

THE MOST POWERFUL KING IN SCANDINAVIA – THE REPRESENTATION
OF KNÚTR INN RÍKI IN KNÝTLINGA SAGA

O REI MAIS PODEROSO DA ESCANDINÁVIA - A REPRESENTAÇÃO DE KNÚTR
INN RÍKI NA KNÝTLINGA SAGA

Deniz Cem Gülen¹

Abstract: This article investigates an understudied aspect regarding Knútr inn ríki, focusing on the representation of Knútr in *Knýttlinga saga*. After summarizing Knútr's reign in the saga, it points out the historical inaccuracies in the saga of Knútr inn ríki and compares his representation therein to how Knútr was politicized in several other primary sources from different geographies and genres. Building upon that, by demonstrating the possible Danish influence on the saga author and Knútr's historical impact, it explores why the saga author may have wanted politicise Knútr in this way.

Keywords: Knútr inn ríki, *Knýttlinga saga*, Medieval Denmark, *konungasögur*.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga um aspecto pouco estudado acerca de Knútr inn ríki, com foco em sua representação na *Knýttlinga saga*. Após resumir o reino de Knútr na saga, o artigo aponta imprecisões históricas na saga de Knútr inn ríki e compara esta sua representação com a maneira como Knútr foi politizado em diversas outras fontes primárias de diferentes origens e gêneros. A partir disto, demonstrando a possível influencia dinamarquesa sobre o autor da saga e sobre o impacto histórico de Knútr, o texto explora o motivo pelo qual o autor da saga poderia querer politizar Knútr de tal maneira.²

Palavras-chave: Knútr inn ríki, *Knýttlinga saga*, Dinamarca Medieval, *konungasögur*.

Introduction

Due to his status as one of the most prominent Scandinavian rulers, Knútr inn ríki has been the subject of several historical studies (Bolton, 2009; Lawson, 2004; Larson, 1912).

¹ Deniz Cem Gülen is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Aberdeen's Centre for Scandinavian Studies. E-mail: r01dgc15@abdn.ac.uk

² Translated by Dr. Julia Gezatt.

These studies have mostly covered the administrative system of Knútr's empire, his influence on Scandinavian history, or his English reign. By contrast, the representation of Knútr in the Scandinavian primary sources is a topic that has been mostly neglected. This paper will compare several primary sources pertaining to Knútr and will, in particular, explore the strongly worded representation of him in *Knýtlinga saga*.

***Knýtlinga saga*, its Structure and Background**

Knýtlinga saga is the only Icelandic source that covers a significant portion of medieval Danish history other than *Skjöldunga saga*. The surviving version of the saga starts with the life and reign of Haraldr Gormsson (r. 958-986) and covers three centuries of medieval Danish history before ending with the death of Burizlav in 1187. Traditionally, it is accepted that the saga consists of three sections: the predecessors of Knútr inn helgi (r. 1080-1086), the reign of Knútr inn helgi, and the successors of Knútr inn helgi (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 12).

The first section of the saga starts with the conversion of Haraldr Gormsson and continues until the accession of Knútr inn ríki. Although the focus of this section is Knútr inn ríki (r. 1016-1035), the saga offers only sparse information on his English campaign in 1015-1016 before moving to the next section.³

The second and largest section of the saga discusses the reign of Knútr inn helgi. Although Knútr only ruled Denmark for six short years, the chapters relating to him are equivalent to two-fifths of the saga. Furthermore, the narrative of the saga is characterized by a different and superior writing style in comparison to the first and third sections of the saga (Heller, 1967, p. 164). The complex sentence structures and the use of several uncommon words in this section are some of the characteristics that differentiate it from the other two sections. The saga mostly focuses on the religious aspects of Knútr and emphasizes several times how devoted he was.

Although the last section of the saga begins with Óláfr I (r. 1086-1095) and his release from prison,⁴ the focus of this section is Archbishop Absalon (c. 1128-1201) and Valdimarr I

³ A more detailed explanation will be presented in the following section.

⁴ According to the saga, King Knútr inn helgi imprisoned his brother, Óláfr I because Knútr believed that Óláfr was scheming against him (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 167; Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 72).

(r. 1146/1154-1182).⁵ Due to the remarkable similarities between this section and *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus, the representation of Valdimarr's reign in the saga has attracted several scholars (Weibull, 1915; Albeck, 1946; Malmros, 1979) and is one of the most studied topics of the saga.

Unfortunately the studies relating to the saga are rather limited,⁶ but the traditional studies of the saga can be divided into four groups: those interested the authorship issue (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986; Hallberg, 1963), an exploration of the usage of *Liðsmannaflokkur* (Poole, 1991), an investigation of the sources of Knútr inn helgi's saga (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012) and those studying the similarities between Saxo's *Gesta* and the saga (Weibull, 1915; Albeck, 1946). In addition to these topics Alexandra Petrulevich brought a different perspective by focusing on the Wendish place-names and place-name variants in *Knýtlinga saga* in her PhD thesis (Petrulevich, 2016). Tatjana N. Jackson also recently approached the saga from a new angle with her article on *Spatial Orientation in Knýtlinga saga* (Jackson, 2017).

