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Remembrance of King Óláfr Tryggvason in the Kings' Sagas

Abstract

The remembrance of King Óláfr Tryggvason in the saga literature has been subject of various books and articles. In this article, I will examine the remembrance of Óláfr Tryggvason through one memory place (*lieu de mémoire*), Svøldr, and three characters vital to his story and who also connect King Óláfr Tryggvason to the West Slavic area. The places and characters are important pieces for memorizing the story and, at the same time, are easily developed by the authors to suit the plot.

Keywords: Kings' Sagas; Viking Age; Pomerania; memory place

This article concentrates on remembrance of Norwegian King Óláfr Tryggvason who died around the year 1000 A.D. He is remembered especially as the king who began to convert Norwegians to Christianity but his fascinating life has also kept his memory alive in the Old Norse-Icelandic literary tradition. King Óláfr's life was entwined with history of Norway – perhaps I should say more generally with Scandinavia – and the area of the West Slavs. Therefore, his commemoration and remembrance are of interest to historians in Poland too.

To understand the importance of Óláfr Tryggvason's remembrance in the Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature, it is crucial to understand the political framework of that era in northern Europe. When looking back to the era right before the year 1000 and beyond, it seems to be rather crucial in the North European history. The contemporary Christians were expecting that the end of the world was approaching and they – or at least some of them – were preparing for the second coming of Christ while at the same time the conversion process was only starting to proceed in the northern most European areas. The conversion process was intertwined with the formation of kingdoms in Scandinavia. The eastern trade route, Austrvegr, had begun to lose its meaning when the silver flow from the east started to decline towards the end of the 10th century. This had profound changes in the political landscape of Scandinavia: many Scandinavians would turn their

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attention to west and to the British Isles. Many kings and local chieftains were adopting the new faith and not least because of the benefits it brought. Political power had been dispersed in Scandinavia, and local chieftains, whether they were called earls or kings, held power. However, during the 10th century this division of power was already changing when some powerful chieftains began to exert power on larger territorial areas.¹ Therefore, for Scandinavians, the era around the year 1000 meant change in many ways.

As we read from later medieval sources as well as from a contemporary runestone which was erected in Jelling by King Harald Bluetooth, in Scandinavia the Danes seem to have been first ones to adopt Christianity officially, and new bishoprics emerged in the Danish areas at the end of the 10th century.² Conversion was also underway in Norway during the 10th century, and in the Old Norse Kings' Sagas King Óláfr Tryggvason has been granted an important role in this pursuit. Yet this is just the official side of history that we perceive from later sources – as new archaeological excavations have supplemented our knowledge, the picture of conversion has become more vivid and multifaceted. For instance, the view that missionaries had been crucial in the conversion process has been questioned. More emphasis has been focused on the mutually beneficial symbiosis of clergy and kings who affected the conversion process.³ It seems that long before official conversion, Christianity had already won ground among Scandinavians. Whereas the official history tells how missionaries came from the German archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and from the British Isles and emphasizes the role of kings in the conversion process, contact with Christianity was made everywhere the Scandinavian Vikings travelled.⁴ Christianity most probably did not replace the old local beliefs in Scandinavia but there was co-existence and time for syncretism before Christianity was officially adopted by rulers, and also after it had been declared as the only, official religion. With the official acceptance of Christianity religion, rulers gained a means of exerting power.⁵

The era around the year 1000 saw power struggles between Scandinavian kings that paved the way to three different Scandinavian kingdoms. Although the clashes especially between the Danes and Norwegians would continue in the coming centuries, it is reasonable to point out that the fates of kings Óláfr Tryggvason and his follower Óláfr Haraldsson entail essentially what the history of Norway at that time was about: would the Norwegians accept Christianity officially and would they serve a Danish or Norwegian king? In this article, I have chosen to concentrate on King Óláfr Tryggvason because his saga stands in the

1 Sawyer / Sawyer 1997, pp. 86–91; Brink 2008, pp. 87–112; Poulsen / Sindbæk 2011, pp. 18–26.

2 Lund 1997.

3 Winroth 2012.

4 Sanmark 2004.

5 Berend 2007.

crux of these events, and his fate was bound also to the history of emerging Poland and the West-Slavic tribes. In this sense, examination of this missionary king in the historiography of Old Norse sources is appropriate regarding the conference theme: *Between East and West – studies on the history of memory, commemoration and reception of medieval culture*. I examine the remembrance of King Óláfr Tryggvason through the concept of memory places (*lieux de mémoires*) and by also applying this to three characters presented in the sagas.

