PART THREE

MARTYR-CULTS OF SECULAR LEADERS IN ELEVENTH- AND TWELFTH-CENTURY SCANDINAVIA

3.1. St Ólafr Haraldsson of Norway

The cult of St Ólafr Haraldsson originated in a period marked by two pivotal developments in medieval Norwegian history: the emergence of Christian kingship and the organisation of the Church. The history of the cult cannot be divorced from these developments. At the coronation of Magnús Erlingsson in 1163/1164, overseen by Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson of Nidaros, the king vowed to rule justly and support and protect the Church’s independence. Not long after the coronation these promises were further expressed in a Letter of Privileges (Privilegiebrev) in which Magnús acknowledged Ólafr Haraldsson as the ultimate ruler of the realm while at the same time presenting himself as the saint’s vassal on earth.¹ In addition, the archbishop of Nidaros, in his capacity as guardian of Ólafr’s relics, was granted fiscal privileges for his see.

In 1163/64 Church and Crown appropriated the cult of St Ólafr in order to enhance their own political and ecclesiastical agenda.² By receiving his crown directly from St Ólafr, Magnús Erlingsson not only asserted his divine right to kingship, but also side-stepped the sensitive issue of his (somewhat weak) hereditary claim to the throne. Similarly, the archbishop’s endorsement of Magnús’ kingship


² Of course there was more to this scenario than the alliance between two abstract institutional identities; concrete political considerations were also at play. Archbishop Eysteinn belonged to a powerful family in Trøndelag while Magnús’ father, Erlingr skakki, had built up a strong political base in the Vestlandet and the Viken region. Thus the alliance served the interests of two prominent political factions. Bagge 2003, p. 68. Helle 2003, p. 374.
was a calculated move, which aimed at securing a more stable royal authority. The king, in turn, was expected to consolidate and extend the precious independence that the Church had acquired in the course of the twelfth century, especially following the founding of the archbishopric of Nidaros in 1152/53. Thus in 1163/64 the cult of St Ólafr provided a bridge between the interests of regnum and sacerdotium. In a different sense the cult served in this period as a barometer for the relationship between the two authorities; in this respect the change in the guardianship of the saint’s corporal relics is particularly telling. According to saga tradition the eleventh-century kings of Norway treated the relics as their personal possession. *Heimskringla* tells that before Haraldr harðráði embarked on his ill-fated invasion of England in 1066, he locked the reliquary and threw the key into the river Nid. A century or so later Eysteinn crowned Magnús Erlingsson both in his capacity as archbishop of Nidaros and as the guardian of Ólafr’s reliquary.

Thus in 1163/64 Church and Crown presented themselves as partners with St Ólafr sanctifying their respective powers. The equilibrium between the two authorities did not last; it ended with the fall of Magnús Erlingsson at the battle of Fimreiti in 1184 which effectively heralded the beginning of Sverrir Sigurðarson’s sole rulership in Norway. In the civil war both factions had claimed to have the backing of St Ólafr. On one side there was King Sverrir enforcing laws attributed to the saint, declaring that he had experienced visions in which Ólafr in dubbed him as his warrior and designated heir. In the other camp there was Archbishop Eysteinn who, as discussed, is

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3 For an historiographical survey of the Norwegian (and indeed the Scandinavian) Church see Bagge 2005, esp. 25–26.

4 On the eleventh-century shrines of St Ólafr, see Ekroll 2003, pp. 325–329.

5 *Heimskringla* III, pp. 175–176. This story captures well the close identification of the Norwegian kings with the cult of St Ólafr. A less well-known account, preserved in the thirteenth-century *Chronica Manniae*, tells how King Magnús berfætr dared to open the reliquary on his own accord. Shortly afterwards Ólafr appeared to Magnús in a dream and told him that in punishment for his deed he must choose between two options: to stay in Norway and die shortly thereafter or to try his luck abroad. The king chose the latter option and embarked on a military expedition to the British Isles on which he was killed (1103). *Chronica Regum Manniae et Insularum. The Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys*, ed. by P. A. Munch (Christiania, 1860), p. 6. The two accounts also neatly sum up the ambivalent nature of the relationship between the Norwegian kings and St Ólafr. While Ólafr brings lustre and legitimacy to their rule, they are no more than his substitute rulers on earth and any transgression on their part will be punished.

6 *Sverris Saga*, pp. 3–5.