Knútr inn ríki in *Knýtlinga saga*

The narrative of Knútr starts with the death of his father, Sveinn Haraldsson (r. 986–1014). In the saga, Knútr is only ten years old when Sveinn dies but because Knútr's brother Haraldr is already dead too, Knútr is made King of Denmark (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 100). After his ascension to the throne, the Danish chieftains in England ask for his help but Knútr spends the next three years in Denmark due to his young age and inexperience. Later, Knútr gathers his army in Denmark for an expedition to England (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 101-107). Knútr's brother-in-law Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson from Norway (r. 1000-1012) who has a great reputation for courage and leadership in war, as well as several other chieftains join Knútr for his campaign (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 102-103). Shortly after, the army sails to England and arrives at Humber: "Knútr konungr kom til Englands ok sigldi útan at Englandi, þar sem Fljót heita (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 103)".⁷

⁵ Due to the civil war period in Denmark, Valdimarr was one of the three kings from 1146 to 1154.

⁶ One of the main reasons of this is the lack of original manuscript (Phelpstead, 2005, p. 164; Hallberg 94).

⁷ "King Knut sailed to England and made landfall at a place called Humber (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 29)".

The saga claims that upon landing, Knútr and his army start plundering, looting and burning down every settlement that they encounter. Until Lindsey, the Danish army does not encounter any resistance. At Lindsey, an army (which the saga claims was formed by the locals) tries to stop the Danes. Although Knútr's army suffers heavy casualties as well, Knútr manages to capture Hemingbrough (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 106). Before leading his army south, Knútr's success also continues in Northumberland where his army defeats the English although some of the survivors manage to flee.

Immediately before the chapter relating to the Battle of Sherston, the saga introduces the marriage of Knútr and Queen Emma (c. 985-1052). According to the saga, shortly after the death of King Æthelred II (r. 978-1013), Emma decides to sail to France in order to visit her brothers (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 107). Once King Knútr's men learn this, they seize her ship and bring her into Knútr's presence. Knútr and his chieftains agree that he should marry Emma.

After this brief description of Knútr's marriage, the saga discusses the Battle of Sherston. The eldest son of Æthelred, Edmund the Strong (r. 1016) is crowned as the king, organises his army and marches to face King Knútr. The two armies meet at Sherston and the saga claims that one of the most famous battles of the time takes place: "... ok varð fundr þeira þar, sem heitir at Skorsteini, ok var þat in frægsta orrosta, er í þann tíma hafi verit (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 108)".⁸ Both parties suffer heavy casualties and the two leaders come face to face although neither of them gets hurt. Eventually, the Danish army manages to rout the English forces and pursue them throughout the day.

After the Battle of Sherston, the saga argues that one of Knútr's loyal followers, Earl Úlfr, gets lost in the forest while following the English soldiers (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 109). In this forest, Úlfr meets with a youngster named Godwin, herding a flock of sheep. After a brief discussion, Godwin agrees to help Úlfr to find the Danes but first, they visit Godwin's father (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 110). Wulfnoth makes Úlfr promises to find a position for Godwin when they reach Knútr's ships because Wulfnoth believes that if anyone hears that Godwin helped a Dane, it will cause many problems for the family (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 110-111). Eventually, Godwin and Úlfr reach Knútr's ships and Úlfr

⁸ "They met a place called Sherston in one of the most famous battles of the time... (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 31)".

keeps his promise. Gyda, Úlfr's sister' marries Godwin and Knútr awards Godwin an earldom (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 111).

Later in the saga, the Danish army continues its march. Knútr faces and defeats the English army, led by Æthelred's sons, at Brentford, Ashington and Norwich respectively.⁹ After these battles, Knútr decides to besiege London after he learns that Edmund and his brothers have fled there. First, the Danish army tries to use the Thames; however, a large fort prevents this (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 115). As seen in *Liðsmannaflokkr*,¹⁰ the Danish army launches another attack to London:

<p>Hvern morgin sér horna Hlökk á Tempsar bakka, skala Hanga mǫ hungra, hræskóð lituð blóði; hvé sigrfíkin sækir snarla borgar kala, dynr á brezkar brynjur blóðiss, Dana vísi. Margr ferr Ullr í illan oddsennu dag þenna frár, þars fœddir vǫrum, fornan serk, ok bornir, enn á enskra manna qlum gjóð Hnikars blóði, qrt mun skáld í skyrtu skreiðask hamri samða (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 116).</p>	<p>Each morning exulting the war-maiden admires on Thames banks the bloodstained battle-gear: the black raven will relish how the ravenous Dane-king bravely batters with his blade the British mailcoats. We were born and bred here where many a brisk battler will assume his old shattered shirt this morning. We still feed the English to the ospreys of Odin; the singer dresses swiftly in his hammered steel shirt (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, pp. 36-37).</p>
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According to the saga, the Danish army once again fails to break into the city but eventually, both parties exchange their hostages and agree on peace. The country is divided between Knútr and Edmund, and it is decided that if either of them dies without any successor, the surviving king will inherit after the other (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 119). The saga, however, claims that Knútr hires Edric Strjona (Edmund's foster father) to assassinate Edmund. After this, Knútr drives all the remaining sons of Æthelred out of England which

⁹ Apart from Edmund, Æthelred also had three more sons: Edgar, Edwig and Edward.

