

1. The fugitive

HARALD SIGURDSSON was a half-brother of King Olaf the Saint; they had the same mother.¹ Harald took part in the Battle of Stiklestad where King Olaf was killed.² Harald was wounded in that battle, but managed to escape, along with many other fugitives. In the words of the poet Thjodolf Arnorsson:³

*I heard that the storm of arrows
Raged around King Olaf,
And the king's young brother
Fought beside him bravely.*

1. Harald was the son of Sigurd Sow.

Sigurd Sow (Halfdanarson) was one of the petty kings in tenth-century Norway; he ruled over Ringerike. Harald Sigurdsson's mother was Queen Asta Gudbrand's-daughter; her first husband, before Sigurd Sow, was King Harald of Westfold, and their son was Olaf Haraldsson (St Olaf).

2. King Olaf Haraldsson (St Olaf) was King of Norway from 1016 to 1030, when he was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad, near Trondheim. Norway was still semi-pagan when Olaf Haraldsson came to the throne, and during his reign he fought ruthlessly against heathen practices. Eventually, the chieftains and farmers rebelled against him; King Olaf was driven from Norway, but later returned with a ragtag army. At Stiklestad he fought his last battle against overwhelming odds during an eclipse of the sun (31 August 1030), and died a martyr to the Christian faith. Miracles were reported within a few hours of his death, and he quickly came to be regarded as a saint; his cult spread through Scandinavia and western Europe, and also to Iceland and the British Isles, where several churches were dedicated to him (one of them, in London, is mentioned in chapter 57). The great Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, which is still being reconstructed, is dedicated to him. His life story is told in Snorri Sturluson's *St Olaf's Saga*.

3. Thjodolf Arnorsson was one of the many Icelanders who became Court Poets to the Norwegian kings. Several of his poems are still

KING HARALD'S SAGA

*Reluctantly, Prince Harald
Left King Olaf fallen
And went to secret hiding;
He was fifteen years old then.*

It was Rognvald Brusason¹ who brought him from the battlefield and smuggled him to a remote farmhouse in a forest. There Harald's wounds were tended until he was fully recovered. After that the farmer's son escorted him east across the Kjolen Mountains; they kept clear of the main routes, using forest paths as much as they could. The farmer's son had no idea who his companion was; and as they were riding across from one wild forest to another, Harald composed this stanza:

*Now I go creeping from forest
To forest with little honour;
Who knows, my name may yet become
Renowned far and wide in the end.*

Harald travelled east across Jamtland and Halsingland, and from there into Sweden. There he met Earl Rognvald Brusason and many more of King Olaf's men who had escaped from the battle.

2. In Russia

NEXT spring they got some ships, and that summer they sailed east to Russia to the court of King Jaroslav and stayed with him over the winter.²

extant and are to be found scattered throughout many of the Kings' Sagas; but he is best known for his long eulogies in honour of King Magnus the Good (1035-47) and King Harald Sigurdsson.

1. Rognvald Brusason, who died c. 1046, was for several years Earl of Orkney. The history of the Norse Earls of Orkney is told in *Orkneyinga Saga*.

2. Jaroslav, the son of St Vladimir and great-great-grandson of Rurik, the founder of the Russian state, was sole ruler of Russia from 1036 to 1054; before that he had shared the kingdom with his brother Mstislav since 1019. He married Ingigerd, the daughter of

IN RUSSIA

In the words of the poet Bolverk Arnorsson.¹

*You wiped blood from your greedy
Sword when battle was over.
You fed the ravens with corpses
While wolves howled in the mountains.
The next year, king of warriors,
You spent east in Russia;
Nowhere have I ever heard
Of a greater soldier than you.*

King Jaroslav gave Harald and Earl Rognvald and their men a good welcome. He made Harald and Earl Rognvald Ulfsson's son, Eilif, commanders of his defence forces. In the words of the poet Thjodolf:

*Side by side
The two leaders fought;
Shoulder to shoulder
Their men lined up.
They drove the Slavs
Into defeat
And gave the Poles
Scant mercy.²*

Harald stayed in Russia for several years and travelled widely throughout the East. Then with a large following he set off on an expedition to Greece, and eventually he reached Constantinople. In the words of the poet Bolverk:

*Bleak showers lashed dark prows
Hard along the coast-line;*

King Olaf Eiriksson of Sweden (St Olaf addressed a series of love-poems to her before she became Queen of Russia). Jaroslav became the father-in-law of King Harald Sigurdsson of Norway (see chapter 17), King Andrew I of Hungary, and King Henry I of France.

