Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in Flateyjarbók

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Flateyjarbók ("The book of Flat Island") is the name given to GKS 1005, fol., a manuscript now preserved at the Árna Stofnun Magnússonar in Reykjavík, Iceland. Flateyjarbók is the largest of the extant medieval Icelandic manuscripts and is beautifully illuminated with historiated initials. It contains 225 leaves, with the text laid out in two columns to the page. The manuscript was commissioned by Jón Hákonarson, a very wealthy farmer who lived at Viðidalstunga in the Húnavatn district in the north of Iceland, and was undoubtedly written somewhere in the area, either at Viðidalstunga or at the nearby monastery of Pingeyrar, or possibly to the east of Húnavatn, in Skagafjörður. The manuscript was begun by the priest Jón Þórdason in 1387; his hand starts on 4 verso, originally the verso of the first leaf of the manuscript, and continues through the next-to-last line of the first column of 134 verso. On these pages he copied Eiríks saga víðförla, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, and virtually all of Óláfs saga helga. Jón Þórdason left Iceland for Bergen, Norway, in the summer of 1388, and the work of continuing Flateyjarbók fell to another priest, Magnús Þórhallsson, whose hand begins on the last line of the
first column of 134 verso and goes on until the end of the manuscript (apart from 23 leaves, now folios 188-210, which were added by Þorleifur Björnsson in the second half of the fifteenth century). After finishing Ólafs saga helga for Jón Póðarson, Magnús copied Noregs konungatal, Sverris saga, Hákónar saga gamla, excerpts from the Ólafs saga helga by Styrmir fróði, Grænlendinga þáttir (also known as Einars þáttur Sokkasonar), Helga þáttir ok Úlfs, Játvarðar saga, and an annal he compiled himself. The annal seems to have been written continuously until its end in 1390, although there are fragmentary entries for 1391 through 1394, the year Jón Póðarson returned to Iceland. After the annal was well started, Magnús added three leaves to the front of the manuscript, leaving the first one blank and beginning the two-column format on the recto side of the next. On these pages he copied the poems Geisli, Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar, and Hyndluljóð, followed by an excerpt from a translation of Adam of Bremen’s Historia hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum, the short narratives Þáttir frá Sigurði konungi slefu and Hversu Noregr byggðist, and genealogies of Haraldr hárfagri. Returning to the first leaf, he centered a brief foreword in the middle of the verso side. Magnús also illuminated the entire manuscript.

In this paper, I examine Hversu Noregr byggðist and the genealogies and argue that they form a response by Magnús Pórhallsson to Eíríks saga víðforla and Fundinn Noregr, two of the texts that Jón Póðarson included in the first part of Flateyjarbók. This argument depends on the assumption that for the continuation of the manuscript Jón Hákonarson controlled the choice of kings’ sagas but left Magnús free to select the other texts. It is possible that Jón may have asked that certain items written by his friends (e.g., Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar) or referring to his family (e.g., Þáttir frá Sigurði konungi slefu) be included, but the remainder are far more likely to have been familiar to the priest rather than to the landowner. I believe we can see a strategy—first of matching texts and then of competing genres—in which Magnús literally surrounds the earlier part of Flateyjarbók with annals, chronicles, genealogies, and other historical records that recuperate proper linguistic and paternal relationships, all of which he uses to supplement (or even answer) Jón Póðarson’s typological history and stories in which King Óláfr Tryggvason’s Icelandic retainers are portrayed as his spiritual sons. Moreover, it seems possible that Magnús did not merely choose texts in reaction to Jón’s editorial program, but that he deliberately modified them to make them support his own agenda more strongly.

The last of Magnús’s prefatory texts are additional prose supplements to Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in the genres of mythography and genealogy. Like many of his other additions, Hversu Noregr byggðist (“How Norway was settled”) and the Ættartölur (genealogies) are preserved only in Flateyjarbók. The former is a version of the origin legend that, in the words of Margaret Clunies Ross (1983:54), “traces the ancestry of certain ruling Norwegian
families to the giant Fornjótr and his sons, the latter of whom appear as anthropomorphic representations of three of the primal elements, fire, air, and water.” It also describes how one of Fornjótr’s descendants, a king named Nórr, gave his name to Norway, the country he conquered. The other version of this story, which is believed to be the older of the two, is found in Fundinn Noregr, the title bestowed on the first three chapters of Orkneyinga saga (Flb. I:241-243). The *terminus post quem* for Hversu Noregr byggðist could thus be as late as 1225-1230, if Finnbogí Guðmundsson is correct in attributing Fundinn Noregr to Snorri Sturluson. Sigurður Nordal (Flb. I:xxv) suggests that Hversu Noregr byggðist serves as a kind of introduction to the Ættartölur, which trace the ancestry of Haraldr hárfagri back through Óðinn, Priam of Troy, Saturn, and Noah to Adam. The genealogies are followed by a list of Norwegian kings and a note about the death of Olaf Hákonarson. According to Nordal, Magnús compiled all this from sources of various ages and in places expanded it himself.