To summarize King Óláfr's connections especially to the West-Slavs, it is necessary to run through the main points of his life. As a young man, Óláfr would raid the area of the West-Slavs called *Vindland* (Wendland) in the sagas. He met a daughter of local Prince Búrisláfr, Geira, and they were married. Óláfr helped his wife rule an area, which is not defined very well in the saga, but after her rather untimely death he left for new raids. The second conjunction with West Slavs took place years later, when Óláfr had become king of Norway. He married Danish princess Thyri, who had according to the sagas either been married to Óláfr's former father-in-law Búrisláfr or was his fiancée, but who had refused to marry him because he was a heathen. The third conjunction happened, when Thyri insisted that Óláfr should claim her dowry from Búrisláfr. Óláfr left for Wendland and according to the sources had a successful meeting with Búrisláfr. King Óláfr was ambushed by his enemies King Sveinn of Denmark, King Óláfr of Swedes and Norwegian Earls Sveinn and Eiríkr on his way back to Norway and he died in the battle of Svǫldr. The sagas which recall King Óláfr's life usually end here but saga of Óláfr Tryggvason written by a monk named Oddr around the beginning of the 13th century ends with an episode in which Óláfr was actually just wounded in the battle. The legend continues that he was saved by Ástriðr, sister of his former wife Geira, and as it is appropriate for a saga describing a saint-like king, Óláfr took exile and lived as a monk rest of his life probably in the Near East. This version is, of course, connected to the fact that the saga tries to depict Óláfr Tryggvason as a saint and predecessor of Óláfr Haraldsson, the real savior and converter of the Norwegians.⁶

Sources

The earliest saga sources concerning King Óláfr Tryggvason hail from around the beginning of the 13th century and known as the Kings' Sagas. His saga is included in compendia about the Norwegian kings such as *Ágrip af Noregs konungasögum*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which were written at the end of the 12th century

6 Jónsson 1957; Einarsson 1985 (1), pp. 19–24; Einarsson 1985 (2), pp. 141–162; Aðalbjarnarson 1985, pp. 225–372.

(*Ágrip*), around 1220 (*Fagrskinna*) and ca. 1235 (*Heimskringla*).⁷ His life is touched upon in Latin texts such as *Historia Norwegiae* and *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* by Theodoricus Monachus. The Icelandic monk Oddr Snorrason composed the so-called oldest *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*⁸ in Latin about 1190, but it is only preserved in three Icelandic translations. The version in AM 310 4to is interpolated with *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which, again, brings King Óláfr's *vita* closer to the history of the West Slavic area. Oddr based his version of the saga to written and oral sources but apparently, he felt free to expand the saga with anecdotes.⁹ *Jómsvíkinga saga*, although concentrating on the Jómsvíkings and their actions in present day area of Pomerania, Denmark, and Norway, is intertwined with the lore of Óláfr Tryggvason because of his connections to the West Slavic area and to the history of the Jómsvíkings who had founded their stronghold in Wendland. We can consider that these two sagas were so intertwined that the contemporary audience must have been aware of both – the other being an “immanent” saga.¹⁰

The sagas about the kings of Norway are certainly based on real events, but when looking at the lore and tradition about King Óláfr Tryggvason we must see it in the context of the time of writing and Norse-Icelandic memory culture, that is, in the 12th and 13th centuries. As has been claimed, Icelandic authors of the Kings' Sagas were not just writing about the history of kings but also their own history and thus creating their group identity.¹¹ The history of Icelanders was intertwined with the history of Norwegians. One layer in the historiography of Kings' sagas was the Christian worldview which gave it a framework and time concept: the Kings' Sagas present a teleological history according to which it is inevitable in the history of the Norse people that they were bound to become Christians, and in many cases the time reckoning in the sagas reflect Christian chronology.¹² In the most religiously biased sagas such as Oddr's version, King Óláfr Tryggvason was commemorated as the predecessor of King Óláfr Haraldsson, later known as the Holy. In this context, the kings were compared to John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

