

## Ireland in the *King's Mirror*. Sources and significance of an Old Norse text

Interest in the mid-thirteenth century Old Norse text, *Konungs Skuggsjá* (The King's Mirror), has recently revived, and new perspectives have been added to an honourable canon of earlier studies. The debate has moved from matters such as date and authorship, to issues such as the political theory reflected in the book's contents.

The main focus of writings on the two chapters which deal with Ireland has been the question of source material, though there has also been some discussion of its authorship. There has not been an examination of what the Irish chapters reveal about the political philosophy and purpose of the King's Mirror. This article seeks to redress that gap and to relate the Irish chapters to the debate on political theory.

The article begins with a review of both older and more recent writings, on the King's Mirror in general and of its Irish chapters. It then offers a close analysis of the Tara episode. In relation to the traditional themes, the Tara episode reveals a great deal about the author's *modus operandi*, and provides clues as to his sources, whether written or oral, Latin or Irish. It also offers insights into the author's views and intentions on the central theme of the work as a whole, the relation of church and state.

Along the way I will offer some additions and corrections to the identifications of the places in the pioneering work of Kuno Meyer.<sup>1</sup>

### Earlier analyses of the King's Mirror

The King's Mirror, also known by its Latin title *Speculum Regale*, survives in around sixty manuscript copies. The oldest extant copy is dated to 1275; the original manuscript is lost. The most important copy is held by the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen; this was the basis of the edition pub-

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the folklore and traditions associated with the places mentioned in the King's Mirror, see Eamonn Noonan, "What Magnus Lawmender learned about Ireland", *Cappelen's Magazine*, 2005.

lished in 1920 by Finnur Jonsson.<sup>2</sup> The definitive published edition today is by Ludvig Holm-Olsen, dating originally from 1945 and revised in 1983.<sup>3</sup> An English translation by Laurence Marcellus Larson, *The King's Mirror*, was published in New York as early as 1917.<sup>4</sup> A translation into New Norwegian was published in the 1976.<sup>5</sup> Earlier published versions date from 1768 in Danish and Latin; 1848 in the original; 1881; and 1915 in photographic reproduction.<sup>6</sup>

Academic debate has centred on the inter-related issues of the text's authorship and date. The author deliberately opted for anonymity, and this greatly complicated the task of establishing the precise date of its first appearance. Finnur Jonsson held it must have been written around 1230 or earlier.<sup>7</sup> A section on how to treat different aristocratic ranks makes no mention of a duke, and this points to a composition date before 1237, when this rank of the nobility was first introduced to Norway with the awarding of that title to Skule Bårdsson. Fredrik Paasche and others argued that it must have been later, possibly as late as 1260.<sup>8</sup> There is firm evidence that the original predates 1263, in that it reports the amount of the fine to be imposed for the murder of a 'hirdsmann'; the fine in question was abolished in that year. The manuscript also cites books which were probably not available in Norway until the mid-thirteenth century. Fredrik Paasche notes that the author frequently decries the situation where there is no unchallenged king; this also places it firmly during the difficult reign of Håkon Håkonson.

Paasche strongly backed the theory that the book was commissioned by King Håkon Håkonsson (1217-1261), and used for the education of his son Magnus Lawmender (1261-1280). This view has been widely accepted and has found its way into contemporary textbooks.<sup>9</sup> Paasche believed it was written just after 1260, and he proposes Håkon's archbishop, Einar Gunnarson, known as Smjorbakr/Smørrygg,<sup>10</sup> as the likely author. This is not unreasonable. Einar was a good friend of Magnus and performed the coronation of

<sup>2</sup> Finnur Jonsson (ed.), *Konungs skuggsjá*, Copenhagen 1920.

<sup>3</sup> Ludvig Holm-Olsen (ed.), *Konungs Skuggsjá*, Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskriftinstitut, 1983 (2<sup>nd</sup> edn).

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Marcellus Larson, *The King's Mirror*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1917. Larsen's translation was sometimes unsatisfactory on placenames, for which I relied instead on Holm-Olsen's 1983 edition.