¹⁰ *Liðsmannaflokkr* is a poem composed by either Saint Óláfr or Knútr the Great's household troops during the English campaign. See: Poole, 1991. For the full version of the poem see: <http://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php?id=1023&if=default&table=text>

causes unhappiness among Anglo-Saxons although, due to lack of any candidate to replace or challenge Knútr, the uprisings do not cause him any problems in the end.

The story of Knútr ends with his rivalry against Saint Óláfr (r. 1015–1028) and his pilgrimage to Rome (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 121-123). The saga suggests that after defeating Óláfr, Knútr appoints his nephew, Hákon Eiríksson as the ruler of Norway and although Óláfr returns to Norway, his men betrays him and Óláfr dies at Stiklastaðir. After Óláfr's death, Knútr starts his pilgrimage. Throughout the pilgrimage, Knútr helps the poor and makes sizeable donations to every monastery he encounters, as well as other large establishments (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 123). On his way back to England, Knútr contracts an illness and loses his life at the age of thirty-seven. The brief description of him by the saga author emphasizes the generosity, importance and power of Knútr by stating that: “Han var kallaðr Knútr inn ríki eða Knútr gamli. Hann hefir verit ríkastr konungr ok víðlendastr á danska tungu... Þat er allra manna mál, at Knútr konungr hafi ríkastr verit ok víðlendastr konunga á Norðrlöndum... Knútr konungr hefir verit þrvastr konunga á Norðrlöndum... (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 122-124)”.¹¹

The Different Representations of the Historical Events in the Saga

Due to lack of surviving documents, the chapters relating to Knútr are, potentially, some of the most valuable sources that historians have for this figure. However, the saga of Knútr inn ríki contains several important historical inaccuracies and fails to demonstrate Knútr's political agenda in England, as well as Denmark.

One of the initial problems with the saga relates to the events surrounding the death of Sveinn Haraldsson and Knútr's ascension to the throne. As demonstrated above, the saga claims that by the time Sveinn dies, Knútr is only ten years old, but, since his brother, Haraldr, is already dead, he has to be crowned king of Denmark. This information is problematic in two key respects: Knútr's age and Haraldr's faith. The year of Knútr's birth is somewhat unclear and hard to evaluate. From the saga's perspective, if Knútr was only ten years old when Sveinn died, this means Knútr was born in 1004. In *Svein Forkbeard's*

¹¹ “He was more powerful and ruled over more territories than any other Norse-speaking king, and people called him Knut the Great, or Old Knut... Everyone agrees that no king in Scandinavia was ever so powerful or ruled over a more wide-ranging kingdom... There was never a king in Scandinavia more generous than Knut... (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, pp. 40-41)”.

Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England, 991-1017, Ian Howard has argued that this mistake occurred because the saga author followed *Heimskringla's* time scale and was not aware of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* account of the events of 1013 (Howard, 2003, pp. 100-101). According to the Chronicle, after taking hostages from Lindsey, Northumbria and the Five Borough Towns, Sveinn put Knútr in charge of them (Swanton, 1996, p. 145). This means, if Knútr was indeed in a position to handle several hostages during Sveinn's conquest in 1013, he was most definitely older than nine, contradicting *Knýtlinga's* chronological framework. Although Knútr's exact date of birth is unknown, it has been suggested that this was either 990 or 999 (Howard, 2003, p. 100). Furthermore, the saga omits the short reign of Haraldr II (r. 1014-1018) and instead, argues that Knútr became king immediately after Sveinn's death. Even though our knowledge about Haraldr is scarce, it has been argued that Haraldr was regent during Sveinn's conquest of England and after his death; he continued to rule Denmark (Steenstrup, 1893, p. 73).

The description and outcome of the Battle of Sherston is another problematic chapter in the saga. As seen previously, the saga argues that the Danish army manages to defeat the English army and faces no significant resistance throughout the campaign until it reaches London. On the other hand, if one looks at the Worcester Chronicle, the outcome of this battle is significantly different. The Worcester Chronicle suggests that both sides suffered heavy casualties and neither managed to break its opponent, and that they broke off the battle (Swanton, 1996, pp. 149-151). By contrast the Battle of Ashingdon is a lot more important than the saga demonstrates. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claims that the king assembles his army and faces the Danes at the hill which is called Ashingdon, where Knútr defeats the English and earns himself the kingdom (Swanton, 1996, p. 152).

