



*A Kingdom for my Bed:  
Marriage, Sexuality, and Power  
in Harald Fairhair's Conquest of  
Norway*

Karl Christian Alvestad



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## A Kingdom for my Bed: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in Harald Fairhair's Conquest of Norway

Karl Christian Alvestad

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH-EASTERN NORWAY

**Abstract:** Snorri Sturluson's account of Harald I Fairhair's conquest and unification of Norway starts with a failed marriage proposal and a haughty girl refusing to marry Harald until he has subjugated all of Norway and rules as the land's sole king. This episode is commonly held as a mythological explanation for what triggered Harald's war of conquest and is by many scholars seen as a fanciful tale. However, this story alongside Harald I's other marriages and unions illustrates a pattern of behaviour that can shed light on ideas of power and sexuality in ninth- and tenth-century Norway, whilst illuminating the role of the royal bed and royal unions in the formation of a unified kingdom. Harald's bed is to some extent the chrysalis that unifies Norway into a political unity. Although this bed does not create a political and culturally unified kingdom, the idea of entering into the bed and the benefits of any possible children helped Harald to align himself with strategic families and regions. This article untangles the importance and meaning of Harald's bed and unions for this process and explores what this can tell us about power and sexuality in Viking Age Norway.

**Keywords:** Norway; unification; marriage; concubines; inheritance; Harald Fairhair

The unification of Norway is attributed to the conquests and actions of the legendary Harald I 'Fairhair' Halfdanson (c.850-933) son of Halfdan 'the Black' (died c.862). Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) claims in his *Heimskringla* that this unification sprang out of the region of Vestfold in south-eastern Norway, and from there it spread across the southern and eastern parts of Norway before eventually conquering the whole kingdom. At the ascent of the child king Harald in 862, local rivals rebelled and invaded Harald's territories, but due to the help of his maternal uncle Guttorm, Harald drove back the invaders and secured domination over the local lords and kings. These events made Harald the dominant power in Viken, the area around modern Oslo. At some point after securing these areas, Harald heard about the beautiful Gyda, who was the daughter of king Eirik of Hordaland in western Norway, and sent his men to ask her to marry him or to abduct her to be his mistress. Gyda refuses Harald's advances until he is the sole king of Norway, planting the idea in Harald's head of subjugating all of Norway. The years that followed this refusal took Harald on a campaign of conquest north across Dovre into Trøndelag where he defeated the local kings and won many of the local men as his allies. Among them was the powerful Earl Haakon Grijotgardsson, whose kin had emerged as the dominant powers in the northern Norwegian regions of Hålogaland and coastal Trøndelag prior to the start of Harald's conquests, and whose daughter Asa Harald then married to cement the alliance with Earl

Haakon and his power base in Trøndelag and Hålogaland. After securing the rich and powerful region of Trøndelag, Harald turned his attention to Møre and the western coast of Norway. The subjugation of Møre and the western coast of Norway took several years, with Harald and his allies Earl Haakon and Earl Rognvald slowly subduing or expelling the local aristocrats that resisted. The conquest culminated in c. 872 with the battle of Hafrsfjord, where Harald's forces secured victory over the kings of Hordaland, Rogaland, Agder, and Telemark, and thus united Norway from the river Gøta to Hålogaland under one crown. Among the fallen at the battle of Hafrsfjord was King Eirik of Hordaland, father of Gyda, causing Harald to send for Gyda, who became his mistress.

This compressed narrative of the unification of Norway and the conquests of Harald I has, since the re-emergence of the Norwegian state in 1814, been retold as the foundation myth of the current Norwegian state. Nevertheless, in this narrative, and in the early thirteenth-century source *Heimskringla*, hints are made to the role of other individuals and alliances on Harald I's path to power. Although the scholarly consensus acknowledges the importance of alliances and friendships for maintaining and developing political and social authority in the Viking Age, little direct and specific attention has been given to the role of Harald I's marriage bed in his wider political policies, and the implications of the bed for his political project. Some excellent studies by scholars such as Takahiro Narikawa,<sup>1</sup> Jenny Jochens,<sup>2</sup> Else Mundal,<sup>3</sup> and Jon Vidar Sigurdsson have commented on the importance of marriages for the early Norwegian kings,<sup>4</sup> and Harald I especially. Narikawa and Mundal have recently discussed the particular significance of one of Harald's marriages, that to the Sami woman Snæfrid, who, according to Snorri Sturluson, is the maternal ancestor of the later eleventh- and twelfth-century kings of Norway. Although the papers about this very specific union have given excellent insights into how Snorri presents Snæfrid and the Sami, this union is just one of many Harald formed during his lifetime and by focusing on just one, we might struggle to see the full picture and its nuances in Harald's policies and actions. Jochens' study of the wider politics of reproduction at the Norwegian court considers a longer time span, from the end of the ninth to the thirteenth century, making it difficult at times to grasp the implications of multiple marriages and sexual partners for one specific king.<sup>5</sup> These studies are paralleled by Sigurdsson's work that has focused on the role of friendship and aspects of creating and maintaining friendships.<sup>6</sup> Within the temporal and geographic scope of his work, he comments on the importance of marriages for social and political role of friendships throughout the Viking Age and the medieval period based on the saga literature. By drawing on the ideas of these scholars, this paper will focus on Harald I, his life and unification of Norway, and explore what role marriages, concubines, and children played in his political

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<sup>1</sup> Takahiro Narikawa, "Marriage between King Harald Fairhair and Snæfridr, and their offspring: Mythological foundation of the Norwegian medieval dynasty?," *Balto-Scandia, Extra Edition: Reports of Balto-Scandinavian Studies in Japan* 6 (2011): 111–136.

