaken by Auður Magnúsdóttir (2001). Although focused on Iceland and the *samtíðarsögur*, the analysis is widely applicable in the saga context.

<sup>187</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 65

<sup>188</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2020: 217-8

<sup>189</sup> Stafford 1983: 43

<sup>190</sup> *HARN*: 21; *Heimskringla I*: 306. Cf. Bandlien 2005: 177-8.

<sup>191</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 331-2; cf. similar tactics used by Snorri Sturluson himself in Auður Magnúsdóttir 2020: 223-5.

<sup>192</sup> See the cases in chapters 1 and 2; cf. Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 42ff.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Bagge 1999: 303.

kinship.<sup>194</sup> Central aristocratic relationships are forged through shared kinship with women,<sup>195</sup> and while this particular relationship does not automatically grant any status or power to the woman involved, she is virtually irreplaceable in terms of maintaining it.<sup>196</sup>

Such widespread links create the notion of women as vital to connecting kin groups beyond just their own marriages. This phenomenon is well supported in the textual material, and scholars have previously investigated the position of women as irreplaceable network links in Anglo-Saxon England,<sup>197</sup> and in 12<sup>th</sup> century Denmark.<sup>198</sup> Many of the women of the *konungasögur* find themselves in similarly central network positions. There are clear cases of the disruption of a marriage causing the disruption of an entire network, for instance when Magnús Sigurðarson of Norway (r. 1130-5) decides to send his Danish wife back to her kinsmen, reportedly because he did not love her. He subsequently faces fervent Danish opposition, leading Snorri in *Heimskringla* to remark that “...gekk honum allt síðan þyngra. Fekk hann óþokka mikinn af frændum hennar.”<sup>199</sup> (...everything worsened for him, as her kin became intensely hostile to him.) It is not certain if the wife herself contributes to the king’s downfall, but in any event, this description adds considerably to the image of female members of networks; just as they were instrumental in the creation, renewal and expansion of network bonds, so too could they be instrumental in their breakdown.

Women’s marriages frequently establish them as links between individuals and networks, creating a position they can often leverage for influence, including occasions where they are left with an exceptionally powerful personal network of their own. There are few instances where women are able to obtain political influence without first beginning a relationship with a male aristocrat, often a king or someone of equivalent standing.<sup>200</sup> A relationship with a king is a coveted position for many reasons and for many women, and often affords them extraordinary political opportunities if they prove able to capitalise on their circumstances, which is the main focus of this thesis. In many situations, the path for a saga woman to move from a mere linking position to a node in her own right lies through motherhood. As per Lévi-Strauss, “Motherhood is not only a mother’s relationship to her children, but her relationship

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<sup>194</sup> Lévi-Strauss 1963: 39-46; Vestergaard 1988: 189

<sup>195</sup> Prominent examples include the maternal uncles of Haraldr hárfagri and Óláfr Tryggvason; see *Heimskringla I*: 94-5, 230-1.

<sup>196</sup> Women could also be caught in the middle when their kinship groups clash; see Larrington 2009: 513-7.

<sup>197</sup> Particularly the phenomenon of the ‘peace-weaver’; see Cavell 2015: 358ff.

<sup>198</sup> Hermanson 2000, particularly pp. 108-11

<sup>199</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 279; similar information is given in *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*.

<sup>200</sup> Bandlien 2005: 160-2; Wærdahl 2019: 103-4

to other members of the group.”<sup>201</sup> By becoming a mother, a woman creates a network bond with her children, and strengthens the bond with the father, but she simultaneously creates a stronger bond with the various connected network members anticipating an heir. For a concubine or a temporary lover, bearing the child of a man of higher rank could trigger social advancement.<sup>202</sup> For a wife, having a child, particularly a son who could function as the father’s heir, could assert her position as the predominant woman of the family. If the father is a king or a similarly powerful man, this would strengthen these advancements.<sup>203</sup> Many saga women consequently see their positions improve after giving birth; having a child leads to an increase in social and political status within the kinship group, and within the wider network structure.

Further evidence for the prominent position of mothers in Old Norse networks of kinship is provided by the textual evidence of matronymic links, of which there are multiple examples. Kinship in the sagas is primarily counted patrilineally, but in some cases, where the mother’s kin is more prominent or powerful than the father’s, or when the father is unknown or deceased, her line can be followed.<sup>204</sup> This leads to the implication that when someone is listed by their mother’s name rather than their father’s, it signifies power and status invested in the person or lineage of the mother. In most cases there is a structural, dynastic reason, for instance when the line of succession ran through the mother, but there are several exceptions, often involving the extent of a woman’s parental authority and control over her children, as will be argued.<sup>205</sup>

Parental authority is similarly important in the interaction between political strategy and the institutions of fosterage and step-parenthood. Fosterage is another common inter-network bond.<sup>206</sup> It is primarily associated with situations where the parents are of higher rank than the foster-parents,<sup>207</sup> but this is not always the case.<sup>208</sup> While a social institution under normal circumstances, a “network of serial clientage”,<sup>209</sup> it could also be a way for the young individual being fostered to gain protection in a powerful household, and build a network of their own.<sup>210</sup> There are indications of fosterage by exceptionally high-ranking individuals, e.g.

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<sup>201</sup> Lévi-Strauss 1969: 482

<sup>202</sup> Jochens 1987b: 332-4; cf. Auður Magnúsdóttir 2001.

<sup>203</sup> Jochens 1987b: 327ff., particularly p. 335 and pp. 343-4.

<sup>204</sup> Hødnebo 1974: 319; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 104

<sup>205</sup> See discussions in chapter 1, and Appendix IV.

<sup>206</sup> Goody 1982: 114

<sup>207</sup> Explicitly stated in *Heimskringla I*: 145.

<sup>208</sup> Miller 1990: 122-3; cf. Hansen 2008: 76; Parkes 2006: 360-3.

<sup>209</sup> Parkes 2006: 360

<sup>210</sup> Byock 1982: 247-8

kings, as signalling patronage of, rather than clientage to, the fostered individual and his or her family.<sup>211</sup> This can still, however, be of significant benefit to the fosterer; the *konungasögur* contain multiple examples of royal children detached from their parents (by the latter's death, absence or otherwise), and powerful figures seeking political assets offering to take them in as a way of gaining advantage.<sup>212</sup> As such, aristocratic fostering, and offers of it, are flexible and can often lie at the crossroads between kinship, friendship and lordship,<sup>213</sup> something occurring with both male and female foster-parents, as we shall see.<sup>214</sup>

The ultimate position for a woman in networks of kinship is the role of aristocratic widow, particularly if she is also a mother. Medieval women, it has been argued, were released from male authority and allowed independent exercise of their husbands' power upon widowhood.<sup>215</sup> Scholarship has paid considerable attention to the topic, establishing for instance how medieval widowhood was gender-specific; men's status did not change.<sup>216</sup> This in turn goes to show that widowhood is indeed a transformation of a woman's social agency, although the extent and nature of the transformation can vary according to age, class and geographical location. The common denominator is that a widow finds herself in a position where she is independent from a male guardian (although still rooted in dependent roles according to social norm).<sup>217</sup> The position and agency of early medieval Scandinavian widows at large is well-documented: there is considerable evidence for wealthy widows as independent patrons of art and craftsmanship,<sup>218</sup> and early law codes allow widows to speak as virtual men at the assemblies, having inherited the landowner role from their husbands.<sup>219</sup>

These aspects of widowhood correspond to the image found in the sagas. Saga widows are often powerful when playing a social role, including as guardians of their husband's heirs or properties.<sup>220</sup> Widows, particularly aristocratic widows, lack a superior male authority figure, and their relative independence enables their embodiment of masculine ideals.<sup>221</sup> Socially, a

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<sup>211</sup> Parkes 2003: 761-6; cf. the situations of Haraldr gráfeldr and Óláfr Tryggvason in ch. 2 and 4 below. This further corresponds more closely to the custom in feudal Europe; see Bloch 1962: 226.

<sup>212</sup> There are multiple alleged kings' sons who are encouraged by their foster-parents to make bids for the crown, such as Hákon Magnússon Þórisfóstri (d. 1095) and Sigurðr Sigurðarson Markúsfóstri (d. 1163); cf. similar situations in Ireland, described by Parkes 2006: 365-6.

<sup>213</sup> Vogt 2010: 12; Byock 1982: 247-8

<sup>214</sup> For women as foster-mothers in sagas in general, see Jochens 1996b: 206-9.

<sup>215</sup> McNamara & Wemple 1973: 135-7; Kuehn 1981: 128-30; Stafford 1997b: 75. Cf. Nelson & Rio (2015) for a more tempered, but still positive, view of widows' legal status.

<sup>216</sup> Nelson 1995: 84

<sup>217</sup> Nelson 1995: 109-11; cf. Wærdahl 2017: 98-101.

<sup>218</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 162-4

<sup>219</sup> Sanmark 2014: 94-6

<sup>220</sup> Ricketts 2010: 10

<sup>221</sup> Jochens 1995: 62-3

widow could thus function as a man, particularly if she has young sons. While she is not necessarily able to inherit the official political role of her husband, she is often able to assume his dominant position in the kinship group, due to her parental authority over her children.<sup>222</sup> If an infant son inherits his father's status as head of an aristocratic household, but the mother inherits her husband's control of their children, this can create a considerable opening for a widowed mother to wield the influence her husband wielded, and take command of the wider network surrounding the household itself,<sup>223</sup> occasionally extending to wider and more complex political factions. Studies of saga widows have tended to exclude royal widows, as these have somewhat different parameters,<sup>224</sup> but in the *konungasögur*, I argue that their social power and position are rooted in the same sources as that of other widows, but with the added benefit that the widows of kings tend to avoid the disadvantages, vulnerabilities and social pressure forced upon widows at large.<sup>225</sup> The royal widows of the kings' sagas frequently find themselves in a dominant network position from which they can make the power of the kin group their own.

Both for women specifically and the people populating the narratives in general, kinship is the basic unit of the aristocratic networks of the *konungasögur*. Eleanor Searle refers to Germanic kinship structures as the “building blocks for the social, political, and military arrangements of the medieval North.”<sup>226</sup> While it does not have to be the most important bond, it is the initial structure from which one or more individuals are able to build further bonds, and construct and expand a network. It is the only type of bond most individuals possess by default, but it could at the same time be greatly shaped, negotiated and strategically used through personal agency.

### **Friendship bonds**

Traditional views of the social structures in the sagas have been dominated by studies of kinship, embodied in ideas of *ættesamfunn*, ‘*ætt* society’ or ‘kinship society’.<sup>227</sup> This focus has recently shifted to include other structures and bonds, the most important of which have been bonds of friendship. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, arguably the foremost authority on saga

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<sup>222</sup> See for instance Stafford (1997b: 77-80) for aristocratic parental authority.

<sup>223</sup> A widow can for instance maintain her husband's lordship bonds and call upon his retainers; see Ricketts 2010: 179. See also the lordship section below.

<sup>224</sup> Ricketts 2010: 1. Cf. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 145ff., particularly p. 155.

<sup>225</sup> Negative aspects of widowhood are central to Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's chapter on widows, where the author discusses loss of protection and pressure to remarry; see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 155-7.

<sup>226</sup> Searle 1988: 160

<sup>227</sup> The classic work is Johnsen 1948.

friendship, emphasises it as “the most important social bond in Iceland and Norway up to the middle of the thirteenth century”, explicitly challenging the conventional belief in the *ættesamfunn*, and arguments about the centrality of friendship bonds have gained traction in recent scholarship.<sup>228</sup> Building on Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory, friendships provide an alternative form of voluntary interpersonal alliance to the common form of alliance through exchange of women, i.e. marriage and concubinage.<sup>229</sup> Medieval friendship associations were, however, intended to be as longstanding and generational as kinship associations. Here, I am primarily interested in the concept of ‘political friendship’, instituted only by landowners, chieftains and the aristocratic class.<sup>230</sup> Distinct elite families have distinct wider networks, creating a need for complementary alliances to maintain one’s position and security.<sup>231</sup> As such, institutionalised friendship as it occurs in the sagas is most frequently tactical and transactional, meant for political and/or economic gain for both parties.<sup>232</sup> It serves as a more or less formal contract with clear reciprocal obligations.<sup>233</sup> In essence, aristocratic friendship is a voluntary social bond through which individuals or groups guarantee one another political support where it is required, and can be horizontal or vertical depending on the disparity in status and power of the parties involved.

### *The terminology of friendship*

The first task is to establish the boundaries of friendship. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson sees marriage and concubinage as connected to friendship rather than kinship, the granting of fiefs by chieftains to their followers, as inherent to friendship rather than lordship.<sup>234</sup> He thus operates with an expanded definition of aristocratic friendship, and there is admittedly considerable overlap between the various bonds.<sup>235</sup> Here, however, I will only refer to friendship in cases where there is a voluntary cooperative bond between two or more individuals and no kinship relation is established. Methodologically, such friendship can be analysed and categorised in a similar way to kinship: through the singling out of a handful of recurring Old Norse-Icelandic

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<sup>228</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 2; cf. Bandlien 2005: 4; Helle 2008: 371.

<sup>229</sup> Lévi-Strauss for instance uses ‘blood brotherhood’ between men as an alternative to men building bonds through the exchange of women; see Lévi-Strauss 1969: 483-4.

<sup>230</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 126-7; the author estimates this group of participants to have made up about fifteen to twenty percent of the Norwegian-Icelandic population c. 900-1300.

<sup>231</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 43-4

<sup>232</sup> Byock 1982: 217

<sup>233</sup> Miller 1983: 338-42; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 3; cf. Althoff 2004: 100-1.

<sup>234</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 2, 21-2, 68; cf. Vestergaard 1988: 161; Hermanson 2000: 173-5; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 40ff.

<sup>235</sup> See also Auður Magnúsdóttir (2020: 217) who similarly connects exchange of women, particularly in the context of concubinage, to friendship as well as kinship.



phrases and terms for voluntary cooperative bonds, to get as close as possible to a distinctive vocabulary of friendship in the sagas. While many instances of casual friendly relationships do exist, I am primarily interested in friendship as a formal social bond, where two or more individuals use certain terms and actions to declare that a bond exists between them, or at least are referred to by a saga author in such a manner. ‘Political friendship’ and ‘alliance’ are two sides of the same coin, and an agreement of friendship is not necessarily any less binding than an agreement of marriage.<sup>236</sup>

Formal friendship exists first and foremost around the term *vinr*. This noun corresponds more or less to the modern term ‘friend’ and is used in a similar fashion, but with the added difference that *vinir* are bound to each other in a manner similar to kinsmen.<sup>237</sup> This is even more true for the noun form *vinátta*. From a purely linguistic perspective, *vinátta* is simply the ‘friendship’ to *vinr*’s ‘friend’. However, the longer noun carries stricter connotations of the formalised binding nature of interpersonal relationships described above. Whereas *vinr* on its own can be used relatively neutrally, *vinátta*, a key part of network language in the *konungasögur*, is almost always descriptive of an institutionalised bond, possibly with legal ramifications.<sup>238</sup> When *vinátta* occurs in the historiography, it on most occasions comes as an offer or a joint agreement (if between equals),<sup>239</sup> or a coveted reward (if spoken to a social inferior).<sup>240</sup>

I will call attention to one particular use of the term, namely when it is qualified as *vinátta fullkominn*, the ‘fullest version’ of friendship. This does not necessarily mean that there are any limits to *vinátta* mentioned without the qualifier; simply that in certain cases the friendship is emphasised as particularly strong. *Vinátta fullkominn* is in most cases the province of kings, used and promised by many rulers throughout the *konungasögur*, and by relatively few others.<sup>241</sup> Nevertheless, there are exceptions, and as we shall see, these exceptions include women. In fact, aside from the powerful archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson, the only non-kings promising *vinátta fullkominn* in *Heimskringla* are aristocratic women.<sup>242</sup> As such, the closest we can get to a definition of the specific ‘sub-term’ is that it indicates

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<sup>236</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 3

<sup>237</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 14

<sup>238</sup> Byock 1982: 42, 217; Miller 1983: 339–40

<sup>239</sup> See the agreement of *vinátta* between Óláfr Haraldsson and Rognvaldr jarl; *Heimskringla II*: 85.

<sup>240</sup> E.g., Óláfr Haraldsson’s reward of *vinátta* to a warrior who has given him aid; *Heimskringla II*: 82.

<sup>241</sup> There are only 10 instances of *vinátta fullkominn* in the *konungasögur*, and similarly few in other sagas; see Appendix III.

<sup>242</sup> Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir, daughter of Erlingr Skjalgsson, and Ástríðr Ólafsdóttir, whose usage of the term I return to in chapter 2.

royal vertical friendship, or at least friendship offered by an individual who believes their friendship a precious commodity to the people it is offered to.<sup>243</sup>

While *vinr* is the main term, certain forms of friendship can also be expressed through the word *kunningi*, referring to a more distant friend, an acquaintance, or a contact. It appears to be a less meaningful, and more informal, friendship connection than *vinr*.<sup>244</sup> *Kunningi* is relatively rare; it only appears three times in *Heimskringla*, and most sagas only contain a single instance or none at all.<sup>245</sup> Nevertheless, it is important for network analysis, due to its nature as a potentially looser counterpart to the more formal *vinr*. All indication suggests *kunningjar* for the most part do not have a formal bond between them, instead simply possessing mutual awareness and friendly terms, but there are indications that *kunningjar* are still considered part of each other's networks, such as *Knýtlinga saga*'s mention of a group of magnates assembling an army containing “*margir frændr þeira, vinir ok kunningjar*.”<sup>246</sup> (many of their kinsmen, friends and acquaintances.)

### *Gendered friendship*

Friendship is the network association with the strongest masculine connotations. Most cooperative bonds found in the sagas, and nearly all the ones which are solidly formalised, are those formed between men.<sup>247</sup> Most friendship studies consequently focus almost exclusively on men, and those emphasising women typically study their exclusion rather than any inclusion.<sup>248</sup> Nanna Damsholt has shown how in Scandinavian Latin literature, male fellowships, including friendships, were used “to keep women in their place in the social hierarchy.”<sup>249</sup> Her article showcases the underlying and inseparably intertwined connections between friendship, masculinity and social power. Damsholt finds that while men occasionally engage in friendships with women, these are inherently different from friendships between men, with the women only being passive participants, reliant on the men's assistance.<sup>250</sup> The male dominance of the friendship bond is equally evident in the sagas. As we shall see, women could participate actively in aristocratic friendship, but there is little doubt surrounding the claim that it carried deep masculine connotations, meaning that

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<sup>243</sup> Cf. Hermanson & Orning (2020a: 38) for the application of *vinátta* to vertical bonds.

<sup>244</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 359

<sup>245</sup> See Appendix III.

<sup>246</sup> *KnýtS*: 181

<sup>247</sup> See Appendix III.

<sup>248</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2017: 34-5) includes only a brief note on female friends; cf. van Deusen (2014) for a study of women's exclusion from friendship in the *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>249</sup> Damsholt 2013: 195

<sup>250</sup> Damsholt 2013: 190-1

women actively participating in aristocratic friendships participate in a masculine sphere and essentially fill masculine functions in these aristocratic power networks. This is mostly supported by assessing the primary evidence. Unlike the kinship term *frændi/frændkona*, the female-specific friendship noun *vinkona* does not occur in the main body of kings' sagas.<sup>251</sup> The masculine noun *vinr*, 'friend', is used for both men and women. While kinship by necessity includes both sexes, and there are frequent chances for women to derive power from it, aristocratic friendship is a voluntary public bond heavily intertwined with masculine power politics, leaving it accessible only to women able to play men's roles.

More widely, women must have formed cooperative bonds with men and with each other, but textual evidence of even casual friendship is scarce, and unrecorded bonds cannot be taken for granted.<sup>252</sup> Often it is based on loose descriptions such as a woman being *vinholtr*, 'steadfast in friendship', without any specific bond indicated.<sup>253</sup> Similarly, women, like men, can be offered friendship as payment for their actions. *Morkinskinna* recounts an episode where Álfhildr, mother of Magnús Ólafsson, releases an aristocratic prisoner of war, upon which the latter, declaring himself indebted, instructs her to 'come to him as a friend' if she is ever in need ("*vitja kunnliga Þorkels geysis, ef þú þykkisk þurfa*").<sup>254</sup> The promise itself shows that men are willing to declare friendship with the promise of aid to women, indicating again that they are occasionally allowed entry into such male-dominated social bonds, and Þorkell does indeed provide such aid when requested.<sup>255</sup> Any connection, nevertheless, is tied to Damsholt's description of female dependence. Þorkell's promise implies that Álfhildr will need his help, and this suggestion is likely not something he would have offered to the king himself. Álfhildr's inclusion in the friendship institution is nevertheless undeniable, and it is not a unique occurrence. There are other indications of unmarried women entering non-romantic relationships with powerful men: Borghildr Ólafsdóttir, the daughter of a Norwegian landowner, according to *Heimskringla* has an exclusively platonic friendship with King Eysteinn Magnússon (r. 1103-23), going to great lengths to prove that there was nothing more than friendship between the pair. Borghildr is said to be frequently visiting the king and talking with him ("*var Borghildr jafnan á tali við konung*").<sup>256</sup> and is mentioned as a

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<sup>251</sup> The only kings' saga application is from the late (c. 1300) *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. The term is extremely rare across the saga corpus, with the *ONP* listing only 19 total cases; see "*vinkona*", n.d.

<sup>252</sup> I here concur with Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2017: 35).

<sup>253</sup> *Morkinskinna* describes Haraldr harðráði's daughter Mária as "*vinhollust*", 'most steadfast in friendship'; see *Morkinskinna I*: 324.

<sup>254</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 166

<sup>255</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 172

<sup>256</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 257

remarkably wise and knowledgeable woman (“*vitr kona ok fróð mjök*”).<sup>257</sup> Borghildr is thus a woman in an affectionate and potentially advisory, but supposedly not sexual, relationship with the king.<sup>258</sup> With descriptions of a man and a woman often sitting and talking together frequently being used to hint at sexual relationships, the situation here is far from certain, but is in itself far less important than the fact that Borghildr strives to show that the friendship is exclusively platonic, thus showing that a woman participating in a non-romantic relationship with a king is neither impossible nor even frowned upon, and in this instance less damaging than the implication of a sexual relationship. Such examples indicate the importance of friendship to the women of the *konungasögur*, and show that their participation in some form of friendship associations, although uncommon, appears to have been socially accepted. However, when a woman cannot take on masculine roles, her entry into a predominantly masculine institution evidently creates the need for a distinct dynamic. It is the woman’s role that is frequently scrutinised and questioned, and she is the one who is formally dependent on what the man has to offer. As such, male-female friendship, unlike male-male friendship or the exceedingly rare friendships where a woman can play the role of a man,<sup>259</sup> often appears to be an unequal association even when it is a horizontal and voluntary bond.

As mentioned, it has been debated which is more important for an individual’s political position, kinship or friendship. In terms of networks and political power in the *konungasögur*, I am sceptical of notions that one could only reliably count on one type of bond, or that political success could be achieved with only one or the other.<sup>260</sup> Crafting and maintaining both kinship and friendship bonds is vital to the pursuit and achievement of political objectives. In fact, kinship connections are frequently shown to be the primary basis of network formation in the *konungasögur*,<sup>261</sup> with friendship as a supplemental addition to grow the network after the fact. On the other hand, this is by no means enough. Individuals with strong kinship bases consistently form friendship bonds with other individuals external to the kin group, and those individuals and networks successfully claiming Norwegian kingship or equivalent power achieve this through utilising all available forms of bond rather than restricting themselves to a certain kind of connection. However, as will be central in subsequent chapters, it is important to note that all powerful women encountered in the

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<sup>257</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 257

<sup>258</sup> Although in a strange turn, *Heimskringla* subsequently notes her sexual relationship with Eysteinn’s brother and colleague Sigurðr; this is corroborated in *Morkinskinna II*: 106. Cf. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 65.

<sup>259</sup> More on this in ch. 3.

<sup>260</sup> Cf. Bagge (1999: 313) who argues that solid factions were often formed based on kinship and friendship both.

<sup>261</sup> Esmark et al. 2020b: 19

*konungasögur* derive their power and political position in some form through the institutions of kinship, marriage and motherhood. Further, they simply do not have the same level of access to the friendship institution as men. This means that while bonds of kinship and friendship are to some extent available to network members of either sex, and while women frequently build networks based simultaneously on both forms of bond, the kinship association is potentially even more vital to aristocratic women than to their male counterparts.

### **Lordship bonds**

While kinship and friendship often function in similar ways and build on each other through the creation of complementary alliances, the third form of network bond is slightly different. Lordship bonds are more prominent in saga accounts of Norway than in the more thoroughly discussed Icelandic context,<sup>262</sup> but even this is often a voluntary bond.<sup>263</sup> Political leaders lead through consensus and alliances, particularly when kingship is contested, and lordship is arguably the most personal and individual form of bond.<sup>264</sup> However, it is distinct from the bonds of kinship and friendship in that it is exclusively vertical; lordship bonds must have a superior and an inferior, both of whom recognise the difference in rank as part of the connection they establish. It is a bond of allegiance rather than alliance. While both parties stand to gain from the association, as in voluntary kinship and friendship connections, a key distinction lies in the notion that in lordship bonds, the parties gain different benefits. Lordship bonds are similarly rooted in personal transactions and reciprocal exchange, but the exchange is uneven and hierarchical.<sup>265</sup> The superior gains the military and political support of the inferior, and the inferior gains the protection and/or financial support of the superior. Often the former is connected to fulfilling a specific endeavour, and the latter occurs upon the successful completion of said endeavour. This translates to the political scene, where those who pledge themselves to support a royal claimant, expect political prominence in the potential new regime.

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<sup>262</sup> Searle 1988: 162; Searle's point corresponds well with Miller (1990) who emphasises balanced and reciprocal bonds in the Icelandic feud context.

<sup>263</sup> Bagge 1996: 22-3; Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 59

<sup>264</sup> Althoff 2004: 102; Orning 2013: 49

<sup>265</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020a: 34

### *The terminology of lordship*

Old Norse-Icelandic lordship language is primarily based on a terminology of subordinate relationships which only became formalised in Scandinavia around the time of writing of the *konungasögur*.<sup>266</sup> Key terms are *þjónosta*, ‘service’, and *trúnaðr*, ‘trust’ or ‘faithfulness’, both of which can refer to allegiance depending on the contextual placement.<sup>267</sup> An offer of *trúnaðr* to a higher-ranked person, for example, will often denote a pledge of allegiance to that person.<sup>268</sup> This can be observed in mentions of *trúnaðarmenn*, ‘faithful men’, serving aristocratic individuals, including women.<sup>269</sup> *Þjónosta* similarly denotes a personal relationship of sworn service; in the texts used here it typically refers to personal servitude, and aristocratic women, like men, can hold personal lordship over a *þjónostumaðr/-kona*, ‘servant (male or female)’, *skósveinn*, ‘shoe-boy/male servant’, or *ambátt*, ‘bondswoman/female servant’.<sup>270</sup> Both *trúnaðr* and *þjónosta* are also on occasion used for voluntary subordinate relationships between aristocrats, but I have found no instances of women being involved in such bonds in the texts in question.

More widespread in the sagas focusing on the distant past is the use of possessive pronouns to describe lordship relationships. This is particularly integral to the *konungasögur* as it seems to some degree to be closely connected to structures of rulership and extensive geopolitical power bases. The most straightforward examples of this are variations of the description ‘becoming x’s man’. *Heimskringla*’s *Óláfs saga helga* alone contains 12 instances of an individual voluntarily accepting another’s lordship being described as “*gerðisk hans maðr*” (became his man).<sup>271</sup> The possessive term signifies a pledge of one’s services to another individual, particularly as it is occasionally combined with the explicit swearing of oaths.<sup>272</sup> Poets, serving in the entourages of kings and other great men and tasked to record their deeds, are a good example of such possessive lordship,<sup>273</sup> particularly as the poets’ success is often

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<sup>266</sup> The introduction of new terms of fealty toward the end of the civil war period has been seen as a key change in the nature of lordship; see Orning 2008: 51-6; cf. Hermanson & Orning 2020a: 42-3.

<sup>267</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 642; Orning 2008: 51-2, 118-9.

<sup>268</sup> Particularly if the offer is explicitly referred to as *trúnaðareiðr*, oath of loyalty, but this is rarer in the *konungasögur* focusing beyond their immediate past; cf. Orning 2008: 257-8.

<sup>269</sup> See for instance *Heimskringla I*: 225.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. a reference to the *þjónostukonur* of Ástríðr Eiríksdóttir in *Heimskringla I*: 226. Several female lord-servant relationships will be discussed below. See also the discussion of various forms of indentured servitude in Karras 1988: 43-4.

<sup>271</sup> The term is for instance applied when the poet Þórðr Sigvaldaskáld joins the service of Óláfr Haraldsson; *Heimskringla II*: 54.

<sup>272</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 168: “*Gerðisk jarl þá hans maðr ok batt þat swardögum*” (The jarl became his man and bound this with oaths.)

<sup>273</sup> Clunies Ross 1999: 56-9; Clunies Ross 2005: 44-51; Poole 2005: 269ff.; cf. Goeres 2015: 126-7, 172.

dependent on their adherence to the ideals of their lords,<sup>274</sup> but it is similarly used across the political spectrum, including by whole populations submitting to a ruler.<sup>275</sup> Possessive pronouns are regularly used in the *konungasögur* in order to demonstrate an existing or potential relationship between a superior and an inferior. The inferior ‘belongs’ to the superior not in the sense of involuntary servitude, but in the sense of having sworn themselves to this particular superior and not another. Beyond this, such lordship bonds appear to be, as Hermanson & Orning suggest, highly flexible and non-specific.<sup>276</sup> With elite networks vying for kingship, the allegiance of lesser aristocrats, poets and warriors in itself becomes a commodity, not intended for a specific purpose but rather intended to expand the network. Even individuals close to the top of the aristocratic hierarchy, such as jarls, and kings, can move into allegiance bonds if they themselves are not strong enough to hold independent power.<sup>277</sup> Swearing allegiance can be part of a strategy to further one’s own position, illustrating conceptions of power through submission, and that one can retain one’s influence even under another’s lordship.

Subordinates such as retainers are an important part of the lordship structure of the sagas, and have been referred to as potentially being their lords’ friends, but also as a possible combination of friendship and allegiance bonds in one.<sup>278</sup> It is worth noting that it is difficult to distinguish between vertical friendships and lordship in this context, and there is no reason to think that friendship and lordship bonds could not co-exist between the same two individuals of different rank. As such, a retainer can certainly be a friend to his lord, but it still is a lordship bond.<sup>279</sup> The crucial point is that any reference to ‘his’, ‘her’ or ‘their’ men under a person’s command is part of the lordship/allegiance structure. This ranges from lowborn servants to fellow aristocrats, as long as they have pledged themselves to said person. The unequal lordship bonds in this way strongly complement more horizontal kinship and friendship bonds, by greatly extending an aristocrat’s network power base. An aristocratic network can be a pyramid, where existing kinship and friendship bonds provide a base from which further politically designed bonds, including lordship bonds, can then be built.

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<sup>274</sup> Goeres 2015: 145

<sup>275</sup> *Heimskringla* describes how the people of Orkdœlafylki submitted to Haraldr and “*gerðusk hans menn*”; see *Heimskringla I*: 98.

<sup>276</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020a: 36

<sup>277</sup> An examples of a jarl swearing allegiance is found in *Heimskringla I*: 238, and a king being asked to do the same in *Heimskringla II*: 76.

<sup>278</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 58ff.

<sup>279</sup> Orning 2008: 113-4, 126-7; cf. Hermanson & Orning 2020a: 32.

## *Gendered lordship*

Most lordship bonds are male-dominated, but not technically male-exclusive. There is no direct bar to women holding authority over dependent individuals, nor is there any inherent difference to female lordship as in the case within friendship bonds. Rather, lordship bonds tend to be associated with men for the simple reason that most lords are men, and the formal lordship positions of kingship, chieftaincy and military command *are* male-exclusive. However, there is one area where women consistently participate in partially formalised vertical bonds, both as superior and inferior: namely the household. The household in the sagas is an entity organised around a married couple and their children, and potentially a variety of other subordinate members.<sup>280</sup> While it is heavily rooted in kinship structures, the internal dynamic of the household itself functions as a hierarchical arena of lordship bonds. In a typical case, the husband has authority over his wife, but both husband and wife have authority over everyone else, including children and other relatives.<sup>281</sup> This is demonstrated by possessive words typically being used about a man receiving a woman in marriage, but a woman can then simultaneously be described with a possessively framed relationship with inferior household members.<sup>282</sup> Frequently, the husband would cede control over the domestic space itself to his wife,<sup>283</sup> and while the medieval household itself has been described as another male power structure, it required a woman's presence close to the top.<sup>284</sup> The position of head of household is thus a lordship position, but such headship could be shared, including with wives, and it could also be held solely by women, for instance high-ranking widows.<sup>285</sup> Furthermore, even the wife as subordinate, like any subordinate in a lordship relationship, could and should offer her counsel and assistance to the husband/lord.<sup>286</sup>

Many of women's lordship bonds throughout the *konungasögur* are communicated through the household. The royal households of the kings' sagas function as what Miller refers to as complex households, often containing members of the wider kinship group, non-family members, and visitors.<sup>287</sup> From the perspective of female heads of households, this presents the opportunity for considerable social power. An aristocratic female householder has access

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<sup>280</sup> Bandlien 2005: 66

<sup>281</sup> Althoff 2004: 103

<sup>282</sup> Jochens (1986: 151-2) has outlined the possessive vocabulary of marriages.

<sup>283</sup> Clover 1993: 365; Jochens 1995: 117-8

<sup>284</sup> Chamberlayne 1999: 51

<sup>285</sup> Miller 1990: 119-20; Skovgaard-Petersen 1998: 26. Similar observations have been made in the late Roman context, where female heads of household arose as a pragmatic solution to powerful women's status never being legally defined; see Cooper 2007: 110-4.

<sup>286</sup> Althoff 2004: 103-4; more on this in the discussion of women's speech in chapter 2.

<sup>287</sup> Miller 1990: 114-5



to servants over whom she has authority, and either alone or with a husband she can take in non-biological children for fostering. Widows, or wives whose husbands are absent, can arguably go even further as participants in lordship structures from within the household, for instance carrying the ability to call on household warriors, preside over the household's resources, or asking their own superior lords for help.<sup>288</sup> In this manner, they have a householder's lordship bonds at their disposal, whether inherited or temporarily controlled. In turn, command over the household, can translate into command over a wider network, or, in the case of a royal household, a kingdom. Max Weber's mantra stating that "the roots of patriarchal domination grow out of the master's authority over his household" holds true for women as well as men.<sup>289</sup> The extent of the lordship authority provided through the position of head of household is dependent only on the number of individuals directly or indirectly attached to said household, which is why female heads of royal households tend to be exceptionally powerful. Parental authority over children who have authority over a wider group is particularly potent in cases of widowed mothers, especially if those children are young. As such, women's lordship bonds are more indirect, but they are still a vital component to understanding the power dynamics of women in networks.

### **Binding the bonds: gifts, *kærleikr* and the language of tactical affection**

Occasionally the language of networks is a language of physical symbols. Gifts are an integral and irreplaceable part of the social framework of a network society, and have received considerable attention in the saga context,<sup>290</sup> and beyond.<sup>291</sup> As per Marcel Mauss, "In Scandinavian civilization... exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily."<sup>292</sup> Mauss argues that gifts and counter-gifts are in archaic societies the most readily available way in which to build human relationships, and that the gifts' symbolic function often supersede any material value. Building on this, gift-giving stands out as a key aspect of network analysis, a central component of the construction and maintenance of bonds. It is frequently tied to the feast, another ritual aspect of network politics,<sup>293</sup> but while it is exceedingly rare for kings'

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<sup>288</sup> Ricketts 2010: 179

<sup>289</sup> Weber 1978: 1006; cf. Althoff 2004: 103.

<sup>290</sup> Gurevich 1968; Byock 1982: 41-2; Miller 1986; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 12-23, 127-9

<sup>291</sup> Mauss 2002; Kjær & Watson 2011; Kjær 2012; Althoff 2020: 123-5

<sup>292</sup> Mauss 2002: 3

<sup>293</sup> Orning (2015: 175ff.) discusses the feast as an essential element of political governance. While women are often absent from feasts, they can have central roles in meals in general; see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020: 150-2.

saga women to participate actively in feasting, their access to ritualised gift-giving is more equal.

Gift-giving in the *konungasögur* is an instance of publicly expressed generosity and the collective binding of bonds in a social arena. These rituals were meant to establish a certain dependence for the recipient to the giver; gifts for instance created a debt of honour where the recipient would be mandated to offer something in return, whether reciprocating by offering another gift, committing to a certain action desired by the giver, or pledging support in the form of friendship or allegiance.<sup>294</sup> Given its socio-political importance, the gift-giving ritual in aristocratic networks would be far from a private matter. As per Jón Viðar Sigurðsson: “Three actors took part in the gift-giving process: the giver, the receiver, and those who witnessed the transaction. The eyewitnesses were perhaps the most important. It was these people who would relate the news of the gift, and thus of the giver’s generosity and the newly established friendship.”<sup>295</sup> Gift-giving in the network context is consequently about social power. By giving gifts to equals, subordinates and even superiors, chieftains and other aristocrats use the opportunity both to flaunt their generosity and their wealth, similar to what they would gain by hosting a feast, and simultaneously to unilaterally establish a relationship with another individual or group. The recipient of a gift is left with a duty to reciprocate, socially enforced by the notion that not reciprocating signals inferiority to the giver of the gift,<sup>296</sup> and even rivals have a ritual obligation to receive gifts.<sup>297</sup> In the saga context, gift-giving has been described as another element of aristocratic competition, as both revolve around obligations of reciprocal exchange.<sup>298</sup> As such it is used as a tactical tool by kinsmen, friends and lords in the Norwegian politics of the kings’ sagas,<sup>299</sup> and it creates a connection, in turn enabling new network bonds or the reinforcement of existing ones. Throughout the sagas it is essential in various ways to all forms of group association outlined above, but particularly the voluntary bonds of friendship and lordship. This might mean that kinship bonds are not as dependent on regular maintenance, but including gifts in agreements with kin is clearly necessary in situations where an individual has to ensure that his or her kinsman’s

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<sup>294</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 19

<sup>295</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 20

<sup>296</sup> Mauss 2002: 83

<sup>297</sup> Mauss 2002: 52-3

<sup>298</sup> Miller 1990: 299

<sup>299</sup> All aspects are found in a much-cited example from *Morkinskinna*, where King Magnús Ólafsson and his uncle Haraldr Sigurðarson use feasts to stage a competitive gift exchange to each other’s followers and to each other, attempting to outdo the other while simultaneously building bonds. See *Morkinskinna I*: 125-6. Cf. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 52; Orning 2013: 50-1.

interests still aligns with their own.<sup>300</sup> In all network contexts, gifts are used to ensure cooperation and loyalty; sometimes it is an act of genuine affection, sometimes it is purely tactical, and most of the time it is somewhere in between. As with much of saga politics, gift-giving is male-dominated, but not male-exclusive, finding its way into various forms of structured network interaction by women.

Similarly, in the language of networks, spanning across the variety of interpersonal bonds, one term stands out from the others. *Kærleikr* appears to be the closest one might get to an all-encompassing network term, and as it is a central component of nearly all my case studies, I will outline its network connection here. The direct meaning is relatively uncomplicated, with the most immediate translation being ‘love’ or ‘affection’.<sup>301</sup> It does roughly correspond to modern terms of affection, but the usage and implications make *kærleikr* one of the more complex aspects of network terminology. Being used to refer to all forms of close and intimate personal relationships, it can be found within all the different social bonds investigated above. The main problem surrounding *kærleikr* is whether it describes genuine emotional affection, or expressions of tactical ingratiation, a problem exacerbated by the fact that it almost certainly is used in both contexts. While *ást*, the noun for ‘love’, and *unna*, the verb ‘to love’, are more frequently used to describe affection between spouses, between parents and children,<sup>302</sup> or even between especially close friends,<sup>303</sup> *kærleikr* too is used to describe the feelings and motivations of an individual who genuinely cares about another. On the other hand, it is also, more frequently, used to describe instances of individuals forming cooperative relationships regardless of emotional considerations.

It is important to recognise that affection between partners is not only a significant factor, but one that could function as an aid to the supporting structure of a network. Even politics is not altogether cynical, and there are instances of chieftains rewarding their *mágar* due to their affection for their wives. Hákon jarl of Hlaðir is for instance described to have loved his wife Þóra so much “*at hann gerði sér svá miklu kærri en aðra menn frændr Þóru.*”<sup>304</sup> (that he was more affectionate toward Þóra’s kin than any other men.) Due to this, her kinsmen gain political and economic advantages. The construction of and additions to networks is thus not always only a cold and calculated process, but one in which affection and other more

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<sup>300</sup> Óláfr Haraldsson for instance gives grand gifts to his stepfather Sigurðr in reward for aid in battle; see *Heimskringla II*: 70.

<sup>301</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 368

<sup>302</sup> ‘*Unna*’ is exclusively used by *Heimskringla* to describe affection by spouses, parents or foster-parents; see Appendix III.

<sup>303</sup> See Appendix III under ‘*ástvinr*’.

<sup>304</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 248

emotional aspects of interpersonal relationships are important as well. It is clearly stated that Hákon loved Þóra, and that this love is the motivation behind his actions toward her relatives. His relationship with them is described using the term *kærr*, the adjective form of *kærleikr*. Through his love for his wife, Hákon thus establishes an affectionate relationship with her relatives, his *mágar*, and this affection materialises in them being given prominence, power, and political importance. It is highly possible that Hákon intertwines his affection with strategic concerns, and the usage of *kærr* here is almost certainly both genuine, due to his love for Þóra, and tactical, due to his expansion of his network with reliable allies, particularly as he strengthens the bond further by marrying his daughter to one of her kinsmen.<sup>305</sup> Nevertheless, spousal affection is the driving force behind both the marriage itself and of the wider alliance. Similar instances are found across other network bonds, with words of affection such as ‘*ást*’ and ‘*kærr*’ frequently used in conjunction with friendship terminology.<sup>306</sup> Once again, there is little to separate genuine affection from tactical concerns.<sup>307</sup> All indication suggests that one can simultaneously be a good friend and a key political supporter, and as such, even the most politically advantageous relationships *could* be built on a foundation of personal emotional connection.<sup>308</sup>

In many circumstances, however, it appears that *kærleikr* and its equivalents are less descriptors of affection, and more a coded formulaic way of describing the institution of cooperative network bonds. High-ranking aristocrats of both sexes are often described receiving emissaries and potential allies *í kærleikr mikill*, with great affection.<sup>309</sup> This *kærleikr* is usually tied to the establishment or reinforcement of a network bond, such as *vinátta*.<sup>310</sup> Finally, in cases where a formal network bond is successfully negotiated between independent parties, it is customary for the sagas to state that the parties parted in great affection, again expressing *kærleikr*, often accompanied by the giving of gifts.<sup>311</sup> In such situations, *kærleikr* describes anything from friendly diplomatic overtures to solid confirmation that a bond has

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<sup>305</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 248

<sup>306</sup> There are 10 kings’ saga instances of *ástvinr*, in addition to all the instances where *kærleikr* is combined with friendship terms; see the entries under ‘*ástvinr*’ and ‘*kærleikr*’ in Appendix III.

<sup>307</sup> Cf. Esmark et al. 2020b: 21.

<sup>308</sup> The close relationship of Haraldr hárfagri and Rognvaldr jarl is recounted in *Heimskringla*, with the most immediate example of genuine friendship found when Rognvaldr famously cuts Haraldr’s hair upon his fulfilling his promise to unite the country. See *Heimskringla I*: 122.

<sup>309</sup> An example of this exact phrasing and context is found in Óláfr Haraldsson’s reception of Einarr, an Orcadian emissary; *Heimskringla II*: 164.

<sup>310</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 164. Óláfr’s reception of Einarr is followed by sending *vináttumál*, a formal offer of a friendship alliance, to the latter’s superior Þorfinnr jarl.

<sup>311</sup> Again using the case of Óláfr and the Orcadians, the king forges a friendship bond with Þorfinnr jarl and presents him with a ship as a gift. On their parting, *Heimskringla* states: “*Skilðusk þeir konungr ok jarl með kærleikum miklum*” (Then the king and the jarl parted in great affection); see *Heimskringla II*: 165.

been forged, and in all cases, it is closely tied to the initiation of a new connection into one's network. A kings' saga politician might feel genuine affection for her connections even if their interactions are primarily tactical, and it cannot be discounted as a contributing factor, but most instances where *kærleikr* is applied to individual associations or alliances are dominated by strategic necessity and the motivation of mutual gain.<sup>312</sup> As such, the term can refer to genuine or calculated affection, or both at the same time, but in all cases, it serves as an emotionally loaded reinforcement of the establishment of network bonds.

The application of *kærleikr* to highly vertical relationships where one party is allegiant to the other highlights its strategic usage, and women's usage of *kærleikr* is a matter of particular importance because it otherwise often is the province of kings. In lordship bonds, the tactical bestowal of *kærleikr* frequently occurs as a king's reward to his loyal subordinates. As such, the term takes on a meaning of royal or superior favour rather than emotional affection, although in a two-way sense where the recipient of the favour is simultaneously bound to the giver. This is seen for instance in Oddr Snorrason's description of royal behaviour toward potential household warriors: "*þá spanði hann alla til sín ok gerði sér kæra.*"<sup>313</sup> (he gathered them all and bound them to himself in affection.) The bond of *kærleikr* is thus used to attach the followers he wants to his own retinue. As the term itself is an abstract concept, it could here refer to all sorts of gracious behaviours from the social superior, but the important part lies in the application. These men are brought into the king's employ, and would expect more than just affection from the association, for instance material wealth, but affection, *kærleikr*, is here used to describe the glue a king can use to establish the bonds. The king's relationship with his retainers thus again takes the form of a transaction where royal *kærleikr* (and its attached benefits) is traded for participation in the royal retinue. Political leaders could show genuine care towards their followers, and royal favour would be a sought-after reward for many even in a purely emotional form, but the combination of *kærleikr* with bonds of allegiance is most often formal, strategic and highly calculated. From the perspective of the social inferior, achieving a superior's *kærleikr* through ingratiating oneself with him/her is a way to accomplish political objectives.<sup>314</sup> From the perspective of the superior, *kærleikr* can similarly be used to bind potential inferior allies to one's own political cause. There are multiple examples of network leaders explicitly using tactical affection in this way, often

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<sup>312</sup> See '*kærleikr*' in Appendix III.

<sup>313</sup> Oddr: 239

<sup>314</sup> An example, which I shall return to in chapter 2, is found in the Icelander Hjalti Skeggjason's interactions with the king of Sweden; see *Heimskringla II*: 95-6.

combining gifts and affectionate words with ‘binding them with bonds of *kærleikr*’.<sup>315</sup> In such cases, *kærleikr* is a public display of interpersonal affection, but like gift-giving, it is simultaneously a purely strategic attempt at politically motivated construction of bonds.

*Kærleikr*, like the attached gift-giving, thus becomes a tool for aristocrats to expand their networks, and as will be made clear, this tool is as gender-neutral as the others.

Conclusively, the language of networks as established here, involving both the wider bonds and the more specific terminology, thus provides the analytical framework for assessing women’s political behaviour and their participation in the male-dominated social and political structures and hierarchies of kings’ saga society. Both the sagas themselves and the literature surrounding network bonds predominantly emphasise kings and other men, but as these sections have suggested and as the remainder of the thesis will emphasise, both politics and political language contain structural openings for women’s active participation. Female network members’ use of all these bonds, tools and strategies will be shown across the remaining chapters, each containing case studies examining and defining the integration of kings’ saga women in socio-political network structures. Chapter one centres on women’s use of networks and distinctive network connections as tools for political advantage and suggests a new female political role in the ‘network organiser’. Chapter two investigates the role of speech in women’s construction and maintenance of networks, and vice versa. Chapter three examines the portrayal of foreign queens encountered by saga characters outside the Scandinavian kingdoms, and establishes the presence of these women in the context of the saga presentation of women’s political participation, investigating perceived cultural-geographical limitations to the network model. Finally, the fourth chapter investigates the distinct network behaviour in the kings’ sagas immediate past, c. 1136-1200. The case study chapters will be followed by a concluding discussion centred on the correlation between social status, network circumstances, and political activity, ultimately establishing the structural causes of the opportunities allowing certain women’s political participation.

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<sup>315</sup> E.g., when King Knútr of Denmark attempts to sway the Norwegian magnate Einarr þambarskelfir to his side: “*Knútr konungr gaf Einari stórar gjafir ok batt hann í kærleikum miklum við sik. [...] Þau heit virðusk Einari mikils ok hét þar í mót trúnaði sínum.*” (King Knútr gave Einarr great gifts and bound him to himself in great affection. Einarr appreciated these promises and in return swore his allegiance.); *Heimskringla II*: 307.

## **Part I: Women's power through networks, c. 950-1040**

# Chapter 1

## The female network organiser: interpersonal bonds as political tools

After describing Haraldr hárfagri's unification and death, the historiographical narratives are dominated by succession conflicts where members of Haraldr's *ætt* and other political groups compete for the Norwegian kingdom. In many texts, this is where one can find the main body of narrative exploring the saga paradigm of ruthless but mundane *Realpolitik*, removed from older myths of pagan sorcery, but simultaneously distant from the writers' own present. In this paradigm, politics takes the form of careful conflict management combined with the continuous establishment of social network bonds, to gain advantage over existing and potential rivals. This chapter provides an initial investigation of women's participation in these processes, often having to rely on proxy wars and subterfuge with male connections as network proxies, but still taking an active hand. I closely examine specific women's use and management of networks and network bonds to gain advantages for their candidates, husbands and sons, in these elite power struggles, and to advance their own political interests through doing so. The case studies analysed here will be used to outline the 'network organiser' role as a new lens through which to read politically active women. Each kings' saga woman and her political career comes with distinct characteristics, but all these women consistently begin in positions as independent leading figures in kinship groups, subsequently used to establish complementary bonds on their own behalf, and direct wider networks on behalf of male relatives, despite possessing little to no legitimate authority. Often, this position and these tactics are what leaves the woman in question as the leading figure of an aristocratic network, despite having to relinquish formal rulership to male associates. In turn, this network reading of kings' saga women is what enables a deeper critical understanding of why and how certain women are structurally enabled to enter the 'man's world' of power politics.

### The political conflict of the *konungasögur*

Certain qualifications ought to be made about kings' saga conflicts, and why women repeatedly find their places in them despite men having a virtual monopoly on participation in warfare. First of all, small-scale saga conflicts function as integral parts of the social development, and rarely erupt into full-scale war.<sup>1</sup> This is common for both *konungasögur*

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<sup>1</sup> Orming 2013: 45-6



and *Íslendingasögur*, flowing over into much-discussed concepts of feud, itself another reciprocal network ritual where violent action is followed by violent reaction, often leading to generational conflicts between families.<sup>2</sup> Rooted in the demands of honour, any minor inter-network incident could spark a wider conflict, but these could also be sparked by more cynical pursuit of secondary gains, emphasising political advantage over emotional impulse.<sup>3</sup> This is frequently the case in the kings' saga setting, where blind pursuit of vengeance for honour's sake is rare, and the narratives are dominated instead by ambitious political manoeuvring.<sup>4</sup> In such a setting, the opportunities for women to take active part in the aggression are more widespread than in structured warfare. Any evidence for female participation in active combat is slim and circumstantial,<sup>5</sup> but the political conflicts of the kings' sagas are nonetheless filled with, and occasionally dominated by, female participants functioning as organisers and advisors in and of the conflicting networks. Conflict and feud are historically male preoccupations, but only in the sense that the actual violence and other public aspects are typically monopolised by men.<sup>6</sup> However, various scholars have emphasised how women in medieval conflicts could perform active roles, particularly when enabled to rely on men as proxies.<sup>7</sup> This is key to the network organiser role.

It must be acknowledged that the central focus of kings' saga conflict is not precisely the same as the small-scale feuds of the *Íslendingasögur*, even prior to the civil war era (c. 1130 onwards). Icelandic family saga conflicts are limited in scope, based around farm owners having to call upon individual connections to perform vengeance killings or occasionally very minor skirmishes of up to a few dozen people.<sup>8</sup> Although there are many similarities, the conflicts found in the kings' sagas are comparatively larger, both in terms of numbers and scale. The kings' saga conflicts essentially function as an aristocratic competition for geopolitical control over Norway. They often involve small battles, the gathering of fighting forces organised around complex factions resulting from a multitude of bonds,<sup>9</sup> and more ambitious prizes such as the ultimate aspiration of kingship, while still sharing the central

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<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive discussion of the concept of feud goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but see particularly Miller's definition of feud; Miller 1990: 180-2; see also Byock's (1982) influential work.

<sup>3</sup> Miller 1990: 198; White 2013: 282; Orning 2013: 51; Esmark et al. 2020b: 19

<sup>4</sup> The former is a central theme in many *Íslendingasögur*, such as *Brennu-Njáls saga*. See for instance Kress 1979: 37; Byock 1982: 53-4.

<sup>5</sup> This is primarily tied to legends of shieldmaidens. See for instance Jochens (1996a: 87, 101) for an analysis of the literary evidence, and Price et al. (2019: 181ff.) for a recent archaeological find.

<sup>6</sup> Boehm 2007: 190

<sup>7</sup> Miller 1990: 120 170; Esmark et al. 2020b: 20; see also Wærdahl (2019: 95ff.) for women in late medieval conflicts, and White (2005: 111-3) for similar observations outside the Nordic region.

<sup>8</sup> Miller 1990: 187-8.

<sup>9</sup> See also Esmark et al. 2020b: 20.

characteristics of the feud by operating under the veneer of honour and social demands. Following Sverre Bagge, this permeates the portrayal of aristocratic society as presented by the *konungasögur*, particularly *Heimskringla*: the narrative is centred on political competition and the strategies required to win, and conflicts arise primarily because of long-term interests rather than accidental clashes.<sup>10</sup> Both Bagge himself and other historians have characterized this competition as a ‘political game’, which I find useful as an organising principle.<sup>11</sup> It is a deadly serious process, but it includes shrewd stratagems, careful planning of sequences of moves, and ploys to outmanoeuvre an opponent or political rival to claim the ultimate prize of kingship. As such, it is a competition with inherent rules,<sup>12</sup> similar to Althoff’s *Spielregeln* for medieval aristocratic politics.<sup>13</sup> Bagge presents this as a key difference between the *konungasögur* and the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>14</sup> This focused political ‘game’ is perhaps the most defining feature of the texts and their presentation of history; as such, it provides part of the lens through which networks and women are encountered. It is within these conflicts, and within the networks and factions operating them, that we find the most politically influential women in Old Norse historiography, and strong indications of the organisational and structural nature of their power.

To illuminate the pathways of women who function as organisers of politically driven networks and their roles as tactical builders of interpersonal bonds, this first chapter will investigate women in three instances of political turmoil, from the first decades after the death of Haraldr hárfagri (around 932),<sup>15</sup> to immediately after the death of Óláfr Haraldsson in 1030. These cases include Gunnhildr ‘konungamóðir’, the controversial Sigríðr ‘stórráða’, who plays roles in all three Scandinavian kingdoms, and Álfífa Álfrimsdóttir, *de facto* ruler of Norway on behalf of her male relatives. All three women are kings’ wives and kings’ mothers, and all three are in various ways independent from male authority, at least in specific situations, while simultaneously basing their political influence on their network bonds with men. All three then use their networks as tools to establish, increase and maintain political power through conflict, each contributing to the hypothesis of the female network organiser, building and using groups and bonds and exercising power through her relationships with men, as the central kings’ saga political role accessible to elite women. Their central network

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<sup>10</sup> Bagge 1991: 82ff.; cf. Andersson 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Bagge 1991: 82-7; Bagge 1996: 87; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 2; Esmark & Orning 2013: 2; also Orning in the same volume. Cf. Bandlien 2005: 4, who describes saga marriage politics as a ‘game of cards’.

<sup>12</sup> Orning 2013: 73ff.

<sup>13</sup> Althoff 2004: 3; Althoff 2020: 25ff.; Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 56

<sup>14</sup> Bagge 1991: 77-8

<sup>15</sup> For the dating of Haraldr’s death, see Ólafía Einarsdóttir 1968: 30-4.

positions contradict and supersede their relative political exclusion as women, creating the opportunity to exercise sanctioned political power on the kingdom level.

### **Gunnhildr: networks of rulership**

Gunnhildr konungamóðir, wife of Haraldr hárfagri's son and immediate successor Eiríkr 'blóðøx' (r. 931-33), and mother of various royal children, most prominently Haraldr 'gráfeldr' (r. 961-70), is a popular figure in both sagas and saga scholarship.<sup>16</sup> In terms of source material, she is one of the most extensively described women in the kings' saga genre, appearing both in Old Norse and Latin historiography.<sup>17</sup> Gunnhildr is, as I will show, an ideal example of a woman's political career being built through organisation of networks, but she has tended to be analysed first and foremost as a villain and a negative influence.<sup>18</sup> While she is well documented, she is also quite questionable in several ways, including considerable variation between different source accounts. I will here primarily be using the linked accounts of *Ágrip*, Oddr Snorrason, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, with Theodoricus Monachus and the *Historia Norvegiæ*, as well as the partially connected *Orkneyinga saga*, as supplementary sources wherever they contribute to the overall historiographical perception of the Gunnhildr figure.<sup>19</sup> As I am here primarily interested in her political role and its connotations for medieval perceptions of female political power, I will only briefly mention her legendary origins and supernatural connections, and first and foremost focus on her behaviour during the height of her power, the period immediately prior to and during the kingship of her sons, the 'Gunnhildarsynir'. The narrative tracks political manoeuvring to a far greater extent than the historiography of the aggressive unification wars of Haraldr hárfagri, and as such leaves fertile ground for network analysis. As such, this is an attempt to understand Gunnhildr as a female political strategist in the historiographical record, rather than as a malevolent and supernatural literary antagonist, and to use her example in turn to make observations about women's network organisation. I will here track her political career in three phases.

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<sup>16</sup> Previous discussions on Gunnhildr include Sigurður Nordal (1941: 135-55), Sayers (1995: 57-77), and Heinrichs (1996: 213-29), all particularly emphasising her role as sorceress and villain. However, Gunnhildr has also been an important part of the many broader examinations of saga women; see for instance analyses of her sexuality in Jochens (1995: 70-5), of her impact of queenship ideals in Larrington (2009: 509ff.), and of her motherhood in Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013: 82-6).

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix I, for the considerable quantity of kings' sagas and related texts she appears in compared to other women.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to figuring so heavily in the historiography, Gunnhildr makes memorable appearances in many Icelandic family sagas, for instance in *Laxdæla saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, where she often functions as a supernatural and sexually voracious foil to Icelandic protagonists. Cf. Sayers 1995: 57ff.; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 83-4. Her role in *Egils saga* in particular also received much attention in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; see Olsen 1944; Koht 1946-8.

<sup>19</sup> For the close connection of the insular *Orkneyinga saga* to the kings' sagas, see Berman 1985: 118-9.

*Phase one: Gunnhildr building her network*

In her early days with her father-in-law and husband as kings in Norway, Gunnhildr primarily functions as a central advisor to the latter. *Ágrip*, for instance, refers to her counsels as dominating Eiríkr's violent reign on several occasions.<sup>20</sup> Eiríkr's (and Gunnhildr's) early reign is reportedly a time of oppression, violence, and murder, but the sagas include scarce discussion of the organisation of their government and the structure of the aristocratic social fabric. Furthermore, it is not long before the couple are usurped by Eiríkr's popular younger brother Hákon 'inn góði' (r. 934-61), ending a time of strife for which Gunnhildr is usually blamed.<sup>21</sup> The family then leaves for England, and Eiríkr assumes the kingship of Norse-ruled Northumbria, a period described only briefly in the *konungasögur*, but one that has received considerable attention elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> My analysis of Gunnhildr as the first kings' saga female network organiser, however, begins with the death of her husband, at which point Gunnhildr arguably inherits a leadership position in her network.<sup>23</sup> Upon losing Eiríkr, she finds herself a widow in England, without a power base and with very young sons, and surrounded by enemies, with *Fagrskinna* stating the English king Játmundr<sup>24</sup> turned his hostility towards them.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, this is the point at which Gunnhildr's competent management of network ties is first put on display.

The initial step in this process is taken when the family leaves England and travels to Orkney: “Tóku þá synir Eiríks undir sik Orkneyjar ok Hjaltland ok hofðu skatta af ok sátu þar um vetrum, en fóru í vestríking á sumrum, herjuðu um Skotland ok Írland.”<sup>26</sup> (The sons of Eiríkr laid Orkney and Hjaltland under themselves and claimed taxes from them. They stayed there in the winter and went raiding in the summer, harrying in Scotland and Ireland.) The passage itself is relatively straightforward. Northumbria has become dangerous for the family after Eiríkr's death, and so they escape to the more solidly Norse-dominated Orkney. However, the power dynamics of the passage are different from what it first lets on. A few chapters later, the text lets its readers know that Gamli, the eldest son of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, is somewhat

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<sup>20</sup> *Ágrip*: 7-12.

<sup>21</sup> Most explicitly so in *Fagrskinna*: 76.

<sup>22</sup> The Northumbrian reign of Eiríkr has been the subject of considerable scholarship and has tended to be accepted as historical (Campbell 1942: 92). It is also described more extensively in *Egils saga*, based on a poem by Egill himself thought to be authentic (Sawyer 1995: 42), but this poem does not mention Gunnhildr (Woolf 1998: 190). Some scholars, however, argue the Eiríkr who ruled Northumbria may not have been Eiríkr blóðøx; see Downham 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Larrington (2009: 510) holds that this is when Gunnhildr becomes politically active.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund I, r. 939-46.

<sup>25</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 79; the term used is *óvingask*, a verb describing persons becoming the opposite of friends.

<sup>26</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 155; the episode is also included in *Orkneyinga saga* (*OrknS*: 17-20).

older than his brothers, but that not even he is considered an adult by any means.<sup>27</sup> While the textual timeline is somewhat murky at this point, this reference to their continued childhood status is at least a full year later than the journey to Orkney, if not more. As such, with all her sons still children, the decision-making on the family's behalf must be ascribed to Gunnhildr herself, but she is exercising her power through the official male authority of her sons. All indication suggests that the Gunnhildarsynir seize control of Orkney through diplomacy or political negotiation. There is no mention of any direct hostility involved, and conversely, the family's relationships with the ruling jarls are by all accounts cordial and cooperative, Orcadian warriors having previously fought alongside Eiríkr,<sup>28</sup> and later in *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga* it is mentioned that the isles had sworn allegiance to him.<sup>29</sup> With the islands' elite frequently submitting to Norwegian rulers, it is possible that Gunnhildr has already here let her sons be declared kings in opposition to their uncle, with Orkney becoming the first region recognising their kingship.<sup>30</sup> As such, the passage could be read as the mother orchestrating an opportunity for her sons to craft their first springboard to power by setting them up as royal pretenders in a friendly environment.

One detail of interest is the textual application of the collective pronoun *þau*, and even simply 'the sons of Eiríkr', when the reference of the action is clearly to Gunnhildr. A further complication arises with the mention of the sons of Eiríkr raiding the British Isles the following summer, despite the text firmly establishing that the boys themselves are too young to fight. This problem has a clear solution: *synir Eiríks* in this type of context refers not to the described individuals alone, but to them and the network surrounding them. The passage has already stated that the family brought a host of people with them to the isles, and so we must assume that any adult warriors among these are the ones doing the raiding, potentially alongside their new-found allies in the Orkney population. This explains how Gunnhildr can wield power and have it referred to as an action performed by her sons. *Synir Eiríks* is the symbolic description of a political faction, a network consisting of a kinship group, its retainers, and its allies. This network is the subject of the action verbs *taka* and *fara*, and Gunnhildr is now its foremost leader.<sup>31</sup> The children hold the legitimate authority as royal

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<sup>27</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 162

<sup>28</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 154

<sup>29</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 159

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Beuermann (2011: 119ff.) for an assessment of the extent of Orcadian ties to Norwegian royal authority, situated somewhere between independence and incorporation.