Another issue is Earl Úlfr and his meeting with Godwin. Although our knowledge relating to Úlfr's contribution to Knútr's campaign is limited, it has been argued that Úlfr was in England as one of Knútr's most trusted men (Westrin, 1920, p. 906). However the sources other than *Knýtlinga saga* do not indicate any instance in which Úlfr pursues the enemy and gets lost in the forest. One could imagine that during the battle, Úlfr might have lost his way in the forest, but the lack of any other source to prove this story raises questions. Furthermore, the involvements of Godwin and his father are also problematic. Godwin's rise to power did indeed happen under the rule of Knútr. Only two years after Knútr's ascension, Godwin was an earl and around 1020 he became the earl of Wessex

(Williams, 2004), but no extant source supports such an early meeting between Knútr and Godwin. Lastly, the saga vastly undermines Wulfnoth's position.¹² According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, after facing unknown and unjust charges, Wulfnoth escapes with twenty ships, survives a storm and burns down the fleet of his pursuer, Brihtric (Swanton, 1996, pp. 138-140). Eventually, King Æthelred confiscates his property in Sussex (Barlow, 2002, pp. 26-27).

These historical inaccuracies and other different representations of some historical events in the saga raise an important question: why was Knútr's story told in this particular manner? Speculative answers can be tried, such as: different writing traditions, a lack of access of Latin sources, or even the influence of heroism in the saga literature; but, it seems to me that the most significant factors are the likely Danish influence on the saga author, political circumstances at the time of compilation, and Knútr's historical success.¹³

Political Representation of Knútr inn ríki

The politicization of historical figures and events is a well-known problem (Byock, 1992, pp. 44-59). From the British Isles to Iceland, almost every literary tradition has such instances. The representation of Haraldr Sigurðarson (r. 1046-1066) and his English campaign of 1066 in *Heimskringla* is a clear example of this. In King Haraldr's saga, Tostig Godwinson (c. 1026-1066) visits Haraldr after Harold Godwinson (r.1066) sends Tostig into exile (Monsen and Smith, 1932, p. 557). Although Haraldr initially refuses to help Tostig, Tostig eventually persuades Haraldr to help by promising him the English crown (Monsen and Smith, 1932, p. 558). Haraldr organizes his forces and sails to England but ultimately loses his life at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. It is argued that Haraldr already had plans to invade England but from the saga's perspective, it is Tostig who convinces Haraldr to do so

¹² Although our knowledge regarding to Wulfnoth Cild is limited, according to Frank Barlow, Wulfnoth was an influential figure in England and was the thegn of South Saxon. For more information see: Barlow, 2002, p. 25.

¹³ Apart from the aforementioned historical inaccuracies, Saint Óláfr's absence during the campaign and the saga's version of *Liðsmannaflokkur* must be discussed. As demonstrated above *Knýtlinga saga* does not suggest any alliance between Knútr and Óláfr, which contradicts with the various Saint Óláfr's sagas. *Knýtlinga saga* clearly demonstrates their rivalry and does not give any credit to Óláfr during the campaign of 1016. This also affects *Liðsmannaflokkur* since both the Legendary and the Oldest Saga of Saint Óláfr argue that Óláfr himself is the author while in *Knýtlinga saga* the poem is a collective effort of Knútr's household troops (Poole, 1991, pp. 90-1). It has been suggested that the reason there are differences between these sources is that the author of *Knýtlinga saga* used a lost *Knúts saga* (Albeck, 1946; Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. xci-cix).

(Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, 1972, p.137), thus it is Tostig who should be blamed for Haraldr's death. While this political aspect is rather hard to see in Haraldr's case, the historical writings on Knútr are clear demonstrations of the proposed idea.

Apart from *Knýtlinga saga* there are a few other surviving historical records on Knútr: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Encomium Emmae Reginae* and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* are the three comparative sources that will be used in this paper.

a) Knútr in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is one of the most important sources for medieval English history. The chronicle is a collection of several annals and it is believed that the original manuscript was initiated by a scribe in Wessex in the late ninth century during the reign of Alfred the Great (Abels, 2005, p. 15; Keynes and Lapidge, 2004, p. 41). Nine of the manuscripts have survived and it has been suggested that these manuscripts share a rather complex relationship (Swanton, 1996, pp. xxi-xxviii). Due to the Chronicle's main focus being Wessex, it is hard to argue for its objectivity – a problem which becomes clear in the entries about Knútr.

The representation of Knútr changes drastically throughout his interactions with England. As demonstrated above, the chroniclers were clearly aware that Knútr was with Sveinn during the campaign of 1013. From this early reference on, the entries involving Knútr show a clear political bias against him. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that after Sveinn's death, the Danish fleet declares Knútr as the next King of England (Swanton, 1996, p. 144). However all the English councilors disagree and Æthelred is crowned as the king because he is their natural lord (Swanton, 1996, pp. 144-145). Shortly after, all the Danish kings are outlawed from England: "And full friendship was secured with word and pledge on either side, and [they]¹⁴ declared every Danish king outlawed from England for ever (Swanton, 1996, p. 145)". Knútr leaves England, but in response he destroys several settlements and, when he arrives to Sandwich, he cuts off the hands and noses of the hostages (Ruitter and Ashby, 2018; Swanton, 1996, p. 145).¹⁵

¹⁴ Here they refers to the councilors.

