

An Epic Reign

BY ROWDY GEIRSSON

Sverd i fjell (Swords in Rock) is one of Norway's most awe-inspiring monuments.

THE STORIES OF KING HARALD FAIRHAIR ARE THE STUFF OF LEGENDS. HERE'S A LOOK AT HIS LIFE AND THE MONUMENTS THAT COMMEMORATE HIS SIGNIFICANCE IN VIKING HISTORY.



Few figures from the Viking Age have achieved the same degree of legendary status as Harald Fairhair. As the man credited with uniting Norway into a single nation, the old sagas are rife with references to either his grand deeds or to his tyrannical rule, depending on the source's point of view.

Magnificent monuments have been built in Norway to commemorate his significant accomplishments and he often receives mention or plays a prominent role in current television series and historical fiction novels that address the topic of Viking Age Norway. The Harald Fairhair as we know him in each of these contexts remains the product of medieval myth-making, but that doesn't make his renowned life or the various cultural mementos dedicated to it any less fascinating.

Most of what we know about Harald's life stems from the blurring of fact and fiction in "The History of Harald Fairhair," which comprises a chapter of Snorri Sturluson's epic, "Heimskringla" ("The Lives of the Norse Kings"). Written around 1230 in Iceland, the volume is just one of Snorri's many manuscripts and, in typical medieval Icelandic fashion, is loaded with elements of fantasy in addition to select historical truths.

Snorri himself was a bit of a scoundrel who vied his entire life to help overthrow Iceland's independent rule and deliver the country into the folds of the Norwegian crown, so his bias tended to favor Norway and present it in a positive light, which contrasted with that of many of his contemporaries in Iceland.

A VOW TO CONQUER

In the pages of "Heimskringla," we learn of Harald's impetuous vow to neither cut nor comb his hair until he has laid claim to all of Norway. Harald had become king of the Vestfold region (the area southwest of current-day Oslo) when his father, Halfdan the Black, died around the year 860 while riding his sled over a frozen lake and falling through the ice. After a tumultuous period of subduing insurgencies instigated by his vassals in the wake of his father's death, Harald sent messengers to Hordaland (the area around Bergen) to ask the local king's daughter, Gyda, for her hand in marriage. Gyda refused outright, stating that she would not marry Harald until he had proven himself worthy by becoming the king of all of Norway.

Upon hearing this, Harald made his vow and initiated his quest to conquer the entire nation, bearing the nickname "Thickhair" for the next 10 years. Only when he had finally achieved his objective did he have his hair cut and thus earn his enduring nickname of "Fairhair" (or "Finehair," or "beautiful haired," depending on the translation).

Whether there is any kernel of truth in Harald's romantic motivation to conquer his neighboring Norwegian petty kings or whether this was concocted entirely as a figment of Snorri's imagination remains unknown. In fact, some

historians doubt Harald even existed as an actual historical person, although most generally tend to agree that he was real and that the stories about him have simply been exaggerated into the realm of fantasy. In any case, the sagas state that Harald steadily spread his influence and power across the land.

After making his famous vow to subdue all of Norway, one of the first milestones that Harald achieved was the deal that he brokered with Håkon Grjotgardsson, the ruler of the Trøndelag (the area around Trondheim).



(Right): The Kringla leaf (Kringlublaðið) is kept in the National and University Library of Iceland in Reykjavík. It's the only surviving page from "Heimskringla."

(Below): An illustration of Harald Fairhair from the 14th-century Flateyjarbók.



According to the old stories, this deal allowed Håkon to maintain some autonomy in exchange for acknowledging Harald as his sovereign.

To seal the deal, Harald married Håkon's daughter (all of his supposed affection for Gyda didn't stop Harald from taking 20 different wives over the course of his long life). Harald and Håkon formed a strong alliance together and presented a unified front against the petty kings of Vestland, an area corresponding to modern Norway's western fjords region that encompasses Hordaland as well as additional historic territories and that has given its name to the present-day Norwegian county of Vestland.

BATTLE AT SEA

Harald's subsequent confrontation with the Vestlanders (who were led by Gyda's father) became one of the most significant and famous battles of the entire Viking Age. Traditionally dated to the year 872 (but now thought to have likely occurred a decade or two later), the battle took place at Hafrsfjord, within the municipal boundaries of modern-day Stavanger in southwestern Norway.

