CHAPTER ONE

ORIGIN MYTHS AND RULERSHIP.
FROM THE VIKING AGE RULER TO THE RULER
OF MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: CONTINUITY,
TRANSFORMATIONS AND INNOVATIONS

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I. Subject and research questions:
The ideology of power—construed and formed through origin myths

Myths and narratives about the origins of ruling dynasties are at the
centre of this study. From the perspective of a historian of religion
mythology is always of central importance when we seek to discern
the ideology of pre-modern societies: there, power and ideology fre-
quently manifest themselves via the structure and symbolic language
of myths.¹ This study in particular shall show that origin myths and
genealogies which propagate the descent of individual dynasties from
gods and other powers were vital elements in the ideological founda-
tion of the elite’s power.

Within our common project shedding light on the Nordic hierar-
chy of king, earl (jarl), and chieftain (høfdingi), this chapter seeks out
those origin myths with a bearing on the ideology of power; first and
foremost connected to the great “Norwegian” ruling dynasties of the
Viking and early Middle Ages: the earls of Hlaðir and the kings of the
hárfagri-dynasty, transformed into the Ynglingar-dynasty. In addition,
origin and initiation myths are also important ingredients in the nar-
ratives on the earls of Orkney and the chieftains in the Faeroes.

At the centre of this study is the permanent tension between the
use of pagan origin myths made by the Christian Middle Ages, and
the pre-Christian form and function of the mythological complexes.
We shall discuss possible innovations, re-use and transformations of
pagan mythological models within the educated milieu of medieval

¹ Cf Schjødt 1999; Lincoln 1999.
historiography, and ask whether we can discern ideological changes within this type of mythological material from the Viking to the Middle Ages.

A key term when we talk about how power was constituted in Nordic society is kin. However, in our context the term should not be understood to denote elementary biological relations: on the contrary, we are to a very high degree confronted with ideological constructions of kinship. And while Nordic tradition usually defines kinship via both the father’s and the mother’s side (cognatic kinship), in the genealogies of the ruling dynasties the male line predominates (agnatic kinship). Such propaganda proclaiming the ancientness of the ruling dynasty and its divine origin with the help of a constructed lineage is a well-known feature in a comparative perspective, and it is usually expressed in dynastic origin myths.

There are two general types of origin myths: those that focus on the origins of an individual ruling dynasty and its territorial conquests, and those that describe the gestation of peoples. Both types can be found in Nordic texts. This study focuses on the first type of myths, in genealogical and in narrative contexts, since they legitimise the claims to power of individual dynasties.

The particular connection between rulers and gods, whichever shape it takes, is a common phenomenon in pre-modern societies. It is precisely his relation with the divine sphere which makes the ruler stand out as someone special. Based on this phenomenon scholars have formulated the well known theory of “sacral kingship”.

A distinctive characteristic of Nordic origin myths is that the ruling dynasties do not exclusively descend from gods, but that they to a correspondingly high degree also descend from their antipodes, the

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2 The division is not wholly consistent. While Ynglingatal (Yt) and Háleygjatal (Hát) show constructed agnatic lineages, Hyndluljóð (Hdl) shows that aristocratic kinship can also be conceived of along male and female lines, both in the earthly and in the mythological sphere.

3 The theory of sacral kingship has been discussed intensely for the pagan Nordic society. Newer research has a tendency to play down the divine or sacral aspects of the ruler. Scholars recognise more complex mythological and cultic relations establishing the ruling dynasties as society’s elite, yet which do not necessarily render the ruler divine or sacral. Within mythology it is first and foremost origin myths that legitimise the chosen dynasty’s right to rule. Since the expression “sacral kingship” can evoke wrong associations with older research based on an evolutionary model, we should consider replacing the term with for example the more neutral “ideology of rulership”, cf Steinsland 1991; Sundqvist 2002.