¹⁵ The entry in the chronicle is: "Cnut himself went out with his fleet – and thus the wretched people were betrayed through him – and then turned southwards until he came to Sandwich, and there out

Other than the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, this event cannot be seen in any other historical sources. It would appear that this event is written in order to represent Knútr as a barbarian who is not fit to rule a proper Christian kingdom.¹⁶ It seems to me that the chroniclers believed that the coronation of Æthelred and the supports of the councilors were strong enough to keep Knútr out of power in England. However, in 1016 Knútr became the King of England after a renewed invasion. From his coronation onwards, the entries about Knútr are no longer critical of him. Although the chronicle does not discuss Knútr's reign in much detail, his coming to the throne significantly changes his representation (Swanton, 1996, pp. 154-159). However, although the entries are relatively objective in their discussion the events that occurred in the following years, they are also substantially shorter and do not reflect Knútr's reign in detail.

b) Knútr in *Encomium Emmae Reginae*

Another important historical source for Knútr's reign and its representation is *Encomium Emmae Reginae*. *Encomium* is an eleventh century text, written by a Flemish author who is believed to have been a monk at the Abbey of Saint Bertin in Saint-Omer (Stafford, 1997, p. 28). The text was commissioned by Queen Emma herself (Campbell and Keynes, 2008, p. xiii) due to the political instability at the English court (Stafford, 1997, p. 28). Similar to *Knýtlinga saga*, it also has three sections: Sveinn Haraldsson's conquest of England, Knútr's reconquest of England as well as his marriage with Emma and his reign, and lastly Harold Harefoot's (r. 1035-1040) reign with the addition of the accession of Queen Emma's sons, Hǫrða-Knútr (r. 1035/1040-1042)¹⁷ and Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-1066) to the throne. Due to Emma's involvement with the writing process, the work is widely accepted as biased and significantly favors her marriage with Knútr over Æthelred (John, 1980, p. 61).

Throughout *Encomium*, Knútr is represented as a wise, devoted Christian king with high moral standards. Unlike the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Knútr has a good reputation from the beginning as *Encomium* does not reflect Æthelred as the natural choice and puts the blame on Sveinn when it discusses why the English decide to support Æthelred instead of

ashore the hostages which were granted to his father, and cut off their hands and their noses (Swanton, 1996, p. 145)".

¹⁶ See Ruiter and Ashby (2018) for a detailed discussion on the punishment method and its impact.

¹⁷ In 1035, Hǫrða-Knútr is crowned as the King of Denmark and only after the death of Harold Harefoot in 1040 Hǫrða-Knútr is crowned as the King of England.

Knútr (Campbell and Keynes, 2008, p. 15). Furthermore, there are several references to Knútr's piety depicting him as a proper Christian king. For instance, *Encomium* argues that Knútr was more than helpful to the Church: "Amicus uero et familiaris factus est uiris ecclesiasticis, adeo ut episcopis uideretur coepiscopus pro exhibitione totius religionis, monachis quoque non secularis sed caenobialis pro continentia humillimae deutionis." (Campbell and Keynes, 2008, pp. 34-36).¹⁸

c) Knútr in *Gesta Danorum*

Apart from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Encomium*, Saxo's *Gesta* is another important source to investigate because unlike these two sources, *Gesta* represents a Scandinavian perspective. *Gesta*, a twelfth century chronicle, discusses Danish history from prehistory to the late twelfth century. It was written by Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish historian during the late twelfth to early thirteenth century. Saxo's work consists of sixteen books in Latin and can be seen as two volumes: a legendary part and a historical part, divided at the end of the ninth book with Gorm the Old (r. 936-958).¹⁹ It has been argued that because the Chronicle was written under the guidance of Archbishop Absalon, it is not unbiased on Danish rulers and especially favours Absalon's time (Albeck, 1946, pp. 143-330).

Gesta's record of Knútr is significantly more detailed than the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in most cases.²⁰ Saxo's work presents Knútr becoming the king of Denmark,²¹ his ascension to the English throne and his marriage with Emma. Furthermore, *Gesta* also offers more information than the previously discussed sources by demonstrating his reign in Denmark and the rebellion against him which is organized by Úlfr (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, pp. 741-747). Saxo's account ends Knútr's reign with a high note by strongly suggesting that he was the most brilliant king of Denmark:

Hunc Kanutus exitum habuit, quo nemo nostrorum regum, tametsi plura alii uictoriis illustrauerint, splendidior fuit. Adeo enim operum eius magnitudinem propitiae fame

¹⁸ "He indeed became a friend and intimate of churchmen, to such a degree that he seemed to bishops to be a brother bishop for his maintenance of perfect religion, to monks also not a secular but a monk for the temperance of his life of most humble devotion (Campbell and Keynes, 2008, pp. 35-37)".

¹⁹ For further discussion on Gorm's reign see Michael Gelting, *Poppo's Ordeal: Courtier Bishops and the Success of Christianization at the Turn of the First Millennium*, 2010.

²⁰ Knútr's English campaign is one of the exceptions where the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offers more detail. Saxo's *Gesta* rather briefly discusses the campaign before he is crowned as the king.

²¹ Saxo fails to mention Haraldr II and shows similarities with *Knýtlinga saga*.

fides auxerat, ut quos rerum gestarum gloria pares habuerat, amplitudine claritatis excellat (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, p. 772).