We can observe similarities in all the sagas telling of King Óláfr Tryggvason, and these parts of the saga form the lore around him that was probably circulating as oral tradition becoming part of the Old Norse-Icelandic collective memory. I would next like to examine two aspects of this lore and discuss what is

7 Of these sagas, *Ágrip* is the briefest and mentions only the main events of King Óláfr's life.

8 Jónsson 1957.

9 Haraldsson 1993, pp. 448–449; see also Jóhannesdóttir / Óskarsson 2014, p. 14.

10 About the concept of an immanent saga and *Jómsvíkinga saga*, see Aalto 2018 (2).

11 Jakobsson 1997; Aalto 2010.

12 Aalto 2017, p. 323.

their role in the remembrance of King Óláfr Tryggvason through them. These aspects are remembrance through places and people.

Lieux de mémoires – Remembrance of King Óláfr Tryggvason through Svǫldr

I have earlier written about the importance of places and place names in *Jómsvíkinga saga* and in that context I have examined Svǫldr which is the place for last battle between Óláfr Tryggvason and his enemies.¹³ Jakub Morawiec has analysed the circumstances and reasons which lead to this battle in which Óláfr Tryggvason was confronted by King Sveinn of Denmark, King Óláfr of the Svear and Norwegian Earls Eiríkr and Sveinn.¹⁴ The exact place of Svǫldr has never been solved but the battle took place supposedly somewhere near Öresund.¹⁵

Jómsvíkinga saga itself concentrates on events before the rule of King Óláfr Tryggvason, but the Jómsvíkings play a role also in his life, especially at the end of it in the battle of Svǫldr. As mentioned before, King Óláfr was related to the leader of the Jómsvíkings, Earl Sigvaldi. Sigvaldi's wife Ástriðr was sister to Óláfr's first wife Geira. Sigvaldi joined King Óláfr's enemies in secret and according to the sagas, he led Óláfr to a trap and Óláfr was surprised by his enemies when he was returning from Wendland to Norway.

Fagrskinna states that the epic battle of Svǫldr was the most famous there has ever been in the northern lands,¹⁶ and it can be thus stated that Svǫldr became a *lieu de mémoire* (a memory place) in the saga literature. Even *Ágrip* that is otherwise very brief about King Óláfr Tryggvason's life, concentrates on the battle of Svǫldr. This concept of *lieux de mémoires* was coined by French scholar Pierre Nora.¹⁷ It could refer to concrete places of remembrance such as statues or historical places. However, places of remembrance can exist on an abstract level, too, and they are also linked to memorizing. Francis Yates has been talking about toponyms as furniture of a mind.¹⁸ According to her, toponyms can act as auxiliary means to memorize a story, thus memory places. At the same time, they are building blocks of the story and possibly give credibility to it. If the audience was able to recognize the place names mentioned in the story, it would not just give context but also strengthen the belief in the credibility of the story, whether it is

13 Aalto 2016; Eadem 2018 (1).

14 Morawiec 2009, pp. 230–232.

15 On possible place of Svǫldr, see Morawiec 2009, pp. 209–231.

16 Einarsson 1985 (2), p. 160; Finlay 2004, p. 127.

17 Nora 1989.

18 Yates 1966.

historical or not.¹⁹ Theodore Andersson has argued that among saga themes that must have had a counterpart in oral tradition, toponyms are definitely important.²⁰ Therefore, toponyms are thus also aids for memory. A narrative may employ various techniques to highlight a story, but as Margaret Clunies Ross has argued, this requires a mental model that assumes the existence of a unique pattern of events occurring over time.²¹ In other words, the audience has to be capable of interpreting the story and contextualizing it.

