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The cover image is the so-called “Aarhus Mask”, a depiction on a runestone found in the district of Hasle in Aarhus. It has been dated to the period 970-1020.

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Dreams in Old Norse-Icelandic Royal Biographies as Representations of the Dynastic Identity: The Case of the Fairhair Dynasty

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1: Two Kinds of Dreams as Representations of the Dynastic Identity of the Fairhair Dynasty

Two Old Norse royal biographies (Kings' Sagas), *Fsk.* and *Hkr.*, relate a well-known prophetic dream concerning the rise of the medieval Norwegian Dynasty. The accounts share the same basic outline: King Hálfðan dreams one day, in a pigsty, that he becomes a man with the finest hair, although the color and length of each ringlet vary. One curl excels in color, brightness and length, signifying St. Olaf, national saint of Norway. A wise man interprets this dream for the king: Hálfðan will have many offspring, and they will rule Norway with great honor, although one will be crowned with more glory than the others (ÍF XXIX: 57f.; ÍF XXVI: 90f.). The purpose of the dream is clear: to qualify the paternal offspring of King Hálfðan the Black (and those of King Harald Fairhair, the only son of Hálfðan and legendary founder of a united Norwegian kingdom) as legitimate future kings of Norway. The ringlets represent the dynastic identity of those related to Harald and Hálfðan. Snorri Sturluson also incorporated a different dream to (seemingly) reinforce the ideology of the Fairhair dynasty in his *Hkr.* narrative. In the dream, Queen Ragnhild, mother of Harald and wife of Hálfðan, takes a thorn from her garment and holds it in her hand; the thorn gradually grows into a tall, stout tree, whose crown covers the whole land of Norway and further. Three different colors distinguish its trunk: the lowest part is red as blood, the upper part is bright green, and the twigs of the crown are snow-white (ÍF XXVI: 90). According to *Hkr.*, this dream signifies the fate of Harald and his progeny: the red part of the trunk anticipates his deeds as an excellent warrior, the bright green symbolizes prosperity in his kingdom, the white twigs in the crown mean his long reign, and the wide expanse of the crown anticipates the flourishing of his descendants (ÍF XXVI: 148).

Recent historical researches have begun to challenge this traditional view of King Harald Fairhair as a historical founder both of a unified kingdom and of ruling family in Norway (cf. Krag 1989). Instead, they tend to underline the late development of the tradition. While this new scholarship believes the identity of Fairhair's dynasty to be fictive, however, few researchers have explored the political-ideological motive behind the development of the tradition. Furthermore, although some scholars have considered the dream motif in Old Norse literature (Cf. Turville-Petre 1958), few have analyzed its symbolical, political-ideological meaning. The question I would like to explore is whether these two dreams express the 'same' ideological concept of the Fairhair dynasty. Indeed, previous researchers have often muddled them up, and sometimes tried to ascribe both of dreams' concepts to Snorri (Cf. Røthe 2008: 125-30). But it is the earlier tradition, that also appeared in *Fsk.*, not Snorri, which originally employed the ringlets

dream – in order to promote the fame of St. Olaf. The incorporation of the dream into *Hkr.*'s narrative seems to suggest that Snorri was not hostile to such a typological-hagiological view of Norwegian history (Weber 1987), but attention should also be directed to the other dream. *Hkr.* diverges from *Fsk.* by inserting the analogy of the tree instead than of the ringlets into the dynastic historical narrative.

2: Two Dreams of Trees Anticipating Two Haralds in *Heimskringla*

Snorri employed the motif of the tree dream not once, but twice in his narrative in *Hkr.* The other dreamer is King Sigurd 'the Jerusalem-Traveller' Magnússon. One day, at Jæren in southwestern Norway, he dreamed that a tall tree, though rooted in the ocean, was approaching the shore. When the tree landed, it broke into pieces of diverse sizes, and drifted along the coast of Norway. The episode concludes with the king's interpretation: 'The dream anticipated that a certain person would arrive and settle in Norway. His descendants are also to be scattered over Norway, although all of them would not be equally great' (ÍF XXVIII: 264f.). According to the commentary, the person anticipated in the dream was the illegitimate Harald Gille, half-brother of King Sigurd himself.

Almost the same account appears in the extant manuscript of one more ON royal biography, *Msk.* (ÍF XXXIV: 146f.). The two dreams are clearly interrelated. First, both anticipate the arrival of two namesake monarchs, i.e. Harald, to Norway – men who later became important figures in Norwegian history. Unfortunately, the textual relationship between the manuscripts of these three royal biographies, *Msk.*, *Fsk.*, and *Hkr.*, is so intricate that we cannot speculate on which of these two tree dreams is older, and so original (Cf. Turville-Petre 1958: 93; Louis-Jensen 1977: 70-108). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that *Hkr.* is the only work that contains two tree dreams. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that *Hkr.* represents the tradition of these two dreams: the best as well as the closest to the original.