<sup>5</sup> Alf Hellisk (transl.), *Kongsspegelen*, Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> George T. Flom (ed), *The King's Mirror in facsimile reproduction*, University of Illinois, 1915.

<sup>7</sup> Mattias Tveitane (ed) *Studier over Konungs skuggsjá*, Bergen 1971 reprints among others articles by Jean Young (1938) and Kuno Meyer (1910).

<sup>8</sup> Paasche is otherwise famous as the author of "The Land of the Dark Ships".

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Knut Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt, 1130-1350*, Oslo: Aschehoug, 1995 (= Aschehoug's Norgeshistorie, vol. 3), pp. 183ff.

<sup>10</sup> The nickname suggests a well-fed individual and could be charitably translated as "chubby".

Magnus and his queen in 1261. He died in 1263, and Paasche suggests that this explains why the book was never finished.

Paasche sees the author's choice of anonymity as significant. In his introduction, the author states that he preferred to remain anonymous, lest anyone reject the teachings out of enmity towards the author.<sup>11</sup> For Paasche, this is an indication that the author had a clear and controversial political profile, as had Gunnarson.

Eirik Vandvik has argued that the book had different authors, and that the part most suited to the book's title dated back to shortly after 1194.<sup>12</sup> The context was in his view King Sverre's power struggles with the bishops and the civil wars of this earlier period.

Holm-Olsen accepts that the likely purpose was the instruction of Håkon Håkonsson's two sons, and concludes that the author was a cleric - a Dominican friar, perhaps - close to the royal house.

Regarding the purpose of the book, I am inclined to accept the idea that it was commissioned for the education of Magnus and his brother; this is partly because it is clear that the author certainly intended to impress on his charge the importance of a certain theory of kingship. A further indicator that the intended purpose was the education of Håkon's heirs is the author's choice of the terms "father" and "son" to describe the two figures in dialogue throughout the book. He thereby rejected other possible designations, such as "Nutritor" and "Alumnus" used in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*.<sup>13</sup>

Magnus Håkonson was perhaps the first king of Norway to enjoy an unrivalled claim to the throne, following the ultimate triumph of primogeniture through the 1260 Law of Succession.<sup>14</sup> His principle achievement was the development of a sophisticated legal and administrative system. The Icelandic annals put it thus: "He was the first to rule as sole king of Norway without the envy of anyone. He set up laws and regulations and was therefore called Magnus Lagaboete."<sup>15</sup> Lagaboete is customarily translated as Lawmender, but could also be given as Reformer.

### A new direction in recent historiography

Following decades in relative obscurity, the *King's Mirror* has recently re-emerged as a focus of academic interest, as evidenced by the publication in

<sup>11</sup> Holm-Olsen, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Eirik Vandvik, A new approach to the *Konungs skuggsiá*, in Tveitane (ed.), op.cit., pp. 71-79 (1952).

<sup>13</sup> Cf Thomas Duddy, *A History of Irish Thought*, London: Routledge, 2002, p.20.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Moseng, Opsahl, Pettersen, Sandmo, *Norsk historie 750-1537*, Tano Aschehoug 1999.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Helle, op.cit.

2000 of a compendium of essays edited by Schall and Simek.<sup>16</sup> The main contemporary debate concerns the organisation and content of the work, and it addresses first and foremost the book's political theory. Sverre Bagge argues that the King's Mirror was a sophisticated and deliberate attempt to promote the concept of royal authority, in a country where the idea was subject to serious challenges.<sup>17</sup> One unresolved issue at the time was the not insignificant matter of the relative status of the king and the archbishop. While the aristocracy had at length been formally brought under the authority of the monarch, this was not the case with the clergy. These were rather considered to be under God's authority, as indeed was the king. It was not obvious, therefore, that highest clerical office in the land should defer to the highest secular office. In Bagge's analysis, the project of the King's Mirror is to place the king at the centre of things. On the duties of the populace and the aristocracy towards the king, the King's Mirror is explicit; it then goes on to suggest, implicitly, that the bishop also has duties towards the king. According to Bagge, the way the author does this is to use Old Testament examples of the "king's good judgements." Thus the book supports and propagates a new conception of the king, as both a religious leader and a secular one.