<sup>31</sup> *Orkneyinga saga (OrknS: 17-20)*, discussing the same events, tellingly uses '*Gunnhildr ok synir hennar*'.

sons, but Gunnhildr as their sole surviving parent wields the power within the family group, which then extends beyond.

This further sets a precedent for the mother's power being formally channelled through her sons in the narrative, even if the texts show little interest in hiding her superiority within the group. It cannot be assumed that this is always the case, nor that any mention of action by the Gunnhildarsynir is planned or decided by their mother, but the example shows that the political agency of both is blended together, and the sons practically never seem to take an important action entirely independent of their mother's influence. The early episodes of their careers demonstrate this relationship particularly well, continuing with their return to Scandinavia:

*En er þetta spurði Gunnhildr ok synir hennar, at ófriðr var millum Danmerkr ok Nóregs, þá byrja þau ferð sína vestan. Þau giptu Ragnhildi, dóttur Eiríks, Arnfinni, syni Þorfinns hausakljúfs. Settisk þá enn Þorfiðr jarl at Orkneyjum, en Eiríkssynir fóru í brot. [...] En er Gunnhildr kom til Danmerkr með sonu sína, þá fór hon á fund Haralds konungs ok fekk þar góðar viðtekjur. Fekk Haraldr konungr þeim veizlur í ríki sínu svá miklar, at þau fengu vel haldit sik ok menn sína. En hann tók til fóstrs Harald Eiríksson ok knésetti hann. Fæddisk hann þar upp í hirð Danakonungs.<sup>32</sup>*

When news reached Gunnhildr and her sons of the hostility between Denmark and Norway, they began their journey from the west. They married Ragnhildr, daughter of Eiríkr, to Arnfinnr, son of Þorfiðr hausakljúfr. Þorfiðr jarl returned to Orkney, and the sons of Eiríkr departed. When Gunnhildr arrived in Denmark with her sons, she went to meet King Haraldr and was well-received. King Haraldr gave them lands in his kingdom large enough to hold them and their men. He also took Haraldr Eiríksson as his foster-son and set him on his knee. He grew up in the retinue of the Danish king.

There is much to unpack in this passage. First of all, the circumstances and motivations of Eiríkr's heirs are laid out more clearly: Hákon's new Norwegian regime is at odds with neighbouring Denmark, leaving a potential conflict to exploit. Knowing this, the party sets out to gain traction for their cause. Secondly, but perhaps even more importantly, note the language structure surrounding the subjects of the paragraph: in the first sentence, the introduction of the group as *Gunnhildr ok synir hennar* starts off by more explicitly presenting Gunnhildr as the leader of the kinship group. The additional mention of her travelling to Denmark *með sonu sína*, her sons included as passive participants, further contributes to this sense of the mother's position of full authority. There is little indication of the sons' exact age at this point in the narrative, but they are still considered preadolescent, as

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<sup>32</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 162

referred to with Gamli above. Their incapacity is reaffirmed later in the passage, where it is told that the Gunnhildarsynir later went raiding as soon as they were old enough, implying that they were not yet ready during the initial voyage from England to Denmark.<sup>33</sup>

The actions performed on the journey reinforce both the sense of network-building and Gunnhildr's position of familial authority, which carries implications for her political position both here and later in the narrative. The presentation of the marriage of Ragnhildr Eiríksdóttir to the Orcadian heir is an evident attempt at arranging the marriages of eligible relatives for political gain. The union is meant to establish an alliance where Gunnhildr and her sons can rely on the support of the Orkney jarls for their ambitions, and it secures the first essential addition to their network prior to leaving for Denmark. While the text informs us that the whole family, again the plural *þau*, is involved in marrying off Ragnhildr, this is potentially due to problems with textual consistency, as other sagas including *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* refer to Ragnhildr being married off by Eiríkr before his death, as discussed by Margaret Cormack.<sup>34</sup> In *Heimskringla*, however, Gunnhildr's status as head of the family with preadolescent sons leaves little doubt that the orchestration is hers alone. The episode shows how women can take charge of the expansion and consolidation of their networks using relatives as resources just like men do, as discussed in the introduction. There is virtually no difference between the marriage politics of Gunnhildr and those of kings and other male network leaders pursuing alliances and the formation of political parties. Even the language is the same, with the passive and objectified Ragnhildr being treated as political coin to be spent as part of the networking efforts, the only difference being that the one spending the coin is not a father or a brother, but a mother in a similar position of patriarchal authority.

The subsequent arrival in Denmark is the key moment of Gunnhildr's early network-building. The King Haraldr in question is here Haraldr Gormsson (r. 958-86), part of a long tradition of Danish kings actively attempting to extend their power base into Norway.<sup>35</sup> By making their way to King Haraldr, the family establish a firm base from which to wrestle power in Norway away from their popular kinsman. The reception of landholdings and the boys' entry into the king's retinue serve to establish a vertical connection. Gunnhildr and her sons willingly enter a lordship bond and give their allegiance to the Danish king, in order to obtain his support for their endeavour. It is possible this allegiance is entirely nominal, but nevertheless, it is a

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<sup>33</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 162

<sup>34</sup> Cormack 2001: 64-5

<sup>35</sup> Danish claims to overlordship over parts of Norway were fluid, but they occurred for centuries; see Krag 2008: 189-90.

mutually beneficial agreement where Haraldr gains the loyalty of promising pretenders to the Norwegian throne, and they in turn gain his official support in attempting to claim it. Further, by letting Haraldr gráfeldr be officially fostered by his Danish royal namesake, Gunnhildr builds a firm voluntary kinship bond similar in strength to a marriage alliance.<sup>36</sup> Due to the relative power dynamic of royal fosterage, Gunnhildr and her sons accept another degree of subordination, but the bond likely serves to officially seal a broader political agreement, given that the inclusion of the verb *knésetja*, to set on one's knee, implies a public and formalised initiation of fosterage.<sup>37</sup> The establishment of this bond is further a point where the interaction between the sagas and the Latin historiography proves particularly important. The Old Norse historiographical tradition refers to Gunnhildr as coming from Northern Norwegian parentage and possibly Finnish upbringing.<sup>38</sup> Latin texts, for instance the *Historia Norvegiæ*, state that she is the daughter of Gormr, king of Denmark, and thus the sister of the King Haraldr referred to here.<sup>39</sup> While the lack of solid evidence leaves her parentage impossible to verify either way, most scholars tend to agree that the Danish explanation is more likely than the one favoured by the sagas.<sup>40</sup> The link to Gormr and Haraldr would certainly help explain the ease with which Gunnhildr forms a Danish power base for her sons. In this context, she would not be forging new bonds as much as solidifying the already existing bonds of kinship by having her eldest son Haraldr fostered by her royal brother. The younger Haraldr in this reading receives aid from his maternal uncle, the central kinship figure discussed previously and with whom he is bound through his mother.

This explanation is further made more plausible when contrasted with the vague and supernatural nature of Gunnhildr's origins in *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. This is likely a saga fabrication rather than a story with historical roots,<sup>41</sup> and it has previously been argued that such a manipulation of ancestry is part of the larger vilification of her.<sup>42</sup> *Ágrip*, when describing Gunnhildr taking her sons to Haraldr Gormsson, states that “*Gunnhildr snørisk aptr til Danmarkar til Haralds konungs*”<sup>43</sup> (Gunnhildr returned to Denmark to King Haraldr). The text thus references her ‘return’ to Denmark and its king without having

<sup>36</sup> See for instance Miller 1990: 122-4.

<sup>37</sup> Parkes 2003: 764. Similar language is for instance used in *Heimskringla* in the famous episode where Haraldr hárfagri's messenger sets the young Hákon inn góði on King Aðalsteinn's knee, where the action, real or metaphorical, is treated as a binding agreement; see *Heimskringla I*: 145.

<sup>38</sup> *Ágrip*: 7; *Fagrskinna*: 79; *Heimskringla I*: 135

<sup>39</sup> *HN*: 80-2

<sup>40</sup> Finlay 2004: 54n47; Driscoll 2008: 87-8; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 83; cf. Nordal 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Sayers (1995: 60) considers the identification of Gunnhildr's ancestry rooted in xenophobia.

<sup>42</sup> Jones 1984: 121-2; Ciklamini 1979: 210-11; Larrington 2009: 509-10

<sup>43</sup> *Ágrip*: 12



established that she has spent significant time there in the first place.<sup>44</sup> The journey to Denmark and the smooth establishment of powerful alliances implies existing bonds between the two parties (although, if King Haraldr is indeed hostile to the current Norwegian regime, he might be well-disposed to any potentially friendly alternative pretender). Nevertheless, regardless of the nature of the bonds, Gunnhildr and her sons here achieve the power base and the network connections they require in order to begin actively pursuing their objectives in Norway itself.

For years, the narrative is then dominated by battles against Hákon, in which male warriors, including the now adult Gunnhildarsynir, naturally take centre stage. Still, even here Gunnhildr's organisational influence is seemingly unavoidable. Practically all the sources agree that she was held responsible for the death of Hákon in the midst of his final battle at Fitjar; a battle which would have been won by his side had his death not turned the situation around. According to Theodoricus, Hákon is murdered by an arrow on Gunnhildr's orders.<sup>45</sup> Saxo includes a supernatural element, claiming that she uses an arrow obtained through sorcery.<sup>46</sup> *Heimskringla* takes a more mundane position, claiming that the king is killed by a regular arrow, but that the shooter may have been Gunnhildr's *skósveinn*, 'servant'.<sup>47</sup> *Ágrip*, finally, combines the two approaches, stating that the *skósveinn* kills Hákon "...með gørningum Gunnhildar"<sup>48</sup> (...through the sorcery of Gunnhildr). The varying accounts leave room for interpretation, but it is worth noting that Hákon's death is the primary strategic objective for his political opponents, and the common denominator across the material is that he is killed at Gunnhildr's behest. The king is the main obstacle to her sons claiming power, both in terms of military-political strength and of any *ætt*-based succession to kingship, accepted by Hákon himself when he allegedly recognises their succession before dying,<sup>49</sup> and the accomplishment of his removal is bestowed by the sources upon Gunnhildr. As far as it is described, the assassination of Hákon is not simply an example of direct female participation in a masculine sphere through organising a network of fighting men, it is simultaneously a political masterstroke, accomplishing all of Gunnhildr's ambitions with a single action. Nor is this the first time in the narrative that Gunnhildr is thought to have removed an obstacle to the family's power. Earlier, when Eiríkr positioned himself as his father's heir and several of his

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<sup>44</sup> Two chapters earlier, the text does briefly mention that Eiríkr and Gunnhildr briefly fled to Denmark upon having been expelled from the country by Hákon, but this simply solidifies the link further; *Ágrip*: 8.

<sup>45</sup> *HARN*: 10

<sup>46</sup> *GD I*: 684

<sup>47</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 190-1; cf. *Fagrskinna*: 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Ágrip*: 11

<sup>49</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 192

brothers started declaring themselves kings in their own right over certain regions, she similarly protected her husband's interests by allegedly having one of them assassinated.<sup>50</sup> But while her husband and sons directly partake in the violence, Gunnhildr as a woman is typically reliant on male proxies to do so.

While these are rumours filtered through saga interpretations and as such hardly reliable evidence, they do provide an important chance to analyse the characterisation of Gunnhildr overall with more nuance. Disregarding the sorcery allegations in the Hákon example, espoused first and foremost by the more clerical sources critical to the death of a Christian king, this is not scapegoating. In a cynical world where the goal is to further the interests of ones' family and friends and combat those of one's rivals and enemies, Gunnhildr makes intelligent political decisions and, by doing so, further establishes her widespread influence and access to a variety of methods. She has servants loyal to herself, and she is able to use them for strategic purposes. Her organising role on her kinsmen's behalf allows her access to the same resources a male leader would have. The image created by these episodes is consequently one of a woman willing and able to use any means necessary to achieve the political objectives of her male family members, and through them, to achieve her own. There are primarily only a select few instances where she is imbued with hints of supernatural characteristics in the kings' sagas: her origin story, and in some cases in her actions towards her brothers-in-law. Beyond these episodes, there are only rumours, and even the rumours seem to cease after her sons' assumption of kingship.<sup>51</sup> As such, Gunnhildr's power in the kings' sagas is not rooted in the supernatural, it is rooted in network politics.

#### *Phase two: the hegemony of Gunnhildr's network*

The joint rule of the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, following the death of Hákon, is centred on the public aspect of rulership, where Gunnhildr herself is not necessarily the main figure. It is here important to mention that unlike her network leadership during her sons' adolescence, she is not in complete authority anymore. With her sons now adult kings, she does not directly control all the network's actions, but she still strongly guides them. This period is a point of contrast between *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* and their respective portrayals of Gunnhildr, with the former being mostly silent. *Heimskringla* dives straight in at the very beginning of *Haralds saga gráfeldar*: “Eiríkssynir tóku þá konungdóm yfir Nóregi, síðan er Hákon

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<sup>50</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 146-7

<sup>51</sup> Only Oddr Snorrason (Oddr: 128-31) ascribes sorcery to Gunnhildr in the time of her sons' rule, but only applies it to pagan sacrifices, and again explicitly states that these are only rumours.

*konungr var fallinn [...] Gunnhildr, móðir þeira, hafði mjök landráð með þeim. Hon var þá kǫlluð konungamóðir.*<sup>52</sup> (The sons of Eiríkr then took kingship over Norway, after the fall of King Hákon. Gunnhildr, their mother, had great share in governing the country with them. She was then called ‘mother of kings.’) The language here is particularly telling. First, the statement that Gunnhildr had *mjök landráð* with her sons is important. With *ráð* here meaning ‘rule/government’, the term roughly translates to ‘great share in governing the country’, and is a direct and unequivocal statement of power, exceedingly rare for non-kings.<sup>53</sup> Further, the inclusion of the title *konungamóðir*, and more importantly, the assertion that she was known by this moniker at the time, denotes unusual prominence, and implies recognised authority.<sup>54</sup> It solidifies the idea of the maternal bond as the basis for her power and provides her with structurally rooted governmental roles existing through the link to her royal sons. More than anything, it sets her up as the primary authority figure of the kinship network, which evidently can take precedence over her sons’ institutional roles of kingship. This is further supported by Haraldr gráfeldr and his brothers being more and more frequently referred to as “*Gunnhildar synir*”, the sons of Gunnhildr, in both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, as well as in other sources.<sup>55</sup> While these are more or less informal descriptions of the brothers as a group, Haraldr himself is formally referenced as “*Haraldr konungr Gunnhildarsonr.*”<sup>56</sup> The matronymic version is here used despite the fact that the brothers inherited their royal powers through their father and grandfather. There must, in other words, be a reason why Gunnhildr is worth mentioning over Eiríkr, and this is heavily linked to her personal prominence and power. It is likely that this version is used because the brothers are more strongly connected to her than to their father, supported by the fact that most references to them as sons of Eiríkr stem from before the latter’s death, whereas references to them as sons of Gunnhildr primarily occur after it.<sup>57</sup> This in turn serves as a testament to the power she holds over them as a widowed mother: the sons maintain institutional power over the kingdom, but the mother holds superiority within the household and the kinship group.

This period is also a particularly fertile area for studies of long-term political conflict and a woman’s central role in them, developments closely connected to another key process, the consolidation of royal power. In the main episode of *Heimskringla*’s *Haralds saga gráfeldar*,

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<sup>52</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 198

<sup>53</sup> See *landráð* in Appendix III.

<sup>54</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 85

<sup>55</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 83-109; *Heimskringla I*: 198-204. Similar references are made in skaldic poetry, such as a poem by Þórðr Sjáreksson cited in *Heimskringla (Heimskringla I)*: 191)

<sup>56</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 109

<sup>57</sup> See Appendix IV.

a family council meeting, Gunnhildr is at the centre: “*Gunnhildr konungamóðir ok synir hennar váru opt á tali ok málstefnum ok réðu landráðum. Ok eitt sinn spyr Gunnhildr sonu sína: ‘Hvernug ætli þér at láta fara um ríki í Þrándheimi?’*”<sup>58</sup> (Gunnhildr konungamóðir and her sons often spoke and deliberated about the rule of the country. One time, Gunnhildr asked her sons: “What do you intend to do about the realm in Þrándheimr?”) As the first person mentioned and the primary speaker (aside from a brief interlude where Haraldr expresses hesitation, she is in fact the only speaker), the kings’ mother is presented as the convenor of these meetings, and this is shown to be where her power often lies, reasserting her position of seniority as seen above. By asking an open question, she sets the agenda for the meeting, inquiring how her sons intend to remove the powerful jarls of Hlaðir from Þrándheimr and thus increase their hold on the country. She targets this group, and not others, for kinship-related reasons: “*Víkina austr hafa þeir Tryggvi ok Guðrøðr, ok hafa þeir þar nokkura tiltölu fyrir ættar sakir.*”<sup>59</sup> (“Víkin to the east is held by Tryggvi and Guðrøðr, and they have some claim there through the lineage.”) By referencing the *ætt*, she establishes common ground with the two kings in Víkin, both of whom are descended from Haraldr hárfagri. Gunnhildr is thus shown crafting network ties around the concept of *ætt*, and this distinction between members and non-members of the dynasty is an important part of the early consolidation of her sons’ rule. As with much network formation in this context, this is almost certainly a matter of political convenience rather than ideological aspirations, given Gunnhildr’s dubious treatment of members of the Fairhair line in other cases.<sup>60</sup>

Having laid out her case, she indicates that the decision is officially theirs, but by asking the question about the jarls of Hlaðir, she is the one creating a need to address the situation. Her behaviour further shows her ability to shape that decision, which, in the end, she actually makes herself anyway: “*Haraldr ok Erlingr skulu sitja í haust á Norð-Mæri. Mun ek ok fara með yðr. Skulu vér þá öll saman freista, hvat at sýslisk.*”<sup>61</sup> (“Haraldr and Erlingr will stay in Norð-Mæri this fall. I will also go with you. then we will all together see what we can do.”) Despite asking their opinions, hearing their arguments, and presenting herself as a mere adviser, the authoritative voice in this concluding remark, using *skulu*, a necessity verb, to simply state what shall be done, shows the level of power Gunnhildr holds in the situation. She decides, and the kings listen. This use of language operates in conjunction with the

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<sup>58</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 204

<sup>59</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 204

<sup>60</sup> Eiríkr ‘blóðøx’ got his name through serial fratricide (*Heimskringla I*: 138-40), and Gunnhildr was said to have poisoned another brother (*Heimskringla I*: 147); additionally, there is the power struggle with Hákon referenced above.

<sup>61</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 205

chosen pronouns: Gunnhildr switches between *ek*, ‘I’, and *vér*, ‘we’, making decisions for herself as an individual, and for the collective network, in the exact same manner, ensuring that her motivations are seen as identical to the good of the group.<sup>62</sup>

However, even at the centre, this network dynamic does appear to stretch beyond the core of the family, and council meetings and the like are abundant. Let us consider for instance the following passage, upon Haraldr’s later invitation to visit the king of Denmark again:

“*Haraldr gráfeldr bar þetta mál fyrir Gunnhildi ok aðra vini sína.*”<sup>63</sup> (Haraldr gráfeldr brought this matter before Gunnhildr and his other friends.) The first striking detail is that Gunnhildr is indirectly described as counted among her son’s *vinir*. There is no indication of a friendship connection between parents and children as a regularity, and it is far more likely that the term here instead carries a different meaning given the context.<sup>64</sup> Given that Haraldr is here asking for advice on what course of action to pursue, I would argue that *vinir* here refers to ‘those friendly to him’ or ‘his supporters’, i.e. his central network, dominated by his mother. While uncommon, this would still be consistent with the definitions of the term, and there are few other alternatives for a description of ‘those to whom one is close’, including both family, loyal subordinates and close friends.<sup>65</sup> The passage is followed by extensive deliberations on which course of action to pursue, finally leading to a majority recommendation to the king, which he follows. The situation leaves room for an interpretation as collective rulership by the network with Haraldr and his brothers as royal figureheads; a situation which would both confirm and explain Gunnhildr’s unrivalled influence, admitting only that she might not be the only powerful voice in the network behind her sons.

Following on from Gunnhildr’s question above, network connection beyond the ties of kinship is also apparent in the family’s dealings with Sigurðr jarl and the rival Hlaðir dynasty, among King Hákon’s closest allies and friends, beginning with a *sættarboð*, settlement negotiation, as Sigurðr has refrained from paying taxes after Hákon’s demise. This *sættarboð* begins a relatively typical network dispute settlement.<sup>66</sup> Messengers go back and forth between the disputing parties, peace is forged, and oaths are sworn. “*Skyldi Sigurðr jarl hafa slíkt ríki af þeim í Prándheimi sem hann hafði fyrr haft af Hákonni konungi.*”<sup>67</sup> (Sigurðr jarl

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<sup>62</sup> Gunnhildr similarly alternates between *ek* and *vér* when convincing Eiríkr’s men to help her take care of the Finnish sorcerers she is supposedly living with; see *Heimskringla I*: 135.

<sup>63</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 236

<sup>64</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2017) mentions no instances of parents functioning as their children’s friends. Nor have I discovered any similar instances throughout my readings of the *konungasögur*.

<sup>65</sup> See for instance Cleasby-Vigfusson: 709.

<sup>66</sup> The rules of the *sætt* have been described by Miller (1990: 261ff.); cf. Bagge 1991: 121-3.

<sup>67</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 200

was to have the same lands under them in Þrándheimr as he had had before under King Hákon.) The question is what the settlement means for the political situation, and the parties' future goals. The circumstances of the agreed relationship are unclear, and although the language seems to suggest Sigurðr becoming a vassal of sorts, with *jarl* a specific position normally subordinate to a *konungr*, I am hesitant to describe this arrangement as a lordship bond. While the jarl keeps his domains *af þeim*, 'from/under them', there is little evidence of Gunnhildr and her sons asserting any form of control in Þrándheimr. Rather, Sigurðr's contribution in exchange for keeping his lands in peace is simply formal recognition of their kingship. All other indications suggest the parties keep to their separate areas of geopolitical influence,<sup>68</sup> and Gunnhildr and her sons simply need the *sætt* because their branch of the family is unpopular and has few described connections within the country, and their hold on the kingdom is strained and tenuous.<sup>69</sup> They are further ascribed a certain fear of being surrounded by "*vinir Hákonar konungs.*"<sup>70</sup> Subjugating the aristocracy with military force would be difficult and jeopardise an already precarious position. The *sætt* buys time for Gunnhildr and her sons to organise their network.

After what appears to be an attempt to lure Sigurðr into a trap,<sup>71</sup> the network's next manoeuvre is an attempt to entice Sigurðr's brother Grjótgarðr to betray him and help them kill him, reinforcing the idea that the initial offer of friendship to the jarl is mere stalling. The political plans, and Gunnhildr's role in them, can be assessed further in the network's subsequent dealings with Grjótgarðr, as the latter accepts their invitations and comes to meet Gunnhildr and her sons. Gunnhildr's centrality is here immediately noted, with Grjótgarðr coming to meet both "*Harald konung ok Gunnhild*"<sup>72</sup> (King Haraldr and Gunnhildr). This strongly implies that her power within both the network and the kingdom is connected and potentially equal to her son's, and that the manipulation of Grjótgarðr is a joint effort. Next, it is emphasised that the two receive Grjótgarðr "*í inum mestum kærleikum*"<sup>73</sup> (in the utmost affection), showing the effort on their part to establish a connection through forming personal bonds. It is, of course, an alliance of convenience. They proceed to goad Grjótgarðr, and encourage him to switch sides, by pointing out how Sigurðr has essentially humiliated him: "*Tölðu þau fyrir Grjótgarði, hversu jarl hafði hann lítinn mann gørt.*"<sup>74</sup> (They told

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<sup>68</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 198

<sup>69</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson 2016a: 15; Krag 2008: 189-90

<sup>70</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 200

<sup>71</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 205-6

<sup>72</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>73</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>74</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206; for goading as a network tool, see chapter 2.

Grjótgarðr, that the jarl had made him a little man.) Finally, they highlight potential advantages, and it is made clear that both sides stand to gain considerably. Grjótgarðr gets to usurp his brother, and Gunnhildr and her sons can replace a mighty rival with a loyal supporter. This is further a direct answer to the question she poses above; the family cannot simply seize power in Þrándheimr from Sigurðr, based partially on the popularity of his dynasty. The proposed solution of replacing him with Grjótgarðr is thus an attempt to respect local tradition and strengthen bonds between the king and his people, while simultaneously expanding the influence of their ruling network to previously hostile regions. The suggestion is for Grjótgarðr to become the king's man, *jarl hans*,<sup>75</sup> the possessive pronoun indicating a vertical relationship. This is a contrast to Sigurðr's relationship with Hákon inn góði; the former was referred to as the king's closest *vinr* and a powerful aristocrat with a more cooperative than subservient relationship to the king.<sup>76</sup> Gunnhildr and her sons are here attempting to change the nature of the bond with the regional hierarchy of Þrándheimr, bringing Grjótgarðr into their network under their lordship. The replacement of Sigurðr with his brother carries the additional benefit of installing a puppet jarl in place of an independent power. While this plan ultimately ends in failure, with Grjótgarðr in turn being replaced by Sigurðr's son Hákon, the episode is nevertheless important for the attempted expansion of network power along the lines of Gunnhildr's original plan.<sup>77</sup>

Nearly all Gunnhildr's activities continue to fit within the network frame. Seemingly cutting her losses, she immediately seizes on the opportunity to establish a relationship with the newly installed Hákon jarl after the establishment of a truce to end the conflict: "*Þá gerðisk kærleikr mikill með þeim Hákon jarli ok Gunnhildi, en stundum beittusk þau vélræðum.*"<sup>78</sup> (Then great affection rose between Hákon jarl and Gunnhildr, but often they schemed against each other.) With tactical affection in mind, note the repetition of *kærleikr*, used in almost the exact same way as in the diplomatic reception of Grjótgarðr above. One might reasonably interpret *kærleikr mikill* as indicative of an affectionate relationship, but there are details suggesting that this relationship is of a more artificial nature. *Stundum beittusk þau vélræðum* can be translated as 'often they schemed against each other', indicating underlying subterfuge. Given that the context is a highly tenuous ceasefire negotiated by the war-weary networks of both parties, Gunnhildr (and Hákon, for that matter) is hardly in love, but rather attempting to

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<sup>75</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>76</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 163-4

<sup>77</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 211

<sup>78</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 211

smoothen relations and solidify her and her sons' hold on the country, while still attempting to gain the upper hand against a once and future rival. We can compare to the accounts of *HARN* and *Ágrip*, both of which state that Gunnhildr and Hákon spent significant time embroiled in various plots and schemes against each other.<sup>79</sup> Their testimonies are similar to the one found in *Heimskringla* but are more explicit in their emphasis on the continued enmity, even if it might not be out in the open. In *HARN* and *Ágrip*, there is no affection, but rather covert conflict, ultimately concluding with Hákon tricking Gunnhildr into a trap leading to her demise.<sup>80</sup> Reading the texts in tandem, there seems to be a consensus that Gunnhildr spent this period manoeuvring against Hákon, albeit through subterfuge and covert schemes, and that any *kærleikr* describes merely another tactical tool. Like kings using affection to build their power base, so too does *Heimskringla*'s Gunnhildr use it for her own political purposes. In this context, it is meant to aid in the consolidation of her network's power.

### *Phase three: the power behind the throne*

The later period of her sons' reign sees Gunnhildr fully embrace the role of an organiser behind the scenes. The power of the network solidified along with her sons' kingship, she works now to safeguard both for the future. There are various examples throughout her career of the dispatch of personal agents for a variety of political purposes, including scouting, diplomatic missions, and assassination attempts. This is already shown for instance in her dealings with her brothers-in-law, and overall, such action particularly comes to the fore in the other long-term conflict aside from the one against the jarls of Hlaðir, namely the attempt to remove all other scions of Haraldr hárfagri's *ætt*. This shadow conflict aspect comes in even more clearly when the sons of Gunnhildr, having made peace with Hákon jarl, subsequently attack and kill the two eastern kings, Tryggvi Ólafsson and Guðrøðr Bjarnarson, with whom they previously made peace. Both these murders are described in *Heimskringla* as the spontaneous actions of Gunnhildr's sons Haraldr and Guðrøðr, respectively, and there is no indication of her hand in these killings. As the only evidence of Gunnhildr's attitude to these kings is her recognition of their kinship bonds in the council meeting, it is possible that she is opposed to removing them due to the political ramifications, but it is also possible that she once again partakes in the planning.<sup>81</sup> However, Tryggvi's infant son Óláfr escapes through the actions of another woman, his mother Ástríðr Eiríksdóttir, daughter of the

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<sup>79</sup> *HARN*: 12-13; *Ágrip*: 15

<sup>80</sup> *HARN*: 12-13; *Ágrip*: 15

<sup>81</sup> Oddr Snorrason (Oddr: 130), for instance, describes the aftermath of the killing of Tryggvi as "*Nú hafa þau Gunnhildr ok synir hennar fullgort sitt ráð*" (Now Gunnhildr and her sons had completed their plans).



magnate Eiríkr Sigurðarson ‘bjóðaskalli’. This is where Gunnhildr clearly resumes her independent network organisation, spending years attempting to apprehend the two, to remove young Óláfr Tryggvason from the picture one way or another. While often seen as another part of her villain role,<sup>82</sup> this narrative is another key example for Gunnhildr’s political activity, as it shows the mother of kings when operating from a position of strength. The network she has so carefully and adeptly managed is in power in the Norwegian kingdom. The Gunnhildr we find here is attempting neither to seize nor consolidate power, but rather to secure the legitimacy of her sons for the foreseeable future, and it has previously been argued that this Gunnhildr has shaped saga representations of other powerful women.<sup>83</sup> Her position is here far less tenuous, and her political influence and network organisation become more direct.

The first sign of her involvement occurs when her sons come back from having eliminated the rival kings from the *ætt*: “*En er þeir fundu Gunnhildi, móður sína, sögðu þeir alla atburði um þessi tíðendi, er þá höfðu gork i fgr þeira. Hon spurði at vendiliga, þar sem var Ástriðr. Þeir segja slíkan kvitt þar af sem þeir höfðu heyr.*”<sup>84</sup> (When they met with Gunnhildr, their mother, they told her all the details of what had happened. She asked about everything concerning Ástriðr. They told her of all that they had heard.) The Gunnhildarsynir returning and meeting with their mother here practically take the form of enforcers reporting to an authority figure after a successful mission. The questioning from her side is framed almost as an interrogation, and leaves little doubt that while the sons are required to perform military action, the mother is taking responsibility for the organisation of the network’s overall political activity. Again, she is setting the agenda for the conversation, similar to her role in the council meeting. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that she is asking for news about the mother rather than the son. While she sees Óláfr as a rival for her sons, the focus implies that she sees Ástriðr, who would perhaps fill her organisational position if Óláfr became king, as a rival for herself.

Nor does her involvement end with words, but is considerably more explicit now that her sons have consolidated their power. Gunnhildr proceeds to send spies to search for news of Ástriðr’s whereabouts.<sup>85</sup> The military activities of Haraldr and his brothers over and done with, the political fallout is thus for their mother to deal with. This is another point where

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<sup>82</sup> See for instance Sayers 1995: 62.

<sup>83</sup> Jochens 1996a: 181; Larrington 2009: 510

<sup>84</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 226

<sup>85</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 227

Gunnhildr’s capabilities as network leader beyond advising her sons comes to the fore, corresponding more closely to her early activities during their childhood. With spies apparently at her direct disposal, whether they are hers or the kings’ here matters little; she commands them and directs them throughout the country. This power, and her use of it, is escalated when she receives the necessary intelligence, learning that Ástríðr and her son have fled to the former’s father Eiríkr. Again, Gunnhildr is presented as dispatching men to accomplish her political objectives: “*Pá gerir Gunnhildr þegar sendimenn ok býr þá vel at vápnum ok hestum, ok hafa þeir þrjá tigu manna.*”<sup>86</sup> (Then Gunnhildr prepared agents and offered them good weapons and horses, and they numbered thirty men.) *Sendimenn* typically refers to messengers, but here their purpose is evidently not simply to bring words, and so I have opted to translate the term as the more general ‘agents’.<sup>87</sup> To lead these agents, Gunnhildr relies on a personal friendship connection with a hitherto unknown aristocrat, described as “*ríkr maðr, vinr Gunnhildar, er Hákon er nefndr.*”<sup>88</sup> (a powerful man called Hákon, a friend of Gunnhildr.) Note further how this is presented as an operation prepared and executed by the kings’ mother alone, relying on her own personal connections. As a widowed mother and a network leader, she is part of the circles of aristocratic friendship and lordship.

As it turns out, the rival party predicts Gunnhildr’s moves, and her targets escape to Sweden. Her influence, however, is not confined within Norwegian borders: “*Pá sendi hon enn Hákon... austr til Eiríks Svíakonungs með góðar gjafar ok vináttumál.*”<sup>89</sup> (Then she sent Hákon east to Eiríkr, king of the Swedes, with good gifts and offers of friendship.) Gunnhildr’s efforts thus continue into the field of international diplomacy, additionally displaying her access to both formal friendship and gift-giving. Her emissaries are dispatched to Eiríkr, a semi-legendary but relatively well-documented Swedish ruler (r. 970-95), and *vinátta* is established with the king.<sup>90</sup> Only then does Hákon reveal his errand. Stating that he has been tasked to bring Óláfr Tryggvason back to Norway, he simultaneously assures King Eiríkr of the noble nature of this request: “*vill Gunnhildr fóstora hann.*”<sup>91</sup> (“Gunnhildr wishes to foster him”) By declaring that the intention is to retrieve Óláfr for fostering, Gunnhildr, her sons and her emissaries are again using the promise of legitimate network bonds to draw

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<sup>86</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 227

<sup>87</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 523

<sup>88</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 226

<sup>89</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 229

<sup>90</sup> For Eiríkr, see Lindkvist 2008: 223.

<sup>91</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 229

enemies out from hiding, similar to the faction's behaviour in the negotiation with Sigurðr jarl. Here, the alibi is sufficiently diplomatic to secure the assistance of King Eiríkr, but it eventually fails due to Ástriðr's refusal and the Swedes' insistence on abiding by her decision on her son's behalf. Nevertheless, in brief successive episodes, *Heimskringla* has included Gunnhildr using multiple friendship bonds of her own, combined with gift-giving and offers of fosterage, in addition to her pre-eminence within the kinship group.

*Heimskringla* here appears to be based at least partially on the older account of Oddr Snorrason. The Old Norse-Icelandic translation of Oddr's Latin history includes roughly the same narrative and chain of events, with Gunnhildr sending out scouts to discover young Óláfr's whereabouts, followed by various expeditions to capture him, first in Norway and subsequently in Sweden. I will call attention to a few textual details, however, first when Eiríkr bjóðaskalli, Ástriðr's father, sends her and Óláfr away to safety: "*En þat hygg ek at þau Gunnhildr muni sveininn vilja láta fara sem fjoður hans.*"<sup>92</sup> ("I believe that Gunnhildr [and her sons] want the boy to suffer the same fate as his father.") Eiríkr's words thus confirm a belief that Óláfr's death is the objective. While Gunnhildr's intentions were always suspicious, the declaration paints a picture of the situation as a covert attempt at quietly removing the young potential pretender from the equation. Second, the usage of '*þau Gunnhildr*' is another example of the convergence of Gunnhildr and collective pronouns. I have translated the term as referring to Gunnhildr and her sons, but in the narrowest sense, the combination of Gunnhildr with the collective *þau* places the subject of the sentence as 'Gunnhildr and her people', implying that the individuals pursuing Óláfr are Gunnhildr and *her* network. This pronoun usage goes further than before at presenting Gunnhildr as the explicit leader of a political group, whether it is intended to include her sons, her henchmen, or both.

The other detail is baffling at first sight. According to Oddr, the Hákon sent out by Gunnhildr to capture Óláfr is none other than Hákon jarl Sigurðarson: "*En á hinu næsta hausti rak Gunnhildr Hákon á brott af eignum sínum ok sagði hann skyldu vera útlagðan af Nóregi fyrir sína tilgernainga, nema hann gerði slíkt allt sem hon hafði beitt fyrr.*"<sup>93</sup> (The next autumn Gunnhildr drove Hákon from his lands and said that he should be banned from Norway for his treachery, until he had done all that she had asked.) While this is obviously strange based on what Snorri tells us, Oddr explains it with Hákon having been caught attempting to betray the Gunnhildarsynir, instead of the attempted betrayal triggering another open conflict, as in

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<sup>92</sup> Oddr: 131

<sup>93</sup> Oddr: 138

*Heimskringla*. In this version, his mission is a punishment and a chance to redeem himself in Gunnhildr's eyes. The episode does appear to constitute at least a minor point of divergence between the various source texts, although there is still significant overlap. *Ágrip* simply states that both Gunnhildr and Hákon both want Óláfr out of the way, and that Ástríðr leaves “*at forðask bæði fláræði Gunnhildar ok sona hennar ok Hákonar jarls, er ǫll kippðusk þá enn um Nóreg.*”<sup>94</sup> (to avoid the malice of both Gunnhildr and her sons and Hákon jarl, who all still fought over Norway at this time.) Unlike Oddr, *Ágrip*'s author recognises the hostility, as opposed to reluctant cooperation, between Gunnhildr and Hákon, but nevertheless agrees with Oddr's saga that both sides wish to eliminate young Óláfr. We know Snorri likely used both Oddr and *Ágrip*, so it is possible Snorri decided due to the hostile Norwegian aristocratic relationships that Oddr must have included the wrong Hákon, and that he consequently added a different Hákon to replace him in the story.<sup>95</sup> This alternative Hákon is never given any background or explanation in the text, and his journeys on Gunnhildr's behalf mirror those of Hákon jarl in Oddr's text, making it very possible that Snorri simply made a minor amendment to better reflect his view of how events must have transpired. Leaving matters of identification aside, the most important point is rather Gunnhildr's capabilities and powers in relation to this Hákon. Oddr's saga presents us with a situation in which she is personally capable of driving a powerful nobleman from his estates and ordering him to perform certain tasks, power normally only associated with kings, and rare in any case.<sup>96</sup>

Oddr's Hákon, regardless of how much stock one puts in his identity, adds the final detail of importance here himself: “*Mik hefir sent Gunnhildr, dróttning alls Nóregsveldis, at leita eptir Ástríði ok syni hennar, ok vill hon fæða upp sveininn ástfóstri.*”<sup>97</sup> (“I have been sent by Gunnhildr, queen of all Norway, to search for Ástríðr and her son, and she wishes to foster the boy with great affection.”) By promising fostering with great *ást*, Gunnhildr adds a dimension of tactical affection to her attempts to lure Óláfr into her grasp. Even more striking, however, is the usage of the royal title. As far as I have been able to find, the reference to Gunnhildr as *dróttning alls Nóregsveldis* is unique to Oddr. It is rare enough for her to be referred to as queen, and the use of this title is primarily found in episodes prior to her widowhood.<sup>98</sup> Given

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<sup>94</sup> *Ágrip*: 19

<sup>95</sup> Bagge (2006: 498-9) attempts to track the textual development in the persecution narrative, but asserts that there is no way of knowing whether the changes made in later sagas were caused by a desire for historical accuracy or by a contemporary social agenda.

<sup>96</sup> Oddr describes Sveinn tjúguskegg's exile of Sigvaldi jarl similarly; see Oddr: 230.

<sup>97</sup> Oddr: 136

<sup>98</sup> The *dróttning* title is never applied to Gunnhildr in *Ágrip*, and only once in *Heimskringla* while Eiríkr is alive. There are some instances of it in the *Íslendingasögur*, for instance in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 43 and ch. 56, where

the state of Oddr's saga as a translation from a Latin original, it is probable that the title, not found in any Old Norse original text, is a choice by the translator based on a corresponding Latin term, but it is nevertheless striking that an Old Norse-Icelandic mention of Gunnhildr exists with what is clearly an indication of rulership.

Assessing Gunnhildr's political career, it is helpful to refer to the three phases as three stages of power. In the first, she is the indisputable authority figure in the kin group due to the death of her husband and the youth of her sons. In this time the sources present her as spending her efforts on crafting a network from the bottom, which is later able to function as a power base for her sons. In the second stage, after the battle at Fitjar, she uses a combination of old and new network bonds to consolidate her sons' kingship alongside them, and often plays a supporting role as her sons claim the public mantle of kingship. Finally, in the third stage, her royal sons pursue various military activities while she herself serves as an administrator, performing all the political functions her sons will not or cannot perform themselves. While she appears to fail in her main objectives, Gunnhildr successfully safeguards against the rise of a new political faction, a new network, centred around a rival pretender to the ancestral inheritance of Haraldr hárfagri. As such, she exercises direct political power on behalf of the family, when the network surrounding them is firmly in control of the kingdom. Everything in this process, from the death of Eiríkr in England to the cat and mouse game with Ástríðr and Óláfr, appears decidedly calculated, not hot-blooded and spontaneous. While the sagas seem fond of exaggerating the misdeeds of Gunnhildr and her sons, all these actions make perfect sense in terms of political strategy. Haraldr gráfeldr and his brothers attempt to gain, expand and secure geopolitical power over the kingdom of Norway, as so many others do before and after them. Following William Sayers, this political Gunnhildr is the one subsequently "available for deployment" as a family saga villain,<sup>99</sup> ultimately transforming her into the female personification of the threat of Norwegian kingship to Iceland.<sup>100</sup> Looking beyond saga authors' ulterior motives, however, the kings' saga Gunnhildr and her sons are not appalling villains, but rather leaders of a network which climbs to the summit of power through the workings of *Realpolitik*. Based on what evidence we have, there is reason to argue that this is first and foremost Gunnhildr's network, and consequently that she is the most powerful individual in Norway in this context. All the actions above, all the machinations and

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Gunnhildr, alongside Eiríkr, is mentioned repeatedly as *Gunnhildr dróttning*, but there is no other mention of Gunnhildr the widow as *dróttning*.

<sup>99</sup> Sayers 1995: 62

<sup>100</sup> Sayers 1995: 69ff.

manoeuvres in the game of politics, were taken or at least inspired by Gunnhildr, who, as the first of many women, is able to assume a position of network leadership and channel her power through the official positions of male relatives.

There are indications of Oddr Snorrason's Gunnhildr being presented as even more overtly powerful than the versions found in later sagas such as *Heimskringla*. In the very beginning of Oddr's saga of Óláfr, we can find another example of the sons and the mother having gathered together, similar to *Heimskringla*'s council meeting, but this time for a feast in Sogn. This episode, however, is also unique to Oddr. The narrative starts out cordially, but the Gunnhildarsynir erupt into infighting about who should be the main king. The fighting is solved similar to regular dispute settlement, with the brothers' friends mediating and going between them, but the underlying conflict remains. This is where Gunnhildr comes in: "*Hon fór til ok kvazk skyld at dæma mál sona sinna ok bað þá hlíta þeim dómi sem hon vildi gera ok lét makligast at hon sætti þá. Ok þar kom at þat varð.*"<sup>101</sup> (She went to her sons and said that she had an obligation to judge their cases and asked them to abide by the decision she would make. She considered it most appropriate for her to reconcile them, and this is how it was done.) This is perhaps an ever more overt example of Gunnhildr's role as the dominant authority figure of the family and the wider network and thus, given the situation, the kingdom. She directly intervenes in the conflict of her sons, all of whom are claiming kingship, and is apparently recognised by all sides as an authority able to command all of them. She then proceeds to dictate the terms of the settlement between her sons, a political concept often relying on mediation by multiple network members: "*Þat vil ek dæma ykkar á milli, at Haraldr hafi forræði fyrir ríkinu Nóregsveldi, því at ek met hann yðarn bræðra fremstan.*"<sup>102</sup> ("This I will decide for you, that Haraldr shall rule over the Norwegian realm, because I deem him to be the greatest of you brothers.") This declaration alone demonstrates unusual influence over the other participants in the feast, including others connected to the kings, but the action is sharpened further by the fact that the text has her simultaneously dictating who shall be king. She single-handedly takes the fate of the Norwegian kingdom in her hands, and her declaration is not met with any protest from anyone present. Further, by subsequently declaring Guðrøðr entitled to compensation from Haraldr in exchange for accepting his lordship, she abides by the transactional customs of the *sætt*: the younger brother receives ships in exchange for his acceptance of Haraldr as over-king of Norway. In

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<sup>101</sup> Oddr: 128

<sup>102</sup> Oddr: 128

this way the intra-network conflict is solved, all through the authoritative intervention of Gunnhildr, the clear network leader.

While Gunnhildr in *Heimskringla* and *Ágrip* is shown to be perhaps the most influential player in Norwegian political game, and Oddr Snorrason's account accentuates her power even further, the Gunnhildr found in the corresponding sections of *Fagrskinna* is comparatively passive. She is slightly involved while Eiríkr is alive, but mostly through indirect references, and this involvement vanishes almost completely after his death. *Fagrskinna* is the only source to avoid mentioning her in correlation with the battle of Fitjar, and she is absent even when her sons take power in Norway. The killing of Sigurðr, for instance, is performed exclusively by her sons, without any preceding familial planning session.<sup>103</sup> Her name does not even come up in the relevant chapter except for three references to the brothers as 'Gunnhildarsynir'. It is a stark contrast to the presentation in *Heimskringla*, where Gunnhildr is the main organiser of the reign, but it does not imply disagreement between the authors in substance as much as in style. Later, *Fagrskinna* presents the reign of Álfífa, discussed below, thus: "*menn jöfnuðu þessu ríki við Gunnhildar öld, er verst hafði verið áðr í Nórøgi.*"<sup>104</sup> (men compared this reign to the time of Gunnhildr, which had been the worst of all in Norway.) It is evident from this comparison that the *Fagrskinna* author believes in the concept of a 'rule of Gunnhildr', given the reference to a time in which Norway was in her power. Further, it maintains that the Norwegians of the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century did so. Moreover, the agency that she does have in the text is often indirect and implicit, communicated through Eiríkr and/or their sons, but direct participation and organisation of the kinship group is still present. She communicates her divination of Hákon's arrival to Eiríkr through speaking a complex skaldic verse, participating in predominantly male public spheres and tying into the aforementioned concept of verbal agency.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, upon Eiríkr's death, she patronises the composition of a longer poem in his honour ("*Eptir fall Eiríks lét Gunnhildr yrkja kvæði um hann*").<sup>106</sup> As the only kings' saga example of a widow commissioning a poem for her dead husband, it is a unique act of female agency even if not directly indicating political power, although it has been argued that *Fagrskinna*'s association of the poem with Gunnhildr could be meant to further vilify her.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, it is striking that the Norwegians, according to *Fagrskinna*, consider Gunnhildr to be the *valdandi* of their

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<sup>103</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 101

<sup>104</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 202

<sup>105</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 202

<sup>106</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 77

<sup>107</sup> Lindow 1987: 310; cf. Goeres 2015: 56-8.

misfortunes. As a word with the dual meanings of ‘person responsible’ and ‘person of power’, the usage implies that the people are simultaneously blaming Gunnhildr for the political and moral decay of the country, while also respecting that she has a certain amount of influence which has been used to cause this situation. An indirect suggestion of power behind the scenes is thus consistently present, even when described action is limited to a minimum. *Fagrskinna* too, while showing less interest in Gunnhildr as opposed to the men of the story, recognises her central involvement during their reigns. The relative lack of Gunnhildr’s activities appears then to be simply a result of the text’s selectivity in its narrative inclusion of political manoeuvring. The overall trend is for *Fagrskinna* to be considerably less invested in the activities of women, even when it recognises their presence and political contributions.<sup>108</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the text is far more interested in battles and military engagements.<sup>109</sup>

Despite these inter-textual variations, the sources do all contribute to the same picture of Gunnhildr as an influential political administrator for the network surrounding her sons’ claim to the Norwegian throne. Working to set up for, consolidate and safeguard her sons’ kingship, her primary involvement lies in crafting links and negotiating interpersonal bonds; sometimes with or through her sons, sometimes in her own right. Doubling as a network enforcer, she on many occasions appears to perform a variety of clean-up operations after her sons’ military actions; at the very least this happens in the conflicts both with Hákon inn góði, Hákon jarl and Óláfr, something fitting perfectly with the supporting roles discussed in the introduction. She consistently has to work from the background and on the side lines, but essentially is allowed all the agency that a king or a male network leader is; her advice is almost always followed by her sons and her orders are never questioned by her male agents. This is a common trend for many kings’ saga women, who can find remarkable political influence as a power behind, or next to, the throne, while organising everything to keep the occupant of said throne with a strong and stable network-based government. Gunnhildr konungamóðir is, at least in the *konungasögur*, not as much a scapegoat or a villain as much as she is a perfect example of a woman participating in a transactional, connection-based and often ruthless political culture where long-term pursuit of strategic objectives for personal gain, and the gain of one’s network, is central.

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<sup>108</sup> A considerable number of women explored in depth in *Morkinskinna* and/or *Heimskringla* are either absent (see Appendix I) or glossed over in *Fagrskinna*, including Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir, Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir, Ingiríðr Rognvaldsdóttir and Kristín Sigurðardóttir, all of whom will be discussed below.

<sup>109</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002a: xvii-iii



## Sigríðr stórráða: networks for vengeance

While Gunnhildr is the most extensive case, analysis of women receiving somewhat less exposure reveal that she is not alone in wielding remarkable power through organising networks and network bonds. In the same texts we find Sigríðr stórráða, perhaps the most salient example in the Old Norse histories of a woman functioning as the social glue holding network bonds together, but simultaneously another woman who knows how to use this position to accomplish her own objectives through managing these bonds. Sigríðr is, according to the sagas, the daughter of a certain Skoqlar-Tósti, a powerful warrior described as one of the most renowned men in Sweden.<sup>110</sup> As with Gunnhildr, there is considerable doubt surrounding her origins,<sup>111</sup> as the German chroniclers Adam of Bremen (c. 1075) and Thietmar of Merseburg (c. 1015) both identify a Polish princess with something similar to Sigríðr's marital career, married to successive Swedish and Danish kings.<sup>112</sup> The Sigríðr stórráða figure as such, however, is unique to the kings' sagas, where she is initially encountered as the widow of the Swedish King Eiríkr mentioned above, and mother of his successor Óláfr Eiríksson 'sænski' (r. 995-1022).<sup>113</sup> As a young royal widow, Sigríðr is a desirable match, which comes to dominate her first series of appearances in the sources. The reader of the *konungasögur* first encounters Sigríðr in a brief scene where she hosts two minor kings who have arrived as potential suitors, and proceeds to burn them inside their lodgings for having the audacity to attempt to woo her from a position of weakness.<sup>114</sup>

### *Marriage negotiations*

The epithet *stórráða* is often translated as arrogant or haughty, but it can also mean ambitious.<sup>115</sup> Either way, the personality outlined is the same: Sigríðr thinks highly of herself and pursues lofty personal goals. This defines her behaviour both as a saga individual and as a network organiser. She is from a kings' saga perspective primarily important for her antagonist role in the late career of Óláfr Tryggvason, and it is here that we find evidence of her network-building activity. As such, nearly all evidence of her activities is derived from

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<sup>110</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 215; cf. *Fagrskinna*: 147.

<sup>111</sup> See Sørensen (1993: 19-21), who uses Sigríðr as a case study for saga source criticism; cf. Fritz 2006: 185, for evidence supporting Sigríðr's existence, and Toll 1926, for an older examination of the character.

<sup>112</sup> Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (hereafter *GHEP*) states that Eiríkr's widow was married to Sveinn tjúguskegg, as with Sigríðr in the sagas, discussed below (*GHEP*: 81), having mentioned that she was a Polish princess in scholium 25 above (*GHEP*: 78). Thietmar's *Chronicon* (Warner 2001: 334-5) mentions an unnamed daughter of Mieszko I of Poland having children with Sveinn.

<sup>113</sup> The epithet *sænski*, the Swedish, is often used by the sagas to distinguish this king from the Norwegian Óláfrs.

<sup>114</sup> Including Haraldr grenski, the father of Óláfr Haraldsson; see *Heimskringla I*: 287-9.

<sup>115</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 597

*Heimskringla*'s and Oddr Snorrason's respective sagas of Óláfr. I will begin here by assessing the first communication between her and the Norwegian king in *Heimskringla*:

*Sigríðr dróttning í Svíþjóð, er kolluð var in stórráða, sat at búum sínum. Þann vetr fara menn milli Óláfs konungs ok Sigríðar dróttningar, ok hóf Óláfr konungr þar upp bónorð sitt við Sigríði dróttningu, en hon tók því líkliga, ok var þat mál fest með einkamálum. Þá sendi Óláfr konungr Sigríði dróttningu gullhring þann inn mikla, er hann hafði tekit ór hofshurðunni á Hlōðum, ok þótti þat hofuðgersimi.<sup>116</sup>*

Queen Sigríðr in Sweden, who was called *stórráða*, stayed on her estates. That winter men travelled between King Óláfr and Queen Sigríðr, and Óláfr then proposed marriage with Sigríðr, she responded favourably, and this was bound with a personal agreement. Then Óláfr sent Sigríðr the great gold ring he had taken from the door to the pagan temple at Hlaðir, and he considered it a precious treasure.

What this episode first of all shows, is that Sigríðr is considered perfectly free to handle her own remarriage without the interference of male relatives, despite the suggestion that women's consent became a factor only in Christian times.<sup>117</sup> She is presented as an independent widow completely in control of her own life, her own properties and agents, and her own conjugal prospects.<sup>118</sup> Her independence combined with the approach taken by Óláfr make the marriage discussion appear indistinguishable from any other negotiation of alliance between two equal parties, and this is reinforced by the recurring emphasis on royal titles and description of messengers going back and forth. Furthermore, in addition to the negotiation itself the text describes Óláfr sending an exceptionally precious ring directly to Sigríðr, further solidifying the relationship through ritualised gift-giving; the object becomes a part of the negotiating pattern of establishing a bond. In a strange scene, Sigríðr's resident blacksmiths discover the ring to be copper-based rather than pure gold, leading to a certain degree of suspicion surrounding the whole engagement process. It is not confirmed whether Óláfr knew the truth about the ring or not, but in any case, it does not immediately disrupt their agreement.<sup>119</sup> Óláfr has given Sigríðr a gift and Sigríðr has received it, but the disappointment surrounding the gift has left her sceptical, and threatened the trust built into the potential bond.

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<sup>116</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 309

<sup>117</sup> Jochens 1995: 48; Jochens recognises the existence of saga cases involving consent prior to the eleventh century, but does not explore cases such as this, where there is a connection between a woman's power and status and her marital independence.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Bandlien 2005: 176-7.

<sup>119</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 309

When Óláfr subsequently insists she abandon her paganism prior to the marriage, Sigríðr responds by refusing to forsake the beliefs of her ancestors, causing Óláfr to strike her.<sup>120</sup> However, she is arguably the reasonable one in this story, particularly in *Heimskringla*. She is the victim of Óláfr’s physical assault, while also presenting herself as willing to accept his beliefs if he will accept hers; a peculiar display of religious tolerance in the face of Óláfr’s fanaticism.<sup>121</sup> Even Oddr’s hagiographic history struggles to present it any other way.<sup>122</sup> Óláfr is the party unable to compromise, with Sigríðr simply defending her customs. Furthermore, it is clear from the source material that this is a tactical marriage, meant to bring political benefits to both parties through the bonds and influence they bring; hence the negotiation. By adopting a tolerant stance, Sigríðr shows herself willing to accept certain concessions in order to advance her position; as such, it is tempting to suggest she is simply a better and more flexible player of the political game than a fundamentalist like Óláfr, whose unnuanced approach often seems to create more enemies than friends.<sup>123</sup>

#### *Sigríðr’s sole-purpose network construction*

As a result of the unfortunate end to the negotiation, the royal widow makes it her mission to become Óláfr’s enemy for life, as shown in *Heimskringla* with the inclusion of her ominous remark “*Þetta mætti verða vel þinn bani.*”<sup>124</sup> (“This might well become your bane.”) It is here that Sigríðr’s described political involvement begins in earnest, and it is here we find one of the clearest examples of where network analysis can considerably illuminate the narrative activities of an elusive female figure. Her career is never as explicitly nor as extensively described as that of Gunnhildr, but there is nevertheless significant potential to draw out information about the opportunities for political influence afforded to a high-ranking woman through her working of network associations. It is possible Sigríðr is restricted to the background because she is never placed geographically in Norway and is consistently part of the opposition to Norwegian kings, but even what little information the sagas give is valuable for understanding her position in elite political structures.

Sigríðr’s eventual remarriage to Danish king Sveinn ‘tjúguskegg’ (r. 986-1014) is explicitly described in *Heimskringla* to bind together a resourceful and strong network from across

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<sup>120</sup> This detail occurs both in *Heimskringla* (*Heimskringla I*: 310), *Fagrskinna* (*Fagrskinna*: 147) and Oddr’s *Óláfs saga* (Oddr: 238).

<sup>121</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 310

<sup>122</sup> Oddr: 237-8

<sup>123</sup> Óláfr’s uncompromising attitude to forcing Christianity on the aristocracy is particularly well illustrated in *Heimskringla* (*Heimskringla I*: 317-8), where he destroys another temple and executes a recalcitrant magnate outside its doors.

<sup>124</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 310

Scandinavia: “...fekk Sveinn konungr Sigríðar innar stórráðu, dóttur Skoqlar-Tósta, móður Óláfs ins sænska, Sviakonungs. Tóksk þar þá með tengðum konunga kærleikr ok með ǫllum þeim Eiríki jarli Hákonarsyni.”<sup>125</sup> (King Sveinn married Sigríðr stórráða, daughter of Skoqlar-Tósti, mother of King Óláfr of Sweden. The bonds between the kings sparked considerable affection between them, and between them and Eiríkr jarl, son of Hákon.) This is a network rooted in both kinship and friendship associations, but it is constructed through political marriages resulting in the participants mentioned here all becoming *mágar*. The *tengðir*, ‘bonds’, mentioned in the passage are very much links in the network sense, typically referring to affinity-based kinship bonds such as these. They come into being between the kings because of the marriage of the Danish king to his Swedish colleague’s widowed mother, and Eiríkr jarl is connected to them through his own marriage to the Danish king’s daughter. The network is, nevertheless, primarily being built for the singular objective of removing the Norwegian king from the Scandinavian political equation. All the members have grudges against him,<sup>126</sup> and simultaneously a motive of religious difference. In contrast to Óláfr’s aggressive Christianity, both Sveinn<sup>127</sup> and Eiríkr, son and successor of the Hákon jarl discussed above,<sup>128</sup> are, like Sigríðr, noted pagans. As such, there is little doubt that the *kærleikr* which here emerges between three of the four most powerful men in the region, signifies mutual trust to fulfil a plan and a readiness to cooperate, rather than any emotional connection between them.

Sigríðr is the key member of this alliance. This is a network which would eventually go on to achieve her political ends, with the help of a patchwork of internal associations, but Sigríðr’s marriage to Sveinn is the catalyst, the most important bond. As shown above, Sigríðr herself is presented as a rich and independent widow at the time of this marriage, who owns considerable lands, commands a host of retainers, and assertively refuses marriage offers from *smákonungar*, ‘petty kings’.<sup>129</sup> Thus it is made to seem highly likely that the union stems at least partially from her own wishes. This is also indicated by Saxo, whose account presents Sveinn’s marriage to Sigríðr as a mutually beneficial alliance of equals similar to how the

<sup>125</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 341

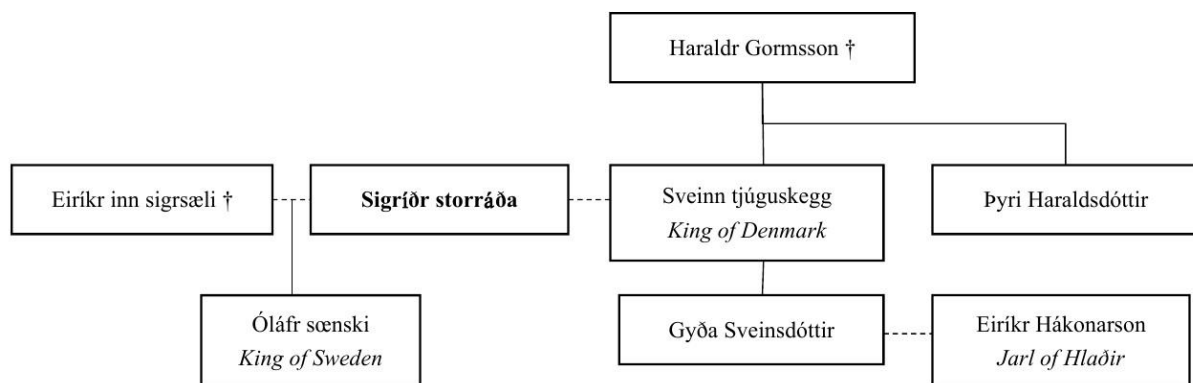
<sup>126</sup> In addition to the striking of Sigríðr, Óláfr was ultimately responsible for the death of Hákon jarl, Eiríkr’s father. Sveinn’s grudge is discussed in context below.

<sup>127</sup> Sveinn’s religion is not explicitly presented either way in the *konungasögur*, but both Adam of Bremen and Saxo describe him explicitly as a pagan; see *GHEP*: 72; *GD I*: 704.

<sup>128</sup> Eiríkr is presented as explicitly pagan in *Ágrip*: 24. It is noted by *Heimskringla* that he converts to Christianity in the end, but his consistent promotion of religious freedom is contrasted with Óláfr’s aggression; see *Heimskringla I*: 372.

<sup>129</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 287-9

sagas describe Óláfr’s initial attempt to marry the queen.<sup>130</sup> Sigríðr, because of her longstanding grudge against Óláfr, thus becomes the implied instigator of the plan to unite against him. While her direct function is that of providing the *tengðir* for political reasons, in the saga narrative she is simultaneously a node in her own right. She is constructing an alliance to fulfil her own personal goals, resulting in a combined pan-Scandinavian force joining to defeat and kill the Norwegian king. It is evident that saga authors consider Sigríðr to be responsible Sveinn’s military alliance and the battle of Svǫldr. In fact, they tell us that this dominated her life from then on, as per Oddr: “Ok af þessi sök gerðisk dróttning reið mjök, svá at margan dag síðan var hon í miklum umsátum um Óláf konung ok dró at langt ráð.”<sup>131</sup> (And for this reason the queen became so angry, that for many days since she conspired against King Óláfr and for a long time made plans.) In all of the texts, most of her appearances from this point onward relate to bringing these plans to fruition.



