

A KING' S LUCK? A DISCUSSION OF BATTLE- LUCK AND ILL-FORTUNE IN SVERRIS SAGA

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Abstract:

This article brings the concept of luck to the forefront in a discussion of the Saga of King Svërris (Svërris saga) while at the same time introducing the reader to the age of the Civil War in Norway. An important scholar who has contributed to outlining the role of luck in Norway's early medieval political ideology was Vilhelm Peter Grønbech with his seminal work, The Culture of the Teutons. The methodology employed in this short contribution is that of comparing and contrasting Grønbech's established theory with more recent hypotheses and interpretations in order to reach a conclusion whether the theoretical concepts of the mentioned scholar are applicable in the interpretation of Svërris saga.

Rezumat:

Acest articol așază conceptul de noroc în fața cortinei, într-o discuție despre Saga regelui Svërris (Svërris saga), familiarizând în același timp cititorul cu perioada războiului civil din Norvegia. Un important savant care a contribuit la evidențierea rolului norocului în ideologia politică timpurie medievală a Norvegiei a fost Vilhelm Peter Grønbech în lucrarea sa monumentală intitulată Cultura Teutonilor. Metodologia utilizată în această contribuție are în vedere compararea și contrastarea teoriei stabilite de Grønbech cu ipoteze și interpretări mai recente, pentru a stabili dacă conceptele teoretice ale savantului menționat mai sus sunt aplicabile în interpretarea Svërris saga.

Keywords: Svërris saga, Svërrir Sigurðarson, Civil War, Norway, Luck

*Svërris saga*¹ fits the category of kings' sagas (*konungasögur*) and is set in the period of King Svërrir Sigurðarson (c. 1145/1151 – 9 March

¹ The edition used in the current analysis is J. Stephoton's translation: *Svërrissaga – The Saga of King Svërrir of Norway* (London, David Nutt), 1899, henceforth *Svërris saga*; original medieval manuscripts of Svërris saga now exist in four copies: A.M. 327, 4to at the University Library

1202). It conveys a multitude of information regarding political power and kingship in Norway and as such is one of the first sources that will be analysed in this chapter. Unlike the other sagas, the first part of *Sverris saga* has been written while the king was sovereign (somewhere between 1185 to 1188²), so this makes most of it contemporary to the events described and confirms its significance. Furthermore, the first part of *Sverris saga*, called *Grýla* (i.e. “bugbear”), was anecdotally put to paper by the abbot Karl Jónsson while King Sverrir was dictating, which might permit a direct analysis of the ideology of power in Norway based on the opinions and beliefs of a king.

Historians and other scholars have seen it as an important source of propaganda aimed at supporting Sverrir’s claim to the Norwegian throne.



of Copenhagen (dating back to cca. 1300), A.M. 47 fol also at the University Library of Copenhagen (dating to the early 14th century), *Flateyar-bok* at the Royal Library at Copenhagen (written in Iceland in the late 14th century) and A.M. 81a fol. at the University Library of Copenhagen (middle 15th century).

² Sverre Bagge, “Ideology and Propaganda in *Sverris saga*” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 108 (1993): 1-18

Coin (front) of King Sverre Sigurdsson of Norway which reads: "+ REX SVERVVS MAGNVS". Public domain picture, source: C. I. Schive, *Norges Mynter i Middelalderen*, Christiania, 1865, on-line: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sverre_01.png

To understand the context this source was written in, it best to offer some more clarifications about the political milieu in Norway at that time. The period is called the Civil war era, a term which denotes the period from about 1130 to the middle of the 13th century. It was an age of frequent battling between rival kings, princes and pretenders to the throne of Norway and its causes are still somewhat of a reason for debate among historians today. Nevertheless, it is useful to look back to King Harald Hárfagri's (c. 850 – c. 932) unification of Norway after the battle of Hafrsfjord (872) as the beginning of the struggle to bring Norway under a strong centralized command. Also, the role of the Church in sometimes promoting division should also be taken into consideration. What is noteworthy about political power during this period is that it was shareable whenever there was more than one claimant to the throne (brothers or cousins), as succession laws were not clear, which often resulted in a struggle for dominance between the two co-rulers.