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction: Medieval Norwegian Kingship," *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (1987): 327–349; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Else Mundal, "The Relationship between Sami and Nordic Peoples Expressed in Terms of Family Associations," *Journal of Northern Studies* 2 (2009): 25–37.

<sup>4</sup> J.V. Sigurdsson, *Det Norrøne samfunnet* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2008), 26–27, 199–203.

<sup>5</sup> Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction," 327–349.

<sup>6</sup> Sigurdsson, *Den Vennlige Vikingen*; J.V. Sigurdsson, *Det Norrøne samfunnet* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2008).

project.

The main focus of this article will be to discuss the role Harald I's marital and sexual liaisons played in his political unification of Norway. The article will, therefore, focus on the benefits and implications these sexual and emotional unions had for Harald. The article will also consider what the children of these unions meant for the stability of the kingdom through conflicts of interests and inheritance, as this will nuance our understanding of the idea of the role of the royal wife and concubine in the political landscape of ninth and tenth century Norway.

Before starting to explore Harald I's unification and marital liaisons, it is important to acknowledge two crucial aspects about ninth- and tenth-century Norwegian history. Firstly, Norway in the ninth and tenth centuries was predominantly pagan, meaning that although there might have been individuals living in Norway who practiced Christianity, the predominant culture at the time was not Christian or Christianised. Thus this society should not be read in light of the later medieval, or contemporary Christian sexual norms in relation to, for instance, monogamy and primogeniture. In addition to this religious divide, Sara McDougall has argued convincingly that differentiation about a child's worth in succession and inheritance based on its parents marital status did not come into common practice until the twelfth century, even in Christian areas of Europe.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, none of the written sources we have for the life and reign of Harald I are contemporary with him. All of the written sources, including *Historia Norvegia*, *Agrip*, *Fagrskinna*, and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, are penned centuries later by scribes and authors raised and trained in a Christian context. This training and context for the production of these texts might have influenced the texts and their relationship with sexual morals and practices. In addition to this, the chronological gap between the historical events, and the date of the written sources has contributed to a significant scholarly discussion about their trustworthiness in relation to the actual historical events predating the conversion to Christianity in the eleventh century. The questions about reliability and usability for historical research has particularly been raised about Snorri's *Heimskringla*. The text is believed to have been composed around 1220, by the Icelandic chieftain and poet Snorri Sturluson, and covers the history of the Norwegian kings and their realm from the origin of the Ynglinga dynasty in Sweden in the 600s until the battle of Re in 1177. With its coherent narrative, length and details the text has become both a popular and scholarly favourite for studying the emergence and development of the Norwegian kingdom. However, the temporal distance between Snorri's writing of the text, and the time of the events he is covering has caused scholars like Sverre Bagge,<sup>8</sup> Claus Krag,<sup>9</sup> Sigurdsson,<sup>10</sup> Torgrim Titlestad,<sup>11</sup> and Anthony Faulkes<sup>12</sup> to reflect on the extent Snorri might be a reliable

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<sup>7</sup> Sara McDougall, *Royal Bastards: The Birth of Illegitimacy 800-1230* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State formation in Norway c.900-1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 25–26; Sverre Bagge, "Mellom kildekritikk og hitorisk antropologi: Olav Den Hellige, Aristokratiet og Rikssamlingen," *Historisk tidskrift* 81 (2002): 173–212.

<sup>9</sup> Claus Krag, *Norges Historie fram til 1319* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), 45; Claus Krag, "Rikssamlingshistorien og ynglingerekken," *Historisk tidskrift* 91 (2012): 159–189.