1. Bolverk Arnorsson was the brother of Thjodolf Arnorsson. He, too, was one of King Harald's Court Poets.

2. Harald and Eilif must have taken part in the campaign waged by King Jaroslav against the Poles in 1031.

KING HARALD'S SAGA

*Iron-shielded vessels
Flaunted colourful rigging.
The great prince saw ahead
The copper roofs of Byzantium;
His swan-breasted ships swept
Towards the tall-towered city.*

3. In Constantinople

AT that time, Empress Zoe the Great and Michael Catalactus were joint rulers of the Byzantine Empire.¹ As soon as Harald reached Constantinople he presented himself to the Empress and immediately joined her army as a mercenary; that very autumn he joined one of the galleys patrolling the seas east of Greece. Harald kept his own men together as a separate company. The commander-in-chief of the whole army was a man called Georgios,² a kinsman of the empress.

Soon after Harald joined the army, all the Varangians³ became very attached to him, and they fought side by side in battle. Eventually Harald became the acknowledged leader of all the Varangians.

Georgios and Harald sailed to many of the Greek islands and inflicted heavy damage on the corsairs there.

1. Empress Zoe was first married (in 1028) to Emperor Romanos Argyros, but later she had him strangled in his bath. Zoe then married Michael IV, and they ruled from 1034 to 1041, when Michael died.

2. Georgios Maniakes; he led the Byzantine forces in campaigns in the Euphrates (1033-5) and Sicily (1038-40). There is no evidence to suggest that he really was kinsman to the empress.

3. The Varangians (*Væringjar*) were the Scandinavian warriors, mostly from Sweden, who served in the bodyguard of the Byzantine emperors. Byzantine sources do not mention them before 1034, but it is thought that they were operating in the days of Emperor Basil II (976-1025). After the Norman Conquest of England, large numbers of English soldiers joined the Varangian Guard, and in the

4. At odds with Georgios

ONCE on an overland march they had decided to camp for the night near a forest. The Varangians were the first to arrive in the area, and they chose the best place they could find for pitching their tents; it was on the highest ground, for the terrain was rather boggy and any rain would turn the lower ground into a swamp ill-suited for camping.

When Georgios, the army commander, arrived and saw where the Varangians had pitched their tents, he ordered them to move their camp elsewhere, saying that he wanted to pitch his own tents there himself.

But Harald said, 'If you arrived first at the night quarters, you would choose your own place and we would have to be content with pitching our tents elsewhere. In the same way, you can now camp anywhere you like - except here. I had assumed that it was the privilege of the Varangians here in the Byzantine Empire to be completely free and independent of all others, and to be beholden only to the emperor and empress to whom they owe their allegiance.'

They argued this fiercely, until finally they seized their weapons and were on the point of coming to blows. But wiser men intervened and separated them, and said it would be more sensible for them to settle the matter by clear agreement once and for all, to prevent similar disputes arising in the future. So a peace meeting was arranged by the best and wisest men, and there it was agreed with the consent of all parties that lots should be thrown on to a piece of cloth and that the Greeks and the Varangians should then draw the lots to decide which of them should take precedence when riding or rowing or putting in at harbour or choosing the ground for their tents. And the decision reached by the drawing of lots was to be binding on both sides.

latter years of the Byzantine Empire the Guard was composed almost entirely of Englishmen.

Now the lots were made. But before they were marked, Harald said to Georgios, 'I want to see how you are marking your lot, to make sure we do not mark our lots in the same way.'

