THE EARLY KINGS OF NORWAY, THE ISSUE OF AGNATIC SUCCESSION, AND THE SETTLEMENT OF ICELAND

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Abstract: The early Norwegian kings are scarcely attested in sources earlier than the twelfth century, in contrast to the rich and varied descriptions of them from twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources. It will be argued that the historical narrative of their reign had direct relevance for at least two contemporary issues during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One was the precedence of sons of kings in the order of succession to the Norwegian throne. This claim was strengthened by the genealogical lines of the Norwegian kings which existed from the 1120s or 1130s onwards and demonstrated that the Norwegian monarchy had always passed to heirs in the direct male line. Another important issue was the aspiration of the Norwegian kings to extend their rule to Iceland in the thirteenth century. Paradoxically, at this very time the view gained ground in saga narratives that Icelandic settlers had been opponents of the earliest Norwegian kings.
Keywords: medieval Europe, history of Norway, Norwegian kings, medieval Norway, medieval Iceland, Old Norse Sagas, royal biography, uses of the past, sagas and society, Old Norse society.

INTRODUCTION

The narrative history of those early kings of Norway traditionally associated with the period between 870 and 1000 extends back to the twelfth century. The oldest texts in Old Norse and Latin tend to be more succinct than early-thirteenth-century works such as *Heimskringla*, which have long served as the principal sources for the standard narrative of Norwegian history.[1] In fact the kingdom of Norway is not mentioned in any pre-eleventh-century source, and this, in turn, raises questions about our overall knowledge of the earliest Norwegian kings. The present article seeks to examine the context in which the twelfth- and thirteenth-century narrative history of the Norwegian kingdom was constructed, and to consider two key issues that confronted narrators of that history.

The corpus of royal history composed by Icelanders and Norwegians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries offers an excellent source for investigating the role of the past in medieval political life in general, as so much of the predominantly agrarian, traditional society was regulated in accordance with a dominant vision that found expression in historical writings. Such was the power of historical precedent that even innovations in social, political and legal practices benefitted from any association with the force of custom. Once assigned such customary status, social practices were legitimized and could assume prescriptive status.[2] The relevance of the past for the present ensured that it became a way of engaging with and (even) managing contemporary political reality, with the past providing justification for current forms of political action.

The uncertain knowledge of history may paradoxically be one of the main reasons for the extensive use of historical legend and myth in medieval European society. Precisely because so little was known about the past in any critical sense, it could become a vehicle for change. The search for the past was guided by (then) current necessity, whilst, on the other hand, the historical understanding of the past also de-

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[1] See Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley 1991) 1.

[2] See for instance Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Tex: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore & London 1997) 84.

termined the discursive representation of contemporary events. This explains the apparently didactic function of historical works such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* or the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.

The histories of the earliest Norwegian kings were situated in a remote past about which twelfth-century chroniclers knew little. The accumulation of knowledge about these kings in later works contributes little to greater trust in their veracity from a modern perspective, but it does reveal the perceived need within thirteenth-century Icelandic and Norwegian society to examine the past in the context of the present, and to harness its utility as a way of understanding and legitimizing events in the society in which the narratives were composed.

In the following discussion, the paucity of knowledge about the earliest Norwegian kings from ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century sources will be demonstrated, in order to highlight the rich and varied descriptions of the same Norwegian royalty from twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources. The context in which this tradition assumed written form will then be examined, as will its further development in a new social context during the thirteenth century. The discussion seeks to show how these medieval narratives can be used, not as quarries for information of uncertain historical reliability, but rather as texts that articulate fundamental ideas relating to the political realities of the period in which they were produced, notably to the political realities of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic and Norwegian histories.

EARLY MEDIEVAL SOURCES ABOUT NORWEGIAN KINGS

The earliest mention of Norway (OE. Norðweg) or 'the land of the Norwegians' (OE. ðæt Norðmanna land) can be found in the description of the voyage of Ohthere (ON. Óttarr) in the Old English Orosius, dating from the reign of king Ælfred of Wessex (r. 871-899).[3] This land can be identified as the later kingdom of Norway, but the text offers no clue as to whether such a kingdom existed at the time and includes no mention of Norwegian kings, which has baffled scholars of the period.[4]

The oldest text which refers to a king of Norway is the inscription made by King Harald Gormsson at Jelling in the tenth century, in which he claims to have conquered Denmark (ON. tanmaurk) and Norway (ON. nuruiak) "and Christianized the Danes" (ON. auk tani karþi kristną).[5] The reign of Harald in Denmark is dated between 958 and 987 and he is thus the oldest king of Norway identified in any contemporary source.[6] However, a brief rune inscription is open to many interpretations. In what sense did Harald conquer Norway and does the term "Norway" refer to the same geographical unit as that mentioned by Ohthere in the ninth century, or to some differently

[3] *The Old English Orosius*, ed. Janet Bately (Oxford 1980) 13–16.

[4] See for instance Raymond Ian Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths* (London 1995) 46.

[5] *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*. ed. Lis Jacobsen and Erik Moltke, 3 vols (Copenhagen 1941–1942) II, col. 79.

[6] See Kjeld Christensen and Knud J. Krogh, "Jelling-højene dateret. Kristendommens indførelse og Gorm den Gamles død," *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark 1987* (1987) 223–231; Knud J. Krogh and Bodil Leth–Larsen, *Hedensk og kristent. Fundene fra den kongelige gravhøj i Jelling*. Vikingekongernes monumenter i Jelling 2 (Copenhagen 2007); Else Roesdahl, "King Harald´s Rune-stone in Jelling: Methods and Messages," *Early Medieval Art and Archaeology in the Northern World. Studies in Honour of James Graham-Campbell*, ed. Andrew Reynolds and Leslie Webster (Leiden, Boston 2013) 859–875.

contoured area, or to the Norwegian kingdom referred to in the later and more extensive saga sources? The most prominent contemporary narrative source on the reign of Harald, Widukind of Corvey's *Res gestae saxonicae sive annalium libri tres*, makes no mention of his conquest of Norway; it was more preoccupied with the miracle of Harald's baptism.[7]