Apart from the foreword to the manuscript, Hversu Noregr byggðist and the Ættartölur are the last texts Magnús added, and they offer multiple connections to the rest of Flateyjarbók. With its reference to the “Skjöldungs, Buðlungs, Bragnings, Öðlingar, Völsungs or Niflungs, from whom the royal families come” (Flb. I:22), the beginning of Hversu Noregr byggðist recalls Freyja’s request that Hyndla recount Óttarr’s legendary genealogy (Hyndluljóð, st. 11):
Now count up the ancient kin
And the children of the races of men:
Who is of the Sköldungs, who of the Skilfings
Who of the Ölings, who of the Ylfings,
Who is of the obal-born, who is born to hersir,
The choicest of men in Miðgarðr?

The first sentence of *Hversu Noregr byggðist* also anticipates the *Ættartölur*, which include Haraldr’s Skjöldung, Buðling, Bragning, Öþling, and Niflung ancestors (Flb. I:25-27). As the third in the series of texts supplementing *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Hversu Noregr byggðist* also looks backwards to *Ór hamborgar historíu* and forward to *Fundinn Noregr*, which Jón Ólóðarson interpolated into *Ólafs saga* as part of *Orkneyinga saga*. The *Ættartölur* are similarly relevant. They clarify the relationships of most of the names mentioned in *Hyndluljóð*, as well as providing a synopsis of the legend of Hálfdan gamli. The genealogies of Haraldr hárfagri anticipate *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, which begins with an account of his life. Even the regnal list can be thought of as a brief yet comprehensive contextualization of *Ólafs saga*. However, the most interesting intertextual relationship is that between *Hversu Noregr byggðist* and *Eiríks saga víðförla*, almost immediately adjacent to it. The former relates how Nórr’s son, Prándr, inherited the area that was named Prándheimr after him, and the latter begins at this point: “Prándr was the name of the king who first ruled over Prándheimr” (“Prándr er nefndr konungr sá, er frystr réð fyrir Prándheimr,” Flb. I:30). In order to understand *Hversu Noregr byggðist’s* own textual origins, I will examine its relationship with *Fundinn Noregr* before proceeding to the relationship with *Eiríks saga*.

In their broadest outlines, the narratives of *Fundinn Noregr* and *Hversu Noregr byggðist* are the same. The family rules Finnland and Kvenland; Fornjót’s descendant Porri is associated in some way with sacrifices, which explains the origin of the term *porablót*. Porri has two sons, Nórr and Górr, and a daughter, Góa. One day she disappears, and her brothers go in search of her. After conquering Norway on his way south, Nórr meets a king, Hröfr í Berg, who is part giant and the one responsible for Góa’s abduction. In the end, Hröfr marries Góa and Nórr marries Hröfr’s sister. The country is divided between Nórr and Górr, with the mainland going to the former and the islands to the latter, who took possession of them as he sailed south to meet his brother. Nórr is the ancestor of the Norwegian “land kings,” Górr the ancestor of the “sea kings.”

Within this shared framework, however, the two narratives differ in a
number of ways. Some are minor differences in content (e.g., in Fundinn Noregr, Fornjótr is the king of Finnland and Kvenland, but in Hversu Noregr byggðist, he is described as a man and it is Þorri who is the king of Gotland, Kvenland, and Finnland) or are blind motifs in Hversu Noregr byggðist that make sense in the fuller narrative of Fundinn Noregr (e.g., in Hversu Noregr byggðist, we are told that the Kvens’ sacrificial rite is a month late, although no reason is given; in Fundinn Noregr, we learn that the rite that occurred a month later is an extra one that was held to ask for Góa’s return). Fundinn Noregr closes with the genealogy of Górr’s son Heiti, the ancestor of the earls of Orkney; Hversu Noregr byggðist omits that one line of descent (presumably to avoid repeating it, as it is already in the manuscript) and supplies the genealogies of the other sons of Górr and all the sons of Nórr. It thus appears that in some places Hversu Noregr byggðist abbreviates Fundinn Noregr but in other places expands upon it. For example, Fundinn Noregr explains briefly how Norway disintegrated from its original unity under Nórr into the multiplicity of districts ruled by his descendants; Hversu Noregr byggðist omits the explanation and instead traces the genealogy of each descendant of Nórr who gave his name to a district of Norway.