Georgios agreed. Then Harald marked his own lot and threw it on to the cloth alongside the other. The man who had been chosen to draw the lots now picked one of them out and raised it aloft between his fingers and said, 'The owner of this lot shall take precedence when riding and rowing and putting in at harbour and choosing the ground for his tents.'

Harald seized his hand and snatched the lot away from him and hurled it into the sea. Then he said, 'That was my lot that was drawn.'

'Why did you not let everyone else see it?' demanded Georgios.

'Look at the one that's left,' said Harald, 'and you will recognize your mark on it.'

When the remaining lot was examined, everyone saw that it had Georgios's mark upon it; so it was decided that the Varangians should take precedence in all the matters that were in dispute.

Many other disagreements arose between them, and Harald always got the better of it in the end.

5. Among the Saracens

IN the summer all the forces went on a campaign together. Whenever the whole army was engaged, Harald saw to it that his own men were kept out of the battle or else were stationed where the danger was least; he claimed that he was anxious to avoid losses among his men. But whenever he and his men were engaged on their own, he drove them into battle so fiercely that they either had to be victorious or be killed. Thus it often came about that victories were won when Harald was in command, whereas Georgios did not succeed. The troops noticed this and said they would be better off if Harald were

the sole commander of all the forces, and they criticized the general for his and his army's failures. Georgios retorted that the Varangians were refusing to support him, and told Harald to take his men away elsewhere and see what they could do by themselves, while he himself remained in command of the rest of the army. So Harald now left the main army, taking with him the Varangians and the Latin-speaking troops,¹ while Georgios remained in command of the Greek army.

It now quickly became apparent what each was capable of; for Harald gained victory and booty wherever he fought, whereas the Greeks went back to Constantinople – apart from some ambitious young warriors who were eager to share in the plunder, and who joined Harald's troops and accepted his command.

Harald now went with his army to Africa, to the parts which the Varangians call the Land of the Saracens.²

There he increased the strength of his army considerably, and captured eighty towns; some of them surrendered, and the others were taken by storm.

From there he went to Sicily. In the words of the poet Thjodolf:

*Bravely the young gold-giver
Risky his life constantly,
Capturing eighty cities
In the Land of the Saracens;
Then the young warrior,
Scourge of the Saracens,
Waged his grim game of war
On the level plains of Sicily.*

1. These 'Latin-speaking troops' were probably a band of Normans (who spoke French rather than Norse) who had been fighting under the Duke of Salerno before joining Georgios Maniakes on his campaigns in Sicily in 1038-40.

2. 'Africa' is probably a mistake here for Asia Minor. It is known that in the winter of 1034-5 the Varangians were heavily engaged in the western parts of Asia Minor, and in the following year there was constant fighting on the eastern borders of the Byzantine Empire, in the Caucasus.

KING HARALD'S SAGA

In the words of Illugi the Brynjudale-Poet:¹

*Harald, you forced the Mediterranean lands
To submit to the great Emperor Michael
(We have heard how Atli
Invited his brothers-in-law home).² . . .*

This poem shows that Michael was the Greek Emperor at this time.

Harald spent several years in Africa and garnered there an immense hoard of money, gold and treasure of all kinds. All the booty he did not require for expenses he used to send by his own reliable messengers to Novgorod into the safe keeping of King Jaroslav.

In this way Harald amassed a vast hoard of wealth – not surprisingly, considering that he had been plundering in the richest parts of the world where gold and treasure are the most plentiful, and considering the scale of his achievements there: it has already been stated in all truth that he conquered eighty towns.

6. In Sicily

As soon as Harald landed in Sicily he started plundering there too, and laid siege to a large and populous town. He surrounded it, because he realized that the walls were too stout

1. This Illugi, from Brynjudale in Iceland, was another of the Court Poets in Norway; very little is known about him.

2. The second couplet refers to a famous episode in Germanic heroic legend. King Atli (Attila) of the Huns determined to lay his hands on the famous Nibelung treasure, whose hiding-place was known only by his brothers-in-law, Hogni and Gunnar (Gundicarius of the Burgundians). He treacherously invited them home to a feast, and there tried to force them to reveal the secret. They both refused to tell him, and both died under torture, and the secret died with them.