**Figure 1.** Sigríðr stórráða’s Svǫldr network.

In *Heimskringla*, the focus continues to lie on her efforts with her husband Sveinn: “Hon eggjaði mjök Svein konung til at halda orrostu við Óláf konung Tryggvason... Hafði Sigríðr dróttning slíkar fortǫlur optliga í munni, ok kom hon svá sínum fortǫlum, at Sveinn konungur var fullkominn at gera þat ráð.”<sup>132</sup> (She forcefully goaded King Sveinn to go to war with King Óláfr Tryggvason. Queen Sigríðr frequently spoke such words, and Sveinn eventually became bent on following this advice.) In this particular situation, with Sigríðr goading the men in her life on to violence and war, many readers will recognise the role of the female inciter, to whom we shall return in the following chapter. It is, nevertheless, another example of a woman starting a politically motivated war by proxy. *Heimskringla* presents the true

<sup>130</sup> *GD I*: 722-4

<sup>131</sup> Oddr: 238

<sup>132</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 349; cf. *Fagrskinna*: 147. The goading is presented in the form of a longer exchange in Oddr: 295-9.

reason for Sigríðr's plans, her personal enmity, and then has her give an excuse to Sveinn, Óláfr having slept with his sister without his permission, and thus insulted his honour.<sup>133</sup> Sveinn, like Eiríkr blóðøx before him, is easily manipulated into following the wishes of an ambitious wife, and other powerful network members are subsequently drawn into the plan. Encouraged by his wife, Sveinn organises messages and meetings, activating the bonds established above, and the alliance begins planning battle against Óláfr.<sup>134</sup> Þyri, Sveinn's sister and Óláfr's new wife, provides similar goading on the Norwegian side, which has led some scholars to conclude that the episode as a whole is an effort to blame the Norwegian defeat on women.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, Sigríðr's efforts should not be dismissed due to similarities with a scapegoated literary archetype. The passage is revealing for the dynamic of the network going against Óláfr. Note first of all the usage of network language to describe her hostile relationship with the king of Norway. *Óvinr* is simply the negative inversion of *vinr*, arguably another, albeit different, bond; the queen being presented as Óláfr's greatest *óvinr* presents her as having the strongest bond of animosity to him, similar to how the various references to an individual as *hinn mesti vinr* would refer to another's closest friend and most important supporter.<sup>136</sup> In other words, it is reasonable for us to conclude that Sigríðr is the most important, albeit not the only, driving force behind the network's efforts against Óláfr. The question becomes if Sveinn's efforts can be described as Sigríðr's efforts. It is rarely so simple, but I would suggest that we again encounter a situation similar to Gunnhildr. Sveinn, like the Gunnhildarsynir, is the person responsible for taking all the actions relating to preparing the inter-kingdom network for war against Norway. Nevertheless, the testimony of the sources appears to make it clear that Sigríðr constantly stands behind him and instructs him on what to do. There is little doubt that Sigríðr is the primary driving factor behind Sveinn's actions; the only question is how directly she is able to shape them.

### *Comparisons with Oddr Snorrason's saga*

While *Heimskringla* simply has Sigríðr goading Sveinn, and Sveinn taking the reins from there in terms of building a force to defeat Óláfr, Oddr Snorrason's saga puts her in a considerably more active organisational role. When Sveinn relents to her pressure, Oddr's Sigríðr directly intervenes to build the alliance: "*Fyrst skalt þú senda menn í Vinðland á fund*

<sup>133</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 349. Bandlien (2005: 128) sees the episode as a disruptive conflict with a legal guardian, but argues that Snorri defends it by painting Sveinn as a bad guardian.

<sup>134</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 349

<sup>135</sup> Both women's goading are seen by Jochens as scapegoating of women by Snorri; see Jochens 1987a: 100ff.

<sup>136</sup> Although as Miller points out, the term *óvinr* is often used for open conflict as well, representing a drastic understatement of the hostile relationship; Miller 1990: 182.

*Sigvalda jarls er þú hefir gert útlagðan fyrir allt Danaveldi; bjóð honum til þín, at þit sættizk, ef hann vill eignask eignir sínar ok ríki, þat er forellri hans hefir haft, Síðan skalt þú skilja þat á hann, at hann fari sendiferð þína til Nóregs...*<sup>137</sup> (“First you shall send men to Vinðland to meet Sigvaldi jarl, whom you have outlawed from the Danish realm. Bid him to settle with you, if he wants to reacquire his properties and lands, which his ancestors have had. Next you should require this of him, that he travels as your emissary to Norway...”) Sigríðr here speaks from a position of authority. The use of *skulu*, a verb of necessity, implies that she simply instructs Sveinn how to act, and now that she has brought him on board with her planning, decides rather than advises. The authoritative voice is thus similar to Gunnhildr above. Through this mission, the help of Eiríkr jarl is also enlisted along with the recall of the outlawed Sigvaldi, and thus, Sigríðr’s coalition begins to establish itself. It is further Sigríðr who suggests the dispatch of the exiled jarl to Norway with the mission of drawing Óláfr out into the open, particularly important seeing as in *Heimskringla*, Sigvaldi famously becomes the man to lure Óláfr into the ambush and betray him.<sup>138</sup>

Further, Oddr has Sigríðr explicitly bring her son Óláfr of Sweden into the alliance as well, stating that the latter blamed his namesake for striking and betraying his mother, and that “*Sigríðr var ok mjök eggjandi þessa ófriðar*”<sup>139</sup> (Sigríðr also strongly incited this enmity). It is thus Sigríðr, operating around the various scenes of her family network, who speaks and manipulates this plan into being. Finally, in the culmination of Oddr’s account, confident of success with the support of her royal male relatives behind her, she is the one putting forward the strategy to take out Óláfr Tryggvason, with her suggestion to Sveinn and Sigvaldi to lure him away from Norway and into a trap: “*En ef Óláfr konungr Tryggvason ferr ór Nóregi ok látir þú hann líða um Eyrarsund ok fari hann sína leið sem hann vill, má hann þá öngum grunum á renna at þú sér eigi trúlig.*”<sup>140</sup> (“If King Óláfr Tryggvason leaves Norway and you let him pass through Eyrarsund and go where he wishes, he has no reason to suspect that you are not faithful.”) Her plans are then sealed with another goading line to force Sveinn’s hand: “*En þenna hlut mátt þú mest sýna hversu lítill þú ert, Sveinn konungr, ef þú lætr hann þá fara aptr í friði ok frelsi.*”<sup>141</sup> (“This time you will most clearly show how small you are, King Sveinn, if you let him return in peace and freedom.”) Oddr thus presents the ambush strategy as the ultimate endgame of Sigríðr’s plan to destroy Óláfr. The religious element of the

<sup>137</sup> Oddr: 296-7

<sup>138</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 350-3; see also Finlay (2014: 73-5) for a deeper analysis of Sigvaldi’s role.

<sup>139</sup> Oddr: 307

<sup>140</sup> Oddr: 297

<sup>141</sup> Oddr: 297-8

network comes to the fore again, as in *Heimskringla*, with her suggestion of exploiting Óláfr's proselytising ideals to spring the trap on him: “*Veit ek, ef þetta liggr við, at fyrir hvetvetna fram mun hann fara at boða Guðs nafn, ok mun oss þá auðvelt at leiða hann með þessu í nokkvorar umsátir.*”<sup>142</sup> (“I know that, if this is the reason, he will go at any cost to preach God's name, and then it will be easy for us to lead him into an ambush.”) Although the military part of the plan remains the exclusive province of the male network members, Sigríðr, like Gunnhildr, makes specific tactical recommendations, and includes herself in the collective group, *oss*, meant to lead the king into a trap. She has carefully crafted a network centred around herself in order to fulfil her political goals, and now she directly manages its operations. The death of Óláfr fulfils the primary purpose of this network, but it also puts Sigríðr in a far more powerful position, first as the strategic planner of his demise, but subsequently also in the aftermath of it. We first encounter her having moved away from the Swedish court and practically retired to her estates, a situation she clearly wants to remedy, given the long pursuit of a second high-ranking marriage. At the end of her narrative, she is married to the most powerful king in the north, she is still the mother of the king of Sweden, and both these kings are allied with the jarl of Hlaðir, now the ruler of Norway. All her personal enemies, on the other hand, have been eliminated through the actions of this same network.

Sigríðr is another woman whose prominence varies from source to source. The Norwegian synoptics largely ignore her, emphasising instead the grudges between Óláfr and Sveinn. Saxo claims she held the power of government in Sweden during her son's early reign, thus defining her early career as somewhat like that of Gunnhildr.<sup>143</sup> No other source mentions such a regency-like arrangement, or indeed anything about her early reign, but that is not necessarily reason to dismiss it, given that Saxo's *Gesta* is the only source that is not predominantly Norwegian-centric. However, by bringing together Saxo's account with the narratives of Snorri and Oddr, we can gain a broader understanding of later ideas of Sigríðr and her power. There is no doubt that network bonds are vital to Sigríðr's political role, the question is simply her extent of influence over the direction of the network. Oddr's testimony, and to an extent Saxo's, suggest that she is the primary organiser of the network's activities. Snorri's younger text retains most of the same narrative, but it is somewhat more hesitant to directly ascribe everything to Sigríðr. Nevertheless, tying Oddr's descriptions back to

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<sup>142</sup> Oddr: 297-8

<sup>143</sup> *GDI*: 714



*Heimskringla*, one could reasonably argue she is presented as the orchestrator in the younger text as well, due to her status as the central kinship link of the anti-Óláfr network, her intensive efforts to convince Sveinn to move against the Norwegian, and finally, *Heimskringla*'s consistent assertion that Sigríðr independently controls her own remarriage. Oddr and Snorri certainly agree that she shapes the direction of the network after it has been established, but there are thus also indications of consensus surrounding her influence over the process of forming the network in the first place.

### **Álfifa: insider and outsider networks**

The final case study is taken from the next generation in the Danish royal kinship group, and it gives the opportunity to investigate a woman in Norwegian politics whose network spans multiple kingdoms, while simultaneously possessing few stable connections in the Norwegian context itself. Álfifa Álfrimsdóttir (born c. 990), Ælfgifu of Northampton in English sources, was likely the first wife<sup>144</sup> of Knútr Sveinsson 'inn ríki' (king of England 1016-36, king of Denmark 1018-35), son of Sveinn tjúguskegg (and son or stepson of Sigríðr, but this is difficult to establish based on the available material),<sup>145</sup> and at one point king of Denmark, England and Norway. She was the daughter of a prominent Anglo-Saxon aristocrat, and vital to Knútr's consolidation of control in Northern England.<sup>146</sup> In the sagas, the narratives focus on Álfifa's Norwegian regency on behalf of Knútr and their son Sveinn after the defeat of King Óláfr Haraldsson by Knútr's allies in the battle of Stiklarstaðir.<sup>147</sup> In this context, as an Anglo-Saxon aristocratic woman intertwined with a Danish invader, she carries multiple foreign identities to the Norwegian political scene.<sup>148</sup> Her political role here is not corroborated by older texts, but certain details are: her relationship with Knútr is referenced in English sources,<sup>149</sup> and Knútr's placement of Sveinn as his representative in Norway is described by the near-contemporary Adam of Bremen.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, she appears to have made a strong mark in Norway, and is tied closely to Old Norse literary culture and skaldic tradition.<sup>151</sup> She is widely remembered in saga texts, appearing in central roles in *Ágrip*, the *Legendary saga*, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*.

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<sup>144</sup> Although referred to as a concubine in English sources favouring her rival, Knútr's wife Emma, these sources tend to manipulate history against Álfifa; see Stafford 1997b: 233-4; Stafford 2004.

<sup>145</sup> See the introduction to Sigríðr above.

<sup>146</sup> Bolton 2007: 247-9

<sup>147</sup> The narratives of Óláfr Haraldsson are at the centre of the following chapter.

<sup>148</sup> For her origin in England, see Stafford 2004; Bolton 2007: 247-8.

<sup>149</sup> E.g. the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*; more on these sources in chapter 3.

<sup>150</sup> *GHEP*: 100

<sup>151</sup> Townend 2005: 254

While Álfífa has received less scholarly attention than her counterpart Emma, Knútr's Anglo-Norman queen, her appearance in the saga tradition is a crucial example for this discussion,<sup>152</sup> as she is one of the most politically prominent network organisers of the *konungasögur*, but also a reviled figure. I argue here that Álfífa, although an external participant in Norwegian politics, functions as a Norwegian network leader little different from her native rivals. Any denigration she does receive as an outsider never appears to be tied to her own identity, but is instead connected to anti-Danish sentiment, which comes through particularly strongly in *Fagrskinna*.<sup>153</sup> I will here delineate the sources and boundaries of her power through the network lens and define her position accordingly. As one cannot understand Álfífa individually without considering the Norwegian political background, nor without the context of the men around her, I will pay particular attention to the language surrounding her relationships with her male relatives, primarily her patron Knútr and her son Sveinn, of her depicted interactions with other political players, and of critical descriptions of her behaviour by political opponents. Building from this, the analysis is divided into two parts both drawing from all available texts: the first centred on her assumption of power in Norway alongside her son and the dynamic of their subsequent rule; the second centred on her role in the emerging faction disputes eventually leading to the expulsion of their regime.

### *The assumption of power*

A considerable segment of the interpersonal power dynamic is revealed by a brief passage in *Ágrip* on Knútr, Sveinn and Álfífa: “*pá setti hann Svein son sinn ok Álfífu móður hans í ríkit.*”<sup>154</sup> (Then [Knútr] put his son Sveinn and Sveinn's mother Álfífa in charge of the kingdom.) This description is reiterated in the *Legendary saga*, which further adds that mother and son arrive “*við allra beztra manna sonum*”<sup>155</sup> (with the sons of all the best [Danish] men). While relatively straightforward, these lines speak considerably as to the background for Sveinn and Álfífa's rule, as it in more ways than one implies an agreed-upon division of official power. Sveinn does become king, but he receives control of the kingdom alongside his mother, without any defined boundaries between them. However, both Sveinn and Álfífa remain reliant on Knútr. It is his privilege to appoint them, and his power which makes it possible to ‘*setja í ríki*’, a phrase often used to describe the establishment and consolidation of

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<sup>152</sup> Scholarly work on Álfífa tends to either only compare her to Emma or read her as simply a part of Knútr's career; see for instance the brief discussion of Álfífa alongside Emma in Campbell (1971), and the more thorough assessment of her life and career in Bolton (2007); cf. Townend 2005: 252ff.

<sup>153</sup> Indrebø 1917: 148

<sup>154</sup> *Ágrip*: 28

<sup>155</sup> *Helgisaga*: 338

a new regime.<sup>156</sup> Power is thus split in more than one way. Sveinn and Álfífa share the reins of Norwegian government, but the factor enabling them to do so is the reliable backing of Knútr.

This explanation finds resonance in *Heimskringla*, which includes a previous instance of Sveinn and Álfífa ruling on Knútr's behalf, namely in the fortress of Jómsborg in Vinðland.<sup>157</sup> The Jómsborg episode demonstrates governmental experience, potentially for both Sveinn and Álfífa, but it further allows for a placement of their power in subordinate roles within Knútr's administrative network rather than as traditional independent kingship. While Sveinn is to receive the title of king over Norway, *konungsnafn yfir Nóregi*, it is little more than an honorific if power really lies elsewhere with his father.<sup>158</sup> However, royal investment secures legitimacy for the regime, ensuring that formally speaking, Sveinn is indeed to occupy the official position of Norwegian kingship. He requires the assent of the regional assemblies, and thus the support of existing dominant political players, but Knútr's power ensures that the confirmation meets no issue.<sup>159</sup> Rulership over both Vinðland and Norway is thus demonstrated to be solidly under the undisputed authority of Knútr, who simply requires trustworthy representatives in the outlying provinces of his fledgling empire. Consequently, Sveinn and Álfífa's regime invokes traditional royal legitimacy, but simultaneously draws its political control from Danish pressure.

In these passages, Álfífa is mentioned only briefly, a supporter and aide to her son Sveinn. The dynamic of their relationship, however, as well as their rule over Norway, is further elaborated in both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. The *Fagrskinna* account is explicit about the division of actual power going instead in Álfífa's favour:

*Álfífa móðir hans, er kǫlluð var en ríka Álfífa, hún réð mest með konunginum, ok mæltu þat allir, at hún spillti í hvern stað ok fór fyrir þá sök stjórnin illa við landsfólkit, ok svá margt illt stóð af hennar ráðum í Nóregi, at menn jǫfnuðu þessu ríki við Gunnhildar ǫld, er verst hafði verit áðr í Nóregi. Um Álfífu ǫld leigðu fiskimenn sjóinn... Þessu olli ríki Knúts konungs, at eigi váru rán né manndráp, en ekki kenndu menn þat Álfífu.<sup>160</sup>*

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<sup>156</sup> *Setja til*, *setja at*, and *setja yfir* are all frequently used to denote the assumption of rulership over, or assigning another rulership over, a particular region. See for instance the seizure of power by Queen Ása (*Heimskringla I*: 84). There are also many instances of the verb *setja* applied to the context of assuming rulership in *Haralds saga hins hárfagra*, perhaps most similarly expressed in the description of Einarr jarl's return to power in Orkney (*Heimskringla I*: 132).

<sup>157</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 398

<sup>158</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 398-9

<sup>159</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 399. "var hann þar til konungs tekinn á hverju lögþingi" (he was there taken as king at every assembly).

<sup>160</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 201-2; a similar account is also provided in *Ágrip*: 28-9.

His mother Álfífa, who was called Álfífa ‘the Powerful’, made most decisions for the king, and everyone said that she caused damage in all places, and for this reason the government was unpopular with the people of the country. So much ill came from her rule in Norway, that men compared it to the time of Gunnhildr, which had been the worst of all in Norway. In the time of Álfífa fishermen paid rent for the sea. Due to the power of King Knútr there was no plundering nor murder, but men did not give credit for this to Álfífa.

The text clearly states that Álfífa is more powerful than her son, but the way it does so is peculiar. *Hón réð mest með konunginum* can mean that she ruled with the king, but the application of the superlative *mestr* and the placement of the king in the dative case suggests a meaning of ‘she did most of the ruling for the king’, or more concisely, ‘she ruled for the king’. The indication is that Sveinn does formally wield the decision-making power, but he is completely dominated and controlled by the will of Álfífa. This is clearly no secret, which implies another clause to the unspoken agreement in the works behind the investment of Sveinn. Just as the Norwegian magnates initially accepted a potentially incapable king due to his father’s power, they may also have accepted that his mother would have to rule with, for and through him. As with Gunnhildr, Álfífa’s familial power over Sveinn thus supersedes his nominally superior royal status, and this occurs with social acceptance. In a similar vein, a parallel between Álfífa and Knútr is found in the epithet *en ríka*. Álfífa, like her husband, is explicitly remembered for her exceptional power, whereas no such recognition is awarded to their son. Again, this demonstrates the widespread acknowledgment of her superior authority in Norway. While this passage takes a critical tone towards the person of Álfífa and her political decisions, even this provides valuable insights when looking beyond exaggerated criticisms, as the text appears to explicitly recognise that Álfífa receives disproportional condemnation. The same power that grants her the ability to rule ensures a period of relative peace in the Norwegian kingdom, but Álfífa herself is not given the credit she may have deserved, which goes instead to the absent and detached Knútr.

Another valuable detail is again the parallel with Gunnhildr. While the sentence appears to be inserted primarily for scapegoating women in positions of power, a popular saga tool in the case of both these women, linking *Álfífu ǫld* to *Gunnhildar ǫld* creates a particularly powerful comparison rooting Álfífa’s political role solidly in the same sources as Gunnhildr. Although having to channel their power through the authority of male kings, husbands and sons, both women rule Norway with and for men through their leadership positions in family networks, in their shared role as kings’ mothers, a role also shared with Sigríðr. Neither Gunnhildr nor Álfífa is ever a ruling queen in the formal sense, nor do they belong to the royal lineage, nor

are they explicitly occupying official governmental roles. Nevertheless, they are presented as the most powerful women encountered in the *konungasögur*, going far in confirming the unofficial and network-based nature of women's power, regardless of the origin of the power holder.

*Heimskringla's* account follows *Fagrskinna's*, but provides additional detail: “*Hann [Sveinn] var bernskr bæði at aldri ok at ráðum. Álfífa, móðir hans, hafði þá mest landráð, ok váru landsmenn hennar miklir óvinir.*”<sup>161</sup> (Sveinn was childish both in age and wits. His mother Álfífa had most of the government of the land, and the men of the country were unfriendly with her.) Note first the elaborate use of *bernskr*. The adjective is often used to describe kings who are not yet of an age acceptable for rulership.<sup>162</sup> Here, however, Sveinn's status as *bernskr* is expanded to cover his mental acuity. His incapability is highlighted, the allegation being that he is more child than adult. Álfífa, in contrast, is presented as controlling the *landráð*, the government of the land, making her a member of a highly exclusive group of non-royal network leaders,<sup>163</sup> including Gunnhildr above.<sup>164</sup> In Álfífa's case, the superlative *mestr* (similar to the *Fagrskinna* usage above) combined with the unqualified use of *landráð* without mentioning other participants, asserts that she is the most powerful individual in Norway; Sveinn is the king, but Álfífa is the ruler. As such, her situation is comparable to several male rulers, from Haraldr hárfagri's uncle Guthormr, who controlled *öllum landráðum* during the minority of his nephew,<sup>165</sup> to Erlingr skakki, referred to as *landráðamaðr góðr* while ruling Norway for his underage son.<sup>166</sup> There is essentially no difference between Álfífa's rule and the rule of powerful male Norwegians who for whatever reason cannot themselves claim kingship, nor is her legitimacy ever questioned, only her behaviour.

The passage also includes the first glimpse of internal political tension between networks rising throughout the reign of the new regime. As factions begin forming, there is a vaguely outlined foreign party including Sveinn, Álfífa, and other Danish aristocrats accompanying the pair to Norway. *Morkinskinna* shows this more explicitly later in the narrative: “*Fór Sveinn konungr þá brot við þetta ok Álfífa móðir hans ok allir Danir, þeir sem með honum höfðu verit í Nóregi, suðr til Danmerkr.*”<sup>167</sup> (King Sveinn then left for Denmark, along with

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<sup>161</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 410

<sup>162</sup> See for instance the instances of *bernskr* listed in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*; “*bernskr*”, n.d.; cf. the discussion of Magnús Ólafsson and Hørða-Knútr in chapter 2.

<sup>163</sup> See Appendix III, where all applications of *landráð* to non-kings participating in government are listed.

<sup>164</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 198

<sup>165</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 94

<sup>166</sup> Erlingr is confirmed as a viable regent for the country for this reason; see *Heimskringla III*: 374.

<sup>167</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 24

Álfífa his mother and all the Danes who had been with him in Norway.) While this goes far in confirming the existence of a larger Danish group, the accounts of *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla* also contribute to this by including an apartheid-like legal division: “þá skyldu danskir menn hafa svá mikinn metnað í Nóregi, at eins þeira vitni skyldi hrinda tíu Norðmanna vitnum”<sup>168</sup> (Danish men would have such high standing in Norway, that testimony from one of them would overturn the testimony of ten Norwegians). The implementation of such laws dividing subjects by national identity implies an influx of Danes in Norway. By the kings’ saga accounts, the full Danish presence, dominated by but not exclusive to the ruling dynasty of the Knýtlingar, is considerable enough to constitute Álfífa’s main power base, although we cannot know its full size. Note further how Álfífa, due to her connections to Sveinn, Knútr and the remainder of the network, is simply grouped together with the Danes in Norway. While her general foreignness and her status as an outsider are thus important, her being English is irrelevant to saga authors preoccupied with illustrating the resistance to Danish occupation.<sup>169</sup>

This resistance is dominated by the group described as the *landsmenn*, the ‘men of the country’, a term representing the native population but likely primarily referring to the Norwegian aristocracy, led by magnates such as Einarr Einriðason ‘þambarskelfir’ (c. 980-1050), a powerful jarl in Þrændalög who fought for Óláfr Tryggvason, but then supported Knútr against Óláfr Haraldsson.<sup>170</sup> In fact, the term often refers to the native leadership of a country contrasted with external forces.<sup>171</sup> That the *landsmenn* become Álfífa’s *óvinir* means that the regime has lost the backing of the Norwegian aristocratic core. It is simultaneously a striking use of a friendship term, highlighting the fact that her regime is not (yet) facing a violent uprising, but rather increasing socio-political opposition, as the Norwegians become disillusioned with something framed as foreign tyranny.<sup>172</sup> The tension in turn leads to a crystallisation of the bases for Álfífa’s network-rooted power. Through Knútr’s might and the support of the Danish faction, Álfífa draws power from both kinship and lordship bonds, both of which become sorely needed as the country fractures and whatever legitimacy her son can claim becomes a factor of decreasing importance. Keeping this in mind, one can assess the various direct examples of Álfífa’s rulership and management of political tension.

<sup>168</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 400; cf. *Ágrip*: 28.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. chapter 3.

<sup>170</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 307

<sup>171</sup> See the same usage in *Heimskringla’s Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, (*Heimskringla I*: 252, 255) and *Óláfs saga helga*, (*Heimskringla II*: 13, 47).

<sup>172</sup> Cf. the similar application of *óvinir* to Gunnhildr above.

Nowhere is this more visible than in a *Legendary saga* and *Fagrskinna* depiction of a rowdy assembly in Niðaróss in which both Sveinn and Álfifa participate. There is considerable protest against their discriminatory laws, and Einarr þambarskelfir takes the floor: “*Ekki var ek vinr Óláfs konungs, en þó váru Þrændir ekki þá kaupmenn, er þeir seldu konung sinn ok tóku við meri ok fyl með. Konungr þessi kann ekki mæla, en móðir hans vill illt eitt ok má auk yfrit.*”<sup>173</sup> (“I was not a friend of King Óláfr, but the Þrændir were not salesmen when they sold their king and got a mare and a foal with it. This king cannot speak, and his mother wants only what is bad, and is capable of achieving it.”) The aristocrat’s words are followed by cheers and agreement, showing that the assembled men have little respect for Sveinn. The notion that the king cannot speak challenges his authority completely, but the insult itself goes to both Sveinn and Álfifa. However, while Einarr’s words are endorsed by the assent and laughter of the assembly, Álfifa’s subsequent intervention puts her power on display: “*Þá mælti Álfifa: ‘Setisk niðr bændr ok hlýði konungs ærendi, en kurri eigi svá lengr.’ En því næst þögnuðu menn.*”<sup>174</sup> (Then Álfifa spoke: “Sit down, *bændr*, and listen to the king’s business, and do not chatter any longer.” And then men were quiet.) Her response demonstrates that once she makes an explicit command from her position of authority, that command is obeyed and the disrespect to the king fades into silence.

Through asserting control over the assembly, Álfifa is here shown exercising *de facto* kingship in council, particularly due to the inactivity of her son, which is here made more explicit. She has to contend with a hostile aristocracy challenging some of her and her son’s decisions (the contents of which are never revealed), but the last line demonstrates her unmatched authority in the face of this hostility: she commands the landowners to listen and obey, and the command is immediately followed. There are various episodes in the texts to which we can compare this, including assemblies attended by male rulers. Perhaps the most prominent example is from *Heimskringla*, when Óláfr Tryggvason as part of his conversion efforts with the magnates of Rogaland similarly gets the *bændr* to quieten with stern words.<sup>175</sup> In both cases, the magnates’ silence following their speeches equals submission. While the insults of Einarr and the derisive reaction of the remaining attendees show that the Norwegians at this point have minimal respect for King Sveinn, their completely different response to Álfifa’s words suggests deferential attitudes to the person holding the real power, even if she too is affected by Einarr’s mockery. Here there is little indication of her attempting

<sup>173</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 206; cf. *Helgisaga*: 373.

<sup>174</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 206

<sup>175</sup> Although Óláfr appears to be aided by some form of divine intervention; see *Heimskringla I*: 305-6.

to convince the aristocrats to support her son. The line she does speak is an authoritarian assertion, a pure expression of her power. Álfífa is at this stage not trying to build new bonds or to expand her political support. Rather, her speech at the assembly is an attempt at confronting an opposing network and establishing superior authority in the face of adversity.

### *Networks in opposition*

As shown above, the emergence of the opposing network is presented in *Heimskringla* as a divide along Norwegian/Danish lines, but in *Fagrskinna*, the showdown at the assembly expands the political context. The implication is that the 1030s see a power struggle amongst former allies: the segments of the Norwegian aristocracy who supported Knútr against Óláfr Haraldsson, such as Einarr, now turn into a faction acting in opposition to Álfífa. Álfífa, although an outsider to Norway, thus leads a network rooted in Scandinavian political tensions into what becomes an inter-Scandinavian conflict.

*Heimskringla* does not include the council scene, but it similarly inserts Álfífa into the centre of this faction struggle by emphasising conflict surrounding the sanctification of Óláfr, using another *Legendary saga* scene where she strives to ensure that the supposed evidence of the dead king's sainthood, the idea that his body does not decay, is rejected. On three consecutive occasions, Álfífa attempts to thwart the process by requesting additional proof that the king's flesh and hair remain untouched by soil or fire. On each occasion, the proof miraculously holds, until eventually, Einarr þambarskelfir condemns Álfífa for being unreasonable, ending all discussion.<sup>176</sup> While her efforts fail, Álfífa's goal is nevertheless clear: she is trying to put Óláfr's sainthood, and thus his symbolic status as a royal martyr, in doubt. By opposing the emergence of a Norwegian saintly cult, she makes attempts at controlling the developing narrative, while simultaneously denigrating the opposing faction seeking to venerate their deceased king (even if many of them opposed his cause at the time).<sup>177</sup> Historically speaking, it is possible the Knýtlingar may have attempted to assume control over rather than attack the idea itself, and Knútr's political network certainly took part in the promotion of it.<sup>178</sup> As such, this scene may represent a subversion by saga authors, scapegoating Álfífa to fit with later ideologies surrounding Danish tyranny and the cult of Óláfr, but in terms of political strategy, the clash perfectly illustrates tension between Danish-based and Norwegian-based aristocratic

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<sup>176</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 404-5; cf. *Helgisaga*: 370-1, for the older version of the sanctification scene.

<sup>177</sup> Rainford (1995: 78-9) discusses the cult of Óláfr as a symbol of the struggle against Danish occupation, subsequently being used to support and uphold the Norwegian monarchy; cf. Townend 2005: 260.

<sup>178</sup> Townend 2005: 262-5, 273; Rainford 1995: 92-3



networks, and Álfífa's attempts to control it. She strives to maintain the legitimacy and stability of her regime in the face of new Norwegian identities springing up to challenge it.<sup>179</sup> As in *Fagrskinna*'s assembly, Einarr þambarskelfir emerges as the leader of the opposition, and as the main challenger to Álfífa's power. When Einarr and his colleague Kálfr Árnason collect the young Magnús Ólafsson from Hólmgarðr,<sup>180</sup> the opposition faction solidifies around the merging of existing networks: the old aristocratic opposition to Óláfr on one hand, and the latter's kin and friends outside Norway, a focus in the next chapter, on the other.

While many personal motivations are obviously about, we might interpret the saga portrayal of the rising conflict as ideological tensions between Danish expansionism, embodied by Álfífa and her Danish allies, and a Norwegian independence movement, embodied by the defiant aristocracy of Þrændalög. This comes to the fore in the key points of contention, such as the new laws and the exhumation of Óláfr. It is a classic kings' saga theme, dating back to Hákon jarl and Óláfr Tryggvason, who both fought battles against superior Danish forces at Hjörungavágr (c. 986) and Svölðr respectively, and it fits into scholarly ideas of Norwegian identity.<sup>181</sup> At this point in the narratives, Álfífa is seen by both allies and rivals as the head of the Danish network in Norway, subordinate only to an absent Knútr. *Morkinskinna*, for instance, includes a line referring to the difficulties involved in retaking Norway for Óláfr's network, due to "...mótgang þeira Knútlinga ok Álfífu er ek ætla at þó sé enn öllum þeim verri ok grimari."<sup>182</sup> ("...the resistance of the Knýtlingar and Álfífa who I think is the worst and most malicious of them all.") Álfífa is again presented as something of a villain, but the most noteworthy point is her immediate prominence. In the context of these Norwegian power struggles, Álfífa is the leader of the Knýtlingar. She is not a widow like the women above, but Knútr's absence and apparent trust in her to manage the ruling party in Norway leaves her in a similarly dominant position.<sup>183</sup> As such, there is evidently an element of foreignness in the narratives of Álfífa's rule, but it is predominantly Danish in nature, and they simultaneously firmly establish her as a network leader within the Scandinavian context.

As with Gunnhildr (and to an extent Sigríðr), it is evident from all relevant texts that Álfífa, through her royal kinship bonds, functions as the leading organiser of a politically dominant network, and in this position, she is allowed the same agency as male opponents. Her council

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<sup>179</sup> *Fagrskinna* also corroborates Sveinn and Álfífa's presence at the exhumation of Óláfr's body; see *Fagrskinna*: 201.

<sup>180</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 414-5

<sup>181</sup> Bagge 1995: 6; see the whole article for a full discussion of medieval Norwegian 'nationalism'.

<sup>182</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 19; a similar account is found in *Orkneyinga saga*: 55.

<sup>183</sup> According to the version of *Óláfs saga helga* found in *Flateyjarbók*, Knútr swore never to set foot in Norway to honour Óláfr; see Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 832.

denunciation of the similarly powerful Einarr demonstrates this, as does the frequent consideration she is given by her enemies. She may be entirely dependent on the guaranteed backing of Knútr to achieve such prominence, but this simply serves to further root her position in network bonds. This is further indicated by Sveinn being referred to both by the patronymic ‘Knútsson’ and the matronymic ‘Álfífuson’ by the texts, but the latter with far more frequency.<sup>184</sup> It has been suggested that this serves to denigrate the young king, but if he is considered dominated by his mother, and Álfífa is the leader of the ruling network in Norway with Knútr never setting foot in the country, it is neither surprising nor unreasonable for Sveinn to be referred to in this manner, particularly given the consistent connection between the two in references to the Norwegian government.<sup>185</sup> Sveinn, the accepted king of Norway, is recognised as the son of Álfífa more than the son of Knútr.<sup>186</sup> Similar to the connection between Gunnhildr and the Gunnhildarsynir, it speaks volumes about her political position in kinship-based ruling networks during her son’s reign, even if it were meant to reflect badly on him.

In a *Morkinskinna þáttur*,<sup>187</sup> Álfífa retains a powerful position at the Norwegian court even after the eventual deposition of Sveinn by Magnús Ólafsson, figuring prominently in marriage negotiations where she attempts to marry off her daughter in conversation with a German duke representing the emperor, by presenting her as King Magnús’ sister.<sup>188</sup> This *þáttur* is highly unreliable, considering how it portrays Álfífa operating in Magnús’ court after already being described having left the country with Sveinn. Nevertheless, the context is less important than the description of her behaviour, which seems to further confirm her consistent role as an active network politician. Like many other powerful male and female network leaders, she is pursuing marriage politics, attempting to manoeuvre network members into the correct positions for the family’s political gain. Perhaps most striking of all is the fact that this daughter is not a child of Knútr. *Morkinskinna* thus puts Álfífa in a position where she is managing her own family network, joined to but simultaneously independent from the Knýtlingar. Although this account is questionable, such manoeuvring after the deaths of Sveinn and Knútr corresponds to similar accounts of her political activities in England.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Heimskringla* applies the matronymic five times and the patronymic only once; see Appendix IV.

<sup>185</sup> Townend 2005: 266

<sup>186</sup> Both Haraldr gráfeldr and Sveinn are also remembered with a matronymic in the anonymous poem *Nóregs konungatal*; see Gade 2009: 772, 781.

<sup>187</sup> One of *Morkinskinna*’s many *þættir*; see Andersson & Gade 2012: 13.

<sup>188</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 56

<sup>189</sup> Contemporary sources indicate Álfífa/Ælfífu attempting to manipulate the English succession at the same time; see Stevenson 1913: 115.

Ultimately, *Ágrip*, the *Legendary saga*, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, while presenting different, sometimes almost contradictory, pieces of evidence, all paint a similar picture. Through her command of Knútr's vice-royal network and the royal legitimacy provided by her son, Álfífa wields exceptional power. Both her own circle and the alliance opposing her function as multi-member power bases competing for the crown, but she, standing at the heart of the structure of bonds binding the network together, is presented as its leader. She never occupies a formal position, and she is entirely dependent on the support of others, predominantly Danish men, but this support enables her to dominate Norwegian politics for a number of years. As such, it is prudent to use the term rulership, but not direct rulership, and in a sense more akin to Gunnhildr than to any male king. Just as Gunnhildr only rules through the official kingship of Haraldr gráfeldr, Álfífa does the same with Sveinn, and while Álfífa does seem to be even more publicly powerful, the council scene demonstrating her personal hegemony over the aristocracy, she is even more dependent on an external source, the overwhelming military strength of Knútr. Álfífa, more than anything, is acting as a network organiser on behalf of her family. She is a representative of Knútr, with her decisions ultimately independent from his oversight, but rooted in bonds with him and others.

### **The network organiser: a true kings' saga politician**

Many women of the early kings' saga narratives, the three cases here perhaps more than anyone, have often been seen as vilified and scapegoated for the demise of male Christian heroes.<sup>190</sup> It has become increasingly clear that this does not give the whole picture. The saga presentation is rarely so black and white in terms of morality, with *Heimskringla* in particular embodying a more balanced stance.<sup>191</sup> Instead, what we find is a sequence of powerful women who actively and successfully play the political game. Admittedly they do so with violence, ruthlessness and treachery, but not more so than their male associates, from Haraldr hárfagri to Óláfr Tryggvason, or perhaps particularly Hákon jarl. Gunnhildr, Sigríðr and Álfífa are adept politicians at the heart of influential aristocratic networks. Two are royal widows, and the third is the wife of an absent king; they all thus lack superior male authority figures while being able to root their authority in legitimate male power, possessing multiple kinship connections with past and current kings. This allows them a social position with the freedom to act as they will as leaders of the network, and they use this freedom to play the

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<sup>190</sup> Jochens 1987a, particularly pp. 109-111; cf. Jochens 1996a: 174-80 198, 210-1.

<sup>191</sup> There are for instance other examples of praiseworthy female opposition to Óláfr Tryggvason, see the behaviour of the aristocratic Guðrún in *Heimskringla* (*Heimskringla I*: 318-9).

political game alongside men. While they are all dependent on the ability to channel their power through male network members, they are each able to shape the direction of their geopolitical spheres, and directly or indirectly feature on the stage of public politics, through building, managing and maintaining social bonds, both on their own and others' behalf. The findings from the analysis of these case studies provide the opportunity to start speaking more clearly about female political activities as presented in the historiography, and to define a new recurring avenue for women's political participation. It is my hope that the role of the female network organiser can contribute to the framework necessary for understanding the norms and boundaries for women's political power in the kings' sagas.

Having studied these initial cases, I will suggest a definition, or at least a description, of the role, which will remain at the forefront of the following chapters. In short, it refers to an individual, male or female, who is centrally placed in the bonds of group association, holds a dominant, but informal, position in a larger or smaller aristocratic family unit, and actively utilises this position to direct and expand the resources of the unit's wider network to directly or indirectly influence socio-political events. Women's control of networks is often, as shown previously, connected to their role in the household. A woman in command of a household, an opportunity quite a few of them seem to have taken advantage of, would have sufficient external agency to commit to her own bonds of group association in addition to those she contributes to crafting on behalf of the group, and to expand her own network through additional bonds of kinship, friendship and lordship. Usually, the elite network organiser will be able to rely and call upon connections within all three of these, whether through bonds formed on her own, or the bonds of her male relatives. She is subsequently able to direct parts of this network, or the entirety of it, to the fulfilment of her and her core kinship group's socio-political ambitions. Nor would a woman need to be the most powerful person in a given network in order to function as a network organiser; she could operate alongside men equal to or more powerful than her, and through a variety of methods wield social, and by extension political, power. Neither Álfífa nor Sigríðr can be said to have been the most powerful individual member of their network; what matters is their ability to both use their own power and manoeuvre others into using theirs.

Bagge separates the male characters in the kings' sagas (*Heimskringla* specifically) into 'politicians' and 'heroes.'<sup>192</sup> If we were to fit women into this delineation, it appears that they

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<sup>192</sup> Bagge 1991: 154-6

are unsurprisingly barred from the ‘hero’ type, with its emphasis on martial and athletic prowess, embodied by warrior kings. In the network organiser, however, we find a female role corresponding closely to male ‘politicians’, described by Bagge as cold and calculating individuals manoeuvring for personal gain, but simultaneously intelligent, measured, and highly effective, and not painted in a more unfavourable light than the heroes.<sup>193</sup> Excluded from the most overt public displays of masculine virtue, this form of political participation is thus a way for a woman to stand with one leg planted within male spheres; an operator of masculine power structures who is not herself a man. Often, such influence involves someone else holding the nominal power, but it is no less capable of shaping the direction of the political sphere. While she cannot participate militarily, it is Sigríðr’s accomplishments as a network organiser which bring Óláfr Tryggvason down. It is Gunnhildr who organises a network from the bottom up upon her husband’s passing, and skilfully builds it up to take control of the Norwegian kingdom for her sons. In both their cases, and in the case of Álfifa’s rulership, traditional authority lies elsewhere.

Furthermore, the possibility needs to be addressed in which women functioned as assisting network organisers, not always the acting head of the network, but functioning in a supporting organisational capacity and wielding influence over and power together with one or more male relatives. There are several cases of aristocratic couples working together as partners without one necessarily being relegated to a mere counselling position. This would fit with Gunnhildr while Eiríkr was still alive, as she is consistently described as dominating him rather than merely giving counsel, with Sigríðr after her second marriage, as well as with later women as will be shown in subsequent cases. A network did not necessarily have only one leader, or one organising authority figure, even when it had a king, and these episodes establish the possibility that women might lead networks alongside their husbands, as relatively independent partners rather than subordinates, and that network power is thus not restricted to the relative independence of widowhood.

The nature of the network organiser’s power is somewhat ambiguous when considering sociological definitions. She does not hold any legitimate authority because she does not hold any official position.<sup>194</sup> Networks, although they can utilise formalised agreements and oaths, are based on the active combination of continuously negotiated bonds of personal trust, rather than static institutions. Network organisers are never automatically influential, and always

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<sup>193</sup> Bagge 1991: 154-6

<sup>194</sup> Legitimate authority is explored both by Weber (1978: 226-7) and by Wrong (2017: 49-52).

products of their circumstances; the flexibility deriving from this independence from institutionalised structures is part of what enables such individuals to become exceptionally powerful. Consequently, network leadership is more often than not rooted in the more situational forms of power, such as power through coercion and inducement: threats and promises, forceful commands, friendly suggestions, and offers of gifts and bonds.<sup>195</sup> This stems from the sheer necessity of networks being constructed around cooperation and the distribution of military and financial resources to build and secure personal ties. The key point is that such power is largely informal and situational. A network organiser is an individual who, through her bonds, is able to distribute resources, use force or the threat of force to compel others, and hold a network together through personal qualities, including rhetorical and political competence.<sup>196</sup> The historiography is filled with women in key network positions who purposefully cause particular political actions by manipulating bonds, commanding associates, and arranging circumstances in order to force a particular strategic outcome. It is based both around the authority to command social subordinates, a social position sufficient to build bonds with relative equals, and the ability to manipulate superiors. Kings' saga women's political influence often requires the use of one or more of these, frequently in combination. All the case studies presented in this chapter are examples of this combination, and the female network organiser, the merger of all these functions, can thus provide a more flexible yet systematic organising principle for women's political agency and influence.

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<sup>195</sup> Wrong 2017: 41-9

<sup>196</sup> Wrong 2017: 60-1: cf. Weber 1978: 1114ff.

## Chapter 2

### Networks and political agency in women's speech

#### a) The forms and functions of female saga speech

Due to the relatively limited appearance of female speech in the kings' sagas, the existing instances become immediately important as an object of study when addressing women and networks. Some of these instances were touched on in the previous chapter, but this chapter serves as an in-depth analysis of various forms of female speech present in the texts at hand. By systematically assessing examples of women's speech occurring in the kings' sagas, including the aforementioned inciter, it will be shown that these are not necessarily primarily used as scapegoating tactics by misogynist historians, but rather constitute a series of patterns of socio-political speech intended to improve the speaker's position within aristocratic networks, and to gain political advantage for such networks. All these speech patterns can be positively as well as negatively framed in the texts, and they can be performed by individuals of either sex. Political speech is an area where gender is particularly fluctuant, and leaves room for considerable negotiation both ways, the common denominator simply being skilful verbal manipulation. The sections investigating patterns of speech will subsequently be followed by key case studies of network-building female speech from *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga*, while also drawing on the case studies introduced in the previous chapter, showing how women in the kings' sagas perform both public and private speech within the network framework, establishing speech techniques as valuable tools of the female network organiser, particularly in her dealings with men.

#### *The female inciter: a misunderstood network participant?*

The inciter, the woman using goading and shaming words to instigate a violent and vengeful reaction in a male associate, often by attacking his honour and masculinity, is perhaps the most infamous of female roles in the sagas, and incitement has been read as saga women's "primary device of involving themselves in men's affairs".<sup>1</sup> As mentioned initially, there have been two primary ways of reading the inciter role: as a male-constructed literary motif of women existing primarily as scapegoats to take blame away from men,<sup>2</sup> or as a legitimate role

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<sup>1</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 15

<sup>2</sup> Heller 1958; Jochens 1996a: 174-80; Jesch 1991: 191

enabling active participation in social and even political affairs. The latter view has taken many forms, with inciting read as a type of speech based on a female-exclusive genre of lament poetry,<sup>3</sup> as a way for non-combatants to participate in feud,<sup>4</sup> as an active defence of the household's honour,<sup>5</sup> or as a form of verbal agency for an excluded social group.<sup>6</sup> It has recently been argued by scholars such as David Clark that inciters are not necessarily scapegoated for male violence, but rather displaying power and taking control of their destinies.<sup>7</sup> Clark has further suggested that there are several ways of reading such inciters and their agency. In one, they are male impersonators, taking for themselves the male role of active vengeance.<sup>8</sup> In another, conversely, they are female impersonators, purposefully embracing a role prescribed for them to gain traction for their immediate plans.<sup>9</sup> Both readings imply a certain degree of situational power and traversal of the gendered space, but neither necessarily paints the speaker of goading words in a negative light. Clark further draws a particularly relevant distinction between an older pagan ethic of honourable, praiseworthy revenge, which is seen as a relic of an ideology of the past, and a new Christian ethic problematising vengeance and emphasising forgiveness and moderation instead.<sup>10</sup> Clark's work thus enables a reading of incitement in the kings' sagas as correspondingly closely to the former, as the texts often present goading and incitement to vengeance as both rightful acts and political tools.

Despite scholarly differences, the core of the role and its behavioural characteristics are relatively established, but its potential function as partially facilitating women's political participation has received little attention.<sup>11</sup> I will here only discuss incitement and other forms of women's speech in the kings' sagas specifically, in order to show that it is here for the most part not negatively framed, and rather describes value-neutral independent action for personal and group gain. Inciters, and other manipulative and rhetorically persuasive women, are merely taking on the role of active verbal organisers of network response, or simply presenters of ambitious strategies, in situations where the family honour, fortune or standing

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<sup>3</sup> Clover 2002: 39-40

<sup>4</sup> Miller 1990: 212-3

<sup>5</sup> Sørensen 1993: 238-9

<sup>6</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 19-25

<sup>7</sup> Clark 2012: 38-42

<sup>8</sup> Clark 2012: 38

<sup>9</sup> Clark 2012: 39-42

<sup>10</sup> Clark's fourth (Clark 2012: 89ff.) and fifth (Clark 2012: 117ff.) chapters centre around examinations of these two different ideologies. The argument is to some extent anticipated earlier by Sørensen (Sørensen 1980: 11).

<sup>11</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013: 16ff.) goes furthest in discussing inciting as a potential vehicle for women's personal agenda. Cf. the section on gendered goading below.



is under threat, or (more frequently) where there is political opportunity. As such, women performing goading are network organisers using speech to achieve their goals. As an action, goading or inciting in these particular texts nearly always appears calculated, rooted in social structures, and often implies considerable socio-political power for the speaker.

Kings' saga goading can take many forms, but even the most formulaic incitement patterns found within these texts fit within the network organiser model. An applicable instance is found in *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga*, around which this chapter is centred. In a developing feud over grain and resources, one of the relatively few instances of extensive reciprocal feud in the *konungasögur*, Sigríðr Skjalgsdóttir, the sister of the renowned Western Norwegian chieftain Erlingr Skjalgsson (c. 975-1028), speaks to her kinsman Þórir hundr at the funeral of her murdered son. Sigríðr, like many inciters, has previously been read as a pure scapegoat, inserted to shift blame away from the actions of men.<sup>12</sup> However, considering the context surrounding her words, kinsmen and friends gathering over her son's corpse, her behaviour is that of a woman wielding social power in a network context. When the gathered network disperses, she presents them all with customary gifts, and finally approaches Þórir in an initially friendly fashion: “*Svá er nú, Þórir, at Ásbjörn, sonr minn, hlýddi ástráðum þínum. Nú vannsk honum eigi líf til at launa þat, sem vert var. Nú þótt ek sjá verr til fær en hann myndi vera, þá skal ek þó hafa vilja til. Nú er hér gjof, er ek vil gefa þér, ok vilda ek, at þér kvæmi vel í hald.*”<sup>13</sup> (“It is thus, Þórir, that my son Ásbjörn listened to your kind counsels. Now he is no longer alive to reward this as you deserve. I am not as good at this as he would have been, but I shall put my will to it. Here is the gift I will give you, and I hope it will be of use to you.”) Sigríðr evidently has resources at her disposal, prominently including the ability to draw upon her network connections. Unable to achieve vengeance herself, she sends for her brother-in-law. When he arrives, the passage indicates that several of those close to Sigríðr and Ásbjörn are present, particularly due to the mention of the former giving gifts to her friends, an important aspect of maintaining and strengthening the network bond. Having given her other associates items with presumably fewer aggressive connotations, her interaction with Þórir also thus begins with the giving of a gift, and the emphasis of his previous bond to Ásbjörn. She seemingly wishes to reward Þórir for his past actions and is set to leave him with a parting gift to ensure their continued affectionate cooperation. This is built carefully

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<sup>12</sup> Jochens 1987a: 102-4

<sup>13</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 213; there is no corresponding scene in the earlier *Legendary saga* of Óláfr, which instead jumps straight from killing to conflict.

into the network structure, and Sigríðr has set the scene to then skilfully wield the power of social norms to get her will when presenting the gift itself:

*‘Hér er nú spjót þat, er stóð í gognum Ásbjörn, son minn, ok er þar enn blóðit á. Máttu þá heldr muna, at þat mun hæfask ok sár þat, er þú sátt á Ásbirni, bróðursyni þínum. Nú yrði þér þá sköruliga, ef þú létir þetta spjót svá af höndum, at þat stæði í brjósti Óláfi digra. Nú mæli ek þat um,’ segir hon, ‘at þú verðir hvers manns níðingr, ef þú hefnir eigi Ásbjarnar.’<sup>14</sup>*

“Here is the spear that pierced my son Ásbjörn, and there is still blood on it. Then it should be easier for you to remember how it looked in the wound you saw in your brother’s son Ásbjörn. Now you can do a manly deed if you let this spear go from your hand into the chest of Óláfr digri. And I pronounce,” she said, “that you shall be every man’s *níðingr*, if you do not avenge Ásbjörn.”

Sigríðr’s goading of Þórir relies primarily on two terms, both involving concepts of courage and manliness. First, she uses the adjective *sköruligr*, ‘bold’ or ‘manly’, to establish what Þórir should be doing if he is to be fully considered a man.<sup>15</sup> Second, she turns to conditionally branding him *hvers manns níðingr*, a *níðingr* in the eyes of every man, if he does not do this, employing a sexual insult with roots in cowardice or unmanliness, the strongest possible insult in the eyes of the law.<sup>16</sup> This has a clear impact on Þórir, who is described as furious and unresponsive, and as having to be guided onto his own ship, after having heard Sigríðr’s goading words. Additionally, of course, he eventually acts on them. By handing him the bloodied spear and informing him of the consequences of inaction in public view, Sigríðr has painted Þórir into a corner. She has no direct power over him, but what she has done is little different from putting a ritualised curse on him, which can only be lifted in the eyes of society by performing the suggested deed. In this manner, Sigríðr arranges for a male connection to follow her wishes, given that he now owes her a symbolic debt.

Furthermore, Sigríðr’s goading of Þórir specifically is both justified and reasonable when judging by the narrative leading up to the words. Þórir has verbally abused and incited Ásbjörn on at least two occasions prior to this, shaming his manliness for letting himself be robbed,<sup>17</sup> and then again for agreeing to serve the king as punishment for subsequently having killed his assailant, goading him to be more *mannligr*, ‘manly’.<sup>18</sup> These are the *ástráðum*, the kind or loving counsels, sarcastically referred to by Sigríðr, who now sees Þórir as needing to

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<sup>14</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 213.

<sup>15</sup> *Sköruligr* and *skörungur* are most frequently descriptors of masculinity, occasionally also applied to bold and aggressive women; see Sørensen 1993: 205-6; Straubhaar 2002: 261. It is also similar to Clover’s *hvatr*.

<sup>16</sup> *Níðingr* and its usage is a central theme in see Sørensen 1980. Cf. Cleasby-Vigfusson: 456.

<sup>17</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 198

<sup>18</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 206

accept the consequences of his past actions by avenging the nephew who bore the brunt of his abuse. If anyone is scapegoated for past and future violence in this episode, it is Þórir rather than Sigríðr.

Finally, the goal of Sigríðr's inciting, the killing of King Óláfr Haraldsson, here known as *digri*, 'the stout', is not only personal, but can simultaneously be considered a pursuit of political advantage. Sigríðr seeks vengeance for her son, but it was not the king who killed him, nor was he responsible for his death in this instance other than the fact that Ásbjörn's killers were men loyal to him. Óláfr did order Ásbjörn's death in an earlier scene, but the latter was then saved by the interjection of Sigríðr's brother Erlingr.<sup>19</sup> Sigríðr now seeking Óláfr's death is an example of the intersection between personal vengeance and strategic concerns. The political climate surrounding the inciting episode is one where Erlingr is in an increasingly violent struggle with Óláfr, and King Knútr of the Danes is consistently trying to turn Norwegian magnates such as Erlingr (and eventually Þórir) against his royal colleague. In this sense, even Sigríðr's aggressive inciting of Þórir unites segments of a wider kinship network in a common political cause.

Sigríðr's inciting, considered next to the goading words of Gunnhildr and Sigríðr stórráða discussed in the previous chapter, show that individuals inciting to violence in the kings' saga context are rarely doing so simply to instigate or prolong conflict, nor are they literary devices inciting murder for little reason. The rhetorical pattern of goading in the *konungasögur* is more closely tied to political strategy, consciously manipulative speech for the purpose of political gain, whether on behalf of the speaker or others. Similar tools are used to justify these persuasions, including appeals to vengeance, honour and masculine duty, but the words are nearly always intended to orchestrate an increase in the relative power of the speaker and her network. This politically motivated inciting is not just an example of female agency in itself, but very often also results in the women's rather ambitious political goals being met. Women performing inciting and manipulative speech in the *konungasögur* frequently end up with an improved position, whether through increased personal power, the removal of rivals and threats, or through advancing the interests of their wider networks. This point is at the forefront of the present chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 204-6

### *Inspirational inciting: goading as network encouragement*

Several scholars have recently highlighted positively framed instances of female speech in the form of mediating wise women who steer men away from violence rather than encourage it.<sup>20</sup> Here, I will suggest that positively framed alternatives to the vengeful inciter are not mutually exclusive with encouragement to violence, as long as that violence comes with political benefit. While *hvøt*, ‘whetting’, typically implies direct incitement to violent acts, there are also a variety of textual examples of speech with inciting characteristics leading to a beneficial outcome for the speaker and/or their network, even if the violent element is still present. This ‘inspirational inciting’ in the kings’ saga context usually involves a woman appealing to aristocratic masculinity and urging a man to realise his potential. This is frequently accomplished through encouraging manly aggression and ambition in male network associates, behaviour expected from promising aristocrats and kings,<sup>21</sup> rather than leading or coercing them into bloody vengeance for its own sake. As per Ruth Mazo Karras, “medieval masculinity involved proving oneself superior to other men,”<sup>22</sup> and in the *konungasögur*, this competition for superiority is regularly embodied in political ambition. Sverrir Sigurðarson in the contemporary *Sverris saga* for instance considers it *lítillmannligt*, ‘unmanly’, for a king’s son not to pursue power.<sup>23</sup> When an aristocratic woman speaks to highlight or question these qualities in a male network associate, the speech is an attempt to achieve political gain through and with him, and where both goading and violence are mere means to an end.

Kings’ saga women frequently utilise these methods in order to improve their position within kinship networks. This falls into established theories of ‘heroic consent’, women’s acceptance of marriages as long as their husbands retain heroic aristocratic qualities.<sup>24</sup> An early instance of this in *Heimskringla* is a rather famous, albeit heavily romanticised, event in Norwegian history writing. The core of the episode is the refusal of the maiden Gyða Eiríksdóttir, daughter of a petty king in Western Norway, to marry a young Haraldr hárfagri, as she will not waste her *meydómr*, ‘maidenhood’, on a man ruling mere counties, declaring it strange

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<sup>20</sup> Clark 2012: 161-3; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 25-7; see also Byock 1982: 94-5; Orning 2013: 62.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Jesch (2004: 123-6) for the emphasis on kings becoming powerful through martial aggression and winning glory, and Percivall (2008: 146) for active participation in politics and war as integral to masculine status. In contrast, Evans (2019: 25) has discussed how the masculinity of men at large was centred around more mundane qualities such as honour, responsibility, familial loyalty and abiding by social (and sexual) norms.

<sup>22</sup> Karras 2003: 10

<sup>23</sup> SvS: 8

<sup>24</sup> Bandlien 2005: 40

that no man has attempted to unify Norway under himself.<sup>25</sup> The textual placement of Gyða as an inciter is evident from the way in which she mocks Haraldr's limited aspirations and demands he becomes something more before being worthy of her. His inadequate ambitions become symptoms of inadequate manliness. Far from merely inspiring ill deeds, however, she is here encouraging masculine aggression and reminding men of the central importance of ambition and winning glory, which is then solidly confirmed as being considered highly positive by Haraldr himself. The king, when told by his men of Gyða's refusal and of her verbal challenge, and how she is in their opinion "*djǫrf ok úvitr*"<sup>26</sup> (presumptuous and ignorant), responds that she did nothing wrong in her speech and has actually instilled in him something that he should have realised himself.<sup>27</sup> Admirable men are thus condoning and embracing the woman's inciting. Finally, the story reaches a climactic end when Haraldr does indeed claim his prize upon his successful conquest of the country.<sup>28</sup> Gyða herself is nevertheless not a mere object; there is power in her words, and the fact that she does marry him means her estimation of her own value is correct. By setting conditions for herself to consent to marry Haraldr, she is ensuring her place as the wife of a powerful ruler rather than merely a glorified local chieftain. Using her speech, she is thus able to channel her own ambitions through highlighting and encouraging his.<sup>29</sup>

Nor is this trend confined to early unification narratives. Further examples are provided by Ástríðr Tryggvadóttir, sister of Óláfr Tryggvason, and Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir, daughter of Magnús Ólafsson and granddaughter of Óláfr Haraldsson. The former is set to marry Erlingr Skjalgsson to seal a politically beneficial alliance for her brother, but berates him by pointing out "*Lítt nýt ek nú þess... at ek em konungsdóttir ok konungssystir, ef mik skal gípta ótígnum manni.*"<sup>30</sup> ("It is little use to me that I am the daughter and sister of kings if I am to marry an untitled man.") Ástríðr laments the status of her intended husband, but she simultaneously reinforces the point that it is her own royal status, and her relationships with kings, which allows her the right to complain and attempt to influence her fate accordingly. The same is true for Ragnhildr, who is to be married off by her kinsman King Haraldr Sigurðarson to broker a peace deal, but the king informs her suitor, Hákon Ivarsson, that he has to seek Ragnhildr's consent prior to any agreement. Upon Hákon's proposal, she says the following:

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<sup>25</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 96-7

<sup>26</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 97

<sup>27</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 97

<sup>28</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 118

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Saxo's Gurith, last of the ancient Danish royal line of Skjöldungar, requires a suitor unite the southern kingdom before marrying her; see *GD I*: 502-12.

<sup>30</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 306

“*Opt finn ek þat, at mér er aldaudi Magnús konungr, faðir minn, ef ek skal giptask bónda einum, þó at þú sér fríðr maðr eða vel búinn at íþróttum. Ef Magnús konungr lifði, þá mundi hann eigi gipta mik minna manni en konungi. Nú er þess eigi ván, at ek vilja giptask ótignum manni.*”<sup>31</sup> (“I realise that my father King Magnús is dead, if I am now to marry a commoner, even though you are a handsome man and highly skilled. If King Magnús were alive, he would not marry me to a lesser man than a king. Now it cannot be expected that I will marry an untitled man.”) Ragnhildr overall speaks to Hákon the same way Gyða spoke to Haraldr hárfagri; she rejects the marriage due to finding the suitor’s social status lacking, and she deems herself worthy of more. On the other hand, a difference lies in her praising Hákon for his personal qualities, and implicit in her statement is again the notion that she *is* willing to marry him provided that he achieves the title and power that she believes her royal station warrants. This is confirmed when she does marry him upon his appointment as jarl.<sup>32</sup> As such, these speeches are structured attempts to improve the overall status of the women’s intended kinship groups, and while it has been suggested that Snorri is critical of their marital objections, there is little textual indication of this.<sup>33</sup> The emphasis elsewhere on pursuing ambitions in line with one’s status, combined with royal women expressing such objections to perceived lesser marriages being a recurring theme, instead makes it far more probable that both Ástríðr and Ragnhildr act in line with social (and royal) expectation.<sup>34</sup> Both are presented as *konungsdætr*, ‘king’s daughters’, and both emphasise royal connections as reasons for the validity of their demands. By using such rhetorical strategies, they stand to secure their future prospects, politically or otherwise. Aristocratic and royal women know their worth in marriage, and their consent to a marriage can in many cases be their most valuable political asset, as it is often actively sought by men in the texts.

The unifying factor of all these episodes, with varying degrees of connection to the inciting concept, is the encouragement of masculine ambition in men, used to further the speakers’ own ambitions. This is a trend also strongly connected to parental pride or the channelling of ambition through children. Coming back to *Óláfs saga helga*, such themes are strongly present in the role of Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir, wife of King Sigurðr ‘sýr’ and mother of Óláfr Haraldsson, who counsels her son to pursue his ambitions with similar political aims in mind:

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<sup>31</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 129

<sup>32</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 132

<sup>33</sup> Bandlien 2005: 177-8

<sup>34</sup> There are multiple examples of this, but two are found in the behaviours of Haraldr hárfagri in the Gyða episode and in Sverrir Sigurðarson’s ambitions cited immediately above.

“Svá er mér um gefit, sonr minn, at ek em þér fegin orðin ok því fegnust, at þinn þroski mætti mestr verða. Vil ek til þess engi hlut spara, þann er ek á kosti, en hér er lítt til ráðastoda at sjá, er ek em. En heldr vilda ek, þótt því væri at skipta, at þú yrðir yfirkonungr í Nóregi, þótt þú lifðir eigi lengr í konungdóminum en Óláfr Tryggvason, heldr en hitt, at þú værir eigi meiri konungr en Sigurðr sýr ok yrðir ellidauðr.”<sup>35</sup>

“My son, I have become joyful because of you, and I would be happier if your power in your prime became the greatest. I will spare no expense for your benefit, but mine is not the best place to come for counsel. Though I would rather, if I could decide, that you become king of all Norway, even if you live no longer as king than Óláfr Tryggvason, than that you remain no more than a petty king such as Sigurðr sýr and die of old age.”

By explicitly downplaying the value of her counsel, Ásta takes the position of a supplicant with her son, not that of an assertive mother such as Gunnhildr. This is highlighted by the fact that she does not interject during an initial conversation between Óláfr and Sigurðr where the two men discuss the future of the Norwegian kingdom, choosing rather to address the former directly after her husband has expressed concerns at the dangers of Óláfr attempting to retake his patrimony. By waiting, she has made the conversation an arena where she can contrast Sigurðr’s cautious words with her encouragement of Óláfr to actively pursue his ambitions.<sup>36</sup> This does not mean her intent is in any way sinister, and there are multiple indications throughout the passage of Ásta merely wanting the best for both her son and herself, even if she is using manipulative tactics. For instance, comparing her son to his kinsman Óláfr Tryggvason and his premature demise is not by necessity leading him into an early grave, but rather accepting the risk inherent to his pursuit of power. What Ásta tells Óláfr is that becoming *yfirkonungr*, ‘high king’, is a goal worth pursuing *despite* the risk of death; this does mean that death is inherent to this course of action. Instead, it shows a mother’s role in convincing a king to pursue the most dangerous and potentially violent course of action, which simultaneously happens to be the most ambitious and politically advantageous one for the family. Her utmost pride in Óláfr derives from his *þroski mátt*, which combined translates to ‘power in full age’ or ‘power in his prime’. However, by looking at the words as individual components we might find yet more about the underlying argument Ásta is making. The former, *þroski*, can refer to full age, prime or manhood in the sense of maturity, but also to a state of manly or vigorous behaviour.<sup>37</sup> *Mátt* can be taken to mean ‘might’ both in the sense of strength and power.<sup>38</sup> As such, Ásta’s hope for her son is that by becoming

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<sup>35</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 46

<sup>36</sup> See Jesch (2004: 125-8) for how these qualities are highlighted in Óláfr more widely.