Until the rule of King Sverrir, these power struggles were often quite modest, involving small scale forces, namely the *hirð* (entourage) of the kings or pretenders plus personal army contingents (*lendir menn*) and local armed men that might have been persuaded to join the wars. After 1170, with the clear distinction of the rival faction of the *Birkibeinar*,³ the fighting for the throne assumed a more distinct civil war character, which created consequences for the entire community in Norway.⁴

In her recent study on Norse culture, Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer posed the pertinent question whether luck was an essential character

³ *Birkibeinar*, meaning „birch legs“, a pejorative reference to the alleged poverty of the members of this movement, formed in 1174 under the leadership of the pretender Øystein Møyla.

⁴ Knut Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia. Prehistory to 1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 374

trait of the ideal or “heroic” male⁵. Before her, Danish historian Vilhelm Grønbech conferred capital importance to luck in the culture of the “Teutons”, writing two full chapters on this subject in his acclaimed work, the first one entitled “Luck” and the second one “Luck is the Life of the Clan”⁶. Most notably, the Danish scholar pointed to the difference between the ancient and modern notions of luck, believing that our idea of this concept “fails altogether to indicate the true force of the word”⁷ as it was understood in the Norse world a millennium ago.

Grønbech introduced different categories of luck: luck of fertility (of crops), luck of cattle, luck of fishing, friend-luck, luck of weather or wind-luck (here he gives the example of St. Óláfr who was said to have been able to sail in one day as much as others in three), and ultimately the luck of battle (the “*sigrsæli*, gift of victory”⁸) – which the Danish historian of religion exemplifies by referring to the entire lineage of King Haraldr Hárfagri⁹. What did this type of battle-luck confer? Most importantly, it brought the loyalty of the people, it was a legitimating factor itself, and it coalesced a military body surrounding the person of the monarch¹⁰, which in turn helped unify the political body of the country. Grønbech ultimately introduces the concept of *kings’ luck*, by explaining:

“To get a comprehensive view of the king’s luck, we have to ask: what was demanded, in the old days, to make a man a true king? War-speed, the power of victory, is but one of the distinguishing marks which place the leader in a class apart from everyday characters. His constitution is marked throughout by greater strength and hardihood. Life is more firmly seated in him, whether it be that he is proof against weapons, or that they seem, perhaps, to turn aside from the spot where he stands. The first time Óláfr Trygvasson misses

⁵ Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer, „The Norse Concept of Luck” *Scandinavian Studies* 79, 3 (2007), 275-294

⁶ Vilhelm Peter Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons* [Vor Folkeæt i Oldtiden], vols. 1-2, transl. W. Worster (London, Oxford University Press, 1931), 127-154, 155-174

⁷ Grønbech 1931, 127

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

his mark is when he aims his bow at Jarl Eíríkr. 'Truly the Jarl's luck is great!', he exclaims. [...] And even though perhaps such a degree of hardiness was only found among the very few particularly favoured, we must presume that the king had this advantage over ordinary warriors, that his wounds healed more quickly and more completely."¹¹

The Danish scholar provides an excellent array of scientific inquiries in regards to the research interest of the present study and also a very encompassing description of his understanding of the concept he introduced. Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer provides a detailed philological critique of Grønbech's work and is one of the few who attempts to bring it up to date. In her view, the lack of luck is not as unequivocally condemned as Grønbech suggested, concluding that moral faults cannot be considered grounds for bad luck in Norse culture, as it is caused rather by certain misdemeanours of those afflicted by lucklessness (such as kin-slaying, oath or peace-breaking, sacrilege). Sommer does not agree to Grønbech that lucklessness was equal to definitive social isolation and unrepairable stigma (*niðingr*)¹².

As regards our research aims, we shall attempt to provide arguments that examples from *Sverris saga* prove that being lucky "of battle" – in the acception of Grønbech – was considered an essential *moral* feature of the king.

