

Battle Speeches in Sverris Saga

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I think it's best to say I like to bounce around when it comes to looking at medieval military history. I find it much more rewarding to look at aspects of warfare that haven't got too much coverage, battles that you don't hear about often, or can be a little quirky. Which brings me today to looking at speeches given before or during battles in a somewhat obscure 13th century saga set in Norway.

Battle speeches tend to be something we usually gloss over - we will say that they things are probably just the imaginations of the chroniclers and we should probably just ignore them and move on to the actual description of the battle, even if the account of the speech is longer than description of the battle itself. So most of us don't pay too much attention to this.

When it comes to looking at battle speeches, John Bliese can be considered the historian who has done the most work on the topic. He wanted to see what were the motivations that medieval commanders were trying to instill into their soldiers. After

looking at hundreds of examples from chronicles and he was able to group them into over a dozen different categories. The most common element to motivate soldiers was to appeal to their martial and chivalric values: 'Be brave, show your valour, fight like men.' Bliese found that this kind of stuff would appear in nearly half the speeches he researched.

Other popular motivating elements were to say that divine aid would support them, aka 'God is on our side!'; the justice of their cause - 'We're the good guys, and they are evil!'; military superiority - 'We got more men than they do'; and don't try to flee 'You can't escape, so stand and fight'

A good example of a speech that puts many of these elements together is the one given by William Marshal at the Battle of Lincoln in 1215 - or at the least the one written up in his 13th century biography The History of William Marshal. The anonymous author of this biography had pointed out that William "was a master of such speeches", and I can't disagree with that after reading the one he gave to English troops before they fought the French:

Listen now, sirs! Glory and honour are at hand! Right here and now, you can win the country's freedom, truly: so damn any man who fails this day to challenge those who seize our lands and property! And may God see that right prevails! The enemy are here, right here in your hands. They're at our mercy, I promise you, come what may, unless

heart and courage fail us. And if we die in this mission, then God who sees and knows the good will set us in His paradise, in that I place my certain trust; and if we defeat them, without a lie, we'll have won lasting honour for all time, for ourselves and all our line! And I tell you, our enemies labour under another grievous burden: they're excommunicated! How much more that shackles them! What a dismal fate they have in store: they'll be going straight to Hell! They're waging war on God and Holy Church, and I swear God has placed them at our mercy. So come, make haste, let's fall on them - the time and the hour are upon us!

So let's now turn to Sverris Saga - first of all what is it? This is an Old Norse King's Saga, part of the family of sagas like Heimskringla and Morkinskinna, that were written in and around the 13th century, which describe the political and military events in Scandinavia, mostly Norway. Sverris Saga is concerned with only one Norwegian monarch - King Sverre.

He is quite an interesting story on his own - which is why I had an issue of Medieval Warfare magazine that focused on him (and here are copies of that very issue). It begins with this boy named Sverre, the son of Unås, a comb maker, and his wife Gunnhild. When he is five years old the family moves to Faroes Islands, and because Sverre's uncle is the local bishop he gets into a career of a priest.

Then one day in 1175, when Sverre is about 25 or 30 years old, mom comes to him and says that I have to tell you the truth son, your father is not Unas - it's King Sigurd Munn of Norway.

Now at this point Sigurd Munn has been dead for about 20 years, so there won't be a family reunion. It should be noted that Norwegian kings - of which there were many during this period because of a lot of civil wars - did have a tendency to have children out of wedlock. But we have absolutely nothing to go on to say whether Gunnhild is telling the truth or not.

But Sverre believes it and he says to himself, and I'm paraphrasing here, "You know I always thought of myself as destined for really great things, and I hate being a priest. So I am going to go to Norway and take the throne!"

It gets more ridiculous. Sverre sails to Norway, which is ruled by Magnus V and this king has done a pretty good job at defeating other claimants and the people seem to like him. So Sverre is going around Norway, trying to be inconspicuous, but he then meets up with the Birkebeiner in 1177. These are the remnants of a rebel group recently crushed by Magnus, and being leaderless and at the point of starving to the death they approach Sverre and says we will make you king if you lead us.