It is not clear why the poet makes this allusion here, since most of the poem is lost. But it may have been intended to heighten the

IN SICILY

to be broken down. But the townsmen had plenty of provisions and all other necessities to withstand a siege.

So now Harald thought up a scheme: he told his bird-catchers to catch the small birds that nested within the town and flew out to the woods each day in search of food. Harald had small shavings of fir tied to the backs of the birds, and then he smeared the shavings with wax and sulphur and set fire to them. As soon as the birds were released they all flew straight home to their young in their nests in the town; the nests were under the eaves of the roofs, which were thatched with reeds or straw. The thatched roofs caught fire from the birds, and although each bird could only carry a tiny flame, it quickly became a great fire; a host of birds set roofs alight all over the town. One house after another caught fire, and soon the whole town was ablaze.

At that all the people came out of the town, begging for mercy – the very same people who had been shouting defiant insults at the Greek army and its leader for days on end. Harald spared the lives of all those who begged for quarter, and took control of the town.

7. A stratagem

THERE was another town which Harald besieged with his army. This town, too, was populous, and so strongly fortified that there was no hope of taking it by storm. The town stood in the middle of an arid, level plain.

Harald told his men to dig a tunnel from a place where a stream flowed through a deep ravine that could not be seen from the town. They put the displaced soil into the water and let the stream carry it away. They toiled at this in relays day

dramatic colouring of the poem, by comparing Harald's perils to those of Gunnar and Hogni; or it may be an oblique reference to a later incident (chapter 14) when Harald tortured the Emperor Constantine X by blinding him.

and night. Meanwhile, the rest of the troops used to march up to the town every day, and the townsmen would take up position on the battlements and exchange shots with the attackers. At night, however, both armies rested.

When Harald reckoned that the tunnel was so long that it must now extend right inside the walls, he told his troops to arm themselves. They entered the tunnel just before daybreak; when they reached the far end, they dug upwards until they struck flagstones laid in lime. This was the floor of a stone-built hall. They broke through the floor and swarmed up into the hall. Inside, many of the townsmen were sitting eating and drinking, and were taken completely by surprise. The Varangians set on them at once with swords drawn, killing some of them while others managed to escape. The Varangians pursued them, while others captured the town gates and opened them. Now the main body of the army poured into the town, and at that the townsmen were routed; many begged for mercy, which was granted to all who surrendered.

That was how Harald captured this town, and with it a vast hoard of booty.

8. The third town in Sicily

THE third town they came upon was the largest and strongest of them all, and also the wealthiest and most populous. It was encircled by huge moats, and Harald realized that it could not be overcome by the same stratagems as the previous towns had been. They besieged the town for a long time without making any headway against it. At this, the townsmen were so emboldened that they drew up their troops on the walls, opened up the gates, and shouted at the Varangians, jeering at them and challenging them to come inside, telling them that they could fight no better than hens.

Harald told his men to ignore what the defenders were saying. 'We can achieve nothing by making an assault on the town,' he said. 'They can attack us with weapons from above,

and even if we succeed in getting a party into the town they could easily shut our men inside if they want, and keep the rest of us outside, for they are in complete control of the gates. We shall therefore retaliate by showing them the same contempt, and let them see that we are not in the least afraid of them. Our troops are to go out on to the plain, as close to the town as possible, but taking care not to come within range of their weapons. They are all to be unarmed, and must indulge in sports, to show the townsmen that their troops do not cause us the slightest concern.

They kept this up for several days.

9. Halldor and Ulf

THERE were two Icelanders in Harald's company; one of them was Halldor Snorrason,¹ who brought this story to Iceland, and the other was Ulf Ospaksson.² They were men of exceptional strength and outstanding warriors, and were very dear to Harald's heart. They were both in the group taking part in the sports.