<sup>37</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 746; Evans 2019: 68

<sup>38</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 419

king of all Norway, he achieves both the highest power and the realisation of his masculine warrior identity. By connecting the two, she uses goading strategies to appeal to all sides of his ambition. She neither attacks nor shames him in any way, but rather highlights his potential.

Ásta's words to her son can be compared to her words to her husband upon Óláfr's arrival, expressed through messengers sent to retrieve him: "*Pau orð, bað Ásta, at vit skyldim bera þér, at nú þætti henni allmiklu máli skipta, at þér tækisk stórmannliga, ok bað þess, at þú skyldir meirr líkjask í ætt Haralds ins hárfagra at skaplyndi.*"<sup>39</sup> ("Ásta told us to carry these words to you, that now she thinks it important that you behave like a *stórmaðr*, and she asked you to make your mindset more like the descendants of Haraldr hárfagri.") The tone used with Sigurðr is more critical and confrontational, as the comparison above already indicates. This is due to differences in where Ásta sees the two men, but also in what she aims for them to do. While she is encouraging Óláfr to take countrywide power and thus to expand upon his existing prowess, she is urging Sigurðr, who is mostly content to govern his modest agricultural territories, to throw his weight behind her son through embracing a degree of ambition himself. To goad Sigurðr into action, she relies on the concept of behaving *stórmannligr*, like a *stórmaðr*, a magnate or 'great man'. Through his lands and titular kingship, Sigurðr more than qualifies as a *stórmaðr* in the magnate sense, meaning that Ásta intends *stórmannligr* to refer to the highest category of aristocratic masculinity, in which ambition is central. Óláfr, the descendant of Haraldr hárfagri, is the *stórmaðr* here being compared to, and the professed *skaplyndi* of the *ætt* is rooted in these particular qualities. By attempting to persuade Sigurðr to join in on the ambitions of the dynasty of Haraldr hárfagri, Ásta encourages her husband and her son to come together for the sake of the *ætt*.<sup>40</sup> She urges Óláfr to embrace his apparently innate qualities at any cost, and she incites Sigurðr to make him support Óláfr's cause, thus using rhetorical strategies with inciting characteristics in order to bind a network together and increase its chances of political success. Ásta, like the women above, encourages ambitious approaches in the men around her, reminding them of their duties as aspiring kings, and simultaneously setting herself up for personal gain as a prominent member of their networks.

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<sup>39</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 41

<sup>40</sup> The *Legendary saga (Helgisaga)*: 211-3) also includes the inciting of Sigurðr, and subsequently has Ásta provide a younger Óláfr with his father's sword.



For the most part, these goading women of the *konungasögur* are described in rather neutral terms, without textual judgment. In many cases, goading simply allows disenfranchised network members access to group decision-making.<sup>41</sup> There is little doubt that certain inciter characters are set up for blame, but one ought to be careful when following Jochens in the argument that this is consistently true in the *konungasögur*.<sup>42</sup> Often, what has been defined as inciting is simply a verbal effort to direct network policy. It is exceedingly rare for any form of goading to be detached from the speaker's pursuit of personal political gain. The women appearing in these texts are too complex to be seen as literary devices with a singular purpose, but aspects of this motif do remain part of the historiographical discourse performed between Snorri Sturluson and his contemporaries. Inciting is present as a rhetorical strategy for the accomplishment of political objectives, performed by itself or in conjunction with other such strategies. As such, it is presented as simply another part of the game of power politics.

*Manipulative speech as intra-network counselling and rhetorical manoeuvring*

One of the most famous examples of saga incitement speech (from *Brennu-Njáls saga*) is met with the comment “*köld eru kvenna ráð*”<sup>43</sup> (“cold are the counsels of women”).<sup>44</sup> Strikingly, the descriptor used is not *hvöt*, ‘whetting’, or *eggjan*, ‘goading’, but rather *ráð*, ‘counsel’. Although it is rare for goading to be explicitly defined by the speaker or the person spoken to, the same term is applied to similar speech elsewhere, including in Ásta’s encouragement of Óláfr above. Manipulative political speech is thus defined as counsel even in situations where it exclusively leads to harm, simply because violence, like inciting itself, is an integral aspect of the political scene in the texts, encouraged and performed by all ambitious aristocrats. Building from this, another lens through which one might view inciting and similar patterns of female speech emerges, particularly if viewed through Althoff’s concepts of lordship and subordination. Throughout most of the known medieval world, pre-feudal and feudal alike, among the vassal’s most important duties to the lord would indeed be the obligation to provide counsel.<sup>45</sup> Typically this takes the form of a lower ranked aristocrat counselling his lord in situations requiring political action, but there is significant room in this counselling relationship for vertical bonds within the household. The role and functions of female family members, even to a certain extent goading and incitement speech, fit neatly with this view; the

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<sup>41</sup> Miller 1990: 213

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Jochens 1987a.

<sup>43</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*: 292

<sup>44</sup> For the speech itself, see Clover 2002: 15ff.; Sørensen 1993: 240-4.

<sup>45</sup> Althoff 2004: 103-4

‘cold counsel’ of women is still the counsel of a member of the household to its head, similar to advice provided by other network members, from subordinate aristocrats to retainers and poets.<sup>46</sup>

In Frankish and Anglo-Saxon societies, queens were normally encouraged, even expected, to advise their husbands, and the line between counsel and domination could often be quite ambiguous.<sup>47</sup> The evidence indicates that this is equally applicable to the kings’ saga paradigm. Note the emphasis in *Ágrip*’s initial description of Gunnhildr upon her marriage to Eiríkr, as *mikil kona ráðum*, ‘a woman giving great counsel’.<sup>48</sup> “*Hón gørðisk svá illráðug, en hann svá áhlýðinn til grimmleiks ok til allskyns áþjánar við lýðinn, at þungt var at bera.*”<sup>49</sup> (Her counsel became so evil, and he so easily led to cruel deeds against the people, that it was heavy to bear.) Textual emphasis lies firmly on Gunnhildr’s counsel, implying that counselling her husband is one of her primary political functions as a royal wife, and it has previously been suggested that this description mirrors similar anxieties in the wider medieval world about the political power of kings’ wives through access to their husbands, although these are not fears about incitement to violence as much as scepticism to women’s power more generally.<sup>50</sup> It is heavily indicated that the combination of her ‘great counsel’ and his apparent weakness of judgment lead to a situation in which his decisions as king are dominated by her persuasive influence. The combination of her *becoming* evil of counsel with the initial description of her as *mikil kona ráðum* clearly communicates that Gunnhildr’s counsels became damaging over time, which by implication means that there must have been a past prior to this where the counsels were less so. A clear distinction is being made by the author between good and evil counsel, confirming that women persuading men to a certain course of action are not limited to inciting. This is supported by the aforementioned descriptions of Gunnhildr later counselling of her sons upon the death of her husband and helping them with the government of the kingdom, often implying that she was the real ruler of the country through her rhetorical and organisational abilities, but where her input is carefully framed as counsel. The descriptions used in *Heimskringla* for their deliberative processes are *málstefnum*, ‘councils’ or literally ‘speech-meetings’, and the verb *ráða landráðum*, ‘discussing the government’. While she is encouraging them to aggressive and ambitious action similar to the goals of an incitement speech, her behaviour is framed within

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<sup>46</sup> For poets as advisors to kings, see Townend 2005: 257.

<sup>47</sup> Stafford 1983: 25

<sup>48</sup> *Ágrip*: 7

<sup>49</sup> *Ágrip*: 7

<sup>50</sup> Larrington 2009: 509; cf. Stafford 1998: 145.

an advisory capacity. Many women seen as inciters, e.g. Sigríðr stórráða, similarly provide counsel to their male relatives, usually husbands.<sup>51</sup> The inciter as a concept is not structurally dependent on a pattern of household counselling, but it is highly compatible with it. More often than not, the goading leads to a positive outcome for the speaker, but simultaneously also furthers the political cause of her wider network.

There is little to distinguish the use of inciting verbs such as *hvetja* and *eggja* from *ráða* beyond the expected outcome of *hvot* being negative/violent, and on the contrary, *ráð*, ‘advice’ being framed as a positive social activity for women.<sup>52</sup> Any differentiation is purely teleological, and as a considerable amount of the counsel given by men and women in the *konungasögur* involves violence or political plots, there is no real distinction between the two terms. The action itself, the speaking of the words urging an associate to perform a certain action, is the same. Not all *ráð* is *hvot*, but *hvot* is a form of *ráð*. What this means is that in the sagas of kings, there is no integral difference between an inciter/goader and a counsellor. Both variants of persuasive speech simply involve women verbally encouraging higher-ranked members of their networks to pursue certain courses of action. In both, the target is almost exclusively male, typically a kinsman, but they can also be directed at friends, suitors or any individual more capable of performing the suggested action than the speaker herself.

Certain goading patterns in the *konungasögur* can also be read as a form of speech-based manoeuvring. In particular cases, persuasive or manipulative speech in the kings’ sagas is shaped into a multi-step rhetorical process where premises are established first to ensure compliance, and the final goal is introduced as the logical consequence of the premises. These premises are carefully introduced as something of considerable benefit to the target, or as a vague request the speaker makes the target agree to before revealing its contents. As such, it describes a process where the target of the speech is not necessarily sympathetic to the speaker’s goals at the outset of the conversation, perhaps even opposed to them, but eventually ends up being led towards partial or complete agreement. Gunnhildr and her sons’ aforementioned manoeuvring of Grjótgarðr of Hlaðir into an alliance is an example of this. They win him over through inviting him to their halls, welcoming him in friendship, leading him into private conversation, and revealing secret information to him. Only then, after all this, do they reveal the purpose of it all: convincing Grjótgarðr to betray his brother Sigurðr

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<sup>51</sup> Sigríðr’s incitement of Sveinn is similar defined as both *eggjan* and *ráð* in the same chapter; see *Heimskringla I*: 349.

<sup>52</sup> Jesch 1994: 8; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 25

and become jarl himself.<sup>53</sup> The network connotations of this were assessed in the previous chapter, but the rhetorical connotations are equally important. It is clear from the presentation of the scene that Gunnhildr and her sons are unable, or at least unwilling, to make this suggestion to Grjótgarðr immediately. Sigurðr is explicitly stated to have been the last in a sequence of topics of conversation, leading to the conclusion that the family is carefully building up to a point where they believe Grjótgarðr will be inclined to agree to their suggestion. This process does not fall into either counselling or inciting, although there is an aspect similar to the latter when they tell Grjótgarðr that Sigurðr has made him *lítill maðr*, a little man.<sup>54</sup> For most of the meeting, the importance instead lies in the process of slowly and gradually crafting the magnate's agreement by pulling on a variety of factors, designed to pull him towards them and away from Sigurðr. Such rhetorical manoeuvring is thus a third way of reading kings' saga women's manipulative speech. With inciting a more or less overt appeal to honour and masculine duty to force or at least coerce the target into compliance with the speaker's demands (e.g., Sigríðr's goading of Þórir hundr), and counselling often direct and neutral suggestions of policy where the speaker relies on her competence and expertise (e.g., Gunnhildr advising her sons), this third pattern emphasises cunning and rhetorical skill. It is rooted neither in enforcing social norms of masculinity nor in the speaker's political abilities, but rather in how she is able to wield her words to achieve what she wants, in what is essentially a highly manipulative negotiation.

#### *Gender and manipulative network speech*

As highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, it is necessary to address the question of whether these patterns of female speech are exclusive to women, or even female-gendered. The inciter motif has tended to be predominantly associated with both femaleness and femininity as they would have been assessed by the saga society,<sup>55</sup> as the role relies on the manipulation of others from a subordinate position rather than reliance on one's own strength and courage, the keystone virtues of men.<sup>56</sup> However, as per Miller, the common characteristic is not sex, but dependence.<sup>57</sup> Any inferior attempting to influence the will of a superior can utilise goading speech as a potential tool.<sup>58</sup> The only common denominator, I

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<sup>53</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>54</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>55</sup> Jochens 1996a: 196-203; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 17-19.

<sup>56</sup> Sørensen 1980: 108

<sup>57</sup> Miller 1990: 212

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Byock 1982: 95; Sørensen 1993: 245; Orning 2013: 61-2.

argue, is the consistent placement of the inciter and the incited within the same network structure, typically with a vertical kinship or lordship bond existing between them.

First off, the *konungasögur* contain several male inciter characters. A formulaic example is again found in *Óláfs saga helga*, where the petty king Hrærekr, blinded by Óláfr Haraldsson, incites his kinship network to prepare an assassination plot against Óláfr. This passage, spoken to his kinsman Sveinn, is particularly emblematic: “‘*En hitt þykki mér þó allra þyngst, ’ segir hann, ‘er þú eða aðrir frændr mínir, þeir er mannvænir hqfðu verit, skulu nú verða svá miklir áttlerar, at engrar svívirðingar skulu hefna, þeirar er á ætt várri er gqor. ’ Þvílíkar harmtqlur hafði hann opt uppi.*”<sup>59</sup> (“I consider it the heaviest to bear,” he says, “that you and my other kinsmen, who ought to have been manly, shall now have become so degenerate, that you will not avenge any of the wrongs done against our family.” He often spoke such words of harm.) The king here laments the state of his kin group upon Óláfr’s ascent to power, and that it would be shameful to refrain from enacting vengeance. While he blames Óláfr for all his own misfortunes, the speech shows that he finds his relatives shirking their masculine duty to be the most painful aspect of the situation. Hrærekr himself at this stage is both old and blind and thus physically incapable, and in line with the arguments of Sørensen and Clover, he has lost his own masculinity.<sup>60</sup> Thus he resorts to inciting, attacking the manhood of his younger and more virile relatives in order to make them do as he wishes. In this sense, Hrærekr falls in line with the archetypal inciter role, since he as an emasculated man is in no superior position to similar inciting women.

However, rhetorically manipulative men in the kings’ sagas are not necessarily weak, powerless or effeminate. *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* all for instance showcase similar tactics being used by Hákon jarl, who throughout several conversations goads and manoeuvres the king of Denmark into violence against his own potential rivals.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the episodes surrounding Hákon, while not dissimilar to inciting, have been described as examples of masterful and ruthless political manoeuvring,<sup>62</sup> by an otherwise powerful man, who simply needs a different tactic in this particular political circumstance.<sup>63</sup> Knútr inn ríki, another leader using all tactics available to him, is described by Theodoricus as both inciting

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<sup>59</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 118

<sup>60</sup> Sørensen 1980: 108; Clover 1993: 381-2

<sup>61</sup> *Ágrip*: 14; *Fagrskinna*: 106-10; *Heimskringla I*: 235-8

<sup>62</sup> See for instance Bagge 1991: 81-4.

<sup>63</sup> Another male inciter is Grégóriús Dagsson, who I shall come back to in chapter 4. Even beyond and prior to the sagas, male inciters can be found in the historical work of Adam of Bremen, who refers to a Frankish bishop and former missionary as ‘the inciter of the discord (*Discordiae incentor*)’ and blames him for goading princes into a civil war; see *GHEP*: 27.

and bribing the Norwegian chieftains against Óláfr, and in *Heimskringla* he sends a Danish bishop to perform the inciting for him.<sup>64</sup> Even the calm and careful Sigurðr sýr is later in *Óláfs saga helga* described to goad, *eggja*, Óláfr into battle having spotted their enemy Sveinn jarl in a vulnerable position.<sup>65</sup> Inciting, manoeuvring and verbal manipulation are mere tools in the political game, used in conjunction with warfare, diplomacy and assassination, and by virtually all the successful saga kings and their aristocratic supporters and rivals, including women and men both.

The crux of the matter is that rhetorically manipulative individuals in the *konungasögur* are simply ambitious individuals of both sexes who are willing to do what it takes to further their own goals and those of their networks. Manipulation is a form of power,<sup>66</sup> and the manipulation found here can be read as a power of supplicants; a means for a political agent to impose her will on an individual who is able to do what the agent herself cannot. What all the examples have in common is that they are instances of persuasive speech where the speaker is dependent on the authority and backing of the target in order to accomplish their goals, and second, that they utilise rhetorical methods of manipulation in order to move the target into a corner where they have little choice but to accept the course of action suggested by the speaker. This, however, means only that it is yet another form of socially and structurally enabled power in a world where strategic necessity dictates one utilise all available means, because the goal is to win the political game for oneself and one's network.

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<sup>64</sup> *HARN*: 30-1; *Heimskringla II*: 371-2

<sup>65</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 68

<sup>66</sup> Defined by Wrong (2017: 28) as “a deliberate and successful effort to influence the response of another where the desired response has not been explicitly communicated.”

## **b) Network-building female speech: case studies from *Heimskringla***

*Heimskringla*'s *Óláfs saga helga* and *Magnúss saga góða* together provide an excellent opportunity to draw out several detailed and connected examples of network-building female speech in its different forms. Swedish royal daughters Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir and Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir, and Norwegian royal daughter Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, are all involved in the long saga narrative of Óláfr Haraldsson and his son Magnús Ólafsson. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has previously analysed these women as examples of female agency in political contexts.<sup>67</sup> I aim here to build on her work to further show how kings' saga women's political involvement is inherently tied to network-building speech, and that these particular women's agency is enabled by their active participation as participants and organisers in what is essentially various iterations of the same network, centred on certain branches of the Norwegian royal dynasty and sympathetic segments of Swedish royal and aristocratic families. As another network stemming from the need for dispute management and resolution, the disputes in question here derive from the question of lordship over Norway in the decades following the death of Óláfr Tryggvason at the battle of Svölðr (c. 1000).

### **Manipulation behind the scenes: Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir and Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir**

The first case studies analysed here are drawn from *Heimskringla*'s *fríðgerðarsaga*,<sup>68</sup> the extensive narrative of the diplomatic endeavours and marriage politics of Óláfr Haraldsson's early reign in Norway, beginning with careful and indirect peace overtures made to his powerful enemy King Óláfr Eiríksson of Sweden, father of Ingigerðr and Ástríðr. The narrative does appear in shorter form in *Ágrip*, *HARN*, the *Legendary saga*, and *Fagrskinna*, and there are hints of a more extensive version stemming from the lost account of Styrmir Kárason, but among the extant sources, only *Heimskringla* provides significant depth.<sup>69</sup> In its account, the Norwegian Óláfr and his representatives spend considerable effort interacting with a sympathetic Swedish-based aristocratic network in which women play central roles, and part of this interaction involves his betrothal to Ingigerðr, the Swedish king's most coveted daughter. While the marriage never comes to fruition, and certain of the early schemes attempted by this network are both relatively limited and largely unsuccessful, the narrative is notable as a long-form example of multiple aristocratic women through speech

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<sup>67</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 93ff.

<sup>68</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002b: xxviii

<sup>69</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002b: xxx-ii

creating and using network associations for political gain. This allows them to competently play the political game with, through and alongside their male associates. The marriage negotiation narrative as a whole provides additional salient examples of the extent of female agency within the network frame, and of women negotiating their own and their allies' status through speech in order to achieve political objectives.

Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, wife of the Swedish Rognvaldr jarl and sister of the now late Óláfr Tryggvason, provides an outstanding example of private network-building speech within an aristocratic household. Her words are presented through a series of private conversations, often dialogue between herself and individual male associates. Ingibjörg first appears with her husband when partaking in their political interactions with Óláfr Haraldsson, an exchange of messages and meetings between the aristocratic couple and the king's network, and she is the foremost supporter of aiding Óláfr. Snorri points out an entire series of reasons why she is determined for them to pursue peace and friendship alliance with Óláfr, indicating Ingibjörg's political motivations as the saga author deems she herself would have expressed them, as well as her efforts in acting on those motivations. First, Ingibjörg is emphasising the kinship connection between her and Óláfr, presented as *frændsemi mikill*.<sup>70</sup> In the context of the *konungasögur*, this emphasis is particularly important due to their main relation lying through joint descent from Haraldr hárfagri, through the petty kings Haraldr 'grenski' and Tryggvi Ólafsson respectively, as well as the alleged participation of Óláfr Tryggvason in Óláfr Haraldsson's baptism.<sup>71</sup> Their kinship is thus inseparably connected to the central historiographical narrative of the Norwegian kingdom, and ties directly into the second point, namely that Ingibjörg wishes, in some form, to pursue vengeance against those responsible for her brother's death: "*Henni mátti eigi fyrnask við Svíakonung þat, er hann hafði verit at falli Óláfs Tryggvasonar, bróður hennar, ok þóttisk fyrir þá sök eiga tiltölu at ráða fyrir Nóregi.*"<sup>72</sup> (She could not forget that the Swedish king had contributed to the fall of King Óláfr Tryggvason, her brother, and that he therefore considered himself entitled to rule over Norway.) Óláfr Svíakonungr, son of Sigríðr stórráða, was part of the alliance defeating Óláfr Tryggvason at Svölör, and *fyrna* here carries connotations of being unable or unwilling to let go of a past slight.<sup>73</sup> Ingibjörg might not be actively working for vengeance, but she carries it

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<sup>70</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 85

<sup>71</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 310. This emphasis on this scene, where Óláfr Tryggvason becomes the godfather of the infant Óláfr Haraldsson as part of his Christianisation efforts, is likely an attempt to establish a bond from one king to the other. It reinforces the same sense of dynastic kinship as found here with Ingibjörg.

<sup>72</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 85

<sup>73</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 183



with her as a motivational factor informing her actions. Third, she wishes to back Óláfr Haraldsson in his precarious position of kingship because she is wary of the Swedish king's intentions to seize power in Norway, her ancestral homeland. A mixture of personal and political motives, her intentions are thus tied to her position in networks and group identities.

In terms of crafting network associations, her goals are clear. Throughout the passage, her focus lies on establishing friendship with Óláfr, eventually resulting in Óláfr and Rognvaldr giving an official pledge to one another: “*Varð jarl af fortølum hennar mjök snúinn til vináttu Óláfs konungs. Kom svá, at þeir konungr ok jarl lögðu stefnu með sér ok hittusk við Elfi [...] Gáfusk þeir gjafar at skilnaði ok mæltu til vináttu.*”<sup>74</sup> (The jarl was greatly moved by her persuasions towards friendship with King Óláfr. Thus, the king and the jarl held a gathering and met by the river.<sup>75</sup> They gave each other gifts at the parting and agreed friendship.) It is explicitly stated that Rognvaldr agrees to this as a result of Ingibjörg's convincing words, but the term used to describe these efforts, *fortölur*, is a telling choice. The most straightforward translation would be ‘persuasions.’<sup>76</sup> While this is general enough to cover most instances of the word, it is another word often appearing with connotations of goading, for instance in several of the goading scenes discussed above.<sup>77</sup> In all these cases, the primary catalyst for the attempted persuasions is a verbal lamentation of slights endured by the speaker. While this is not a universal rule, and the word can occasionally be used for more benign persuasions, the passage does place Ingibjörg in proximity to the inciter role, with possible descriptions of goading merging with the emphasis on longstanding grudges. Ingibjörg is again no mere aggressive trope blindly calling out for revenge, however. Rooted in the rhetorical patterns established above, it becomes clear that her political interests are reasonably limited and completely calculated. While plotting the downfall of Óláfr Svíakonungr may be a long-term aspiration, any assault against him is not part of her short-term plans. Instead, her aim is to use political and diplomatic means to safeguard and expand her network of kinsmen and friends, and simultaneously protect the Norwegian kingdom from further incursions.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 85

<sup>75</sup> *Gautelfr*, or in Modern Swedish Göta älv, the border between the medieval Norwegian and Swedish kingdoms.

<sup>76</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 166

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Sigríðr stórráða's goading of her husband and King Hrœrekr's goading of his younger relatives.

<sup>78</sup> This falls in line with Óláfr's own intentions; see Bagge 2010b: 296 (although it must be pointed out that Bagge here confuses Ingibjörg with Ingigerðr).

### *Ingibjörg's network speech*

This aspect of Ingibjörg's behaviour is accentuated in her next scene, when the messengers of Óláfr Haraldsson, Björn 'stallari' and the Icelander Hjalti Skeggjason, arrive on her and Rognvaldr's lands, asking for help mediating with Óláfr Svíakonungr. When their appeal concludes, Ingibjörg does not wait for her husband to speak before interjecting: "*Skjótt mun ek birta minn hug, at ek vil, jarl, at þér leggið á allan hug at stoða orðsending Óláfs konungs, svá at þetta þrendi komisk fram við Svíakonung, hverngan veg sem hann vill svara.*"<sup>79</sup> ("I will immediately say what I think, and I want, jarl, that you put all effort into supporting the message of King Óláfr, so that this errand reaches the Swedish king, no matter how he will answer.") It has been suggested that there existed a uniquely Norse domestic ethic ensuring women's strong position within a marriage.<sup>80</sup> This certainly rings true in the domestic dynamic between Ingibjörg and Rognvaldr. Her immediate and strong assertion is a powerful indicator of Ingibjörg's influence. While the conversation occurs in a domestic space, Rognvaldr is simultaneously receiving diplomatic envoys from a foreign king, rendering the context of the interaction highly political. By raising her voice before her husband, Ingibjörg shows that she is no mere passive and obedient wife, but a practically equal actor.

Two aspects of this speech are closely linked to the maintenance of network bonds. One is Ingibjörg's enthusiasm to act on behalf of a prominent network member. Óláfr is her kinsman and he and Rognvaldr have sworn mutual friendship, both points established above. Ingibjörg is further stated to have another connection due to her existing bonds with Hjalti, who was a guest at her brother's court in Norway during his reign and with whom she has another, albeit distant, kinship bond.<sup>81</sup> Ingibjörg, by continuing to throw all her effort into supporting the Norwegian king, shows her commitment to honouring the obligations of kinship and friendship, further displayed by her declared willingness to risk personal losses: "*Þótt þar liggi við reiði Svíakonungs eða öll eign vár eða ríki, þá vil ek miklu heldr til þess hættu en hitt spyrisk, at þú leggisk undir höfuð orðsending Óláfs konungs fyrir hræzlu sakir fyrir Svíakonungi.*"<sup>82</sup> ("Even if we gain the anger of the Swedish king, or lose all our property and land, then I will much rather risk this, than that you sleep on King Óláfr's message for fear of the Swedish king.") Her declaration simultaneously establishes that the network, from Óláfr to Björn and Hjalti to herself and the jarl, are in this cause together. It is highly unlikely that

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<sup>79</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

<sup>80</sup> Bandlien 2005: 162

<sup>81</sup> Hjalti's wife is Ingibjörg's second cousin once removed; see *Heimskringla II*: 89.

<sup>82</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

she would be willing to lose everything for nothing, implying that in return, she expects the protection of Óláfr and his other allies, particularly due to her Norwegian origin and her and Rǫgnvaldr's dominions being situated in the Swedish border regions. Due to her enmity toward the Swedish king, it is perhaps even possible that she wishes to commit their lands and forces to Norway instead, although this is purely speculative. Regardless of how far Ingibjörg is aspiring to go, her declaration here is another calculated risk designed to further the interests of herself and her network.

She further adds to the network-building effort by providing a reminder to Rǫgnvaldr of the network support he is able to, and should, rely on in these efforts: "*Hefir þú til þess burði ok frændastyrk ok alla atferð at vera svá frjáls hér í Svíaveldi at mæla mál þitt.*"<sup>83</sup> ("You have high standing and strong kinsmen and everything you need to be free to speak your mind here in the Swedish realm.") While the emphasis on his *burði*, his standing or political status, is important, even more so is the emphasis placed on *frændastyrkr*, 'strength of kin'. By combining the two in order to convince Rǫgnvaldr that he should be bold on behalf of a sworn friend, Ingibjörg asserts that he has the backing of a considerable network, both in the sense of all those Swedes who would respect his word and in the support of kin and friends in powerful positions, examples of which include Ingigerðr konungsdóttir and the well-connected Þorgnýr lögmaðr, both discussed below.

Ingibjörg's comments have previously been connected to formulaic inciting.<sup>84</sup> Her behaviour is indeed bent towards provoking masculine courage and independence, and the jarl responds with "*Ekki er þat blint, hvers þú eggjar.*"<sup>85</sup> ("It is not difficult to see in which direction you are goading.") A similar characterisation is made by the Swedish king, who according to Snorri blames Ingibjörg's goading for Rǫgnvaldr's political dissent.<sup>86</sup> It is again, however, a positively framed version of inciting. This is no secret tactic leading a conversational partner into a trap; Rǫgnvaldr is aware of both her efforts and motivations as seen in his initial response. Nevertheless, he decides to follow her advice to aid Bjørn and Hjalti's mission.<sup>87</sup> One might reasonably ascribe the success of her petition to the notion that by following these speech patterns, Ingibjörg is leading by example. She is speaking freely to her husband and acting independently of him in a public context, while verbally inspiring him to speak freely

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<sup>83</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

<sup>84</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 96

<sup>85</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

<sup>86</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 115

<sup>87</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

in public to the king of Sweden. She is emphasising the strength of their network, asserting the importance of giving aid to allies, and displaying courageous solidarity by describing what she is willing for them to lose, manoeuvring Rognvaldr into a position where he too is socially encouraged to embrace these qualities.

Her bold declaration is contrasted to the jarl's tempered caution in his response, and one might read an element of recklessness into her words considering how the jarl answers her and adds a qualifier to his agreement: "...ek vil eigi hlaupa eptir ákafa Bjarnar eða annars manns um svá mikil vandamál."<sup>88</sup> ("I do not want to rush into such a difficult case for the urgency of Björn or any other man.") Viewed in conjunction with the accusation of inciting, Rognvaldr's stated approach paints a situation in which he is the careful one compared to Ingibjörg's rushing into action. While there is some merit to this interpretation, it does not immediately mean that the jarl is the voice of reason, and this duality fits into a *Heimskringla* trend of convincing political allies to support a particular cause. Shortly before the introduction of Ingibjörg and Rognvaldr in *Óláfs saga helga*, Óláfr himself (and to an extent his mother Ásta),<sup>89</sup> behaves similarly in his interactions with his stepfather Sigurðr sýr:

*"Ek skal eignask ríki þat allt til forráða, er þeir felldu frá Óláf konung Tryggvason, frænda minn, eða ek skal hér falla á frændleifð minni. [...] En hvárt sem þér vilið lýsa nokkurn manndóm um þenna hlut, þá veit ek skaplyndi alþýðunnar, at til þess væri öllum títt at komask undan þrælkan útlendra höfðingja, þegar er traust yrði til."<sup>90</sup>*

"I will claim under my rule the entire kingdom that they took from King Óláfr Tryggvason, my kinsman, or I will fall here with my patrimony. And regardless of whether you will show some manliness in this case, I know the spirit of the common people. They all wish to escape from servitude to foreign chieftains, as soon as they receive support."

In emphasising Norwegian independence and vengeance for Óláfr Tryggvason whom he refers to as his kinsman, the younger Óláfr practically provides a template for Ingibjörg to later echo on the same network's behalf. In emphasising *manndómr*, 'manhood', he too utilises inciting patterns and links his ambitious cause to heroic aristocratic masculinity. *Manndómr* can also refer to manhood/humanity in the ungendered sense, but given the behaviour Óláfr highlights and attempts to pressure his stepfather into, to fight for his ambitions or die trying, one could reasonably suggest the word carries gendered

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<sup>88</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90

<sup>89</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (2002b: xxxix) has previously hinted at a parallel between Ingibjörg and Ásta as inciters of husbands, but the Óláfr comparison is equally applicable.

<sup>90</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 44

connotations.<sup>91</sup> It certainly embodies the male aristocratic ideal as outlined above. Sigurðr sýr, in contrast, urges caution and hints that Óláfr's ambition risks killing him. Arguing against the careful natures of Sigurðr/Rognvaldr (although neither ends up opposing the plans), Óláfr/Ingibjörg in their speeches stand on the side of rightful action. While the encouragement to manly courage is a key part, the speakers' own different genders make little difference in their behaviour; they are both utilising all available tactics to forge potent alliances to further their joint dynastic cause, something understood and accepted by Sigurðr: “*slíkir hlutir liggi í miklu rúmi þeim, er nokkurir eru kappsmenn, er öll ætt Haralds hárfagra ok konungdómr fellr niðr.*”<sup>92</sup> (“such things are of great concern to ambitious men, that the lineage and kingdom of Haraldr hárfagri are in decline.”) Ingibjörg, like Óláfr, is supposed to be descended from Haraldr, and thus falls in line with this trend.

The *konungasögur* have been understood to favour calculating and compromising politicians over single-minded conquerors, and Óláfr's place in this structure is uncertain.<sup>93</sup> His authoritarian tendencies are reflected both in the texts themselves and in scholarship.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, there is little doubt that Óláfr, the royal martyr to be, is the narrative's main protagonist. His ambitions are the driving force of the saga, and there are numerous occasions where they are described as being for the greater good, even though they may in many cases also be considered destructive.<sup>95</sup> Óláfr as he is presented both in *Heimskringla* and in other sagas is too complex to be unambiguously characterised as positive or negative, but he is not purely an aggressor wreaking havoc. In the same way, Ingibjörg is not simply a reckless inciter encouraging her husband to blindly pursue the most bold and aggressive course of action. While she might be suggesting a dangerous path, the entire process is one of mediation between kingdoms, and not encouragement to violence. Ingibjörg, similarly, is no archetypal inciter, although she uses verbal strategies akin to inciting. More precisely, she is an active participant in dispute resolution, a key function of network operations, and one where strategizing for political gain is just as important as in the disputes themselves.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Sørensen (1993: 242) reads the term this way in another inciting scene. Cf. similar arguments about semantically gender-neutral words with a *-maðr* stem as masculine in Jesch 1994: 8.

<sup>92</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 45

<sup>93</sup> Bagge 1991: 82-3, 154-6; cf. Andersson, 1994, pp. 57ff.

<sup>94</sup> A direct textual example can be found when King Hrœrekr argues that the Norwegian magnates are better off submitting to foreign kings and simultaneously being allowed autonomy, whereas the kings of Haraldr hárfagri's lineage represent authoritarian rule; *Heimskringla II*: 45. Many secondary works also deal with these attitudes, see particularly Bagge 2010b: 312ff.; cf. Bagge 1991; Ármann Jakobsson 2014; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016a: 15.

<sup>95</sup> See for instance *Heimskringla II*: 49-51, where Óláfr is acclaimed as king and offers the Norwegians peace, lawful rule, and protection from foreign invaders.

<sup>96</sup> Miller 1990: 261-74; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 44-6

This more tempered view of Ingibjörg's speech is supported by the events of the subsequent chapter. She deliberates at length with Óláfr's men, establishing friendship with them, and agrees to send Hjalti, who is judged less likely to outright provoke the Swedish king with his presence due to his relative independence from the court and the Swedish-Norwegian kinship networks as an Icelander.<sup>97</sup> She gives him men and silver for the journey.<sup>98</sup> Thus making a highly aggressive statement, but also tempering it with consideration, preparation, and a certain measure of caution, she is portrayed as a highly competent jarl's wife and network organiser, simply imbued in the text with exceptional political courage. Further, Ingibjörg has here established herself as an overseer of the strategy. Björn and Hjalti, unhappy with Rognvaldr's delays and hesitation, come to her individually for support, further implying that the jarl's cautious approach may be considered too cautious. Both of Óláfr Haraldsson's messengers converse with the wife rather than the husband in order to come up with a working plan for how to broach the matter at the court of the Swedish king. Both verbally and materially, Ingibjörg has assumed control over the situation on the network's behalf, and Hjalti additionally suggests approaching Gizurr and Óttarr, his and Ingibjörg's kinsmen and skalds at the Swedish court, further showing all of their willingness to build a strategy centred on the utilisation of networks and wide connections.<sup>99</sup>

This ties strongly into Ingibjörg's final addition to the preparations: "*Hon sendi orð ok jartegnir með honum til Ingigerðar, dóttur Óláfs konungs, at hon skyldi leggja allan hug á um hans mál, hvers sem hann kynni hana at krefja at nauðsynjum.*"<sup>100</sup> (She sent words and tokens with him to Ingigerðr, daughter of King Óláfr, that she should put all her effort into helping his case, whatever he might need to ask of her.) Importantly, this is the first direct mention in *Heimskringla* of Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir. The princess is first of all introduced as the logical point of contact for Hjalti to approach upon his arrival. This implies that she is seen by all parties both as someone sympathetic to the cause, and as someone with enough influence in Swedish royal spheres to be of significant aid. Further, the words and tokens, along with the expectation that Ingigerðr will readily offer her assistance to Hjalti when asked by Ingibjörg, strongly indicates an existing relationship between the two women. They have clearly made enough previous contact for Ingibjörg to trust that she can call in a favour from the Swedish king's daughter, and, as indicated by the continued exchange of communications after this

<sup>97</sup> See for instance Harris 1976: 16-7; Poole 2005: 270; Clunies Ross 1999: 56.

<sup>98</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 90-1

<sup>99</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 91; Gizurr svarti is Hjalti's father-in-law and Ingibjörg's cousin.

<sup>100</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 91.

initial episode, the relationship continues in a cooperative manner for the remainder of the narrative. While Ingibjörg's active participation in the political development fades after the departure of Hjalti, it provides proof of the existence of something rarely shown in the sagas: aristocratic friendship between women.<sup>101</sup>

### *Ingigerðr and the court politics of words*

Ingigerðr, the other participant in this association, plays another key role in the narrative surrounding Óláfr Haraldsson, when she repeatedly argues his case to her royal father, communicates with Óláfr's wider network (including Ingibjörg), and essentially functions as a diplomatic ambassador. She is consistently mentioned as Ingigerðr *konungsdóttir*, 'king's daughter', emphasising the royal kinship bond that defines her political role.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, she is described as "*inn mesti vinr Óláfs konungs*",<sup>103</sup> (king Óláfr's greatest friend), establishing the strong bond between her and the Norwegian king, particularly seeing as the core objective of many of these diplomatic exchanges is their betrothal, judged by most of those involved as the ideal way to create lasting peace between the kingdoms.

Ingigerðr's part begins in earnest with Hjalti's arrival at the Swedish court having travelled from Rognvaldr and Ingibjörg. A skilled and sly courtier, the Icelander manages through his connections, flattery and careful political comments to ingratiate himself with the king,<sup>104</sup> giving him the opportunity to pursue his real mission:

*Hjalti segir Gizuri ok Óttari, at hann er sendr með jartegnum til trausts ok vináttu til Ingigerðar konungsdóttur, ok biðr, at þeir skyldu koma honum til tals við hana. Þeir kveða sér lítit fyrir því, ganga einn hvern dag til húsa hennar. Sat hon þar ok drakk með margra menn. Hon fagnaði vel skáldunum, því at þeir váru henni kunnir. Hjalti bar henni kveðju Ingibjargar, konu jarls, ok segir, at hon hefði sent hann þangat til trausts ok vináttu, ok bar fram jartegnir. Konungsdóttir tók því vel ok kvað honum heimila skyldu sína vináttu.*<sup>105</sup>

Hjalti told Gizurr and Óttarr that he was sent with tokens of support and friendship to Ingigerðr konungsdóttir and asked them to come speak to her with him. They deemed this easy, and walked one day to her house. There she sat and drank with many men. She liked the skalds well, as they were her friends. Hjalti carried word from Ingibjörg, the wife of the jarl, and said that she had sent him to receive support

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<sup>101</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2017: 34) lists no kings' saga examples when briefly discussing women's friendship.

<sup>102</sup> And an exceptionally rare title; see Appendix III for a list of instances.

<sup>103</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 111

<sup>104</sup> More on this below.

<sup>105</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 95-6

and friendship, and showed the token. The king's daughter received this well and readily granted him her friendship.

Ingigerðr's position as a network focal point immediately becomes apparent. Despite living at her father's court, she controls her own personal household separate from the main royal household, where she is able to host guests and friends.<sup>106</sup> Among these are Gizurr and Óttarr, counted as part of her network as *kunningjar*, and they secure for Hjalti what is in practice another semi-formal audience with a political leader, not dissimilar from his initial interaction with her father. Both these meetings are the first in a series of private conversations between Ingigerðr, Hjalti and the Swedish king intended to further the network's cause. The passage is particularly important here for what it says about the relationship between the two women, Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir sees the communication as an example of the jarl's wife working through unofficial channels,<sup>107</sup> but there is reason to suggest it is just as official as the interactions with Óláfr Haraldsson. Through Hjalti, Ingibjörg expectantly demands *traust ok vinátta*, 'support and friendship', from Ingigerðr. This confirms the point that the latter is considered the most important individual to contact for aid, and that the two women have a prior relationship, but the phrasing here is more explicitly connected to network bonds. If the previous mention of this indicated positive attitudes toward direct relationships between two female aristocrats, this continuation allows us to glean something about how such a relationship could be used politically. The concept of *traust*, 'support', is often related to network language, especially as something asked of kinsmen and other allies. Rognvaldr for instance asks for *traust* from his influential kinsman Þorgnýr *lögmaðr* further into the negotiations when he requires political support.<sup>108</sup> Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr are not kin, but they share something equally important: *vinátta*. As was shown in the introduction, *vinátta* is both a formalised attachment between individuals or groups, and political currency. An offering of *vinátta* is of value to the recipient, and often used as part of a political transaction by the person making the offer. Here, friendship evidently exists between Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr before Hjalti makes his way to the court, and the former asks for her friend to extend the same courtesy to her Icelandic emissary, with the latter immediately following up on the request, indicating a sense of obligation. While female-female friendship is rare, this example thus serves as an excellent indicator of women's

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<sup>106</sup> While it is not unheard of for medieval queens to run their own households separate from the king (see for instance Stafford 1998: 144-5, 161; Bak 1998: 14-18; Garland 1999: 5), there are few examples of unmarried kings' daughters doing so.

<sup>107</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 97

<sup>108</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 113



participation in the inherently political, formal and reciprocal aspects of aristocratic friendship, particularly as this message is consistently referred to as coming from Ingibjörg alone, not her husband.

In this context we must repeat the emphasis on the correlation between gender and friendship, an exceptionally male-dominated component of the medieval political paradigm.<sup>109</sup>

Frequently tied to male aristocratic identity, formalised friendship bonds are nearly exclusive to men, something only making the present example even more important, and simultaneously overlooked. *Heimskringla* displaying the participation of two aristocratic women in this role indicates something about female agency in the sagas. Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr's communications, though they never meet in person in the text, are described in no different terms than male friendships, including the ones found in the same narrative, for instance Óláfr Haraldsson and Rognvaldr jarl, or indeed male-female friendships, e.g. Óláfr's bonds with Ingibjörg or Ingigerðr individually. The emphasis on *vinátta* is repeated in all these instances, as is the consistent focus on being able to rely on each other's support for political goals. In fact, Ingibjörg's letter to Ingigerðr is perhaps the most overt example of this formal political nature of friendship associations in *Óláfs saga helga*, regardless of gender.

Hjalti's role further requires comment due to his unique position. Although the Icelander is himself a sly political player, and as mentioned functions as an independent courtier, he simultaneously becomes a middleman in what is essentially a long-distance conversation between two powerful royal women. Their joint relationship with him could be considered a lordship bond, and the notion that Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr's friendship is communicated through a male intermediary here adds to rather than detracts from its potency and politically important nature. While Icelanders in the sagas are frequently shown shrewdly interacting with Scandinavian kings,<sup>110</sup> Hjalti is treating these women with no less respect. In fact, the difference in his treatment of Ingigerðr and her father is noteworthy. It is by lying about his allegiances, shamelessly flattering, and telling Óláfr Svíakonungr exactly what he wants to hear, that Hjalti "*kom sér í inn mesta kærleik við konung,*"<sup>111</sup> (got himself into the king's highest affections). This is a clear example of purely tactical ingratiation, its success possibly meant to display the Swedish king as easily fooled and blinded by his rage against Óláfr

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<sup>109</sup> A conclusion reached by many scholars of friendship in medieval Northern Europe; see for instance Clark 2009; van Deusen 2014; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017; cf. the introduction above.

<sup>110</sup> Andersson 1994: 59-60; Clunies Ross 1999: 57; cf. Sverrir Jakobsson (1999) for the connotations of these interactions for political identity.

<sup>111</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 95

Haraldsson, but simultaneously serving to present Hjalti as cunning and guileful in his political interactions. This stands in stark contrast to his approach with Ingigerðr, with whom he abandons his subtlety and reveals the network's plan, asking her opinion on the matter.<sup>112</sup> While the king is thus treated as a dangerous but easily manipulated adversary, his daughter is treated as a valuable political patron and a force to be reckoned with.

These features of both Ingigerðr and her father can be witnessed again in the first instance of direct speech from the former, when she goes to intercede with the king on Óláfr Haraldsson's behalf: "*Ingigerðr konungsdóttir var á tali við föður sinn einn hvern dag, en er hon fann, at konungi var skaplétt, þá mælti hon: 'Hverja ætlan hefir þú á um deilu ykkra Óláfs digra?'*"<sup>113</sup> (Ingigerðr konungsdóttir went to speak with her father one day, and when she found that the king was in good spirits, she said: "What plan do you have for the quarrel between you and Óláfr digri?") Ingigerðr's speech is deliberately built according to certain patterns to achieve maximised effect. This can be observed by dividing her speech into key parts. First, she investigates the king's mood and whether he might be receptive to persuasions. When she judges him to be *skaplétt*, in good/light spirits, she moves forward to the next step. Speaking up, she begins by asking an open question to solidify the idea that she is deferring to the king's decision, portraying herself as a loyal daughter who simply wishes to understand her father's intentions. Next, the core of her argument begins. She presents all the woes that have arisen, the loss of kinsmen and lands, and all the downsides for the Swedes that remain, in prolonging the feud with Óláfr Haraldsson. Then, she paints a grim picture of Norway as a place one would want to stay far away from in any case: "*Er land þat fátækt ok illt yfirfarar ok fólk ótryggt. Vilja menn þar í landi hvern annan heldr at konungi en þik.*"<sup>114</sup> ("That land is poor and difficult to travel, and the people untrustworthy. Men there would rather have any king other than you.") Finally, she offers another alternative which she presents as superior: "*Nú ef ek skylda ráða, myndir þú láta vera kyrrt at kalla til Nóregs, en brjótask heldr í Austrveg til ríkis þess, er átt höfðu inir fyrri Svíakonungar ok nú fyrir skömmu lagði undir sik Styrbjörn, frændi várr, en láta Ólaf digra hafa frændleifð sína ok gera sætt við hann.*"<sup>115</sup> ("Now if I were to decide, you would silence your claims to Norway, and instead fight in the east to conquer the kingdom that Swedish kings have owned before, and which our kinsman Styrbjörn conquered, and then let Óláfr digri keep his patrimony and settle a truce with him.")

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<sup>112</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 95-6

<sup>113</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 98

<sup>114</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 99

<sup>115</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 99

Invoking aspirations to reclaim old glories and the patrimony of Swedish kings in the east, Ingigerðr offers her father another martial option to replace his wish to assert his dominion over Norway. If the first two points establish the futility and lack of results from fighting the Norwegians, the latter makes a conscious effort at channelling the Swedish king's military ambitions elsewhere.

It is only in the last line of the passage that Ingigerðr mentions the case for Óláfr Haraldsson's legitimacy to retain rulership in Norway. Two aspects here highlight the use of network language. First is the use of the word *frændleifð*, 'patrimony', or literally, 'kinsman's inheritance'. By establishing the legitimacy of Óláfr's claim through his kin, combined with the urging of her father to make his move eastwards based on family history, she connects kinship networks to kingdoms, and draws a distinction between legitimate kin-based claims and claims based solely on military might. The second aspect lies in the emphasis on crafting a *sætt*, a settlement or truce, between the two kings. With this suggestion, the king's daughter is involving herself directly in dispute resolution to preserve the established distinction. Ending disputes through settlement frequently occurs in the sagas through the advice and arbitration of the conflicting parties' powerful friends.<sup>116</sup> By presenting herself as a mediator between the two Óláfrs, Ingigerðr steps into this role herself as an individual with connections on both sides. She is aware, as many of the main players in this scheme are, that her impending betrothal might make her part of both royal kinship networks. All other arguments are carefully framed by Ingigerðr as the perspective of the Swedish people, and for the good of the king himself, crafting an opportunity to keep all their interests at heart. Ingigerðr becomes the voice of the people, although primarily meaning the aristocracy with whom the Swedish king is in conflict,<sup>117</sup> in a narrative which has been suggested to contrast their reasonable wishes with stubborn autocracy.<sup>118</sup> Sacrificing the claims to lordship over Norway is, in the case Ingigerðr is building, a comparably small and insignificant price to pay. While the effort is unsuccessful and eventually causes the king's anger, Ingigerðr's speech is rhetorical manoeuvring at its finest. She enters with an agenda that is directly opposed to that of her father, and so she utilises a broad verbal arsenal to paint a picture of his ambitions as fruitless and of her own alternative plan as a considerably more rewarding process.

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<sup>116</sup> Byock 1982: 102; Miller 1990: 260

<sup>117</sup> Bagge 2010b: 313-4

<sup>118</sup> Andersson 2016: 90-1

Ingigerðr's rhetorical attempt is also not necessarily an overall failure, based on what comes next, nor is she necessarily without influence over her future, as Jochens suggests.<sup>119</sup> That influence simply continues to lie through her network connections. When the Swedes come together at Uppsala that same winter, the assembly decides on peace for the exact same reasons she raised, and the faction's ally Þorgnýr in his assembly speech essentially makes the exact same argument. Emphasis is placed on the benefits of a betrothal of Ingigerðr to Óláfr, the uselessness in conquering Norway, and a promise of harrying in the east alongside the king if he so wishes. This finds resonance among the attendant landowners, and the proposal reaches a strong consensus that the Swedish king has no choice but to abide by. Rognvaldr and Þorgnýr get the glory for this truce: "*sú sætt, er gǫr var, [...] var meirr af styrk fjölmennis ok ríki Þorgnýs ok liðveizlu Rognvalds jarls en af góðvilja Svíakonungs.*"<sup>120</sup> (the settlement that was made came about more because of the popular influence and power of Þorgnýr and the support of Rognvaldr jarl than the goodwill of the Swedish king.) However, the argument made by Þorgnýr and Rognvaldr at the assembly echoes the words first spoken by Ingigerðr in private, hinting that her words potentially hold more sway than the text directly lets on. This is further heavily implied by the preceding chapter mentioning letters from Ingigerðr to Rognvaldr and Ingibjörg, a brief meeting between the jarl and the king's daughter, and that Þorgnýr happens to be Rognvaldr's foster-father, subsequently convinced by him to offer support at the assembly upon having heard Ingigerðr's thoughts.<sup>121</sup> Credit being given exclusively to the male members of the network could simply be a consequence of Ingigerðr not being present for the assembly proceedings. The case made at the assembly is in this reading the culmination of a carefully thought-out plan orchestrated by the joint efforts of a widespread aristocratic network, in which Ingigerðr plays a central role as instigator, organiser, and liaison with her father. Beyond the notion that she may have been an architect of the peace agreement, there are various indications that significant segments of the Swedish aristocracy listen to her: when courtiers and magnates are reluctant to approach the king, they have conversations with Ingigerðr instead, requesting her interjection.<sup>122</sup> In lobbying her father, she is the only individual in the circles surrounding the Swedish king who dares to speak with him about the conflict. By showing her receiving petitioners to discuss with her

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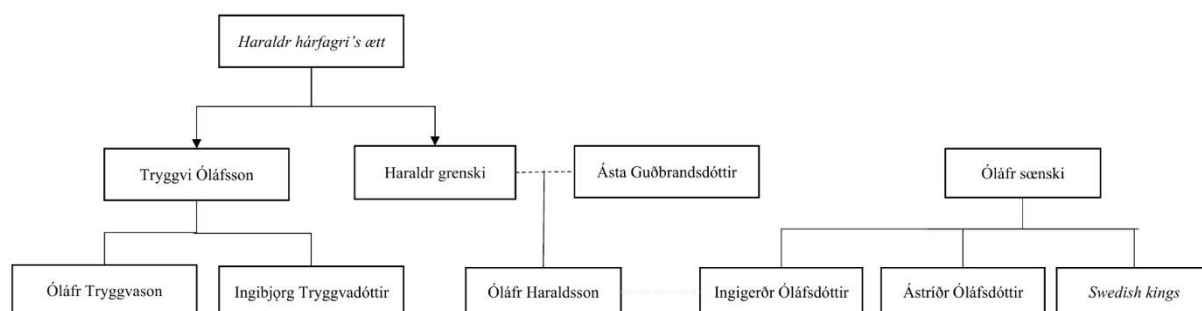
<sup>119</sup> Jochens uses Ingigerðr's lacking participation at the assembly discussed in this paragraph as evidence for Ástríðr's active participation in the assembly below being a likely invention by Snorri; see Jochens 1987a: 109. This, however, necessitates using an author's exclusion of a woman as proof that his later inclusion of another woman must be an invention.

<sup>120</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 133

<sup>121</sup> "*Hann var frændi Rognvalds jarls ok fósturfaðir hans.*"; *Heimskringla II*: 111.

<sup>122</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 131

father, and thus functioning as a mediator again, the *Heimskringla* narrative presents her as an important political voice both for her own network and for the Swedish kingdom.



**Figure 2.** The network of women surrounding Óláfr Haraldsson.

The political situation nevertheless changes once more, sparking the gradual breakdown of the already fragile peace and betrothal agreement, which in turn means the conclusive failure of Ingigerðr's network-building attempts with Óláfr Haraldsson, Rognvaldr jarl, Ingibjörg and others. Her desperation is made apparent in a particular moment where she utilises a last-ditch effort when she fears that the betrothal and peace agreements are about to be broken by her father. The Swedish king returns from hunting, bragging to his daughter that he must have been more successful than any king could be. Ingigerðr responds: "*Góð morginveiðr er þetta, herra, er þér hafið veitt fimm orra, en meira er þat, er Óláfr Nóregskonungr tók á einum morgni fimm konunga ok eignaðisk allt ríki þeira.*"<sup>123</sup> ("This is a good morning hunt, lord, you having caught five grouses, but it was more impressive when one morning Óláfr, king of Norway, took five kings and seized their entire kingdoms.") Óláfr's seizure of power from the five kings is recounted in earlier in the narrative,<sup>124</sup> and it is first told to Ingigerðr by Rognvaldr as part of the case made for why she should consent to marry the Norwegian king.<sup>125</sup> Here, by taking a proud report of a successful hunt and making it a politically loaded challenge, Ingigerðr presents her father with a direct and obstinate appraisal of conflicting masculinities. While the two situations are not necessarily comparable by any means,<sup>126</sup> she paints a picture where her father is a lesser man than her prospective husband, based in the latter's martial accomplishments. This particular episode has also made its way into

<sup>123</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 132

<sup>124</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 105

<sup>125</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 112

<sup>126</sup> Although they have been interpreted as a deliberate attempt by Snorri to establish a contrast between the kings; see for instance Bagge 2010b: 293.

*Fagrskinna*, although the older text only spends a single brief chapter on the marriage negotiations.<sup>127</sup>

There is little room to interpret this statement as anything other than inciting. But the peculiar aspect of this particular instance of the speech pattern, is that the words only come from Ingigerðr's mouth as a very last resort, having tried everything else. Ingigerðr is consistently acting as a loyal and dutiful aristocratic woman, both in interactions with her father on one hand, and with her friends on the other. She is consistently described in *Heimskringla* as attempting to reconcile all of her kinship and friendship connections, and build a peaceful, stable and strong future for all members of her personal network.<sup>128</sup> This final verbal challenge is an act of desperation, especially evident due to the straightforward, conclusive and practically venomous rejection she subsequently receives from her royal father, ending all discussion of her marriage to Óláfr Haraldsson. Nevertheless, while her part in the negotiations is thus rapidly fading, she persists in her commitment to her allies, as upon understanding her father's intentions, she is quick to send messengers to Rognvaldr.<sup>129</sup> By thus informing her network of the king's intentions, Ingigerðr lets the matter slip out of her hands, but she has effectively done all she can with the resources at her disposal.

All parties in the conflict now trigger their nuclear options. Óláfr Svíakonungr, having deliberately ruined the truce with the Norwegians and preparing for open conflict, begins negotiating the marriage of Ingigerðr to Jarizleifr, the Russian king in Novgorod, known in the sagas as Hólmgarðr. Rognvaldr jarl, simultaneously, orchestrates Óláfr Haraldsson's marriage to Ástríðr, the Swedish king's daughter by a concubine, all parties agreeing to circumvent her father in order to still forge lasting bonds to stop the rising tension. This agreement is only reached at the expense of making a personal enemy of the Svíakonungr, who plans to have Rognvaldr executed in retaliation. Both these threads are brought together and resolved by the rhetorical cunning of Ingigerðr herself in her dealings with her father and Jarizleifr's negotiators. Responding to her father's expression of his will, for her to marry Jarizleifr, Ingigerðr uses a form of multi-step rhetoric, where the goal of her speech is revealed only when the build-up is complete. Perhaps more than anywhere else in the saga, the king's daughter here establishes herself as a shrewd political negotiator, beginning by stating her initial demand: "*Ef ek skal giptask Jarizleifi konungi, þá vil ek... í tilgjof mína*

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<sup>127</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 178-80

<sup>128</sup> The affection between Óláfr and Ingigerðr and the Swedish king's attempts to block it have also been interpreted as an attempt to contrast the two; see Bandlien 2005: 128-9.

<sup>129</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 132

*Aldeigjuborg ok jarlsríki þat, er þar liggr til.*”<sup>130</sup> (“If I am to marry King Jarizleifr, then I want Aldeigjuborg, and the jarl’s realm around it, as my bridal gift.”) Like the other royal daughters discussed above, she knows that she has only one bargaining chip, her consent to the marriage, and she intends to make the most of it before agreeing.<sup>131</sup> Her father’s actions have already made it clear that her marriage is inevitably his decision, but her ability to negotiate here, combined with the actions of other women such as her grandmother Sigríðr in the previous chapter, indicates that her consent is at least sought.<sup>132</sup> By making the marriage conditional in the first place, she indicates that she will indeed give her consent at the end of the negotiation, provided that her demands are met. With this established, she extracts promises, first from the negotiators to give her land, then subsequently from her father to give her the choice of aristocratic companions: “*Ef ek skal fara austr í Garðaríki, þá vil ek kjósa mann ór Svíaveldi, er mér þykkir bazt til fallinn, at fara með mér. Vil ek ok þat til skilja, at hann hafi austr þar eigi minni nafnbót en hér ok í engan stað verra rétt eða minna eða metorð en hann hefir hér.*”<sup>133</sup> (“If I am to travel east into Garðaríki, then I want to choose a man from Sweden that I deem the best option to travel with me. I also want, that there in the east he shall have no less rank than here, and in no way fewer rights or lower standing than he has here.”) Only after all of this has been formally agreed, and both her father and Jarizleifr’s men have accepted her second set of conditions, does she reveal that she wants to be accompanied by Rognvaldr, the very man the king intends to execute for his transgressions in the marriage narrative. This time, King Óláfr has been manoeuvred into a corner. The promise has been made, and both Rognvaldr and Ingibjörg are free to go with their ally and friend Ingigerðr. While refusing to give up, Ingigerðr demonstrates both personal loyalty and political ability, inherent qualities of a politician in a network-based society, regardless of sex. By crafting a situation in which she can take her endangered allies to Garðaríki, she skilfully saves and salvages the remainder of her personal network, while simultaneously building a new one for herself in the east. By transferring lordship over her bridal gift of Aldeigjuborg to Rognvaldr, she ensures that she has a powerful kinsman in her new adopted homeland, a place where she presumably would otherwise not have a network. She further is able to maintain her bonds with Óláfr Haraldsson despite all that has transpired, as he later escapes to Garðaríki when

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<sup>130</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 147

<sup>131</sup> While this negotiation is distinctly political due to the wider implications, it simultaneously fits into a later medieval trend of daughters negotiating with their parents over marriage prospects; see Bandlien 2005: 297.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Jochens 1986: 156-8; although Jochens misses the point of Ingigerðr’s agency in the situation to focus instead on the episode as an example of women being forced into marriage.

<sup>133</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 147-8

conflicts arise in Norway.<sup>134</sup> While she then quickly fades from the *Heimskringla* narrative, other sources present her as a powerful queen in Hólmgarðr.<sup>135</sup> *Morkinskinna* shows her as independent of her husband and not averse to clashing with him, and with her own friends at court, she provides a refuge for young Norwegian princes, when Óláfr's son Magnús arrives for fostering.<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, Ingigerðr once again demonstrates exceptional skill in using speech to build opportunities for the preservation and expansion of her personal network. While she uses these abilities for the benefit of others, and at first glance it is simply an act of selflessness, it is important to recognise upon closer investigation that on every occasion, she, too, gets something out of her efforts, primarily in the form of connections, favours, and increased standing. By helping her allies, she is helping herself; by strengthening her network, she is strengthening herself. Group loyalty and self-interest can easily combine in a network organiser's priorities.

#### *Gendered elements of network speech*

Reading both Ingibjörg's and Ingigerðr's speech in tandem, we find elements of the inspirational goading discussed above. Both women strategically utilise aristocratic masculinity as part of their speech efforts. Ingibjörg encourages masculine behaviour in Rognvaldr in order to guide him to what she sees as the right decision. It is not, however, the ritual shaming of manliness often seen in more revenge-based inciting, but more subtle highlighting of qualities he already possesses, and should in her opinion be making use of. In similarly positive terms, Ingigerðr plays with heroic masculine ideals when she attempts to divert her father's attention from Norway and Óláfr Haraldsson by urging him to lead armies eastward like his forefathers. Neither of these speeches are incitement as such, but a pattern akin to inciting is found in Ingigerðr's appraisal of her father's hunting prowess, indirectly stating that in a contest between him and his Norwegian rival, he is the lesser man. While all these instances are different, the common trend is both women's ability and willingness to use aristocratic masculinity as rhetorical ammunition in their political interactions with men, to fulfil their own political ambitions through the men's resulting actions.

Their own personal gendered behaviours diverge. While Ingibjörg is demanding her husband act in a more masculine fashion, she is doing so by performing masculinity herself. She is the bold, independent and aggressive partner who is urging her husband to embrace all three of

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<sup>134</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 328; cf. Lind 2020: 113-4.

<sup>135</sup> For Ingigerðr's tenure in Hólmgarðr compared with Russian sources, see Cross 1929: 184ff.

<sup>136</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 3-5; the passage has Ingigerðr consult with her friends ("vinir hennar") in a row with her royal husband.



those traits, and as such, although she is never explicitly defined as *hvatr* or *skoruligr*, she has at least temporarily moved into the masculine social group in the sense established by Sørensen and Clover.<sup>137</sup> She is seen conversing with and planning with a variety of men (and women) on an equal level, and she plays the political game with confidence. Ingigerðr, on the other hand, finds her agency in conforming to the societal expectation of a royal daughter: she actively seeks an appropriate marriage, as the *konungsdætr* discussed above, but otherwise remains unassuming.<sup>138</sup> She is depicted as less aggressive than Ingibjörg, and more submissive than royal wives and widows. Aside from the one instance, she never steps out of line with her father, and she typically adopts a deferential tone when speaking with men, for instance when she discusses her marriage possibilities with Rognvaldr just prior to the assembly. Responding to his query of whether she is interested in marrying Óláfr Haraldsson, Ingigerðr responds: “*Faðir minn mun sjá kost fyrir mér, en annarra minna frænda ertu sá, er ek vil helzt mín ráð undir eiga, þau er mér þykkir miklu máli skipta.*”<sup>139</sup> (“My father will make this choice for me, but among my other kinsmen you are the one I would let decide for me in cases I deem important.”) By refraining from expressing a direct opinion in the matter, even when that opinion has been made clear in other chapters, Ingigerðr puts on a show of unqualified obedience. In the case of her impending betrothal, not only does she defer to her father, but to another powerful kinsman as well.<sup>140</sup> It is, however, a show. The obedient king’s daughter, due to her communications with Ingibjörg and conversations with Hjalti, is aware that Rognvaldr’s intent differs from that of her father. By stating that it is her father’s choice to make, while then stating that she would be happy for the jarl to decide, she sends a signal to her allies that she is open to her father’s hand being forced. The signal apparently caught, this is precisely what happens in the following section, when Rognvaldr and Þorgnýr turn the assembly against the Swedish king. She thus finds agency, and a way to achieve her objectives, through social conformity.<sup>141</sup>

While this *could* simply be attributed to a difference of personality, it could also tell us something more about expected behaviour from aristocratic women. As discussed, many politically active women are widows, and Ingibjörg is a married woman of royal lineage. Ingigerðr, on the other hand, is the unmarried daughter of a king, living at her father’s court

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<sup>137</sup> Sørensen 1993: 205-6; Clover 1993: 363-5

<sup>138</sup> As per Bandlien (2005: 231), kings’ daughters were always more limited in their choice than other women, because of the political stakes.