The king is presented as the heart and the breast, deciding for the people. The allegory of the universe is featured: the king is identified with the sun. In summer, there is sun, and there is peace and harmony in the winds. In winter, the sun is weaker; the winds are warring. The parallel is that a divided kingdom destroys peace, causes injustice and leads to civil war. The King's Mirror shows the king in an exalted position; but this, according to Bagge, reflects ideology rather than reality. The author's programme is to entrench central authority: creating a dependent aristocracy; judging, being the judge; setting the legal norms.

### Writings on the Irish chapters

The two chapters in *The King's Mirror* devoted to Ireland (out of a total of 70) are entitled "The Natural Wonders of Ireland" and "Irish Marvels which have Miraculous Origins". The distinction is important: natural wonders did not have a religious dimension; miracles did. Though relatively short (about 250 lines or 3500 words), the Irish extract is replete with fascinating details. I can locate a total of four academic articles devoted to it. The first of these

<sup>16</sup> J. E. Schnall & R. Simek (eds.), *Speculum regale. Der altnorwegische Königsspiegel (Konungs skuggsiá) in der europäischen Tradition*, Wien: Fassbinder, 2000

<sup>17</sup> Sverre Bagge, 'Old Norse Theories of Society. From Rígsþula to Konungs Skuggsiá', in Schnall & Simek, op.cit., p. 17ff; also Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, Odense, 1987.

was by none other than Kuno Meyer, who accomplished two things.<sup>18</sup> First, he identified most of the places named. Secondly, by comparing the various anecdotes with the nearest known parallels (as opposed to sources), he set out the theory that the principal source must have been oral, not written. Meyer identified parallels to many of the stories related in earlier Latin manuscripts, the *History and Topography of Ireland* by Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) and the *Mirabilia* stories compiled by Nennius. Meyer pointed out that there were wide discrepancies in the details and the locations of most of the episodes. He therefore came to the conclusion that these were not the principal sources. He then analysed the orthography of the place names, and concluded:

“All of them are phonetic renderings of spoken Irish of the thirteenth century. They are not based upon written forms either Irish or Latin.”<sup>19</sup> (p.142)

One of the instances he cited was the word used for Glendalough. He posited that Glumelaga was miswritten for Glinnelaga, and argued that this was a phonetic rendering of the locative of the Irish place name, as opposed to a faulty copying of Glendalocha from a manuscript.

Jean Young subsequently wrote about two episodes that did not have parallels in either Giraldus or Nennius – the Tara episode and the description of the ‘wild men’. Both had parallels in Irish language sources.<sup>20</sup> The *Rennes Dinnseanchas* includes a passage about Tara, which refers to a false judgement by Lugaid Mac Con in a case involving sheep grazing on his wife’s property – upon which the side of the house fell over. This manuscript dates from around 1300, but the story goes back to the eleventh century or earlier. Young suggests that the *King’s Mirror* account may have been a confused rendering of this story, and used this as an argument in favour of the theory of an oral source over and above eventual written sources. Young then summarised the links between Håkon Håkonsson and the Orkneys, and between the Orkneys and the still extant Viking kingdom of Dublin; this could clearly have facilitated the oral transmission of information on Ireland.<sup>21</sup>

A separate academic debate concerns the placing of the Ireland section in the *King’s Mirror* as a whole. The Irish chapters are unusual in the overall context of the work, and not only because they are geographical chapters.

<sup>18</sup> Kuno Meyer, “The Irish *Mirabilia* in the Norse ‘*Speculum Regale*’” in Tveitane (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 130-143.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Young, “Two of the Irish *mirabilia* in the *King’s Mirror*”, in Tveitane (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 125-131; *Rennes Dinnseanchas*.

<sup>21</sup> Young does not mention an earlier candidate as an intermediary of Irish learning in Norway: Harald Gille (Gille Chríost), an Irishman who was king of Norway from 1130 to 1136; cf. Moseng, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-6. According to Snorre, he was initially mocked for his halting Norwegian; one assumes therefore that he was more comfortable speaking Irish.