Other differences between the two narratives are more significant. In Fundinn Noregr, Þorri is described as devoted to the practice of holding sacrifices (“Þorri var blótmaðr mikill,” Flb. I:241), whereas in Hversu Noregr byggðist, he is described as an excellent king, and it is his people who make sacrifices to him (“Þorri var konungr ágætr... Hann blótuðu Kvenir til þess, at snjóva gerði ok væri skjóðari gott. Þat er ár þeirra,” Flb. I:22). In Fundinn Noregr, Nórr and Hrólf r fight each other before coming to a settlement, whereas in Hversu Noregr byggðist, Góa intervenes immediately and Hrólf swears fealty to Nórr. In Fundinn Noregr, the sons of Górr fall out with the sons of Nórr and a civil war ensues, but no such thing happens in Hversu Noregr byggðist.

The effect of these changes in Hversu Noregr byggðist is twofold. For one thing, Nórr’s family and family relationships are considerably deproblematized or culturally “improved”—Þorri is no longer an active pagan, and his grandsons co-exist amicably instead of slaughtering another like Thebans. For another, greater emphasis is laid on Nórr’s role as the first king of Norway and precursor to Haraldr. In Fundinn Noregr, Nórr’s encounter with King Hrólf í Berg resembles the episodes in the mytho-heroic sagas in which the protagonist and a worthy opponent test each other in a duel before deciding to become blood-brothers. In Hversu Noregr byggðist, however, Nórr is depicted much more as a king than a wandering hero or roving viking; in fact, his meeting with Hrólf is rather like an idealized episode from the unification of Norway, in which a district king decides that discretion is the better part of valor and submits to Haraldr without a fight.

As the prologue to Orkneyinga saga, Fundinn Noregr’s function is to link
the genealogy of the earls of Orkney to the legendary Nórr, the descendant of Kári (“gust of wind”) Fornjóttson. *Hversu Noregr byggðist* seizes on the various implications of this linkage and builds on it to provide two interlocking origin legends: a “horizontal,” onomastic one to explain how the districts of Norway got their names, and a “vertical,” social one to explain the creation of the various ranks of Norwegian nobility. The latter depends on the linguistic theory presented in *Fundinn Noregr*, which asserts a unity between signifier and signified in order to identify Fornjótr’s sons with the primal elements. In *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, it is name (i.e., title) and rank that are one. Jarlar are created when Nórr’s grandson Guðbrandr refuses to be called “king” and gives himself the name “earl” instead (“ok lét gefa sér jarlsnafn,” Flb. I:24). Three generations later, another Guðbrandr declines to take the name of either king or earl, and he gives himself the name hersir. The proliferation of Nórr’s descendants and their acts of self-naming create a hierarchically organized society in which the king is literally the father of his people and each member of the nobility has freely chosen his social station. The stability of such a society is thus doubly guaranteed: “natural” family ties reinforce the feudal allegiance of the aristocracy to the king, who is also of the oldest branch of their lineage, and the identity between one’s name and one’s essential nature ensures that a man with the name of “earl” can never be transformed into a man with the name of “king.” The Norway thus constituted in *Hversu Noregr byggðist* is a mythical kingdom indeed.