When all this had been going on for several days the townsmen became even bolder and started manning the walls un-

1. *Halldor was the son of Snorri the Priest.*

Snorri the Priest (d. 1031) was one of the leading chieftains in Iceland in the last decade of the tenth century and the first third of the eleventh century. He figures prominently in many of the sagas, including *Njal's Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, and *Grettir's Saga*.

His son, Halldor Snorrason, spent many years abroad, and there is an excellent account of his adventures in *Halldor's Story*.

One of Halldor's descendants was Snorri Sturluson, the author of this saga.

2. *Ulf was the son of Ospak, the son of Osvif the Wise.*

Ulf was a nephew of Gudrun Osvif's daughter, the heroine of *Laxdæla Saga*. His great-grandson, Archbishop Eystein Erlendsson (see chapter 37, note 2), was one of the most influential men in twelfth-century Norway; he was archbishop from 1161 to 1188.

His Story

armed and leaving the gates open at the same time. When the Varangians observed this, they went to their sports one day hiding swords under their tunics and wearing helmets under their hats. When they had played at their games for a while they saw that the townsmen still suspected nothing; and suddenly they drew their weapons and made a rush at the gates. When the townsmen saw them coming they formed up fully armed and advanced to meet them. Battle was joined at the gates. The Varangians had no shields, so they wrapped their cloaks around their left arms; many were wounded and several killed, and soon they were all very hard pressed.

Harald was on the way from camp with the rest of his army to back them up; by then the townsmen were up on the battlements raining stones and missiles on the attackers, and a fierce battle was raging.

The Varangians who were fighting at the gates thought that relief was coming rather more slowly than they would have liked. As Harald came up to the gates his standard-bearer was killed. Harald then said to Halldor Snorrason, 'Halldor, you carry the standard.'

Halldor picked up the standard and said rather stupidly, 'Who would want to carry the banner before you, if you follow it as timidly as you have done today?'

But these words were spoken more in anger than in truth, for Harald was the bravest of warriors. Now they fought their way into the town. It was a fierce battle, but eventually Harald got the upper hand and captured the town.

Halldor Snorrason was severely wounded in the fight. He got a deep gash in the face, which left an ugly scar for the rest of his life.

10. The fourth town

THE fourth town Harald came to with his army was even bigger than all those which have been described already. It was so strongly fortified that there was no hope of taking it by

storm. They laid siege to this town and blockaded it so that no supplies could reach it.

But when they had been there only a short while, Harald fell ill and took to his bed. He had his tent moved away from the main camp, for he found it more restful to be apart from all the clamour and clatter of the troops. As his men were constantly coming in groups to consult him, the townsmen realized that something was afoot in the Varangian camp, and sent spies to find out what was happening. When the spies got back to the town they reported that the leader of the Varangians was ill, which explained why there had been no assault on the town.

After a while Harald's strength began to fail, and this caused great concern and despondency among his men; and all this was reported to the townsmen. Eventually his illness became so critical that rumours of his death spread throughout the army. The Varangians now went to parley with the townsmen, told them that their leader was dead, and asked the priests to grant him burial inside the town. Many of the townsmen present at this meeting were in charge of monasteries and other important establishments there, and each of them was eager to have this corpse for his own church, because they realized that precious offerings would accompany it. So all the clergy donned their robes and came out of the town in a splendid procession, bearing shrines and other holy relics. The Varangians, too, formed up in a magnificent cortège, carrying the coffin on high under a canopy of precious cloth and many banners.

When the Varangians reached the gates they set the coffin down right across the entry, jamming open the gates. Then they sounded the call to arms on all their trumpets and drew their swords; the rest of the Varangian army came bursting out of the camp fully armed and rushed up to the town shouting their war-cries. The monks and other priests in the procession who had been competing to be the first to receive the offerings were now twice as anxious to be as far away as possible from the Varangians; for the Varangians killed anyone they could lay their hands on, priests and laymen alike: they

rampaged through the whole town, killing all the inhabitants and plundering everything they could find.

They took an enormous amount of booty there.

