

English Models for King Harald Fairhair?

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King Harald Fairhair (or Finehair) – *Haraldr hárfagri* – is the recognised founding father, not only of the medieval Norwegian dynasty but of the Norwegian kingdom itself. His place in history is official enough for the present king of Norway to be Harald V, counting from Harald Fairhair. When the name of the founding father was chosen for the present Harald, born in 1937 as the first Norwegian-born prince in modern times, few would have doubted the basic facts of Harald Fairhair's personal and political career, as described by the great saga writer Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241) in his *Heimskringla*.¹ The specialists would have rejected items with a distinctly legendary flavour and disputed some details, e.g. of chronology, but in broad outline Harald and his achievements counted as documented history.

Gradually, this balance has shifted. The Harald we meet in the sagas is basically a legendary hero. As a historical character he is more elusive. By the criterion of being known from contemporary sources, Harald is at best 'semi-historical'.² A considerable body of skaldic poetry is, indeed, connected with him in one way or another. But the uncertainties of oral transmission over a gap of some 250–350 years make this material 'contemporary' with King Harald in a somewhat blurred sense. In addition, skaldic poetry is elusive in style and pays scant regard to background and context. It therefore gives precious little information unless read in the context of the much later saga prose in which it is embedded. Apart from the poetry, the written sources on Harald Fairhair are far from contemporary, much of the important information being known only through Snorri Sturluson, writing some 300 years after Harald's death.

Not that King Harald is by any means Snorri's invention. Snorri's written sources must have included a substantial narrative on King Harald (of which traces survive in the much later codex *Flateyjarbók*)³ which may have provided him with much of his detail and interpretation. Harald is included in shorter histories of the kings of Norway, written before *Heimskringla*. These, in turn, can be traced back to a lost work by Sæmundr the Learned (d. 1133). So the basic idea of Harald Fairhair as the founding father of the Norwegian kingdom would have been current at least as early as around 1100. This still leaves a gap of some 200 years between the events and their recording, inviting doubt as to whether King Harald should be seen as a historical person at all (Sverrir Jakobsson, 1997; Sverrir Jakobsson, 2002).

Did King Harald Fairhair really exist? Here, he joins such colleagues as King Arthur of Britain, King Gunther of the Niebelungen, or King Priam of Troy. To us they are the product of storytellers, who did not create them out of thin air but largely

¹ Snorri Sturluson, 2002 / 1991, henceforth cited by book and chapter for the convenience of readers using different editions or translations.

² 'Hálforsögulegur barbarakóngur' (a semi-prehistorical barbarian king) in the judgement of Björn Þorsteinsson (1991, 15).

³ The main study of this connection is an unpublished thesis by Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir. Some of the results are presented in her 1991 article.

out of earlier material. Some of it is fact, some fiction; some picked up as ready-made episodes, some put together from different sources. It is a matter of definition how much of such material must be factual, and how much of it originally related to a single person, for the hero to be an historical person.

I would not even attempt to guess what stories, anecdotes and attributes may have been historically true of King Harald Fairhair (ca. 900), nor what sort of material, fact or fiction, was current about him during the tenth century. Only in the eleventh century can we reasonably conclude something about this tradition, and then it is about its context and relevance rather than its actual content.

The documented political history of Norway begins in the late tenth century, with the country dominated by an alliance between two dynasties: the royal house of Denmark and the regional rulers of Northern Norway, the so-called Earls of Lade / *Hlaðir* (*Hlaðajarlar*). This alliance was challenged and finally replaced by the royal house of Norway which traces its ancestry to King Harald Fairhair (the Fairhair Dynasty, *Hárfagreætten*, in modern Norwegian).

The challenge was made separately by three formidable Viking lords, allegedly descended from three different sons of King Harald. The first challenger was King Olaf Tryggvason 994/995–999/1000; the second, St. Olaf 1015–1030, followed by his son, Magnus the Good 1037–1047; and the third, King Harald Hardrada, 1046–1066. None of the three was reared as a prince; all had left Norway at an early age to make their own way in the world. They return rich and famous after a career of fighting, the two Olafs as Viking leaders in the West, mainly in England; Harald as a Varangian general in the Byzantine Empire.