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are among the earliest and most important sources concerning Norwegian kings, although there is no mention of a Norwegian kingdom in tenth-century annals. There are two kings mentioned in connection with tenth-century events whom later scholars were to identify tentatively as Norwegian kings. One of them is Eric, son of Harald, who is called king of Northumbria in the Worcester Manuscript and the Peterborough Manuscript. According to the Worcester Manuscript, the Northumbrians made Eric (OE. Hyryc/Yric) their king in 948 but abandoned him in the same year.[8] According to the Peterborough Manuscript, Eric, son of Harald (OE. Yric Haroldes sunu) was accepted by the Northumbrians as king in 952.[9] Both sources state that Eric was driven out by the Northumbrians in 954 and that Ædred then succeeded to the kingdom. Nowhere in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles is this same Eric associated with Norway or any kingdom of the Norwegians, although modern scholars, relying entirely on the testimony of the much younger sagas, tend to take this for granted.[10] That there was a King Eric in Northumbria in the tenth century is corroborated by coins dedicated to "Eric rex" but these coins offer no indication that this Eric was also a king of Norway.[11] In fact, if the name alone was taken as an indication one might be tempted to assume that he was a Danish king, as the West Nordic version of the name would be Eiríkr, with the first vowel a diphthong.[12]

Another king who appears in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles is Olaf (OE. Anlaf/Unlaf), who raided in the south of England with more than 90 ships and fought the Anglo-Saxons at Maldon 991 but was received by king Æþelred in 994 and promised never again to engage in hostilities against the English.[13] Prevailing scholarly opinion has identified this Anlaf as Olaf Tryggvason, known as king of Norway in later sources.[14] However, the kingdom of Norway is not mentioned in the chronicles; in fact

[7] *Quellen zur Geschichte der sächsischen Kaiserzeit. Widukinds Sachsengeschichte, Adalberts Fortsetzung der Chronik Regionos, Liudprands Werke*, ed. Albert Bauer & Reinhold Rau, 5th ed. (Darmstadt 2002) 168, 170.

[8] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D, ed. G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge 1996) 44–45.

[9] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 5. MS E, ed. Susan Irvine (Cambridge 2004) 55.

[10] Cf. Alex Woolf, "Eric Bloodaxe revisited," *Northern History* 34 (1998) 189–193; Clare Downham, "Eric Bloodaxe – axed? The Mystery of the Last Viking King of York," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 26 (2004) 51–77. For a brief overview of the arguments see Clare Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland. The Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014* (Edinburgh 2007) 112–120.

[11] Christoper E. Blunt, *Coinage in Tenth–Century England from Edward the Elder to Edgar´s Reform* (Oxford 1989) 223–225, 228–229.

[12] See Erik Björkman, *Nordische Personennamen in England in alt– und frühmittel-englischer Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur englischen Namenkunde*. Studien zur englischen Philologie 37 (Halle 1910) 34–35.

[13] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 8. MS F, ed. Peter S. Baker (Cambridge 2000) 86–89; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D (n. 8 above) 48–49; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 5. MS E (n. 9 above) 61–62.

[14] See Simon Keynes, "The Historical Content of the Battle of Maldon," *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford 1991) 81–113.

there is a reference in the Peterborough Manuscript to "the first tax [paid] to the Danish men because of the great terror which they wrought along the sea coast" (OE. ærest gafol Deniscan mannum for þam mycclan brogan þe hi worhtan be þam særiman), which is mentioned in connection with the battle of Maldon.[15] Of course, there is no certainty that the term Danish refers here to men from the kingdom of Denmark, but it demonstrates that the link between Olaf and Norway can not be established solely on the basis of Anglo-Saxon chronicle evidence.

The earliest reference to a king of Norway in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles occurs when we read that King Cnut drove King Olaf from Norway in 1028; he returned in 1030 and was then killed.[16] In 1045–1047 there are references to a threat to the English from King Magnus in Norway, which came to nothing as a result of his war with Svend in Denmark. The Worcester Manuscript states that in 1048 Magnus was replaced as king of Norway by Harald, his paternal uncle (OE. fædera).[17] Thus, in the eleventh century, we have more reliable contemporary information about the kingdom of Norway and its kings.

In 1066 several of the Anglo-Saxon chronicles relate how "Harald, king of Norway" (OE. Harold cyng of Norwegon) came to Scotland (or into the Tyne, according to the Abingdon Manuscript) with 300 ships and joined Earl Tostig in his rebellion against King Harold Godwinsson and secured a great victory at York. They then encountered King Harold at Stamford Bridge and "Harald Fine-hair" (OE. Harold Harfagera) was killed.[18] This is the first mention of the epithet "harfagera" in any source, and it obviously derives from the Old Norse "hárfagri."[19] This might be the name by which King Harald wished himself to be known. It must have been his opponents who gave him the epithet "severe" (ON. harðráði), by which he is generally known in thirteenth-century Old Norse kings' sagas.

In the *Logos nouthetêtikos pros Basilea*, an appendix to the Byzantine strategic manual *Strategicon* composed by Cecaumenos, probably in the late 1070s, one Araltes (ON. Haraldr), "a son of the king of the Varangians" (Gr. basileôs men Varangias ên uios) is mentioned as having served the emperor in his campaigns in Sicily.[20] This Araltes is described as having a brother, Ioulavos (ON. Óláfr), whom he succeeded as king. It is then stated that he always maintained good relations with the emperor after becoming king. The names Harald and Olaf recall the Norwegians mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, but without further evidence it would be hard to prove that the Varangian kingdom was identical with that of Norway. As it happens, however, such evidence does exist.

[15] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 5. MS E (n. 9 above) 61.

[16] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D (n. 8 above) 64–65; *The Anglo–Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 5. MS E (n. 9 above) 75–76.

[17] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D (n. 8 above) 67–68.

[18] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition* 6. MS D (n. 8 above) 80.

[19] For an overview of the epithet hárfagri in English sources see Judith Jesch, "Norse Historical Traditions and the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*: Magnús berfoettr and Haraldr hárfagri," *Grufudd ap Cyna: A Collaborative Biography*. Studies in Celtic History 16, ed. K. L. Maund (Woodbridge, Suffolk 1996) 117–148, at 139–144.

[20] *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris De officiis regiis libellus*, ed. Vassilij G. Vassilievskij and Viktor Jernstedt (Saint Petersburg 1896) 97.