<sup>10</sup> Sigurdsson, *Det Nørøne samfunnet*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> T. Titlestad, *Norge I Vikingtid Våre Historiske og Kulturelle Røtter* (Stavanger: Sagabok, 2011), 76–77.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Faulkes, "Snorri Sturluson: His life and work," in *The Viking World*, ed. S. Brink and N. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 313.

source for the political, social and cultural practices and developments before his own lifetime, and especially those prior to the conversion to Christianity. The general view held by scholars is that Snorri's text reflects the social norms of his own thirteenth century, rather than the seventh to the twelfth centuries that his text is set in. This has caused scholars like Krag and Bagge to argue that *Heimskringla* must not be taken at face value and that although the text may contain traces of historical memory this information needs to be cross-referenced with other sources to be trusted.<sup>13</sup> They both accept that Skaldic poetry, which Snorri has interspersed in his prose, allows scholars to interact with more near-contemporary accounts of the events detailed. It is outside the scope of this article to explore the nature of Skaldic poetry, but the common consensus is that these poems are believed to have remained unchanged from the time of their creation, making them snapshots into the time of their origin. This use of poetry is in many ways Snorri's redeeming feature for reliability for the early history of Norway, and by cross-referencing this poetry with the prose narrative it is possible to reconstruct a more comprehensive understanding of this period. In addition, Anthony Faulkes has argued convincingly that, unlike other contemporary twelfth- and thirteenth- century Scandinavian sources, which are written by ecclesiastically trained scribes, Snorri's text seems to lack any ecclesiastical bias related to marriage and sex, and that he had a limited understanding of contemporary theological arguments.<sup>14</sup> I believe on the basis of this, that *Heimskringla* reflects traditional, and pre-Christian, social values rather than the values and norms promoted by the church. Consequently, it is my belief that Snorri's account of Harald I's lifestyle, and his sexual and matrimonial unions, is more likely to resemble the actual historical norms of the pre-Christian ninth and tenth century than it does contemporary European ideals of monogamy and primogeniture. Because of the presumed lack of ecclesiastical bias, this paper will treat the unification narrative in prose and poetry as it is found in *Heimskringla* as a reflection of the historical events and social norms, this will direct the reading of the social and political role of Harald I's bed in this article. Through this reading, the article will continue by exploring Harald's marital and sexual unions in light of the unification narrative; before considering the status of these unions and the importance and differences between wives and concubines for Harald I in the wider pattern of friendship and power; and the consequences of these sexual and marital unions, namely children, and their implication for Harald's dynastic stability through competing inheritance claims.

### **The Unions of the Unification Narrative**

The overwhelming scholarly consensus is that marriages in Norse society were an economic, social, and political contract between two families,<sup>15</sup> suggesting that we must understand all such historical and pseudo-historical relations as having real or intended benefits to the parties of the marriage. Thyra Nors emphasises that "marriage was the

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<sup>13</sup> Krag, *Norges Historie fram til 1319*, 45; Krag, "Rikssamlingshistorien og ynglingerekken," 159–189; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 25–26; Bagge, "Mellom kildekritikk og hitorisk antropologi," 173–212.

<sup>14</sup> Faulkes, "Snorri Sturluson," 313.

<sup>15</sup> Krag, *Norges Historie fram til 1319*, 144–145; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 20–22; Sigurdsson, *Skandinavia i Vikingtiden*, 62; Sigurdsson, *Den Vennlige Vikingen*, 128.



framework for an economic community to which both husband and wife contributed,<sup>16</sup> but until after the conversion to Christianity, the legal parties in such unions were the father or closest male kin of the bride, and the groom, meaning the bride had little to no agency in the choice of partner. This meant that daughters and weddings could be an important economic and social resource for fathers and brothers, helping them achieve political and social goals. Resources such as daughters and gifts, as Sigurdsson has conclusively demonstrated, were crucial in building and maintaining social networks and political alliances in Norway and Iceland between 900-1300.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on these ideas Sverre Bagge and Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide have argued that “early royal administration was probably rudimentary: the king had to rule through personal friendships with leading men and by travelling the country to make his presence felt.”<sup>18</sup> This statement implies that the kings from Harald I to Olaf II were reliant on maintaining friendships with leading localised men who could, on the one hand, be his men in the regions, and on the other be his allies if other regions rebelled. Such friendships are well attested in *Heimskringla*, with Haakon I working closely with earl Sigurd of Lade,<sup>19</sup> or Harald I's close friendship with Ragnvald Earl of Møre. For the reign of Harald I this means that he had to maintain his political position and influence through personal relationships and gift-giving, practices well attested throughout early medieval Europe. Moreover, in this process marriage is an effective way of binding key families to himself.

Marriages then, like now, joined two individuals and their family networks. However, in the Viking Age such familial networks, or kin, were egocentric, meaning that their composition and structure differed from person to person. Margaret Clunies Ross highlights that “kinship systems of early medieval Iceland were bilateral or cognatic, that is, that an individual's kinship was traced through both paternal and maternal links.”<sup>20</sup> She argues that a similar system developed over time in Norway, but highlights that at the beginning of the Viking age Norwegian kinship networks, at least as they appear in the oldest surviving law codes, were mainly patrilineal. As such Clunies Ross' argument implies that a marital or sexual union producing children resulted in a stronger linking of two families, who through this link had a shared social bond and responsibilities, which in the right context take a political nature. These premises and observations are seconded by Jon Vidar Sigurdsson who highlights that Norse societies practiced bilateral kinship, but he also notes that the resulting kinship networks were often weak and could result in occasional conflicts between competing branches of kin or kinship networks.<sup>21</sup> In situations of conflict an individual might be brought into conflict between their maternal and paternal kin, in which case the individual's needs might be put in a difficult position politically and socially, resulting in the kin group's role in peacekeeping and

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<sup>16</sup> Thyra Nors, “Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 21 (1996): 37.