It could be argued that Svǫlðr is a special case of its own among toponyms of the sagas because it is surrounded by myths. First of all, its location cannot be confirmed, and the sagas – especially Oddr Snorrason’s version of King Óláfr Tryggvason’s saga – imply that King Óláfr may not have died in the battle but was saved possibly by his former sister-in-law Ástriðr.²² This mysterious end of King Óláfr Tryggvason was of course used as to enhance his saintly-like role paving the way to Óláfr Haraldsson the Holy. *Heimskringla* presents the end of the battle as followingly:

En sú Vinðasnekkjan, er menn Ástriðar vǫru á, røri brot ok aprt undir Vinðland, ok var þat þegar roeða margra manna, at Óláfr konungr myndi steypt hafa af sér brynjunni í kafi ok kafat undan landskipunum, lagzk síðan til Vinðasnekkjunnar ok hefði men Ástriðar flutt hans til lands. Ok eru margar frásagnir um ferðir Óláfs konungs gørvar síðan af sumum mǫnnum...²³

While the author of *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson, is not repeating Oddr’s version in full in which Óláfr is miraculously saved by Ástriðr and her crew, he refers to the “many stories” about King Óláfr told after his supposed death. Although the sagas tell how heavy-handedly King Óláfr Tryggvason tried to convert his subjects, his qualities as the converter of Norwegians and predecessor of King Óláfr Haraldsson, later known as the Holy, surpass his actions in the sagas. King Óláfr Tryggvason’s saga is a good example of how a popular saga of a Christian king is constructed. First, he has his adventures as a young man, then conversion to Christianity, misfortunes when ruling his people, then a heroic battle against enemies, and at the end death in a battle (or supposed escape

19 The question of historicity of sagas and the role of toponyms is, of course, much more complex than can be touched upon in this article. About the use of place names in the sagas and their meaning for the audience, see Aalto 2018 (1), pp. 80–81.

20 Andersson 2006, p. 16.

21 Clunies Ross 1994, p. 24.

22 Jónsson 1957, pp. 190–191.

23 Aðalbjarnarson 1985, pp. 367–368; [But the cruiser of Vinðr that Ástriðr’s men were on rowed away and back off Vinðland, and there was already a report [...] by many people that King Óláfr must have thrown off his coat of mail in the water and dived away from under the longships, afterwards swimming to the cruiser, and that Ástriðr’s men had taken him ashore. And there have been many stories made since about these travels of King Óláfr’s by some people...; translation by Finlay / Faulkes 2011, p. 230].

according to the legend). The climax of the saga is conveniently taking place at sea where the actual location of the battle has not been confirmed, which adds a mythical dimension to King Óláfr's lore. Svǫldr becomes thus an epic place in the cultural and collective memory of Old Norse-Icelandic saga tradition and it made its way into the skaldic poetry. As an example could be mentioned Skúli Þorsteinsson's poem about Svǫldr:²⁴

Fylgðak Frísa dolgi,
 (fekk ungr) þars spjör sungu,
 – nú fiðr ǫld, at eldumk –
 (aldrbót) ok Sigvalda,
 þás til móts við meiti
 malmþings í dyn hjalma
 sunnr fyr Svǫðrar mynni
 sárlauk roðinn þórum.²⁵

Thus, Svǫldr is epitomized both on prose and poetry. Its geographical location or, in fact, the lack of thereof does not matter. The place is inscribed into the lore of King Óláfr Tryggvason.

Remembrance through Characters

The tradition connected to Óláfr Tryggvason entails several characters but I have chosen the following ones for examination: Earl Sigvaldi (leader of the Jómsvikings and Óláfr's brother-in-law), Prince Búriðr (Óláfr's father-in-law) and his daughter Ástriðr (Óláfr's sister-in-law). These characters are essentially part of the West-Slavic contacts that King Óláfr had in his life. They offer a viewpoint to remembrance: the characters play a role especially at the end of King Óláfr's life. Interestingly, these characters seem to be half historical and half-mythical themselves.