They exist in two versions; indeed the sixty or so surviving MS are classified according to which version they contain. The main branch has a shorter version of the Ireland chapters, coming before the chapters on Iceland and Greenland. A second branch has a longer Ireland section, located between those on Iceland and Greenland. To complicate matters, there is a small group of MS that has the longer Ireland section before the Iceland one.

As such, the Irish chapters are central to the controversy about whether the book was written by one hand or by many. The introductory passage envisages treatment of four categories: merchant, king, clergy and peasant. The text only covers the first three. The possibility that further volumes were completed but have been lost without trace is not considered likely. Holm-Olsen suggests that the book was in fact complete, and accepts that the preface was a later addition. He maintains however that it otherwise had a sole author, albeit one who was not precluded from inserting without attribution extracts from other works.

Benedicte Hallseth, in the most recent academic article devoted to the Irish chapters, published in 1967, takes these variations as evidence that the Irish chapters were written by a different author.<sup>22</sup> She offers two arguments in support of this conclusion: first, the material is of a different nature from the rest of the material in the King's Mirror, and second, the inclusion of the Tara episode in a later chapter on good and bad legal judgements is ill-fitting. Like Young, she focussed on the Tara episode. Holm-Olsen rather endorses an opposing view (Hoffmann) that the author revised the Irish chapters at some point, added some further material, and took the opportunity to revise the chapter order.

Regarding the question of one or many authors, it should be remembered that the book itself is in the nature of a compilation of material covering a wide range of fields. As such, it is entirely to be expected that the author drew on many diverse sources. It is also both likely and entirely legitimate that he took more care with the adaptation of some passages than with others. The more he adapted from earlier sources, the more he acted as an author. Where he limited himself to including material without significant changes, his role would have been comparable to that of an editor. The fact that different passages have different styles, or that the material included may not have reflected intervening events (such as the nomination of a duke), does not contradict the thesis of one author, as long as we accept that the author acted also as an editor.

The case for the "exceptionalism" of the Irish extract is not compelling. While the Ireland section (like the Greenland and Iceland sections) are uncharacteristic in the sense that they convey a great deal of geographical in-

<sup>22</sup> Benedicte Tullinius Hallseth, "Írland-afsnittet i Konungs Skuggsiá" in *Maal og Minne*, 1967, pp. 50-63; in this she follows none other than Fridtjof Nansen; cf. Vandvik, *op.cit.*, p. 72, fn 2.

formation, the wonders and miracles mentioned can well be considered as an elaboration of a central theme of the first part of the King's Mirror, namely the importance of avoiding temptation and respecting God.

Yet the existence of two versions of the Irish chapters and the repetition of the Tara episode later in the work are intriguing aspects of the King's Mirror. They merit closer study.

### A note on the places named in the King's Mirror

Before I go to Tara, however, I would like to run rapidly through some of the other places named in the Irish chapters of the King's Mirror. Seven of the ten places can be identified with ease: Lough Neagh; Slieve Bloom; Inishglora; Inischlodran, in Lough Ree; Glendalough; Tara; and Clonmacnoise. Three remain enigmatic: Kertinagh (an island in Lower Lough Erne), Loghica (Loycha in some MS), and an unnamed island in Lough Ree.

Kuno Meyer misses the identity of Loghica; he did not find Kertinagh; and he did not speculate on the unnamed Lough Ree island. He also remarked, inaccurately, that the places mentioned were largely in the east of the country. In fact, the common denominator of these sites is rather that they are all on or near waterways navigable by the Vikings; all were visited by Vikings from the earliest stages of their presence in Ireland.<sup>23</sup>

I believe that we can add to the positive identifications. Lough Key, another waterway in the Shannon basin, is a plausible identification for Loghica.<sup>24</sup> The strongest indicator is the orthography of the place name, including the variant rendering of Loycha. Secondly, Lough Key had a link to the pre-Christian traditions: it was a burial place for kings of Tara, as well as kings of Connaught. The surrounding area was raided by Vikings in 872, while the adjacent Boyle Abbey was flourishing at the time the King's Mirror was composed. The Annals of Loch Cé record the burial on Trinity Island of Maelciarain O'Lenachain, chief priest of Tuaim-mná in 1249.<sup>25</sup>

There are other possible candidates for identification as Loghica. One of these, based on an old Irish name for the site, Loch Irce,<sup>26</sup> is Gougane Barra, in Co. Cork, where St Finbar established a monastery. An argument against this identification is that none of the other sites mentioned are so far south.