<sup>139</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 112

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Jochens 1986: 158.

<sup>141</sup> For female agency through conforming to the standards of male expectation, see Mahmood 2005.

and under his authority.<sup>142</sup> While there are not many saga women to compare to, it is likely that Ingigerðr's confined behaviour is a result of her marital situation, similar to the contrast between widows and wives, and that it has little impact on her agency per se, but considerable impact on how she is forced to channel that agency.<sup>143</sup> There are several indications of this. First of all, her behaviour does change upon her marriage to Jarizleifr. In *Hólmgarðr*, there are indications of Jarizleifr and Ingigerðr functioning as a cooperative aristocratic couple more akin to Rognvaldr and Ingibjörg.<sup>144</sup> Further, through Hjalti's interaction with her one can witness Ingigerðr keeping her own household and welcoming visitors and supplicants privately without direct interference from her father. Connected to this, the expectations presumably placed upon her do not restrict her from following her own agenda as long as she adheres to them. It is arguably only when she goads her father about Óláfr Haraldsson's superior martial prowess, which could be interpreted as anything from insult to betrayal, that she is rebuked and denied, and while the Swedish king has consistently opposed the betrothal agreement, it appears as if this particular episode presents him with an excuse to break it. In her bachelorette situation, Ingigerðr appears able to do whatever she wants as long as she defers to her father and her other male kinsmen.<sup>145</sup> Married and unmarried women thus clearly have different roles in the network, reflected both in the development of Ingigerðr's own agency, and in the differences between her and Ingibjörg.

Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr nevertheless both actively and skilfully participate in male-dominated political institutions, but without needing to step out of their accepted gendered roles. While there are instances of both, particularly the former, appearing more active and aggressive than the men in their lives, they ultimately situate their actions and behaviour within the confines of societal expectation. A loyal aristocratic wife and a virtuous royal daughter, the two cooperate with male kinsmen and friends rather than attempting to dominate them as Gunnhildr allegedly does, and they consequently face fewer accusations of transgression. On the other hand, there are clear instances of participation in male-dominated spheres, contributing to the perception that any confines of gender are not immediately disqualifying.

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<sup>142</sup> In Latin terms defined as *patria potestas*; see Kuehn 1981: 128-9; Dillon & Garland 2015: 298.

<sup>143</sup> Medieval unmarried daughters of high-ranking families were kept close as trusted members of their networks, but firmly under the authority of their fathers or other male relatives; see for instance Herlihy 1985: 48-9; Cooper 1996: 76-7; Bandlien 2005: 231; cf. Nelson (1998: 55-9) for the close proximity of Frankish kings' daughters to the kings.

<sup>144</sup> During Óláfr's stay in Garðaríki, all his formal interactions involve Jarizleifr and Ingigerðr together; see *Heimskringla II*: 343.

<sup>145</sup> For similar autonomy afforded to unmarried medieval women, see Parsons 1998; Phillips 2003: 120-2.

### *Network power dynamic*

The relative power of both women is closely connected to their bonds with the men closest to them. The passive and cautious demeanour of Rognvaldr jarl, combined with the possibility that Ingibjörg, daughter and sister of kings, might be considered of a higher social rank than her husband, leads to a situation in which she is given considerable room for manoeuvring. Ingigerðr, as established, similarly appears to be operating independently of her father at the Swedish court. Both women's influence is primarily channelled through advising, convincing and manipulating men in private conversations, and it is a power they make the most of, forging roles for themselves as mediators, diplomats and court politicians. As the royal women of the previous chapter, they play these roles on behalf of male kinsmen and friends, but with their own voices, pursuing their own goals. It is established from the very introduction of Ingibjörg that she is aiding neither Óláfr nor even Rognvaldr out of duty alone, but because of her own ambitions on behalf of her wider network. Ingigerðr decides for herself that she wishes to marry Óláfr, and she explores ways in which she can attempt to combine this goal with the strengthening of both the Norwegian and Swedish royal networks.

Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr both primarily operate within the primarily private spheres of the household, but this does not restrict them from outside interaction or political participation on behalf of the network. *Heimskringla* consistently mentions Ingibjörg alongside Rognvaldr, to the extent that he appears unable to engage in politics without her assistance. In as many as four separate scenes, they are presented as a unit heading a household together, with messages and appeals going to both of them.<sup>146</sup> The text thus seems to indicate they function as partners in power: they both speak when supplicants and messengers arrive, Ingibjörg often first; and on both the two occasions where the couple is portrayed deciding on a course of action together, first in pursuing friendship with Óláfr, and second with agreeing to assist his Swedish diplomatic endeavours, it is explicitly her will being asserted. In both cases, the text takes care to extensively describe her motivations while stating nothing about Rognvaldr's.

Ingigerðr konungsdóttir, due to her role in the narrative as social glue making the peace agreement possible, functions as a human prize. This is not uncommon for medieval royal women, but in Ingigerðr's case she draws considerable power from the position. Take for

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<sup>146</sup> See three meetings with Óláfr and his messengers in ch. 67 (*Heimskringla II*: 85), 69 (p. 88), and 78 (p. 111), and the mention of the two as joint recipients of Ingigerðr's correspondence in ch. 72 (p. 100).

instance the description of the contrast between Ingigerðr and Ástríðr by the Swedish magnate Arnviðr ‘blindr’ after the narrative above is concluded and Óláfr has married Ástríðr:

*‘Þér hétuð Óláfi digra dóttur yðarri, Ingigerði. Er hon konungborin í allar álfur, af Uppsúa ætt, er tignust er á Norðrlöndum, því at sú ætt er komin frá goðunum sjálfum. En nú hefir Óláfr konungr fengit Ástríðar, en þó at hon sé konungs barn, þá er ambótt móðir hennar ok þó vinðversk.’<sup>147</sup>*

“You promised Óláfr digri your daughter Ingigerðr. She is descended from kings on all sides, from the line of the Uppsúar, the most exalted of all in Northern lands, because this line descends from the gods themselves. But now King Óláfr has gotten Ástríðr, and though she is a king’s child, her mother was a slave-woman who was even Wendish.”

In an absurd way, though perhaps telling for views on women, the contrast between the sisters is subsequently compared to the contrast between more and less valuable farm animals,<sup>148</sup> as such, the passage appears to say less about female agency and more about women as political currency spent by men, as discussed in the introduction. However, if we look past this treatment, the description of Ingigerðr here is extraordinary. Emphasising her kinship relations with illustrious kings, Arnviðr’s description, accepted by all those listening, suggests that Ingigerðr is the most high-born of all the women in the *konungasögur*, and is only comparable to descriptions of kings attempting to justify their lineage.<sup>149</sup> This is further supported by *Fagrskinna*’s account, where Ingigerðr is mentioned as *konungs dóttir ok dróttningar*, ‘the daughter of a king and a queen’.<sup>150</sup> Such kinship ties evidently allow for certain privileges. For instance, her royal father and Jarzleifr’s negotiators both being so quick to agree to all of her conditions suggests that it would be perfectly conventional for illustrious royal daughters to make such demands in a marriage negotiation, particularly if her consent to the marriage is indeed desired if not required. Unmarried daughters of reigning kings are practically never encountered in speaking roles in the kings’ saga narratives,<sup>151</sup> but for Ingigerðr, her agency and political prominence are a direct result of her royal kinship bonds.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 152-3

<sup>148</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 152-3

<sup>149</sup> See particularly the descriptions of kings’ kinship discussed in chapter 4. The only comparable description of a woman is made about Haraldr hárfagri’s mother Ragnhildr; *Heimskringla I*: 87-9.

<sup>150</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 179

<sup>151</sup> Only two dubious exceptions exist, both from *Haralds saga hins hárfagra*. Gyða and Snjófríðr, who both interact with and later marry Haraldr hárfagri, are the daughters of a petty king in Western Norway and a king of the Finns respectively. Only the former speaks directly; see above.

<sup>152</sup> The same is true for Ástríðr Tryggvadóttir and Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir from the section above, but neither is the daughter of a reigning king when they appear and speak.

On the other hand, her status is what ensures that her father keeps her close, and nearly all her described agency and actions occur within the confines of the Swedish court. The position of her illegitimate sister Ástríðr is exactly the opposite, painting a clear picture of differences in the status of women in royal networks based on their parentage and resulting social standing. While Ástríðr must accept being given to Óláfr as a lesser replacement when the Norwegian king fails to obtain his first choice Ingigerðr, she is afforded considerably more independence. In *Heimskringla*, she agrees of her own volition to be taken to Norway against her father's wishes, and to marry Óláfr without his knowledge.<sup>153</sup> The *Legendary saga* goes further, and describes Ástríðr herself travelling to the king to seek a union with him.<sup>154</sup> Unlike Ingigerðr who remains with their father, Ástríðr is away as the ward of another magnate, and appears to consistently act without seeking the approval of her dynastic superiors. This relative independence causes Ástríðr to continue to stand out, and arguably makes her a considerably more powerful queen than her sister despite her lesser status, as we shall see.

#### **A woman's political oration: Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir at the assembly**

Networks can disintegrate if their central figures die.<sup>155</sup> This is certainly the case for the network around Óláfr Haraldsson. Like his namesake Óláfr Tryggvason, the younger Óláfr eventually becomes the target of an alliance between the king of Denmark and segments of the Norwegian aristocracy, and with his defeat and death at the battle of Stiklarstaðir c. 1030, the network suffers a dramatic blow and is spread to the winds. But in its attempted resurgence a few years later, when Óláfr's young son Magnús is being brought from exile in Garðaríki to return to Norway through Sweden, we find one of the most public examples of female political participation in the *konungasögur* generally, and in *Heimskringla* specifically, namely the speech given by the now widowed Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir at an assembly near Sigtúna. Presented in support of her stepson Magnús' endeavour to retake the kingdom lost by his father's death, it provides a unique glimpse of the forms and sources of publicly expressed power accessible to an aristocratic woman. On one hand, this includes verbal agency, active involvement in statecraft and the skilful use of rhetorical techniques. On the other, it simultaneously incorporates the exploitation of networks and network bonds in order to achieve political goals. In this case, the disintegrated network around Óláfr is arguably reformed around not one, but two central figures: Ástríðr and Magnús.

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<sup>153</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 144-6

<sup>154</sup> *Helgisaga*: 272-4

<sup>155</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 61

I shall here analyse both the prose narrative of the speech itself as presented in the main body of text of *Heimskringla*, and Sigvatr Þórðarson's commemorative verse cited immediately after the speech, beginning with the former, where Ástriðr herself is directly speaking:

*Hon fagnaði forkunnar vel Magnúsi, stjúpsyni sínum, ok lét þegar stefna fjölmennit þing, þar sem kallar er á Høngrum. En á því þingi talaði Ástriðr ok sagði svá: 'Hér er nú kominn með oss sonr ins helga Óláfs konungs, er Magnús heitir, ætlar nú ferð sína til Nóregs at sækja fōðurarf sinn. Er mér skylða mikil at styrkja hann til þessarar ferðar, því at hann er stjúpsonr minn, svá sem þat er öllum kunnigt, bæði Svíum ok Norðmönnum. Skal ek hér engan hlut til spara, þann er ek hefi fōng á, at hans styrkr mætti mestr verða, bæði fjölmenni þat, er ek á forráð á, ok svá fé. Svá þeir allir, er til þessar ferðar ráðask með honum, skulu eiga heimla mína vináttu fullkomna. Ek vil því ok lýsa, at ek skal ráðask til ferðarinnar með honum. Mun þat þá öllum auðsýnt, at ek spari eigi aðra hluti til liðsemðar við hann, þá er ek má honum veita.' Síðan talaði hon langt ok snjallt. En er hon hætti, þá svōruðu margir, sōgðu svá, at Svíar hōfðu litla tírarfōr farit til Nóregs, þá er þeir fylgðu Óláfi konungi, feðr hans – 'ok er eigi hér betra at ván, er þessi konungr er,' segja þeir. 'Eru menn fyrir þá sōk ófúsir þessarar ferðar.' Ástriðr svarar: 'Allir þeir, er nōkkurir hreystimenn vilja vera, munu ekki æðrask um slíkt. En ef menn hafa látit frændr sína með inum helga Óláfi konungi eða sjálfir sár fengit, þá er þat nú drengskapr at fara nú til Nóregs ok hefna þess.' Kom Ástriðr svá orðum sínum ok liðveizlu, at fjöldi liðs varð til með Ástriði at fylgja honum til Nóregs.<sup>156</sup>*

She warmly welcomed her stepson Magnús, and had a well-attended assembly gather, at the place called Hangrar. At this assembly Ástriðr spoke, and said this: “Here with us now is the son of the saintly King Óláfr, who is called Magnús; he intends to journey to Norway and seek his father’s inheritance. I owe him my support for this journey, because he is my stepson, as is known to all, both Swedes and Norwegians. Here I shall not spare any expense that I have in my power, neither in the manpower that I control nor in coin, so that his strength may be the greatest possible. All those who would go with him on this journey, shall have my full friendship. I will also announce, that I will journey with him; it will be obvious to all that I keep nothing else that I might give him to help.” After this she spoke at length and eloquently. But when she stopped, many replied and said that Swedes had received little glory from travelling to Norway when they followed his father King Óláfr - “and there is no better to expect from this king; for this reason men are reluctant to make the journey.” Ástriðr responded: “All those men, who wish to be valiant men, will not be perturbed by such things. And if men have lost their kinsmen with the saintly King Óláfr, or themselves been wounded, then it is now manly work to travel to Norway and avenge this.” Ástriðr achieved this with her words and her aid, that many people joined her in following him to Norway.

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<sup>156</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 4-5

The paragraph is filled with explicit and implicit details surrounding Ástríðr's power before, during and after the speech, and certain qualifications must be made prior to a full analysis. In terms of verbal agency, the scene is unprecedented. Public oration is almost completely exclusive to men in the *konungasögur*, and both in the speech itself and the activities surrounding the assembly, Ástríðr displays unrivalled agency.<sup>157</sup> The direct power presented in the speech, control of resources, manpower and coin, is more questionable, but it lies remarkably close to similar appeals made by men pursuing kingship, needing to convince others to fight for them.<sup>158</sup> Likely, the resources Ástríðr claims to control are promised future rewards rather than components of her power at her present, with no textual indication of Ástríðr controlling military or financial resources of her own.<sup>159</sup> The eventual success of her appeal, explored further below, is due to her influence as well as her rhetoric, and I would argue that it is this influence and its anticipated results (including the potential ability to reward those persuaded when the goals are accomplished) that *forráð* here refers to. In essence, what this all implies is that while the speech is a testament of power in its own right,<sup>160</sup> it serves an even more illuminating scholarly purpose as a display of how political power is *created* by a woman through political rhetoric. There is little to suggest that Ástríðr has men under her command or that she physically controls vast riches. Instead, it is through *orð sín ok liðveizla*, 'her words and her aid', that she is able to sow the seeds of this power. Unlike a man claiming kingship for himself, however, she is using these gifts to gain momentum for the claims of her stepson Magnús.

A network-rooted perspective on Ástríðr's speech is by necessity threefold, as achieving full understanding of Ástríðr's formation, maintenance and active use of network bonds requires an investigation of three aspects: the textual description of Ástríðr herself, of her bonds with the claimant in question, and finally, of the integration of network bonds into the speech itself. I will pursue these avenues in order, and begin by defining Ástríðr's present position in the text. Her husband killed and his supporters dispersed, she appears to have sought refuge with her kinsmen in Sweden, a kingdom governed by her brother Emundr Ólafsson, son of Óláfr

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<sup>157</sup> The only other explicit example of female assembly speech is found in *Fagrskinna*'s presentation of Álfifa's participation in the council in Þrændalög, discussed in the previous chapter. However, while this also serves to highlight the speaker's sanctioned and exceptional authority, it functions very differently from an oration like Ástríðr's, as it primarily consists of a single comment. Furthermore, no parallel exists in *Heimskringla*. Cf. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 93-4.

<sup>158</sup> See for instance the usage of *forráð* and the verb version *forráða* for various instances of abstract power in *Óláfs saga helga*: ch. 66 (*Heimskringla II*: 84), ch. 79 (p. 113) and ch. 194 (p. 345). Cf. Bagge 1996: 32, for kings establishing themselves through speech.

<sup>159</sup> Although she does have some semblance of an aristocratic retinue, as shown with the poet Sigvatr below.

<sup>160</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013: 93-4, 104-5) has given a succinct summary of the speech itself as an example of female power.

scenski. Given these circumstances, it is unlikely that she holds any officially sanctioned position or power, nor is there any textual indication of such. There are, however, several details suggesting that her social status remains intact. First, one might point out that immediately preceding the speech, she is introduced as *Ástríðr dróttning*.<sup>161</sup> The text thus presents her as retaining the title of queen despite having lost her position in Norway. This does not define any specific institutional authority, particularly not in her current geographical circumstance, and the title itself is relatively common, but the application of it to a woman in exile is unique.<sup>162</sup> The sustained attachment of name and title clearly implies continual and widespread recognition of her royal status and connections,<sup>163</sup> both of which provide valuable political currency in a network-based society.

Further, *Ástríðr* is seemingly given free rein to do as she pleases with a foreign claimant, as her brother, King Emundr, does not play an active role in receiving Magnús, nor is he described attending the assembly. Seeing as the family has supported Óláfr inn helgi on several occasions, it is highly possible that she has his blessing to lend him her support,<sup>164</sup> but while supporting Magnús appears to have been part of Swedish royal policy at this point,<sup>165</sup> in this narrative *Ástríðr* acts independently of, although likely in accordance with, her male relatives. The text never mentions any official support from Emundr for Magnús' cause, and the former later supports a rebellion against him.<sup>166</sup> This is no guarantee that Magnús did not receive Emundr's aid initially, but at least in the narrative of *Heimskringla*, his Swedish support is solidly rooted in this one scene. Similarly, the gathering of the assembly itself is *Ástríðr*'s decision alone; it does not happen on either man's request. While Magnús remains mostly passive in this episode aside from his overall pursuit of support, the text tells us that *Ástríðr* ordered the assembly convened. While the primary purpose of the assembly is to build Magnús' forces, *Ástríðr* is convenor, representative, and only named speaker, with Magnús and all others for the duration of the assembly reduced to roles revolving around the queen. This carries striking implications, most prominently the simple fact that *Ástríðr* wields enough influence in Sweden to be able to call an assembly, a male-dominated political institution

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<sup>161</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 4

<sup>162</sup> No other woman up to this point in the narratives is referred to as *dróttning* without being actively in power alongside her male relatives; see the list in Appendix III.

<sup>163</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 93, for similar observations about the recognition of the title.

<sup>164</sup> Adam of Bremen's *GHEP* (p. 108) further states that the king at the time was in fact Qnundr, Emundr and *Ástríðr*'s brother, who earlier gave aid to Óláfr inn helgi. For the concord between Qnundr and Óláfr, see *Heimskringla II*: 226-7.

<sup>165</sup> Swedish support is later switched from Magnús to Danish pretender Sveinn *Ástríðarson*; see *Heimskringla III*: 40.

<sup>166</sup> Sveinn *Ástríðarson*'s attempt to take the throne of Denmark; see *Heimskringla III*: 40.



which most women would be barred from speaking at, let alone convening.<sup>167</sup> This simple act demonstrates exceptional agency and politically marketable influence, and is further accentuated by the description of the assembly as *ffjólmennt*, meaning well-attended or, more literally, ‘having many people’. Her titular position, her freedom of action and her access to a dynamic platform showcase a situation in which Ástríðr enjoys broad popular appeal, if not direct royal power on the level of her late husband and her brothers. We might also tie this popularity partially to the initial description of Ástríðr’s image in *Heimskringla*’s *Óláfs saga helga*, where she is introduced as *mild af fé*, ‘generous with wealth’, and it is said that all men thought highly of her, “*pokkaðisk hverjum manni vel*”.<sup>168</sup> There is still no evidence of her holding any official authority, and so all her political success in the situation comes from her influence based on reputation, status, and existing bonds with others, in which case past popularity among the Swedes is of great help.

This leads into an assessment of her bonds with Magnús, the royal claimant in question. The two are not related by blood, but by association to the same person: Óláfr inn helgi. Ástríðr is Óláfr’s widowed queen, Magnús his son by a concubine; a son who now intends to be recognised as his father’s heir. There is thus a bond of kinship between them, but it is shared kinship, not direct. While this might appear a minor distinction in a society where forged bonds are no less important than default ones,<sup>169</sup> it does imply that Ástríðr’s reception of Magnús, and her subsequent strong support for his cause, is not familial duty, but a voluntary network bond for both parties. A parallel can be found in the aforementioned case of Óláfr’s stepfather Sigurðr sýr, whom the former must convince in order to receive his support.<sup>170</sup> Neither father nor son is entitled to his step-parent’s support, but both need it to succeed. Ástríðr and Magnús have never had a relationship in the text, familial or otherwise, until this point; unlike Óláfr and Sigurðr, they are never mentioned as *mágar* or *frændr*. Like Sigurðr, she is not obligated to support her stepson, but chooses to do so. A kinship bond exists, but it is only now activated and amplified for political purposes, which appears to be in the interest of every party involved. She welcomes him warmly *because* he is her stepson, a relation highlighted at the beginning of the speech, when Ástríðr explains how she owes him strength and support. Although their shared kinship does not necessarily warrant it, Ástríðr thus

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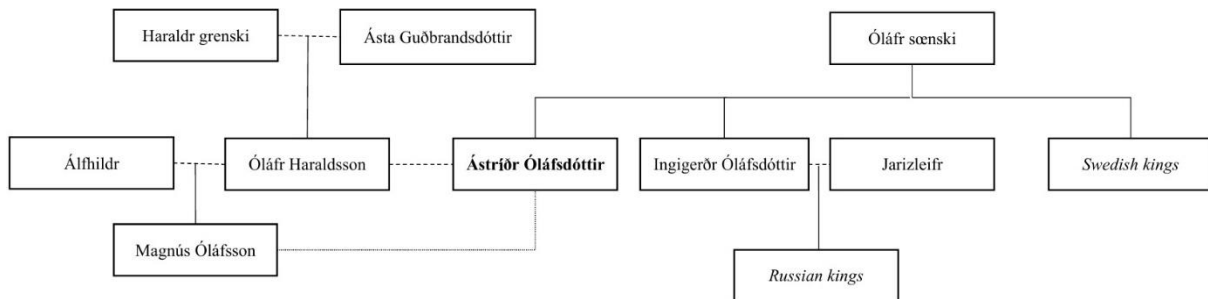
<sup>167</sup> Sanmark (2014: 85ff.) describes women at the Viking Age assemblies as only being allowed speaking roles in very specific situations, such as speaking on behalf of dead or absent husbands, or in a witness capacity.

<sup>168</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 130

<sup>169</sup> A key point of Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017.

<sup>170</sup> For the conversations between Óláfr and Sigurðr sýr, see *Heimskringla II*: 41-7. Cf. the discussions in the sections above.

chooses to present her aid as, indeed, an obligation.<sup>171</sup> This creates a firm bond between them, built off the foundation of shared kinship and shared loyalties, and implies that everyone present shares in the bond.



**Figure 3.** Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir’s kinship network.

Finally, the use of network language in the speech itself requires analysis. This is found particularly in Ástriðr’s appeal for men to follow Magnús towards the end of the speech, where she promises her *vinátta fullkominn*, ‘full friendship’, to all those who accept. This carries several implications for Ástriðr’s power and status in the text. First, it makes her offer a promise of *quid pro quo*. The warriors in attendance will not simply follow Magnús out of respect or obedience to him or to Ástriðr, but out of the promise of a reward. They too are in pursuit of personal gain. This in turn lends further weight to the argument presented above, that the resources she considers at her disposal are indeed not readily available, but rather form an integrated part of the network structure of reciprocal exchange. When she speaks about the resources she controls, including manpower, Ástriðr refers not to any soldiers under her direct command, but men susceptible to her influence. These are not her sworn and loyal subordinates, but warriors inclined to listen to her plans, offers, and demands due to regard for her and her status. They might thus be considered part of her network in the loosest sense.

This ties into the other key point, namely that as part of this exchange, friendship is the most valuable commodity she has to offer. Based on the established nature of *vinátta fullkominn*, normally the province of kings, it puts Ástriðr in a unique quasi-royal position. Those on the receiving end of her *vinátta* are subsequently associated with her and made part of her network, in a royal vertical sense. Óláfr Haraldsson for instance frequently engages in such friendship, such as in this interaction with an aristocratic warrior known as Eyvindr úrarhorn after the battle at Nesjar (c. 1016): “*er þeir skilðusk þar, þá hét konungr honum vináttu sinni,*

<sup>171</sup> For the tenuous support structure of kinship networks, see Miller 1990: 164-66; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 115.

*en Eyvindr konungi liðsemð sinni, hvar sem hann vildi kraft hafa.*”<sup>172</sup> (when they separated, the king promised him his friendship, and Eyvindr promised the king his aid, wherever he needed strength.) Their agreement then continues in a profitable manner for both parties. What Ástríðr does with the warriors in attendance at Sigtúna is in principle the same as what Óláfr does in his relationship with Eyvindr: promise royal friendship in a practically transactional exchange for loyal support. If her friendship is coveted enough to be a promised reward for military assistance, it is a bond that the listeners consider a precious resource, similar to how Eyvindr might have seen Óláfr’s friendship. This takes us back to recognition of her royal status and the coveted influence attached to it.

Ástríðr, too, engages in friendship on at least one occasion before the speech, having formed an association with a Norwegian man named Björn. “*Hann var vinr ok kunningi Ástríðar dróttningar... ok hafði hon fengit honum ármanning ok sýslu á ofanverðri Heiðmork.*”<sup>173</sup> (He was a friend and acquaintance of Queen Ástríðr, and she had obtained for him administrative offices in upper Heiðmork.) In this case, we do not get to observe the forming of the friendship, and there is not necessarily an immediate and transactional connection between their friendship and her help in him achieving his position, but at the very least, it appears he owes this position to being her friend. This in itself makes the relationship transactional to a certain extent, given the similarity to kings providing their friends with lucrative posts in exchange for political, military or economic support.<sup>174</sup> In any event, the episode thus provides a further indication of Ástríðr having the tools of networks at her disposal prior to the speech at Hangrar, and using them to establish bonds benefitting her.

More directly, the conditions of royal *vinátta* are explored in an earlier passage of *Óláfs saga helga*, where another aristocrat, Hringr, attempts to convince the petty kings of Upplönd to rally behind Óláfr in his bid for the crown: “*Hví myni hann oss þat eigi vel launa ok lengi muna með góðu, ef hann er svá mikill manndómsmaðr sem ek hygg ok allir kalla? Nú munum vér á þá hættu leggja, ef ek skal ráða, at binda við hann vináttu.*”<sup>175</sup> (“Why should he not reward us well [for our aid] and long remember it with appreciation, if he is so great a man as I think and all say? Now we must brave this danger, if I should decide, to bind ourselves to him in friendship.”) The form of friendship that Hringr here delineates, is, first of all, a

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<sup>172</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 82

<sup>173</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 297

<sup>174</sup> The aforementioned Eyvindr úrarhorn for instance becomes King Óláfr’s retainer, whereas Haraldr hárfagri provides his closest friends such as Rognvaldr jarl with lands to govern; see *Heimskringla I*: 106. Cf. more on this relationship in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 50-7.

<sup>175</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 48

vertical bond. He wants the kings to bind themselves to Óláfr, *binda við hann*, in *vinátta*. It is thus evidently a matter of mutual loyalty and allegiance, rather than simple expressions of affection. Further, the other side of the friendship appears to hold gifts, monetary or otherwise. Hringr expects for him and his colleagues to be well rewarded by the king if they remain loyal to him over time. Óláfr, in return, immediately sees fit to offer the assembled chieftains his *vinátta fullkominn*.<sup>176</sup> This association is exactly what Ástríðr promises those who heed her call to arms. A practical institution, *vinátta* here involves bonds, loyalty and often gift-giving, and, in the case of royal friendships such as the one outlined by Hringr, it incorporates the formal pledging of support in order to later profit from the successful king's generosity. By promising *vinátta* in exchange for martial assistance, Ástríðr is binding the men to herself (to a greater degree than she is binding them to Magnús), similar to how Óláfr binds Hringr and the other petty kings to himself. In this capacity, she is acting like a king.

*An alleged eyewitness testimony*

Immediately following the speech in the *Heimskringla* text are three stanzas of skaldic verse attributed to Icelandic courtier Sigvatr Þórðarson (c. 995-1045), a central political participant and the most favoured poet of Óláfr Haraldsson. In a focused study of the verse, Judith Jesch argues it must have been composed alongside other verses for a single occasion, perhaps to celebrate Magnús' return to power in Norway.<sup>177</sup> As a much older, potentially contemporary, narrative of the events surrounding the speech, it significantly complements the story told in *Heimskringla*'s main body of text, although as with all skaldic poetry cited in the sagas, the accuracy and reliability of the preserved version must be treated with caution.

*Hrein getum hóla launa  
hnossfjöld lofi ossu  
Óleifs dætr, es átti  
jǫfurr sigrhvatastr digri.  
Þings beið herr á Hǫngrum  
hundmargr Svía grundar  
austr, es Ástríðr lýsti  
Óleifs sonar mólum.*<sup>178</sup>

We will reward with poems of praise the bright gifts of the daughter of Óláfr [= Ástríðr], to whom the victorious and stout king was married. A massive army of Swedes attended the assembly at Hangrar in the east, when Ástríðr proclaimed the case for Óláfr's son [= Magnús].

There are several ways in which the verse aids our understanding of the speech and of Ástríðr's political position, the most immediate of which is simply its corroboration of her

<sup>176</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 48.

<sup>177</sup> Jesch 1994: 14

<sup>178</sup> *Poem about Queen Ástríðr* (Jesch 2012a: 645); for the in-text citation in *Heimskringla*, see *Heimskringla III*: 5-6.

activities. Jesch argues the verse is most likely the source of the prose version.<sup>179</sup> This is supported by the lack of any corresponding event in other kings' sagas, and while one cannot discount the possibility of additional sources having been utilised, the in-text citation and the similar content renders the assertion of the verse as Snorri's main source plausible. Regardless of whether the speech is built solely from the testimony of Sigvatr's stanzas or not, his words about Ástríðr's actions provide confirmation of many details. Like the prose text, it presents Ástríðr as the primary speaker at an assembly where a great number of Swedish warriors have gathered to hear the case for supporting Magnús Ólafsson, and in both verse and prose, Magnús is incapable of reclaiming his inheritance without the support of Ástríðr.

Assessed in conjunction with the prose speech, the verse can be used to shed further light on Ástríðr's position in and reliance on network bonds. One particularly striking point where the poem arguably provides more information, lies in the queen's relationship with Magnús, particularly illuminated in the second stanza:

*Máttit hon við hættna,  
heilrjóð Svía deila  
meir, þótt Magnús væri  
margnenninn sonr hennar.  
Olli hon, þvít allri  
áttleifð Haralds knátti  
mest með móttkum Kristi,  
Magnús konungr fagna.*<sup>180</sup>

She, fully decisive, could not have had more progress in her dealing with the bold Swedes if the very energetic Magnús were her own son. Along with mighty Christ, she contributed most to King Magnús receiving Haraldr's ancestral inheritance.

In the analysis of the relationship as presented in the speech, we saw that Ástríðr is not obligated to support Magnús, due to their less significant kinship bond, but chooses to emphasise it for additional effect. In the poem, Sigvatr tells us that Ástríðr could not have had more success speaking on behalf of Magnús even if he were her biological son. This establishes that Magnús being a stepson rather than a biological one is indeed a detriment in terms of Ástríðr building her case; she has considerable success in persuading the Swedes *despite* Magnús being merely her stepson. The assembled crowd is thus presented as less willing to listen to a woman speaking on behalf of a stepson, than a mother speaking on behalf of her son, indicating that it is in Ástríðr's (and Magnús') interest to highlight their bond as much as possible. It further provides an indication that the mother-son relationship is what Ástríðr aims for. Such a relationship, as a *de facto* king's mother, could put her in a

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<sup>179</sup> Jesch 1994: 1

<sup>180</sup> Jesch 2012a: 645

favourable position both because the maternal figure of a young and untested king could find herself in a position of considerable authority, and because linking herself directly to Magnús (instead of indirectly through his father) provides her with a legitimate position from which she might regain her role as queen in Norway. Again, she is considering both Magnús' fortunes and her own, while mindful of the connection between the two. The description of her as *heilrjóð*, 'fully decisive', indicates that she has considered the opportunity and decided to pursue it.

Those fortunes are closely tied to the endeavour of taking power in Norway, or more accurately *reclaiming* power, seeing as both the speech and the verse highlight the concept of rightful inheritance. But whereas the prose version of the speech simply focuses on Magnús' *föðurarf*, paternal inheritance from Óláfr, the poem describes the sought-after goal as *áttleifð Haralds*, the ancestral inheritance from Haraldr. Which Haraldr this refers to has been the matter of some debate. While Haraldr hárfagri was long the default interpretation, both Jesch and Claus Krag have suggested that the description refers to Óláfr's father Haraldr grenski, a theory supported by the mention of the latter in other cited poems by Sigvatr.<sup>181</sup> While the concept of the Norwegian kingdom as the inheritance from Haraldr hárfagri was in Krag's view just emerging at the time of composition, the two concepts of inheritance are not directly incompatible, given that Haraldr grenski too was allegedly a descendant of Haraldr hárfagri, and it is rarely clear which Haraldr is referred to by Sigvatr's poems. However, what needs to be kept in mind is that while these are Sigvatr's words, they are channelled through Snorri's adaptation, and potentially interpretation. When Snorri speaks of Óláfr (and Magnús) as the heir to Haraldr, that Haraldr is not his father Haraldr grenski. The link to Haraldr hárfagri in *Heimskringla* has been shown both explicitly (as in the episode with Ásta and Sigurðr sýr) and implicitly (as in the links to Óláfr Tryggvason). While it is thus possible that Sigvatr had a separate goal, Snorri's goal in his inclusion of Sigvatr's poetry is to connect the reconquest of Norway to the return of Haraldr hárfagri's descendants. The Norwegian royal network growing around Ástríðr and Magnús in *Heimskringla*, similar to the network around Óláfr, Ingigerðr, Rognvaldr and Ingibjörg from which the new one derives, is clearly ideologically centred on the *ætt* of Haraldr hárfagri.<sup>182</sup>

In this network, Sigvatr Þórðarson himself is a key participant, as he appears throughout the narrative as an important ally of the royal network leaders. His relationship with Ástríðr dates

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<sup>181</sup> Jesch 1994: 9; Krag 2003: 191

<sup>182</sup> Cf. Ingigerðr's usage of *frændleifð* above.

back to the end of the *friðgerðarsaga*, where he acts as a middle-man for the marriage of Óláfr and Ástriðr alongside Rognvaldr jarl, conversing with Ástriðr and subsequently bringing information about her back to the king. Already a confidante of Óláfr,<sup>183</sup> the Icelander has thus additionally established a cordial relationship with his soon-to-be queen, not unlike Hjalti's relationship with Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr.<sup>184</sup> Similarly, he already has a personal connection to Magnús due to the fact that he named him in Óláfr's absence, and refers to himself in verse as tied to the young king because of this event.<sup>185</sup> Presumably thanks to these pre-existing relationships, the poet remains an important figure in Magnús' court after the reconquest of his kingdom: “*En er Magnús var konungr orðinn at Nóregi, þá fylgði Sigvatr honum ok var inn kærsti konungi.*”<sup>186</sup> (When Magnús had become king of Norway, then Sigvatr accompanied him and was in the king's highest affections.) As established, variations of the adjective *kærr* can refer to genuine friendship, but also (more frequently) to a close cooperative political relationship.<sup>187</sup> In this reading, regardless of the emotional connection, Sigvatr has established himself once more as a central and influential courtier in Norway, despite he himself having few explicit aristocratic and royal ties. It is subsequently added that when Magnús arrived at Sigtúna prior to the speech itself, “*þá var Sigvatr þar fyrir með Ástriði dróttningu, ok urðu þau öll fegin mjök... Síðan rézk Sigvatr í ferð með Ástriði dróttningu at fylgja Magnúsi til Nóregs.*”<sup>188</sup> (Then Sigvatr was already there with Queen Ástriðr, and they were all very glad. Afterwards he joined Queen Ástriðr in accompanying Magnús to Norway.) Both these mentions indicate that Sigvatr here practically has become Ástriðr's retainer and a member of her household, and that she has essentially assumed the role of the poet's patron, previously held by her husband. This is crucial. If Sigvatr has indeed transferred his primary loyalty from King Óláfr to Óláfr's widowed queen, then it is through Ástriðr that he becomes part of the struggle to reinstate Magnús in his father's position, a detail emphasised in the second half of the quote. While nothing excludes the poet from having his own personal agenda, he is here a part of Ástriðr's network, which she brings to the cause of retaking the Norwegian kingdom. He remains her steadfast supporter even after the accomplishment of the network's primary goal, evident from the composition of the poem declaring her importance. This is further supported by the suggestion of multiple other sagas

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<sup>183</sup> Clunies Ross 1999: 56-9

<sup>184</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 144

<sup>185</sup> The naming scene is presented in *Heimskringla II*: 210. Sigvatr refers back to his naming of Magnús, his godson, in a poem cited in *Heimskringla III*: 19.

<sup>186</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 20

<sup>187</sup> See the index of *allkærr* and *kærleikr* in Appendix III.

<sup>188</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 18-9

that Ástríðr had a relationship with the aforementioned Óttarr as a younger woman, who in fragments from the lost saga of Styrmir Kárason is treated by Ástríðr as a court retainer, with her explicitly stating that she wishes to treat her poets as Óláfr treats his.<sup>189</sup> The lack of Styrmir’s full text makes it difficult to judge its proximity to the *Heimskringla* narrative, particularly as later manuscripts tend to expand her independent role considerably,<sup>190</sup> but a poem by Óttarr is also briefly mentioned in the *Legendary saga*, meaning Ástríðr’s association with poets would have been a widely held belief.<sup>191</sup>

Beyond Sigvatr’s intentions and the nature of their bond as a lordship bond, the fact that the verse stanzas even exist is a matter of no small significance. As a commemorative poem, it is closely connected to the *dróttkvætt* (lit. ‘king-composition’) metre, the primary Old Norse style of royal panegyric verse. The function of this particular instance of *dróttkvætt* as formal commemoration of a woman makes it a unique example of skaldic poetry, and of a genre dedicated to the preservation of the deeds of kings, chieftains and accomplished warriors.<sup>192</sup> Sigvatr’s verse thus stands out as a public commemoration of an exceptional woman in a space normally reserved for powerful men, particularly considering that *dróttkvætt* has been read as a shared language reserved for the male-exclusive inner circles around the king.<sup>193</sup> This is a central aspect of Ástríðr’s unusual socio-political role, as it simultaneously imbues her with male-adjacent and king-like connotations. She surrounds herself with poets like a king, and she is celebrated and commemorated like a king.

#### *Ástríðr and Magnús: the two network nodes*

In the poem’s presentation of the two named individuals, Ástríðr and Magnús, there are some noteworthy word choices, particularly in the third and final stanza:

*Mildr á mennsku at gjalda  
Magnús, en því fǫgnum,  
- þat gerði vin virða  
víðlendan - Ástríði.  
Hon hefr svá komit sínum,  
(sǫnn), at fǫ mun ǫnnur,*

Generous Magnús owes Ástríðr for her bold aid, and we are glad, for through it the friend of men [= ruler] gained vast lands. Deeply decisive, she supported her stepson like few others, and with words I praise the lady’s glory.

<sup>189</sup> See Johnsen & Jón Helgason 1941: 706. Óttarr, like Sigvatr, composes a poem about Ástríðr, later triggering an awkward reaction from Óláfr; see Bandlien 2005: 132.

<sup>190</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 101-4

<sup>191</sup> *Helgisaga*: 301

<sup>192</sup> Jesch argues Sigvatr was forced to invent new ways of performing *dróttkvætt* to include vocabulary appropriate for a female subject; Jesch 1994: 7.

<sup>193</sup> Lindow 1975: 321-3



(*orð gerik drós til dýrðar*)  
*djúpróð kona stjúpi*.<sup>194</sup>

Magnús is described here as *mildr*, ‘generous’ or ‘gracious’. Two lines below, he is *vinr virða*, ‘the friend of men’, a kenning for ruler. These descriptors both imply involvement as a network leader, but in the context of the speech, he remains a silent bystander who builds bonds with his followers through his presence alone, while letting his stepmother play the part of active engagement. This might be because of the political advantages of letting her speak, but it might also be a result of Magnús at this early stage being very young.<sup>195</sup> Five chapters later in *Heimskringla*’s narrative, during a diplomatic meeting between Magnús and the new Danish king Hqrða-Knútr (r. 1035-42), the text states that “*konungar váru báðir bernskir ok ungir*”<sup>196</sup> (the kings were both child-like and young). This implies that during this meeting Magnús is not yet considered an adult, and by the saga reckoning it takes place in the spring of 1036, a full year after the Swedish assembly.<sup>197</sup> References to his martial activities in other poems focusing on his youth are vague and formulaic, implying a sense of embellishment to justify his kingship,<sup>198</sup> and the same is likely true for the references to his generosity and friendship-building here. All evidence suggests that while he may be old enough to act on his own volition, he is too young to command serious respect in public political and military spheres.

The words used to describe Ástríðr are different. The aforementioned *heilróð*, ‘fully decisive’, and here *djúpróð*, ‘deeply decisive’, serve two purposes: first, to indicate her decisiveness in the political pursuit inherent to the speech, but simultaneously once more to frame a women’s speech as *ráð*, ‘counsel’. There are similarly two action verbs in the second stanza, *valda* and *deila*. While their usage in the verse is somewhat vague, we can infer a lot from analysing them. *Deila*, to deal, here implies ‘deal with’ in the sense of ‘to speak to’ or even ‘to preside over’.<sup>199</sup> As such, it serves to establish Ástríðr’s taking an active role in the assembly itself. *Valda* (3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense *olli* in the text) means ‘to cause’ while simultaneously carrying

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<sup>194</sup> Jesch 2012a: 645

<sup>195</sup> Jesch 2004: 131

<sup>196</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 12

<sup>197</sup> The text describes the assembly as taking place in spring, and the kings’ meeting the following spring, separated by a fall and winter containing the seizure of power by Magnús and the death of Knútr inn ríki, both events typically dated to 1035.

<sup>198</sup> Jesch (2004: 131-5) discusses how Magnús’ alleged fighting in his youth is poetic convention rather than historical record, and that he is in such poems a potential warrior, rather than the actual warrior he later becomes.

<sup>199</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson (p. 98) operate with several meanings following these lines; in essence, *deila* can mean any variation of ‘to deal with’ depending on the textual context.

connotations of wielding power.<sup>200</sup> Ástriðr's efforts and influence are what makes Magnús' assumption of kingship happen. The verbs together indicate Ástriðr's active hand in events and her level of control over them, as opposed to Magnús' relatively amenable description. This takes us back to the third stanza, where the queen is described acting with *mennska*, humanity. While this is in most circumstances a noun with few gendered connotations, both Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson and Jesch argue that in the context of the poem, the word has a masculine meaning, and is meant to describe that Ástriðr has conducted herself in a manly manner.<sup>201</sup> This ties well into the descriptions of her active behaviour on a public stage, contrasted with Magnús' figurehead role. As Jesch herself admits in her footnotes, the evidence is not substantial enough to prove this suggestion, but it hints at an important point: Ástriðr's unique position in the gendered space.<sup>202</sup>

This leads us back to the speech itself, and to the other component of Ástriðr's appeal as described by Snorri's prose. Her promise of friendship is met with concern that Magnús' endeavour will be ill-fated. The audience's reluctance is expressed to her, and it is left to her to respond. This shows that this Swedish audience does not immediately trust the foreign and untested Magnús or his potential, but on the other hand, the listeners place their faith in Ástriðr to convince them otherwise. Reluctant or not, she controls this crowd, while Magnús is a bystander for the duration of her performance. To secure the desired outcome, she plays her trump card. It is *drengskapr*, 'manly work',<sup>203</sup> she says, to follow Magnús and avenge friends lost and injuries sustained in King Óláfr's cause. Anyone wishing to be considered a *hreystimaðr*, 'valiant man', will have to follow her. She has brought them into the fold with her promise of *vinátta*, and she concludes with a direct appeal to their masculine honour, courage and identity.

As is often the case with saga depictions of gender, while the statement is presented as positive, encouraging the supposed right course of action, the implied subtext is negative. Any man who does not follow Magnús and pursue vengeance, gives up his masculinity.

Manipulating gender roles in speech in order to work the listeners is a familiar tactic, strongly connected to inciting, but this is expressed publicly to an assembled crowd of warriors. It is another royal rhetorical tactic. Sverrir Sigurðarson in *Sverris saga*, for instance, riles up and

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<sup>200</sup> *Valda* can also mean 'to rule' or 'to have power over'; see Cleasby-Vigfusson: 675.

<sup>201</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002c: 6n.; Jesch 1994: 8-9

<sup>202</sup> Jesch 1994: 8n.

<sup>203</sup> More literally 'manliness' or 'manly courage', but I have opted for the present translation as the noun here describes the quest or task at hand. Cf. Lunden 1997: 91.

turns his fleeing army around with similar appeals to their manliness: “*Hví flýi þér? Snúið aftr ok berizk sem bezt... Ok dugið nú mannliga.*”<sup>204</sup> (“Why do you flee? Turn back and fight as well as you can. Behave now as men.”) By simultaneously attacking their manliness and giving them the option to defend it, Sverrir uses a version of inciting as a military tactic in the midst of a battlefield. And what Sverrir does on the battlefield, Ástríðr does at the assembly. By combining the prospect of winning glory, taking vengeance and gaining her friendship all at once, she has given the assembled audience the perfect package of stimulants to secure their cooperative participation.

I would further argue that Ástríðr herself is included in this circle of masculinity, and that it is a key aspect of the recognition of her status and consequently, her power. While her intelligence and rhetorical skill have been noted repeatedly in *Heimskringla*,<sup>205</sup> she is never witnessed using these talents in the text until now. This could be her own choice, but it could also imply that she has been restricted by her father and husband, the two Óláfrs, to a role with minimal agency and public expression, at least limiting her active political participation in a public arena. The most significant changes have now made her a widowed queen without a son, whose father is gone; further, there is no sign of her (in fact quite passive) brother controlling her in any way, and Magnús arrives at Sigtúna as a virtual supplicant and little more than a child. In contrast to her time in Norway, she is here left without any male authority figure that she is required to defer to. As such, just like many royal saga widows, her network position has enabled her to function as a man, to the extent that is able to call a grand assembly and subsequently hegemonise it. Through the central speech, she uses her connections to build a strong network meant for war, and distributes royal friendship as if she were a king. Most explicitly, by going with Magnús personally, she is making herself part of the fight, and by saying that it is *drengskapr* to go to Norway to avenge Óláfr, she automatically includes herself in this concept, becoming a declared active participant in the ‘manly work’ that is to be done, strengthened by the fact that as the king’s widow, she is honouring her husband’s memory.<sup>206</sup> Consequently, when the crowds assemble to listen at Hangrar, they see not a woman out of place, but a royal widow in masculine roles, very much in place.

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<sup>204</sup> SvS: 74

<sup>205</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 130, 144

<sup>206</sup> A common expectation from medieval royal widows; see MacLean 2003: 37.

### *Network power dynamic*

The lack of any similar account in *Ágrip* or *Fagrskinna* begs the question if *Ástriðr* is simply inserted by Snorri as a textual vehicle for Magnús' return. There are, however, several factors indicating that she is not. First of these is the testimony of Sigvatr's poetry, used by Snorri for corroboration, which the older sagas may not have had access to or chosen not to include, and which includes *Ástriðr* herself as a political subject.<sup>207</sup> Additionally, as I have argued, the scene portrays her, not Magnús, in the stronger position. Power in the kings' sagas is (ironically) never just about kingship, but about the political triumph of a network. Magnús is simply a claimant at the head of a network, and all other members, particularly those in positions of seniority and prominence, benefit from the realisation of his claim. As I have previously shown in the case of Gunnhildr and others, when a family network controls the crown, the king is not necessarily the only, nor even the strongest, key member. There are several examples of widowed queens or other parental figures wielding such a mantle, enabled by their kinship bonds.

That *Ástriðr*'s power goes beyond a mere plot device function is also indicated by the fact that she does indeed remain powerful in the text, beyond the speech and Magnús' successful reconquest. This is most explicitly shown in her clashes with *Álfhildr*, Magnús' biological mother. When *Álfhildr* shows up at Magnús' court and demands a place of honour next to her son, *Ástriðr* refuses to allow a former servant, an *ambátt*, to intrude upon her newly recovered position as queen, and is quick to assert her dominance.<sup>208</sup> Whether due to this class distinction or due to *Ástriðr*'s influence, the court itself is equally quick to take side, and her pre-eminence is forcefully endorsed by Sigvatr in another brief poem cited in the text: “*Ástriði lát æðri, Álfhildr, an þik sjalfa.*”<sup>209</sup> (“*Álfhildr! Let Ástriðr have higher rank than yourself.*”) Sigvatr being the same poet who is cited praising *Ástriðr*'s oratorical efforts to see Magnús persevere, and simultaneously himself being an active ally of *Ástriðr*, thus implies that her position is at least partially earned due to her support and her carefully constructed network bonds, i.e. with Sigvatr, and not simply based on her old status as Óláfr's queen. This indicates how *Ástriðr* sees a position for herself in Magnús' ruling network from the very beginning of the saga, when he arrives at Sigtúna and she speaks on his behalf. As widow of

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<sup>207</sup> For Snorri's usage of poetry as contemporary evidence to support his own historiography, see Jesch 2013; Clunies Ross 2014; Goeres 2015: 5-7.

<sup>208</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 14; the *Legendary saga (Helgisaga)*: 274 further asserts that *Álfhildr* was *Ástriðr*'s servant rather than Óláfr's. Cf. Karras 1988: 43, for the usage of *ambátt* as an insult.

<sup>209</sup> Jesch 2012b: 736; cf. *Heimskringla III*: 20.

Norway's previous ruler, sister to Sweden's present ruler, and stepmother to the current claimant, she is in a key position in an extensive aristocratic network, and she wields considerable influence due to this position. It is the opportunity provided by supporting Magnús which allows her to convert this influence into political power.

The renewal of her power and the successful assertion of superiority over Álfhildr shows that Ástríðr wants, and gets, something from her efforts. What she starts out with is primarily a combination of rhetorical skill, force of personality, and sociopolitically recognised status, the latter deriving from past and present royal relationships. Through these efforts, however, she sways warriors to her side, helps to take a kingdom for a claimant of her choosing, and is returned to her position as queen in Norway. Further, she ends up as *de facto* queen mother with her husband's son on the throne, despite the fact that the king's biological mother is alive and present. The aforementioned subsequent reference to Magnús' young age and status as *bernskr*, childish, further speaks volumes about the potential power of his closest supporters once the crown is secured. The mention of the king's young age is followed by the statement that “þá höfðu landráð fyrir þeim ríkismenn, þeir er til þess váru teknir í hváru tveggja landi.”<sup>210</sup> (Then the government was controlled on their behalf by magnates who had been chosen for this in both countries.) Decision-making power is thus invested in the aristocratic players surrounding Magnús, and it is highly probable that Ástríðr plays a part through her bond with Magnús. *Ríkismenn* is a masculine noun, but like *stórmenn*, it is not impossible for a woman to be included, and we have already witnessed Ástríðr traversing the gendered political space.<sup>211</sup>

However, suggesting that Magnús is just a vehicle for Ástríðr's return to power would be equally lacking in nuance. What we see instead is a partnership where both players seemingly create something from nothing through the creative use of network associations. Ástríðr needs Magnús in the Norwegian context as much as he needs her in the Swedish one, but through her rhetoric, she lays the groundwork for accomplishing her own political goals as well as those of her stepson. Magnús wins kingship over Norway militarily, but that victory is first enabled here, with the construction of a formidable force. What Ástríðr does in the final appeal of her speech, when emphasising the righteousness of vengeance for Óláfr and others, is to forge a mutual bond binding this force together, not just her and Magnús. It is the appeal

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<sup>210</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 12; cf. a similar reference in *Ágrip*: 32.

<sup>211</sup> Other instances of *-maðr* nouns applied to women include Emma Ríkarðardóttir and Kristín Sigurðardóttir, both discussed below.

to this bond which accomplishes the creation of a new network rallying behind Magnús' claim.

## **Conclusion**

The cases of Ingibjörg, Ingigerðr and Ástríðr provide three different female speech-based narratives doubling as three different network-enabled political roles, although each case incorporates elements of all three speech patterns discussed above, and each case emphasises the construction of networks. Both the similarities and differences provide key details for this analysis. I will briefly summarise the distinctive traits of each example, emphasising the approach and the starting status, followed by an assessment of shared characteristics.

Ingibjörg speaks powerful words in private. While her key role is formulated through speech and coercion, she functions as a network organiser similar to the women discussed in the preceding chapter. She sets network policy through her words and encourages her husband to move in the directions of her choosing, but she also speaks to others and directly sets plans in motion, expressed for instance through her interactions with Hjalti. A broker of network bonds, she readily emphasises kinship (e.g. with Óláfr and Hjalti), utilises the bonds of friendship (e.g. in her communications with Ingigerðr, but also when helping to establish connections between Óláfr and Rognvaldr), and exercises lordship (e.g. by receiving envoys alongside her husband, and by distributing network resources). She functions as Rognvaldr's partner rather than a subordinate.

Ingigerðr, on the other hand, is a mediator operating in both public and private. She occupies several unique positions, both by being an unmarried royal daughter as discussed above, but also by being stuck between two networks, between which there is a degree of hostility if not open conflict. She knows she is an exceptionally desirable match, and she uses her high status to work as a medieval lobbyist. Situated at the Swedish king's court, she moulds personal relationships in order to resolve the dispute between the opposing networks and establish a path for herself to marry a king, simultaneously protecting the interests of her various connections.

Ástríðr, finally, is enabled by her network circumstances to exercise public power through speech. Having seemingly been afforded more independence than Ingigerðr due to their different status and initial marriage prospects, and subsequently being a moderately active queen during Óláfr's reign, this all culminates in her widowhood. At the assembly in Sweden, she is a male-adjacent public orator who constructs a network from a podium, using a variety

of rhetorical techniques to appeal to masses of people, binding together evocations of shared bonds, masculine honour and a common cause.

The techniques themselves are not necessarily that different between Ástriðr's exceptionally public speech, and Ingibjörg and Ingigerðr's conversations in more private spheres. All three women use various rhetorical strategies linked to the patterns discussed above. There are elements of inciting, counselling and rhetorical manoeuvring, indicating that none of them can be reasonably categorised into simplistic single-purpose roles. Rather, these patterns together form a framework for aristocratic women's speech and interactions with men. In this context, the most important recurring aspect of all these speeches is again the centrality of network politics. The examples show women using speech to create, merge and consolidate aristocratic networks and in this way to further political causes. Ástriðr creates one based on sentiment, to some extent aided by concepts of ideology and legitimacy. Ingibjörg attempts to strengthen, manage and use one for her own reasons and manoeuvres its members accordingly. Ingigerðr uses political connections to try to merge disputing networks and by doing so, plays a central role in international political negotiation. All of them are able to build and maintain friendship and lordship bonds in addition to their basic kinship ties.

Politically, while the three women discussed here are individually different, as royal widow, jarl's wife, and king's unmarried daughter respectively, the speech examples reveal much about female power through the lens of the kings' sagas, and thus about the medieval understanding of women's power. The episodes further showcase women's pathways to political participation through networks, and thus complement the network organiser cases discussed above. Through rhetorical performance combined with network participation and organisation similar to the women studied in the previous chapter, Ingibjörg, Ingigerðr and Ástriðr are able to forge potent roles for themselves in the world of saga power politics, but unlike women such as Gunnhildr, they face little to no condemnation for their efforts. Particularly the half-sisters Ingigerðr and Ástriðr are consistently portrayed as women to be admired rather than reviled, strongly indicating that these forms of network-rooted female power are in the Scandinavian kingdoms of the sagas both socially enabled and socially accepted, any denigration being instead a result of situational and personal factors.

## **Part II: Testing the boundaries**



## Chapter 3

### Outside encounters: foreign queens in political saga narratives

At the edges of the saga politics at the heart of the first two chapters, foreign women's involvement in the Norwegian-centred historiography centres around two key themes. One consists of women from outside the three core Scandinavian kingdoms involved in Norwegian and Danish power politics due to their personal relationships with individual kings.<sup>1</sup> The other is a cultural fascination with foreign female rulers whose actual power mechanics are often different and more direct than those of Scandinavian network organisers; this fascination is also highly present in the *fornaldarsögur* and their presentation of the *meykonungr*, the 'maiden-king', a powerful transmasculine woman who often functions as a foil for male protagonists.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally the two themes can overlap. In the case of the Anglo-Saxon Álfifa, I argued in chapter one that she operates close to a Scandinavian female politician within a Scandinavian kingdom, but there are simultaneously external influences imbuing her with more directly authoritarian tendencies. There are other examples where the lines between conceptions of native and foreign women's political participation are being challenged or, occasionally, reinforced. This chapter will apply the network framework to these particular women, with the central question being whether their political behaviour is presented as inherently different from Norwegian, Swedish and Danish women due to their foreignness, or similar due to their inclusion in the same narratives.

While it will be argued that the saga presentation of foreign women most often follows along the same lines and themes as the presentation of native Scandinavian women, geographical distance and cultural context leave different imprints, and certain geographical limitations of the described power structures are thus exposed. This chapter will investigate three women with three different degrees of connection to the political scene described in the sagas: Emma, operating at the fringe of Scandinavian politics; Allógía, the queen encountered by Óláfr Tryggvason in Hólmgarðr; and finally Zóe, a distant powerful woman whose only connection lies through her personal relationship with the travelling Haraldr Sigurðarson. The common trend is that they are politically prominent queens encountered outside the three main Scandinavian kingdoms by male saga characters travelling abroad. The saga presentation of

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to include Sigríðr stórráða's relationship with Sveinn tjúguskegg in this, given the aforementioned indications that she might have been Polish. This would involve some distance from the saga explanation of her, however.

<sup>2</sup> See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013: 107ff.) for an assessment of 'the female ruler' as she appears in the *fornaldarsögur*.

all three women's political participation, I will argue, and thus their level of connection to the political framework established thus far, is shaped differently based on their geographic and cultural proximity to it, with England, Russia and Byzantium having three different levels of connection to Scandinavia, and thus three different levels of conceptual distance to the Scandinavian men whose experiences these women are presented through. It is simultaneously worth noting that the saga portrayals of these women fit relatively closely with the contemporary record of those women from within their own contexts.

As mentioned in chapter one, Emma Ríkarðardóttir (c. 984-1052) and Álfífa Álfrimsdóttir share a role as spouses of Knútr inn ríki, the most geopolitically successful Scandinavian king in the *konungasögur*.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, they may both be considered Scandinavian in certain ways,<sup>4</sup> but I have opted to separate them here based on where they are encountered in the saga narratives: Álfífa in Norway and Emma in England. As Knútr's Norman wife and widow of his predecessor Aðalráðr (r. 978-1016), Emma is a popular subject of medievalist scholarship, particularly for her role in the political developments of the early kingdom of England.<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Duke Ríkarðr of Normandy (r. 942-96) and his Danish wife Gunnor, Emma married Knútr to secure his control over England after the successful Danish invasions, possibly against her wishes.<sup>6</sup> As the widow, wife, stepmother and mother of English (and Danish) kings, she served as a carrier of legitimacy, a well-known power mechanism for medieval royal women in Europe outside Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> It is also commonly accepted that Emma had a court network of her own which made the transition to Knútr along with her.<sup>8</sup> In terms of contemporary historiography, she is well documented in English sources, for instance briefly in the collection of medieval annals known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,<sup>9</sup> and more extensively in the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (c. 1041-2),<sup>10</sup> which she personally commissioned and which serves as a political pamphlet justifying her and her kinsmen's

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<sup>3</sup> On Knútr, see particularly Bolton 2009; Haki Antonsson 2018.

<sup>4</sup> For problems involved in distinguishing between ethnic identities in the Anglo-Scandinavian sphere, see Innes 2000: 65-7; Trafford 2000: 19-20, 26-30. Cf. Krag 2008: 199 for the view of Denmark, Norway and Britain constituting one political-military scene.

<sup>5</sup> Emma figures particularly prominently in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, prominently pioneered by Pauline Stafford (1983 1997a & 1997b). More recent contributions include Tyler (2017) and Butler (2020). For a previous brief assessment of her saga activities, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 90-1.

<sup>6</sup> Fjalldal 2005: 45; Butler 2020: 11

<sup>7</sup> For Emma and the English context specifically, see Stafford 1981 (particularly pp. 10-15). For Frankish women, see Nelson 1986: 7-9. This custom of female legitimisation is also particularly prevalent in Byzantium, where the period 1028-81 alone saw no fewer than six emperors achieve legitimacy through marriage or adoption bonds with women; see Herrin 2013 (particularly p. 7 and p. 195), and also my own previous work in Mindrebø 2017. More generally, cf. McNamara & Wemple (1973: 126ff.) for a foundational study of women's power and property rights in the wider European paradigm.

<sup>8</sup> Bolton 2009: 91

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Stafford 1997b: 9-10; Jorgensen 2010: 4ff.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell 1949: xxi; Butler 2020: 7

ambitions.<sup>11</sup> Her English career, however, is not described to any considerable extent by the *konungasögur*, where her second marriage to Knútr, and her being King Aðalráðr's widow, is only briefly dealt with.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* both provide glimpses of her political activity during Knútr's reign.

Slightly more distant than England, but still connected to Scandinavia, the second case is from Novgorod/Hólmgarðr.<sup>13</sup> During Óláfr Tryggvason's exile from Norway and arrival there, he encounters Allógía, introduced as queen of the surrounding kingdom next to King Valdamarr,<sup>14</sup> but with little to no information about her kinship or ancestry. The saga narrative is centred on Óláfr himself, but Allógía plays a particularly prominent role, and the narrative speaks considerably about depictions of female political power and the centrality of network bonds, but simultaneously of different forms of female power than those examined thus far. As with Emma, the sagas spend relatively few words on Allógía, but this again allows for a more precise investigation of the portrayal of a foreign woman's political involvement, as we only ever observe her in one particular context, and primarily only through the lens of her direct interactions with one Norwegian aristocrat. Allógía, as she appears, is unique to the sagas, but as I will show, she too can be closely connected to more contemporary portrayals of women's power found in local sources.