<sup>17</sup> Sigurdsson, *Den Vennlige Vikingen*.

<sup>18</sup> S. Bagge and S. Walaker Nordeide, “The Kingdom of Norway,” in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c.900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 141–142.

<sup>19</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla Volume I: The Beginnings to Olaf Trygvason*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), 98–103.

<sup>20</sup> M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in the Medieval Northern Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1:89.

<sup>21</sup> Sigurdsson, *Det Norrøne samfunnet*, 212.

conflict mediation.<sup>22</sup> For Harald the creation of kinship ties could cement and strengthen ties of friendship, and create a useful tool in case of conflict with members of his in laws' kin or localised elites. Consequently, if we are to apply aspects of a bilateral kinship sentiment to Harald's marriages they are likely to have had social and political implications.

Snorri claims that by the time of his death in 933 Harald had been married to Asa Haakonsdaughter of Trøndelag, Svanhildr Eysteinsdaughter from Hedmark,<sup>23</sup> Ashildr Hringrsdaughter from Ringerike, Ragnhild Eiriksdaughter from Jutland, and the above-mentioned Snæfridr, daughter of Svasa king of the Sami, as well as plausibly some other women – Snorri claims that when Harald married Ragnhild he dismissed nine wives.<sup>24</sup> In addition to these marriages, Snorri explicitly states that Harald took Gyda Eiriksdaughter from Hordaland as his mistress and that he has a child with his handmaiden Thora Morstrstong from the island Moster, whose elite background Snorri highlights.<sup>25</sup> The naming of seven women, and the references to the nine dismissed wives, demonstrates that Harald follows the pattern of early medieval kings of practicing polygamy,<sup>26</sup> with both wives and concubines at the same time. While Gyda and Thora are important for the narrative of Harald I's reign and the succession line, their status as mistresses means it will be better to return to them later in the article to compare their status and role in relation to the women identified as Harald's wives. In doing so, this article will better showcase the nuances and significance of these liaisons of Harald. Although it is plausible that Harald had other liaisons, the introduction of the aforementioned women is always in relation to their fathers, male kin, and area of origin. This identification pattern points to an intrinsic understanding of daughters and brides as the property of male relatives and that they could be used to promote the interests of men. This reading of the situation implies that these women had little to no agency in the selection of marriage or sexual partners; such an understanding of the situation is supported by Ruth Mazo Karras' argument that women in the Norse sagas were exchanged by and dominated by men,<sup>27</sup> and by Ingvild Øye stressed that women of high social standing were “tokens of peace and hostages to guarantee alliances.”<sup>28</sup> Audur Magnúsdóttir concurs with these suggestions, stating that “it is well known that alliances through marriage were meant to create a bond between two families ... this type of relationship is typical for marriage alliances, in which the families as a rule were of the same or similar social and economic standing.”<sup>29</sup> For Harald this meant that if he wishes to maintain peace with a significant local leader or to assert his domination of an area he could pursue a policy of politically significant marriages to gain and maintain influence.

According to Snorri the taunting and refusal by Gyda was the catalyst for Harald's

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<sup>22</sup> J.V. Sigurdsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>23</sup> In *Haralds Saga ins Harfagra*, Svanhildr is identified as the daughter of earl Eystein. This is plausibly the same man who in *Halfdanar Saga Svarta* was identified as king Eystein of Hedmark. Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 49. This explanation seems to be supported by Narikawa, “Marriage between King Harald Fairhair and Snæfridr,” 116.

<sup>24</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Jochens, “The Politics of Reproduction,” 327–349.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, “Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (2003): 488.

<sup>28</sup> Ingvild Øye, “Kvinner, kjønn og samfunn. Fra Vikingtid til reformasjon,” in *Med kjønnsperspektiv på Norsk historie*, ed. Ida Blom og Sølvi Sogner (Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske Forlag, 1999), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Audur G. Magnúsdóttir, “Women and Sexual Politics,” in *The Viking World*, ed. S. Brink and N. Price (London: Routledge, 2008), 42.