<sup>23</sup> Donncha Ó Corráin argues that the Vikings had a systematic approach to the gathering and retention of intelligence relevant to their programmes of conquest and settlement. cf. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "The Vikings in Scotland and Ireland in the ninth century," *Peritia*, vol. 12, 1998, pp. 296–339.

<sup>24</sup> This was suggested to me by the Irish Ambassador to Norway, Donal Hamill.

<sup>25</sup> LC1249.16–19, p. 392, ll. 19–27 and p. 393, ll. 1–4.

<sup>26</sup> Here and elsewhere I draw on Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, available through [minerva.ucc.ie:6336/dynaweb/locus/dictionary](http://minerva.ucc.ie:6336/dynaweb/locus/dictionary).

Rather, there is a noticeable concentration along the waterways of the Rivers Shannon and Erne.

Inchbofin is the leading candidate to be the small island in Lough Ree where many hermits lived, and where no-one could die of disease. Most of the smaller islets in Lough Ree could not support many inhabitants, but Inchbofin has a long record of habitation.

There is no compelling argument for the presumption, repeated by Holm-Olsen, that Kertinagh is actually in Lough Derg.<sup>27</sup> According to tradition, St Patrick entered purgatory in the year 435, through a cave on what is now called Saints Island. The picture of an island tormented by devils on one half and calm on the half occupied by a church has no obvious parallel with what we know about Saints Island – where there was a cave that led to purgatory and which became a place of pilgrimage. Nor would an island governed by devils be likely to later acquire the name Saints Island. Lough Derg's prominent status as a place of pilgrimage leads one to suspect that the author could have easily identified Lough Derg and its particular tradition, if that was the place he had in mind.

The author specifies that he is talking about Lough Erne, and that this is a large lake, rich in salmon, and with many islands. Kertinagh is therefore likely to be one of the islands along the Erne which has an ancient church. The description states that it is large enough to be inhabited, but is not, and that there is an abandoned church on it. Candidates include White Island, which has an outstanding series of statues dating back to the sixth century, and Devenish Island, where St Molaise founded a monastery which was sacked by the Vikings in 837. Another possibility is the centre of Enniskillen, which was once an island (Inis Ceithleann). A further intriguing possibility is that there is a link to Boa Island, site of what is believed to be Ireland's oldest statue, a two-thousand-year-old Janus statue (the Lusty Beg man). The statue itself is a symbol of the kind of duality which reputedly plagued Kertinagh.

### The Tara episode and the question of sources

Neither Meyer nor Young analysed the Irish chapters of the *King's Mirror* from the point of view of the book's broader didactic purpose. Yet the extract on Ireland reveals, as well as great verve, a high degree of pedagogical sophistication. This is best illustrated by the treatment of the Tara episode, which is worth close examination. The author deliberately and skilfully adapts the legend of the destruction of Tara to his own ends.

Tara is referred to as Themar in the *King's Mirror*, an easily recognisable derivation from the name used in the oldest Irish sources, Temair. The an-

<sup>27</sup> Holm-Olsen, p. 160, citing Todd's 1848 edition of Nennius.



cient seat of the kings of Ireland was long desolate by the time the King's Mirror was written. The desertion of Tara remains a great riddle; after many centuries as a centre of power and worship, it was apparently abandoned in the sixth century and has been uninhabited ever since. One theory is that it ceased to be a royal residence relatively early, but continued to be used as a ritual centre (for example for coronations) for some time.

A written model for the King's Mirror extract has not been definitively identified; it does not feature in either the *Mirabilia* or in Giraldus. Irish sources include two different legends involving a king of Tara, a disputed legal judgement, and a consequent catastrophe. One of these is in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*. In this version, Tara suffered from a curse imposed by St. Ruadan following a dispute with King Diarmuid – a dispute which involved legal judgements.