The scant information about King Olaf, King Magnus and King Harald in Anglo-Saxon and Byzantine sources can be greatly supplemented by information available in *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, composed in the 1070s by Adam of Bremen, a cleric serving the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. This history of the mission of the Archbishopric in Scandinavia mentions eight kings of Norway, starting with the late tenth-century Haccon (ON. Hákon) who was the "first to take for himself the kingship among the Norwegians, who were ruled by dukes before that" (Lat. primus inter Nordmannos regnum arripuit, cum antea ducibus regerentur). Among the information Adam offers on Hákon is that he was from the family of Ingvar (ex genere Inguar) and ruled Norway for thirty five years (Lat. triginta quinque annis). According to Adam, this Hákon was driven from the throne by the Norwegians because of his high-handed manner but was restored by the Danish King Harald Gormsson who "valorously restored him and made him well-disposed to the worshipers of Christ" (Lat. sua virtute restituit et Christicolis placatum effecit).[21] In the era of King Svend, Harald's successor, the son of Håkon, Thrucco (ON. Tryggvi), ruled as a pagan king of Norway but his son and successor, Olaph (ON. Óláfr), was baptized and "the first among his people to accept Christianity" (Lat. ex ea gente primus fuisse christianus).[22] We also learn, however, that some believed he abandoned Christianity and was a magician who practiced bird divination; as such he was known as Craccaben (ON. krákubein, crow-bone). Following Olaf's death in a naval battle between Scania and Zeeland (Lat. inter Sconiam et Seland), King Svend of Denmark also became the ruler of Norway.[23]

In *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* it is stated that when King Svend of Denmark invaded England he took with him Olaf, son of Craccaben, and this same Olaf was later elected ruler of Norway.[24] There then followed constant war between King Olaf and King Canute (Lat. Chnud, ON. Knútr), Svend successor, which lasted throughout their lives (Lat. continuum fuit bellum, nec cessavit omnibus diebus vitae eorum). As in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, Olaf is depicted as having been driven from his kingdom, before eventually returning with an army. In the ensuing battle he was slain and became a martyr.[25] After the death of Canute, the Norwegians elected Magnus, an illegitimate son of St. Olaf, as their king; following an invasion he also became king of Denmark.[26] The testimony of Adam confirms to some degree the Anglo-Saxon chronicle evidence.

There are also some parallels with the Strategicon of Cecaumenos, in that Harald, the brother of Olaf, is described as having travelled to Constantinople and fought against Saracens in the service of the Emperor. He then returned to Norway and became king following the death of his nephew Magnus.[27] In contrast to the chronicler's

[21] *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, ed. Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner, 7th ed. (Darmstadt 2000) 258.
[22] Ibid. 268, 270, 272.
[23] Ibid. 276.
[24] Ibid. 290.
[25] Ibid. 296. 298, 300, 302.
[26] Ibid. 318.
[27] Ibid. 338, 340, 342.

acknowledgement of Olaf as a martyr and a saint, King Harald is depicted as a tyrant exceeding all others (Lat. rex Haraldus crudelitate sua omnes tyrannorum excessit furores) [28] In the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* there is also a brief reference to the death of King Harald in England and to his sons and successors, Olaf and Magnus.[29]

To sum up: the eleventh-century Norwegian kings Olaf, Magnus, and Harald are well attested in Latin, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon contemporary sources and there seems little doubt as to their familial relationship. The three kings preceding them, Håkon, Tryggvi, and Olaf, are only mentioned in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, although a note in Adam's history suggests that Olaf, son of Tryggvi, went to England where he became a Christian (Lat. venit in Angliam ibique suscepit christianitatem). This reference could be interpreted as rendering him identical with the Anlaf mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles.

The context of these few fragments of information on the Norwegian rulers is very important for any estimation of their significance. First, it should be emphasized that this is incidental information rather than any coherent narrative tradition about these monarchs. The sources from which the information derives are primarily devoted to matters other than the history of the kingdom of Norway. Thus, the Norwegian kings only appear as enemies or allies of Anglo-Saxon and Danish kings, or of the see of Hamburg-Bremen. They are never central figures in the narrative. Before the twelfth century there was no tradition of written royal biography in prose form associated with Norwegian monarchs. This has two implications. Firstly, this means that the narrators who are the main sources of the information are disengaged from the persons they depict and leave much unsaid. Secondly, their agenda is very different from that of royal biographers. The portrayal of Norwegian kings did not constitute a vehicle for conscious portrayal of the past but was rather part of a tradition devoted to a different agenda, whether of the church or of Anglo-Saxon and Danish kings.

It is important to note that information about Norwegian kings gathered from these sources must have been based to a large degree on Scandinavian witnesses, as indicated by epithets such as Craccaben and Harfagera, which would only have meaning for a Scandinavian audience. Behind the brief statements of the Anglo-Saxon chronicles or *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* it is possible to sense competing traditions in respect of these monarchs. Olaf Tryggvason was seen either as one of the originators of Christianity or as an aggressive monarch dabbling in magic, or even both these elements simultaneously. King Harald was sometimes depicted as a fair-haired and glorious king but on other occasions as a stern tyrant. This was before the emergence of a conscious Old Norse saga tradition which harmonised these conflicting narratives and gave precedence to a particular context. For the development of this tradition, no place was more important than the remote island of Iceland, whose reputation as a repository of ancient lore developed during the twelfth century. It was there that traditions about Norwegian monarchs acquired a new twist.

[28] Ibid. 346.
[29] Ibid. 394, 396.

THE TWELFTH-CENTURY HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVOLUTION

Around 1134, the Icelandic priest and chieftain Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148) completed his final version of the Book of the Icelanders (ON. Íslendingabók), a synoptic overview of the history of Iceland from its settlement up to the time of the author.[30] In this brief work, Ari includes information about Norwegian kings and their genealogies, much of it very different from the material found in earlier works.

Ari begins his narrative by stating that Iceland was settled in 869 or 870, in the time of King Harald Finehair (ON. Haraldr hárfagri) who was "the first of his kin to be the sole ruler of the whole of Norway" (ON. es fyrstr varð þess kyns einn konungr at ǫllum Norvegi).[31] Concerning this Harald, who is not mentioned in any earlier written source, Ari offers the following information: He is said to have been the son of Halfdan the Black and ultimately descended from a line of the kings of Sweden that went back to Yngvi, king of the Turks. Ari himself could also trace his ancestry to this line. According to the Book of the Icelanders, Harald was a king for seventy years and died at the age of eighty; he was sixteen years old when the settler Ingolf first journeyed to Iceland. To prevent the depopulation of Norway during this settlement period, Harald levied a tax on emigrants from Norway, which during Ari's lifetime came to be known as the landing fee (ON. landaurar).[32] Apart from this detail, all the other information available to Ari concerning Harald is either genealogical or chronological.