The main terms that designated the concept of luck, good fate, in Norse sources were *gipta*, *gæfa*, *auðna* and *hamingja*; the adjective lucky was designated by *heppinn*, *gæfumadr*, and *giptumadr*¹³. Bad luck or lucklessness was expressed as *gæfuleysi*¹⁴. In *Sverris saga*, besides the indirect examples offered above, other instances where the concept of luck or bad luck is directly mentioned in relation to military affairs are:

- Chapter 26, in battle against the Jamts "the Birkibeins set upon them with such fierceness that the yeomen recoiled before them; and seeing the *ill luck* (our emphasis) of their force, they

¹¹ Ibid, p. 131-132

¹² Sejbjerg Sommer 2007, 293

¹³ English-Old Norse Dictionary, University of York, *sub voce* (p. 90), on-line http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/language/English-Old_Norse.pdf, accessed 25.06.2017

¹⁴ Ibid.

fled [...*ok þeir sá úfarar sinna manna, þá flýðu bændr...*], followed hard by the Birkibeins, who slew as many as they wished. Nearly one hundred of the Jamts were slain, and a great number were wounded. King Sverri had a hundred men, and the Jamts twelve hundred. In the morning the King sent for his other men, and all came. The Jamts now begged for peace, and brought hostages to the King, and were reconciled to him. He laid a heavy tribute on them. They agreed to become his subjects, and he appointed bailiffs to collect fines and other dues. The Jamts confirmed the agreement with many oaths, and when the tribute was paid, the King departed from them without more ado"¹⁵. In this example, the reference to the Jamts' lack of fortune emphasizes the disproportionate size of the conflicting forces. The Jamts' were twelve times more numerous than the forces of King Sverrir – the chronicler says – so the former's loss of the battle could only have resulted from their lucklessness, i.e. their lack of military experience, strategy and, probably, military equipment, as opposed to Sverrir few but veteran troops.

- Chapter 29, when King Sverrir addresses his men after the defeat at Hattarhamar: “And now that our *ill-luck* (our emphasis) has become known [*ok er vārvar úfarar spyrjast til búandanna*], we are chased and harassed wherever we go, and all who know of our wretchedness think we are nobody of consequence. Before this battle, victory was always on our side, and men all dreaded to come to blows with us”¹⁶. In this example, we become witnesses to Sverrir's despair at his lack of luck. It becomes synonym with the loss of cause, because of the defeat, even if not fatal, dispelled the Birkibeinar's reputation as an invincible force and reduced them to the status of lawless brigands.

¹⁵ *Sverris saga*, chapter 26

¹⁶ *Sverris saga*, chapter 29

- Chapter 32, after King Sverrir's victory over Magnús near Niðarós (at Kaupang – the market-city), Jarl Erling remarked: “*Luck* (our emphasis) fared not thus when it wished us well’ [...*eigi fór þá svá er vel vildi...*]”¹⁷. Jarl Erling's saying here represents a bitter proverbial remark on the going of the war, an observation of the type of the *fortuna labilis* motif (changeable fate) from later medieval romances¹⁸.
- Chapter 68, when the Birkibeinar were forced to abandon Niðarós they met Sverrir and reported: “him of their *ill-luck* (our emphasis) and the loss of many of their fellows. The *Birkibeins* who had accompanied the King from the east spoke of the mishap rather scornfully”¹⁹. In this other example, the lucklessness of the *Birkibeinar* at Niðarós was met with hostility even by their own allies, who reacted with contempt to hearing the news of their fellow Birkibeinar being routed.
- Chapter 105, when the Kuflungs, the enemies of the King's faction, were preparing to attack them, one of their warriors, Nefari, spoke the verses:

“Smite the Birkibeins!
Let Sverri lot
The worser be
We'll brandish hard
And swift the tried salmon-of-the-shield [sword]/
No bragging words; our boast shall be
The number of the slain.
A smarting storm
We'll raise, let God give *luck* (our emphasis)”²⁰. [*látum skipta guð
giptu*]