An epic sea battle fought aboard ships between Harald's forces and the last remnants of the Vestland that opposed him, the Battle of Hafrsfjord is generally considered to have been the culminating achievement in Harald's quest to become king over all of Norway. Harald's forces emerged victorious, and the site of the battle is now commemorated with one of Norway's most unique and awe-inspiring monuments—Sverd i fjell (Swords in Rock).

Comprised of three massive sculptural swords that loom over the shore of Hafrsfjord just south of Stavanger's city center, Sverd i fjell was designed by Norwegian artist Fritz Røed, and unveiled by King Olav in 1983. Standing 10 meters (32 feet) tall, the swords represent peace, unity and freedom. The swords themselves are modeled on the remains of historical ones discovered in Norway and the monument itself has become iconic among Viking Age history buffs.

SETTLING AT AVALDSNES

Following his victory at Hafrsfjord, the residual unruliness of Vestland prompted



Harald to settle down in the region at Avaldsnes, itself an ancient seat of local sea kings dating to approximately the year 200. Its prominence at the time was due to its strategic location along the Nordvegr (The North Way), the trade route that ran along Norway's coast. Avaldsnes continued to serve the same function for subsequent Norwegian monarchs after Harald made it his own royal residence till the start of the 15th century.

Avaldsnes lies about 30 miles northwest of central Stavanger and has become something of a hot spot for archaeologists, historians, and anyone else with a general interest in Norse history.

Because of its historic significance, Avaldsnes now hosts the Nordvegen History Centre, a top-notch museum dedicated to



(Above): A traditional house at the Viking farm at Avaldsnes.

(Left): The medieval stone church at Avaldsnes, on the Island of Karmøy, Norway.

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Located just north of Haugesund city center, Haraldshaugen is Norway's national monument.

the site's local history, as well as western Norway's largest Viking market festival that is held for four days each June at Avaldsnes' own reconstructed Viking Farm. The site is also home to the ruins of a royal manor built by King Håkon IV Håkonsson in the 13th century and St. Olaf's Church, also built by Håkon Håkonsson.

AN ENDURING LEGACY

Harald's life remained far from quiet according to the legendary stories. Among his other exploits, he conquered Shetland and Orkney in the British Isles, and set in motion the strife that would embroil Norway after his death by initially dividing the kingdom among his sons and then attempting to transfer the sole inheritance to his favored son, Erik. Erik would earn his nickname "Bloodaxe" by killing many of his own brothers before being ousted by Harald's youngest son, Håkon the Good, upon his return from England where he had been fostered by King Æthelstan.

But all of that occurred after Harald's death.

Harald is said to have died in his bed at the age of 80 at his royal estate in Avaldsnes around the year 933 and was buried in a mound in Karmøy or Haugesund. It's another instance in which no one really knows for sure where the boundary between fact and fiction lies, but in the 19th century popular belief held that Harald was buried in Haugesund. To commemorate the millennial anniversary of the Battle of Hafrsfjord and the unification of Norway, an extravagant monument was thus raised to Harald's honor at the site of what was then believed to be his grave.

Haraldshaugen is now a national monument in Haugesund, about 5 miles north of Avaldsnes. The monument itself was

erected in 1872 and designed by architect Christian Christie. It consists of a massive grave mound surrounded by a granite wall that features 29 stones, one from each of Norway's historic counties. A 17-meter-tall obelisk rests upon the mound and at its base four bronze panels depict some of the legendary highlights of Harald's life.

All of which paints a very different picture than that depicted by many of the medieval Icelandic sources, which instead often tend to portray Harald as a tyrant whose policies provided the primary impetus for the Norwegian exile to Iceland. Historians generally believe these Icelandic sources to be overwrought attempts to glorify and legitimize the island nation's founding.

But such contrasts and contradictions are par for the course for a figure with such a larger-than-life status as Harald. The achievements attributed to him have been used to fit the purposes of those who have propagated the stories about him over the centuries. And that continues even in our

present day, not least of which within the realm of pop culture and entertainment.

POP CULTURE PORTRAYALS

While not used as a political device to legitimize national history or anything tangential to it, writers across the spectrum of media today have gravitated towards Harald's legendary life for their own needs inherent to creating a good story for potential audiences. First and foremost of these is the Harald Fairhair found in the History Channel's "Vikings" television series.