*Hversu Noregr byggðist*’s assertion of the identity between name and thing, together with the genealogies documenting the “real” sons of the king of Norway, forms a myth of linguistic and social propriety that stands in absolute opposition to the metaphorical myths of spiritual genealogy that Jón Þórðarson added to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in which Icelanders of any degree can be transformed into the “sons” of the king of Norway by coming to him for conversion and staying to serve him as a retainer (Rowe 1998). The political

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9 The transparency of language is argued in the first chapter of the *Gylfaginning*; see Clunies Ross (1983 and 1987).
10 The close relationship between linguistic and social structures is another characteristic of Snorri’s thinking. Clunies Ross (1987:80-96) argues that the system Snorri uses in *Skáldskaparmál* to classify kennings and heiti suggests that he considered the hierarchy of society to be implicit in language.
11 Despite its depiction of Nórr as an earlier Haraldr hárfagri, *Hversu Noregr byggðist* does not follow Haraldr’s example here; the first chapter of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* describes how Haraldr created earls to serve as rulers for the districts that had previously been governed by kings (“Sumir [konungar] höfðu eitt fylki til forráða, en sumir nokkurur meir. Alla þa tók Haraldr konungr af lífi... Jarl setti hann í hverju fylki landi at stjórna ok lög at dæma...,” Flb. I:39).
12 A similar socio-linguistic theory is found in the mytho-heroic saga *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar*, perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that this saga, too, adapts the legend of Fornjótr, providing an account of the descendants of Fornjótr’s son Logi and the origin of Hálogaland that is missing from *Fundinn Noregr* and *Hversu Noregr byggðist* but that is a perfect imitation of their subject-matter. Rowe (1999) explores the ideological implications of *Þorsteins saga’s* use of the legend.
13 We may think, for example, of *Hrómundar þáttr halta*, which ends by recounting how
implications and ideological function of each of these myths are contraries as well. Jón’s þættir extend the spiritual relationships of Christianity to the political sphere and portray each subject’s submission to his king as voluntary and affective. Magnús’s legend of a single origin for kings, earls, and chieftains paradoxically erases every distinction but one between them, presenting them as all of royal blood. Both of these ideologies could serve Jón Hákonarson. As an Icelander, he could participate in the metaphoric relationship with the king that Jón Þórðarson proffered, and as a descendant of a hersir, he could claim a literal one. Both are relationships that could potentially be turned to his advantage.

Viewed as a response to Jón Þórðarson’s textual production, Hversu Noregr byggðist thus corresponds to Fundinn Noregr, but seems to speak to—indeed, to speak against—the þættir interpolated into Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar. However, Magnús chose to copy Hversu Noregr byggðist into the manuscript just before Eiríks saga víðförla, which Jón used to introduce Óláfs saga. This placement juxtaposes Hversu Noregr byggðist with a foundation myth of quite another sort. As has just been described, Hversu Noregr byggðist is an adaptation of a text that finds in northern giants the origin of the kingdom of Norway. If the author of that text was not Snorri Sturluson himself, then it was someone who articulated ideas that are “pervasive and important in the Edda” (Clunies Ross 1983:55). Eiríks saga adapts a different origin legend of Snorri’s, the Æsir migration from Troy that is recounted in Ynglinga saga. Eiríks saga presents a Christianized version of this theme, telling of the translatio of Christian culture from Greece to Norway in the earliest days of the monarchy. By a fortuitous coincidence, both of Snorri’s dynastic origin legends wound up in Jón Þórðarson’s part of Flateyjarbók in one form or another, enabling Magnús to identify one legend and set its variant next to the other legend. Magnús may have gotten the idea for this from Eiríks saga itself, which grafts the two legends together. Insofar as Eiríkr is the son of Þrándr, his saga invokes the legend of Fornjótr, but insofar as he brings an eastern religion to the north, it rewrites the beginning of Heimskringla.

The two origin legends share a number of structural components, some of which take similar forms in the two legends and some of which appear as opposites. The most important of these components are geographical information, a journey that precedes an act of cultural foundation, the presence and loss of a brother during the journey, the role of the hero and his brother as invaders or defenders of another country, the thing of value gained during the

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14 Genealogies found in copies of Vatnshyrna, another manuscript written for Jón Hákonarson, trace his family back to Ínarr Þveræringr and his wife Guðrún, the Icelandic daughter of the Norwegian hersir Pórkell Klyppr (Flb. I:viii-ix, Halldórsson 1990b:198-199).
journey, the act of cultural foundation, and the role of women.