The other version is given in the *Rennes Dinnseanchas* and involves Lugaid mac Con and Cormac mac Art. The king, Lugaid, judged that sheep which had grazed the queen's land without permission should be forfeited. Cormac mac Art, hearing this, dissented, stating that it was far better to exchange a shearing for a shearing. He challenged the king, who realised his error and at the same time acknowledged that Cormac was suited to be king. Lugaid abdicated.

The King's Mirror version is clearly not a simple reproduction of either story, and cannot have been based on a manuscript including a simple recounting of either the *Clonmacnoise* or the *Rennes* stories. Kuno Meyer concluded that the contradictions between this and earlier versions suggested that the author's source was oral. I disagree. The Tara anecdote as given in the King's Mirror is in a far more sophisticated format than any of the anecdotes in *Nennius* or Giraldus, or indeed than in the *Annals*; it is in the form of an *exemplum* – a sermon. There seem to be two possibilities: either the author knew one or other of these stories, saw its didactic potential for his own purposes, and substantially rewrote the material in a different genre, or he learned the Tara story in a version, now lost, that had already been transformed into a cautionary tale. Such an intermediate version, in my view, is more likely to have come to Norway in written form rather than by an oral report from someone familiar with Ireland.

Although no Irish manuscripts have ever been found in Norway, it is not impossible that some were indeed transferred, at some point during over four centuries of exchange preceding the composition of the King's Mirror. Is there a lost book of miracles and wonders of Ireland, a companion piece to the seventh century *De mirabilibus locis sanctae* by the Irish Augustine or to Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*? Could Columbanus or Eriugena have included the Tara story as a sermon in writings which have not survived? Could Peter of Ireland, a near contemporary of Håkon Håkonson, have used such an an-

ecdote in his teaching on natural philosophy at Naples?<sup>28</sup> There is certainly evidence that the Irish church was from the beginning interested in the proper basis for legal judgements, and to this end carefully studied guidelines set down by Innocent I.<sup>29</sup>

I would argue that the elements given in the King's Mirror make it much more likely that the version at the disposal of the author was based on the Lugaid Mac Con story, and not on the conflict between Diarmuid and Ruadan. The author specifies that the people were at the time heathens, where he could easily have omitted to do so. This would probably have strengthened his argument, insofar as he wished to establish Christian norms of justice – but he chose to include it, which means it was probably in the intermediate version. The Tara episode is in all versions of the King's Mirror included in the chapter giving examples of “the miraculous powers of holy men”, and is surrounded by anecdotes of specifically Christian character. The author of the King's Mirror tended to include the names of Irish saints, in keeping with his penchant for carefully recording the names of people and places. Having identified both St Diarmuid and St Kevin in the immediately preceding anecdotes, a reference to St Ruadan would have been entirely in character, if Ruadan's curse had been the model for this particular version of the fall of Tara. The failure to refer to Ruadan or to Christianity is striking, and suggests that the Clonmacnoise version is not the ultimate source. An additional clue is the fact that the Ruadan story has no reference to the walls falling, but the Lugaid story has. In the latter version, one wall falls. This element is embellished here – all the walls fall – in order to emphasise the message.

Whatever the source, it is clear that the author deliberately reworked the original story – whether written or oral – in order to adapt it to his own didactic purposes. It is relevant in this respect that the Tara episode, unlike any of the other marvels from Ireland, is repeated in a later chapter of the King's Mirror, as an illustration of the “difficult duties of the king's judicial office”. This reappearance is particularly fascinating – not least because the author changes many details second time around. A close look at the similarities and differences between these passages is called for.

### The Tara anecdote and the political philosophy of the King's Mirror

The author is not being explicitly didactic in the Irish chapters of the King's Mirror; a geography lesson by its nature deals less in opinions and ideology

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Duddy, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, London: Longman 1995, p 152 f, on Cumminian's letter, c. 633.

than a law lecture. He has also acknowledged, in the preceding chapters, a more relaxed context: "since we are wearied with profound questions and thoughtful discourse, let ... us turn our conversation to matters of a brighter sort ... my mind is often as eager for amusement as for things of useful intent."<sup>30</sup> Yet this is by no means a casual retelling of an amusing story. The author took the trouble of adding a specific introduction to the Tara episode when he revised the chapter:

"Many wonderful things have come to pass in Ireland which certain highly endowed saints have brought about in an instant; and these, too, must seem very marvelous. Thus far, however, we have spoken only of such things as have been achieved through a holiness so great that they remain as a testimony to this day and seem as wonderful now as on the day when they first occurred. But those other matters that men regard as surely genuine and speak of as actual facts we may now proceed to point out."