conquest of Norway, but Harald's rule beyond the war of conquest, until 932/3, as presented in *Heimskringla* is dominated by Harald's military fight for dominance and control over the conquered territories. Snorri's account suggests that throughout the unification process Harald raided areas and fought a number of battles, in which he sought to frighten or convince the local population to accept him as their king, and in so doing gaining legitimacy for himself and his heirs. To pacify the regions and local leaders, Harald shrewdly sought out alliances and cemented these in different ways, including marriages. A plausibly contributing reason for Harald's need to marry Asa, Svanhildr, Ashildr, and Ragnhild must have been the nature of pre-institutional kingship, whereby a king's power can only be felt through direct presence. Thus the presence of an individual closely related to the king, such as the king's father-in-law, may have strengthened the link between the regions and the centre of power. As Harald's realm extended beyond what one person feasibly could dominate and control personally, he needed to consider other ways to maintain influence, such as having loyal friends in strategic places. This implies that the rationale for Harald's marriages to the daughters of these earls and kings might be found in looking more closely at what areas Harald I actually controlled, as this would indicate what regions he was effectively able to dominate himself. Although Snorri claimed Harald originated from Vestfold, in the southeastern parts of Norway and near Viken, Sverre Bagge champions the argument that Harald's realm actually was concentrated on the western coast of Norway between Sogn and Rogaland.<sup>30</sup> Bagge's claim is seconded by Claus Krag, who argues that Snorri's focus on Vestfold as the ancestral land of the Norwegian kings was meant to cement the Norwegian king's claim over the region in the face of Danish expansion.<sup>31</sup> Jon Vidar Sigurdsson agrees with Bagge and Krag that it is likely that Harald's powerbase was in the western parts of Norway,<sup>32</sup> and that it was the subsequent generations of the Fairhair family that brought the southeast and north into the Norwegian kingdom. This implies that Harald I's core area of influence was the south-western coast of Norway, suggesting that Harald's wives were part of a policy of foreign affairs whereby marriages established and maintained peace with, and possibly political influence over, surrounding princes. For in addition to all of Harald's wives bearing him children, which we will come back to later, they all originated in areas bordering Harald's core domain. The areas of Trøndelag, Hedmark, Jutland and Ringerike are regions bordering onto, yet outside, Harald's core area of influence. Seen in this context it is likely that these unions were meant to pacify any potential rival to Harald's rule and to provide stable alliances along his borders. This policy is exemplified in the marriage to Ragnhild, as the kings of Jylland in earlier decades had exerted significant power in the Viken region of south-eastern Norway, and with this marriage Harald secured a political alliance with a powerful Danish king which negated any plausible challenges to his rule from Denmark.<sup>33</sup> A similar explanation might be found in the marriage to Asa, Svanhildr, and Ashildr, all of whom were daughters of formidable chieftains. If Svanhildr's father is King Eystein Eysteinson of Hedmark, then Snorri presents him and his sons as some of the key opposition to first Halfdan the Black's, and then later Harald I's, consolidation of

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<sup>30</sup> Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Krag, *Norges Historie fram til 1319*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Sigurdsson, *Skandinavia i Vikingtiden*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Bjørn Myhre, *Før Viken ble Norge* (Vestfold: Vestfold Fylkeskommune, 2015), 133–141.



power in eastern Norway.<sup>34</sup> It would, therefore, be sensible to pacify this powerful kin through marriage. Svanhildr thus functions as a guarantor for the peace between the two families.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, by surrendering his bed to the daughters of significant chieftains, Harald was able to cement his friendship and alliances with the said chieftains and their kin; and through that attempt to establish some kind of hegemony over the regions. Yet, these unions only account for the five of the seven named women of who entered Harald's bed and bore him children.

### Marriages, Concubines, and Friendship

Whereas Harald's five wives tied a legal and formal bond of commitment between the conqueror king and his in-laws, the account of Harald's subjugation of Norway in *Heimskringla* also names Gyda and Thora as mothers of Harald's sons. Although mothers of future kings and lords, the two women are highlighted as Harald's mistresses or lovers, not his wives. This differentiation by Snorri gives a crucial insight into social and cultural attitudes to sex, alliances, and friendships in ninth and tenth century Norway. In this section, the article will explore how we might understand Gyda and Thora, and how they relate to the wider policies of Harald's reign and to a wider European context.

Gyda and Thora's stories about their involvement with Harald are slightly different from the other women of his life. As previously mentioned, Harald had been pursuing Gyda for over 10 years through his conquest of Norway to show that he was worthy of her, and only after defeating his enemies and her father at the battle of Hafrsfjord was he able to claim her as his mistress. Snorri says nothing about whether she came willingly or not, but it is plausible that Gyda was part of the spoils of victory in the eyes of Harald. Gyda gave Harald five sons. Unlike Gyda, Thora's story does not start in the context of war. According to *Heimskringla*, she is one of many youths of noble birth who are in service in Harald's household.<sup>36</sup> Among whom, she was the "finest woman and most beautiful," and Snorri stresses through her introduction that she is of good kin and of the line of the west Norwegian chieftain Horda-Kåre, thus situating her both socially and geographically within the core of Harald's realm. Snorri also stresses the age difference between Harald and Thora, for she bore him a child when he was nearly seventy, whilst she is identified as young.<sup>37</sup> Based on the narrative in *Heimskringla*, it is impossible to exclude the possibility of rape or sexual exploitation. Snorri claims that Harald retained the mother and child at the royal residence for a time.<sup>38</sup> Both Gyda and Thora seem to have resided near Harald during their time of favour, and they were both able to make Harald acknowledge these children publically, making them his legal heirs. But unlike Harald's five named wives, these two concubines are both 'native' members of elite families from within the core areas of Harald's realm. Nors has highlighted that "there is very little in Danish sources to support the idea that concubines in the early middle ages were poor women,"<sup>39</sup> and similar observations have also been made in the Anglo-Saxon materials, from

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<sup>34</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 48–49, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Øye, "Kvinner, kjønn og samfunn," 75.