Sverre says no. Then a little while later they return and say we will make you king if you lead us. And if you say no we will kill you. This time Sverre agrees.

So Sverre and ragtag band of followers start going around Norway, attacking farms and towns, and trying to keep away from Magnus' army. Gradually this force starts getting better and larger, and in a series of battles they defeat Magnus and his men. In 1184 at the Battle of Fimreite Sverre wins again and this time Magnus is killed. So Sverre is the King of Norway, which he rules until his death in 1202.

So Sverris saga is the account of this rise to throne and his subsequent reign. A couple of things to point out here - it's generally believed that at the least the first part of this saga was written under the supervision of Sverre himself. It is also not what you would call a glowing account of the man - these Old Norse sagas tend to be somewhat impartial. It's pro-Sverre, but not by much.

It's also pretty much the only in-depth source of King Sverre and his reign, so we're stuck with it.

The good thing for medieval military historians is that this saga has a lot of campaigns, battles, and even a couple of sieges. When it comes to battle speeches, there are just over a dozen battles where you get a speech before or during a battle, mostly by Sverre but not only him.

Some of these speeches are what you might call a typical battle speech narrative - the two sides are about to do a battle, and the saga writer takes a few paragraphs to say and Sverre went to his men and said this.

But many of the others don't fall into this pattern. Let's begin with the first speech, which happens in 1177 just as Sverre has started his war. He's fighting a local force called the Jamts, who had a much larger force than his. The Jamts surround Sverre's army, but the King-to-be decides to attack them at night. He calls his men together and says,

"Make use of the same password and encourage one another in the same phrases that you hear the Jamts use; and as soon as possible withdraw from their host and pass over to the islands. But first let us make a fierce attack on them and try if they will give way."

That's all we get - no rousing words - just telling them to try a stratagem - which does work.

The second speech is actually very odd - Sverre and his men have reached the town of Nidaros and the Birkebeiners want to attack it. Sverre then begins to talk and says no we shouldn't attack it: "Your plan seems to me unwise. I don't suppose the townsmen

will let us quietly take possession of the town. I expect they will defend it, for they will not look on us Birkebeiners as likely to restrain from plunder and pillage.”

He then gives the other plan to lure the townsmen away from the city, but his own Marshal disagrees, and the men go with a frontal attack. Sverre ends the conversation with “Your scheme, opposed to my wises, will turn out, I imagine, badly.”

Of course the Birkebeiners lose the battle, and Sverre is nearly killed. There is even an episode in this fight where Sverre is trying to runaway over a beach hill when he trips over his own cloak and falls down.

So things are looking bad for the Birkebeiners and the saga then quickly moves to having King Magnus chasing Sverre and his men. At this point we get our first more standard battle speech from Sverre, where he says that this a bad situation, because everyone thinks the Birkebeiner are now weak, and Magnus has a lot more men. But Sverre doesn't think they should flee, saying “It seems to me a braver course to confront our foes, though our band is not larger. Even if we are overwhelmed by superior numbers, we may yet so behave as to obtain great renown in our fall, since we shall fight against King Magnus himself. But if we win a victory over him, then will our strength increase thereby.”

The saga author tells us that Sverre said more encouraging words and the men applauded him. In the following battle, the Birkebeiners are successful in holding off Magnus and his men.

The heart of this paper is based on four battles that happen between Sverre and Magnus between 1179 and 1184 - all of which devote space to fairly lengthy speeches by Sverre. What I really find interesting is how each of them are very unique in tone and topic.

The first one is a very rah - rah type speech - basically Sverre tells them that he had a dream the last night in which they would win this battle, and that Magnus' men are either drunk or too sleepy to fight. He even proposes rewards for his men:

I will now make known to your what is to be gained; whoever slays a baron, and can bring forward evidence of his deed, shall himself be a baron; and whoever title a man shall cause to be vacant, that title shall he his; he shall be a King's man who slays a King's man, and he shall receive good honour besides.