11. Back to Constantinople

HARALD spent several years on these campaigns, both in the Land of the Saracens and in Sicily.¹ Then he went back to Constantinople with his troops and stayed there for a while before setting out on an expedition to the Holy Land.² He left behind all the gold he had been paid by the Byzantine Emperor, as did all the Varangians who went with him.

It is said that in all these campaigns Harald had fought eighteen battles. In the words of the poet Thjodolf:

*All men know that Harald
Fought eighteen savage battles;
Wherever the warrior went*

1. In 1038, Emperor Michael sent an expedition under Georgios Maniakes to wrest Sicily from the Saracens. The Greeks captured practically the whole of Sicily, defeating the Saracens heavily at Messina and Tragina in 1040. Thereafter Georgios was removed from his command, but rebelled and tried to win the throne for himself – and was killed in battle in 1043. His successors in command threw away all the advantages Georgios had gained, and invaded southern Italy in an attempt to deal with the Normans there, but were severely defeated.

Other sources suggest that Harald Sigurdsson took part in both these campaigns, but that he left Italy early in 1041, and fought for the Byzantine Emperor against the Bulgarians later that year.

2. The Saga's chronology seems to have gone awry here. In 1036, Emperor Michael concluded a treaty with the Caliph of Egypt, which permitted the emperor to restore the damaged church that had been raised over Christ's grave. Harald seems to have been in command of the troops sent to escort the Byzantine craftsmen to Jerusalem. But this could scarcely have been after the Sicilian campaigns of 1038–41; it must have been soon after the treaty with the Caliph of Egypt was signed, in 1036 or 1037.

*All hope of peace was shattered.
The grey eagle's talons
You reddened with blood, great king;
On all your expeditions
The hungry wolves were feasted.*

12. To Jerusalem

HARALD went with his troops to the Holy Land and all the way to Jerusalem; wherever he went in Palestine, all the towns and castles were surrendered to him. This is how the poet Stuf Thordarson,¹ who heard Harald's own account of these events, described them:

*With courage sharp as a sword-edge
The all-triumphant warrior
Left Greece to conquer Palestine –
An easy task for Harald.
With his overwhelming power
The land fell to his army
Unscorched and undisputed;
May the Almighty protect him.*

The poet states there that Palestine submitted to Harald without being laid waste by fire and sword. Harald then went to the Jordan and bathed in the river, as is the custom of all pilgrims. Harald gave treasure generously to the shrine at the grave of Our Lord, the Holy Cross, and other sacred relics in Palestine. He cleared a route all the way to the river Jordan, killing all the robbers and other trouble-makers in the area. In the words of the poet Stuf:

*With shrewd and awful warnings
The king imposed his justice*

1. Stuf Thordarson (Stuf the Blind) was the grandson of Gudrun Osvif's-daughter, the heroine of *Laxdæla Saga*. There is an account of his first meeting with King Harald Hardradi in *Stuf's Story*.

*On both banks of the Jordan,
And curbed the robbers' power.
All the people could be certain
That swift punishment would follow
Any ill-deeds or transgression;
May his soul abide in Christ.*

Then he went back to Constantinople.

13. Harald imprisoned

WHEN Harald returned to Constantinople from his expedition to Palestine, he was eager to visit Scandinavia and see his native land again; he had heard that his nephew, Magnus Olafsson, had become king of both Norway and Denmark.¹ So Harald now resigned his command with the Byzantine Emperor.

But when Empress Zoe heard about this she was furious, and brought charges against him: she accused him of having defrauded the emperor of treasure which had been won in campaigns under Harald's command.

Empress Zoe had a beautiful young niece called Maria; Harald had asked for her hand in marriage, but the empress had refused. Some Varangians who had been mercenaries in Constantinople brought north the story that according to well-informed people, Empress Zoe had wanted to marry Harald herself, and that this was her real complaint against Harald

1. Magnus Olafsson (King Magnus the Good) was an illegitimate son of St Olaf. For five years after St Olaf's death in 1030, Norway was ruled by a boy-king, Svein, the son of King Knut Sveinsson (Canute the Great). But such was his tyranny that Norway's chieftains sent a deputation to Russia, where Magnus Olafsson was staying at the court of King Jaroslav, to invite him to return to Norway as king. He was acclaimed king as soon as he reached Trondheim in 1035. He was elected King of Denmark as well in 1042 on the death of King Harda-Knut of Denmark.