Earl Sigvaldi was son of Ear Harald of Sjælland (Sealand) who joined the Jómsvikings and later became their leader when the founder of the Jómsvikings, Pálna-Tóki, died. Sigvaldi's character has been subject of deeper analysis elsewhere so I conclude here only what has been pointed by earlier research.²⁶ Sigvaldi is not a typical saga hero, and in fact, he is maybe an antihero. His looks are

24 Heslop 2017, p. 362.

25 *The Scaldic Project* [2022]; [I followed the Frisians' enemy [= Eiríkr] and Sigvaldi, where spears sang; I got renown young – now people find I grow old –, when we [I] bore the reddened wound-leek [SWORD] into the din of helmets [BATTLE] against the meeter of the metal-assembly [BATTLE > WARRIOR] south before the mouth of Svolder; translation by Kate Heslop: Heslop 2017, p. 360.

26 Finlay 2006; Aalto 2009.

depicted as suspicious (he is, for instance, said to have had a crooked nose) and he flees from the battle of Hjörungavágr in which the Jómsvikings and Danes were defeated by Norwegians. Sigvaldi also deceives King Óláfr and leads him to his enemies which in a way only confirms his suspicious reputation for the audience. In other words, he is the villain or even a Judas character in the lore of Óláfr Tryggvason. Sigvaldi is mentioned both in saga sources and skaldic poems, and his family roots have been connected to the elite group that supported the Jelling dynasty in Denmark, but otherwise his historical background is hard to confirm.²⁷

Sigvaldi's contrast is his wife Ástriðr, and the events in Óláfr Tryggvason's lore underline the contradictory roles beyond that of the *Jómsvíkings saga*, as a deceiver and helper respectively. Ástriðr was according to the sagas daughter of King Búrisláfr of Wendland and her sister Geira was married to King Óláfr Tryggvason. The women in general do not play prominent roles in either King Óláfr Tryggvason's saga or in the *Jómsvíkings saga*, but they do affect his fate. The roles of women in the saga literature fall into the following types according to Forrest Scott: The grand lady; the beautiful, helpless bride; the faithful wife; the egger-on of men.²⁸ Ástriðr is definitely the grand lady but also the faithful wife who helps her husband with her advice. When Earl Sigvaldi promised to King Sveinn to attack Norwegians while he was heavily intoxicated and obviously regretted his promise later, Ástriðr softly yet determinedly pushed her husband to fulfill his oath. In other words, she looked after that her husband would keep his vow and thus maintain his honor and reputation. Ástriðr acts as Sigvaldi's conscience and reminder how he should behave. For instance, after the battle of Hjörungavágr she indirectly criticizes her husband for not being very brave. In Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* she also rises above her husband with her behavior when helping King Óláfr to escape – this is thus not a question of whether the events are real or not, but what kind of role is given to her in the saga and how she is remembered. Ástriðr does not seem to be connected directly to any historical character but she is given the role of a loyal wife and grand lady in the sagas.

The character of Prince Búrisláfr is the closest tie to Polish history in the saga. He remains as a background figure even if he basically has an important position as a ruler. For instance, when King Óláfr marries his daughter Geira, nothing is mentioned about Prince Búrisláfr's role.²⁹ It appears as if Princess Geira was an independent ruler and not dependent on her father. This depiction, of course, supports the saga's plot and Óláfr's role in helping Geira to rule over her territory.