As already noted, the epithet Finehair was applied in contemporary sources to the eleventh-century King Harald who invaded England in 1066, whereas Ari's Harald Finehair is an ancient and exceptionally long-lived ruler from the ninth century who is associated with the founding of Icelandic society. The only source other than Ari in which reference is made to a Norwegian king called Harald at such an early stage is also a late one. William Malmesbury (ca. 1090–1143) mentions a 'a certain king called Harold of Norway' (lat. Haroldus quidam, rex Noricorum) who sent a golden ship with a purple sail to King Æthelstan of England (r. 924–939).[33] This Harold is, however, not referred to as Harald Finehair, as William reserves that epithet for the eleventh-century Harald, brother of St. Olaf.[34]

The statement that Harald was the first of his kin to rule Norway is no passing remark within the texts, as Ari proceeds to trace the genealogies of three Norwegian kings back to Harald. In every instance he diverges from the genealogy that can be established from Adam of Bremen's work on the archbishops of Hamburg. This is in fact the greatest discrepancy between the two works, which generally offer similar information about events and developments which are covered by both, such as the foundation of the Church in Iceland.

[30] The last date in the Book of the Icelanders relates to the period of Guðmundur Þorgeirsson as lawspeaker which ended in 1134. His successor is not mentioned. *Íslenzk fornrit I. Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík 1968) 23. The process of composing the Book of the Icelanders took a number of years, as evidenced from the fact that two of its three patrons were already dead by 1133.

[31] Ibid. 3.

[32] Ibid. 3–6, 9.

[33] *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi De gestis regum Anglorum.* Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores, 90, ed. William Stubbs (London 1887–1889) 149.

[34] Ibid. 281, 318–319.

The first king traced by Ari back to Harald is Olaf Tryggvason, who is not depicted as semi-pagan or a magician in this text. On the contrary, he is credited with instigating the Christianization of Norway and Iceland. Ari traces the ancestry of Olaf to Tryggvi, son of Olaf, son of Harald Finehair.[35] St. Olaf, known in this text as Olaf the stout (ON. Ólafr enn digri), is also traced back to Harald Finehair, as he is said to be the son of Harald, son of Godred, son of Beorn, son of Harald Finehair.[36] Instead of St. Olaf being the son of Olaf Tryggvason, he is depicted by Ari as a distant relative, with Harald Finehair the common ancestor. The same applies to King Harald, referred to as Finehair by the Anglo-Saxon chronicles. There is no mention on his being the brother of St. Olaf; he is now the son of Sigurd, son of Halfdan, son of Sigurd hrísi, son of Harald Finehair.[37] Again, a distant relative seems to have succeeded to the Norwegian crown, as the only common ancestor mentioned in Ari's narrative is Harald Finehair.

Thus, in Ari's narrative we have three separate lines of Norwegian kings all descended from an early common ancestor through the male line, in stark contrast to the view of Adam of Bremen, who describes the Norwegian monarchy as passing from father to son or, in one case, to an uncle of the preceding king. It is difficult to ascertain in which time these views developed or whether they had any significance for the kings contesting the Norwegian throne in the eleventh century.[38] What is clear is that there is no mention of such a genealogy in any preserved text older than the Book of Icelanders.

What are the implications of the royal genealogies for which *The Book of the Icelanders* is the oldest source? A notable difference between them and the evidence gained from the eleventh century sources is the fact that the claim of Harald Sigurdsson to the throne of Norway no longer rests on his being the brother of St. Olaf, instead he is a claimant because of his descent in a straight male line from a ninth century King Harald, who happens to be his namesake. In fact, the genealogy in *The Book of the Icelanders* demonstrates that the claim of King Harald rests on the same foundation as that of Olaf Tryggvason and St. Olaf. The fact that they share a name further illustrates the connection between the eleventh century Harald and his putative ninth century ancestor who emerges in this text as the progenitor of the Norwegian royal line. This genealogy of the Norwegian kings was a convenient one for Harald and his descendants, who still ruled Norway at the time of the composition of *The Book of the Icelanders*.

It so happened that at the time of Ari's composition of *The Book of the Icelanders* in the 1130s, the kingdom of Norway was contested between three descendants of King Magnus Bare-Legs (d. 1103). One of them was King Magnus the Blind (d.

[35] *Íslenzk fornrit* I (n. 30 above) 14.

[36] Ibid. 19.

[37] Ibid. 20. On the epithet *hrísi* see Else Mundal, "Sigurdr hrísi eller Sigurdr risi?" *Nordica Bergensia* 29 (2005) 5–13.

[38] See Claus Krag, "Norge som odel i Harald Hårfagres ætt," *Historisk tidsskrift* 68 (1989) 288–302; Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, "English Models for King Harald Fairhair?" *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature — Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint papers of the 13th international Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th–12th August, 2006*, ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Durham 2006) 359–365.

1139), son of King Sigurd the Crusader (d. 1130), who inherited the kingdom from his father in a straight male line. The others were illegitimate sons of Magnus Bare-Legs, one of them Harald gilli (d. 1136), who had come from Ireland to establish his relationship with the king, and the other Sigurd the fortuitous deacon (ON. slembidjákn, d. 1139), who later formed an alliance with King Magnus. One of the causes of internal strife in this period seems to be that the right to royal succession was not limited to just a few individuals; at any one time there could be many individual pretenders with an equal claim to the throne. Not only could all sons of a king make such a claim, but also all men in patrilineal descent from a king. Ari's Book of the Icelanders reinforces this fact by tracing three patrilineal royal lines from King Harald Finehair, all apparently with an equal right to the throne of Norway.

The earliest extant law on royal succession in Norway is from 1163.[39] According to this law, there should be only one king, following the principle of primogeniture. If the oldest legitimate son was not fit to be king, the bishops and a council of sixty representatives of the "wisest men" (ON. hina vitrasto menn), twelve from each bishopric, should select another legitimate royal son. Subsequently they were at liberty to choose another of the royal heirs. If the king had no suitable heir, the council could then choose whoever they thought would better "guard both God's right and the laws of the land" (ON. bæðe guðrs rettar at gæta oc lannz laga). If the representatives could not agree, the bishops should decide the election.

The ideology of this law is clear; the emphasis is on legitimate birth, consensus within society and the role of the Church. The law is in accordance with the principles enunciated in the privileges accorded to the church in connection with the coronation of King Magnus Erlingsson in the 1160s, where the king is said to hold Norway as a fief from St. Olaf.

More problematic is the relationship between the law of 1163 and older laws or customs which no longer exist in written form, if they ever did.[40] Our main sources for the selection of Norwegian kings before this time are royal biographies, in Latin and Old Norse, all of them composed after 1163 and thus influenced by what the narrators knew and thought about the law of Magnus Erlingsson. In an overview of the evidence of the sagas as to royal succession before 1163, Absalon Taranger emphasized two common themes in all such narratives. First, the right of all sons of kings to claim the throne, and second, the necessity of being acclaimed as king at a thing or an assembly.[41] This may reflect prevailing customs before 1163 but that is not easy to prove.