However Olaf Tryggvason may have justified his claim to the throne, he managed to establish some sort of legitimacy. When St. Olaf seized power, he had a double claim to inherit the legitimacy of his earlier namesake: partly as another champion of Christianity, partly as a prince of the same royal house. If he had not been so earlier, then at least now the legendary founding father had become a factor of political importance. Storytelling and story-development about King Harald must have received a boost, only to gain more importance still as Norway was pulled between rival kings or pretenders: St. Olaf and Canute the Great of Denmark and England; then between their respective sons, Magnus and Swein, and finally between the competing co-rulers Magnus and Harald Hardrada. Magnus's legitimacy derived obviously from his saintly father, Harald's partly from St. Olav as his maternal half-brother but more importantly from his own descent, in a direct male line, from King Harald Fairhair.

Magnus's early death ushered in his uncle's sole reign. King Canute's family no longer contested Norway as his line had come to an end, both in England and Denmark. Harald, however, enjoyed limited popularity domestically, and faced more or less organised opposition with the old dynasty of Lade at its centre. The legend of Harald's royal house, and especially its founding father, must have been a bone of contention in Norwegian political circles, with stories stretched in one direction by Harald's court (including his Icelandic skalds), in another by the opposition.

After King Harald's death in battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066, when attempting to conquer England, his two sons and two grandsons were able to sit on the Norwegian throne relatively unchallenged. After the death of King Magnus Bareleg in 1103, every Norwegian king or pretender claimed descent from him, and through him

from Harald Hardrada and thus ultimately from Harald Fairhair. Those pretenders were in such supply, at least from 1130 onwards, that any serious opposition found expression in supporting one or another of them. While the legend of Harald Fairhair was thus politically neutralised it had been established as a salient theme of Norwegian history. No doubt it continued to develop and mature. Royal propaganda, tempered by anti-royal counter-propaganda, would gradually become the sort of saga 'infotainment' of which Snorri Sturluson was the unsurpassed master.

During both phases of its development – the more political and purely oral phase of the eleventh century and the less political and increasingly literary phase of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries – the legend of King Harald Fairhair was bound to assimilate new items and ideas from various directions. Stock motifs from folklore would sneak in; foreign literary models of royalty might exert their influence (neither the Old Testament, classical literature, nor medieval epics should be excluded *a priori*). And factual knowledge of recent or contemporary history would suggest to the storytellers how earlier and less-well known history could plausibly have happened.⁴

Such influences are not limited to the Norwegian experience. The Viking world – notoriously – extended far beyond the home country, not least to England. And this brings me to the theme of my paper: two items of the King Harald Fairhair legend which I suggest were inspired by English history.

The first of these two items is King Harald's **confiscation of freehold land**; the second, his **feudal pyramid with earls** as regional governors under the king. Both of them are known mainly from Snorri⁵ and are not supported by skaldic evidence. Scholars would have found them hard to accept even back in 1937, and now they are seen as blatant anachronisms. Whatever historical truth may form the hard core of the King Harald legend, these particular items must be later additions.

Snorri (or possibly his source) seems to be aware that these details do not fit easily with the facts of later history, a problem he finds a clever way around. He places them early in King Harald's career, before his conquest of Norway was complete. When the king grows older, Snorri has his numerous and unruly sons overthrow their father's system of earldoms in order to carve out a royal role for themselves, if only regionally (*Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 35). After Harald's death, Snorri provides convincing circumstances for his youngest son to restore the right of freehold property (*Hákonar saga góða* ch. 1). But why introduce those items at all, only to dispense with them again? They must have been too deeply ingrained in the legend for Snorri to ignore.

Before progressing further, let us look at Snorri's description (in *Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 6):

⁴ How the sagas use clues from more recent history to flesh out events of the remote past is a common theme in saga scholarship. For a sustained application of the idea, see e.g. Helgi Guðmundsson's (1997, 220–295) studies in *Orkneyinga saga*.

⁵ Including *Egils saga*, commonly attributed to him. However, at least the confiscation theme would have been fully developed in Snorri's main source; see Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir (1991, esp. pp. 140–144) who also examines the place of *Egils saga* in this context.

[Land]

Haraldur konungur setti þann rétt, allt þar er hann vann ríki undir sig, að hann eignaðist óðul öll og létt alla búendur gjalda sér landskyldir, bæði ríka og óríka.

[Earls]

Hann setti jarl i hverju fylki, þann er dæma skyldi lög og landsrétt og heimta sakeyri og landskyldir og skyldi jarl hafa þriðjung skatta og skylda til borðs sér og kostnaðar. Jarl hver skyldi hafa undir sér fjóra hersa eða fleiri og skyldi hver þeirra hafa tuttugu marka veislu. Jarl hver skyldi fá konungi í her sex tigu hermanna en hersir hver tuttugu menn.

Wherever King Harald gained power he made it the law that all ancestral lands and possessions belonged to him; also, that all farmers had to pay a tax* to him, both the great and the humble.