Such was the end of Cnut, a ruler whom none of our kings surpassed in brilliance, even though others won more dazzling victories. The trustworthiness of his gracious reputation had so much augmented his great deeds that, though there were some who had equalled him in their glorious exploits, he excels them all in the extent of his renown (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, p. 773).

d) Comparisons to Knútr in *Knýtlinga saga*

As demonstrated above, the representation of Knútr in *Knýtlinga saga* is flattering. Although the saga does not discuss his reign in either continental Scandinavia or England, the general understanding from the saga is that his reign was quite successful, as mentioned previously. In addition to his military campaign and pilgrimage, the saga also represents Knútr's generosity as well as his economic success in England:

Knútr konungr hefir verit orleik konunga á Norðrlöndum, því at þat er sannliga sagt, at eigi hafði hann þat miðr umfram aðra konunga, hversu mikit fé hann veitti í vingjafir á hverju ári, heldr en hitt, at hann tók miklu meira í skatta ok skyldir á hverju ári af þrim þjóðlöndum en hverr sá annarra, er hafði eitt konungsríki fyrir at ráða, ok þó þát með, at England er auðgast at lausafé allra Norðrlanda (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p.124).

There was never a king in Scandinavia more generous than Knut, for it is said in all truth that he went far beyond other kings, lavishing such riches every year in gifts to his friends; but at the same time, he took much more in annual dues and taxes from the three realms than anyone ruling over just a single kingdom, England being richer in money than any other northern land (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 41).

The distinct and yet similar representations of Knútr in these other three historical records can be explained by the contemporary events in their respected time periods. For the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the historians understandably had to change their perspectives on Knútr from a foreign invader to a proper Christian king due to his coronation. The starting point of *Encomium Emmae Reginae* is demonstrating Knútr to be an equitable and a religious king so that Queen Emma could reinstate her status, facilitating the crowning her sons, Hqrða-Knútr and Edward the Confessor after the reign of Harold Harefoot. Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* demonstrates a nationalistic historical background and is guided by an important political figure of the age. *Knýtlinga saga*, however, is rather different than these sources.

Being written in Iceland during the second half of the thirteenth century (Weibull, 1915, p. 179), and wholly unlike the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, the saga and the saga author do not have any demonstrable personal connections with Knútr. As opposed to Saxo's *Gesta*, the saga was not written by a Danish historian and did not aim to represent a glorious history of Denmark, as can be seen throughout the saga whose narrative is critical towards several Danish kings for their actions. The reigns of Haraldr III (r. 1076–1080)²², Óláfr I²³ and Niels (r. 1104–1134)²⁴ are some of the examples of this different attitude.

Why the Saga Author Politicized Knútr

a) The Danish Influence on the Saga Author

There have been several studies on the authorship issue of the saga, however, as with other early Icelandic writings, the debate around this issue still continues. It has been suggested by several scholars (Sigurður Nordal, 1953, p. 226; Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 19.) that Óláfr Þórðarson, one of the nephews of Snorri Sturluson and the author of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, should be accepted as the author of the saga for three reasons: his family ties with Snorri and his educational background, his visit to Denmark and personal relationship with King Valdimarr II (r. 1202–1241), and lastly the continuity of the usage of the similar verbs, adjectives and nouns in *Knýtlinga Saga* (Hallberg, 1963). On the other hand, these studies fail to answer or disregard the fact that the saga does not actually represent a unity of vocabulary, or the issue of the end date of the

²² Haraldr konungr var maðr kyrrlátr ok fálátr, ómálugr, ekki talaðr á þingum. Urðu aðrir mjök at hafa tungu fyrir honum... Danir kǫlluðu hann Haraldr hein... (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 145) (King Harald was quiet, reserved man, and not being good speaker had nothing to say at assemblies, so others always had to act as his spokesmen... The Danes called Harald 'the whetstone'... (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 54).

²³ Óláfr konungr Sveinsson var ríkr maðr ok grimmr ok heldr óvinsæll... ok var hann lítt harmdauði alþýðu manns... (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 211) (King Olaf Sveinsson was a man of great power, ruthless and rather unpopular... in general there was little grief at his death... (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 105).

²⁴ Ok með því at Níkulás konungr gerðisk þá mǫrgum mǫnnum mjök óþokkaðr í Danmǫrk, þá veittu þeir honum þeir honum þegar atgǫngu, er hann kom í staðinn (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 263) (... and as King Nikulas had become highly unpopular with most people in Denmark, they set on him as soon as he entered the town ((Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 140).

saga (Heller, 1967; Zernack, 2001).²⁵ However, if the saga author was indeed Óláfr Þórðarson or if he was involved in the composition of the saga by any means, this strong representation of Knútr in ríki becomes rather easily explicable due to Óláfr's connection with the Danish court.