The emphasis here on "actual facts" is intended to draw attention to the veracity and legitimacy of the Tara story.

Tara is described as a capital or royal borough, in olden times, and as the loveliest place in the whole country. The author specifies that the episode occurred in pre-Christian times: the people were heathen and "did not have the true faith concerning God".

"[A]ll the people in the land believed that the king who resided at Themar would always render just decisions and never do otherwise; ... they held firmly to their belief that every case would be decided properly if that king passed upon it; and never, they thought, could an unrighteous decision come from his throne. On what seems to have been the highest point of the borough, the king had a handsome and well built castle in which was a large and beautiful hall, where the king was accustomed to sit in judgment. But once it happened that certain lawsuits came before the king for decision in which his friends and acquaintances were interested on the one side, and he was anxious to support their contentions in every way. But those who were interested in the suits on the other side were hostile toward him, and he was their enemy. So the outcome was that the king shaped his decision more according to his own wish than to justice. But because an unrighteous judgment had come whence all people expected just decisions and because of this popular belief, the judgment seat was overturned and the hall and the castle likewise, even to their very foundations. The site, too, was overturned, so that those parts of the earth which had formerly pointed downward were now turned upward; and all the houses and halls were turned down into the earth and thus it has been ever since. But because such a great miracle happened there, no one has since dared to inhabit the place, nor has any king ventured to set up his throne there; and yet, it is the loveliest place known in all that country. It is also

<sup>30</sup> Larson, Ch. VIII.

thought that if men should attempt to rebuild the town, not a single day would pass without the appearance of some new marvel.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Tara anecdote in the chapter on the king’s judicial office

The political significance of the Tara anecdote is even clearer when the author later repeats the story as a legal didactic text. It is significant also that the author took the trouble to signpost legal studies very early in the book: “give thought to your studies, especially to the law books.”<sup>32</sup> This would explain why the story is included in the latter part of the *King’s Mirror*, in chapters which are a mixture of political treatise and legal textbook. The main focus here is the king’s role in judging over disputes, and the author constantly emphasises the importance of applying justice rather than favouritism. A series of examples of good and bad verdicts are given.

The story of the destruction of Tara is perfectly suited to this section. It runs directly to a moral of great relevance to a future king: a king should base his decisions on the law and should avoid favouritism; failure to do so can have catastrophic consequences. This time round, as a good teacher should, he begins by stating the lesson he is preaching: “wherever justice is sold for money or is stricken down by arrogance, divine revenge and punishment, physical or spiritual, will surely come.”<sup>33</sup>

There are a number of variations from the earlier account, and each is tailored to the specific educational purpose of this section of the manuscript. The first variation is to enhance the importance of the site: Tara is now described as the leading city in Ireland, and the king had his chief residence there; no one knew of a finer city on earth. This reflects the sharper, more instructive purpose of this section of the book, and the fact that the Tara story is now in the company of examples of biblical provenance.

The next variations are slight, but significant. Firstly, the people’s beliefs were specified a little more: “they were firm in the belief that there could be no deviation from righteousness in judgment on the part of the king who dwelt in Themar; for no decision was pronounced in Ireland which they could consider just before the king at Themar had passed upon it.” This does two things: it establishes righteousness as a key theme; and it further emphasises the pre-eminence of this particular king. This is no minor ruler, but the most important in the country; hence his judgements are of added importance.

Secondly, the status of the disputing sides in the legal conflict is modulated: the losing side are characterised as “men whom the king disliked”

<sup>31</sup> Larson, Chapter XI.

<sup>32</sup> Larson, Ch. III; the quote is immediately followed by the remark that “those who gain knowledge from books have keener wits than others.”

