

NORWAY AND ITS RULING DYNASTY
IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC LEGENDS OF ORIGIN

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Ancient myths gave to curious people answers to the questions that bothered them, such as how the world was created and why it exists as a whole in spite of its contradictions. A harmonious concept of the origin of the main elements of the surrounding world was formulated in early Scandinavian mythology. According to it, pagan gods, supervised by *Ódinn*, created the world out of *Ymir's* body. They killed the giant and filled in the gulf *Ginnungagap* with his body. In a miraculous way the giant's flesh turned into soil, his skull - into the sky, his bones became mountains and his blood turned into seas. This and other myths provided exhaustive explanations at an early stage of the Norseman's comprehension of his surroundings. However, at a certain stage of history, depending on the development of national and ethnic self-consciousness, it became essential not only to explain the very fact of creation but also to locate the people and the country within a more general picture, out of a felt need to explain their origin. It became necessary to connect in a chain some facts of prehistory and history proper to follow the beginning of the present way of life. That is why legends of the formation of territories, legends of the origin of peoples, genealogical legends of the ruling dynasties, toponymic legends and some other were so widely spread.

Old-Norse literary writings of different genres contain numerous etiological legends, long and short, and combine them quite often with geographical descriptions of specific regions. Legends on the origin of Norway are included in a natural way into writings aimed at describing the history of the country, such as Latin *Historia Norvegiæ*:

Norwegia igitur a quodam rege, qui Nor nuncupatus est, nomen obtinuerat. Est autem Norwegia regio vastissima sed maxima ex parte inhabitabilis præ nimietate montium et nemorum ac frigorum. Quæ in oriente a magno flumine incipit, versus occidentem vero vergit et sic circumflexo fine per aquilonem regyrat. Est terra nimis sinuosa, innumera protendens promontoria, iii habitabilibus zonis per longum cincta: prima, quæ maxima et maritima est; secunda mediterranea, quæ et montana dicitur; tertia silvestris, quæ Finnis inhabitatur, sed non aratur...²

We can often find legends about the origin of Norway in sagas. In *Íslendingasögur* they are scanty, but they are abundant in sagas specially devoted to the history of Norwegian kings, such as the one in *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* by the monk *Oddr Snorrason*:

Sa konungr ræd fyrst Norege er NórR het. i sudr fra Norege er Danmavrk oc avstr Svíþjóð en i vestr Englandzhaf. ok norþr Finmörk. ok er lengz lanzins yr svðri oc i norðr. fra Gauttelfe svnnan ok norðr til Vegistafs. en breiðdin or avstri ok i vestr fra Eðaskoge til Englanz siofar³.

In his legend about the first ruler of Norway *Odd* derives

the name of the country from the name of *Nórr*. It is a question whether the name can be correlated with *Nóri*, the name of a dwarf from *Edda*⁴, or whether that was another legendary personage. It is evident, though, that *Oddr* in this legend gives a popular etymology of the name of the country. The word **Nordvegr*, constructed from the roots *nord-* and *vegr*, had the original meaning "the Northern Route"⁵. In the Middle Ages this spelling of the word was out of use. It was misplaced by simpler forms: *Noreg*, *Norege*, *Nóregr*, *Nórigr*, *Norvegr* etc., and the original meaning of both roots was lost. The new form of the place-name caused desemantisation of the name of the country. It became easier to derive it from a mythological or legendary name. It is worth noting that *Oddr* does not try to trace *Nórr's* ancestry and by not doing so shows him to be the legendary personage of great importance for the early history of Norway.

Legends about the origin of separate parts of the country were constructed in a similar way. Thus, in the late *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnsonar*, from no earlier than the middle of the fourteenth century, there was preserved a patronymic legend of Trondheim:

bráðr hefir konungr heitit; vid hann er kendr
brándheimr í Noregi; hann var sonr Sæmings konungs, sonar
Óðins, er réð fyrir Hálogalandi.

It appeared to the author of the legend that it was not sufficient to name *Práðr* alone as the founder of *Prándheimr*. The author also gives information about *Práðr's* father, calling him the son of a legendary king *Sæmingr* whose reign brought fame to *Prándheimr*. The kin is said to begin with *Ódinn*.