Alternatively, it could be argued that Snorri himself combined these two dreams, inventing and adjusting one episode to accord with the other. Then, it is likely that the purpose of duplication was to compare the newer figure of Harald Gille as an antitype of the older Harald Fairhair, based on a Christian typological perspective. Snorri certainly knew the concept of such a Christian typology (Weber 1987: 109-15), as the comment on the ringlets dream in the previous section suggests.. If we accept this suggestion, the purpose of inventing the older Harald's dream was to promote the legitimacy of the newer Harald, i.e. Harald Gille.

3: Dynastic Image Defined by Two Haralds: Harald Fairhair and Harald Gille

The arrival of Harald Gille and the death of his brother, Sigurd (1130), triggered a new era – the ‘Civil War’ period in medieval Norway, which lasted until 1240. Several royal claimants, including some with dubious legitimacy, competed for the throne of Norway. Researchers have traditionally assumed that the lack of the rules governing royal succession, and above all, the loose definition of eligibility for kingship, was behind the conflicts (Jochens 1987: 240; Sigurðsson 2008: 24). Harald Gille was first of a series of candidates, all claiming royal descent but on less certain grounds. And, born away from Norway, their paternity was not self-evident.

Under these circumstances, royal claimants turned to literary works to reinforce their legitimacy. In this context, the legendary figure of Harald Fairhair must have constituted a dynastic anchor: being the offspring of a remote ancestor could at least to some extent compensate for the lack of a direct line of paternal succession.

The introduction of the second tree dream in *Hkr.*, anticipating the arrival of Harald Gille, is arguably one such effort to re-define the dynastic identity at that time. Descent from Harald Fairhair was not enough: to be king of Norway, you needed to be offspring of another Harald, i.e. Harald Gille. In contemporary Denmark, several hagiographies were written for promoting the fame of murdered royal saints, in order to qualify a related offshoot of the dynasty as a more suitable candidate for the throne over other royal members (Hoffmann 1975: 58-89). In Norway, the Cult of St. Olaf has often been regarded as a variant of such a royal cult. Yet, few researchers have noted that Harald Gille was likewise assassinated by his political rival, and is mentioned as a saint by both *Hkr.* and *Msk.* (ÍF XXIV: 177; ÍF XXVIII: 303; Cf. Haki Antonsson 2007: 164-66). I suggest that the account in *Hkr.* served a similar political-ideological function, and exploited the tradition of an underdeveloped cult of the assassinated Harald Gille as a literary tool to favor certain royal claimants who were related to him.

4: Snorri Sturluson and the Birkebeins

This additional qualification for royal succession helped legitimize one major political faction during the ‘Civil War’ period. As the struggles went on, diverse personal alliances gradually converged on two political factions: King Sverri and his successors, and the anti-Birkebeins.

It is important to note the differences between the genealogies of the rulers of each faction. While all the kings representing the Birkebeins, such as King Sverri, were descendants of Harald Gille, most of the ‘opponent-kings’ belonged to the branch of King Sigurd ‘the Jerusalem-Traveller’, his half-brother. This meant that it was only the rulers of the Birkebeins who were the offspring of two Haralds. Emphasizing the

relationship with Harald Gille supported the Birkebeins' claim to be legitimate rulers of Norway. It also served as a polemic against the anti-Birkebeins, excluding them from the stock of eligible candidates.

Snorri's life and work were also entwined with this political and cultural atmosphere. As Guðrún Norðal stresses, Snorri's Norwegian connection is a key to understanding the historical context of his literary activity (Norðal 2006). He needed to find a cultural and political supporter abroad, in order to gain ascendancy over other Icelandic chieftains taking part in the ongoing power struggle in thirteenth-century Iceland. His cultural talents, such as the art of skaldic eulogy and historical writing, were useful for currying favor with patrons. In fact, the medieval numeration of skaldic poets, *Skáldatal*, mentions Snorri as a skald serving five rulers of Norway. It is worth remarking that all of these rulers belonged to the Birkebeins. This political orientation corresponds markedly with the re-defined representation of the Fairhair Dynasty in *Hkr.*, as demonstrated above.

5: Concluding Remarks

Our observations have so far illustrated the diversity of the concept of the Fairhair Dynasty as a political-ideological agenda in Old Norse royal biographies, focusing on *Hkr.*'s special position among them. Above all, *Hkr.*'s definition of dynastic identity, represented by the two tree dreams, explicitly diverges from another contemporary work, *Fsk.*, with regard to the favor attributed to the offspring of the two Haralds whose arrival the dreams anticipated. In the light of the royal struggles of the Civil War era, the ideological message of these two dreams must have pleased certain rulers of the Birkebeins, whose support Snorri eagerly sought. The historical traditions of Harald Fairhair and his dynasty developed in twelfth- and thirteenth century Iceland, not as isolated, purely literary fictions, but as political agendas, entwined with the political and ideological power struggles in contemporary Norway. And this presentation has illuminated one aspect of *Hkr.* that has often been overlooked: Snorri did not merely follow the existing discourses of the Fairhair Dynasty, but actively manipulated them to conform to the contemporary political milieu. While the political bias of other works has been relatively well-known, we should now reassess *Hkr.*, analyzing this compilation of royal biographies more carefully and closely, as a unity with a certain historical point of view.

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