Geographical information plays a different role in Hversu Noregr byggðist than it does in Eiríks saga. In the second chapter of the latter, Eiríkr’s geography lesson sets his and Óláfr’s story (that is, the story of the conversion of Norway) into the universal context of Christian cosmography. In Hversu Noregr byggðist, however, the geographical information is an integral part of the legend itself, which tells how both the districts of Norway and the country as a whole got their names. In its main purpose, then, as the description of the creation of the political landscape, the naming of the country and its districts are not factual, as is the naming of the world and its regions in Eiríks saga, but constitutive or performative—the geopolitical entities spring into being as they are named by the narrator. Secondly, the geographic information in Hversu Noregr byggðist, limited as it is to Norway and the misty lands to the northeast of it, in effect depicts Norway as a miniature cosmos of its own. The important geopolitical entities are all internal, and as the author has changed Górr’s journey to the Baltic and visit to his relatives in Denmark (in Fundinn Noregr) to a journey to the Polar Sea, Denmark is written out of the story, just as Rome has been erased from the map of Eiríks saga by having the throne of the Emperor in Mikilgarðr be the seat of Christianity. Rather than locating Norway at the edge of the world, as the geographical information in Eiríks saga does, the geographical information in Hversu Noregr byggðist resituates it at the center.

The next components—the journey, the presence and loss of the brother, the role of the hero and his brother as invaders or defenders, the journey’s reward, and the act of cultural foundation—can be discussed as a group. Here, too, they take opposite forms in the two texts. Eiríkr, having sworn to find the earthly paradise, stops off in Denmark, acquires a blood-brother, and travels with him to Greece, where they are baptized and serve the king by successfully defending the country from invaders. They then continue east, but the Danish Eiríkr turns back at the sight of the dragon at the entrance to Ódáinsakr, and Eiríkr proceeds without him, entering paradise, conversing with his guardian angel, and eventually returning to Norway with his new religion. Nórr and Górr, however, travel in search of their missing sister. They part ways at once, with Nórr conquering the natives as he heads west from the Keel and Górr apparently travelling by sea. Nórr’s victories stop at the water’s edge, where he meets up with his brother. Nórr then heads back inland and Górr out to sea again. Nórr conquers all of Norway before coming to Heiðmark, where he finds his sister and accepts the fealty of Hrólf, the king who abducted her. After marrying Hrólf’s sister, Nórr travels to the seashore for a second time to meet his brother, who has arrived from Dumbshaf after taking possession of all the islands he passed on the way. They divide the kingdom between them, with Nórr getting the mainland from Jötunheim to Álfheim and Górr getting all the islands that lay to the larboard of his ship as he sailed south. The legends thus
differ in every respect: Eiríkr has his brother with him only for the first part of his journey, whereas Nórr and his brother travel separately yet meet periodically and end together; the two Eireks succeed in defending the land they travel to, whereas Nórr and his brother are successful conquerors; Eiríkr finds paradise and returns to the land of his father with a new religion, whereas Nórr finds his sister and returns with a wife to the land he conquered. Eiríkr serves the King of Greece and the King of Heaven and never becomes a king himself, whereas Nórr becomes a king whom other kings serve. He starts off from the ill-defined realms of the east (“Porri... réð fyrir Gotlandi, Kvenlandi, ok Finnlandi,” Flb. I:22) and arrives in the kingdom of Norway. Eiríkr’s journey, in contrast, is a spiritual one that ends not with the return to Prándheim but with his corporeal assumption. He starts off from the kingdom of Norway and arrives in the kingdom of Heaven.

Not surprisingly, Eiríkr and Nórr’s acts of cultural foundation are also opposites. Nórr establishes the kingdom of Norway and founds its ruling dynasty, which in turn gives rise to the ranks of the aristocracy, whereas Eiríkr lays the basis for the conversion of Norway and thus may be said to help to found the church. Far from being the father of his country, he is so uninterested in perpetuating the dynasty that he disappears bodily. Indeed, for a narrative that is in many respects modelled on the fornaldrarsögur, Eiríks saga is notable for the absence of any women. Eiríkr’s mother is never mentioned, he has no sister for his blood-brother to marry, and the Greek king has no daughter to distract him from his mission. The contrast between the inescapable proliferation of noble Norwegians in Hversu Noregr byggðist and Eiríks saga’s refusal of the carnal could not be more striking. Hversu Noregr byggðist tells of the establishment of the three axes of (secular) society—the horizontal axis of the political landscape, the vertical axis of the social hierarchy, and the temporal axis of the succession of fathers and sons. Although Eiríkr participates in two filial relationships, being the physical son of Prándr and the spiritual son of the King of the Greeks, the historical dimension of Eiríks saga is marked not by the temporal succession of generations but by the typological pattern of prefiguration and fulfillment. As a fighter and a father, Nórr uses his body to establish a society that starts with him and endures long after he is gone, whereas Eiríkr transcends his body to help establish a Christian society that will not come into being until long after he is gone but that will endure until the end of time. Although his adventures take place early in Norway’s history, their ultimate goal is eschatological.