The line "*Ódinn - Sæmingr - Práðr*" is not always the same. In *Hversu Noregr byggdist* of *Flateyjarbók* the origin of *Práðr* is different: there he descends from *Nórr*⁶. The semantic connection of the two names - *Nórr* and *Sæmingr* is clear. *Nórr* is linked with *Nóregr*, a Northern country. *Sæmingr* is a patronymic word, derived from *Sámr* ("a Saami, a Finn"), belonging also to the number of patronyms of the Northern area: the territory of *Sæmingr's* realm is Halogaland, the Northern part of Norway. A significant feature of the two passages is the very fact that different genealogical legends are suggested for *Prándheimr*. It could testify to the fact that the authors of the two texts based their stories on different etiological legends. Each of them suggested his own variant of a patronymic legend following the historical and mythological tradition known to him. We have reason to point to the use of different traditions, because the genealogical line "*Ódinn - Sæmingr*" also exists in some other literary works, for example in the *Snorra Edda*:

[Ódinn founded Sigtunál. Eftir það fór hann norður
þar til er sjár tók við honum, sá er þeir hugdu að lægi um
öll lönd, og setti þar son sinn til þess ríkis er nú
heitir Noregur. Sá er Sæmingur kalladur og telja þar
Noregskonungar sínar ættir til hans og svo jarlar og adrir
ríkismenn, svo sem segir í Háleyggjatali.

In the overwhelming majority of cases the genealogical line leading from the two legendary founders of Norway and its regions to real people is seen to go back in a direct line to *Ódinn*, the supreme pagan Scandinavian god. The legend about

Ódinn as the forefather of the Scandinavian gods and people which was only outlined by Snorri Sturluson in his *Ynglinga saga*¹⁰ is clearly formulated in the *Snorra Edda*:

En Ódinn hafði með sér [in Norway] þann son sinn er Yngvi er nefndur, er konungur var í Svíþjóðu eftir hann, og eru frá honum komnar þær ættir er Ynglingar eru kalladir.

Þeir æsir tóku sér kvonföng þar innanlands, en sumir sonum sínum, og urðu þessar ættir fjölmennar, að um Saxland og allt þadan um norðurhálfur dreifdist svo að þeirra tunga Asíamanna var eigin tunga um öll þessi lönd, og það þykjast menn skynja mega af því að rituð eru langfedganöfn þeirra, að þau nöfn hafa fylgt þessari tungu og þeir æsir hafa haft tunguna norður hingad í heim, í Noreg og í Svíþjóð, í Danmörk og í Saxland, og í Englandi eru forn landsheiti eða stadaheiti, þau er skilja má að af annarri tungu eru gefin en þessari¹¹.

Legends containing similar material were widely used by the authors of *fornaldarsögur*. Thus, the author of *Sturlaug's saga starfsama* states at the beginning of his story:

Allir menn þeir er sannfrodir eru at um tidendi uita þat at Grickir ok Asíamenn bygðu Nordrlönd. hofz þa tunga su er sidan dreifdz um öll lönd. formadr þess folks hiet Ódinn er menn telia ætt til.¹²

It is generally accepted now that mentioning of Ódinn in the genealogies presented in the *fornaldarsögur* was essential for their authors to express the ancient and distinguished character of legendary and historical kings' kins. This would make sense if the sagas had been written in pagan times, but it does not explain the role of such legends in stories written in Christian time. Besides, in *Sturlaug's saga starfsama* the etiological legend is at the beginning of a story which is not directly connected with the main plot. Therefore it must have had another function in the saga.

The problem of the role of etiological legends and how the authors of the sagas made use of traditional legendary and mythological elements needs to be studied separately. Much could be explained by sagas' artistic peculiarities. Etiological and pagan genealogical legends could have been added to the texts to create the atmosphere of the remote past, to make the plots of sagas look more archaic. However, there must be a reason for the remarkable stability, in some literary genres, of legendary and mythological elements which were inseparably connected with the pagan understanding of nature and history. The use of these elements looks even more inappropriate when we recollect that the writings in question were created not earlier than the end of the twelfth century; that more than two centuries had passed since Christianity was adopted in Scandinavia; that we can read them now thanks to the tremendous labors of clerical scribes; that European Christian culture brought its own both eucumenic theory and genealogy into Scandinavia.

In Scandinavia as well as elsewhere in Europe the biblical *Genesis* was accepted as the basis for an "official" ethnic and geographical theory. Its interpretation in the North of Europe had some specific features due to the fact that biblical texts - even after they were supplemented by data from other ancient and medieval writings - did not account the origin of Nordic

countries. The learned Icelanders themselves had to introduce corrections into the canonical texts. Here is an example.