He appointed an earl for every district, whose duty it was to administer the law and justice and to collect fines and taxes*. And the earl was to have a third of the taxes and penalties for his maintenance and other expenses. Every earl was to have under him four or more *hersar*, and every *hersir* was to have twenty marks of revenue. Every earl was to furnish the king sixty soldiers for his army, and every *hersir*, twenty.

* [Or 'rent(s)'.]

The word **earl** is old, in Old Norse (*jarl*) as well as in Old English, in the general sense of 'nobleman, warrior'. In Scandinavian usage it also became a title of certain regional rulers. Within what later became the Kingdom of Norway at least two hereditary earldoms were established: those of Lade and Orkney. It is hard to know exactly how old they were or how early the title of earl began to imply subordination to a king – the King of Denmark in the case of the Lade earls. Be that as it may, the division of an entire kingdom into provinces, governed by earls chosen by the king – such an arrangement was surely unknown – until 1017, when King Canute did just that in his newly conquered English kingdom (basically by combining the Scandinavian title *jarl* and the established English office of *ealdormann*). Only after that could it plausibly occur to the Norse storytellers that their own conqueror, good old Harald Fairhair, might have done more or less the same.

This influence of English reality on Norse legend might have occurred quite soon after the event, as the Norwegians must have followed developments in England with keen interest. After all, their own King Olaf had a background in English power politics; King Canute had close Norwegian ties (his brother-in-law Erik had been promoted from ruling Norway as Earl of Lade to becoming Canute's first Earl of Northumbria); and Canute would soon appear as a pretender to the very crown of Norway.

Even if the idea of King Harald's feudal pyramid with earls at the top may have arisen later, the model would still have to be English. In England the office of earl kept its regional character well into the Norman period and, while the earldoms decreased in size and importance, the title of earl remained the highest noble rank in the country. In eleventh-century Scandinavia (Orkney not included), earldom developed in a

different direction. While there is mention of some regional earls, especially in border districts, the typical earl had a central role (*riksjarl*) rather than a regional one, and there was only one such earl at a time in each kingdom. The details of Snorri's account also fit the English system, e.g. the 'third penny' (i.e. one-third) of judicial income, which accrued to an English earl both before and after the Norman conquest. The obligation to provide a certain number of soldiers (*hermann*) is more similar to the Norman 'knight's service' than to the Saxon levy, the *fyrð*. In Viking-age Scandinavia, military service was very different, a sort of general naval levy, *leiðangr / almenningr*. Snorri typically wriggles out of this anachronism by having the *almenningr* introduced in Norway only after Harald Fairhair's reign (see *Hákonar saga góða* ch. 20).

While maintaining that the idea of Harald Fairhair's feudal pyramid must be inspired by the English model, I hesitate to venture a firm date as to when this might have been added to his legend, only that it could not have happened before the reign of King Canute. If the addition occurred soon afterwards, the required knowledge must have reached Norway through personal contacts; if late, the transmission (to Norway or perhaps Iceland) might have been via a literary route.

Similar arguments apply to Harald's **confiscation of land**. While land grabbing may be one of the most basic objectives of war and dispossession a constant threat to the defeated, Snorri describes something much more specific. His conqueror does not just kick out the other lot to replace it with his own, he legislates himself into the position of universal landlord. Such a move would surely be unthinkable in the Viking world – until the Norman conquest of England. William the Conqueror not only confiscated most of the estates of the Saxon nobility but introduced a brand new sort of feudalism under which all the land in the kingdom, at least theoretically, was held from the king. This novelty, as seen through Saxon eyes perhaps, is, I suggest, reflected in Harald Fairhair's precocious system of feudal landholding. While I cannot exclude a literary channel, oral transmission seems just as likely, especially if it occurred soon, while Harald Fairhair was still connected specifically with King Harald Hardrada. The latter's hated memory continued to inspire some storytellers⁶ who would find it gratifying to discover a new despotic trait in his great ancestor.

In this paper I have pointed out two similarities between the real history of eleventh-century England and the imagined history of ninth-century Norway. I regard them as nice little reminders of the way historical memory is shaped by the assumptions and preoccupations of each generation. This is a useful point to bear in mind when we consider the interplay of history and fantasy in saga narrative.

⁶ Harald's 'reception' in the sagas is highly variable, from *Fagrskinna*'s faithful royalism and Snorri's reserved admiration to the all-out vilification of *Hemings þátr*. Whatever the age of individual stories, the competing traditions in the portrayal of Harald must hail back to the politics of his own lifetime.

Literature

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