[39] See *Norges gamle love indtil 1387* I, eds. Rudolf Keyser and Peter Andreas Munch (Christiania 1846) 3–4.

[40] Cf. Jens Arup Seip, "Problemer og metode i norsk middelalderforskning," *Historisk tidsskrift* 32 (1940/1942) 49–133: Johan Schreiner, "Lovene om tronfølgen i Norge," *Festskrift til Erik Arup den 22. november 1946* (Copenhagen 1946) 88–104; Torfinn Tobiassen, "Tronfølgelov og privilegiebrev," *Historisk tidsskrift* 43 (1964), 191–273; Andreas Holmsen, "Erkebiskop Eystein og tronfølgeloven av 1163," *Historisk tidsskrift* 44 (1965), 225–266; Sverre Bagge, "Den heroiske tid – kirkereform og kirkekamp 1153–1214," *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537. Søkelys på Nidaroskirkens og Nidarosprovinsens historie*. Senter for middelalderstudier, NTNU. Skrifter nr. 5, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim 2003) 47–80.

[41] Absalon Taranger, "Om kongevalg i Norge i sagatiden," *Historisk tidsskrift* 30 (1934–1936) 110–166, 273–308, at 291–293.

However, we can state with certainty that the texts are a reflection of how the narrators of earlier Norwegian history chose to portray these customs.

The main point of contention was the rights of illegitimate sons of kings, such as King Sverre Sigurdson (ON. Sverrir Sigurðarson), who killed and succeeded Magnus to the throne in 1184, versus the rights of the offspring of legitimate unions, such as King Magnus the Blind and the son of his sister, Magnus Erlingsson. The latter was not a king's son but according to the throne law of 1163 this mattered less than the legitimacy of his birth. A historical narrative portraying earlier customs could thus never be neutral, and the prevailing view in the historical narratives seems to support the claims of Sverre. In this question, the testimony of Ari Þorgilsson from the 1130s assumed particular importance.

There are three narrative histories of Norway which were probably composed in the last quarter of the twelfth century. These are the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* by the monk Theodoricus (ON. Þórir), *Historia Norwegiae* and *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum*, both by unknown authors. These three works influenced later, more extended historical narratives and the basic outline of succession and chronology of individual kings was established in these synoptic histories. It is evident that they were all heavily influenced by earlier Icelandic texts, both the Book of Icelanders but also other works by Ari Þorgilsson and works of the historian Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133) that have since been lost.[42]

Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium by Theodoricus actually begins by noting the great learning of the Icelanders and their ancient poetry.[43] There are many similarities between Theodoricus's account of the Norwegians and that of Ari Þorgilsson, such as the identity of the first settler of Iceland and the reference to the presence of Irish monks before the settlement.[44] Although Theodoricus may have relied mostly on oral witnesses, the main exception is a list of Norwegian kings to which he refers at one point in the narrative.[45]

Theodoricus justifies placing Harald Finehair at the beginning of the narrative by stating that before his time there was no royal line in Norway (lat. Sed quia constat nullam ratam regalis stemmatis successionem in hac terram extitisse ante Haraldi pulchrecomati tempora).[46] Two of Harald's sons are now mentioned for the first time in historical literature, Eric the fratricide (lat. Ericus fratrum interfector) and Hacon,

[42] See esp. Svend Ellehøj, *Studier over den ældste norrøne historieskrivning*. Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana 26 (Copenhagen 1965); Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga. En studie i historiske kilder*. Studia humaniora 2 (Oslo 1991)

[43] On Theodoricus cf. Arne Odd Johnsen, *Om Theodoricus* og hans "Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium" (Oslo 1939); Jens S. T. Hanssen, "Observations on Theodericus Monachus and his History of the Old Norwegian Kings, from the End of the XII. Sec.," *Symbolae Osloenses* 24 (1945) 164–180; Jens S. T. Hanssen, "Theodericus Monachus and European Literature," *Symbolae Osloenses* 27 (1949) 70–127; Bjarni Guðnason, "Theodoricus og íslenskir sagnaritarar," *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, ed. Einar Gunnar Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík 1977) 107–120; Sverre Bagge, "Theodericus Monachus – Clerical Historiography in Twelfth-century Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 14 (1989) 113–133.

[44] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae. Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen*, ed. Gustav Storm (Kristiania 1880) 8–9.

[45] Ibid. 44. On the origin of this list see Ellehøj, *Studier over den ældste norrøne historieskrivning* (n. 42 above) 182–196, 266–276.

[46] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 3, 6.

fosterson of Halstan (lat. Hocon nutricius Halstani). Also mentioned are Harald Greycloak (ON. gráfeldr), son of Eric and successor to Hacon, who ruled with his brothers (lat. cum fratribus suis), and the successor of Harald Greycloak, Earl Hacon the Bad Sigurdsson (lat. Hocon comes filius Sigwardi, qui cognominatus est malus).[47] This Hacon might be identical with his namesake mentioned by Adam of Bremen as the first king of the Norwegians, or may be based on the narrative in *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*, as the events of his reign narrated by Theodoricus are similar to those related by Adam.[48] All these kings went on to feature in later kings' sagas, although the line of earls (Hacon and his sons) seems to have enjoyed special status and its rulers were not regarded as kings.

The ancestry of Hacon's successor, Olaf Tryggvason, is traced in the same manner as in the Book of the Icelanders, and the same goes for St. Olaf later in the narrative. The exception is King Harald, who appears here for the first time under the epithet 'hardrader'; he is described simply as a brother of St. Olaf and his ancestors are not traced back to Harald Finehair.[49] Apart from this, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* follows the genealogy provided by Ari Þorgilsson. This is done despite the fact that the work is dedicated to Archbishop Eystein, a staunch supporter of King Magnus Erlingsson.