In a number of Old Norse manuscripts, the oldest of which was written in the beginning of the fourteenth century, there is preserved a text the form and content of which are practically identical. The stability of the text allows to regard it as a separate treatise on the problem of how the people spread around the Earth¹³. The treatise retells the biblical legend in a condensed form. The initial version of the text was written on the basis of Isidore's *Etymologies*. The author of the treatise expanded on his source and introduced some additional information about Northern and Eastern Europe which was missing in Isidore's work. Thus he created a learned legend about the origin of the Scandinavian peoples which gives them much in common with other peoples of Christian world¹⁴. The legend includes some data on Norway:

Iapheth atti vii syni, þeira nofn voru þessi: Gomer, Magoc, Madai, Iuban, Tubal, Masok, Tirak. Þessi ero þiodlond i þeim hluta heims, er Eyropa heiter: Sviþiod sum hinn micla, þar red Magoc, Kyflingaland, þath kollum ver Garda-riki, þar var Madai, Grikland, þar red Iuban, Bolgara-land, þar var Tirak, Un[g]jaraland, Saxland, Frakland, Spanland, þar var Tubal, Romverialand, Danmork, Sviþiod, Noregr, þar var Gomer, Gallia, Capadocia, þar var Masoc. En allz ero þar cc þiodlanda, en tungur gengu þar iii ok xx¹⁵.

As this text shows, Norway, like other European countries, is placed by the author in Iaphet's part of the Earth, and to be more exact, in the share of Iaphet's son Gomer. Another manuscript gives a similar text, except that Norway and other Scandinavian countries are located in the share of Iaphet's son Tubal:

Iafeth Noa sonr atte .vij. sono. Þessi ero nofn þeira: Gomer, Magon, Madia, Ioban, Tubal, Mosok, Tiras. Þessi ero þar þiodlond. Magon red Suiþiod hinni miclu sumri, en Madia Kyflinga lande þat kollum ver Garda riki. Ioban Girclande. Tiras Bolgara lande oc Vngara lande, Saxlande oc Fraclande. Tubal Spania lande oc Rumueria lande, Suiþiod oc Danmorc oc Noregi. En Gomer red Gallia. En Mosoc Kapadocia. En alsz ero told þar þiod lond .i. oc .cc., en tungur .iiij. oc .xx¹⁶.

The lists of countries in possession of Iaphet's sons also vary with regard to non-Scandinavian countries. According to the first version, Gomer had *Romverjaland*, *Dannork*, *Sviþiod* and *Noregr*; in the second version he also owned *Spania lande*. In the first version *Spanland* as well as *Un[g]jaraland*, *Saxland* and *Frakland*, belongs to *Tubal*. These discrepancies clearly reveal that the authors of the Scandinavian "learned legends" strove to introduce data about their own region into the biblical ethnic and geographical scheme.

In the sagas the legend of the descent of the Scandinavian peoples from Noah's sons was not popular. There are only isolated examples of the mention of Noah and his descendants¹⁷, such as in the Introduction to *Pidriks saga af Bern*:

"þat seiggia flester menn, ath fyrst epter Noha flod voru menn suq storer og sterker sem risar og lifdu marga manns alldra"¹⁸.

Thus, the Christian biblical tradition made it possible

for medieval Icelandic writers to develop the eucumenic theory but within the limits of Holy Writ. Making use of the same principle they also revised the history of the ruling dynasties, using traditional legendary and mythological data, but again they did it within definite limits. A compromise between pagan and Christian ideas is suggested by Snorri Sturluson in the Prologue to his *Edda*. The story begins as a retelling of the biblical tales of Adam and Eve and of those who survived the Flood in Noah's ark and how they lost their belief in God and invented other gods for themselves. The retelling goes slowly. Many centuries separate the author from that time. This is not the history of his native land - this is prehistory. The next part of his historical story is more energetic. It is known to him from Old Norse retellings of ancient subjects. Troy's king *Munnon* (or *Mennon*) belongs to written actual history. Having enumerated *Munnon's* descendants, Snorri comes to *Ódinn* and other legendary and mythological personages. They are believed to be the predecessors of famous dynasties - *Völsungar*, *Skjöldungar*, *Ynglingar*. The whole history - from Adam - from Snorri's contemporaries - is retold in strict succession. Now it looks like a single line connecting both the first man, and the supreme pagan god, as well as a famous king. The Prologue to *Snorra Edda* shows the amalgamation of the two traditions: of the old pagan and of the new Christian traditions.