27 Morawiec 2009, p. 101.

28 Scott 2002, p. 226.

29 Einarsson 1985 (1), p. 144; Aðalbarnason 1985, p. 253.

The character of the Wendish Prince Búrisláfr presented in the sagas cannot be attested, but I have earlier suggested that following historical characters may lie behind him: Prince Mstivoj (ca. 967–990/995?) of Obodritians, Prince Mieszko I (ca. 960–992) and Prince Boleslav I Chrobry (992–1025),³⁰ but also Duke Boleslav Wrymouth (1086–1138). These princes were one way or other involved in the history of Pomerania/Wendland which was close to the Danes and also known to other Scandinavians. My hypothesis is that all these characters may have donated certain traits to the saga character Prince Búrisláfr. Prince Mstivoj was married to King Harald Bluetooth's daughter Tofa, so this could have given background to the story of Prince Búrisláfr being engaged to Thyri in the Ólafs saga tradition. The fact that the Wendish prince is called Búrisláfr is plausible because after Mstivoj, history knows of several Boleslavs who were more famous. Boleslav I Chrobry who ruled at the end of the 10th century and at the beginning of the 11th century was probably familiar to the Scandinavians, but more likely Duke Boleslav Wrymouth was more famous because he lived closer to the time of writing down the sagas. When the saga of King Óláfr was written down at the end of the 12th century, this latter Boleslav's reputation was maybe known to the authors. Scandinavian-Wendish/West-Slavic marriages are recorded in various medieval sources which show that West-Slavic rulers in general were known to the Scandinavians. Closest to the time of writing down of the sagas was the marriage between Danish Prince Magnus Nielsson and Ryksa who was daughter of Boleslav Wrymouth.³¹ All in all, the character (and name) of Prince Búrisláfr seems thus to function as a stereotype for a Slavic ruler in the sagas, and it is impossible to connect him with just one historical character.

Even if Prince Búrisláfr is a "silent character" (he speaks only in the *Jómsvíkinga saga* version AM 291 4to when asking advice from his daughter Ástriðr), his importance for the saga plot cannot be underestimated. After all, King Óláfr Tryggvason travels to meet his former father-in-law to negotiate about his wife's dowry which was still in Búrisláfr's possession. The negotiations were successful and there was no quarrel between the former son- and father-in-law. Nothing is mentioned that Búrisláfr would have been a heathen even if Thyri had refused to marry him because he was a heathen and old.³²

To conclude, the key characters in Wendland are not prominently presented in the saga tradition of Óláfr Tryggvason but remain more as background figures. However, their background and story were certainly known to the audience *via* the *Jómsvíkinga saga* tradition. Interestingly, the character of Prince Búrisláfr seems to have been invented as a combination of historical characters – rulers of

30 Aalto 2009.

31 Morawiec 2009, pp. 79–80, 216–217.

32 Aðalbjarnason 1985, p. 341.

West Slavs – and literary conventions. It shows that the presented saga characters – even with historical roots – consist of layers of remembrance. Historical and unhistorical characters are brought to life in the saga tradition, and contemporary and near-contemporary characters that the authors had heard about affected the remembrance. This supplements our knowledge about the nature of saga literature and how we should read it and interpret it.

Concluding Remarks

Why is King Óláfr worthy of remembrance in the Old Norse sources? His fascinating life story was obviously worth telling. It took him from the Norwegian mountains to the court of Kievan Rus' and to Viking expeditions in Baltic and in the British Isles, with him finally ending up as the king of Norway. His life story culminates in the epic sea battle of Svǫldr. Moreover, he has been elevated in the medieval Norse historiography as the figure who brought Christianity to Norway and started to convert Norwegians. As we know today, this is the narrative – commemoration – that medieval authors wanted to present. In reality, the conversion process had begun before Óláfr Tryggvason's rule. However, the two Ólafas – Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson – were compared by medieval authors to John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. This presentation served, of course, the purposes of the Church and for those who were later in favor of canonizing King Óláfr Haraldsson.

The tradition of King Óláfr Tryggvason is built on blocks which can be called memory places. In this article I have examined the building blocks that connect Óláfr's remembrance to the West-Slavic area. In this context the building blocks are not just places but also characters. Historicity is not at the heart of the lore even if a kernel of truth lies there. The remembrance of different characters reveals that it has different layers which consist of the historical and un-historical. The events, characters and places in Óláfr Tryggvason's saga show that the contacts between east and west were alive and well in the Viking Age and the events served to be repeated as part of the Old Norse collective memory.

Depending on the saga version, the life of King Óláfr Tryggvason contains exciting, entertaining but as well as very humane elements that the audience may have been able to relate to, that which must have affected to the popularity of the lore. The perfect commemoration of a hero king contains the divine and humane at the same time: love, death, passion for religion and at the end, a miracle.

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