Historia Norwegiae is a text composed in the later half of the twelfth century, perhaps as early as 1160.[50] In it can be found further information on the sons of Harald Finehair, although those who became the ancestors of later kings are given special emphasis. Eric has a new epithet, Bloodaxe (lat. sanguinea securis), which was retained in later texts, and his three sons who later ruled Norway are listed as Harald, Sigward and Gunrod.[51] In the text there is a genealogy derived from the poem *Ynglingatal*, predating the later use of that text in *Heimskringla*. The phrase "perpetuus rex Norvegiae" is used about St. Olaf, and echoes terminology primarily connected with King Magnus Erlingsson.[52] The author was also very familiar with Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, which not only provided phrases and pieces of information but also defined the entire undertaking of our anonymous author. The geographical introduction of *Historia Norwegiae* is a correction and extension of Adam's missionary map of the North; the praise of Olaf Tryggvason forms a contrast with Adam's more ambiguous picture of the king. Furthermore, as argued by Lars Boje Mortensen, the "author's ambition to show the present state of Christianity and paganism in the Norwegian realm forms a clear parallel between the contemporary concerns of the missionary mandate of the archdiocese of Trondheim and the former

[47] Ibid. 7, 9–11.

[48] *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, (n. 21 above) 258; *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 11–18.

[49] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 11, 21, 50. This is rectified in Historia Norwegie which traces all three kings to Harald Finehair, in the same manner as Ari; see ibid. 109–111.

[50] See Lars Boje Mortensen, "Introduction," *Historia Norwegie*, ed. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen 2003) 8–47.

[51] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 105, 107.

[52] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 109.

one of Hamburg–Bremen as described by Adam."[53] In the light of this dependence, it is interesting to note that when it comes to genealogy, the testimony of Ari is preferred to that of Adam.

Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sǫgum is either based on *Historia Norwegiae*, or draws from a common source. Thus, the information offered there offers only minor divergences, such as the mention of a fourth son of Eric Bloodaxe, Ragnfred.[54] It is explicitly stated that Olaf Tryggvason, St. Olaf and King Harald all could claim direct male descent from Harald Finehair.[55] *Ágrip* has, like Theodoricus, been connected with the Archdiocese of Trondheim, even if its standpoint is less obviously pro-clerical.[56] It is, however, also based on the same list of kings that Svend Ellehøj has argued was used as a source in the *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*.[57]

Common to all three accounts is their confirmation of the basic outline of the Norwegian royal genealogy offered by Ari Þorgilsson, in contrast to the testimony of older works such as *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* by Adam of Bremen. There is also more information on the kings that ruled during the years between Harald Finehair and Olaf Tryggvason, even if there are minor discrepancies between individual accounts. The most interesting of these concerns Earl Håkon in *Ágrip*, who in the two Latin accounts is described as son of Sigward (lat. filius Sigwardi) or from the line of the earls of the Mærir and the Háleygir (lat. ex Moerensium et Halogensium comitum prosapia extitit oriundus).[58] In *Ágrip*, however, Håkon is said to be a descendant of King Harald Finehair through a female line.[59] This is connected with the transformation of Håkon from a king, in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, to an earl (lat. comes) in the later narratives. Håkon is not a king by birthright as he is not descended from Harald Finehair in a male line. Even if one of the texts makes him out to be a descendant through a female line, that does not alter the fact that he cannot be considered a king. For the readers of *Ágrip* the situation of Earl Håkon, the son of a king's daughter, must have had obvious resonance in respect of Magnus Erlingsson, the son of an Earl and a daughter of King Sigurd the Crusader.

It is evident that all three narrative histories of the earliest Norwegian kings composed in the last quarter of the twelfth century could be used in support of the view that only the sons of kings were to be considered as legitimate monarchs of Norway. This was indeed the position of the pretender Sverre Sigurdsson, contrary to the provisions of the Law of Succession from 1163. As the eventual victory of King Sverre and his family was by no means a foregone conclusion at this time, all the narratives reflecting this view must be regarded as broadly supportive of Sverre's position concerning this issue. This is even true for the work of Theodoricus, who through his connection with Archbishop Eystein is commonly placed in the opposite camp, as well as for the less obviously pro-clerical *Ágrip*.

[53] See Mortensen, "Introduction" (n. 50 above) 17.
[54] *Íslenzk fornrit XXIX. Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sogum; Fagrskinna – Nóregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík 1985) 12.
[55] Ibid. 19, 25, 36–37.
[56] Ellehøj, *Studier over den ældste norrøne historieskrivning* (n. 42 above) 278–279.
[57] Ibid. 266–276.
[58] *Monumenta Historica Norvegicae* (n. 44 above) 11, 111.
[59] *Íslenzk fornrit XXIX* (n. 54 above) 14–15.

The genealogy of the oldest Norwegian kings which was becoming commonly accepted by the end of the twelfth century cannot be found in any source composed before the 1130s, the decade when the strife between different sons of kings ushered a period of civil strife in Norway which lasted until 1240. Although not always harmonising well with earlier accounts, the version of Norwegian royal genealogies of which the Book of Icelanders is the earliest known representative became the dominant model on which later narratives were based and this success was consolidated in the last quarter of the twelfth centuries. The historiographical triumph of this narrative coincided with the political triumph of the line of Sverre, the champion of the agnatic principle of royal succession. In the early thirteenth century the triumph of his grandson, Håkon Håkonsson, was in no small part due to his being a king's son, which gave him an advantage over other pretenders to the Norwegian throne, such as his distant kinsman and father-in-law Earl Skule (ON. Skúli Bárðarson, 1189–1240).[60] With the accession of Håkon to the throne in 1217 and his final triumph in 1240, this ceased to be an issue in Norwegian politics and other matters came to the fore, which are also reflected in thirteenth-century writings about the earliest Norwegian kings.

FOUNDATION MYTHS: CONFLICTING VIEWS FROM THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

Following the consolidation of royal power in Norway, King Håkon Håkonsson strove to extend his rule to the North Atlantic, becoming overlord of Greenland and Iceland shortly before his death in 1263. Before the introduction of Norwegian royal power, Icelandic society was characterized by violence and strife as various individual chieftains and magnates fought for control over the country. In the later stages of this struggle, the position of Icelandic aristocrats towards the king became an important factor in determining success in this power contest.[61] The thirteenth century was thus a period of political and constitutional change in Iceland, which is mirrored in the kings' sagas, which were composed before and around the introduction of royal power in the country.

The narratives concerning the early Norwegian kings, which were composed in the first half of the thirteenth century, can be divided into three major groups, of which *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* will be discussed here as important representatives for each group. The last work, *Egils saga*, is only the most prominent of many sagas devoted to Icelandic families and individuals, the Sagas of the Icelanders, in which the earliest Norwegian kings play a narrative role. In contrast, in *Fagrskinna*, a history of Norwegian kings extending from the late ninth century to 1177, the focus never strays from the kings and their actions. The basic structure of *Heimskringla* resembles that of *Fagrskinna* though with much more emphasis on aristocrats and magnates and their dealings with the king. Thus, *Heimskringla* has generally been regarded as less royalist in outlook than *Fagrskinna* and more in tune

[60] See Sverrir Jakobsson, "Formáli," *Íslenzk fornrit XXXI. Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar I. Bǫglunga saga*, eds. Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset (Reykjavík 2013) xxxiv–xxxvi.