<sup>36</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Nors, "Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers," 36–37.

which Clunies Ross draws a similar conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

According to Audur G. Magnúsdóttir, taking a concubine was a very effective way of creating a new alliance.<sup>41</sup> Bagge and Hans Jacob Orning second this, and argue that the taking of concubines or mistresses was a common practice among the medieval kings of Norway, and that they actively used them as tools to maintain alliances with “prominent Norwegian families,”<sup>42</sup> for unlike bilateral networks of kinship created through a marriage, the concubinage relationship was unilateral causing an alliance that could not be broken or would not accommodate conflicting loyalties.<sup>43</sup> Although politically unilateral, a king was dependent on the consent from a woman’s guardian before he could enter into a relationship with her, thus giving the family of the concubine some power in the situation.<sup>44</sup> As concubines generally came without any property or legal responsibilities,<sup>45</sup> to Harald and to other men of his time they offered a way to, on the one hand, seek sexual and emotional fulfilment,<sup>46</sup> while on the other hand give the woman and her family an opportunity for social and political advancement through their proximity to the centre of power.<sup>47</sup> However, concubines were subordinate in status to a wife, as well as her partner and male kin, and this limited her ability to take on roles relating to patronage or negotiation in the Norse context.<sup>48</sup>

Considering that only Gyda and Thora, who are not his wives, are native to his core area of rule, this implies that Harald’s political position within western Norway was significantly stronger and more secure than in the surrounding regions of Trøndelag, Hedmark, Ringerike, and Viken, not to mention among the Sami. This implies that his rule in western Norway at the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth century made him able to pursue a policy of using official marriages to secure ‘international’ stability whereas he could use equally respected, but less legally- and economically-binding mechanisms such as concubinage to maintain relationships with his domestic allies and friends.

In a wider context Harald is not the only ruler to have had a concubine or mistress; what perhaps is more unusual is that Harald’s children by these women have equal rights as their siblings to inherit from their father, provided that the child had been acknowledged by the father. This quirk of Norse legal practice seems to have parallels or reflections in pre-conquest Anglo-Saxon England,<sup>49</sup> at the Frankish court,<sup>50</sup> as well as in the other Scandinavian kingdoms until the mid-twelfth century; such as in Denmark where according to Nors: “Valdemar the Great maintained his alliance with the Hvide family by means of his relationship to his concubine and so did his son Valdemar II.”<sup>51</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross demonstrated in 1985 that children of concubines in Anglo-Saxon England were “able to

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, “Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Past and Present*, 108 (1985): 3–34.

<sup>41</sup> Magnúsdóttir, “Women and Sexual Politics,” 42.

<sup>42</sup> Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 48; Hans Jacob Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 250–256.

<sup>43</sup> Magnúsdóttir, “Women and Sexual Politics,” 45.

<sup>44</sup> Jochens, “The Politics of Reproduction,” 335–338.

<sup>45</sup> Nors, “Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers,” 37.

<sup>46</sup> Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> Jochens, “The Politics of Reproduction,” 343–344.

<sup>48</sup> Magnúsdóttir, “Women and Sexual Politics,” 46.

<sup>49</sup> Clunies Ross, “Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England,” 6.

<sup>50</sup> Jochens, “The Politics of Reproduction,” 329–331.

<sup>51</sup> Nors, “Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers,” 36–37.

inherit from their father, depending on social convention and the willingness of the man to recognize the relationship.”<sup>52</sup> As Nors demonstrates in her 1996 article, children of concubines in Denmark were, up until the twelfth century at least, considered legitimate, and the concept of illegitimacy gained traction after the second half of the twelfth century with the increased influence of the church.<sup>53</sup>

### **Children, Inheritance, and Stability**

Among Harald's many liaisons, only those who bore him sons and heirs are mentioned by name in *Heimskringla*. The text suggests that he might also have been married to other women, or had other concubines, in the claim that Harald dismissed nine wives when he married Ragnhild Eiriksdughter from Jutland. With Asa, he has four sons; Gyda five; Ragnhild only Eirik Bloodaxe; with Svanhildr three sons; Ashildr three sons and his only named daughter, Ingigerdr; Snæfridr four sons, and finally with Thora only the son Haakon. In other words, between these seven named women, Harald has twenty-one sons, and one daughter. Taking into account the plausibility of inaccuracies of the text, and the possibilities of miscarriages and infancy deaths, the number of children surviving implies that it is likely Harald took his duty of securing the succession seriously through these sons. To his contemporaries Harald's sons must have been an indicator of Harald's masculinity and the political stability of his reign and the future of his dynasty.<sup>54</sup> Thus for Harald it was in his interest to ensure a significant number of sons who could succeed him, as children in many ways symbolised and reinforced his victory at Hafrsfjord. Although too many surviving sons also set the kingdom up for conflict surrounding the inheritance from Harald. For the woman and her kin, the birth of a royal child could firmly establish the family as part of the extended kin of the king through the bilateral kinship systems of the Viking Age and allow the family to gain political and social influence. Thus, the use of these sexual and marital relations was an effective tool available for both the local chieftains and for Harald in the unification project.