As with the competing ideologies that inform Hversu Noregr byggðist and the þættir added to Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, Hversu Noregr byggðist and Eiríks saga offer their audience competing exempla or models of behavior. Jón Póðarson describes them both in his afterword to Eiríks saga:

The one who wrote this book set this exemplum in it first because he wishes each man to know that there is no true faith except in God, because although heathen men may get
much fame from their deeds of valor, there is a great difference when they end the life of this world, since they have then taken their reward from men’s praise for their accomplishments, but they have then the expectation of punishment for their violations and faithlessness when they knew not their Creator. But those who have loved God and had all faith and fought for the freedom of Holy Christianity have nevertheless received greater praise from the wisest men. And this, too, which is greatest, that when they have gone forward through the common door of death, which the flesh may not escape, they have taken their reward, that is to say, the eternal kingdom with Almighty God without end, like this Eiríkr, as was just described.15

Here again, it looks as though Magnús is attempting to give the lie to Jón, for Hversu Noregr byggðist presents a history of Norwegian kings that is as depaganzied as it can be. Descendants of Fornjótr, the king and people of Norway are untainted by any connection with the Æsir, and although the Kvens sacrifice to Nórr’s father, Nórr does not bring the practice to his new kingdom. Rather than portraying Nórr as a “good pagan,” Hversu Noregr byggðist avoids the question of his religion entirely. This strategic silence enables his history of conquest, colonization, and the forcible seizure of power to avoid being condemned as “heathen... deeds of valor.” That Nórr’s behavior is intended to be understood as exemplary is signalled by the categorization of the text as a dæmi (like ævintyr, an Old Norse term that translates the Latin exemplum): “Nú skal segja dæmi til, hversu Noregr byggðist í fyrstu...” (Flb. I: 22). Just as Hversu Noregr byggðist displaces Þrændr from the position of “first king,” so too does it replace Eiríkr (and by implication Olaf Tryggvason) with Nórr (and by implication Haraldr hárfagri) as the model of kingly behavior.

It is tempting to wonder whether Magnús, with his apparent interest in genealogies, was the one who created Hversu Noregr byggðist from Fundinn Noregr in order to have a foundation myth with which to counter Eiríks saga. But in that case, why would he have omitted the vow to find their sister that Nórr and Górr swear at the beginning of their journey in Fundinn Noregr? This would have strengthened the parallelism with Eiríks saga, in which Eiríkr’s journey also begins with a vow to find something. The omission of Górr’s travels through the Baltic to Denmark is easier to understand, for to admit the existence of Denmark before the establishment of Norway would be to make a powerful concession, as superior age always confers superior authority. Moreover, Magnús may have had no wish to portray the creation of Norway as being linked in any way—or even as being geographically proximate—to Denmark, so as to avoid any implication that the Danish claims to Norway had

15 “En því setti sá þetta ævintyr fyrst í þessa bók, er hana skrifandi, at hann vill, at hverr maðr viti þat, at ekkj er traust trútt nema af guði, því at þó at heimini menn fái fræði mikla af sínum afrekverkum, þa er þat mikill munr, þá er þeir enda þetta hit sundliga líf, at þeir hafa þá tekit sitt verðkaup af orðlofi mana fyrir sín frama, en eigi þá ván hefnigrar fyrir sín brot ok truleysir, er þeir kunnu eigi skapara sinn. En hinir, sem guði hafa unmat ok þar allt traut haft ok baríat fyrr fælsi heilagrar kristni, hafa þó af hinum vitrustum mónum fengit meira lof, en þat at auk, at mest er, at þa er þeir hafa fram gengit um almenniligr dýrr dauðans, sem ekkj hold má forðast, hafa þeir tekit sitt verðkaup, þat er at skilja eftítt riki með allsvaldanda guði utan enda sem þessi Eirekr, sem nú var frá sagt,” Flb. I:37-38.
a historical foundation. If this seems too far-fetched, perhaps we may attribute only the first sentence of *Hversu Noregr byggðist* to Magnús. With its echoes of *Hyndluljóð* and the *Ættartölur*—and perhaps its use of *dæmi* to pre-empt Jón’s categorization of *Eiríks saga* as an *ævintyr*—this sentence fits *Hversu Noregr byggðist*’s location in the manuscript as though it were made for it. The second sentence, “Fornjótr hét maðr” (Flb. I:22), is very similar to the first sentence of *Fundinn Noregr* (“Fornjótr hefir konungr heitit,” Flb. I: 241) and was probably the “original” first sentence of *Hversu Noregr byggðist*.