It has been previously suggested that the author of *Knýtlinga saga* had benefited from some Danish sources (Albeck, 1946; Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. cxvii-cxxxv). For instance, striking resemblances between the saga and some of the Danish historical sources (namely: *Passio Sancti Kanuti regis et martyris*, *Gesta Swenomagni* and *Gesta Danorum*) occur in several chapters. As Bjarni Guðnason points out, the conversation between Knútr inn helgi and an unnamed priest about the priest's wife are rather similar in both *Knýtlinga saga* and *Gesta Swenomagni* (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. cxxix). In these sources, the king plans to sleep with the priest's wife but eventually Knútr conquers his temptation and spends the night by himself. Several other similarities can be seen in the last sections of the saga and Saxo's *Gesta* (Weibull, 1915, pp. 179-237; Albeck, 1946, pp. 143-330). Although the reasons for these similarities are still discussed by historians (Gelting, 2012, pp. 322-34; Malmros, 1979), it is possible to see that the saga author was working under the influence of *Gesta* or, potentially, of the sources Saxo himself had used when composing his chronicle since the representations of King Valdimarr I's reign are almost identical in the two texts.

It would seem reasonable to suggest that an author who had access to several Danish sources would be influenced by the Danish historical tradition. While it is still debatable whether Óláfr Þórðarson is the author of *Knýtlinga saga* or not, Óláfr's referral to King Valdimarr II as "my lord" in his treatise on rhetoric (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 19) suggests a clear Danish influence on the proposed saga author. As already mentioned; although the saga does criticize some of the previous Danish rulers, on balance the number of praise outweighs the criticism. Apart from the sagas of Knútr inn ríki, Knútr inn helgi, and Valdimarr I, the saga also depicts several other kings as successful and praiseworthy, such as: Eiríkr I (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 213-239) and Valdimarr II (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. 316-317).

²⁵ *Knýtlinga saga* ends in 1187, instead of 1241 the date of Óláfr's departure from Denmark. It is questioned date if Óláfr was the author of the saga, why did he not write the years he was in Denmark.

It seems plausible that during his time in Denmark (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, p. 315) Óláfr became familiar with Danish history by using the recently established royal archives (Gelting, 2012, p. 330). As Gelting suggests, when Valdimarr I was crowned as the sole ruler of Denmark after the Danish civil war (1131-1157), one of his early actions was to hire an Anglo-Norman named either Ralph or Radulf in order to introduce administrative reforms (Gelting, 2012, p. 330). An Anglo-Norman in this period was a very logical choice by King Valdimarr as in the mid-eleventh century, England was in the process of re-organizing its royal administration after the Anarchy and the outcome of the reformation policies of King Henry II were highly influential (Amt, 1993, pp. 113-181). Although the Danish sources fail to address this period of administrative innovation, preferring to mostly focus on the struggle of Valdimarr against Wends, it is logical to argue that Valdimarr followed Henry's footsteps which ultimately ended with the establishment of royal archives. (Gelting, 2012, p. 331). Even though many of the sources were written before the royal archives were created, one would imagine that these sources were gathered at the archives and used by the historians of the age.

b) Knútr's Historical Success and His Importance on Scandinavian History

As has been discussed in the earlier sections of this study, Knútr inn ríki is not the central figure of *Knýtlinga saga*. Although Knútr was the king of England and Denmark, and the Norwegians as well as of some of the Swedes at various points (Lawson, 2004, p. 41), the saga only reserves a handful of chapters for his reign. Furthermore, these chapters are rather short on detail and mostly focus on his English campaign. The significantly shorter reign of Knútr inn helgi, however, is discussed in a lot more detail than those of the other Danish kings. As demonstrated previously, Knútr inn helgi's reign covers two-fifths of the saga and consists of over thirty chapters in the saga which suggests the importance of saintly figures for *konungasögur* (Phelpstead, 2005, pp. 170-174). It has been argued that there are two reasons that the main focus of the saga is the reign of Knútr inn helgi: (1) by the time the saga is written, the life of a saint would have been seen much more important than those of distinguished monarchs due to literary and cultural conventions of the society (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 12) and (2) the author of *Knýtlinga saga* strongly imitated *Heimskringla* as a model by adopting the same narrative style and focus points, as can be observed by comparing *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga Helga* and *Knýtlinga's saga of Knútr inn helgi* (Bjarni Guðnason, 2012, pp. cxiii-cxxxiv). With these two arguments in mind, it is

understandable that Knútr inn ríki is not the main figure of the saga. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the saga author wanted to strongly demonstrate the significance of Knútr not only for Danish history but also for Scandinavia itself.

One of most impactful legacies of Knútr was arguably the North Sea Empire. Knútr's thalassocratic empire dominated most of mainland Scandinavia and a significant part of the British Isles. Knútr managed to create the largest historical Scandinavian empire of all time including England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden:

When the eleventh century began its fourth decade, Canute was, with the single exception of the Emperor, the most imposing ruler in Latin Christendom. Less than twenty years earlier he had been a landless pirate striving to dislodge an ancient and honoured dynasty; now he was the lord of four important realms and the overlord of other kingdoms. Though technically Canute was counted among the kings, his position among his fellow-monarchs was truly imperial. Apparently he held in his hands the destinies of two great regions: the British Isles and the Scandinavian peninsulas. His fleet all but controlled two important seas, the North and the Baltic. He had built an Empire (Larson, 1912, p. 257).