Another such important and similarly often overlooked instance of female rulership, simultaneous to Emma's queenship in England and Álfifa's Norwegian hegemony, is found in *Zóe porphyrogenita*<sup>15</sup> (c. 978-1050) a Byzantine empress who ruled jointly with three husbands and a total of five co-rulers over the course of twenty-two years (1028-50).<sup>16</sup> She plays a prominent role in Haraldr Sigurðarson's adventures after the battle of Stiklarstaðir, presented in *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. As with Emma, the kings' saga accounts of *Zóe* can be compared to contemporary historiography written by eyewitness sources at the Byzantine court, providing a valuable case where the potential accuracy of saga recollections of a provably powerful female ruler can be demonstrated. This in turn provides a direct link to saga attitudes on direct female rulership, with a case entirely removed from the

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<sup>11</sup> Stafford 1997b: 29; cf. more on this below. For all English sources on Knútr and Emma, see Bolton 2017: 13ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 33

<sup>13</sup> For the Scandinavian-Russian connection, see the recent monograph by Sverrir Jakobsson (2020, particularly pp. 150-7, where Óláfr's appearance is mentioned).

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir 'the Great', r. 978-1015.

<sup>15</sup> 'Born in the purple'; a description of children born to a reigning emperor, the highest honour amongst Byzantine royalty.

<sup>16</sup> A brief earlier assessment of *Zóe* in the sagas is presented by Lönnroth 1998. Cf. also a brief mention in Sverrir Jakobsson 2020: 141. A significant body of literature exists on *Zóe* in the Byzantine context; see Oikonomides 1978; Laiou 1992; Garland 1999: 136-57; Zulian 2007; Hill 2013: 79-82; Mindrebø 2017.

familiar Scandinavian paradigm, while also connecting back to the cultural fascination with powerful eastern queens seen for instance in the example of Allógía.

With the genre focus on Norway, all three women in one way or another exist ‘outside’ and their appearance in the kings’ sagas lies in their interaction with Scandinavian men from the ‘inside’. Emma, like Álfífa, operates on the other side of the conflict in which the network discussed in the previous chapter works to reinstate Óláfr Haraldsson and his son Magnús. Within these networks, she exercises power through men, and through the strategic placement of her sons with Knútr, manoeuvres in anticipation of royal succession. However, while Álfífa functions as a Norwegian royal mother similar to Gunnhildr or Ástríðr due to her physical presence in Norway, it will be argued that Emma, who remains in England and Normandy, fits into a high medieval view of women’s political role, more compatible with the kings’ sagas’ portrayal of their immediate past and present. Allógía, on the other hand, stands at the crossroads between Old Norse network politics and the fascination with powerful foreign queens, revealing features of both at the same time. Zóe, as will be shown, operates almost entirely outside these same network structures. Her Byzantine paradigm, despite the proven connections of Byzantium to early medieval Scandinavia,<sup>17</sup> is one with few direct ties to the political game of the sagas. In Zóe’s kings’ saga context, it is Scandinavian travellers and saga authors who interact with what is to them foreign power structures, and not, as with Emma and particularly Álfífa, the other way around.

### **Emma: the periphery of Scandinavian networks**

While Emma undoubtedly must have been a cunning politician, the question is how her political activities are framed in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and if her placement in a foreign context impacts the saga representation of her power. I will examine the only example of her involvement as a direct agent, a conspiracy occurring toward the end of Knútr’s reign. The gist of the plot is an alliance between Emma and her husband’s powerful brother-in-law Úlfr jarl Sprakaleggsson to put Hǫrða-Knútr on the Danish throne in his father Knútr’s absence in England.<sup>18</sup> This episode appears to be unique to the sagas,<sup>19</sup> specifically to *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*.<sup>20</sup> In *Fagrskinna*, the queen and the jarl are presented as equals, whereas in

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<sup>17</sup> A considerable body of scholarship exists on the links between Byzantium and Viking Age Scandinavia, and the depiction of this link in the sagas; see Blöndal (1978), Shepard (2016), and Sverrir Jakobsson (2016b; 2020).

<sup>18</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 202; “Úlfr jarl ok Emma dróttning gørdðu ráð sín á milli” (Úlfr jarl and queen Emma made a plan between them).

<sup>19</sup> Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta* does not mention any such event, nor do the English sources.

<sup>20</sup> *Knýtlinga saga* (*KnýtS*: 122-3) considers Hǫrða-Knútr’s coronation to follow rather than contradict his father’s wishes, and does not mention Emma in this context.

*Heimskringla*, the focus lies on Emma, with Úlfr a mere supporter of the plan. The latter text includes the following: “*En í þessi ráðagörð hafði verit upphafsmaðr Emma dróttning.*”<sup>21</sup> (The originator of this plan had been Queen Emma.) This appears straightforward, and the painting of Emma as an accomplished political schemer is corroborated other places, with both sources and modern scholarship leaving little doubt that she must have been ambitious, intelligent and politically savvy.<sup>22</sup> One important detail is the use of the word *upphafsmaðr* to describe her role in this particular political plot. It probably only refers to the plan itself being her idea, as Úlfr, being Hǫrða-Knútr’s foster-father and temporary regent of Denmark, has an at least equal interest in his coronation, and more direct control over the boy.<sup>23</sup> However, it speaks to Snorri’s view of her political participation. In *upphafsmaðr*, the stem *-maðr* means simply ‘man’, but can also mean ‘man’ in the sense of ‘human’.<sup>24</sup> The word as a whole thus translates more closely to ‘man/person of origin’. Like other words ending with *-maðr*, it can and occasionally does refer to women, but the application of a predominantly masculine noun is nevertheless important as a rare occurrence.<sup>25</sup> In the sagas Emma, upon playing power politics with men, is presented as at least equal to men.

Even so, a closer reading reveals that her activities take place exclusively within the royal household. She appears to be constructing a network and instigating a conspiracy through it, and subsequently gets recognised as the focal point of the plot, but she never leaves Knútr’s side. In fact, much of her role in the conspiracy requires direct access to her husband, such as the key part of procuring a forged letter from Knútr endorsing his son’s elevation to kingship: “*Hafði hon látit gera bréf þessi ok látit innsigla. Hafði hon með brögðum nát innsigli konungs*”<sup>26</sup> (She had ordered this letter made and let it be sealed, after she had obtained the king’s seal with trickery). Finally, when the plan is discovered and Knútr returns to Denmark, Emma is the one who is described approaching him while her co-conspirators, Úlfr and Hǫrða-Knútr, are hiding from him; the pair ask the queen to intercede on their behalf. As the network member with the connections necessary to conclude the dispute, her role in the royal household becomes vital again.<sup>27</sup> She is thus the primary actor of the plot despite her domestic appearance. She is willing to work against the wishes of her husband when their interests

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<sup>21</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 275

<sup>22</sup> For Emma’s political plots in England, see Stafford 1997a, particularly p. 6 and p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 202

<sup>24</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 407

<sup>25</sup> The *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* lists 23 occurrences of *upphafsmaðr*, of which two describe women (the other instance being from *Guðmundar saga byskups*); see “*upphafsmaðr*”, n.d.

<sup>26</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 275

<sup>27</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 275

clash, and despite her constant attachment to Knútr, she is an individual political actor, not just a link in the king's network.

While it has been argued that Emma uses a legitimate need to protect Denmark from an impending Norwegian-Swedish attack in order to attempt to ascend to the position of *de facto* regent,<sup>28</sup> there is no indication of Emma showing any concern for Danish affairs beyond the advancement of her son, nor of her potentially replacing Úlfr as regent. Relying on the narratives of *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* both, we find a situation where it is Úlfr who organises on the Danish side and becomes Hǫrða-Knútr's protector and kingmaker, whereas Emma is only the key participant within the royal English household; it is when Úlfr travels to England that the two agree on their plan and Emma forges the letter. While there are minor differences, the sources mostly overlap on this. In *Fagrskinna*, Úlfr travels to England and meets with Emma, but the coronation is absent.<sup>29</sup> *Heimskringla* does not include Úlfr's journey to England, but relates his appearance with the forged letter at a Danish assembly, and subsequently explains that Emma had acquired the letter from her husband.<sup>30</sup> There is no evidence of Emma spending any of this time outside England. She resides with Knútr, hence why she is able to procure his seal, and by aiding the coronation of her son she is protecting her future interests rather than rapidly advancing her present ones. Similarly, while Úlfr might be operating on the basis of legitimate need due to the impending attack on Denmark, there is no indication of Emma taking this into account. It is far more likely that the jarl's arrival in England and desire for a king allows her to take advantage of a political opportunity. However, while she may or may not have been the plan's *upphafsmaðr*, it is Úlfr who performs the majority of the political manoeuvring and is arguably the main individual network organiser behind Hǫrða-Knútr's elevation to kingship. Emma's influence consistently exists only within Knútr's English court.

Female power through the placement of a son on the throne is a familiar strategy, both in Old Norse historiography and elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> One might question why Emma attempts this in a situation where she is already Knútr's queen, but it is vital to recognise that her position is precarious. She is a non-native English queen who has married the foreign invader who usurped her first husband's kingship; the same invader has multiple women associated with

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<sup>28</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 90-1

<sup>29</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 202

<sup>30</sup> *Heimskringla*: 275-6

<sup>31</sup> Contemporary examples include the aforementioned Olga in Kiev, Adelheid and Theophanu among the Ottonians, and a variety of Byzantine empresses; see for instance Althoff 2003: 39-46; Hill 2013: 82-5.

him, and sons with at least two. While she is often presented as Knútr's undisputed consort, this view is marred by the fact that the earliest English sources, such as the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, tend to be biased in her favour, and may have adapted the narrative to fit her presentation of her career with Knútr.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly murky territory given Emma's direct patronage of the *Encomium*, after Knútr's death when she was facing the challenge of maintaining her power through her connections with him and with their sons.<sup>33</sup> The work's author was part of her network,<sup>34</sup> and wrote on her behalf to secure her and her sons' status and influence in Anglo-Danish politics.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, she manipulates history to present herself in a better light, potentially at the expense of others. The text contains many of what Elizabeth Tyler refers to as "fictions of family", where the encomiast, on Emma's instructions, amends the details of her kinship group to present her in a better light.<sup>36</sup> Prominently, it asserts that Álfifa was a concubine, that Emma was thus Knútr's only wife, and that her children with Knútr are the king's only legitimate heirs.<sup>37</sup> Although not included in the sagas, it must be affirmed that Emma's patronage of historiography and tactical use of it is another expression of power meant to drive the cause of her and her sons. It is, for all intents and purposes, a medieval European version of the same expressive power found in Old Norse texts for instance in Gunnhildr's and Ástriðr's patronage of praise poetry discussed above, but unlike those women, there are reasons to argue, as Emily Butler does, that Emma at this stage simply did not have other forms of power available to her.<sup>38</sup>

The covert, court-based strategies inherent in the Hǫrða-Knútr conspiracy in the sagas is sharpened by the English sources' presentation of similar strategies being used in England, including, but not limited to, the creation of the *Encomium*. She is portrayed in that text as making her marriage to Knútr dependent on the precedence of her children in royal succession,<sup>39</sup> and both before and after his death, Emma manoeuvred for the advancement of her sons to kingship in the English realm.<sup>40</sup> Pauline Stafford, using the Anglo-Saxon evidence, has seen this period as a time where Emma the widowed mother was forced to protect and advance her and her sons' power in order to avoid losing it altogether.<sup>41</sup> This

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<sup>32</sup> Tyler 2017: 103ff.; cf. Stafford 2004.

<sup>33</sup> See Campbell's (1949) introduction to the *Encomium* text for details on its creation.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell 1949: xix

<sup>35</sup> Tyler 2017: 52, 101-3, 131-2

<sup>36</sup> Tyler 2017: 57

<sup>37</sup> *Encomium Emmae Reginae*: 38-40

<sup>38</sup> Butler 2020: 21; cf. Stafford 1997a: 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> *Encomium Emmae Reginae*: 32

<sup>40</sup> Searle 1988: 138-9; Stafford 1997b: 242-5; Bolton 2017: 196ff.; Butler 2020: 11-16

<sup>41</sup> Stafford 1997a: 19

Emma, the queen-mother striving for the elevation of her sons, is the one that comes through in the saga texts as well, and it can certainly be read through a network lens. She is seen maintaining network bonds with Úlfr, as well as utilising her central position in the royal household kinship group, thus deliberately preserving and increasing her own power through her personal male connections similar to the women discussed so far. By using these connections, she can play an indirect role in Danish power politics that she, an English queen who may never have set foot in Denmark, otherwise could not. Emma is queen in England both before and after the beginning of her second marriage, but there is no evidence of her ever being granted a similar position in any of the core Scandinavian kingdoms. Any political influence she may have had would have to be carefully crafted through embracing opportunities such as this, and as such, it is her network which allows Emma the foreign queen influence on the Danish political scene similar to her influence on English affairs.

While operating from the centre of Knútr's empire, the saga presentation of Emma, in this sense, falls within the political power model discussed so far, if in the periphery of it. She does root her power in bonds with men, familial identity, and the household,<sup>42</sup> and participates in networks with Danish aristocrats. Foreignness is never considered as a factor in the texts, corresponding to the placement of England within a partially Scandinavian sphere. Nevertheless, her political behaviour is distinct. In many ways, she is presented as far more passive and indirect in her approach than the women discussed so far. While the *Encomium* does show expressive power in itself, the Emma of the sagas never directly speaks, she never openly challenges the authority of her male kinsmen, and during the one instance of her performing political organisation evocative of the network organiser role as outlined here, her activity is performed with subterfuge and almost entirely behind the scenes, within Knútr's English household. This does not diminish her influence, but it does render the saga version of Emma different from Norwegian and Swedish women such as Gunnhildr, Sigríðr and Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir. In many ways, the sagas' presentation of Emma's political style as more deferential and restrained, setting her sons' interests ahead of her own, and of her role as a legitimising factor, serves to foreshadow their portrayal of female political participation in the Scandinavian kingdoms in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 11<sup>th</sup>-century context, however, she stands in contrast to those women performing public roles of network leadership in the political game.

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<sup>42</sup> Stafford 1997b: 192



## Allógía: the juncture of networks and queenship

Even more clearly defined than the encounter of Emma by Knútr and Úlfr, Russian queen Allógía is exclusively seen through the lens of Óláfr Tryggvason in his exile. One step further removed from Scandinavian politics, she serves as an example of the conceptual borderlands between the saga network framework on one hand, and direct female royal authority, associated with foreignness, on the other. The initial meeting between the two occurs upon Óláfr's revenge-killing of Klerkón, the Estonian merchant who enslaved him and killed his foster-father. Both *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla* inform us that there was *mannhelgr mikill*, 'inviolability of life', in Hólmgarðr, and that killers were required by law to be killed themselves.<sup>43</sup> *Ágrip*, possibly the oldest surviving text to include the episode, refers to the aftermath of the killing in concise terms:

*Hann hljóp á hald dróttningarinnar, ok með bæn hennar ok af því, at hvatligt þótti vera verkit manni tólfvetra gómlum at vinna, ok af því at sannlig þótti hefndin vera, þá þá hann miskunn af konunginum, ok tók síðan at vaxa vitorð of hann ok svá metorð ok allt yfirlæti.*<sup>44</sup>

He fled to ask the queen's support, and through her petition, and because it was thought a manly deed for a twelve-year-old to commit, and because the revenge was considered just, he received mercy from the king. Afterwards, knowledge of him grew, and his standing with it.

The basic composition is straightforward. Óláfr flees the murder scene, seeks shelter with a powerful figure, and impresses said powerful figure and the rest of the court with his masculine virtue despite his premature age.<sup>45</sup> He is pardoned and removed from any obligation to the law based on his qualities and the righteousness of his cause, and thus he bonds with the royal household. However, while Óláfr's manliness and claim to just cause appear to be necessary justifications, these reasons are not enough to automatically excuse his capital crime in the eyes of the law. Even in *Ágrip*'s concise depiction of the scene, we get the first glimpse of his specific bond with the queen. The notion that he would seek out *hald dróttningarinnar*, 'the queen's support', indicates that her influence is widely recognised. And indeed, it is the queen's influence that leads to his escape from execution. She has a larger, more direct role in saving Óláfr, and consequently a closer relationship with him, despite the

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<sup>43</sup> *Ágrip*: 20; *Heimskringla I*: 231; *Heimskringla* uses '*mikil friðhelgi*', sanctity of the peace.

<sup>44</sup> *Ágrip*: 20; the other 12<sup>th</sup> century sources vary in their description of Óláfr's entry into Valdamarr's household, with Theodoricus Monachus simply stating he was fostered there, and the *Historia Norvegiæ* and Oddr Snorrason writing different brief accounts of the murder of Klerkón and some vague connection to the fostering. Only the latter mentions Allógía (see below).

<sup>45</sup> Aristocratic masculinity had to be achieved, and was not inherent. See several articles about youth and masculinity in the Old Norse context; i.e. Jesch 2004; Percivall 2008 (particularly pp. 143-6); Larrington 2008 (particularly pp. 155-9).

fact that it is ultimately the king's decision to pardon him. It is possible that she would not be able to save him were it not for the external rationalisations of the act, but nevertheless, the key factor of the acquittal is her petition.

*Ágrip* subsequently concludes the anecdote, and simply tells us that Óláfr stayed in the royal household before eventually venturing back to reclaim his patrimony, but *Heimskringla* continues. In terms of textual relationships, it is possible both that Snorri relied on *Ágrip* as one of his sources, or that both accounts separately relied on older sources, but in either case they provide similar transmissions of the same fundamental narrative, including the depiction of Allógía and her power.<sup>46</sup> *Heimskringla*, however, expands significantly. Much of the structure is retained, with Óláfr going to the queen to seek protection, with the addition that he is accompanied by his uncle Sigurðr, a retainer with the Russian king.<sup>47</sup> Further, Óláfr's personal qualities again make an impression on Allógía. In this case, his physical beauty, being "*allra manna fríðastr*",<sup>48</sup> is the crucial factor, and similarly tied to masculine status. A key difference arises, however, in the descriptions of Allógía's sheltering of Óláfr. In *Ágrip*, Óláfr is saved by the queen's petition, and it is the king's privilege to decide his fate. Here, she "*bað kalla menn til sín með alvæpni*,"<sup>49</sup> (summoned fully armed men to her side). The queen calls on physical protection by her own men, evidently prepared to defend Óláfr's safety and freedom from any pursuer. Again, Óláfr is technically supposed to die for his violation, and the text even states that the entire city population has started a manhunt for the young Norwegian.<sup>50</sup> This could potentially showcase widespread popular sentiment against Óláfr, but on the other hand, the search is described to occur "*eptir sið þeira ok lögum*", (according to their laws and customs).<sup>51</sup> It is thus uncertain if the common people are described as feeling or caring about the matter in any particular way, but it does confirm the social force behind the demands of the law. Allógía's ability to counteract the law, however, is observable when King Valdamarr arrives: "*Gekk hann þá til með sínu liði ok vildi eigi, at þeir berðisk. Kom hann þá griðum á ok því næst sættum. Dæmði konungr bætr, en dróttning helt upp gjöldum.*"<sup>52</sup> (He then went there with his retinue and did not want them to fight. He established peace and settlement. The king set the fines, and the queen paid the debts.) It

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<sup>46</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (2002a: xcix-ci) holds that *Ágrip* and Oddr must have been Snorri's main sources for Óláfr's early life, but also mentions other lost sources such as the independent saga of Gunnlaugr Leifsson.

<sup>47</sup> Note again the importance placed on aid from a mother's brother; cf. the introduction.

<sup>48</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 232

<sup>49</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 231

<sup>50</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 231-2

<sup>51</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 231

<sup>52</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 232

appears as if the queen has here identified a working compromise, when the king agrees to settle for having Óláfr pay fines, and she subsequently pays those fines. This, in turn, shows several details about her. First, that she has access to considerable personal financial resources separate from those of the king. And second, she appears to be willing to invest significant resources in this young foreign aristocrat whom she has just met. This further ties into the most striking point of the passage, namely the implication of the first sentence, where we learn that the king does not want to fight. The very mention of this thought implies that there is a possibility for the retainers of the king to fight against the retainers of the queen, already described as fully armed, providing the first indication of the king and the queen spearheading different factions at the Russian court, independent of each other and not averse to internal conflict.

In the narrative, this section is immediately followed by the statement “*Síðan var Óláfr með dróttningu, ok var hon allkær til hans.*”<sup>53</sup> (After this Óláfr was with the queen, and she was very affectionate towards him.) The first half of the sentence is relatively simple to assess: it refers to Óláfr being, most likely living, with the queen from this point on, as part of her household. This implies him entering her service rather than that of her husband. Regarding the second half, centred on the adjective *allkærr*, it is again difficult to distinguish between genuine affection and calculated behaviour in the interpersonal relationships of the sagas, but it is tempting to suggest that this boils down to a form of patron-client relationship, where Óláfr becomes the queen’s man.<sup>54</sup> He has become a financial, political and emotional investment for Allógía, who has already potentially jeopardised her relationship with Valdamarr. Furthermore, the language of affection is later repeated in a more transactional sense: “[Óláfr] hafði þar it mesta yfirlát af Valdimar konungi ok kærleik af dróttningu”<sup>55</sup> (Óláfr there received the highest honours from King Valdamarr and affection from the queen). More often than not, the ‘giver’ of *kærleikr* is a king, with the relationship describing intimate friendship between a king and a lesser aristocrat or retainer.<sup>56</sup> This is evident in Óláfr’s own later presentation as king of Norway. When the Icelanders Kjartan and Bolli spend time in his court and pledge themselves to friendship with him (and vice versa), “*var konungr allkærr til þeira.*”<sup>57</sup> Óláfr’s behaviour towards the Icelanders, and in particular the description of it, is

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<sup>53</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 232

<sup>54</sup> For a general discussion of the patron-client relationship in medieval Scandinavia, particularly between kings and their retainers, see Orning 2008: 69ff.; particularly p. 88.

<sup>55</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 251

<sup>56</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 368; cf. Appendix III.

<sup>57</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 330

almost a mirror image of Allógía's interaction with his younger self. In Hólmgarðr, young Óláfr certainly does become part of Allógía's network, and their relationship combines and transcends all forms of already established network bonds, through kinship (being fostered in the queen's household), friendship (affection, being *allkærr*) and lordship (becoming part of her retinue). Pulling on the same strings and wielding the same powers as Óláfr and many other male warrior kings, Allógía is here engaging in masculine royal power, and is essentially acting like a king in bestowing her friendship and affection on a young and promising retainer.

This political nature of the relationship, and the connection of Óláfr to Allógía's authority, is significantly expanded in *Heimskringla*:

*Þat var siðr mikill inna ríku konunga, at dróttning skyldi eiga hálfa hirðina ok halda með sínum kostnaði ok hafa þar til skatta ok skyldir, svá sem þyrfti. Var þar ok svá með Valdimar konungi, at dróttning hafði eigi minni hirð en konungr, ok keppðusk þau mjök um ágætismenn.*<sup>58</sup>

It was great custom among powerful kings, that the queen should possess half the retinue keep it at her own expense and receive taxes to pay for it. This was also the case with King Valdamarr, that the queen's retinue was no smaller than the that of the king, and they often competed for outstanding men.

This is the most explicit statement of power found in this context, and a striking declaration of the queen as the king's equal. It is further made clear from the outset that this is a distinctive trait of powerful non-Scandinavian kingdoms (i.e. Hólmgarðr), and that despite the rarity of the phenomenon, the implication is a connection of independent female power to the overall admirable status of the country in question.<sup>59</sup> Simultaneously, it shows a fascination with extraordinary female power as something foreign to the saga discourse. In the case of Allógía, this description means more than mere recognition of rank. Having both men and taxes to pay them means these retainers are not just the queen's appointed bodyguard, but an independent martial unit under her personal lordship. As the sagas' primary understanding of historical power lies in who has the most considerable followings of warriors, this is vital. Allógía has access to personal military and financial resources separate from those of the kingdom, and has already used both in order to force her will on both the king and the law. Nor is it unique to Allógía, but rather to supposedly powerful non-Scandinavian kingdoms such as Hólmgarðr,

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<sup>58</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 252

<sup>59</sup> No other episode in *Heimskringla* mentions such a division of the *hirð*, but there are certain other instances implying shared rulership or equal status between a foreign king and queen, including the previously discussed case of Jarizleifr and Ingigerðr, and the Byzantine empress Zóe below.

as similar language is used in *Yngvars saga víðförla*, thought to have been written by Oddr Snorrason, about Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir upon her marriage to Valdamarr's successor Jarizleifr.<sup>60</sup>

Looking back, this passage illuminates Allógía's behaviour in the earlier scenes. The further implication provided here, briefly hinted at above, is one of separate and contesting networks at the Russian court, and the queen possessing formal political authority similar to that of the king. This causes a different reading of the standoff scene regarding Óláfr and the king's justice, where what we see is a clash of two retinues, led by the king and queen respectively. In at least one area, we learn that these networks are in practically constant political competition: they both strive to claim the best men for their retinue. As a royal *hirð* (an anachronistic term in a 10<sup>th</sup> century context, but describing a presumably generally similar organisation) would typically draw many young and ambitious men, there would be no shortage of candidates, and competition between various factions at court would imply a constant striving to get an edge over one's opponents.<sup>61</sup> In terms of the text, this sparks a different reading of Allógía's motivation, implying that she wants Óláfr, a young foreign king's son, as part of her retinue before Valdamarr can claim him, and proceeds to groom him as a useful political tool as well as an increase to her relative power at court.

This interpretation is reinforced by the placement of the *hirð* passage as part of a narrative in which Valdamarr is being persuaded that Óláfr is a threat to his position, with his allies warning that making Óláfr too powerful would render him a threat, and that he does not know what Óláfr and the queen constantly speak of.<sup>62</sup> The men succeed in convincing Valdamarr of the political risk, the underlying accusation being that Óláfr is potentially used by Allógía in a high-stakes game of power, with a clash of the king's and queen's networks occurring. The last part clearly implies the existence of a potential conspiracy, while also bringing in suggestive accusations of an affair.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of the validity of such claims, the king being swayed confirms that the queen possesses both unbridled agency and potentially an individual agenda, neither of which are even remotely subject to the control of her husband.

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<sup>60</sup> *Yngvars saga víðförla* (Guðni Jónsson 1954). For the saga's authorship, see Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1989: 2-7; Andersson 2003: 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> For an assessment of the concept of *hirð*, its function as a network and its ties to royal power, see Opsahl 2011: 185ff. Opsahl discusses distinctive networks clashing in the context of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*.

<sup>62</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 252; slandering of Óláfr in Valdamarr's circles also occurs in Oddr: 153-4.

<sup>63</sup> A man and a woman 'often speaking together' frequently carries sexual implications; see for instance a similar instance from the beginning of *Heimskringla* in *Heimskringla I*: 41.

Conclusively, Allógía is presented as a particularly potent woman in all texts referring to her, and most descriptions indicate her controlling a variety of resources and having access to her own court network. *Ágrip* and Oddr Snorrason merely imply this last detail, but Snorri develops the account into one where the queen is at the head of an exceptionally influential faction, which she uses for her own ends. Read in this way, Allógía's power evidently does arise from maintaining social bonds in and around the court, and Óláfr, although the subject character of the narrative itself, gets inverted and becomes a singular example case from which we can glean the nature of the queen's political activity. Unlike most saga women, Allógía's power is not channelled through a man, although she still is dependent on relationships with men. Court conspiracy theories aside, there is never any solid evidence that she is not completely loyal and cooperative, nor that her agenda ever does clash with Valdamarr's, but this simply renders her independent power more notable. Oddr Snorrason's account, the other source to include a connection between Óláfr and Allógía, contains both similarities and differences with *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*. According to Oddr, Allógía picks out Óláfr from an assembly of men based on his qualities, but the link between committing manslaughter and meeting the queen is removed. Further, the main distinctive characteristic of Oddr's text is that Allógía's power turns to the supernatural. She identifies Óláfr as a foretold hero from prophecy,<sup>64</sup> which is most often the province of women in Old Norse literature.<sup>65</sup> It is probable that she is conflated with Valdamarr's mother, the one who first speaks said prophecy, but as the account is riddled with inconsistency, possibly due to copying from several different sources, and as the hagiographic narrative is primarily preoccupied with establishing Óláfr's character, it is difficult to divulge original intent. Regardless, Oddr's text, while describing alternative forms of female power, does not significantly illuminate the deeper political analysis based on *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*.

From a historical perspective, it fuels further suspicion that Valdamarr and Allógía are not once mentioned as husband and wife in any of the sources, only as king and queen. It is highly possible that the name and figure Allógía in fact constitute a saga misrepresentation of Olga (d. 969), Valdamarr's grandmother, who was present at his court and whose power is recorded by Russian sources such as the *Primary Chronicle*,<sup>66</sup> as has been theorised by some scholars.<sup>67</sup> The evidence behind this is circumstantial and inconclusive, but as a hypothesis, it

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<sup>64</sup> Oddr: 150-1

<sup>65</sup> See for instance Jochens 1991; Jochens 1996a: 115ff.; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 52.

<sup>66</sup> The *Primary Chronicle* unfortunately has its own reliability issues; see Sverrir Jakobsson 2020: 64-6. Sverrir in his book also touches briefly on both Olga (pp. 55-6, 66) and Allógía (p. 150), but only separately.

<sup>67</sup> For a (very brief) summary, see Andersson 2003: 138. Cf. Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 44.

could potentially explain Allógía's influence and independent behaviour by situating her as a politically experienced widow who was powerful before Valdamarr was born, rather than a loyal and subservient wife. Oddr Snorrason's text also goes far in confusing the king's female relatives: the queen is again not mentioned as wife, both the queen and Valdamarr's mother have prophetic abilities and a direct distinction is never made between them, and said mother is described as remarkably old despite Valdamarr being a young man at this point.<sup>68</sup>

Further contributions can be drawn from Oddr's passages on Valdamarr's conversion. He primarily ascribes this to the preaching efforts of young Óláfr, but the final sentence provides some additional insight into Allógía: "*Ok með heilsamligum ræðum dróttningar, er hon gaf til þessa hlutar at fulltingjandi Guðs miskunn, þá játti konungr ok allir menn hans at taka heilaga skírn ok rétta trú, ok varð þar allt fólk kristit.*"<sup>69</sup> (With the wholesome advice of the queen, that she gave to the cause of supporting God's grace, then the king and all his men accepted baptism and the true faith, and all the people there became Christian.) Oddr partially attributing the conversion of Valdamarr to his version of Allógía corresponds well to the role of Byzantine-educated Olga in the Christianisation of Rus. The *Primary Chronicle* alleges that she repeatedly tried to influence her son, Valdamarr's father Svyatoslav, to convert to Christianity, and due to age overlap it is possible she contributed to Valdamarr's education.<sup>70</sup> She died about two decades before Valdamarr's official conversion in 988 and thus obviously cannot have played a direct role in it, but Óláfr was also long gone by then if we follow the saga timeline.<sup>71</sup> As such, the framework of persons and dates is fluid anyway, but it is certainly possible that Oddr based his Russian queen on the primary woman influencing Russian religious developments at the time.

While it is unfortunate that we may never know the truth about this enigmatic queen, her identity is here less important than the presentation of her power, which is that of a network organiser, but one with a non-Scandinavian frame. While their objective is to commemorate a royal Norwegian hero, Oddr Snorrason and Snorri Sturluson have simultaneously preserved memories of the socially accepted capabilities of a powerful external woman involved in political affairs with early Scandinavians. Some of these traits similarly occur in descriptions of the Baltic queen Geira, encountered and married by Óláfr shortly after his departure from

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<sup>68</sup> Oddr: 144-5

<sup>69</sup> Oddr: 165

<sup>70</sup> *Primary Chronicle* (Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 82-4); for Olga and Valdamarr, see also an episode on p. 85. Cf. Lind 2016: 414-5.

<sup>71</sup> Andersson 2003: 55n3; for Olga's death and the conversion of Valdamarr, see the *Primary Chronicle* (Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 86, 112-3).

Hólmgarðr. The description of Geira similarly includes a powerful woman with a royal title, given significant political freedom with social sanction despite having living adult male relatives who are technically both politically and familially superior to her, although the description is less elaborate than that of Allógía.<sup>72</sup> The Baltic queens of the sagas thus fit well within the established network framework, but simultaneously within roles as independently powerful foreign queens.

### **Zóe: stranger in a strange land**

On the furthest point of removal from the Norwegian political scene we find Zóe. I will argue here that Zóe in particular is an exception operating beyond the boundaries of kings' saga politics, as the single most geographically and conceptually distant female figure from the textual viewpoint. As a reigning empress in a faraway land, her power in the narrative is uniquely independent from reliance on network bonds,<sup>73</sup> and she is accustomed to having her wishes obeyed by virtue of her dynastic authority. While Haraldr Sigurðarson's foreign exile is a favoured subject throughout the genre, and recognised in contemporary sources,<sup>74</sup> we are here only interested in what this narrative can reveal about depictions of Zóe's political role and behaviour. It must first of all be immediately recognised that it is only late in the tradition that Zóe enters the kings' saga narratives centred on his career. The early Norwegian synoptics are, as always, quite brief. *Ágrip* mentions Haraldr's journey to Byzantium, known as Miklagarðr in the sagas, but says nothing about his stay there.<sup>75</sup> Theodoricus Monachus' *HARN* adds slightly more depth, but does not include Zóe in its story.<sup>76</sup> It is impossible to say whether there is a gradual increase in knowledge of the details of Haraldr's stay, or simply an increase in interest in the subject, but in any case, saga descriptions of Zóe are primarily found in the three compendia *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. All three texts follow the same basic narrative structure in their sagas of Haraldr, but their emphasis and attention to detail often varies, for instance in the following introductions of Haraldr and Zóe's initial meeting. The first of these is from *Morkinskinna*:

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<sup>72</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 253-5; Oddr: 154-9; cf. *Fagrskinna*: 144.

<sup>73</sup> Although the Byzantine political scene is in the sagas largely also presented as based around gifts, feasts and the building of alliances; see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016b: 348-50. This is also largely supported in Byzantine sources, such as in the emperor's treatment of the leaders of the First Crusade; see Komnene 2009: 289-95.

<sup>74</sup> Adam of Bremen's *Gesta* describes Haraldr's journey and return; *GHEP*: 124. Haraldr is also mentioned in the *Strategikon* of the contemporary Byzantine writer Kekaumenos.

<sup>75</sup> *Ágrip*: 36

<sup>76</sup> *HARN*: 50



*Hér segir þat at hann fór herskipum til Miklagarðs með miklu liði á fund Garðskonungs er hét Mikael katalaktús. Þá var dróttning i Miklagarði Zóe dróttning in ríka.*<sup>77</sup>

Here it is said that he travelled on warships to Miklagarðr with many men and met the king of the Greeks called Michael katalaktús.<sup>78</sup> Then the queen in Miklagarðr was Queen Zóe ‘the Powerful’.

This introduction is straightforward and concise, adding only a small glimpse of female rulership. Haraldr travels first and foremost *á fund Garðskonungs*, he is there to meet the emperor and present his petition to him. Imperial agency thus lies with Michael. In *Morkinskinna*'s version of the scene, Zóe is simply the queen, which does not necessarily imply direct power, and is introduced after the fact. However, the text does notably go out of its way to recognise her presence, which paints a slightly different picture. It is rare for the kings' sagas to introduce queens and empresses in kingdoms where a male ruler holds all importance, indicating that this case is different. Furthermore, note the addition of the epithet *in ríka*, explicitly describing Zóe as powerful similarly to the descriptions of Knútr and Álfífa. While she thus initially gets a background role in the saga narrative, her political importance is nevertheless established, already on par with Allógía.

In *Fagrskinna*, despite retaining much of the basic structure, key details have evolved:

*Þá réð Miklagarði Zóe dróttning en ríka, er stýrt hafði Miklagarðs ríki með sjau stólkonungum, ok réð með henni þá sá maðr, er hét Mikael katalaktús. Þá beiddisk Haraldr af stólkonunginum ok af dróttningu, at hann vildi þar ganga á málagull.*<sup>79</sup>

At that time the ruler of Miklagarðr was Queen Zóe ‘the Powerful’, who had governed alongside seven emperors, and her co-ruler then was a man called Michael katalaktús. Haraldr requested from the emperor and the queen to be allowed to enter their service.

From the beginning of the description, the reader encounters Zóe in a far more central role. *Fagrskinna*, while exaggerating the number of male co-rulers, in doing so and by introducing her first, recognises her role as the inheriting empress and establishes her prominence. The verbs *ráða*, ‘rule over’, and *stýra*, ‘govern’, are applied first to Zóe and the former only subsequently to Michael. Further, the descriptive contrast between the pair is equally highlighted: on one hand, Zóe, here introduced as ‘*Zóe dróttning en ríka*’, is given a sense of explicit importance, overt status, and name recognition. On the other, the description of

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<sup>77</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 88

<sup>78</sup> Michael IV, r. 1034-41. The *ÍF* editions of the three texts differ in their spelling of Greek names; while I have cited the Old Norse-Icelandic directly in each quote, in my translations and analysis I have followed the *Heimskringla* spelling.

<sup>79</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 228

Michael as “the man called Michael kátalaktús” indicates relative anonymity, and for the purposes of the text, he is merely the current iteration of a sequence of co-rulers. In this reading it is Zóe who is at the centre, the ruler of an empire, with Michael on the sidelines. One concession has to be made, namely that Haraldr here approaches both the emperor and the queen simultaneously, thus again implying shared decision-making and more of a political partnership. Overall, however, Zóe is given more prominence in *Fagrskinna* than in *Morkinskinna*, and even more so in *Heimskringla*. The youngest text closely follows the *Fagrskinna* introduction, but it adds a significant detail which shows a complete role reversal from the earlier *Morkinskinna* introduction. While in *Morkinskinna* Haraldr travels *á fund Garðskonungs*, ‘to meet the emperor’, and in *Fagrskinna* he is described as meeting the pair simultaneously, in *Heimskringla* he travels “*á fund dróttningar*”,<sup>80</sup> (to meet the queen). The younger text thus firmly asserts the point that it is Zóe, not Michael, who wields the power, particularly considering that it establishes her privilege to hear petitions from prominent foreigners. As a woman in a role of direct personal rulership, she is thus starkly different from the Scandinavian women encountered in the same texts, and Zóe’s dominant position is also supported by Byzantine sources.<sup>81</sup>

While none of the sagas paint Zóe’s character in a particularly flattering light, the *Morkinskinna* version again includes several unbelievable *þættir*, including one where Zóe approaches the Norwegians unescorted, asks for a lock of Haraldr’s hair, and is rebuffed with a crude request for her pubic hair in return, at which point she leaves.<sup>82</sup> Arguably this is intended to speak not so much about Zóe as about Haraldr’s superior verbal skill in the face of a foreign ruler, similar to the interactions of Icelanders with Norwegian kings.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the older text thus actively discredits her, which might also explain its presentation of her as less politically prominent. Instead of deriving from each other, it is more likely that all three texts rely on the same sources, and that they represent two slightly different reconstructions from older narratives: a *Morkinskinna* version on one hand, and a *Fagrskinna-Heimskringla* version on the other. Even if the two latter sagas did rely on *Morkinskinna*, they have rectified some of its errors and omitted its more fanciful details, implying access to additional source material. While it is not completely impossible that Byzantine histories made their way to Iceland and Norway by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there is no other indication of this in the saga

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<sup>80</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 71

<sup>81</sup> Contemporary court historians Michael Psellos and John Skylitzes establish Zóe as an exceptionally powerful empress with authority often superseding that of her husbands; Psellos 1966: 87, 123; Skylitzes 2010: 370, 391-5. Cf. Hill 2013: 77.

<sup>82</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 89

<sup>83</sup> See particularly Clunies Ross 1999: 57.

tradition, and it is far more plausible that their own shared source claim, reliance on the oral tradition dating back to Haraldr himself, is truthful. In any case, all three sagas in some form agree in their presentation of Zóe as a ruling queen; from here on, divergence from the established kings' saga power structures becomes increasingly clear.

Formal positions aside, the one instance of Zóe using her power is found in an episode towards the end of Haraldr's stay in Byzantium, where he wishes to marry Zóe's kinswoman Mária,<sup>84</sup> but is denied by the empress, who according to rumours told among the *væringjar* wants Haraldr for herself.<sup>85</sup> All three texts then inform us that Haraldr wants to leave Miklagarðr, but is arrested by the emperor on Zóe's behest.<sup>86</sup> This anecdote appears to show off Zóe as just another woman whose negative qualities are embellished by saga writers, her antagonist role as instigator of Haraldr's fate apparent in the saga narratives. As part of a saga representation of her as a sexual predator with a violent temperament, her desire for him and her jealousy due to his pending departure are consistently presented as the main catalysts for her hostile actions leading to his imprisonment. In *Fagrskinna* (and in *Morkinskinna*), she participates more directly in his arrest and takes part in giving the order: “Zóe dróttning ok Mónakús keisari létu taka Harald ok leiða bundinn til myrkvastofu.”<sup>87</sup> (Queen Zóe and Emperor [Mónomákús] had Haraldr arrested and taken to the dungeon.) Her involvement in the decision to imprison Haraldr is here made explicit, particularly when one notes that it is again Zóe, not her male co-ruler, who is mentioned first. And while Snorri in *Heimskringla* ascribes this act to the emperor alone, he is careful to specify, as before, that he rules alongside Zóe.<sup>88</sup> Zóe is thus responsible for Haraldr's predicament in all texts, further displaying both the power she wields in the imperial capital, and her willingness to use it for sinister purposes.

While this is familiar territory when it comes to saga tropes of women, it is unique in that Zóe's affairs and engagement in all sorts of clandestine activities are again extensively documented by Greek contemporary texts. Her affair during her first marriage resulted in the murder and replacement of her husband with her much younger lover.<sup>89</sup> On that occasion and

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<sup>84</sup> Like an invention, as Mária is presented as Zóe's *bróðurdóttir*, 'niece', whereas the Byzantine sources describe no surviving relatives aside from her sister Theodora.

<sup>85</sup> Varangians. In this context referring to individuals from Northern Europe in the emperor's guard; cf. Blöndal 1978.

<sup>86</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 109; *Fagrskinna*: 234-5; *Heimskringla III*: 85; Theodoricus, on the other hand, refers to Haraldr's arrest and subsequent departure to be due to a disgrace inflicted upon the emperor, making it possible the later sagas amended the narrative to put the Norwegian prince in a better light; see *HARN*: 57.

<sup>87</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 234-5; see also *Morkinskinna I*: 109.

<sup>88</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 85

<sup>89</sup> Both John Skylitzes (2010: 368) and Michael Psellos (1966: 81) report that Zóe poisoned her first husband Romanos III (r. 1028-34); cf. Laiou 1992: 169-70.

others, she is described as dabbling in all sorts of schemes and poisons to facilitate such opportunities and to rid herself of hindrances to her power.<sup>90</sup> Descriptions like these are relatively common for more negatively portrayed women, but in Zóe's case, due to the substantial evidence by various independent eyewitness sources, this is no mere literary trope. Given the emphasis on the tales of the *væringjar* and the cultural importance of Byzantium in the saga society,<sup>91</sup> it is plausible that the surviving stories of Haraldr and Zóe told in the North, rooted in 11<sup>th</sup>-century historical realities, have influenced 13<sup>th</sup> century presentations of powerful and transgressive saga women. For example, this is particularly true for the more reproachable aspects of the characterisation of Gunnhildr, with whom Zóe shares tyrannical tendencies, sexual aggression, subterfuge and the use of poisons, and accusations of dabbling with dark supernatural forces.<sup>92</sup> It is thus possible that stories of Zóe, a hereditary female ruler and thus a foreign concept in more ways than one, has influenced saga tactics for denigrating women seen to aspire to similar authoritarian power.

On the other hand, there are significant differences in political status and political participation. Zóe is not described utilising any network strategies. She is not a mere link, nor is she shown to be dependent on kinsmen, friends and subordinates in order to exercise political influence; her will is simply done. Were it only the sagas including this depiction, one might suggest this is due to her being simply included as a foil to Haraldr, almost like a *meykonungr*,<sup>93</sup> supported by him ultimately kidnapping Mária as a way of getting back at her and showing that he has escaped her power.<sup>94</sup> However, the Byzantine sources describe her similarly, leading to the conclusion that is not necessarily an exaggeration, but rather a description of a form of power foreign to the saga paradigm. This difference is due to the fact that Zóe, both in the sagas and in more contemporary historiography, has access to something almost no other kings' saga women have: political power in her own right. She does not rule through a son or a husband as Gunnhildr and others do; it is her legitimate position as the scion of an imperial dynasty with no surviving sons. Her husbands undeniably also have real power, and the Byzantine context appears to similarly require a man occupying at least part of

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<sup>90</sup> Reports of her resorting to such tactics are found regularly throughout the Byzantine texts; see for instance Skylitzes 2010: 379, 397-8; Garland 1999: 138-46.

<sup>91</sup> Blöndal (1978) and Sverrir Jakobsson (2020) write on the centrality of Varangians in Nordic perceptions of the outside world. This is also reflected in the representation of journeys to Byzantium in certain *Íslendingasögur*, including *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*; cf. Sverrir Jakobsson 2016b: 353-7.

<sup>92</sup> Psellos (1966: 188) describes Zóe attempting to invoke spirits through superstitious rites.

<sup>93</sup> Jochens 1996a: 102-3

<sup>94</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 113-4; *Heimskringla III*: 88-9

the rulership.<sup>95</sup> Those men, however, are dependent on their bonds with her, not the other way around. Zóe as the sole holder of dynastic legitimacy is a unique node around which links revolve and form, which makes it appear as if she does not need to form additional links of her own in order to exercise power.

Zóe's unique position leaves little room for comparison. Indeed, there are few saga women being carriers of royal legitimacy which they subsequently provide to men. Emma is perhaps one (although Knútr is not dependent on her per se), and examples of royal lineage being channelled through women emerge in the Scandinavian context in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>96</sup> However, even rarer are women whose royal lineage allows them to exercise direct political power over a kingdom.<sup>97</sup> In the *konungasögur*, the only examples are semi-legendary women from the time prior to Haraldr hárfagri's unification, who similarly wield direct personal power over a people or an area rather than having to rely on network strategies and political manoeuvres.<sup>98</sup> The brevity of the accounts means we cannot say that they did not use such tactics, but we can reasonably argue that the historiography believes women exercising power by virtue of their own ancestry to be less dependent on negotiating their power through bonds with men. This leaves Zóe and to a lesser extent Allógía, queens with real power, in a position where the only comparable saga cases are mythical women, and later descriptions of maiden-kings in the *fornaldarsögur*. This line of portrayal is the only available saga language for women wielding power in their own right. With no comparable cases from their geographical area and immediate past, the kings' sagas associate real or imagined ideas of direct female rulership with a combination of foreign and mythical women functioning as female kings, getting their will where they express it, and ruling over men. Such rulership is presented independently of network connections, making a woman like Zóe a useful indication of what exists outside Scandinavian power structures in the saga mind.

## Conclusion

Saga portrayals of foreign queens and their political power operate on the sidelines of the power structures established thus far. The difference lies not in their foreignness, as all

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<sup>95</sup> Byzantine sources leave the impression that a female ruler is acceptable only for a short transition period; see Psellos 1966: 159.

<sup>96</sup> Primarily involving women of the civil war era; see chapter 4.

<sup>97</sup> In medieval Scandinavia this does not occur until the late 14<sup>th</sup> century Margrete (who also has parallels to the women from the previous chapter, including in her use of speech and authority; see Layher 2010: 131ff).

<sup>98</sup> The main example is found in Haraldr hárfagri's grandmother Ása in *Heimskringla's Ynglinga saga* and *Hálfðanar saga svarta*. Ása succeeds her father to the rulership over the petty kingdom of Agðir; see particularly *Heimskringla I*: 84. See also Gurith in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, who is able to transfer legitimacy to various men as the last of the Skjöldungar; *GD I*: 502-12.

politically influential women are generally treated the same by the historiography regardless of ethnic origin, but rather their cultural-political context. The kings' saga narratives do not seem to distinguish, at least not explicitly so, between Norwegian and Swedish women and their external counterparts, particularly not when members of the latter group involve themselves in Scandinavian political affairs. In *Heimskringla*, Emma's or Álfífa's ethnicity or origin are never discussed; they are simply introduced by virtue of parentage and lineage as any aristocratic woman.<sup>99</sup> The same is true for Allógía, and for the occasional introduction of women from the Baltic area into royal and aristocratic families.<sup>100</sup> The relative rarity of foreign marriages typically has these women all being treated as any other new member of the kinship network by affinity. They are, however, connected to foreign political elements, and while Emma and Álfífa for instance both participate in the Anglo-Danish empire of Knútr, they are described differently according to the nature and location of their participation. Emma operates within Knútr's court in England, geographically removed from but politically connected to the Norwegian kingdom at the heart of the kings' saga narratives. Álfífa, on the other hand, organises a ruling network in the political frontline between Denmark and Norway, operating in the midst of this very same heart.

On the opposite end of the scale, Zóe's Byzantine context is treated as an exotic, othered landscape where women can play different roles entirely, an adventure world far removed from the day-to-day Scandinavian political game. In essence, she is imbued with the 'emblems of contrast' discussed by John Lindow, and ends up as an othered figure, marking a difference between 'inside' and 'outside' the kings' sagas' political paradigm.<sup>101</sup> It is not necessarily Zóe herself who is the embodiment of difference, but rather her political position. Her direct rulership over a conceptually distant political entity, leaves her with forms of power for which the *konungasögur* have no terms, a legitimate form of female authority with no vocabulary in the language of networks. The tendency of saga authors to treat journeys to Byzantium as journeys to a centre of political and cultural power contributes to this picture.<sup>102</sup> As such, Zóe stands out as a point of departure from the Scandinavian-centric trends of the historiography, neither in terms of ethnicity nor supernatural connotations, but rather in terms of political power itself. The saga authors associate women's authoritarian rulership, as opposed to network power alongside men, with foreignness. Zóe stands out as a fringe

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<sup>99</sup> For Emma, see *Heimskringla II*: 26; for Álfífa, see *Heimskringla II*: 398-9.

<sup>100</sup> See for instance the Scandinavian marriages of the daughters of the king of Poland in *Heimskringla I*: 273.

<sup>101</sup> Lindow 1995: 18-21

<sup>102</sup> This trend is discussed in Sverrir Jakobsson 2016b: 360.

example, but indications are found even in the cases of network organisers with elements of foreignness, such as in the origin story of Gunnhildr, Allógía's equal share in court power, and Álfífa's reliance on foreign military pressure to cement her position in Norway.

In the context of Northern European kingdoms, foreign women are nevertheless more easily integrated. Generally speaking, both Emma and Allógía are woven seamlessly into the historiographical narratives, but not in the same way. Allógía is reliant on network bonds to communicate and exercise her political power in Hólmgarðr, but these bonds are primarily shown in the case of her personal retinue, where Óláfr takes part and implicitly submits to her lordship. Her court position itself appears considerably more formalised and institutionalised than the comparable cases of queens and other women within the Scandinavian kingdoms, with the implication being that in the fascinated eyes of saga authors, foreign queens such as those in Hólmgarðr (and Byzantium) are allowed positions of official royal authority, and are thus not necessarily restricted to political participation only within and through network bonds with men.

Finally, Emma using influential connections to place her son on the throne of Denmark is little different from the actions of a Gunnhildr or Ástríðr, but nor is it particularly different from any ambitious medieval queen. The one difference lies in the fact that Emma, like many medieval women, is forced to work behind the scenes in a court intrigue context to a larger extent than her most publicly powerful Scandinavian counterparts. As such, even the saga version of Emma is possibly shaped to a larger degree by more European ideas of women's political roles.<sup>103</sup> This could potentially be due to a reliance on foreign sources, but it is simultaneously worth reiterating that Emma's brand of political influence is similar to presentations of network power found in the kings' sagas' presentation of their immediate past, as the majority of the public displays of power fade from the narratives after their treatment of the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, signalling a trend in the historiography where the political roles of Scandinavian women are increasingly synchronised with broader medieval views the closer the narratives get to their present, while still maintaining the network aspect. This will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

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<sup>103</sup> Stafford (1997a: 18-20), although not discussing the sagas, describes the limitations placed on Emma due to English political custom.

## Chapter 4

### Vessels of royal power: women in the sagas' immediate past

As the second part of the process to test the boundaries of the network model, this chapter will take a comparative perspective where the framework applied to the sagas' presentation of the women and networks of the distant past is applied to their presentation of the immediate past, the Norwegian civil war era beginning c. 1130 and lasting through the saga writers' own lifetimes. Identifying a contrast is enabled by the distinct nature of the time between these periods in the historiography. The sagas' presentation of Norwegian politics in the decades around 1100 is dominated by the reigns of warrior kings centred on expansion wars and expeditions abroad, from Haraldr Sigurðarson (r. 1042-66) through his grandson Magnús Ólafsson 'berfœttr' (r. 1093-1103) to the latter's son Sigurðr 'Jórsalafari' (r. 1103-30), as well as the stable and reportedly uneventful reign of Óláfr Haraldsson 'kyrri' (r. 1067-93).<sup>1</sup> The internal political game, and women's participation in it, remains largely in the background, partially due to these kings' focus on foreign adventures, and partially due to their indulgent sexual behaviour, which has been discussed by various scholars.<sup>2</sup> The period is overall fraught with brief marriages and concubines, who rarely if ever achieve prominence in the sagas.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the political circumstances previously presenting royal women with opportunities, internal discord and succession crises, are absent. The period sees smooth royal succession from one adult king to the next from 1035 to 1135, most often directly from fathers to sons.<sup>4</sup> Even upon the death of Magnús berfœttr in 1103, at which point there were various young royal sons and multiple king's mothers, none of these women rise to the fore as they are all concubines, some of lowborn origins.<sup>5</sup> The period contains comparably few external threats or uprisings threatening the political integrity of the kingdom, leaving little of the instability which shaped the previous chapters, and providing a lengthy gap leaving an opening for considerable shifts in the political culture.

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<sup>1</sup> *Óláfs saga kyrri* is *Heimskringla*'s shortest saga, spanning only eight brief chapters.

<sup>2</sup> Jochens (1987b: 333-4), Bandlien (2001: 120ff.) and Auður Magnúsdóttir (2013: 84ff.) all discuss the negative impact of royal promiscuity on the kingdom's affairs. It simultaneously made it exceedingly difficult for any one woman to gain political prominence. Hermanson & Orning (2020b: 67) discuss the inter-Scandinavian political system of this century.

<sup>3</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2008: 46

<sup>4</sup> A minor exception occurs when Magnús berfœttr's accession is challenged by his cousin Hákon Þórisfóstri, but no women are involved in the subsequent brief conflict; see *Heimskringla III*: 210-12.

<sup>5</sup> The succession of Sigurðr, Eysteinn and Óláfr Magnússon does not mention women at all; see *Heimskringla III*: 238. For the parentage of Magnús' sons, see p. 229. Cf. Skovgaard-Petersen (1998: 26) for the similar situation around Sveinn Ástríðarson's women.



In contrast, the civil war era is typically referred to as beginning upon the death of Sigurðr Jórsalafari in 1130, with the succession conflict between his alleged brother Haraldr ‘gilli’ (r. 1130-36) and son Magnús Sigurðarson (r. 1130-35). There is a time of calm following the brutal incapacitation of the latter,<sup>6</sup> but ultimately, tensions rise between various successors, introducing the political divides providing the backdrop for this discussion, shaped by the recurrence of multiple contending royal claimants being backed by opposing aristocratic parties. The focus of this chapter, chronologically speaking, begins after the murder of Haraldr gilli as the last recognised son of Magnús berfœttr, and concludes with the establishment of a new ruling dynasty by Sverrir Sigurðarson (r. 1177-1202), alleged grandson of Haraldr through the latter’s son Sigurðr Haraldsson (r. 1136-55). This will here be referred to as the ‘immediate past’ of the kings’ sagas, as opposed to the distant past discussed in the previous three chapters. Not all the kings’ sagas provide extensive evidence for this period. The reign of Sverrir, the final part of the period, is covered by the earlier *Sverris saga*, with which this chapter begins and which several of the later compendia build their narratives into, and is occasionally corroborated by the younger, longer version of *Boglunga saga* (c. early 1220s), but most of the subsequent sagas conclude earlier. *Ágrip* leads into a fragmentary conclusion around 1136. *Fagrskinna* includes some supporting evidence, but glosses over most of the political details of the period and mentions few women. *Morkinskinna* is elaborate in its descriptions of politics in the first half of the period, but the extant version ends with the death of King Eysteinn Haraldsson in 1157. *Heimskringla* is the most comprehensive source for the political situation, but it too ends, as mentioned above, with the battle of Ré in 1177. Together, however, these sources enable us to see the period as a historiographical development, with *Sverris saga* providing a contemporary account which the later sagas weave their political narratives of the preceding period into.

While the established network structures remain in use, women of the 12<sup>th</sup> century are described as taking on a different role as more passive bestowers of legitimacy, vessels of power in struggles between men, and operate almost exclusively within and from bonds of kinship. It will be argued that the women in the networks of the sagas’ immediate past are often presented as mere links between men, and that the period is portrayed as a time of transition where women’s prominence in royal and aristocratic networks gradually fades. Instead of functioning as network nodes, they spend, or are made to spend, their own political capital to advance the interests of sons, husbands, and brothers. Political influence is found

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<sup>6</sup> See a discussion of the context surrounding the mutilation of Magnús in Bandlien 2019: 253ff.

primarily in the infancy of royal sons, and even in such cases it does not again rise to explicitly public authority on a royal level such as in the cases of Gunnhildr, Ástríðr or Álfífa. Similarly, women of the immediate past are largely shown without direct access to formalised friendship and lordship bonds, moving their recorded political role entirely into the kinship group (although some less public lordship bonds remain, such as access to servants and control over households). As such, the role of women in Norwegian politics of the sagas' immediate past is constructed differently from the role of the women of the more distant past. Norwegian women of the 12<sup>th</sup> century remain able to aid in the organisation of networks and play central roles in them as long as it is on behalf of their male children, but even mothers of kings are more frequently sidelined by male warrior chieftains commanding the civil war networks. In this sense, the network organiser role is gradually monopolised by (non-royal) men.

The women of the period are members of two distinct factions.<sup>7</sup> The women of *Sverris saga* are part of the network surrounding Sverrir Sigurðarson, whereas the earlier women from the final stages of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* are part of the network backing Ingi Haraldsson (r. 1136-61) and later Magnús Erlingsson (r. 1161-84). Between the two groups one can witness several political processes changing the structure of the Norwegian kingdom, including both the escalation of the civil wars into near-constant open conflict, and the development from political power being controlled by great magnates to strong royal authority under Sverrir and his successors.<sup>8</sup> The civil wars in many ways represent the last stage in early medieval Norwegian state formation as described in the sagas.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the centrality of aristocratic networks as power bases for kingship bids declines through the development of Norway into a Europeanised high medieval kingdom,<sup>10</sup> gradually replaced by increasing monarchical consolidation, bureaucratisation, and ecclesiastical influence,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Essentially the same factions which later develop into the *baglar* and *birkibeinar* parties; see Bagge 1999: 310-11; Helle 2008: 372-5. These factions constantly change throughout the civil wars (Nysether 2019: 134ff.), but typically remain focused around one pretender at a time.

<sup>8</sup> This particular impact of the Sverrir dynasty is the main focus of Bagge 1996.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Orning (2014), who discusses the civil wars as an integral part of the same political development rather than a disruptive upheaval. This falls in line with the author's view of (limited) conflict as integral to the social infrastructure, as discussed in chapter 1. Similar observations about the civil wars and the development of a stronger monarchy as taking place within a network context are made in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 56-7.

<sup>10</sup> The long reign of Hákon Hákonarson (1217-63) is generally seen as a high point in the process of Europeanisation in Norway; see Bagge 2014: 174ff. Cf. Larrington 2009.

<sup>11</sup> This development has been the object of a considerable body of scholarship, with emphasis on changes in the fabric of society, increased centralisation, and the implementation of standardised succession laws; see for instance Johnsen 1948; Helle 2008: 376ff.; Bagge 2014: 54-60, 140ff.; Bagge 2019: 80-3. For the decline of networks, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017: 116ff.

although networks, and the tensions between them, remain prominent.<sup>12</sup> Women's usage of network bonds in the saga narratives of the civil wars, however, are already very different from representations of the distant past.

### **Women in *Sverris saga***

The writing of *Sverris saga* stands at the beginning of the vernacular kings' saga genre, but its contents lie at the end of the historiographical narratives discussed so far. Considering how scholarly consensus asserts that Snorri and his contemporaries knew *Sverris saga* and organised their own sagas with it in mind, one ought to treat the narrative development in conjunction, and the sagas as part of the same historiographical discourse, but simultaneously recognise the influence of the earlier *Sverris saga* on subsequent saga authors.<sup>13</sup> While *Sverris saga* arguably contains more flagrant issues of bias in favour of one agenda,<sup>14</sup> it is a contemporary account, often treated by scholars as a relatively trustworthy historical-ideological source,<sup>15</sup> and it is often considered the constant all the main compendia appear to be writing towards, tailoring their end points to its beginning.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore natural to discuss the position of women in it, from 1177 onwards, prior to examining *Morkinskinna's* and *Heimskringla's* subsequent treatment of the period leading up to it. In this way, I shall identify women's position in Norwegian royal kinship networks immediately prior to the writing of the sagas, and subsequently investigate the succeeding kings' sagas' portrayal of the development of women's political participation in the decades leading up to this stage. *Sverris saga* includes comparably few women,<sup>17</sup> but I will examine the presentation of the royal women around Sverrir in his attempts to seize power in Norway from the entrenched network of King Magnús Erlingsson. Ultimately, I will show how their political power within aristocratic networks is severely restricted compared to the practically unbridled agency presented in the narratives of the distant past, serving as network tools rather than network leaders.

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<sup>12</sup> Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 68

<sup>13</sup> Andersson 2016: 105; cf. note 15 below.

<sup>14</sup> It is widely considered to have been written under Sverrir's personal supervision; see Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 111; however, cf. Bagge (1996) who argues the saga is still an accurate reflection of events rather than political propaganda.

<sup>15</sup> Bagge 1996: 18-19; Orning 2008: 40-1

<sup>16</sup> Indrebø 1917: 277-8; Bjarni Einarsson 1985: cxxi-iii; Finlay 2004: 1-2; Andersson 2016: 105-6. While *Morkinskinna* breaks off earlier, it is thought to have followed the same pattern; see Andersson & Gade 2012: 64.

<sup>17</sup> Remarkably, only 10 chapters of *Sverris saga* contain a woman in conjunction with any active verb, including one instance referring to the Virgin Mary.

*Sverris saga*'s first female character, Sverrir's mother Gunnhildr, is an elusive woman. Her limited role in the narrative functions primarily to spark her son's ambition,<sup>18</sup> particularly through a dream to foreshadow his greatness.<sup>19</sup> What is more useful from a network perspective, however, is the way she is used by her son in his bid for kingship, such as in the following speech:

*'Peir hafa konunga nöfn borit margir er verit hafa ambáttar synir, en ek þykkjumk sannr son Sigurðar konungs ok Gunnhildar. Er nú þat mǫrgum mǫnnum kunnigt hver ætt hennar er, en ef þeir eru hér sumir, sem mik væntir, at eigi sé þat í kunnleika þá kann ek nú nokkut af því segja.' Þá talði hann allar kynkvíslir hennar fyrir öllum þingmǫnnum í allar kvíslir, ok kǫnnuðusk þá margir við sina frændr til hans, bæði í fǫður ætt ok móður.*<sup>20</sup>

“Many have held the title of king who were the sons of bondswomen. But I am a trueborn son of King Sigurðr and Gunnhildr. Many men know her lineage. But if there are those present who, as I expect, are not aware of it, I will say something about it.” Then he spoke of her kinship bonds before all the assemblymen and many of them recognised their kinship with him through both the father's and mother's lines.