[61] See Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Process of State-Formation in Medieval Iceland," *Viator. Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 40.2 (Autumn 2009) 151–170.

with the interests of the magnates.[62] Unlike the other texts, the authorship of *Heimskringla* is fairly well attested; since the 16th century it has been considered to be the work of the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), a close associate of Earl Skule.[63] During Skule's failed attempt to seize power both Skule and Snorri were killed due to their opposition to King Håkon.

There are also similarities between all these accounts, which they do not share with the earlier, synoptic works. First, they all seem to have been composed in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, probably before 1240. Second, they are much more extensive narratives than the twelfth-century histories, although this amplification does not necessarily make them more reliable as sources. Third, and most importantly, they are all characterized by the use of skaldic poetry, both as source material as well as a literary device to move the narrative along.[64] Most of these skaldic poems only exist in this form, embedded within a prose narrative, and the actual date of their composition is thus always open to question. More importantly, the value of the information on offer is fairly limited if and when the poems are studied independently from the content in which they are placed within the prose narratives. It can be argued that the willingness of twentieth-century historians and literary scholars to use these poems as independent evidence for Viking Age events was mostly due to the fact that they could be used to lend spurious authenticity to the account of the thirteenth-century narratives. Such views, however, have come under increased criticism in recent years, although there is still a noticeable tendency among historians to regard the poems as sources which can be analysed independently of the saga narratives in which they are contained.[65]

The issue in the following discussion is the context in which the narrators of royal history placed whatever sources they had at their disposal as they sought to address issues that were prominent at the time of their composition—as with the relationship of royal power to other kinds of authority and, in particular, the relationship of Icelanders to the Norwegian monarchy. On these issues, it is evident that the attitude of narrators to this distant past was far from neutral. When it comes to the relationship between royal power and that of important magnates, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*

[62] Cf. Halvdan Koht, "Sagaenes opfatning av vor gamle historie. Foredrag i den norske historiske forening 24de November," *Historisk tidsskrift* 5.2 (1914) 379–396; Gudmund Sandvik, *Hovding og konge i Heimskringla*. Avhandlinger fra Universitets historiske seminar 9 (Oslo 1955); Siegfried Beyschag, "Snorris Bild des 12. Jahrhunderts in Norwegen," *Festschrift Walter Baetke dargebracht zu seinem 80. Geburtstag am 28. März 1964* (Weimar 1966) 59–67; Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (n. 1 above).

[63] See Ólafur Halldórsson, "Sagnaritun Snorra Sturlusonar," *Snorri. Átta alda minning*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson and Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík 1979) 113–138. For contrary arguments see Jonna Louis-Jensen, "Heimskringla – et værk af Snorri Sturluson?" *Nordica Bergensia* 14 (1997) 230–245.

[64] For a general discussion of development of the kings' sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Inventing a saga form: The development of the kings' sagas," *Filologia Germanica – Germanic Philology* 4 (2012) 1–22.

[65] On Skaldic poems as historical sources cf. Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga* (n. 42 above) 99–143; Sverrir Jakobsson, "'Erindringen om en mægtig personlighed', Den norsk-islandske tradisjon om Harald Hårfagre i et kildekritiskt perspektiv," *Historisk tidsskrift* 81 (2002) 213–230; Judith Jesch, "Skaldic Verse and the Roots of History," *Quaestio Insularis* 5 (2004) 1–22; Niels Lund, "Leding, skjaldekvad og bønder," *Historisk Tidsskrift* 106 (2006) 243–252; Rikke Malmros, "Fyrstedigtningens kildeværdi: En diskussion med Niels Lund," *Historisk Tidsskrift* 106 (2006) 253–263; Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History. Problems and Perspectives*. The Northern World 54 (Leiden & Boston 2011) 25–109; Klaus Johan Myrvoll, "Bruk og misbruk av skaldekvæde hos norske historikere," *Historisk tidsskrift* 93 (2014) 383–405.

offer a clear contrast. In *Fagrskinna*, the kings are the centre of attention and important magnates play a secondary role. This is far from the case in *Heimskringla*, where much interest is devoted to the central saga in the narrative, that of St. Olaf. Sverre Bagge and other scholars have demonstrated how the opposition between monarchy and aristocratic power is a central concern of its author.[66] This can also be applied to the part of *Heimskringla* that is devoted to the histories of earlier kings, where the narrative is very different from that of *Fagrskinna*.

As regards King Harald Finehair, the *Fagrskinna* narrative is fairly brief and much indebted to fragments of skaldic poems about Harald. The main innovation is a chapter devoted to the relationship between King Harald and the Anglo-Saxon King Æþelstan who is tricked into fostering his son Håkon.[67] In *Heimskringla*, the narrative concerning Harald is much more elaborate than earlier texts, with many innovative features. In particular, there is a discrepancy in the account of the battle of Hafrsfjord which is described differently in *Heimskringla* than in other narratives. In *Heimskringla*, the opposition to Harald is described as an alliance of seven kings, rather than merely the two kings mentioned in the version found in *Fagrskinna, Egils saga* and most other narratives.[68] The depiction of the battle of Hafrsfjord in *Heimskringla* corresponds to a general theme in that particular saga of a monarch facing many minor kings, later echoed in the Saga of St. Olaf within *Heimskringla*.

Concerning the lives of King Eirik, Håkon and the sons of Eirik and Gunnhild, there is much more material in *Fagrskinna* than is the case with its brief treatment of King Harald Finehair. A poem about King Eirik, which is not used in other kings' sagas, is quoted at length and there is a long description of King Håkon's tribulations on his journey from England to Norway.[69] There is, however, no mention in *Fagrskinna* of Håkon's missionary efforts in Norway, which are discussed in *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*. The poem *Hákonarmál* is used in both narratives.[70] As for the sons of Gunnhild, there is an important distinction between *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*. In the former text, they appear as kings of a part of Norway, sharing their power with the earls of Trondheim and two other kings in the east of the country.[71] It is only after a long power struggle and the killing of these rulers that they are able to secure power in the whole kingdom for a brief time. In *Fagrskinna*, these same killings are mentioned but the rulers in question are never depicted as being of equal status with the sons of Gunnhild.[72] Again, there is a divergence in emphasis, not unlike the one that must have been prevalent among the partisans of King Håkon and Earl Skule during the period when these sagas were composed.