<sup>33</sup> Larson, Chapter LVIII.

rather than his enemies. This milder formulation makes it harder to have sympathy for the king's favouritism.

Slight changes are made in the description of the destruction which follows the false judgement, also to enhance the drama (emphasis added): "This **soon** became evident ... **three days later** [a biblically significant interval] the hall **and all the other houses** of the king were overturned ... The people **immediately** began to desert the place. It was never subsequently occupied." The statement that marvels would occur if people returned to Tara is then omitted – this point is relevant to a chapter on miracles, but not to a legal textbook.

The author then adds an editorial, to spell out the lesson: "Now from these accounts you are to conclude that God permits such things to be revealed to men, because He wishes them to understand that such an outcome is daily prepared in a spiritual and invisible manner for men who refuse to render just and right judgments, if they are appointed to determine the suits of men."

In true sergeant major style, and in good pedagogical fashion, the author later recapitulates the lesson, at the end of the chapter: "You also heard how God punished the king and the city of Themar, because the king had distorted a just decision. Though the people did not hold the true faith about God, He punished the deed nevertheless, because they believed that a wrong decision could never come from Themar."

Finally, the story is again summarised and placed in the context of his other illustrations at the start of the next chapter – or perhaps more accurately, the next lecture:

"There are four things which he who goes into the judgment hall must leave outside and never allow to come into the judgment seat with him or even inside the door. The first is avarice; the second, enmity; the third obstinacy; the fourth, friendship. For you heard that Stephen was ordered to disclose whether he had accepted a gift from Tarquin and had promised to secure justice for him in return for the fee. And the judgment was, that if he had sold justice for money, he should follow the fee to destruction. You heard this, too, that he was condemned to die for having saved men from death by force and in defiance of law. You also heard in the earlier account how the king and the city of Themar perished because the king, being friendly to one side and very hostile to the other, had distorted a just decision. Now for such reasons those four things must be excluded, lest any one of them should cause a righteous doom to be distorted."

The message of the Tara episode is that there are higher principles that the secular power should respect; a king, no matter how exalted, cannot bend the law to his own wishes. In my view, this fits well with the political theory of the *King's Mirror*, as elaborated by Sverre Bagge. The author sets out moral imperatives which the secular ruler must respect, and sets these out explicitly on the basis of Christian theology. He does not, however, interpose the head

of the church in this process. By taking this approach, he is able to resolve the delicate issue of the relation of king and bishop. The bishop does not come between the king and God; but he is certainly in a position to draw attention to the religious principles which must guide the king in the exercise of his authority.

### Concluding remarks

There is something extraordinary about the inclusion of the Tara sermon among the examples chosen to teach the precepts of wise, Christian leadership. All the other examples are either from the bible or from the early Christian era. The Tara episode is explicitly from pre-Christian times and does not include any Christian figure. Its appearance in this context reflects the influence and status of the Irish church and of Irish scholars in the early medieval period – when the stories drawn upon in the Irish chapters were composed.

The most likely explanation for the appearance of an Irish story in this context is that a version of the destruction of Tara had earlier been reworked as a sermon for the purpose of impressing on an Irish audience the importance of impartiality in legal judgements. It is unlikely that the author of the *King's Mirror* would himself have embarked on a complete reworking of either the Cormac mac Art story or the St Ruadan story as we know them in order to make a legal point.

It is, however, abundantly clear that the author of the *King's Mirror* was highly skilled both as an editor and as a teacher. The differences between his two renderings of the Tara episode illustrate these qualities well. He did not simply pass on an accumulation of colourful material; rather, he chose and shaped material to suit his pedagogical purpose.

The dual use of this episode also shows that the author had a particular interest in the fate of Tara. It may also be that this anecdote made a strong impression on his royal student, Magnus Håkonsson. Is it possible that this one story held a special significance for the future king of Norway? That it inspired in him a sense of justice that led him to introduce the major law reforms which earned him the nickname by which he went down in history – the Lawmender? If the repetition of the legend of Tara was a deliberate element of the author's programme for promoting a certain style of government, one could argue that Magnus's subsequent career suggests that he succeeded in this goal.