¹⁷ *Sverris saga*, chapter 32

¹⁸ The term “romance” here refers to the French medieval knightly novel that was written in the vernacular (“mettre en romanz”, “faire romanz”). See Friedrich Wolfzettel, “La Fortune, Le Moi et L'Œvre: Remarques sur la Fonction Poétologique de Fortune au Moyen-Age Tardif” in Frederick Burwick, Jürgen Klein (eds.), *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany* (Rodopi B.V., 1996), 200

¹⁹ *Sverris saga*, chapter 68

²⁰ *Sverris saga*, chapter 105

Nefari's verses are illustrative of the skaldic tradition of the North, although they were probably not the most aesthetically valuable such *drapur*, it is remarkable that King Sverrir allowed it that even his enemies' songs made it into his saga. The wishing "*látum skipta guð giptu*" may also be interpreted as a parting phrase, meaning that, ultimately, the fate of the battle was not in the hands of men, as the preparation of both forces was commendable.

- Chapter 120, before the battle of Florvåg²¹, Hallkel Jonsson, one of the Øyskjegg, opined that: "We are not short of troops at this time to fight King Sverrir if we don't become more shiftless, and great *ill-luck* (our emphasis) does not befall us [...*vili eigi meirr óauðna falla til...*], then it is likely [that we win]. Those who have been opposed to King Sverri seem to me to have failed mostly in counsel and I expect that we shall conquer him if we don't proceed rashly"²². This last example is very interesting as it implies that King Sverrir's victories were owed to the fact that his enemies had been unlucky, more precisely, that they lacked good "counsel" (*unrede*²³), i.e. had not made use of adequate strategies to defeat the enemy, so it had not been due to insufficient resources. Lack of good counsel and lack of luck were considered such serious misfortune in Norse and Anglo-Saxon communities at the turn of the millennium that some rulers given names reflected this: Æþelræd unræd (18 March 978 – 1013, 1014 – 23 April 1016) the King of the English and Óláfr ugæfa (deceased 1169) who, much like King Sverrir, contested the claim of Magnús Erlingsson but was defeated in battle and forced into exile.

Taking all these theoretical aspects and examples into consideration, it can be assumed that the concept of luck in *Sverris saga* follows the

²¹ A naval confrontation that took place on 3 April 1194 between King Sverrir Sigurðsson, the head of the Birkibeiner movement, and Sigurð Magnusson, the Øyskjegg party pretender.

²² *Sverris saga*, chapter 120

²³ Grønbech 1933, 143

main features drawn by Vilhelm Peter Grønbech in his seminal study many decades ago. Many of the types of luck described by the Danish scholar are reflected in this saga, thus reinforcing the belief that the king's luck still represented a crucial attribute of royalty during the times the source was written: "the discipline of the army, the generalship of its leader, the force of his blow, his power of compelling victory, are part of the king's luck. Whether we say: the king had luck in learning the use of weapons and the art of war, to remain unwounded in the midst of fight, - or we credit him with a gift for the profession of arms, a gift which made lethal weapons fall harmlessly from him, it comes to the same thing. The king was the luckiest, that is to say, *inter alia*, the bravest, most skilful, wisest and most ingenious of warriors"²⁴. As for Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer's amendment to Grønbech's theory, namely that 'lucklessness' was not a reason of absolute stigma in Norse society, *Sverris saga* does not offer evidence in support of it. On the contrary, any ill-luck is met with scorn and described in the terms of total defeat and social exclusion to the status of a pariah by the king himself. To conclude this reflection on the importance of luck in the political ideology of 12th century Norway, one episode we noticed is revelatory, namely the speech of King Sverrir at the burial of King Magnús, his life-long opponent and rival to the Norwegian throne: "'The man by whose bier we now stand was a brave man, gracious to his men, but we kinsmen had not the *luck* to agree well together'"²⁵.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 139

²⁵ *Sverris saga*, chapter 97.

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