Due to the bilateral nature of Viking Age kinship, these sons were members of both their father's and their mother's kin, and only children with the same parents had similar kinship structures. Thus each of Harald's sons by different mothers had different and possibly competing kinship ties. Although kinship seems to be important in Viking Age Scandinavia, alliances based on kin alone seems to have been situational rather than absolute, meaning that Harald could only rely on his kin's support if they did not share kinship ties with the opposing side. Similar to marriage, kinship was bilateral, but the creation of kin through marriage and childbirth was a way of strengthening existing alliances and friendships. A crucial factor for some families when considering the benefits of the sexual unions of marriage or concubinage with the king for their daughters was that a family might extend its political status if the union produced a child for a number of reasons, as a royal child would cement their relationship to the king.

In addition to confirmation of political ties through the existence of children, Harald

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<sup>52</sup> Clunies Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England," 6.

<sup>53</sup> Nors, "Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers," 19.

<sup>54</sup> Sigurdsson, *Skandinavia i Vikingtiden*, 26–27.

also used fostering as a tool to maintain and confirm friendships.<sup>55</sup> Often fostering took place in a hierarchical manner, where a chieftain would send his sons to be fostered by his subordinate allies; thus the use of fostering could say something about the perceived political and social relationship between the parents of the child and the foster parents. This acknowledgment is crucial for Harald's use of fostering, because Harald fostered his children with their maternal kin, implying a power relationship between Harald and his in-laws where Harald was dominant. There are two notable exceptions to this rule, namely Eirik Bloodaxe, the son of Ragnhild, and Thora's son Haakon. Eirik was fostered by a Lord Thorir Hroaldsson in Firdir county in western Norway,<sup>56</sup> which is in the heartland of the area modern scholars believe Harald dominated; whereas Haakon was first raised at Harald's residence before being, according to *Heimskringla*, fostered at the court of Athelstan (d. 939) of England.<sup>57</sup> Such a policy allowed Harald who practiced ambulating kingship, i.e. travelling between different parts of the kingdom to make his power and authority recognised. Moreover, in such contexts it would be practically difficult to bring a large gathering of children along on the journey. Indirectly fostering stimulated the development and maintenance of avuncular relationships between a child and their maternal male kin helping to give the child a financial and social rooting in the localities of their kin. This fostering in the maternal household, also known as a matrilineal residence, both eased the pressure on the royal court, and made it easier for Harald to be involved with several women at the same time, and through them their families. By employing the mechanism of fostering, Harald was also able to negate plausible conflicts and turmoil at the court between his wives and mistresses, and balancing of different interests and leading families. However, embedding in the locality and fostering gave the sons of Harald a potential power base of their own, making it possible for them along with their maternal kin to resist Harald or to rebel if their interests were threatened.

Upon acknowledging his children at their birth, Harald also granted them legitimacy as his heirs. According to Sigurdsson, the dominant inheritance practice in the ninth and early tenth century was that power and property should be divided equally between all sons,<sup>58</sup> regardless of their mother's status. Nors also attests similar norms in her Danish materials,<sup>59</sup> with the Danish landscape laws making provisions for the legal rights of the sons of concubines until the end of the twelfth century. In a Norwegian context, Øye notes that the crown was *odel* (ancestral inheritance) for all sons and male descendants of former rulers of the kingdom.<sup>60</sup> However, in both Norwegian and Danish cases, such inheritance rights are dependent on one factor: the child's father acknowledging the child as his.<sup>61</sup> Such acknowledgements could cause, as in the case of Harald's sons in the first half of the tenth century, conflict between brothers regarding competing claims to land and titles. This potential for conflict and the actual inheritance conflicts of the Norwegian civil wars between 1130-1240 contributed to the introduction of the ideas of legitimacy and primogeniture in Norway in

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<sup>55</sup> J.V. Sigurdsson, *det Nørøne samfunnet* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2008), 215.

<sup>56</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 72.

<sup>57</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 84–85.

<sup>58</sup> Sigurdsson, *Det Nørøne samfunnet*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Nors, "Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers," 27.

<sup>60</sup> Ingvild Øye, "Kvinner, kjønn og samfunn. Fra Vikingtid til reformasjon," in *Med kjønnsperspektiv på Norsk historie*, ed. Ida Blom og Sølvi Sogner (Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske Forlag, 1999), 75–76.

<sup>61</sup> Nors, "Illegitimate Children and their Highborn Mothers," 23; Sigurdsson, *Det Nørøne samfunnet*, 24.