His life-story is told in Snorri Sturluson's *Magnus the Good's Saga*.

when he wanted to leave Constantinople, although a different story was given to the public.

At that time the Byzantine Emperor was Constantine Monomachus,¹ who ruled the empire jointly with Empress Zoe. Because of these charges he now ordered Harald to be seized and taken to a dungeon.

14. Saved by a miracle

AS Harald was approaching the prison, his dead brother, St Olaf, appeared to him in a vision and promised to help him (later, a chapel was built on that very spot in the street and dedicated to St Olaf; it is still standing).

The prison was a high roofless tower, with a door into the dungeon at street level. Harald was put in through this door, together with Halldor Snorrason and Ulf Ospaksson.

Next night a certain distinguished lady came to the prison with two servants. They scaled the wall with ladders, lowered a rope into the dungeon, and hauled up the prisoners. Saint Olaf had once healed this woman, and now he had appeared to her in a vision and directed her to rescue his brother Harald from prison.

Harald went at once to the Varangians, who all rose from their beds to greet him and welcomed him warmly. They all armed themselves and made their way to the chamber where the emperor lay sleeping. They seized the emperor, and put out both his eyes. This is how the poet Thorarin Skeggjason² described it in his poem:

1. Emperor Constantine Monomachus was Zoe's third husband, and ruled from 1042 to 1055. But once again, the saga's chronology seems to be at fault; the emperor at this time was Michael Calaphates, Michael V, 1041-2 (see next chapter).

2. Thorarin Skeggjason was the brother of another Court Poet, Markus Skeggjason, who was Law-Speaker of the Icelandic Althing from 1084 to 1107.

KING HARALD'S SAGA

*Harald won glowing gold,
But the Emperor of Byzantium,
Cruelly mutilated,
Lost the sight of his eyes.*

In the words of the poet Thjodolf:

*The warrior who fed the wolves
Ripped out both the eyes
Of the emperor of Byzantium;
Strife was unleashed again.
The warrior-king of Norway
Marked his cruel revenge
On the brave emperor of the East;
The Greek king had betrayed him.*

In these two eulogies in honour of Harald, as well as in many other poems about him, it is stated that Harald himself blinded the Byzantine emperor. The poets would surely have attributed this act to a duke or count or some other man of rank if they had known that to be true; but this was the account brought back by Harald himself and the men who were with him.¹

1. It was Emperor Michael Calaphates (1041-2) who was blinded, not his successor Constantine Monomachus (1042-55). The saga here undoubtedly echoes the cataclysmic events that took place in Constantinople in the spring of 1042. Michael Calaphates was the nephew of Michael IV, and became joint ruler with Empress Zoe at his uncle's death. In April 1042, he seized Empress Zoe, deposed her, and sent her to a convent. But the people of Constantinople rose against him and attacked the palace; the Varangian Guard, faithful to the empress, deserted the emperor. After fierce fighting, the emperor escaped to a monastery wearing monk's clothing. But the Varangians tracked him down there, and he was blinded in public. Empress Zoe now married Constantine Monomachus, who became emperor in his blinded predecessor's stead.

It may well be that the Varangians who blinded the emperor were led by Harald Sigurdsson, and that he had been released from prison during the popular uprising.

15. Harald's escape

THAT same night Harald broke into the apartments where the empress's niece, Maria, was sleeping, and carried her away by force. Then they went down to the Varangian galleys and took two of them. They rowed to the Bosphorus, where they came to the iron chains which were stretched across the Sound. Harald told some of the oarsmen to pull as hard as they could, while those who were not rowing were to run to the stern of the galleys laden with all their gear. With that, the galleys ran up on to the chains. As soon as their momentum was spent and they stuck on top of the chains, Harald told all the men to run forward into the bows. Harald's own galley tilted forward under the impact and slid down off the chains; but the other ship stuck fast on the chains and broke its back. Many of her crew were lost, but some were rescued from the sea.