Played by Finnish actor Peter Franzén, Harald became a major character in the final three seasons of the show, although his role deviated quite drastically from even the far-fetched tales attributed to him in "Heimskringla" and other medieval sources. Additionally, Harald plays a prominent role in Linnea Hartsuyker's recent best-selling trilogy, "The Golden Wolf." The main character here,

however, is Ragnvald—one of Harald's top men and the man supposedly responsible for cutting Harald's hair when he finally won for himself the entirety of Norway and Gyda's hand in marriage, thus earning his enduring nickname.

Altogether, the legend, the history, the monuments, the historic sites, and the popular entertainment pieces devoted to him combine to paint a very colorful picture of an enigmatic figure who remains shrouded in mystery. Harald is not the only Norse figure to possess this sort of fantastical status, but unlike some of the others such as Ragnar Lodbrok or Sigurd the Volsung, Harald's accomplishments generally maintain a more solid basis in reality and have served a special purpose in the narrative of nation-building for both Norway and Iceland. The blurring of fact and fiction of his life and the monuments erected to his memory remain uniquely prominent. ▼

Did You Know?

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Visit the Sites

SVERD I FJELL

Location: The shores of Hafrsfjord, just south of Stavanger

This awe-inspiring monument stands 10 meters tall and is comprised of three enormous bronze swords designed by Norwegian artist Fritz Røed. It commemorates the Battle of Hafrsfjord in 872 when Harald Fairhair united Norway into one kingdom. It was unveiled by King Olav in 1983.

AVALDSNES

Location: 30 miles northwest of central Stavanger

Avaldsnes is Norway's home of Viking kings, including Harald Fairhair. Pay a visit to a reconstructed Viking farm, St. Olaf's Church and the royal manor.

HARALDSHAUGEN

Location: Haugesund

Raised in 1872, Norway's National Monument commemorates the millennial anniversary of the Battle of Hafrsfjord and the unification of Norway and the site of what was believed to be Harald Fairhair's grave.

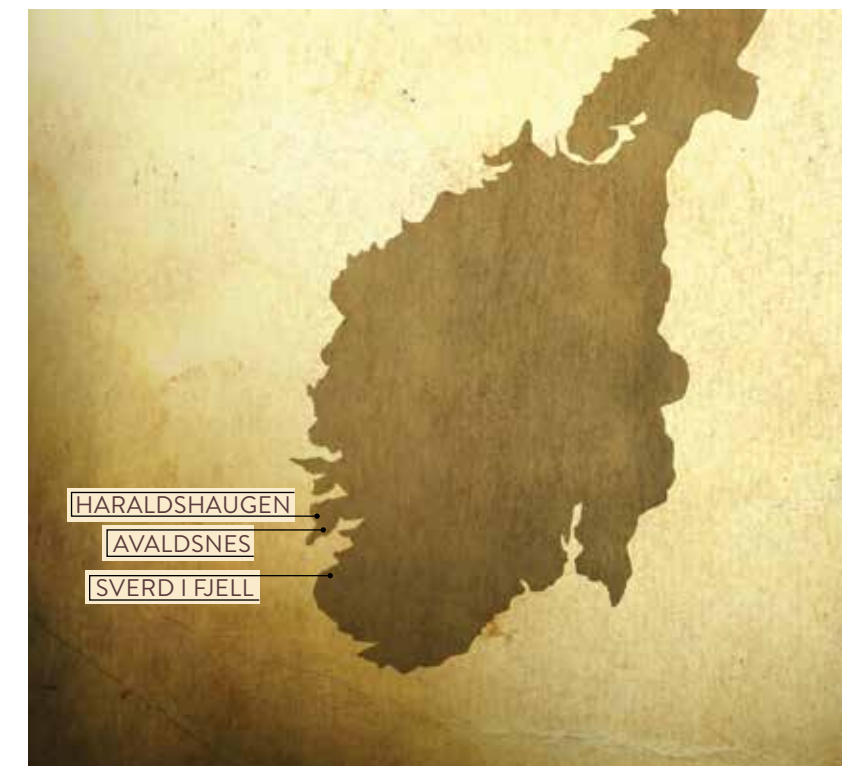


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