[66] See for instance Halvdan Koht, *Innhogg og utsyn* (Oslo 1921) 76–91; Johan Schreiner, *Tradisjon og saga om Olay den hellige*. (Oslo 1926) 82–126; Sandvik, *Hovding og konge i Heimskringla* (n. 62 above); Knut Helle, "Norway in the High Middle Ages," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 6 (1981) 161–189; Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (n. 1 above) 64–65.

[67] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX (n. 54 above) 58–74.

[68] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI. *Heimskringla* I, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík 1941) 94–149, at 114–118.

[69] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX (n. 54 above) 75–80.

[70] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX (n. 54 above) 86–89; *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI (n. 68 above) 186–197.

[71] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVI (n. 68 above) 198.

[72] *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX (n. 54 above) 95–103.

The information relating to the early Norwegian kings in *Egils saga* is in some respects similar to *Fagrskinna*, while elsewhere it seems closer to *Heimskringla*. There are also some innovations, with individuals mentioned who occur in no other texts, as with the cousins of King Harald Finehair who were supposedly slain by Skalla-Grímr, or the son of Eirik who was killed by Egill Skalla-Grímsson.[73] The most important distinction between this saga and those of *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* is the role of the Norwegian kings as antagonists to the main protagonists of the saga, for the family of Egill, the Mýramenn, is party to a feud with the Norwegian royal line which is portrayed as lasting for generations. At the beginning of the saga, the oppressive rule of King Harald is listed as a cause for most of the ninth- and tenth-century Viking activities in Northwestern Europe, not to mention the migration to Iceland and the Faroe islands.[74]

This anti-royal perspective is not unique to *Egils saga*. It also colours several narratives in the Book of Settlements (ON. Landnámabók), where, it must be said, the information about King Harald has its inconsistencies. In some accounts he is described as a friend and patron of settlers, echoing the sentiment also found in the Book of Icelanders. In other accounts, the settlers are seeking to escape his tyranny, in line with the emphasis in *Egils saga*. This dichotomy can be explained by the fact that the existing versions of *Landnámabók*, of which the oldest, Sturlubók, was probably composed in the 1270s, were based on many different sources. The oldest versions of the Book of Settlements were possibly composed in the first half of the twelfth century—one of them perhaps by Ari Þorgilsson himself, as related in the early fourteenth-century version of Hauksbók, whereas the account found in Sturlubók is evidently also based on later saga material, not least *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*.[75]

At the time *Egils saga* was composed, probably between 1225 and 1240, there was a view that the settlement of Iceland had been due to the oppression of the earliest Norwegian kings. Whether this sentiment had existed before that time is more difficult to assess with any certainty. But it certainly influenced the versions of the Book of Settlements that were composed later than *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. There, however, one can also find remnants of an earlier view, more positive to kings such as Harald Finehair, and in line with the version of events found in the Book of Icelanders.

The period in which *Egils saga* was composed is known as the Sturlung Age, lasting from ca. 1220 to the incorporation of various parts of Iceland into the Norwegian realm, which took place in three stages during the years 1262, 1263, 1264. This period was characterized by internal strife, in which the Norwegian king became increasingly prominent, mostly on the sidelines before 1247 but quite openly after that. The historical relationship between Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy thus gained a new immediacy in this period, and the differences in opinion which characterize both the sagas and various parts of the Book of Settlements reflect this immediacy. Why did

[73] *Íslenzk fornrit* II. *Egils saga Skalla–Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík 1933) 66–69, 164–170.

[74] See esp. Gert Kreutzer, "Das Bild Harald Schönhaars in der altisländischen Litteratur," *Studien zum Alltgermanischen. Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*. Ergänzungsbind zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 11, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin 1994) 443–461.

[75] See Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík 1941) 36–37, 75–86.

the Icelandic texts shift to depict the king as more tyrannical during the settlement period just as he was gaining power in Norway and becoming an important agent in Icelandic politics? And why is there is a difference between sources such as *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*, although they were composed in a similar time using much of the same source material? Although the answer to those questions must necessarily be speculative, one important factor must be the intended audience for these texts. While *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* seem to have been written with a courtly audience in mind, the same does not apply to *Egils saga* or the Sturlubók and Hauksbók versions of the Book of settlements, which were primarily aimed at a general Icelandic audience and were preserved in Icelandic manuscripts. In Iceland, the kings of Norway were regarded with more anxiety in the thirteenth century than they had been before and the difficulties of having them as adversaries became an important factor for that generation in its invocation of the past.

CONCLUSION

The corpus of royal history composed by Icelanders and Norwegians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries offers an excellent opportunity for investigating the function of the past in medieval political life. After the evidence is reviewed concerning the early Norwegian kings, who are scarcely attested in sources earlier than the twelfth century, it is evident that the historical narrative of their reign had direct relevance for at least two contemporary issues during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One was the precedence of sons of kings in the order of succession to the Norwegian throne. Another was the aspiration of the Norwegian kings to extend their rule to Iceland and other islands in the North Atlantic.

The first issue was very important in the age of civil wars in Norway, which lasted from the 1130s to the final consolidation of power by Håkon Håkonsson in 1240. Here, the challenge of King Sverre to the throne law of 1163 was a turning point but, as has been shown above, the claims of Sverre were strengthened by the genealogical lines of the Norwegian kings which existed from the time of Ari Þorgilsson onwards and which could be used as proof that the Norwegian monarchy had always passed to heirs in the direct male line. Following the victory of Sverre in 1184, this view of the Norwegian royal succession became the predominant one and was of great benefit to his grandson, Håkon Håkonsson, who was accepted as king in 1217 on the basis of his status as the son of a king.

A further issue, the relationship of Iceland to the Norwegian kings, became more prominent in the first decades of the thirteenth century and finds many echoes in the kings' sagas written during that period. Already in the early twelfth century, a connection in time had been made between the unification of Norway and the settlement of Iceland. In the thirteenth-century sagas, the relationship between the early Norwegian kings and the first settlers of Iceland became an important *topos* in the narratives. The view that these Icelandic settlers had been in opposition to the earliest Norwegian kings gained much ground in saga narratives, at the same time that Icelandic chieftains increasingly looked to the Norwegian kings to support their bid for power within Iceland. This seems paradoxical at first, but the increasing closeness of Norwegian kings

could give rise to both fear and opposition, especially in texts that were aimed towards a more diverse milieu than the king's court. The history of the early Norwegian kings was thus highly relevant to the history of the settlement of Iceland, which was in itself an issue of much contemporary relevance.