While this is a good example of manipulative political speech performed by a man, it is striking how he uses his mother as part of it. The goal here is to assert himself as the true heir, echoing previous arguments he has made in favour of his own claim, such as at the meeting of the kings in Björgvin (now Bergen) where he laments the woes of, and thus explicitly links himself to, both his alleged father Sigurðr, the latter's brother Eysteinn, and Sigurðr's confirmed son Hákon 'herðibreiðr' (r. 1157-62).<sup>21</sup> As such, the contents of the speech are shaped according to the speaker's wishes, but it is the representation that is valuable here. To advance his own interests, Sverrir strongly emphasises his mother's status without elaboration. There is no indication in the text, or in any other source, of what Gunnhildr's supposedly illustrious kinship bonds are, nor does awareness of her kinship appear to be common in Sverrir's audience, given that he sees fit to start explaining before anyone even asks. Instead, it fits with the overall view of Sverrir's parentage claims as mostly a pretence,<sup>22</sup> including the dubious nature of Gunnhildr's revelation of her son's paternity after a discussion

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<sup>18</sup> SvS: 7-8

<sup>19</sup> This dream is comparable to Queen Ragnhildr's dream about Haraldr hárfagri; *Heimskringla I*: 90. The dreams have been comparatively analysed by Lönnroth 2006: 98-101; cf. Bagge 1996: 53-5.

<sup>20</sup> SvS: 199-200

<sup>21</sup> SvS: 60; cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 113.

<sup>22</sup> There is considerable doubt about the veracity of Sverrir's parentage; see Bagge 1993: 3; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 111-4.

with the Pope in Rome,<sup>23</sup> but Sverrir himself puts forward his and his mother's allegedly illustrious kinship bonds as the undisputed truth.

The exaggeration of Gunnhildr's ancestry, like the usage of deceased kings, is all part of a wider weaponization of the past.<sup>24</sup> There is no mention of Gunnhildr, or any unaccounted-for relationship and child of Sigurðr, in *Heimskringla*. Even if Sverrir truly was Sigurðr's son, even less likely is Gunnhildr being the latter's wife and Sverrir being, in his own words, a *sannr sonr*, 'trueborn son', of the pair.<sup>25</sup> Additional irony is provided by Sverrir's derision of illegitimate sons, considering Sigurðr was himself the son of a concubine.<sup>26</sup> As part of his selective and manipulative use of the past, both the speech and *Sverris saga*'s account of the initial revelation of parentage thus provide strong examples of Sverrir using women to legitimise his claims to rule, highlighted by the fact that Gunnhildr plays no further role in the career of her son. It is thus the idea of royal female kinship, rather than the actuality of it, which is important to Sverrir.

This network strategy is found throughout his career, while the women themselves function primarily as Sverrir's tools. While his mother is exaggerated to craft his own legitimacy, his entrance ticket, Sverrir performs further work on this legitimacy by seeking added kinship advantages from his female relatives. Initially, he seeks the aid of Brígiða Haraldsdóttir (c. 1131-1208), his *frændkona*, daughter of Haraldr gilli and thus the sister of Sverrir's alleged father. Primarily, however, he seeks the support of her husband, Swedish jarl Birgir 'brosa', introduced as his *mágr*.<sup>27</sup> It is possible to compare Brígiða's role to the role of Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir receiving dignitaries alongside her husband Rognvaldr, discussed in chapter two, but unlike Ingibjörg, Brígiða never achieves an active role. She becomes a first attempted link for Sverrir to build his aristocratic support, and while Birgir rejects Sverrir (due to already having agreed to support Eysteinn Eysteinnsson, another grandson of Haraldr gilli), Sverrir's intent, to establish himself through kinship channels, is clear.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is Birgir who has to be convinced and it is Birgir who ultimately decides. Brígiða simply serves as a link for Sverrir and Birgir to communicate their relationship through.

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<sup>23</sup> SvS: 7

<sup>24</sup> Bandlien 2013: 359

<sup>25</sup> Saxo, here a relatively independent contemporary source, considers it a blatant lie; see *GD II*: 1390.

<sup>26</sup> More on this below.

<sup>27</sup> SvS: 11

<sup>28</sup> SvS: 11

Sverrir consistently uses kinswomen as links. After rejection by Birgir and Brígiða, Sverrir travels to his alleged sister Cecilía Sigurðardóttir (1155-86), daughter of Sigurðr Haraldsson, in Sweden, where she receives him with a feast.<sup>29</sup> Cecilía independently builds a network bond with her alleged brother, thus acknowledging their kinship connection, but the overall network situation is tricky. The *Sverris saga* author excludes her husband Folkviðr from the narrative for political purposes, as Sverrir needs unmarried female relatives to form alliances. The longer version of *Boglunga saga*, on the other hand, written shortly after *Sverris saga*, does not include a reception of Sverrir in Sweden at all, but it does mention Cecilía's husband. Here, the view is that Cecilía herself endeavours to go to Sverrir's side, partially in order to escape from her marriage, which she has reportedly been forced into by the network around Magnús Erlingsson, who attempted, according to the text, to diminish the *ætt* of Haraldr gilli.<sup>30</sup> Despite slight discrepancy, the two texts essentially correspond in their overall view. Certain details are glossed over, but the important part is that Cecilía aligns herself with Sverrir's cause, that she evidently does abandon her marriage over it, and that by embracing Sverrir as her brother, she provides him with a sense of legitimacy. If she indeed wishes to get away from her Swedish marriage, this is a mutually beneficial arrangement, meaning Cecilía achieves her own ends by aligning herself with Sverrir, corresponding to female agency in the networks of kin discussed in previous chapters.

She quickly returns, however, to being little more than a pawn. When Sverrir calls on her to marry the chieftain Bárðr Guthormsson to advance his own political interests, she quietly acquiesces and plays the role her brother needs her to play. The language in *Sverris saga* treats Cecilía as a passive tool for Sverrir's ambitions, only mentioning that “*Sverrir konungr gifti Ceciliam systur sína Bárði Guthormssyni á Reini.*”<sup>31</sup> (King Sverrir married his sister Cecilía to Bárðr Guthormsson at Rein.) While this is presented as a straightforward process in *Sverris saga*, *Boglunga saga* expands on the subject, recounting that Cecilía faces opposition in her second marriage even though she was reportedly forced into her first. In the face of clerical disapproval, she uses lack of consent as an argument for her first marriage being void, but it keeps being used against her and her descendants.<sup>32</sup> Jochens considers this a bold attempt from Cecilía herself to benefit from the new customs of consent and marry a husband of her choice with her brother's approval, but Jochens selectively uses *Boglunga saga* without

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<sup>29</sup> *SvS*: 12

<sup>30</sup> *Bogls*: 75-6

<sup>31</sup> *SvS*: 155

<sup>32</sup> *Bogls*: 75-6

consulting *Sverris saga*.<sup>33</sup> Overall, while consent may or may not have been required, it is evident that Cecilía marries according to Sverrir's needs, with both sources describing the marriage as part of his consolidation of the kingdom after defeating Magnús, involving many different marriages of his choosing.<sup>34</sup> After her (passive) role in aristocratic marriage politics and Sverrir's network construction, Cecilía has little to no political function. She appears to have died shortly after giving birth to her and Bárðr's only child, King Ingi Bárðarson (r. 1204-17), and so does not have any influence on the politics of succession when Sverrir's line is disrupted in 1204.<sup>35</sup> She is the sole provider of royal legitimacy to Ingi's rule, but this legitimacy is questioned due to the uncertainty surrounding the dissolution of her first marriage.<sup>36</sup> Note also that despite his mother being his royal link, Ingi is consistently referred to by his patronymic.

Sverrir's usage of women as network tools encompass bonds of affinity as well as bonds of direct kinship. A year after his defeat of Magnús in 1184, we are told that he married Margrét Eiríksdóttir, daughter of King Eiríkr Játvarðarson of Sweden (r. 1156-60), and sister of the present King Knútr (r. 1173-95).<sup>37</sup> It is a particularly important political moment for Sverrir, as the pretender from dubious lineage, having defeated his main rival, has his status affirmed with a royal diplomatic marriage. At this point he already has sons, leaving little need to produce an heir. Margrét is simply a network link, and a final distinct instance of female legitimisation; a royal marriage adds further recognition of Sverrir's legitimate kingship. This does not render her devoid of political influence, but that influence primarily exists within the household. Note for instance her activity as an advisor and confidante of her husband when newly elected bishop Níkolás Árnason finds his appointment blocked by Sverrir. Níkolás sends a flattering letter to Margrét, seeking her interjection, leading her to appeal to her husband in private to trust Níkolás' loyalty.<sup>38</sup> A queen would be an influential individual in any era, and separating public and private spheres is difficult, but it is evident that a royal consort's access to political power is here situated almost exclusively in her personal relationship with her husband. It is again an example of male usage of women as links to communicate with. Margrét does not lobby Sverrir on her own behalf, but rather on behalf of a man who needs her only for her connection to the king. She becomes an intermediary for a

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<sup>33</sup> Jochens 1986: 142

<sup>34</sup> SvS: 155; Jochens herself describes language such as that of *Sverris saga*, a woman being *gipt* to her new husband, as leaving no room for female agency; see Jochens 1986: 151-2.

<sup>35</sup> Due to the untimely death of Sverrir's son Hákon while the latter's illegitimate son was not yet born or known.

<sup>36</sup> *BǫglS*: 138-9

<sup>37</sup> SvS: 155

<sup>38</sup> SvS: 170-1

conversation between men. Perhaps partially this is due to Níkolás being able to exploit his position as Margrét's second cousin.<sup>39</sup> The kinship between the two is reason to trust Margrét to interject with Sverrir, and it is indeed rewarded when the king accepts her advice to allow Níkolás' investment, and Níkolás at least temporarily falls in line behind Sverrir.<sup>40</sup> Margrét has thus become the link necessary for a cooperative bond between two men, both through her kinship and her private interjection. Indeed, her role never extends beyond this function, as her only other appearance in the saga is as a passive participant during a siege in Björgvin.<sup>41</sup> Like Cecilía, she appears briefly again in *Boglunga saga* after Sverrir's death, but as a sonless widow, she is unable to maintain her position and almost immediately fades from political importance, her connection to the royal network severed without her connection to the king's person.<sup>42</sup>

The testimony of *Sverris saga* thus leaves an impression of royal women in the saga authors' own time as links for male leaders such as Sverrir to make use of for his own political purposes. Part of this could be due to their roles only existing in a saga narrative focused only on one man, but this can be compared to the women of *Óláfs saga helga*, who as shown above are far more prominent and independent.<sup>43</sup> The female network organiser, in the sense discussed in previous chapters, is absent from *Sverris saga*. No women aside from Sverrir's passive relatives are mentioned beyond brief references to marriage, and rarely more than once.<sup>44</sup> Even Sverrir's daughters are left unmentioned after their birth, and generally, even the king's older kinswomen are themselves only mentioned when they can be used for political benefit. This is not to say that the women around Sverrir do not possess individual or group agency, but it is evident that their political opportunity and behaviour is presented as considerably more restricted compared to the later sagas' portrayal of the women of the distant past.

### **Women in the early civil war networks**

The next question to address is how the later compendia reconcile these differences in their portrayal of the preceding period. Having established the boundaries of women's network

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<sup>39</sup> Both are great-grandchildren of the Swedish King Ingi Steinkelsson, and Níkolás' mother is Ingiríðr Rognvaldsdóttir, whose ancestry is discussed below; Margrét's ancestry is discussed in *Knýtlinga saga* (*KnýtS*: 240).

<sup>40</sup> *SvS*: 188-9; although Níkolás would go on to re-join the struggle against Sverrir and become a leading member of the *baglar* faction.

<sup>41</sup> *SvS*: 216-8

<sup>42</sup> *Bogls*: 62-4; cf. again Hermanson & Orning (2020b: 61) for the disintegration of networks upon network leaders' deaths.

<sup>43</sup> For the attempts of Sverrir to link himself personally and politically to Óláfr, see Bandlien 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Only the four women discussed here and Sverrir's daughter Ingibjörg are mentioned by name in more than one chapter.



participation in the contemporary *Sverris saga*, an analysis of the transition period is enabled. I will here assess the transitional political roles of Ingiríðr Rognvaldsdóttir, wife of Haraldr gilli and mother of Ingi Haraldsson, and subsequently Kristín Sigurðardóttir (c. 1125-78), daughter of Sigurðr Jórsalafari and mother of Magnús Erlingsson, in the final parts of the narratives of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. These women, it will be argued, operate as intermediaries between the broader political and network participation of the women of the distant past, and the contemporary women used exclusively as network links by men in *Sverris saga*.

Ingiríðr, the older of the two, enters Norwegian politics from an already strong network base upon her marriage to Haraldr gilli. She is the paternal granddaughter of the king of Sweden,<sup>45</sup> and she has previously been in another prestigious marriage to the Danish aristocrat Heinrekr skøtulær,<sup>46</sup> providing connections in both of the other Scandinavian kingdoms.<sup>47</sup> As such, she was recently dubbed a “posterchild for the transnational brand of networking”.<sup>48</sup> However, Haraldr simultaneously has a long-term relationship with an aristocratic concubine, Þóra Guthormsdóttir, leaving Ingiríðr with a personal and potentially political rival within the royal household. There is little information about either woman during Haraldr’s reign, but upon his murder by the pretender (and his alleged brother) Sigurðr ‘slembidjárn’, Ingiríðr comes to the fore, and Þóra fades away, indicating a difference in status and political opportunity similar to that between Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir and Álfhildr; Ingiríðr as wife maintains definite precedence in the hierarchical eyes of society,<sup>49</sup> and the description of the two indicates her having access to a wider aristocratic network.<sup>50</sup> It is possible Þóra dies with Haraldr, given her presence with him at the end, but the saga authors do not see her fate as important enough to mention. There is thus reason to believe that Ingiríðr finds herself in a stronger position than many of the women before her. She is the high-ranking widow of a king whose network has not lost his kingdom upon his death, and thus introduces a novel political situation where women play roles in a Norwegian monarchy that is held together by more than the individual personality of the king.<sup>51</sup> I will here analyse three phases of her life with varying degrees of political

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<sup>45</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 279

<sup>46</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 326

<sup>47</sup> When her illegitimate son Ormr has to flee Norway, for instance, he finds refuge with her other sons who rule the kingdom of Sweden; see *Heimskringla III*: 369.

<sup>48</sup> Grohse 2020: 253-4

<sup>49</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2013: 83-4

<sup>50</sup> Grohse 2020: 254

<sup>51</sup> A development closely tied to Weber’s (1978: 1121-6) concept of the routinisation of charisma.

prominence and show how her career is emblematic of how political power, and women's access to it, changes in the saga portrayal of the immediate past.

*Phase one: Ingiríðr the queen-mother*

The aftermath of Haraldr's murder and the subsequent political upheaval provides the first opportunity for Ingiríðr to contribute to shaping the future of Norway. *Heimskringla* includes the following description:

*Ingiríðr dróttning ok með henni lendir menn ok hirð sú, er Haraldr konungr hafði haft, réðu þat, at hleypiskip var gort ok sent norðr til Þrándheims at segja fall Haralds konungs ok þat með, at Þrændir skyldu taka til konungs son Haralds konungs, Sigurð, er þá var norðr þar ok Sáða-Gyrðr Bárðarson fósttraði, en Ingiríðr dróttning fór þegar austr í Vík. Ingi hét sonr þeira Haralds konungs, er var at fóstri þar í Víkinni með Ámunda Gyrðarsyni Løg-Bersasonar. En er þau kómu í Víkina, var stefnt Borgarþing. Þar var Ingi til konungs tekinn. Þá var hann á annan vetr. At því ráði hurfu Ámundi ok Þjóstólfr Álason ok margir aðrir stórir höfðingjar.<sup>52</sup>*

Queen Ingiríðr and the landed men and retainers around King Haraldr decided that a ship should be prepared and sent north to Þrándheimr to bring news of the death of King Haraldr, and to say that the Þrændir should take Sigurðr, the son of King Haraldr, as king. Sigurðr was then there in the north for fostering with Sáða-Gyrðr Bárðarson. At the same time, Queen Ingiríðr travelled east to Víkin. Ingi was the name of her son with King Haraldr, he was being fostered there by Ámundr, son of Gyrðr Løg-Bersason. When they came to Víkin, the Borgarþing was gathered and there Ingi was taken as king. It was his second winter. This decision was endorsed by Ámundr and Þjóstólfr Álason and many other powerful chieftains.

The widowed queen immediately assumes control of the situation after her husband is gone. She is the only individual mentioned by name in the initial discussions following the king's death mentioned in the first sentence, and as the subject of the sentence, she is presented as responsible for gathering the court network around the late Haraldr and arranging for the royal succession. Ingiríðr's role as kingmaker is confirmed even more explicitly in *Morkinskinna*: “*Ferr hon til Inga sonar síns, ok taka hann til konungs á Borgarþingi.*”<sup>53</sup> (She travelled to her son Ingi, and he was acclaimed as king at Borgarþing.) The switch in verb tense from 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular to 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural indicates that it is Ingiríðr who is presented as initiating the process of acclamation by leading him to the assembly, but that he is taken as king by her and by other assembled men at Borgarþing.

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<sup>52</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 303

<sup>53</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 179

The *Heimskringla* suggestion that Ingiríðr wanted both her son and stepson crowned has tended to be accepted without scrutiny.<sup>54</sup> It is possible, but the subsequent creation of opposing factions around the two child kings makes it questionable whether Ingiríðr would personally aid in the coronation of her son's rival. *Morkinskinna* contains nothing about a ship being sent with news of Haraldr's death, indicating that Snorri has either invented this, inferred it from *Morkinskinna*'s slightly shorter description, or he has relied on details about a ship bearing news from another lost source. If the latter, that source is likely the contemporary source \**Hryggjarstykki*, which was used by both authors, and so this explanation still indicates Snorri must have inferred details the author of *Morkinskinna* did not.<sup>55</sup> It is possible he would have seen the joint coronations of Ingi and Sigurðr as an orchestrated attempt to craft two separate power bases necessary in order to resist the inroads of Sigurðr slembidjárn, as Knut Helle suggests,<sup>56</sup> but Sigurðr was at first outlawed and unpopular, and it is only after the coronations that he would become a serious threat.<sup>57</sup> The *Morkinskinna* account appears to frame the coronation of Sigurðr is an unintended consequence, a reaction by the magnates of the Þrændir to the coronation of Ingi, which is described first in the older text.<sup>58</sup> While a ship bearing news would likely have been sent, it is questionable whether it would have carried instructions to crown Sigurðr, and even if it did, Snorri lumps Haraldr's court together, meaning any interested party could have been behind such an instruction. Ingiríðr's priority, however, is the coronation and hegemony of her own son, evident from both preserved accounts.

Regardless of the somewhat murky sequence of events, the coronation of Haraldr gilli's successors is a case of loose aristocratic groups being moulded into coherent factions with unitary visions. Initially, Ingiríðr is the central individual guiding this process, and she is exceptionally influential in this moment. The kingdom lacks a candidate for the throne who is more than an infant, and she controls the main infant candidate. Further, all adult members of the royal *ætt* are either dead, incapacitated or generally reviled, as is the case for the deposed Magnús blindi and his supporter and co-pretender Sigurðr slembidjárn. Ingiríðr is a royal widow with a two-year-old son crowned as Norway's next king, and other external magnates have not yet risen to the fore to surpass her position. Unfortunately, there is little to no

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<sup>54</sup> Helle 2009b; Auður Magnúsdóttir 2013: 83; Grohse 2020: 254

<sup>55</sup> Both sources explicitly state their reliance on *Hryggjarstykki* for this period; see *Morkinskinna II*: 185; *Heimskringla III*: 318-9. For the scope and importance of *Hryggjarstykki*, see Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002c: lix-lxvii. Cf. Finlay 2004: 10.

<sup>56</sup> Helle 2009b

<sup>57</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 304

<sup>58</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 179

information of her activities during Ingi's early reign, indicating that her governmental role may have been limited, or her activities not considered worthy of report by saga authors, but at the very least one could reasonably argue that from a pure network perspective, this political moment is the peak of her influence on Norwegian affairs.

Her next action in the narrative is testament to her skill as a political player, but also potentially of her willingness to set her own interests aside for those of her son. It surrounds her remarriage to support Ingi, which is described in two practically identical accounts in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Her new husband is Óttarr 'birtingr', described as a great aristocratic chieftain, and a source of considerable support for Ingi and Ingiríðr: "*Hann var [...] mikill styrkðarmaðr ríkis Inga konungs meðan hann var í barnæsku.*"<sup>59</sup> (He was a great supporter of the kingship of King Ingi while he was a child.) This marriage is one of the most important moments of Ingiríðr's political career, and there is reason to argue that it may have been initiated, or at least encouraged, by the queen herself (which would fall in line with emerging emphasis on women's consent in marriage).<sup>60</sup> As we have seen, the *konungasögur* have established precedent for widows, particularly royal widows, having power to decide over their own remarriages, with many choosing to remain unmarried, and some, like Sigríðr stórráða, negotiating their own remarriages. Ingiríðr's unique position in this situation, a royal widow with an influential background who has had her son crowned on her own initiative, suggests that the marriage to Óttarr is a move sparked at least partially by the queen herself, but the potential motive can illuminate this further.

Following *Morkinskinna*, Óttarr is one of the key aristocratic supporters of Sigurðr Haraldsson among the Þrændir.<sup>61</sup> He then serves as a central advisor to Sigurðr, with no evidence of a change in loyalties before his marriage in either source.<sup>62</sup> There are consequently two interpretations for this match, though not necessarily mutually exclusive. One is that the marriage to Óttarr is intended to build bridges between the Ingi faction and the Sigurðr faction by uniting the former's mother with one of the latter's most influential supporters.<sup>63</sup> This is supported by the fact that the two kings are described as having a shared retinue during their early years.<sup>64</sup> The other is that Ingiríðr and her pro-Ingi network are attempting to win such an influential supporter over to their side, increasing the relative strength of their base. The main

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<sup>59</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 212; cf. *Heimskringla III*: 322.

<sup>60</sup> Jochens 1986: 143-4, 152; Grohse (2020: 255) hints at similar intentions from Ingiríðr.

<sup>61</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 179

<sup>62</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 200

<sup>63</sup> See for instance Helle 2009b.

<sup>64</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 330

piece of evidence behind this theory is, of course, that this is exactly what happens, with Óttarr described thus: “*En Sigurðr konungr var ekki vinr hans ok þótti hann allt hallr vera undir Inga konung, mág sinn.*”<sup>65</sup> (King Sigurðr was not a great friend of his, and he thought Óttarr preferred the rule of King Ingi, his stepson.) This second sentence indicates that the marriage to Ingiríðr directly causes Óttarr to throw his support behind Ingi, with the opinion of Sigurðr confirming that the *mágr* relationship sparks the change. This statement makes it highly unlikely that this is just a bridge-building exercise, indicating in turn that Ingiríðr’s move is done to absorb him into Ingi’s network as opposed to Sigurðr’s.

This all sparks the question of when exactly the union may have occurred. It is possible to place it more or less immediately after Haraldr’s death, but it is more likely an alliance formed in the new political context. In a sequence of letters between the two kings, responding to Sigurðr slembidjárn’s ultimately unsuccessful invasion c. 1139, the network around Ingi not only describe Óttarr as a member of the circle around Sigurðr Haraldsson, but mention him by name when accusing Sigurðr’s network of holding back their military support. The letter further implies tensions between the two networks already here, confirming the suspicions addressed in the coronation episode above, and even carries a virtual ultimatum between reconciliation and cooperation on one hand, and open conflict on the other.<sup>66</sup> The union between Ingiríðr and Óttarr has almost certainly not been initiated at this point. The developing political situation adds to the confusion, with the invasion being conclusively defeated mere months later, and the marriage being initially mentioned a full three years after this, after the arrival and coronation of two further co-kings, Ingi and Sigurðr’s half-brothers Eysteinn Haraldsson (r. 1142-57) and Magnús Haraldsson (r. 1142-45). The union of Ingiríðr and Óttarr is thus only brought into the narrative long after the defeat of Sigurðr slembidjárn and the end of the external threat, and an exact timeline is never defined. As such, it is highly likely that, rather than an early attempt to build an opposition to Sigurðr slembidjárn, the alliance is a later response to the arrival of the older Eysteinn, and an effort by Ingiríðr to secure and consolidate power around Ingi in an increasingly crowded field.

Ingiríðr is far from a pawn in a game played by others, but she remarries to secure her son’s power rather than her own. In her early manoeuvres as a widowed queen, there are echoes of more temporally distant women such as Gunnhildr or Ástríðr, but primarily because of the

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<sup>65</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 212; cf. *Heimskringla III*: 322.

<sup>66</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 200; *Heimskringla III*: 114-5

role she plays as the widowed mother of an infant king, a role she at least partially relinquishes by remarrying. This initial political moment is rooted in unique circumstances. Ingi upon his acclamation is by far the youngest king in the saga histories of Norway. Even some of his youngest predecessors, including Haraldr hárfagri and Magnús inn góði, were adolescents who played political roles from the beginning of their reigns. Furthermore, while the power of earlier women remains considerable throughout their political careers, Ingiríðr's power and political role changes drastically over the course of hers, as her son gets older, as power is increasingly consolidated around him, and as he is surrounded by an increasing number of powerful male aristocrats, most prominently Óttarr, Grégóríús Dagsson and Erlingr Ormsson 'skakki'.

#### *Phase two: court politics*

As Ingi grows into adulthood, he is still portrayed as dependent on the support of his closest network members, but Ingiríðr's role appears to fade. She never reaches the same level of influence as witnessed with the coronation, particularly after the death of Óttarr (by an assassin possibly sent by the Sigurðr faction), disrupts her network power yet again, while other segments of the aristocracy rise to the fore.<sup>67</sup> This is perhaps best illustrated by what is arguably the last important inciting scene in the narratives of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Amidst the rising tensions between the Ingi and Sigurðr factions in the 1150s, both brothers having reached adulthood, we find a striking instance of a woman and a man both performing inciting speech in the same situation. Ingiríðr remains the dominant woman at court, but in inciting Ingi to action, she is joined by a male warrior chieftain, Grégóríús Dagsson (d. 1161). Unlike Ingiríðr the widowed mother, Grégóríús is not a typical inciter, as he goes on to personally lead the forces of this same network in the resulting battle, commanding both his own men and those of the king. He is consistently represented in *Heimskringla* as an exceptionally brave warrior,<sup>68</sup> a brilliant strategist,<sup>69</sup> and “*mestr hofðingi lendra manna í Nóregi í þeira manna minnum*”<sup>70</sup> (the greatest chieftain of all the Norwegian aristocrats in recent memory). Both his apparent inciting and his honourable martial virtues are also corroborated in *Fagrskinna*.<sup>71</sup> He has previously been defined as a ‘flawed hero’, loyal and protective of his allies but overly emotional, aggressive and brutal in battle.<sup>72</sup> This might be a

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<sup>67</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 322-3

<sup>68</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 340-1

<sup>69</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 348-9

<sup>70</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 364

<sup>71</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 335-6

<sup>72</sup> Ciklamini 1978: 186ff.

fair assessment of his personality, but it is important to point out that he, like Ingiríðr, consistently only operates according to the political benefit of the network. Their combined goading of the king, with internal similarities and differences, provides particularly important insights into the dynamic of this same network.

Ingiríðr begins the scene by verbally censuring her son after one of his men has been killed by the associates of Sigurðr. From *Morkinskinna*: “Þá gekk dróttning þegar á fund Inga konungs ok sagði honum tíðendin ok kvað hann lengi mundu lítinn konung ef hann vildi ekki at hafask þótt hirðmenn hans væri drepnir annarr at qðrum sem svín.”<sup>73</sup> (Then the queen went to meet King Ingi and told him the news and said that he would be a small king if he would do nothing even though his guardsmen were killed one after the other like swine.) In this case, Ingiríðr shames her son Ingi as a pathetic ruler if he does not immediately react, particularly as the perpetrators belong to the faction of his brother and rival Sigurðr, who may even be personally responsible for the outrage. This ought to be seen as another example of tactical inciting speech, due to its attempt to preserve the integrity of the king’s power. No violent or insidious intent is described here, and on the contrary, Ingiríðr simply calls attention to the king’s weakness through the shaming of his royal and manly capabilities, and to how society will perceive him if he does not react to unsanctioned violence and the inherent threat to his authority. Fearing for her son’s position and his ability to retain control over the bases of his power, perhaps mindful of the earlier killing of her husband, Ingiríðr here uses inciting patterns as a measure to protect their joint network. If Ingi’s power falters, so does his mother’s position.

Returning to the idea of goading as a power of the powerless, an influencing method for inferiors in interaction with network leaders, it is clear that Ingiríðr has lost her earlier control over the now adult Ingi. This becomes particularly evident when her inciting attempt is unsuccessful, and the king angrily dismisses her, and the matter is taken out of her hands when the magnate Grégóriús Dagsson enters. While it has been suggested that Grégóriús intervenes in support of Ingiríðr,<sup>74</sup> it is striking how obviously prepared he is, dressed for battle, and explicitly goading Ingi into his own agenda: direct conflict with Sigurðr.<sup>75</sup> After a brief exchange where the mood of the room shifts against him and he sees that the king is being dissuaded from aggressive action, he paints an emotional picture of their enemies

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<sup>73</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 232

<sup>74</sup> Grohse 2020: 255

<sup>75</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 232-3

stealthily attempting to pick them off until their network has withered completely.<sup>76</sup> Having driven the king into a corner, Grégóriús' emotional inciting, unlike Ingiríðr's, is successful. Ingiríðr, on the other hand, is no longer mentioned, but she appears content to step aside for Grégóriús' appeal, given their shared interests in the matter. This finds resonance in their differing rhetorical contributions. Ingiríðr's speech is not direct, only paraphrased, contrasted with Grégóriús' fully recounted lines,<sup>77</sup> and there is a considerable disparity in speaking time.<sup>78</sup> Ingiríðr is thus reduced to a supporting role in Grégóriús' effort to remove the threat from the opposing network, with the latter having taken up the position as the main power behind Ingi's throne. His relationship with Ingi is described in *Morkinskinna* as close friendship,<sup>79</sup> with *Heimskringla* adding the following: “*Gerðisk hann forstjóri fyrir landráðum með Inga konungi, en konungr veitti honum at taka af sinni eign slíkt, er hann vildi.*”<sup>80</sup> (He led the government of the land with King Ingi, and the king let him take whatever he wanted from his property.) Grégóriús' control of the *landráð* as a non-royal network leader leaves him in a position no different from the powerful female network organisers of the distant past, his behaviour and his dominant position next to the king reminiscent of the earlier status of Gunnhildr or Álfifa.

Leaving Ingiríðr aside for a moment, a striking complicating factor is found in the disagreement between the texts over where Grégóriús' motivations originate. *Morkinskinna* includes an anecdote where Grégóriús converses with his mother Ragnhildr, and she goads him to move against Sigurðr after an episode where Geirsteinn, an ally of Sigurðr, is killed for injustices committed against Ragnhildr's sister Gyða, and the king's allies seek revenge: “*Því muntu lengi lítill madr vera at ekki mun skipta þótt frændr þínir sé drepnir, ok muntu minnkask af góðum frændum þínum, ok ærin nauðsyn helt til áðr þetta verk væri gort.*”<sup>81</sup> (“You will be a small man for a long time if you do not act while your kinsmen are killed, and you will be lesser than your great kin. It was completely justified that this deed was done.”) The inclusion of this additional incitement gives Grégóriús another motivation for his actions, and it pulls the episode into the same space as the inciting of Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir discussed in chapter two. Further, it interpolates the inciting of Ingi into another wider network context, where the kin and friend groups behind Ingi and Sigurðr enter conflict without the kings

<sup>76</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 233

<sup>77</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 232-3

<sup>78</sup> In *Morkinskinna*, Ingiríðr's paraphrased speech only contains 25 words including the verbs describing the actions of speaking, whereas Grégóriús' speech contains 166 words in direct quotes alone.

<sup>79</sup> “*Leggja þeir mikla vingan sín í milli*”; *Morkinskinna II*: 229.

<sup>80</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 330

<sup>81</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 226-7



themselves, and the efforts to convince Ingi to escalate is an attempt by the group responsible to end the conflict through achieving all their aims simultaneously. Like Ingiríðr, both Ragnhildr and Gyða are key members of this underlying network, although in the text they receive only minor roles. Neither *Heimskringla* nor *Fagrskinna* include this additional episode, instead emphasising Grégóríús himself as both instigator and main inciter, but they do not contradict it. The scene may have originated from *Ágrip*, which mentions the episode surrounding Geirsteinn and Gyða, but the preserved version ends before the narrative turns to Grégóríús and his mother.<sup>82</sup> Neither Ingiríðr's nor Grégóríús' goading of the king to remove Sigurðr as a threat is thus necessarily considered unjust, but rather an attempt to protect their own political interests, and those of their wider network. All the sagas show that their men are killed off one by one, and that the expanding influence of Sigurðr is a danger to Grégóríús, Ingiríðr and their allies, male and female, and to the power base of their symbolic head Ingi.

The Ingiríðr/Grégóríús episodes showcase how the gendered network dynamic has developed in the saga narratives, and how the *male* network organiser has risen to the fore, partially at the expense of women's political influence. Like the women discussed in the previous chapters, and to an extent like Ingiríðr herself, Grégóríús is a network leader who himself cannot claim kingship but utilises networking and inciting strategies to influence the king. His advantage over the women lies in the fact that he can combine these with military leadership. Ingi has grown up and, due perhaps partially to the rising military tensions, has surrounded himself with warrior chieftains. Grégóríús, having become the most significant power behind Ingi's throne, intends to secure his own political future by any means necessary, and this falls closely in line with Ingiríðr's interests. While both seek to guide Ingi to the desired course of action, they both achieve this through Ingiríðr stepping aside in favour of Grégóríús. The change in dynamic between Ingiríðr and her male colleagues is further reflected in the presentation of the speech itself. She merely provides the initiating spark of a longer rhetorical process, presenting herself as a queen who is no longer in a dominant position at court, but still uses whatever political influence and skill she has to advance her son's cause, then letting Grégóríús take over, both literally in the scene at hand, and symbolically as Ingi's closest influence.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ágrip*: 53-4

*Phase three: the network changes*

In the final phase of Ingiríðr's career, she is similarly supplanted as the central female member of the network. Perhaps the most curious role in these struggles is played by Kristín Sigurðardóttir. As the daughter of Sigurðr Jórsalafari she does not belong to the ruling branch extending from Haraldr gilli at all, but is rather the sister of the defeated Magnús Sigurðarson. It is likely due to these kinship bonds that she is absent from any political action for a long time following her father's death, despite her royal status and the fact that she is, after all, first cousin to both Ingi and Sigurðr if Haraldr gilli's claims of lineage are truthful.<sup>83</sup> Like Ingiríðr, however, she enters the narrative as a part of Ingi's network and political plans, and her political career begins in earnest when she marries Erlingr Ormsson skakki (c. 1115-79), the rising star of the Norwegian aristocracy and one of Ingi's most influential supporters next to Grégóriús, as confirmed in *Morkinskinna*: "*Erlingr var [...] mikill vinr Inga konungs, ok með hans ráði var honum gipt Kristín, dóttir Sigurðar konungs Jórsalafara.*"<sup>84</sup> (Erlingr was a close friend of King Ingi, and at his behest he was married to Kristín, daughter of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari.) Erlingr gets a royal wife, Ingi ties an important aristocrat to himself through the use of his orphaned and brotherless cousin, and Kristín initially only serves as a convenient link in the network surrounding Ingi.<sup>85</sup>

From this point on, however, Kristín enters an important role alongside her husband, essentially functioning as Erlingr's deputy leader of their family network, although operating within the Ingi faction. While Erlingr is elsewhere, she performs the actions he himself would be expected to perform, such as when she is described as receiving guests and hosting a feast at her and Erlingr's estates, while leading the household in her husband's absence. The visitor is Grégóriús, her husband's colleague and occasional rival, and Kristín plays the role of host excellently, even dispensing with her husband's property (a ship) when their guest needs to borrow it.<sup>86</sup> This leads to a striking piece of recognition from the magnate: "*Grégóriús þakkaði henni vel ok lét henni hafa orðit stórmannliga, sem ván var at.*"<sup>87</sup> (Grégóriús thanked her well and said that she had behaved *stórmannligr*, as one would expect.) It is not certain whether this particular word in this context means 'supremely manly', derived from *mannligr*,

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<sup>83</sup> Note that both *Fagrskinna* (p. 358) and *Heimskringla* (*Heimskringla III*: 410) mention a premarital son of Kristín and Sigurðr with no elaboration or negative comment. It is possible their relationship is seen as more distant than previously thought, which has an impact on the view of Haraldr gilli's paternity. This requires examination elsewhere, however.

<sup>84</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 214

<sup>85</sup> Jochens 1986: 152

<sup>86</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 237; *Heimskringla III*: 342

<sup>87</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 342; this entire passage is essentially identical in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* aside from variations in pronoun and name usage.

or ‘like a *stórmaðr*’ (‘great man’ = male aristocrat/magnate), as the word lies at the intersection between meanings of masculinity and aristocratic grandeur.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, in either case there is little doubt that Grégóriús is recognising Kristín’s performance of host duties as masculine. She is described with the same term Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir uses to shame Sigurðr sýr in the episodes discussed in chapter two, and it describes the standard to which aristocratic men are expected to adhere. Kristín is receiving the powerful chieftain as an equal, and for the duration of this episode functions as any other male magnate.

On the other hand, Kristín’s role is tempered by the implications of the following sentence: “*Fóru þeir síðan til Björgynjar ok fundu Erling, ok þótti honum Kristín vel gort hafa.*”<sup>89</sup> (Afterwards [Grégóriús and his men] travelled to Björgvin and met with Erlingr, and he thought Kristín had done well.) The interaction between the magnates serves to further clarify the familial power dynamic. Grégóriús’ mentioning the visit to Erlingr, Erlingr’s approval of his wife’s actions, and the sources’ emphasis on the whole interaction, combine to make it clear that Kristín is second in command to Erlingr when it comes to managing network resources. The husband’s approval is given almost by default, but it *is* a necessary sanction of the wife’s behaviour. By welcoming her husband’s colleague like a *stórmaðr*, she functions as Erlingr’s deputy, a representative of the network able to fill his role when he is not present, but she is consistently subordinate to him, for instance shown in how she employs a spy to learn of their opponents’ plans when she finds herself amongst them without Erlingr, and subsequently dispatches a message to her husband in Björgvin, leaving the rest of the matter to him.<sup>90</sup>

### **Women as royal kinship links**

In the subsequent narrative development, after Ingi and Grégóriús both die in battle against the forces of Hákon herðibreiðr, son of Sigurðr Haraldsson, we find one of the most important interactions between women, kingship and network bonds. A key example of the use of women as legitimising factors as a central component in their political function, it ties into the argument that women of the later kings’ saga period are almost exclusively restricted to bonds of kinship, and typically it is their kinship being used for men’s political purposes. Erlingr, having received word from Kristín, gathers the magnates opposed to Hákon, including all the supporters of Ingi and Grégóriús, to find a successor to kingship and network leadership

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<sup>88</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson: 596

<sup>89</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 237

<sup>90</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 369

(notably presented as two separate positions). It is possible that *Fagrskinna* contained a similar scene, but there is a gap in the preserved manuscript, leaving the *Heimskringla* account as the only preserved version.

*Þá talaði Erlingr skakki, leitaði, ef þat væri ráð höfðingja eða annarra lendra manna, at tekinn væri til konungs sonr Símunar skálps, dóttursonr Haralds konungs gilla, en Jón Hallkelsson byndisk fyrir flokkinn. Jón mæltisk undan. Var þá leitat við Níkolás Skjaldvararson, systurson Magnúss konungs berfætts, ef hann vildi gerask höfðingi fyrir flokkinum. Hann svaraði á þá lund, at þat væri hans ráð at taka þann til konungs, er af konungaætt væri kominn, en þann til ráða fyrir flokkinn, er vænn væri til vits, lét mundu betra verða til liðs. Var leitat við Árna konungsmág, ef hann vildi láta taka til konungs nokkurn sona sinna, bræðra Inga konungs. Hann svaraði því, at sonr Kristínar, dóttursonr Sigurðar konungs, væri bezt ættborinn til konungdóms í Nóregi.<sup>91</sup>*

Then Erlingr skakki spoke and asked if it was the counsel of the chieftains and other landowners that the son of Símun ‘skálpr’, daughter-son of King Haraldr gilli, be taken as king, and that Jón Hallkelsson should bind himself to lead the faction. Jón expressed reluctance. It was then asked of Níkolás Skjaldvararson, sister-son of King Magnús berfættr, if he would become leader of the faction. He replied that it was his advice to take as king someone from kings’ *ætt*, and as leader of the faction someone who was capable of it, in order to gather more people. It was asked of Árni ‘konungsmágr’, if he would let one of his sons, brothers of King Ingi, be taken as king. He replied that the son of Kristín, daughter-son of King Sigurðr, was the most rightful heir by *ætt* to Norwegian kingship.

This passage is particularly valuable as it serves as an explicit and elaborate discussion of kinship among Norwegian aristocrats, and of the *ætt* concept in relation to kingship. No specific *ætt* is mentioned here, and it appears Haraldr hárfagri has fallen out of relevance even to saga authors. Instead, the emphasis lies on *konungaætt*, royal descent, in any form, and we are provided here with a public comparative assessment of several royal branches. The primary function of this gathering is to settle on which candidate has the strongest kin-based claims to leadership of the network, and thus to Norwegian kingship. In doing so, the elaborating chieftains give an indication of which lines from which kings are preferred, providing a template for other contested claims to kingship in the texts.

Building from this, the passage illustrates the increasing prominence of royal women in kinship networks. With the death of Ingi, the network surrounding his claims is left without a claimant from the male line of kings. As a result, every single one of the four candidates mentioned is connected to the royal *ætt* through women, namely their mothers. Strikingly,

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<sup>91</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 373

certain of these men, for instance Níkolás Skjaldvararson, are older individuals who have long been part of the political scene, but whose kinship background has never previously been considered sufficient to pursue kingship. Now that the field is thinned out, these men are suddenly introduced as potential claimants, displaying a drastic widening of Bagge's 'entrance tickets' to the game.<sup>92</sup> This similarly involves those connected to Ingi through his sisters. While the sons of Haraldr gilli devolved into conflict, his daughters Mária and Margrét were married to important Norwegian chieftains, the brothers Símun skálpr and Jón Hallkelsson. These chieftains, having already fought skirmishes for Ingi's side, now find prominence on the political scene; although Símun was killed in a skirmish, his son is considered as a candidate for kingship, and Jón is considered to lead due to his royal connection by affinity. The subsequent third option is particularly revealing, as the children of Ingi's stepfather Áрни 'konungsmágr' are brought up as candidates and referred to as brothers of Ingi. These children are the result of Áрни's marriage to Ingiríðr Rognvaldsdóttir, Áрни having become her fourth husband after the death of Óttarr birtingr. They consequently have no Norwegian royal descent at all, only their mother's connection to kings by marriage.<sup>93</sup> The children of Áрни are thus introduced as candidates as sons of Ingiríðr, an indication both of her unique position in the royal kinship networks and the political capital she must have accrued during the 25-year reign of her son Ingi, even though neither she herself nor her remaining sons are of Norwegian royal ancestry.

The most important individual in relation to the ties of kinship, however, is undoubtedly Kristín 'konungsdóttir'. In *Sverris saga* it is claimed (against Sverrir's interests) that the Norwegians preferred the descendants of Sigurðr Jórsalafari over those of Haraldr gilli, and Kristín is Sigurðr's only surviving child.<sup>94</sup> Even though a significant portion of the reason why the magnates decide to support Magnús is their wish to be led by his competent father Erlingr,<sup>95</sup> Magnús is introduced as *sonr Kristínar*. At no point in this passage is Magnús named, nor mentioned as the son of Erlingr. There are only two important individuals referred to as the reasons why the kingship by rights of kinship should go to the young Magnús: Kristín and her late father Sigurðr.<sup>96</sup> This in turn means that the standard bearer for the royal *ætt* in this gathering is perceived to be Kristín, with both Magnús and his father Erlingr

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<sup>92</sup> Bagge 1991: 85-90

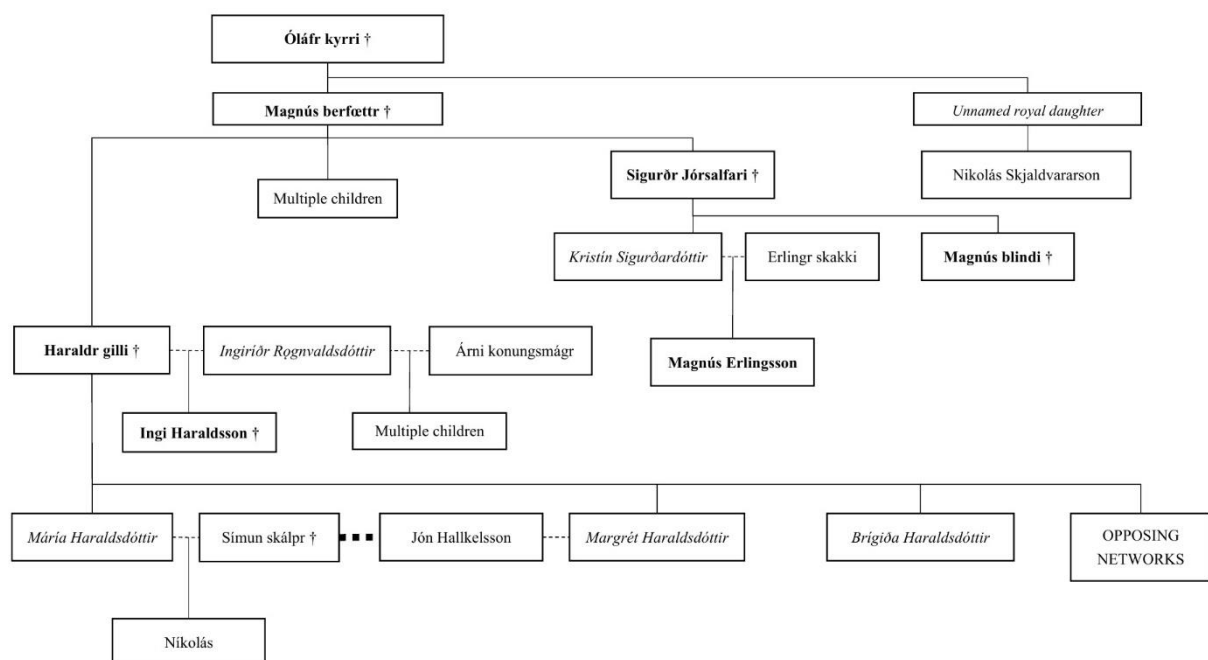
<sup>93</sup> Jochens briefly touches on the topic of a king's maternal half-brothers as receiving a certain status due to having shared the same womb as the king, despite lacking a direct kinship connection; see Jochens 1987b: 344.

<sup>94</sup> SvS: 7

<sup>95</sup> Áрни subsequently refers to Erlingr's leadership as vital to the faction's success and something that is guaranteed by supporting his son for kingship; see *Heimskringla III*: 373-4.

<sup>96</sup> Magnús is similarly recorded as Kristín's son in *Nóregs konungatal* (Gade 2009: 799-800).

deriving their power from her. Furthermore, Kristín is the only woman referred to by name and as an individual. The other kings' daughters remain nameless in this context (although their names can be found elsewhere), and they are only indirectly included. The lack of active women further adds to the scene's assembly-like aura, although the term used for it is *stefnulatag*, 'meeting', rather than the more formal *þing*, 'assembly'. The contrast to the active and dominant assembly or council-meeting participation of Gunnhildr, Álfífa and Ástríðr is clear; here, various prominent royal women are spoken about, but do not themselves speak. Kristín, like the other women, appears to not be present, or at least not speaking, at the gathering, leaving political deliberations to the men of the network, but she nevertheless plays a far more prominent role due to her perceived superior position in the kinship group.



**Figure 4.** The extensive network of royal claimants at the meeting of the Ingi faction.

It has been suggested that men perceived the potential danger of women from superior lineage claiming the throne in their own right.<sup>97</sup> However, there is no evidence of this ever occurring after the unification of the Scandinavian kingdoms.<sup>98</sup> Women can be described as exercising royal power, but never to formally take kingship for themselves. Both Kristín and Ingiríðr exist here as vessels of royal authority and legitimacy, able to actively channel or passively have it be channelled through them to a male candidate, but not to claim such power for themselves. This can be observed in the complete lack of matronymic naming amongst kings

<sup>97</sup> Auður Magnúsdóttir 2013: 105-6

<sup>98</sup> Cf. the discussion of female rulers in the previous chapter.

and high-ranking aristocrats in the immediate past. While all the candidates here draw royal legitimacy from their mothers, their mothers have little control over them, leaving each candidate either an independent adult previously unsuited for kingship, or a male child functioning as a vehicle for his male relatives.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, even passive female legitimacy is problematic. A successor through the female line would still be considered an affront to the law, as demonstrated by a conversation between Erlingr and the archbishop of Niðaróss, retold in *Fagrskinna*.<sup>100</sup> As many other episodes, this scene is expanded upon by Snorri, who has Erlingr defend the succession, partially through an appeal to English and Danish precedent, thus implying a departure from Norwegian tradition.<sup>101</sup> Even more importantly, he asserts the following: “*En móðir Magnúss konungs er konungs dóttir ok dróttningar skilfengin. Magnús er ok dróttningar sonr ok eiginkonu sonr.*”<sup>102</sup> (“King Magnús’ mother is the trueborn daughter of a king and queen. Magnús is also the son of a queen and of a true wife.”) While again removing his own name from the discussion entirely, Erlingr here presents his wife in the noblest light possible, declaring her both *konungsdóttir*, ‘king’s daughter’, and *dróttning*, ‘queen’. While Kristín has never been married to a king, the *dróttning* title is used by her husband to solidify their son’s claim further, the only instance in the *konungasögur* where a woman who is not a king’s wife or a ruling queen is being mentioned as such.<sup>103</sup> It is evidently still a matter of doubt which adds a certain precarity to Magnús’ legitimacy, as his parentage is later used as a critique against him by Sverrir, who bases his claim to usurp Magnús on the notion that there has never before been a king who was not a king’s son.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, this too implies a drastic change in the power structures surrounding women’s political participation. While female legitimacy has evidently been considered unacceptable for centuries, in a time when women would arguably be presented by the sagas as more powerful, a combination of the political interests of certain factions with foreign influence and the collapse of dynastic male lines enables rule-bending.

The episode further provides additional information about the balance of power. Erlingr is shown to be the guarantor of the kingship, the man the network wants as its leader even if Magnús holds the nominal kingship. With the death of Grégóríús, he already appears to be the undisputed aristocratic hegemon of the Ingi faction, and the remaining magnates seem

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<sup>99</sup> While several kings draw royal power exclusively from the female line, including Magnús Erlingsson and Ingi Bárðarson, there are no matronyms applied to kings after Sveinn Álfífuson; see Appendix IV.

<sup>100</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 350

<sup>101</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 395-7

<sup>102</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 396-7

<sup>103</sup> See Appendix III.

<sup>104</sup> Bandlien 2013: 359; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 112

prepared to hand him the governmental reins. Kristín, although certainly an influential individual herself because of her status and familial importance, is used in these manoeuvres as a tool by her husband. Following the decisions made at the meeting, the family as such turns into a unique triumvirate where kingship (Magnús), royal power (Erlingr) and royal legitimacy (Kristín) are spread between three different people, although all three belong to the same household.<sup>105</sup> While Kristín is evidently barred from royal power herself, it is now Erlingr, a man, who functions as a network leader governing through a son, similar to earlier women such as Gunnhildr and Álfífa. Hence, Magnús is referred to by the patronymic Erlingsson even though his royal legitimacy comes from his mother.

After the meeting, the new network structure is solidified. Ingiríðr fades into the background, no longer the mother of a ruling king, but still remains with the faction beyond Ingi's death and thus helps provide a sense of political continuity, for instance travelling alongside Erlingr, Kristín and Magnús to seek the aid of King Valdamarr of Denmark (r. 1154-82).<sup>106</sup> Kristín, on the other hand, succeeds in the role as the most prominent woman in Norway, further reinforced by her status as Valdamarr's maternal cousin. She remains subordinate to Erlingr, but continues to play important political functions, including playing a key part in maintaining Danish-Norwegian relations when they fracture a few years later, acting as a diplomatic operative and mediator in Denmark on Magnús' and Erlingr's behalf. While there are limited skirmishes and disputes surrounding the contested Víkin region, initially promised to Valdamarr in exchange for his support for Magnús' kingship, there does not appear to be open conflict. Kristín's mission to Denmark with a full retinue, explicitly linked to her kinship with the Danish king, is thus an attempt to re-establish a working bond, and Valdamarr receives her warmly despite his enmity with her husband.<sup>107</sup>

Kristín's Danish mission is a distinct instance of the recurring saga theme of a disadvantaged power player travelling south to Denmark to plead for the support of the Danish king in defeating his rivals for the Norwegian throne, evocative of the early journeys of Hákon jarl and Haraldr gráfeldr, both of whom also had to sue for peace. This time, the power player in question is in consolidated control of the Norwegian kingship and further does not initially go himself, but rather has his wife, whose kinship position is stronger, represent him. Only when Kristín has managed to soothe relations does Erlingr arrive. The end result of the embassy

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<sup>105</sup> This is also comparable to the political situation at the time of Sverrir's arrival and Magnús' adulthood, when actual power is divided between a king, a jarl and an archbishop; see Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 110.

<sup>106</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 375

<sup>107</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 405



becomes a lordship bond between Valdamarr and Erlingr, where the latter holds Víkin as a nominal Danish vassal, a compromise essentially leaving both sides with what they want from an official standpoint.<sup>108</sup> This settlement is only possible because of Kristín, sent to Denmark first because of her strong kinship bond, and in order to test the waters to see if Valdamarr is amenable to an advantageous peace agreement. Possibly, given that Erlingr and Valdamarr have been raiding each other's lands shortly beforehand, the accord is on her initiative. Here, with *Morkinskinna*'s ending, *Heimskringla* is the only Old Norse source for Kristín's later activities, as *Fagrskinna* and *Sverris saga* provide only a single brief indirect mention each.<sup>109</sup>

Both Ingiríðr and Kristín are perfect examples of the changing role of women in kings' saga politics. Loyal wives and mothers primarily using their superior network advantages to advance the interests of their husbands and sons, they never achieve the dominant network power of women in the earlier narratives. It is only in the unique circumstance surrounding Ingi's coronation that Ingiríðr finds herself in a position of independent influence. Her role quickly fades when Ingi grows up and surrounds himself with an increasing number of successful male military leaders. As the marriage to Óttarr shows, and potentially also her cooperation with Grégóriús' plan to remove Sigurðr, she is content using whatever influence she can to support these male leaders, as long as it benefits the royal authority of her son, something she explicitly declares to be her main concern in the incitement scene. Regardless of what power Ingiríðr herself may or may not have wielded, it is evident that she has a strong impact on Scandinavian politics through her kinship bonds, for instance in *Sverris saga* where, long after her death, there is a reference to the many “*afspring Ingiríðar*”.<sup>110</sup>

Kristín, following Ingiríðr's later activities, is consistently seen submitting to her powerful husband Erlingr and is seemingly described to simply be obeying his instructions, displaying limited personal agency through her admittedly few textual appearances. Furthermore, despite her occasional forays into masculine politics, she is an almost idealised feminine figure, far removed from the male-adjacent heroines of the distant past. Kristín for instance dutifully cares for the corpse of her cousin Ingi after having been asked by him to do so, corresponding closely to the positive image of saga women in nurturing and healing roles.<sup>111</sup> The only saga instance of Kristín speaking is from this context, and it is quite telling: “*En henni lézk*

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<sup>108</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 405; cf. Hermanson & Orning 2020b: 67.

<sup>109</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 358; *SvS*: 179; cf. mentions of Magnús going to Denmark in *GD II*: 1222.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Ingiríðr's offspring’; *SvS*: 200.

<sup>111</sup> For women's nurturing roles as socially approved, see Clark 2012: 161-3.

*agasamligt þykkja ok kvað eigi kvinna vist þar vera.*<sup>112</sup> (She thought it was dangerous to stay, and said women should not be there.) Such gender consciousness helps to craft an image of Kristín as far removed from the bold aggression imbued in earlier saga women. She is indeed similar to certain other women positioned earlier in the historiography, such as Ingigerðr, another virtuous royal daughter, but Kristín has considerably more lines she does not cross. She never expresses dissent, she never challenges her male relatives, and she never appears to utilise network connections of her own independent of those of her husband. On the few occasions where she shows independent agency, she exclusively does so as a representative of her husband, and to advance the interests of their joint network, which is led by him.

A final direct continuity between the women of the pre-1177 sagas and *Sverris saga* is found in Brígiða Haraldsdóttir. The first woman mentioned in *Sverris saga* after Sverrir's own mother, she is also the last woman mentioned in *Heimskringla* (as well as in *Fagrskinna*), providing a clear transition between the sagas' portrayals of women and politics. In fact, the *Heimskringla* scene is nearly identical to the *Sverris saga* scene discussed above, and it may well have been based on it. However, Brígiða and her husband Birgir, prior to Sverrir's arrival, are in the younger text receiving Eysteinn, son of Eysteinn Haraldsson and Sverrir's cousin. Again, Brígiða is the link, but it is Birgir's help which is sought, evident from the introductory sentence: “[Eysteinn] fór á fund Birgis brosu. Hann átti þá Brígiðam, dóttur Haralds gilla, fǫðursystur Eysteins.”<sup>113</sup> (Eysteinn went to meet Birgir brosa, who was then married to Brígiða, daughter of Haraldr gilli and Eysteinn's father-sister.) It is a meeting of men bound by kinship ties to a woman. One difference occurs, namely that as part of the agreement of support (which precludes them from subsequently supporting Sverrir) the couple both promise Eysteinn friendship, the only instance of *vinátta* involving a woman in the last four sagas of *Heimskringla*.<sup>114</sup> It does not change the presentation of the scene, which is one where Brígiða remains, as in *Sverris saga*, a passive network link between men.

## Conclusion

By examining *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*'s narratives leading toward the contemporary historiography of *Sverris saga*, the women analysed in this chapter allow for the observation of two key trends. First and foremost, there is a substantial contrast between the pre-1040 and post-1136 periods in the *konungasögur*. Women's royal authority in public and masculine

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<sup>112</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 365

<sup>113</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 411; cf. *Fagrskinna*: 364.

<sup>114</sup> See Appendix III under *vinátta*.

spheres is inherently tied to the saga reconstruction of the more distant past. There are no women explicitly involved in the *landráð* after Álfífa and Ástríðr, no kings with matronymics as discussed above, almost no recorded instances of female *vinátta*,<sup>115</sup> and few examples of women crafting network bonds on their own behalf. Ingiríðr and Kristín show, on the other hand, the emerging trend of infant kings controlled by their parents, a phenomenon absent from the earlier period where all kings were adolescent at a minimum. But while king's mothers acquire governmental roles, to some extent observable ones, even these child kings are decreasingly influenced by their mothers and increasingly by powerful male non-royal network organisers such as Óttarr, Grégóriús and Erlingr, the individuals controlling the military and political resources as integral to rulership as the nominal kingship itself. The return of an adult warrior king, in *Sverris saga*'s eponymous protagonist, removes the distinction between these branches of government,<sup>116</sup> and effectively removes women's influence on the monarchy. The women of Sverrir's reign only gain prominence and status by their attachments to Sverrir, and these attachments lead more often to accepting his wishes than to exercising any real power of their own.

The network patterns remain in the narratives of the immediate past, and women are more directly vital to royal kinship, but they are frequently pawns in the power games of men rather than active players, although occasionally still retaining agency and influence. Primarily they function as legitimising links, such as Cecilía in *Sverris saga* and Kristín in *Heimskringla*, but they still use the influence inherent in such positions to increase their own status. The overall trend, however, is that women's active use of network bonds to gain powerful political roles for themselves is largely absent from the narratives centred on the later period, leaving only female legitimacy of male kingship as an increasingly important political factor. Their political influence is tied to the kinship bond, with friendship and lordship, at least in the public sense observed in previous chapters, removed. In the historiography, this relegates them to supporting roles at best.

Women here find agency primarily within their kinship ties to powerful men, and while women of the distant past are shown to be able to form political bonds and networks alone, royal women of the sagas' immediate past to an increasing degree have these bonds formed for them. They only become influential figures through relatively involuntary bonds and only

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<sup>115</sup> For both *landráð* and *vinátta*, see Appendix III; there are no instances of women and *vinátta* in *Sverris saga*, and only one in *Heimskringla*'s sagas of the period discussed in this chapter. For comparison, there are five such instances in *Óláfs saga helga* alone.

<sup>116</sup> Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 110

as representatives of their families, rather than using bonds to fulfil their own political agenda. However, the emergence of standardised queenship,<sup>117</sup> rather than granting women increased political influence, seems to place them within stricter behavioural confines. This is only somewhat observable in the changing roles of Ingiríðr and Kristín, both referred to as *dróttning* but neither shown in an active political role as a king's wife. It does, however, find strong resonance in the *Sverris saga* portrayal of Margrét Eiríksdóttir as a king's wife with high social status, but whose agency primarily exists in private with her husband. Beyond the sources analysed here, the same trend then continues into the presentation of Margrét Skúladóttir (1208-70) in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* as another completely passive political tool, although as the daughter of Skúli Bárðarson jarl and wife of Sverrir's grandson King Hákon Hákonarson she is the person most closely connected to the two most powerful men in the kingdom.<sup>118</sup> After Sverrir's accession, a stable monarch with a single crowned queen with minimal official political power thus appears to become the dominant trend in the historiography of the Norwegian kingdom, with similar descriptions occurring for Margrét's successors.<sup>119</sup> There is no doubt that networks and interpersonal bonds retain social and political importance, but women's active use of these to play powerful political roles is considerably more restricted in the saga narratives of the immediate past.

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<sup>117</sup> Larrington 2009: 509

<sup>118</sup> Margrét is mentioned by name only 13 times in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, she only speaks twice (both times in private conversation), and she is never described to take any political action.

<sup>119</sup> Ingibjörg Eiríksdóttir is similarly described as a passive queen without a significant political role, judging from fragments of *Magnúss saga lagabætis*, the last of the known *konungasögur*.

# Conclusion

## Women in network politics

Through the analysis of women across kings' saga narratives, I have shown how the exercise of political power by women is channelled, negotiated and performed through and within aristocratic networks, and through individual connections relating to such networks. I have explored the nature of the political structures during the development of the Scandinavian kingdoms as presented by the *konungasögur*, and investigated the channels through which women are presented as participating in these structures. My aim here is to conclude the analysis by drawing the cases together and addressing the common parameters determining access to political influence within these networks. Similarly, I will address the parameters determining social acceptance for said influence within the historiographical discourse. Again, due to the nature of the source material, these questions remain inseparably intertwined.

The final argument presented here is thus a direct response to the hypothesis presented in the introduction. Gendered roles are more blurred in network leadership, as this particular form of political involvement does not require gender-exclusive performance, unlike other forms of political and military leadership. Instead, such involvement involves a set of organisational, transactional, and rhetorical roles played by women as well as men. These roles are embodied, as shown, in the network organiser, the common thread throughout this work. However, even in the network context, such roles are evidently only accessible to certain women, and only in certain circumstances. While each of the individuals analysed throughout the thesis is unique in her own way, it has become clear that women's access to political influence through networks, as well as both social justification and endorsement of such influence, is repeatedly based on a variety of recurring factors. Network bonds are the common denominators behind these factors, but primarily in the sense of who the bonds are formed with and what the women's networks themselves represent. In particular, it is women's relations to and behaviour around kings, as well as their own ability to root their power in royal male authority, that determines the potential trajectory of the political careers and how those careers are recorded.

We can divide these factors into three groups determining a woman's political opportunity, and for her social sanction for taking advantage of such opportunity, based on the material discussed:

1. Birth and social status
2. Marital and maternal situation
3. Political circumstances

### ***1. Birth and social status***

I have identified a variety of individual factors relating to kinship, family and birthright as the central core of political networks. While it has been shown that influential women, like men, can occasionally partake in other public associations of friendship and lordship, it is only through kinship that we can assess a woman's opportunity to advance her position within a network and expand her influence into other bonds. For men, kinship factors often determine what can be accomplished in the political context, serving as 'entrance tickets' to the political game.<sup>1</sup> This is equally true for women, and familial factors determine both women's potential access to political power, and societal rationalisations for women exercising such power.