As well as providing additional royal Norwegian genealogies, the *Ættartölur* continue the exploration of some of the themes present in *Hversu Noregr byggðist*. The euhemerization of Óðinn in two of Haraldr’s genealogies more or less supports the depaganization of the Norwegian dynasty, although of course the regnal list, with its references to St. Olaf, eventually makes it difficult to escape the historical fact that the country was originally pagan.16 Similarly, the synopsis of the legend of Hálfdan gamli, which Magnús borrowed from *Skáldskaparmál* (ch. 80), does not mention Óðinn. “And when [Hálfdan] became king, he held a great sacrifice at midwinter and asked to live for three hundred years... But he was told that he would live no more than one lifetime, but for three hundred years no man of low degree would be in his family, and no woman.”17 This excerpt also illustrates the theory of language in which names represent the essential qualities of the things they name. Closely following Snorri, Magnús’s version reads, “These nine [i.e., the first nine sons of Hálfdan and Álfín’s Eymundardóttir] became so renowned that their names have been treated in all records as honorific titles, equivalent to the name of king.”18

The exclusion of women from Hálfdan’s descendants is a curious anticipation of the absence of women from *Eiríks saga*. At first glance, it also recalls the abduction of Góa, which is the motivation for Nórr and Górr’s travels of conquest. However, the role of women in *Hversu Noregr byggðist* is quite different from both that in the legend of Hálfdan and that in *Eiríks saga*. Insofar as Góa has been abducted to be the wife of a king and her loss is compensated for by the king’s sister, who becomes Nórr’s wife, *Hversu Noregr*
byggðist is describing a traditional exogamous exchange of women between different families. Moreover, women are found elsewhere in Nórr’s family; his father has sisters, and he himself numbers several women among his descendants. The inclusion of Skáldskaparmál’s account of Hálfdan is probably due to his place in the genealogies, rather than to any overt desire to provide a further response to Eiríks saga. However, the proximity of the two texts encourages comparison. A typological explanation might be that the legend of Hálfdan provides the “pre-Christian” version of the Christian exclusion seen in Eiríks saga, especially as the sacrifice is not made to any heathen deity. However, as Magnús prefers to structure his histories in terms of genealogy rather than typology, it may be more appropriate to consider the issue as one of dynastic succession, so that whereas in Eiríks saga, the absence of women is a symptom of Christian theology, in the legend of Hálfdan it is a providential solution to a political problem. I say “political,” because this legend gains an interesting resonance in the context of the events that may have led to Magnús’s being asked to work on Flateyjarbók in the first place. Ólafur Halldórsson (1990a:430-431) suggests that the manuscript was originally intended as a gift for the current king of Norway, Olaf Hákonarson, who had ascended to the throne as an eleven-year-old boy when his father Hákon V Magnusson died in 1380. Unfortunately, Olaf died in 1387, the very year that work on the manuscript began, and with him the Norwegian royal dynasty came to an end. His mother Margareta, daughter of King Valdemar of Denmark, had been ruling Norway in her son’s name, and now she became the ruler of Norway in her own right. Margareta had no claim on the Norwegian throne under the official law of succession, but the only other candidate was Duke Albrecht of Mecklinburg, whose mother’s mother was the daughter of Hákon V of Norway, and Margareta was able to persuade the Norwegian Riksråd to disqualify him because of his wars against Magnús and Hákon. The death of young Olaf and Margareta’s consolidation of power must have been a sad blow to the Icelanders, who had no love for the Danes and who now saw the center of government move even further from them than before. There was no point in giving a manuscript glorifying the reigns of the first two Norwegian Olafs to Margareta, and so Jón Pórhallsson left the project. Evidently Jón Hákonarson later decided to keep the manuscript for himself and had Magnús Pórhallsson expand it with two more kings’ sagas. As Magnús copied the legend of Hálfdan into the manuscript, he may have wished that the Norwegian dynasty had been granted six hundred years’ worth of noble male descendants instead of only three.