The formation of this great kingdom was no easy task. As discussed above, after the death of Sveinn Haraldsson, Knútr tried to reinstate himself as the next king of England. The promised help from the Kingdom of Lindsey, however, did not arrive on time because shortly after Sveinn's death, Æthelred attacked Lindsey and took his revenge for their support of the invaders (Bolton, 2017, pp. 72-73). Without any choice, Knútr returned to Denmark where his brother Haraldr was the king. In the following year, Knútr readied his forces and started his English campaign. Eventually, he was crowned as the King of England in the fall of 1016 (Bolton, 2017, p. 93).

Although *Knýtlinga saga* claims that Knútr easily became the king of Denmark, in reality he had to wait a few years for Haraldr's death. With Haraldr's death in 1018, Knútr returned to Denmark and only then became the King of Denmark (Blomqvist, 1970, pp. 157-188).²⁶ This, however, created rivals around continental Scandinavia as well as in Denmark and Knútr had to face the combined forces of Saint Óláfr and the Swedish king Anund Jacob

²⁶ It has also been argued that the Danes previously deposed Haraldr and elected Knútr as their king, however, due to Knútr's constant absence from Denmark, the Danes restored Haraldr as the king once again (Freeman, 1867, p. 404).

(r. 1022-1050) at the Battle of Helgeå in 1026 which is arguably one of the most crucial events for Knútr's reign (Bolton, 2017, pp. 144-149).²⁷

The Battle of Helgeå is one of the important battles for Knútr's domain because initially the battle enabled Knútr to seize control of Norway and parts of Sweden (Bolton, 2017, pp. 144-149).²⁸ Although the sagas of Saint Óláfr (Legendary Saga of St. Óláfr and Snorri's *Óláfs saga Helga*) do not suggest any rivalry between these two historical figures (Poole, 1991, pp. 90-91), Knútr and Óláfr came face to face several times. Two years after the Battle of Helgeå, Knútr sailed to Norway and faced Óláfr once again (Larson, 1912, p. 236). Defeated by the Danish forces, Óláfr went to exile and Knútr was crowned as the Norwegian king (Lawson, 2004, p. 49).²⁹ At the end of these events, Knútr was in control of his thalassocratic empire. His son Hørða-Knútr was ruling Denmark, Knútr's nephew Hákon Eiríksson was his regent over Norway and Knútr himself was the King of England (Bolton, 2017, p. 157). As *Knýtlinga saga* suggests, Knútr was the most powerful Scandinavian king of his time and, after his death, no other medieval Scandinavian king had managed to create an empire this influential ever again.

I believe that the saga author was familiar with Knútr's historical success over Scandinavia and England, however, due to the aforementioned cultural limitations (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, 1986, p. 12) and the complexity of his reign, the saga author did not compose Knútr as the center piece of his work. Therefore, the saga author decided to briefly mention Knútr's greatness by describing him as the greatest medieval Scandinavian king of all time without dealing with the messy details.

Conclusion

²⁷ The outcome of this battle is rather debatable due to the lack of cohesiveness among the historical sources; while Saxo's *Gesta* argues that the Danish side won the battle, *Heimskringla* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggest the contrary and favor Norwegian as well as the Swedish forces (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, p. 745; Monsen and Smith, 1932, pp. 395-397; Swanton, 1996, p. 157). However, the fact that after the battle Óláfr had to retreat (Bradbury, 2004, p. 125) and the continuation of Knútr's Danish reign indicates that the battle was likely decided in favor of the Danes.

²⁸ Our knowledge on Knútr's Swedish rule is relatively limited. Knútr refers to himself as the king of all England, Denmark, Norway, and part of Sweden in his 1027 letter to the English people.

²⁹ Knútr, however, did not rule Norway himself and instead had Hákon Eiríksson assigned as his vassal. After both Hákon and Knútr's death, Magnús Ólafsson (r. 1035-1047) ruled Norway as well as Denmark for five years.

During the course of the last decade, the saga studies changed drastically (Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, 2017). Although the studies written by historians such as Finnur Jónsson (1920) and Sigurður Nordal (1953) are still valuable, the focus of saga studies shifted towards nature of the sagas or their values in terms of ideologies. This shift, however, left many discussions unsettled. Topics such as origins and sources of the sagas or comparative saga studies still require attention from historians.

In this paper I have demonstrated that Knútr inn ríki and his reign are glorified in several primary sources. Apart from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the other three sources that I have explored here describe him as the perfect Christian king. Even the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* changes its perspective on Knútr, becoming significantly more positive after his coronation.

In *Knýtlinga saga*, the previously mentioned description of Knútr is easily noticeable in two consecutive chapters (seventeen and eighteen) as they can be seen close to the ending of Knútr's reign. Although such descriptions of Knútr are usually considered from the perspective of politics, I have argued that, for *Knýtlinga saga*, there are also two additional reasons for the sagas framing of this important monarch: his historical importance, and a likely Danish influence on the saga author. Clearly using *Heimskringla* as his model, the saga author could not compose Knútr inn ríki as the center piece of his work. However, knowing how successful Knútr was, the saga author empathized his greatness and referred him to as the most powerful ruler of medieval Scandinavia. In addition to this, the saga author's use of several sources from Denmark likely led to a pronounced Danish influence on the saga author.

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