First of all, we must assess the matter of social class and establish the parameters which can leave a woman with absolutely no access to the political scene. While most of the extensive case studies have been centred on royal and aristocratic women, primarily because the overwhelming majority of (female) characters in active roles in the kings' sagas are aristocrats,<sup>2</sup> I have mentioned various concubines, servants and other women who are often drawn from below the highest class. When these women appear in kings' saga narratives and interact with royal networks, their political participation is consistently limited, their influence marginalized in the context around them. Álfhildr, mother of Óláfr Haraldsson's illegitimate son, is the most prominent example. A counterpoint to the king's powerful wife Ástriðr, she is described as Óláfr's servant girl, but like other non-aristocratic women she is effectively denied any political influence, restricted at the court of her own son as discussed in chapter two. Her kinship status is described as satisfactory in *Heimskringla*,<sup>3</sup> but likely this is simply an attempt to defend the legitimacy of her son, as similar descriptions are given to other

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<sup>1</sup> Bagge 1991: 85-90

<sup>2</sup> Of the 29 central women referenced in Appendix I, 24 come from undisputed aristocratic/royal lineage, with several of the remaining 5 highly uncertain, e. g. Gunnhildr, as discussed in chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 209

concubines of uncertain kinship who give birth to eventual kings.<sup>4</sup> This technique is the same one used by Sverrir to defend his own legitimacy in *Sverris saga*, where he highlights his mother's kinship status and defines it as impressive, without giving any indication of what it is.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of considerable class disparity and deliberate exclusion of women of low rank can further be reinforced by other characters in the texts, such as Ástriðr's words dismissing Álfhildr as “*ambátt sína*”, ‘her servant’.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the social divide between aristocratic and non-aristocratic women is consistently highlighted. The subsequent critical in-text remark that Álfhildr's intrusive behaviour at court is emblematic of those who gain too much too fast provides us with a relatively rare example of textual enforcement of class norm in *Heimskringla*.<sup>7</sup> Snorri's warning implies that Álfhildr, and women like her, are intruders into the royal and aristocratic sphere. Shortly after in the narrative, these indications are supplemented by Sigvatr, whose aforementioned poem scolding Álfhildr indicates a certain degree of societal contemporary enforcement from those present at the royal court.<sup>8</sup> All in all, Álfhildr, who occupies the same space as the powerful Ástriðr, and whose biological connections to the king are stronger than hers, is consequently denied royal prominence, political influence and social sanction due to her class ties alone.

The scrutiny facing Álfhildr, both by Ástriðr and Sigvatr and by the third-person narrative of Snorri, is remarkably similar to insults thrown against the defeated pretender Sigurðr slembidjárn, another person allegedly attempting to rise above his station. Sigurðr, while waiting to be brutally executed, is accused by his gloating opponents in both *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* of being a slave's son who has tried to take on the trappings of a king.<sup>9</sup> As such, there is certainly a pattern of enforcement of class norms integral to network politics for individuals of both sexes. Commoners, even the daughters of *bændr* and lower aristocrats, are deliberately excluded from playing the political games of the elite, seen when Borghildr Óláfsdóttir, who was mentioned in the introductory chapter, becomes the target of social denunciation for entering *vinátta* with the king.<sup>10</sup> But the male Sigurðr, unlike non-aristocratic

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Þóra Morstrstong, mother of Hákon inn góði, and Borghildr Óláfsdóttir, mother of Magnús blindi; see *Heimskringla I*: 143; *Heimskringla III*: 257. Similar justifications are made for Hákon Sverrisson's tryst with Inga, mother of his illegitimate child Hákon Hákonarson in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*.

<sup>5</sup> SvS: 199-200; Auður Magnúsdóttir (2020: 220-1) suggests that sagas not revealing a mother's parentage indicates that she was of humble birth.

<sup>6</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 14; cf. similar references to Þóra Morstrstong in *Ágrip*: 11; *Heimskringla I*: 143-5.

<sup>7</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 14

<sup>8</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 20

<sup>9</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 208; *Heimskringla III*: 318

<sup>10</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 257

women, is at least allowed to participate in the contest for power and perform all the functions expected from a king, until he is defeated and stripped of his dignity. Men are given the benefit of the doubt for as long as they can uphold their claims through military force, and while Sigurðr eventually fails, the success of Sverrir is an example of when such doubts are ultimately overcome. This does not occur for women. None of the royal concubines mentioned in the narratives are necessarily from the lowest segments of society, many even from lower segments of the aristocracy, but they are to varying degrees considered out of place, their kinship status insufficient to enable active political participation.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the exact nature of the social standing of royal concubines and how exactly their class background could be defined, they are frequently deemed somewhat too low in rank to be consorting with kings, and certainly too low in rank to claim any significant political advantage from such relationships.

The same can, however, be true for wives. Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir, discussed in chapter two, is nearly repudiated by her first husband Haraldr grenski due to not being highborn enough,<sup>12</sup> potentially explaining her later lack of a political role despite being the mother of two Norwegian kings.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Haraldr hárfagri himself is said in *Heimskringla* to have repudiated all of his previous wives when given the chance to marry a Danish princess.<sup>14</sup> As such, non-aristocratic women are consistently excluded from the political game regardless of their marital status. There is little to no indication of these women ever being included in aristocratic network bonds beyond their one link to the king and potentially another to his children. Overall, this shows two things about the impact of class on political access:

1. Women below the aristocratic class are presented as excluded from politics, even those women forming relationships with kings. When such women do approach areas of influence, both explicit comments in the third-person narrative and the more general presentation of society in a saga can express a negative reaction.
2. When women of low or uncertain ancestry do participate in royal kinship bonds, their ancestry is regularly emphasised, exaggerated, or possibly fabricated, so as to justify any links in which the women take part, and to avoid any potential network detriment to the royal and aristocratic men with whom they are linked.

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<sup>11</sup> Hence why Álfifa is disparaged as a concubine in the hostile *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, as discussed above.

<sup>12</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 288

<sup>13</sup> Beyond Óláfr's visit discussed at the beginning of chapter 2, Ásta only appears once more in *Heimskringla*, and only to allow Óláfr to meet his young half-brothers.

<sup>14</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 118-9



If claims of legitimacy are primarily excuses to provide entrance tickets into the political game for men, for women these are very real requirements. Even remote association with a royal network sees a woman's status challenged and scrutinised, leaving little room for political influence unless her position is unassailable. There is a variety of *male* pretenders who use questionable claims to royal lineage as springboards to enter the contest for power, but there is no such opportunity for women. Instead, nearly every woman in a politically powerful role in the *konungasögur*, able to build friendship and lordship bonds and organise wider networks beyond her own immediate family, is born into the highest levels of the aristocratic class. For women, royal and aristocratic status is a categorical matter: while a man can claim it and enforce his claim through military force, a woman in the saga narratives either possesses it, in which case her kinship links are in most cases given elaborate treatment by saga authors, or she does not.<sup>15</sup> The answer determines her political potential.

Within the boundaries of the aristocratic and royal class, political opportunity appears to be more fluid, and the case studies show that certain women are presented as having easier access to network leadership and the independent construction of additional bonds. As an example, we can assess women addressed as *konungsdóttir*, 'king's daughter', a term mentioned on several occasions, for instance regarding Ingigerðr and Ástriðr in chapter two. For a seemingly common term, it is remarkably rare in the historiography, and there are considerably more daughters of kings in the texts than there are women being referred to by this title.<sup>16</sup> It does not occur at all in shorter texts such as *Ágrip*, and while it is applied to some foreign princesses in Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*,<sup>17</sup> Oddr has a tendency to exaggerate titles, possibly, as previously mentioned, due to the text being a translation from Latin.<sup>18</sup> In *Heimskringla*, it is only ever applied to five Scandinavian women, and across the saga material, it is exclusively applied to royal daughters of particularly high rank who are both mentioned as direct subjects and figuring in important roles based on their kinship, shown for instance in how the illustrious Ingigerðr is subject to most uses of the term.<sup>19</sup> Often, these important roles are related to women's marriage prospects, but it does also appear to necessitate a degree of socio-political prominence regardless of marriage politics. The way the word is used, both repeatedly placed after the name of the individual in question, and as a

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<sup>15</sup> Again, the only potential exceptions are Gunnhildr and Sigríðr stórráða, whose ancestry is highly open to interpretation.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix III for a full list of women referred to as *konungsdóttir*.

<sup>17</sup> Including Óláfr's English wife Gyða and the Wendish Ástriðr; see Appendix III.

<sup>18</sup> See Oddr's reference to Gunnhildr as 'queen of all Norway' in chapter 1.

<sup>19</sup> In contemporary kings' sagas such as *Böglunga saga* and in the later *Hákonar saga*, the title does appear to be applied to all royal daughters, but because of the limited scopes of these sagas, there are very few instances anyway.

form of address by other individuals, suggests that it is a formal title rather than a mere description, which would not be unusual in medieval royalty.<sup>20</sup> It is applied no differently from other titles such as *konungr* or *jarl*, and in fact, due to it only being used in the text when referring to a specific individual in singular form, it is even more exclusive. Further, adding to the implied use of *konungsdóttir* as a royal title, it is substituted for *dróttningr* in references to women upon their marriages to kings. Their royal connections remain at the forefront of textual references to them, but the primary connection has changed from father to husband as a consequence of marriage.

Similarly, the female descendants of Óláfr Haraldsson, his daughter Úlfhildr Óláfsdóttir and granddaughter Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir, are referred to with the title.<sup>21</sup> Both of these women are solidly subordinate to their kinsmen and display little in-text agency, but they are both, like Ingigerðr and Ástríðr, exceptionally desirable marriage prospects due to their kinship. The same is true for Kristín Sigurðardóttir in the narratives of the civil war era, discussed in chapter four. Introduced as *konungsdóttir* on multiple occasions, she is unique in that she also keeps the title after her marriage and the coronation of her son.<sup>22</sup> While she does not receive a new title with her marriage, it is also likely she continues to be known for the title due to her husband and son desperately needing her kinship link, particularly indicated by the fact that her role as the daughter of a king is emphasised over her role as mother of a king; after the death of her cousin Ingi she appears to have been Norway's only legitimate royal child.

This ties into an important network point, namely that the women named as *konungsdóttir* are all politically important for the royal kinship links they provide to their wider network, and draw their agency from it as a result. All these women are treated as the ultimate political prizes, valuable links from which to build sturdier network bonds and royal legitimacy, but most if not all are able to actively negotiate their positions and find political roles within them. Those explicitly addressed in the sagas as *konungsdætr* are kings' daughters who are centrally placed in royal kinship networks, and politically prominent enough to be particularly valuable marriage partners and network links. Conversely, many daughters of Norwegian kings are never referred to as *konungsdóttir*. This includes the daughters of minor regional kings as opposed to countrywide kings,<sup>23</sup> but also women such as Mária, daughter of Haraldr

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. in Byzantium, we find the exceptional status of the *porphyrogenetoi*, those 'born in the purple' to a reigning emperor. Zóe is one such.

<sup>21</sup> For Úlfhildr, see *Heimskringla II*: 328. For Ragnhildr, see *Heimskringla III*: 132.

<sup>22</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 405

<sup>23</sup> For example Gyða Eiríksdóttir and Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir, both daughters of regional Norwegian kings. Ingibjörg's sister Ástríðr refers to herself as *konungs dóttir*, but is never addressed by the title in the text; see *Heimskringla I*: 306.

harðráði, who is presented as a virtuous royal daughter, but without the title, as well as the aforementioned daughters of Haraldr gilli. The absence of the title for certain kings' daughters does not, of course, prove that they were never known by it, but it clearly shows what women saga authors actively commemorate and associate as particularly prominent in royal kinship networks. While we know little of contemporary use, the sagas only bestow the title on the very highest echelons of royal women, central to the course of Norwegian network politics, indicating that the title is a peak of social status for women. It is a marker of political importance more than political agency, but the same is true for any title, even king, and status and agency are often intertwined, as we have seen, with the former often enabling the latter.

As *konungsdóttir*, a woman can frequently be justified in participating in politics in the eyes of the sagas, not unlike a *konungssonr*, 'king's son', as she can reasonably control her own network and negotiate her own kinship position without facing scrutiny. Royal links can provide legitimate power for women, and the position of a ruling king's daughter is strong enough to provide room for political participation on its own, often initially by negotiating one's own marriage. On the other hand, it is rarely enough to provide considerable opportunity for political power on its own, and not all *konungsdætr* automatically play powerful roles. We find women who are not described as royal at all, and in many cases not even explicitly aristocratic, but still find themselves among the most powerful individuals of either sex on the political scene. This group can include everything from foreign aristocrats to women who are said to be the daughters of obscure, possibly invented magnates, but whose class background is not in doubt. While aristocratic lineage appears indispensable, royal birth is thus not the only pathway for women to participate in network politics on the royal level. Indeed, if class is a sorting mechanism, and various forms of royal and aristocratic lineage subsequently function as various levels from which to spark political activity, that activity still appears to be highly malleable, but only accessible from certain network positions.

## ***2. Marital and maternal situation***

Another central question has been how royal and aristocratic women generally capitalise on their kinship bonds once those bonds are formed. As we have seen, the right marriage is vital; just as how the most successful women are often daughters of kings, marriage to a king or another powerful aristocrat is essential. Nearly all the women I have discussed have found themselves at least at some point in their careers in marriages or marriage-like relationships

with powerful male political leaders.<sup>24</sup> Women primarily find themselves in important network positions, with the ability to form additional friendship and lordship bonds of their own, after having entered such a marriage. The wife of a king or another powerful aristocrat has access to the networks of her husband, and can often use his status, influence and authority in addition to her own, when forming these additional bonds. The importance of a satisfactory marriage bond, therefore, is vital. This is particularly seen in the cases of kings' daughters and other aristocratic women using rhetoric to improve their prospects and those of their potential husbands, as shown in chapter two.

Similarly, fertility is equally vital, with a royal or aristocratic wife's status frequently being dependent on whether or not she is able to advance the kin group with the birth of a son. As far as terminology goes, a similar title to *konungsdóttir* in terms of royal connection is found with Gunnhildr, famously referred to as *konungamóðir*, 'mother of kings'. It has previously been speculated if this could be more than just a description,<sup>25</sup> and based on the network analysis, this appears highly likely. This particular title is in most texts unique to Gunnhildr and tends to be associated with her alone, but similar variants do exist. Þóra, mother of Sigurðr Jórsalafari, is for instance referred to as *konungsmóðir*, mother of a singular king, in *Heimskringla*.<sup>26</sup> The title is thus not a specific descriptor for Gunnhildr alone, but a kinship-based title recognising the nature of her power and where it stems from, similar to, although an inversion of, the women referred to as *konungsdóttir*. Similar to how women draw network prominence and political opportunity from their fathers, they can also draw it from their sons; the primary importance lies with the royal male connection. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that Kristín Sigurðardóttir, who is the daughter of one king and the mother of another, is only ever referred to as *konungsdóttir*, indicating the precedence of existing royal descent.

As demonstrated throughout the various chapters, the overarching primary avenue is for women to exercise power through a male relative, the best alternative being a son, particularly in widowhood. Such power through motherhood primarily occurs in a situation where there are rightful male heirs over whom the mother has familial seniority. Their political status as kings or king's sons might supersede hers as a mere king's wife or widow, but her network status as a parent and head of household supersedes theirs.<sup>27</sup> As such, her kinship bonds can

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<sup>24</sup> As mentioned, Álfifa's relationship with Knútr is complicated, but functions as a marriage-like kinship bond.

<sup>25</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 85

<sup>26</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 271; cf. Appendix III.

<sup>27</sup> This goes back to the discussion of widowed mothers as particularly powerful in wider medieval Europe; see for instance McNamara & Wemple 1973: 135; Phillips 1999: 16; Garland 1999: 183ff.; Dailey 2015: 16ff.

be supplemented with lordship bonds within the network itself. Both Gunnhildr and Álfífa function this way, as seen through their domineering behaviour over their sons in the council meeting scenes, and their overall treatment, even by their enemies, as leaders of political factions centred around their sons. Ingiríðr and Kristín are later able to fill similar functions when their sons are in their infancy, but only alongside male associates, whereas the women of the distant past are presented as able to play such roles alone, and even during the reigns of adult sons. From the example of Ástríðr, it is further clear that power wielded through a son could also be wielded through a surrogate son. With the arrival of her stepson Magnús, Ástríðr sees a unique political opportunity and embraces it, and while such a relationship would not necessarily work for other women in different circumstances, the important point is that Ástríðr, like Gunnhildr and Álfífa, requires a male figurehead to wield power through, and as a widow without a biological son of her own, a stepson fills this purpose. It is further a good example of an intersection between the issues discussed here; while Ástríðr is not the king's biological mother, it is evidently deemed more reasonable for her to play an influential governmental role on his behalf, than for his low-born mother Álfhildr to do so.

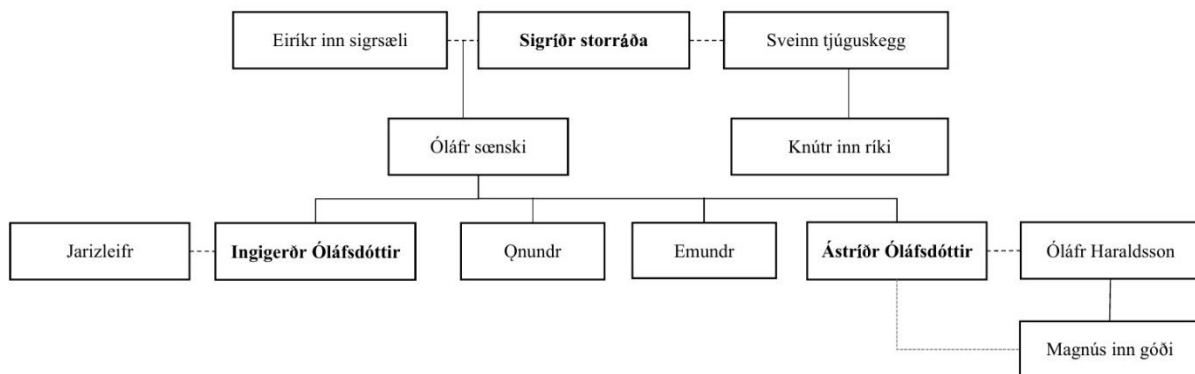
If not through sons, women can exercise some power through husbands, although with considerably less authority within the household. Sigríðr stórráða and Ingibjörg Tryggvadóttir are examples of this. Their respective behaviour with their husbands makes it clear that although they both undeniably wield strong network influence and can pursue individual political agendas from within their roles as wives, they are required to submit to a superior male authority figure to an extent evidently not required from a mother of kings. Even exceptions to the son/husband rule do exist, a prominent example being Ingigerðr's influence as an unmarried daughter. However, Ingigerðr is unique in her ability to negotiate her own position as an exceptionally desirable marriage prospect, similarly relying on royal connections for this negotiating stance, although she is leveraging potential bonds rather than existing ones.

Overall, women here follow along the same lines as men. Men, too, can exercise power through someone where they themselves have little opportunity for legitimacy. From Haraldr hárfagri's uncle Guthormr through Sigvatr Þórðarson to Grégóriús Dagsson and Erlingr skakki we see this trend, providing a wide area of overlap where gender is blurred in political opportunity. Aristocratic and royal women, through their network bonds, are able to reach for the same levels of political power as non-royal, but still high-ranking, men. Neither group can take kingship for themselves, and all require the legitimacy bestowed by royal partners or

sons, but all of them, through these and other connections, can access rulership, *landráð*. Such female rulership through sons, where the father is either dead or absent, is sometimes demonstrated in cases of matronymic naming, where the sons are more closely associated with the mothers than with their fathers.

### *Relationships with kings*

The sum of a woman’s lineage, social status and her marital and maternal career leads to the conclusion that her political opportunity, and chances to make the most of such opportunity, is dependent on her sum of relationships with aristocratic men, most central among which are the numbers, proximity and strength of her royal connections. As should perhaps be expected in sagas of kings, she is defined by her relationships with kings. As the daughter of a king, she can negotiate her own kinship position. As the wife of a king, she can influence the royal household and the external connections based around her husband. As the mother of a king, she can wield royal power through exercising her parental influence within the kinship group. Consider, for instance, the following kinship network:



**Figure 5.** The royal bonds of Sigríðr, Ingigerðr and Ástríðr.

Every man mentioned in this tree is a king, involving rulers from four different kingdoms, and every woman mentioned is able to rely on her connections with these kings, within what has been referred to as an intra-kingdom “kinship web”,<sup>28</sup> to extend her own political reach. Sheer number and weight of royal connections contribute strongly to determining access to status and, consequently, to political influence. With fathers, husbands or intended husbands, brothers, and/or sons in royal positions, the women here all find themselves at any given point

<sup>28</sup> Lind 2020: 113

in the narratives with multiple connections to kingship, enabling a network status unimaginable to most women and indeed most men. This is in turn what enables their effective political participation in saga narratives. Moreover, both Ástriðr and Sigríðr become widows, able to partially determine their own remarriage prospects at certain stages, and to rely on their connections to their husbands, including as a rhetorical tool, without the impediment of having to submit to a living husband's superior authority.<sup>29</sup> The former, for instance, relies heavily on bonds formed during the reign of her husband when exercising the greatest extent of her power as a widow.

While kings' daughters enjoy the highest status and social sanction, and kings' mothers are perhaps most frequently powerful, there is practically no politically influential woman receiving textual treatment in the *konungasögur* who is not daughter, wife and/or mother of kings. In most cases, such as the ones illustrated here, there is more than one such royal link. Gunnhildr and Ástriðr, arguably two of the most powerful women, come closest to being all three. In the former case, the parentage is uncertain, and in the latter, Ástriðr is a stepmother rather than mother. Functionally, however, their behaviour in the narratives is performed as if these ties were unquestionable, with Gunnhildr relying heavily on whatever link she does have to Denmark, and Ástriðr practically adopting Magnús. Even the few exceptions to the royal link rule have only slightly weaker connections.<sup>30</sup> Royal kinship links are thus the catalysts of political participation, a starting point from which a woman is able and permitted to forge further bonds of her own and build personal and familial networks such as the ones found throughout the preceding chapters. Going back to Bagge's point about royal legitimacy as an 'entrance ticket' to the political contest for male claimants, women similarly need tickets to play the game, with royal connections directly determining access to power and political participation.

### 3. *Political circumstances*

The two discussed sets of factors provide the opportunities for women to participate in power politics given the right circumstances, but based on the events transpiring within the texts, those circumstances remain narrow. While royal and aristocratic women consistently have roles to play in important political developments, at the very least through marriages and the

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<sup>29</sup> This further falls in line with medieval royal widows being expected to continue to serve their husbands' memory; see MacLean 2003: 37.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir, who is only the maternal niece of a king but is the daughter of the kingdom's most influential non-royal aristocrat, Erlingr Skjalgsson.

production of heirs, there are only certain types of situations allowing for women in positions of political power, functioning as active network organisers, whereas other situations force them to the sidelines. As shown in the discussion of foreign women, the political framework and cultural context of the geographical area of the narrative is important, and the further saga authors move away from their geographical focus, the further they move away from complex network politics entirely. Nevertheless, it has also become clear that even in the context of the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish kingdoms, where aristocratic networks remain a key component of politics throughout the texts, only certain overarching political situations allow for active participation by women.

First off, while political conflict is essential for women's participation, open war and external conflict is a restrictive circumstance. This is evident in the lack of women at the forefront in those sections of the saga narratives focusing on periods where the Norwegian kingdom is involved in foreign wars. This particularly includes the 'middle period' discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter, and sagas such as those of the adventurer kings Haraldr Sigurðarson, Magnús berfœttr and Sigurðr Jórsalafari. These reigns involve extensive military expeditions abroad including long-term conflicts of expansion, and the accounts of these kings are overall dominated by spheres where women are restricted from taking part, such as active full-scale warfare. Such developments always favour military leaders rather than exclusively political organisers, and the narratives involve little emphasis on network politics and the constant struggle for the social upwards mobility of the kinship group in which many of the women mentioned throughout this thesis find their political opportunities.

Consequently, the female relatives and connections of this type of king are mostly relegated to less visible household influence as far as the sources are concerned. On the other hand, periods of overall internal peace, or at least stability, are evidently also restrictive. There are similarly few women described participating during the sole reigns of the stabilising kings Hákon inn góði, Óláfr kyrri or Eysteinn Magnússon, all described as more or less competent administrators whose reigns are in saga authors' eyes uneventful.<sup>31</sup>

This leaves us with periods of described internal conflict. Nearly all the politically influential women mentioned here are found in limited-scale contests for Norwegian kingship. They forge important roles for themselves in situations where power bases need to be built, and networks need to be organised, expanded and maintained. In fact, the division between what

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<sup>31</sup> In *Heimskringla*, Óláfr kyrri is for instance described as highly successful despite being the focus of the text's shortest saga.



women can and cannot do is nowhere clearer than here; Gunnhildr, Ástríðr and Álfífa are all important to their sons' (or stepsons') political success, but only prior to and after the successful seizure of royal power. In the kings' saga narratives, women step aside for even the slightest military activity, remaining as political organisers in the background. With the network prepared for war, the work of a mother, wife or sister appears to be temporarily interrupted, and she returns only when the same network's power requires careful political strategy to consolidate itself after the military aspect of the conflict has been won. Tied to the political situation are also the circumstances of the kings involved, which goes back to the marital and maternal circumstances. We have seen on several occasions how women find themselves in positions of exceptional power when the king, rightly or not, is referred to as *bernskr*. Times of internal conflict more often than not overlap with the regimes of young, weak or otherwise incapable kings, contributing further to making political power available to a wider network of kinsmen and friends around the nominal ruler, with mothers playing prominent roles.

Overall, this explains why a considerable majority of women's political participation and network organisation is specifically found in only two narrative periods: in the contest for the inheritance of Haraldr hárfagri and his successors c. 950-1040, where all of the most powerful female network organisers are found, or in the early phases of the civil war era from 1136 onwards, where women once more are presented as vital to the development of the royal kinship networks. In both these circumstances, political factions based on network bonds gather around two or more claimants, introducing a clash of networks for power where anyone with the right connections is enabled to manoeuvre and shape the course of the conflict. This further corresponds to previously discussed ideas of the limited scope and politically cooperative nature of conflict. These conflicts have many aspects, not just warfare and battles. The two periods are in many ways different, as the previous chapter established, but both form political contexts in which the circumstances allowing for women's political influence, as far as it goes, are allowed to flourish.

## **Conclusion**

The political scene represented in the kings' sagas is a scene of aristocratic networks vying for hegemony. Politics is effectively organised through the continuous establishment of new interpersonal connections and the careful management and combination of bonds of kinship, friendship, and lordship. This is true for both king and householder, and it is true for both man and woman. The conflicts frequently providing the backdrop for the historiographical

narratives are effectively won by those having the most numerous and powerful connections, and those best able to utilise such connections for ambitious political purposes. The networks encompassing all such connections have dominated this exploration of women's political roles and careers.

Having concluded this assessment of the factors behind women's access to the political game, it has become evident that perhaps to an even greater extent than men, who possess other available avenues, all aristocratic women's lives are entirely shaped by active or passive participation in network bonds, particularly bonds of kinship. This is often a result of women being used by such networks to provide the necessary links between them, becoming the social glue referred to in the contexts of marriage and motherhood, and often intended to function as the ties that bind men together. However, through actively building on the foundation provided by such bonds, women can transcend the function as mere network links and become nodes around which links revolve, given that their network position is strong enough, as demonstrated above. Women's kinship bonds thus provide a foundation from which friendship and lordship bonds can be established, seen for instance in how the only bond of *vinátta* between two women exists between two kings' daughters, and nearly all cases of friendship and lordship bonds involving women emphasise those of the highest social class.<sup>32</sup> Less privileged women could likely work with the same tools to influence socio-political developments on a smaller scale, and we do see sporadic indications of this, frequently related to inciting or household management, but women below the upper aristocratic class, unlike their men, can only ever play minor roles in the political narratives of the kings' sagas.

This is where the criteria discussed above come in. For a woman to seriously influence politics at the royal level she is dependent on an acceptable kinship background and as many connections to kings and powerful male aristocrats as possible, access to formally superior but functionally subordinate male relatives through whom she can exercise effective power, and the right political circumstances providing an opening for non-military aggressive action. Given that her kinship background is sufficiently strong, she can craft additional connections through voluntary bonds to further reinforce her political status and influence. In such cases women are enabled, if not encouraged, to take on the mantle of political leadership. Like male network leaders, women in such positions begin constructing new bonds, arranging marriages,

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<sup>32</sup> See the discussion of the friendship between Ingigerðr and Ingibjörg in chapter 2; cf. the *vinátta* lists in Appendix III.

building aristocratic friendships normally exclusive to men in the narratives, and often take on positions of authority in pre-existing networks, or build their own. Mothers of kings and other aristocratic men can take advantage of the parental authority inherent in their bonds with sons, to wield the power of kingship through them with social acceptance. Wives and widows can use household bonds to build wider political ones. Daughters of kings can rely on their family status to form independent bonds of their own. With these factors in place, there is on many occasions little to separate women's opportunities from men's opportunities within the realm of network politics. Certain positions, such as kingship, chieftaincy, and military leadership, are generally inaccessible to women in the formal sense; direct and official rulership by women is associated only with the mythical past or with exotic foreign contexts. However, given a controllable (or at least easily influenced) male figurehead ruler and sufficient additional support, women in the sagas of kings can exercise the power that comes with such positions while lacking the title itself. Despite their exclusion from most formally established power structures of a kingdom, participation in the aristocratic networks, and thus inclusion in the power structures of social groups, enables women in the kings' sagas to influence politics on nearly the same level as men.

Building on the expanding body of scholarship investigating networks, political systems, marriages, and women's social agency in the texts, this thesis has thus identified various recurring patterns, but the one overarching result is the creation of structural ways of reading the involvement of women not just in marriage and kinship, but in kingdom politics through these and other bonds. The thesis has accordingly established that a marginalised social group, women, can find political agency and authority within semi-formal structures, i.e. networks, while excluded from institutional roles. One of the keys to understanding women's power is that network bonds can practically replace and occasionally take precedence over such institutional positions. The key takeaway here is that network positions and bonds exist in continuous negotiation, and they constitute the roots and causes of women's political participation, while also constituting the main form *of* said participation. The same is arguably true for men, but men have more numerous and consistent opportunities open to them, and women, consequently, are even more directly dependent on the few opportunities they do obtain. This is in turn what allows women to function as network organisers with political power, opening for future research into the further importance of network structures for political analysis. There is still considerably more to be learned of the norms and structures around women's participation in specific bonds, such as friendship, fosterage and servant and

retainer relationships, as well as the extent and boundaries of their potential decision-making power within networks controlling kingship. Similarly, the network framework can provide a template for investigating other marginalised groups' political participation in the kings' sagas and other medieval historiographical texts, including lower classes as hinted at above, the disabled and elderly, children and youths, et cetera. There is consequently a lot more to say about both women and networks in Old Norse historiography, but the present thesis has established the indispensable connection between the two areas of study.

## Appendices

### Appendix I: Registry of central kings' saga women and sources in which they appear

Name and family name or epithet/position	Source appearances in <i>konungasögur</i> or related historiographical texts (in parentheses when mentioned but not named)
<b>Gyða</b> Eiríksdóttir	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Póra</b> Morstrstǫng	<i>Ágrip, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Gunnhildr</b> ‘konungamóðir’	<i>GD, HN, HARN, Ágrip, Oddr, OrknS, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ragnhildr</b> Eiríksdóttir	<i>OrknS, Hkr</i>
<b>Ástriðr</b> Eiríksdóttir	<i>HN, HARN, Ágrip, Oddr, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Allógía</b> (Russian queen)	<i>(Ágrip), Oddr, Hkr</i>
<b>Geira</b> Búrizláfsdóttir	<i>Oddr, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ástriðr</b> Tryggvadóttir	<i>HARN, Oddr, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Sigríðr</b> ‘stórráða’	<i>GD, Oddr, Helgisaga, Msk, Fsk, Hkr, KnýtS</i>
<b>Pyri</b> Haraldsdóttir	<i>GD, HN, Ágrip, Oddr, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ásta</b> Guðbrandsdóttir	<i>HN, HARN, Helgisaga, Msk, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Sigríðr</b> Skjalgsdóttir	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Ingibjörg</b> Tryggvadóttir	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Ingigerðr</b> Ólafsdóttir	<i>HARN, Ágrip, Helgisaga, OrknS, Msk, Fsk, Hkr, KnýtS</i>
<b>Ástriðr</b> Ólafsdóttir	<i>HARN, Ágrip, Helgisaga, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ragnhildr</b> Erlingsdóttir	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Álfífa</b> Álfrimsdóttir	<i>GD, HARN, Ágrip, Helgisaga, OrknS, Msk, Fsk, Hkr, KnýtS</i>
<b>Emma</b> Ríkarðardóttir	<i>GD, HN, Msk, Fsk, Hkr, KnýtS</i>
<b>Álfhildr</b> (concubine)	<i>Helgisaga, Msk, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Zóe</b> (Byzantine empress)	<i>Msk, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Úlfhildr</b> Ólafsdóttir	<i>HARN, Ágrip, Helgisaga, Msk, Fsk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ragnhildr</b> Magnúsdóttir	<i>Msk, Hkr</i>
<b>Borghildr</b> Ólafsdóttir	<i>(Ágrip), Msk, Hkr</i>
<b>Ingiríðr</b> Rognvaldsdóttir	<i>Msk, Fsk, Hkr, SvS</i>
<b>Kristín</b> Sigurðardóttir	<i>(GD), Msk, Fsk, Hkr, SvS</i>
<b>Brígiða</b> Haraldsdóttir	<i>Msk, Fsk, Hkr, SvS</i>
<b>Gunnhildr</b> (mother of Sverrir)	<i>SvS</i>
<b>Cecilía</b> Sigurðardóttir	<i>SvS, BøglS, Háks</i>
<b>Margrét</b> Eiríksdóttir	<i>SvS, BøglS, Háks</i>

## Appendix II: Norwegian kings

Name	Regnal years
Haraldr Hálfðanarson ‘hárfagri’	? – 930
Eiríkr Haraldsson ‘blóðøx’	931-3
Hákon Haraldsson ‘inn góði’	934-61
Haraldr Eiríksson ‘gráfeldr’	961-70
<i>Haraldr Gormsson/Hákon jarl Sigurðarson</i>	970-95
Óláfr Tryggvason	995-1000
<i>Sveinn tjúguskegg/Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson</i>	1000-14
Óláfr Haraldsson ‘inn helgi’	1015-30
<i>Knútr inn ríki/Sveinn Álfífuson</i>	1030-35
Magnús Ólafsson ‘inn góði’	1035-47
Haraldr Sigurðarson ‘harðráði’	1042-66
Magnús Haraldsson	1066-9
Óláfr Haraldsson ‘kyrri’	1067-93
Magnús Ólafsson ‘berfœttr’	1093-1103
Óláfr Magnússon	1103-15
Eysteinn Magnússon	1103-23
Sigurðr Magnússon ‘Jórsalafari’	1103-30
Magnús Sigurðarson ‘blindi’	1130-5, 1137-9
Haraldr Magnússon ‘gilli’	1130-6
Sigurðr Haraldsson	1136-55
Ingi Haraldsson	1136-61
Magnús Haraldsson	1142-5
Eysteinn Haraldsson	1142-57
Hákon Sigurðarson ‘herðibreiðr’	1157-62
Magnús Erlingsson	1161-84
Sverrir Sigurðarson	1184-1202
Hákon Sverrisson	1202-4
Ingi Bárðarson	1204-17
Hákon Hákonarson	1217-63

*\*Names in italics are foreign rulers or rulers who never claimed the title of king*

### Appendix III: Registry of key terms

This registry is by no means exhaustive but provides lists, numbers and chapters for instances of key terms used in the thesis within central texts.

*allkærr* – ‘the most affectionate’, a particularly rare superlative adjective form of *kærleikr* (see below). On one occasion in *Heimskringla*’s *Haralds saga gráfeldar* it is applied to a ‘beloved’ poem,<sup>1</sup> but it is usually applied to interpersonal relationships, typically a royal lordship bond.

*Hkr, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*

Allógía’s fostering of Óláfr – “*var hon allkær til hans*”<sup>2</sup>

Óláfr’s reception of the Icelanders – “*var konungr allkærr til þeira*”<sup>3</sup>

*Hkr, Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*

Haraldr’s relationship with a long-term retainer – “*Hallr hafði verit í sveit konungs ok honum allkærr*”<sup>4</sup>

*Fagrskinna* - the appendix to the *Fagrskinna* A-text has one further inverted usage, where King Haraldr states he will not be *allkærr* to any subjects refusing Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

It is rare enough that the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* has no instances registered in its database.<sup>6</sup>

*ástvinr* – ‘dear friend’, denotes personal long-term friendships between two individuals, but these can contain both emotional and tactical components.

*Hkr, Haralds saga hins hárfagra* (3 instances, applied to Haraldr hárfagri’s relationship with his closest friend Rognvaldr jarl, and with two of the king’s poets)<sup>7</sup>

*Hkr, Óláfs saga helga* (1 instance, Einarr þambarskelfir’s alliance with the jarls of Hlaðir, including both kinship and friendship bonds)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 199

<sup>2</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 232

<sup>3</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 330

<sup>4</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 165

<sup>5</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 368

<sup>6</sup> “*allkærr*”, n.d.

<sup>7</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 123, 127, 141

<sup>8</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 27

*Msk* (2 instances, applied to the Magnús Ólafsson’s relationship with a poet, and to a retainer’s relationship with Tryggvi Ólafsson)<sup>9</sup>

*Fsk* (4 instances, two describe Hákon inn góði’s closest friendship bonds, one has Hákon jarl present himself as an *ástvinr* to Haraldr Gormsson, and one describes the close friends of Óláfr Tryggvason reacting to his death)<sup>10</sup>

**dróttning** – ‘king’s wife, queen’. A very common descriptor of the wives of kings and occasional (predominantly non-Scandinavian) ruling queens. Including those married both to petty kings and countrywide kings regardless of geographical area.

The following list contains the women referred to as *dróttning* in kings’ sagas in approximate chronological order based on the narratives. The names of kings, or other details explaining the title are in parentheses where applicable.

\*source text in parentheses when indirect and not connected to a particular woman’s name but referring to her.

\*\*women’s names in bold when married to a countrywide king of Norway.

Name	Texts
Drótt ( <i>Ynglinga saga</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Bera ( <i>Ynglinga saga</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Yrsa ( <i>Ynglinga saga</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Álof ( <i>Ynglinga saga</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Ása Haraldsdóttir	<i>Hkr</i>
Ragnhildr Sigurðardóttir (m. Hálfðan svarti)	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Ragnhildr Eiríksdóttir</b> (m. Haraldr hárfagri)	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Gunnhildr ‘konungamóðir’</b> (m. Eiríkr blóðøx)	Oddr, ( <i>Fsk</i> ), ( <i>Hkr</i> )
Allógía (queen in Hólmgarðr)	( <i>Ágrip</i> ), Oddr, <i>Hkr</i>
Geira Búrizláfisdóttir (queen in Vinðland)	Oddr, <i>Hkr</i>
Gyða (queen in Ireland)	Oddr, <i>Hkr</i>
Sigríðr ‘stórráða’ (m. Eiríkr, then Sveinn tjúguskegg)	Oddr, <i>Leg</i> , <i>Hkr</i>
Gunnhildr Burizleifsdóttir (m. Sveinn tjúguskegg)	Oddr, <i>Hkr</i>
<b>Þyri Haraldsdóttir</b> (m. Óláfr Tryggvason)	Oddr, <i>Hkr</i>
Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir (m. Sigurðr sýr)	( <i>Leg</i> )
Emma Ríkarðardóttir (m. Aðalráðr, then Knútr)	<i>Msk</i> , <i>Fsk</i> , <i>Hkr</i> , <i>KnýtS</i>
<b>Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir</b> (m. Óláfr Haraldsson)	<i>Leg</i> , <i>Hkr</i>
Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir (m. Jarizleifr Valdamarsson)	<i>Ágrip</i> , <i>Leg</i> , <i>Msk</i> , <i>Hkr</i>
Zóe (Byzantine empress)	<i>Msk</i> , <i>Fsk</i> , <i>Hkr</i>

<sup>9</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 146, 289

<sup>10</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 80, 93, 106, 160



<b>Ellisif Jarisleifsdóttir</b> (m. Haraldr Sigurðarson)	<i>(Msk), Hkr</i>
Gyða Guðinadóttir (m. Játvarðr Aðalráðsson)	<i>Hkr</i>
Eðla (m. Knútr Sveinsson)	<i>KnýtS</i>
<b>Margrét Ingadóttir ‘fríðkolla’</b> (m. Magnús berfœttr)	<i>Hkr</i>
Gyða Haraldsdóttir (daughter of Haraldr Guðinason)	<i>Hkr</i>
<b>Malmfriðr</b> (m. Sigurðr Magnússon Jórsalafari)	<i>Msk, Fsk, Hkr, KnýtS</i>
<b>Ingibjörg Guthormsdóttir</b> (m. Eysteinn Magnússon)	<i>Msk</i>
Úlfhildr Hákonardóttir (queen in Sweden)	<i>Fsk</i>
<b>Ingiríðr Rognvaldsdóttir</b> (m. Haraldr gilli)	<i>Msk, Fsk, Hkr</i>
Kristín Sigurðardóttir	<i>(Hkr)</i>
Sóphía (m. Valdamarr Knútsson)	<i>KnýtS</i>
<b>Margrét Eiríksdóttir</b> (m. Sverrir Sigurðarson)	<i>SvS, BøglS, HáKS</i>
Ríkiza Valdamarsdóttir (queen in Sweden)	<i>Fsk, HáKS</i>
<b>Margrét Skúladóttir</b> (m. Hákon Hákonarson)	<i>Fsk, HáKS</i>
<b>Ingibjörg Eiríksdóttir</b> (m. Magnús Hákonarson)	<i>HáKS</i>

*frændsemi* – ‘kinship’. The *ONP* contains a combined 388 instances of kinship/kinsman/kinswoman (224 *frændi*, 46 *frændkona* and 118 *frændsemi* respectively).<sup>11</sup> *Ætt*, ‘lineage’, is listed with 128.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, there are various adjectives rooted in both core terms.

*konungsdóttir* – ‘king’s daughter, princess’. A rare official title for (primarily unmarried) daughters of kings.

Instances of daughters of Scandinavian kings described as *konungsdóttir*:

Ingigerðr Ólafsdóttir ( <i>daughter of Óláfr sænski</i> )	<i>Fsk, Hkr</i>
Ástríðr Ólafsdóttir ( <i>daughter of Óláfr sænski</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Úlfhildr Ólafsdóttir ( <i>daughter of Óláfr Haraldsson</i> )	<i>Msk, Hkr</i>
Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir ( <i>daughter of Magnús Ólafsson</i> )	<i>Hkr</i>
Kristín Sigurðardóttir ( <i>daughter of Sigurðr Magnússon</i> )	<i>SvS, Fsk, Hkr</i>
Cecilía Sigurðardóttir ( <i>daughter of Sigurðr Haraldsson</i> )	<i>SvS, BøglS, HáKS</i>
Margrét Magnúsdóttir ( <i>daughter of Magnús Erlingsson</i> )	<i>BøglS</i>
Kristín Sverradóttir ( <i>daughter of Sverrir Sigurðarson</i> )	<i>BøglS</i>
Kristín Hákonardóttir ( <i>daughter of Hákon Hákonarson</i> )	<i>HáKS</i>

*konungsmóðir/konungamóðir* – ‘king’s mother’. An exceptionally rare title for widowed mothers of reigning kings who are not themselves daughters of kings nor considered queens.

<sup>11</sup> “*frændi*”, n.d.; “*frændkona*”, n.d.; “*frændsemi*”, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> “*ætt*”, n.d.

In parenthesis when the title is mentioned only as a noun and never as a title following the woman’s name. Possibly considered lesser than *dróttning* due to the two latter examples being concubines who were never queens.

Gunnhildr	<i>Ágrip, Hkr</i>
(Álfhildr, mother of Magnús Ólafsson)	<i>Msk</i>
(Þóra, mother of Sigurðr Magnússon)	<i>Hkr</i>

**kunningi** – ‘acquaintance/friend’; much rarer than *vinr*, with the *ONP* registering only 25 instances compared to 144 for *vinr*.<sup>13</sup> I have identified only 5 instances in the *konungasögur*, but with each case clearly describing a network relationship.

*Heimskringla* (3)

*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 70 – “*kunningjar mínir*”<sup>14</sup>

*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 163 – “*vinr ok kunningi*”<sup>15</sup>

*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, ch. 69 – “*kunningi hans*”<sup>16</sup>

*Sverris saga*, ch. 145 – “*kunningi Bagla*”<sup>17</sup>

*Knýtlinga saga*, ch. 49 – “*margir frændr þeira, vinir ok kunningjar*”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, *Msk* contains two instances of “*vitja kunnliga*”, a verbal action version of *kunningi*.<sup>19</sup>

**kærleikr** – ‘affection’, almost always describes network bonds, frequently of a tactical nature.

Instances where the term is mentioned in conjunction with kinship, friendship or lordship bonds (sentences or passages where declared *kærleikr* is combined with *vinátta*, *frændsemi* or other words indicating a newly formed alliance):

*Heimskringla* (17)

*Haralds saga gráfeldar*, ch. 4 (possessive lordship term)<sup>20</sup>

*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 21 (fosterage, military subordination),<sup>21</sup> 53 (re-

<sup>13</sup> “*kunningi*”, n.d.; “*vinr*”, n.d.

<sup>14</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 91

<sup>15</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 297

<sup>16</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 157

<sup>17</sup> *SvS*: 218

<sup>18</sup> *KnýtS*: 181

<sup>19</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 166-7

<sup>20</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 206

<sup>21</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 251

establishing kinship and friendship bonds),<sup>22</sup> 91 (affinity bonds),<sup>23</sup> 107 (friendship agreement)<sup>24</sup>

*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 91 (patronage of a court poet),<sup>25</sup> 98 (royal friendship),<sup>26</sup> 99 (royal friendship),<sup>27</sup> 106 (possessive lordship term),<sup>28</sup> 117 (friendship and gifts),<sup>29</sup> 143 (message of friendship),<sup>30</sup> 160 (re-establishing patronage),<sup>31</sup> 171 (lordship and gifts)<sup>32</sup>

*Magnúss saga góða*, ch. 8 (kinship bond, reception of parent at court)<sup>33</sup>

*Magnúss saga berfætts*, ch. 7 (lordship with retainers, also in *Ágrip* and *Msk*),<sup>34</sup> 28 (possessive lordship term)<sup>35</sup>

*Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla*, ch. 15 (lordship with retainers)<sup>36</sup>

*Sverris saga*, ch. 60 (kinship bond)<sup>37</sup>

*Sverris saga*, ch. 123 (2 instances, connected to a lordship bond, oaths of loyalty, and gifts)<sup>38</sup>

*Morkinskinna*, ch. 38 (lordship, royal appointment)<sup>39</sup>

In the sagas of Norwegian kings, there are only two exceptions to this usage of *kærleikr* (both from *Heimskringla*), where *kærleikr* is not combined with network terms, but where one or both individuals are simply using *kærleikr* as a political tool for the gain of their network (both discussed in the main body of text).<sup>40</sup>

The *ONP* lists 85 instances of *kærleikr* throughout the corpus, most of which generally follows this pattern, but certain exceptions do exist, such as the 7 instances from *Maríu saga*, where *kærleikr* refers to maternal affection and the love of god.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 302-3

<sup>23</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 341

<sup>24</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 350

<sup>25</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 144

<sup>26</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 164

<sup>27</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 165

<sup>28</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 177

<sup>29</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 197

<sup>30</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 263

<sup>31</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 293

<sup>32</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 307

<sup>33</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 14

<sup>34</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 218; *Ágrip*: 44; *Morkinskinna II*: 29

<sup>35</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 237

<sup>36</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 300

<sup>37</sup> *SvS*: 95

<sup>38</sup> *SvS*: 189

<sup>39</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 214

<sup>40</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 211; *Heimskringla II*: 95

<sup>41</sup> “*kærleikr*”, n.d.

*landráð* – ‘government of the land’ (alternative meaning ‘high treason’). I here list the instances I have identified of *landráð* as ‘government of the land’ when not referring to kings (i.e., in *Heimskringla* discounting 4 applications referring to Haraldr hárfagri, Óláfr Haraldsson, Óláfr sœnski and Eysteinn Haraldsson, and 3 applications with the alternative meaning). Almost all the usage in the *konungasögur* stems from *Heimskringla*, but there are exceptions. The most significant usage in texts used by this thesis beyond *Heimskringla* is found in *Orkneyinga saga*, where there is five instances, two of which refer to women.

In the *konungasögur* alone, the term is applied this way to 10 unique named individuals, 8 men and 2 women.

*Heimskringla* (14)

\*Guthormr - “gerðisk forstjóri fyrir hirðinni ok fyrir öllum landráðum”<sup>42</sup>

\*Gunnhildr – “hafði mjök landráð með þeim”<sup>43</sup>

\*\*Gunnhildr (and her sons) – “váru opt á tali ok málstefnum ok réðu landráðum”<sup>44</sup>

\*Einarr þambarskelfir – “hann skyldi hafa landráð fyrir Hákon, því at hann var þá eigi ellri en sautján vetra”<sup>45</sup>

\*Hákon jarl Eiríksson – “Hákon jarl ok aðrir landráðamenn”<sup>46</sup>

\*Álfífa - “hafði þá mest landráð”<sup>47</sup>

\*unnamed aristocratic groups on behalf of Magnús Ólafsson and Hǫrða-Knútr – “þá hǫfðu landráð fyrir þeim ríkismenn, þeir er til þess váru teknir í hváru tveggja landi”<sup>48</sup>

\*Kálfr Árnason – “hafði landráð mest með Magnúsi konungi fyrst nokkura stund”<sup>49</sup>

\*Skúli konungsfóstri – “réð öllum landráðum með konungi”<sup>50</sup>

\*Grégóríus Dagsson – “gerðisk hann forstjóri fyrir landráðum með Inga konungi”<sup>51</sup>

\*unnamed chieftains on behalf of Eysteinn Haraldsson – “lét mjök hǫfðingja ráða með sér landráðum”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 94

<sup>43</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 198

<sup>44</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 204

<sup>45</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 31

<sup>46</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 336

<sup>47</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 410

<sup>48</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 12

<sup>49</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 23

<sup>50</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 197; this instance is identical with one found in *Morkinskinna*; see below.

<sup>51</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 330

<sup>52</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 331

\*Erlingr skakki – “landráðamaðr góðr”<sup>53</sup>

\*\*Erlingr skakki – “landráðamaðr góðr”<sup>54</sup>

*Sverris saga* (1)

\*Erlingr skakki<sup>55</sup>

*Fagrskinna* (1)

\*Erlingr skakki<sup>56</sup>

*Morkinskinna* (2)

\*Skúli konungsfóstri – “réð þllum landráðum með konungi”<sup>57</sup>

\*unnamed regional chieftains – “réðu mjök lendir menn landráðum”<sup>58</sup>

0 instances in *Ágrip*, *Oddr*, *Helgisaga*, *Boðlunga saga*, and *Knýtlinga saga*.

*Orkneyinga saga* (4)

\*Þorfinnr jarl<sup>59</sup>

\*Helga, jarl’s concubine<sup>60</sup>

\*Ragna, a female Orcadian aristocrat<sup>61</sup> (although with Ragna, the term is applied negatively, i.e. stating that she does not hold *landráð*)

\*Erlingr skakki<sup>62</sup>

**unna** – ‘to love’ (alternative meaning ‘to grant’). Instances in *Heimskringla* of *unna* as love, with categorisations.

*Haralds saga hins hárfagra* (3)

\*spousal affection – “unni svá með ærslum”<sup>63</sup>

\*parental affection – “Honum unni hann mest sona sinna”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 374

<sup>54</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 412

<sup>55</sup> *SvS*: 7; note that this count again discounts instances where applied by a king, or in the case of both Sverrir himself and Sigurðr brennir, pretenders who aspire to *landráð*; and similarly, at least two instances of *landráð* as high treason.

<sup>56</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 348

<sup>57</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 326

<sup>58</sup> *Morkinskinna II*: 175

<sup>59</sup> *OrknS*: 28

<sup>60</sup> *OrknS*: 116

<sup>61</sup> *OrknS*: 157

<sup>62</sup> *OrknS*: 237

<sup>63</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 126

<sup>64</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 137

\*foster-parental affection – “*Aðalsteinn konungr unni honum svá mikit, meira en öllum frændum sínum*”<sup>65</sup>

*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (2)

\*foster-parental affection – “*unni bóandi honum mikit*”<sup>66</sup>

\*spousal affection – “*Jarl unni Þóru svá mikit*”<sup>67</sup>

*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (2)

\*foster-parental affection – “*unni konungr honum mikit*”<sup>68</sup>

\*foster-parental affection – “*unni konungr honum geysimikit ok hafði hann sér fyrir son*”<sup>69</sup>

*Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla* (1)

\*spousal affection (negative) – “*Magnús konungr varð henni eigi unnandi*”<sup>70</sup>

The instances cited in the *ONP* generally indicates the same pattern of *unna* as genuine affection between close relatives alone; see its entry on *unna*, particularly under “*unna mikit*” (although note that the meanings of *unna* are here are grouped together in the entry as a whole).<sup>71</sup>

***vinátta*** – ‘friendship’. Below are listed the usage of *vinátta* in *Heimskringla*, with instances of *vinátta* involving women in bold. Out of 99 total instances, women are included in 12 (numbers in bold).

*Heimskringla*

*Haralds saga hins hárfagra* (2)

*Hákonar saga góða* (1)

*Haralds saga gráfeldar* (6)

*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (9) **(2)**

*Óláfs saga helga* (60) **(5)**

*Magnúss saga góða* (2) **(1)**

*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* (3)

*Magnúss saga berfætts* (5)

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<sup>65</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 146

<sup>66</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 230

<sup>67</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 248

<sup>68</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 130

<sup>69</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 168

<sup>70</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 279

<sup>71</sup> “*unna*”, n.d.

*Magnússona saga* (5) (3)

*Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla* (1)

*Haraldssona saga* (1)

*Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* (4) (1)

In other kings' sagas, the number is only 2 out of 63.

*Sverris saga* (2)

Oddr Snorrason, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (7) (1)

*Helgisaga* (3)

*Morkinskinna* (17) (1)

*Fagrskinna* (13)

*Knýtlinga saga* (21)

***vinátta fullkominn*** – 'full friendship'. Qualification where one party would not otherwise expect to receive the full extent of the other party's friendship, most frequently due to difference in social rank. Only offered by exceptionally high-status individuals.

*Heimskringla* (9)

\*Haraldr hárfagri (*Haralds saga hins hárfagra*, ch. 14)<sup>72</sup>

\*Óláfr Tryggvason (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 82)<sup>73</sup>

\*Óláfr Haraldsson (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 36)<sup>74</sup>

\*\*Óláfr Haraldsson (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 100)<sup>75</sup>

\*Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 138)<sup>76</sup>

\*Ástriðr Óláfsdóttir (*Magnúss saga góða*, ch. 1)<sup>77</sup>

\*Eysteinn Haraldsson (*Magnússona saga*, ch. 15)<sup>78</sup>

\*Eysteinn Erlendsson (*Magnúss saga Erlingssonar*, ch. 16)<sup>79</sup>

\**Vinátta fullr* - Haraldr gráfeldr and Sigurðr jarl (*Haralds saga gráfeldar*, ch. 4)<sup>80</sup>

In other kings' sagas, the term is exceptionally rare. There are no instances in *Ágrip*, *Oddr*, *Helgisaga*, *Sverris saga*, *Boglunga saga*, *Fagrskinna* or *Knýtlinga saga*. It is, nevertheless,

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<sup>72</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 110

<sup>73</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 330

<sup>74</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 48

<sup>75</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 167

<sup>76</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 245

<sup>77</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 5

<sup>78</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 255

<sup>79</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 391

<sup>80</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 205

not entirely exclusive to *Heimskringla*, as there is one instance in *Morkinskinna*, where Sveinn Knútsson offers the Danes his *vinátta fullkominn* in order for them to elect him king.<sup>81</sup>

*Fagrskinna* includes no instances of *vinátta fullkominn*, although the text does include an instance of a group of aristocrats being “*fullkomnir vinir*” of Magnús Erlingsson.<sup>82</sup> *Fullkomnir vinir* is, however, used more casually than *vinátta fullkominn*, for instance often detailing populations of geographic areas having positive attitudes to a ruler, such as here. The same is found several places in *Heimskringla*.<sup>83</sup> It is still the province of kings but appears less formally prestigious.

Sagas relating the same events as the *konungasögur* have some instances of *vinátta fullkominn*, and again primarily with kings or other aristocrats of the highest level:

*Orkneyinga saga* (4)

Óláfr Haraldsson, Magnús Óláfsson, Haraldr gilli and Rognvaldr jarl, Páll jarl

*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (2)

Eiríkr blóðøx, King Aðalsteinn

A search for *vinátta* in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* reveals only two further mentions from later sagas supporting the exclusive nature of the term, from *Sturlunga saga* (Gissur Þorvaldsson, for a time the most powerful man in Iceland)<sup>84</sup> and *Kirjalax saga* (a certain King Dagnus of Syria) respectively.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 53

<sup>82</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 356

<sup>83</sup> See examples in *Heimskringla I*: 293; *Heimskringla III*: 210, 385.

<sup>84</sup> For Gissur, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 2017: 117.

<sup>85</sup> “*vinátta*”, n.d.



## Appendix IV: Matronymic naming

### Gunnhildarsynir and Eiríkssynir in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*

The term “*Gunnhildarsynir*” or “*synir Gunnhildar*” (or variations) occur 2 times and 19 times in *Heimskringla*’s *Hákonar saga góða* and *Haralds saga gráfeldar* respectively, and 13 times in the corresponding section of *Fagrskinna* (ch. 8-16), with most instances (12) occurring in ch. 12 or later. Compare this to the terms “*Eiríkssynir*” or “*synir Eiríks*” (or variations), which occur 27 times and 2 times in *Hákonar saga góða* and *Haralds saga gráfeldar* respectively, and 9 times in the corresponding section of *Fagrskinna* (ch. 10-16), with most instances (6) occurring in ch. 12 or before.

Individual names are rarer, but they contribute further information. Haraldr gráfeldr is referred to by matronymic during his kingship, and by patronymic before his kingship in *Heimskringla*, and again after his death in *Fagrskinna*.

Haraldr Gunnhildarson	Haraldr Eiríksson
<i>Hkr, Haralds saga gráfeldar</i> , ch. 2 <sup>86</sup>	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 10 <sup>87</sup>
<i>Hkr, Óláfs saga helga</i> , ch. 130 <sup>88</sup>	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 29 <sup>89</sup>
<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 13 <sup>90</sup>	<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 16 <sup>91</sup>
<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 16 <sup>92</sup>	<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 16 (2) <sup>93</sup>
Oddr, <i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i> , ch. 18 <sup>94</sup>	
<i>KnýtS</i> , ch. 1 <sup>95</sup>	

Note how Gamli, who dies halfway through *Hákonar saga góða*, is only ever referred to as Gamli Eiríksson except for one instance in *Ágrip*:<sup>96</sup>

Gamli Gunnhildarson	Gamli Eiríksson
<i>Ágrip</i> , ch. 5 <sup>97</sup>	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 10 <sup>98</sup>
	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 25 <sup>99</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 204

<sup>87</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 162

<sup>88</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 221

<sup>89</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 185

<sup>90</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 95

<sup>91</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 110

<sup>92</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 109

<sup>93</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 111

<sup>94</sup> Oddr: 181

<sup>95</sup> *KnýtS*: 93

<sup>96</sup> *Ágrip*: 9

<sup>97</sup> *Ágrip*: 9

<sup>98</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 162

<sup>99</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 179

	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 26 <sup>100</sup>
	<i>Hkr, Hákonar saga góða</i> , ch. 26 (2) <sup>101</sup>

### Sveinn Álfífuson

Sveinn Álfífuson	Sveinn Knútsson
<i>Hkr, Óláfs saga helga</i> , ch. 239 <sup>102</sup>	<i>Hkr, Óláfs saga helga</i> , ch. 247 <sup>103</sup>
<i>Hkr, Óláfs saga helga</i> , ch. 245 <sup>104</sup>	
<i>Hkr, Magnúss saga góða</i> , ch. 4 <sup>105</sup>	
<i>Hkr, Magnúss saga góða</i> , ch. 5 <sup>106</sup>	
<i>Hkr, Magnússona saga</i> , ch. 17 <sup>107</sup>	
<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 41 <sup>108</sup>	
<i>Fsk</i> , ch. 47 <sup>109</sup>	
<i>Msk</i> , ch. 3 <sup>110</sup>	
<i>Msk</i> , ch. 33 <sup>111</sup>	
<i>Msk</i> , ch. 49 <sup>112</sup>	
<i>Oddr, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i> , ch. 17 <sup>113</sup>	

### Other instances of matronymic naming in kings' sagas

Likely reasons for the matronymic, if identifiable, underneath the names.

#### *Heimskringla*

\*Steinn Herdísarson (poet) - 9 instances in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, 1 instance in *Óláfs saga kyrra* (see also 1 instance in *Knýtlinga saga*)

*His maternal great-grandfather was the skald Einarr skálaglamm.*<sup>114</sup>

\*Sveinn Hrímhildarson - 3 instances in *Magnússona saga*

*Parentage unknown.*

<sup>100</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 180

<sup>101</sup> *Heimskringla I*: 181

<sup>102</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 399

<sup>103</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 410

<sup>104</sup> *Heimskringla II*: 406

<sup>105</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 10

<sup>106</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 11

<sup>107</sup> *Heimskringla III*: 256

<sup>108</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 206

<sup>109</sup> *Fagrskinna*: 211

<sup>110</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 26

<sup>111</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 193

<sup>112</sup> *Morkinskinna I*: 288

<sup>113</sup> *Oddr*: 181

<sup>114</sup> Finnur Jónsson, 1920: 624

\*Þórir Ingiríðarson (aristocrat) - 1 instance in *Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla*  
*Parentage unknown.*

\*Gyrðr Gunnhildarson (lawspeaker) - 1 instance in *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs*  
*Parentage unknown*

#### Other kings' sagas

\*Hallvarðr Sunnifuson - 1 instance in *Sverris saga*  
*Parentage unknown*

\*Þórðr Jórunnarson (chieftain) - 1 instance in Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*  
*Parentage unknown.*

\*Sveinn Þórgunnuson (aristocrat) - 5 instances in *Knýtlinga saga*  
*His maternal grandfather was Vagn Ákason the Jómsviking.*

\*Hákon Sunnifuson (aristocrat) - 2 instances in *Knýtlinga saga*  
*His maternal grandmother was Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir, daughter of Magnús inn góði, son of Óláfr inn helgi.*

## List of abbreviations

*Ágrip* = *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*

*BHRD* = *Brevis historia regum Daciae*

*BøglS* = *Bøglunga saga*

Cleasby-Vigfusson = Cleasby, Richard & Gudbrand Vigfusson. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*.

*Fsk* = *Fagrskinna*

*GD* = *Gesta Danorum*

*GHEP* = *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*

*HákS* = *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*

*HARN* = *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*

*Helgisaga* = *Helgisaga Óláfs Haraldssonar*

*HN* = *Historia Norvegiæ*

*Hkr* = *Heimskringla*

*ÍF* = *Íslenzk fornrit* (saga editions published by Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík)

*KnýtS* = *Knýtlinga saga*

*Msk* = *Morkinskinna*

*Oddr* = *Oddr Snorrason. Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

*ONP* = *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*

*OrknS* = *Orkneyinga saga*

*SvS* = *Sverris saga*

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