We have ample grounds for assuming that the concept of historical genealogy, which was formulated by Snorri but which might have existed before him, was officially accepted in noble circles. This assumption is supported by the fact of its usage in descriptions of family trees that were written later, such as the genealogy of Haraldr hárfagri, *Étt Haralds frá Adam*, in *Flateyjarbók*. There we find a continuous description of the human race, beginning with Adam and his sons, continuing with the mention of ancient heroes, and moving on to the Scandinavian mythological *Burri* and *Bors* and then to *Ódinn*. The latest stage of the story is familiar: from *Ódinn* to Haraldr hárfagri. The author's aim here is to place the king's family tree in universal perspective and to describe the sixty-nine generations that separate Haraldr from Adam. The final sentence reveals the intention of the author:

Verdr þessi tala einum manni fátt í sjau tugu at medtöldum bæði Adam ok Haraldri.

In another genealogy for Harald, *Éttartala Haralds frá Ódni*, which precedes the one mentioned above, the description of the king's kin begins with *Burri*, the grandfather of *Ódinn*. This is a different approach to genealogical history. This is a story that describes the Scandinavian part of it.

Thus, if we revise the beginning of the paper we can assume that those medieval authors who created sagas and used the names of pagan gods and other legendary personages in their legends did not deviate from the Christian lore of their time. They based their writings on a new biblical tradition worked out in Scandinavia and for Scandinavia by medieval learned Icelanders. The traditional Scandinavian ideas are interwoven into the Christian ones. They demonstrate a new way of presenting the origin and the history of Norway and its ruling dynasty.

Notes:

- ¹Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Heimir Pálsson bjó til prentunur. Reykjavík, 1988. Bl. 21.
- ²Historia Norwegiæ // Monumenta Historica Norwegiæ. Latinske kildeskifter til Norges historie i middelalderen. Utg. ved Gustav Storm. Kristiania 1880. P. 73.
- ³Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar av Oddr Snorrason munkr / Finnur Jónsson. København, 1932. S. 83-84.
- ⁴Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. Hrsg. von Gustav Neckel. Heidelberg, 1983. Bl. 3, 15.
- ⁵Jan de Vries. Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch. Leiden, 1977. S. 411-412.
- ⁶E.Metzenthin. Die Länder und Völkernamen im altisländischen Schrifttum. Pennsylvania, 1941. S. 73-74.
- ⁷Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar / Franz Rolf Schröder. Halle/Saale. 1917. Bl. 89.
- ⁸Flateyjarbók. B. I. Akraness, 1944. Bl. 22-23.
- ⁹Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Bl. 13.
- ¹⁰Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla. Steingrímur Pálson bjó indir prentun. I. Reykjavík, 1944. Bl. 7-8.
- ¹¹Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Bl. 13.
- ¹²Sturlaugs saga starfsama // Two Versions of Sturlaugs saga starfsama. Ed. and tr. by Otto J. Zitzelsberger. Düsseldorf, 1969. P. 8.
- ¹³In a special work devoted to the study of Old Norse geographical writings E.A.Melnikova singled out this treatise and gave it a conventional name "How Noah's sons settled on the Earth": Мельникова Е.А. Древнескандинавские географические сочинения. М., 1986.
- ¹⁴Мельникова Е.А. Древнескандинавские географические сочинения. С. 130.
- ¹⁵Alfrædi íslenzk. Udg. ved Kr.Kálund. København, 1908. Bl. 8.
- ¹⁶Hauksbók. Udg. ved F.Jónsson. København, 1892-1896. Bl. 164-165.
- ¹⁷A fragment from *Orvar-Odds saga* gives a description of the principalities in *Gardariki* located in the share of *Magok*, Noah's son (*Orvar-odds saga*. Hrsg. von R.C.Boer. Leiden, 1888. S. 187). The text is extant in a late version of the saga and was borrowed by its author from one of the "learned" geographical works. Therefore it cannot be regarded as an example of eucumenic descriptions, typical of sagas.
- ¹⁸Þidriks saga af Bern // H.Bertelsen. Kbh., 1908. B. I. Bl.4.
- ¹⁹Flateyjarbók. Bl. 28-29.
- ²⁰Flateyjarbók. B. I. Bl. 27-28.