Magnus Erlingssons' succession law of 1163/4, but they only became the dominant principle in 1260.<sup>62</sup> This inheritance practice partly explains Harald I's inheritance law of (900-910), whereby he divided his kingdom between his sons and established that all of his male descendants could claim the kingship.<sup>63</sup> Harald's thoughts and actions in this process are difficult to discern, but what is apparent is that upon his declaration of the inheritance edict, Harald acknowledged both his sons by his wives and concubines as his and that they have a stake in the kingdom. Consequently, Harald's acknowledgment of his sons meant that their maternal kin could support their foster children as candidates to succeed Harald I upon the king's death. This might help to explain the subsequent conflicts between Harald's sons in the later years of Harald's reign; as some of these princes, and later sub-kings, fought alongside their kin to position themselves in the best possible way to succeed Harald I as high king upon their father's death. Hence, Harald's lust and the use of his own marriage bed in the processes of unifying and securing the kingdom set his realm and his sons up for conflict regarding the nature and size of their inheritance. These developments meant that by the time Harald died in 933 Eirik and his younger half-brother Haakon were the only viable candidates to succeed Harald I, both with familial and fostering links to significant internal and external pressures on the Norwegian realm.

## Conclusion

From his succession in 862 until his death in 933 Harald I of Norway pursued policies of expansion and consolidation of his power. Alliances and friendships with families such as the earls of Hladir and others were crucial for his subjugation of what was to become the kingdom of Norway, according to Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. Snorri's account of Harald's life names seven women who shared Harald's bed, and suggests that there might also have been others. These women show, as Jochens has argued, that early Norwegian kings practiced polygamy similarly to their European contemporaries,<sup>64</sup> including the Anglo-Danish king Cnut and the dukes of Normandy. However, this article has suggested that there is a correlation between the territorial ambitions and marriages of Harald, and that the status of these women as either wife or concubine in Snorri's narrative corresponds to Harald's political power in these regions. Bagge, Krag, and Sigurdsson have argued that western Norway from Agder to Sogn was the heartland of Harald's domain and where he held most influence,<sup>65</sup> and these areas are also the regions where Harald's two only named concubines, Gyda and Thora, are from. This correlation strengthens the argument that these regions were areas where Harald dominated and had fully subjugated the elite, enough so that he did not consider them a political threat. Thus suggesting that concubinage was a viable option for families to increase their proximity to the king and hope for social and political advancement.

Compared to this, Harald's wives are all from families whose geographical affiliation is outside Harald's core territory. Additionally, Asa's, Svanhildr's, and Ragnhild's fathers are all

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<sup>62</sup> Sigurdsson, *Det Norrøne samfunnet*, 103.

<sup>63</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction," 329–332.

<sup>65</sup> Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 25; Krag, *Norges Historie fram til 1319*, 46; J.V. Sigurdsson, *Skandinavia i Vikingtiden* (Oslo: Pax, 2017), 22.



from families whose political and military influence are attested in Snorri's account of Harald's life. Asa's father helps Harald subjugate the Trøndelag region, but only after accumulating a considerable territorial domain in the north of Norway by himself. Whereas Svanhildr's father and brothers are reported as having invaded Harald's, and his fathers, kingdom in the 850s and 860s. Whilst Ragnhild's father was the king of Jutland, a kingdom whose political influence Snorri points to in *Heimskringla*,<sup>66</sup> and whose military influence was keenly felt in Viken.<sup>67</sup> The correlation between marriage and strong chieftains suggests that Harald, in Snorri's account, has a deliberate policy about when and whom he takes as his wife and lets into his marriage bed, and that these marriages are meant to stabilise political relations between families of similar social and economic standing. Harald's wives are in many ways hostages, or tokens of peace, meant to seal bonds of friendship and alliance between himself and strategic potential opponents.

The consequences of these policies were that Harald could stabilise his personal domain and influence the developments in the neighbouring regions. The birth of children contributed to Harald's influence through the furthering of his kinship ties with his in-laws. Moreover, the use of the maternal kin of the children as foster parents re-enforced these ties but signals also that Harald was the dominant party of these relationships,<sup>68</sup> with the exception of the case of Eirik Bloodaxe, the grandson of king Eirik of Jutland, who was fostered by one of Harald's loyal chieftains. Seen in this light, Harald's concubinage, marriage, and fostering policies illustrates how Harald used his own sex, and the results of sex, i.e. children, to further his political and territorial interests. And they show the power relationship between these parties, where Harald had to marry the daughters of those chieftains whose power he could not directly dominate, but whose subordinate status was firmly established through fostering his sons. Unfortunately, Harald's policies resulted in 21 sons, all of whom he acknowledged, and who all had equal claim to his kingdom regardless of their maternal status according to contemporary legal practices. This legal tradition set the stage for centuries of conflict between different factions and the supposed heirs of Harald, until the conclusion of the civil wars in the middle of the thirteenth century. These findings suggest that Harald constructed his kingdom on the battlefield, but he cemented it, and the idea of it as inheritance, in his bed.

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<sup>66</sup> Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> Myhre, *Før Viken ble Norge*, 133–141.

<sup>68</sup> Sigurdsson, *det Norrone samfunnet*, 215.