Just as Haraldr hárfagri is the ending point for the genealogies tracing his ancestry from Höðr, Álf þinn gamli, Óðinn, Adam, and the rest, so is he also the starting point for the regnal list, which lists his descendants (not all of whom were kings) down to Olaf Hákonarson in 1387. The list then proceeds to give the kings of Norway in reverse order from Olaf Hákonarson back to Haraldr.
The lists of Haraldr’s descendants and the kings of Norway reveal some of
Magnús’s personal biases. He does not draw any attention to Óláfr Tryggvason,
whose name appears without comment between Hákon jarl and Hákon blótjarl
hinn ríki. However, Magnús calls the Danish Sveinn Alifíuson, whom Knútr
installed as king after the defeat of St. Olaf, óforsynjukonungr (“a king not to be
endured”). And to King Magnús Eiríksson, whom St. Birgitta knew as having
the nickname smekk (“the ingratiating” or “the caressing prince”) and whom she
eventually condemned in the strongest terms, he gives the cognomen gðði (“the
good”).19 Finally, we may note that Margareta’s ascent to the throne as ruler in
her own right does not qualify her to be listed among the kings of Norway.
Although this list was written down during her reign, Magnús excludes her
from it, recapitulating Hálfdan’s genealogy and—in a manuscript with hundreds
of pages devoted to the past rulers of Norway—relegating the information about
the current sovereign to a single sentence.

Magnús’s preference for chronicle, annal, and genealogy over Jón’s
typological interpretation of history is consonant with the theory of language
that he borrows from Snorri, in which words transparently reveal the essential
natures of their referents. His use of literal language and “straight”
representation stands in contrast to Jón’s interlaced texts, deferred meaning, and
metaphorical use of language, which work by indirection and a displacement
that is at once literary, linguistic, and familial. Literary displacement occurs
when Jón’s þættir employ the fantastic and entertaining for spiritual purposes, a
risky practice that makes narratives vulnerable to being willfully misread, with
audiences listening to them for their entertainment value alone and ignoring
their ethical content. Linguistic displacement occurs when the þættir recount the
process by which two unrelated men metaphorically become “father” and
“son,” and familial displacement occurs when Icelandic sons are substituted for
Norwegian princes. This substitution interrupts both lineages when Óláfr
Tryggvason is defeated at Svöldr, and the failure of the proper royal succession
ensures that extending typological relationships into the past is the only way in
which writing can continue. Thus Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar may be
(metaphorically) said to engender Eiríks saga vîðförla, a story of a royal
Norwegian who prefigures Óláfr, just as Óláfr Tryggvason prefigures St. Olaf.
Magnús escapes these dangers by his insistence on the mimetic nature of
language and is thus able to write “forwards” history, updating the Icelandic
church annals with current events and the royal genealogies with the last of the
Norwegian kings.

Magnús’s avoidance of metaphor and his insistence on proper linguistic and
familial relations may be read as symptoms of an anxiety aroused by the ending
of the Norwegian royal dynasty. This anxiety does not appear to be felt by

19 This is apparently derived from the annal; Flateyjarníall is the only annal that adds to the
notice of King Magnús’s death in 1375 “ok kalla menn hann helgari” (Storm 1888:411).
Magnúss himself, who seems to have identified most strongly with the historians of Píneeyrklaustur rather than having any sort of personal attachment to the monarchy. Magnúss instead seems to have been provoked by what he found in the first part of Flateyjarbók. However, his strong answer to Jón Þórðarson foregrounds questions of dynastic failure and female rule that were unescapable for Icelanders involved in the power plays and politics of the royal appointees controlling their country. The gesture of recuperation of origins and “real” genealogy that is the second generation of Flateyjarbók would thus seem to be evoked by feelings of loss on the part of Jón Hákonarson, whose grandfather, Gizurr galli, was a retainer of Hákon V. Not only does this layer of the manuscript memorialize the great Norwegian kings of more recent times, but it provides them with an origin legend that looks to neither European classical historiography nor Christian typology for its authorization. Such cultural independence is all the more unusual for its defiance of late-fourteenth-century realities. While Magnúss was imagining a Norwegian monarchy gloriously independent from the rest of Scandinavia and the church, Margareta was forging Norway, Denmark, and Sweden into the Kalmar Union and promoting the canonization of her foster-mother’s mother, Birgitta of Vadstena.

References

Flb., see Nordal.