Thus Harald escaped from Constantinople and sailed on into the Black Sea. But before he put out to sea, he set Maria ashore with a good retinue to escort her back to Constantinople. He told her to tell her aunt, Zoe, how little power the empress had over him, for with all her might she could not have prevented him from marrying the girl.

Harald now sailed north to the Hellespont and from there past the eastern kingdoms. During this voyage he composed sixteen light verses, all ending in the same way. This is one of them:

*Round Sicily we sailed our ship
With pride in all our hearts,
Running like a forest stag
Under a warrior crew.
It's not for any land-lubbers
To try that voyage again;
Yet the golden lady in Russia
Still spurns my suit.*

The last couplet alludes to Elizabeth, the daughter of King Jaroslav of Novgorod.

16. Treasure

WHEN Harald arrived in Novgorod, King Jaroslav gave him a most cordial welcome. Harald stayed with him over the winter and took into his own keeping all the gold he had previously sent there from Constantinople, valuable treasure of all kinds. This hoard of wealth was so immense that no one in northern Europe had ever seen the like of it in one man's possession before. During his stay in Constantinople, Harald had three times taken part in a palace-plunder: it is the custom there that every time an emperor dies, the Varangians are allowed palace-plunder – they are entitled to ransack all the palaces where the emperor's treasures are kept and to take freely whatever each can lay his hands on.

17. Marriage

THAT winter, King Jaroslav gave his daughter Elizabeth in marriage to Harald; the Norwegians call her Ellisif. This is what the poet Stuf the Blind said about the marriage:

*The warlike king of Norway
Won the match of his desire;
He gained a king's daughter
And a hoard of gold as well.*

In the spring, Harald set off from Novgorod and travelled to the town at Lake Ladoga; there he got some ships and sailed off west in the summer. He first made for Sweden, and landed at Sigtuna. In the words of the poet Valgard of Voll:¹

1. Very little is known about this particular Court Poet, Valgard of Voll; but he seems to have come from Voll, in the south of Iceland, and may have been descended from Valgard the Grey, who played a significant role in *Njal's Saga*.

MARRIAGE

*Harald, you launched your vessel
Laden with a cargo of riches
Freighted with hard-won honour
And gleaming gold from Russia.
Through storm and gale, great king,
You sailed your plunging vessel;
And as the sea-spray was thinning
You sighted at last Sigtuna.*

18. Svein Ulfsson

IN Sweden, Harald met Svein Ulfsson, who had been routed by King Magnus the Good at the battle of Helganes that autumn.¹ Harald and Svein greeted one another warmly; they were related by marriage.²

Harald and Svein joined forces and swore pledges of friend-

1. Svein Ulfsson was the son of Earl Ulf Thorgilsson, and nephew of King Knut Sveinsson (Earl Ulf was the husband of Knut's sister, Astrid, cf. chapter 78). Earl Ulf had been made regent over Denmark by Knut when Knut went to conquer England. When King Magnus the Good of Norway was elected King of Denmark in 1042, he installed Svein Ulfsson as Earl of Denmark, to rule as his regent. But Svein had claims on the throne himself, through his kinship with King Knut, and now he usurped the title of King of Denmark. Magnus the Good came over from Norway with an army to depose him and fought three battles with him, in each of which Svein was defeated. The third battle between them, at Helganes, on the east coast of Jutland, was fought in the autumn of 1045.

2. King Olaf Eiriksson of Sweden was the maternal grandfather of Elizabeth, Harald's wife; and Svein Ulfsson's mother, Astrid, was King Olaf's sister.

Harald's wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of Ingigerd (King Olaf of Sweden's daughter), who married King Jaroslav of Russia (cf. note 2, page 46).

Svein Ulfsson's mother, Astrid, was half-sister to King Olaf of Sweden as well as being sister to King Knut of Denmark; Astrid and