The second speech has Sverre telling his men it looks like they are facing overwhelming odds, but they need to fight for victory or die with honor. He is basically trying to convince them not to run away in the battle, ending his speech with "To die in flight is the worst death of all."

The third speech has again Sverre saying that the Birkebeiners are outnumbered, but this time he reminds them of their past victories and notes of their experience in battle has made them stronger. He adds a few sentences saying that he is going to pray to God and Saint Olaf will go there way.

The fourth speech has Sverre again noting their inferior numbers compared to Magnus' force, but he says if they abandon their ships and try to retreat, then it would be likely that they would be killed anyways. He even adds that if they do retreat, then everyone is on their own, and that he will be giving up on his efforts to become king, saying "I will never attempt to acquire ships in Norway." His men are convinced to stay on and fight, which leads Sverre to tell them, "you will send this day a king to his grave." The saga noted that this part of the speech caused great anxiety to many, as they asked themselves "Which King would it be?"

What I really like about these episodes is that in two of these battles we also get battle speeches by King Magnus, which are reported right after Sverre's speeches. The first time he encourages men by saying that they need to remember the previous battles with the Birkebeiners and get revenge, although it is not really much of an honour to fight them.

“We bring to the fight men of high position and brave gentlemen; they have only thieves and highwaymen and robbers, the king thralls and beggars, whom may God confound. Our honourable kinsmen would not be any the more avenged should we slay every Birkebeiner, but we should free ourselves from reproach by doing it.”

The second speech has Magnus beginning with giving a little autobiography of his life, having become the king when he was a young child before telling his followers that there numbers are much larger than Sverre, and that they have him trapped.

Right after this speech we get another speech, this one by Asbiorn Jonsson, who is a leading follower of Magnus but not particularly important to the story. Still he gets to give this bluestery speech about how terrible Sverre and his men are all horrible: “These is an end now to his sleights and tricks, for the Fiend, in whom he trusts, and by whom his counsels are inspired, will fail him... And now Sverre has added to his own evil deeds and violence the only evil he had hitherto left undone, for he has wasted with fire a Christian land; and he shall pay for it. Let us et on these Birkebeiner, two or three on one if it makes the work lighter; and let us deal heavy strokes at all before us, careless where the blow falls, for we use no care in chopping meat for dogs or ravens.”

This speech by Asbiorn is the only one in Sverris saga that has a real vitriol with anger at the other side - and its funny to see that it is directed against Sverre and his side. The

battle soon commences and Sverre is victorious, with both Magnus and Asbiorn being killed.

If these speeches were the product of the saga author's imagination, then he certainly did a good job at making them unique as possible. They also don't line up very neatly with Bliese's list of motivators. We rarely get any references to God supporting your side, or noting the justice of their cause. And keep in mind that Sverre was a priest before deciding to take the Norwegian throne.

There is some parts of the speeches which have appeals to bravery and being valourous, but it really isn't a big element overall here. You get a bit of one side disparaging the other, but again this something that usually stands out.

One has to keep in mind that in a lot of the speeches by Sverre is really trying to convince his men to take action - to fight or not fight - this is persuasion instead of motivation. And the men sometimes don't listen to him, which is reflective of the dynamics between Sverre and the Birkebeiners, with neither side being totally loyal to the other. Up until he is able to kill Magnus, Sverre is the underdog with not much authority. Therefore he has to come up with different rhetoric to get his followers to fight especially when the odds are against them. In one case he appeals to their honour, in another to their experience (and a bit of divine help), and on another occasion he basically tells them if they don't fight he is going to give up.

One last thing I want to mention is that there are several instances where we get Sverre talking about the actual battle tactics he wants to employ - Bliese noted that he didn't see very much of that in the battle speeches he researched, but it seems very logical for me to see that the Norwegian commanders would want to gather their men and tell them what the plans were. So that's what often gets recorded here.