

Heimskringla

Biography / Overview

Heimskringla (c. 1225–1235 CE) is a monumental saga chronicle of Norwegian kings from legendary origins to 1177 CE, attributed to the Icelandic chieftain, poet, and historian Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). Comprising 16 sagas in three main parts—Ynglinga Saga, the lives of historical kings from Halfdan the Black to Harald Hardrada, and the civil war era—it is written in clear, objective Old Norse prose with embedded skaldic verses for authenticity. Named after its opening words “*Kringla heimsins*” (“the disc of the world”), it spans mythology, migration-age legends, Viking expansion, Christianization (c. 1000 CE), and the consolidation of royal power. Modern scholars regard *Heimskringla* as the pinnacle of medieval Scandinavian historiography: a critical synthesis of oral skaldic poetry, Latin chronicles, earlier sagas, and Snorri’s political insight. It shaped national identity in Norway and influenced European historical writing, from Romantic nationalism to modern realism. Preserved in over 50 manuscripts, it remains the most authoritative source on early Norse kingship.

Sources:

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Snorri Sturluson – <https://iep.utm.edu/snorri-sturluson/>

Encyclopædia Britannica: Heimskringla – <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Heimskringla>

Nordic Saga Portal – <https://heimskringla.no>

Bibliography / Primary Sources

Major Published Works:

Heimskringla

Composed c. 1225–1235 CE by Snorri Sturluson.

Survives in ~50 manuscripts/fragments; ~700 pages in modern editions.

Original language: Old Norse (Icelandic).

Key Sections:

- *Ynglinga Saga*: Mytho-historical origins of Swedish-Norwegian kings (from Odin to Halfdan).
- *Separate Kings’ Sagas*: Halfdan the Black → Harald Fairhair → Olaf Haraldsson (Saint Olaf) → Magnus the Good → Harald Hardrada.
- *Saga of the Sons of Harald*: Civil wars to Magnus Erlingsson (1177).

Key Manuscripts and Editions:

- **Codex Frisianus** (c. 1300–1325): Oldest near-complete text.
- **Kringla** (c. 1260, now lost; fragments survive): Once primary MS, destroyed in 1728 fire.
- **Holmberg Edition** (Íslenzk fornrit, 1941–1951): Standard scholarly text (3 vols.).
- **English Translations:**
 - Lee M. Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (1964) – <https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/holhei>

- Alison Finlay & Anthony Faulkes, *Heimskringla* (3 vols., Viking Society, 2011–2016). **Digital:** Heimskringla.no (ON + NO trans.); Snorri Portal – <https://heimskringla.no>

Composition Date

Composed: c. 1225–1235 CE.

Events Covered: Mythic prehistory to 1177 CE.

Source: Finlay & Faulkes; Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*.

Notable / Best-Known For

- **National Chronicle of Norway:** Foundational history of the Norwegian monarchy; used in royal propaganda.
- **Saint Olaf's Saga:** Longest section; portrays Olaf II as martyr-king and Norway's patron saint.
- **Skaldic Authenticity:** Over 600 verses cited as historical evidence.
- **Political Realism:** Explores kingship, law, conversion, and power struggles with detached irony.

Sources:

Britannica; Hollander trans.

Famous Quotes

“It is the nature of kings to be victorious when they fight with chieftains, but chieftains fall when they fight with kings.”

– *Haralds saga Fairhair*, Ch. 6

“A king is for victory, not for long life.”

– Harald Hardrada, *Haralds saga Hardrada*, Ch. 99

“The people must have a king, but the king must have the people.”

– Attributed to Snorri's political philosophy (paraphrased).

Major Works / Textual Contents

Heimskringla (16 sagas):

- **Ynglinga Saga** (1): From gods to historical Ynglings.
- **Halfdan the Black – Harald Fairhair** (2–6): Unification of Norway.
- **Hakon the Good – Olaf Tryggvason** (7–11): Early Christian kings.
- **St. Olaf's Saga** (12): Conversion, martyrdom at Stiklestad (1030).

- **Magnus the Good – Harald Hardrada** (13–15): Joint rule, Byzantine service, Stamford Bridge (1066).
- **Sons of Harald – Magnus Erlingsson** (16): Civil wars, end of independent kingship. **Embedded Poetry**: ~600 stanzas, mostly court poetry. Source: [Heimskringla.no](http://heimskringla.no) Table of Contents

Influences / Intellectual Context

- **Skaldic Tradition**: Þjóðólfr, Eyvindr, Sigvatr—used as primary sources.
- **Earlier Sagas**: *Ágrip*, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*.
- **Latin Historiography**: Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus.
- **Snorri's Context**: 13th-century Iceland; Sturlung civil wars; Norwegian allegiance.

Sources:

Bagge, Sverre. *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (California, 1991).

Legacy and Modern Significance

Canonized as Norway's national history; influenced 19th-century independence. Medieval: Basis for *Flateyjarbók*, Danish *Gesta Danorum*. Modern: Debates on historicity vs. artistry; gender, power, religion.

Sources:

Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity*.

Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century

- **2011–2016**: Viking Society for Northern Research published complete Finlay/Faulkes translation (3 vols.).
- **2018**: 800th anniversary of St. Olaf's cult; *Heimskringla* conferences (Oslo, Reykjavík).
- **Ongoing**: Full ON text + modern Norwegian on heimskringla.no; English at snorriportal.is.
- **Ongoing**: Core in Nordic history, literature, medieval studies (Oslo, Copenhagen, UCLA).
- **2020s**: Cited in leadership studies, political theory, digital humanities (text mining skaldic verse).
- **2021**: Netflix *Vikings: Valhalla* drew on Olaf's saga; scholarly backlash and engagement.

Suggested Reading and Resources

A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship)

- Finlay, Alison & Faulkes, Anthony (trans.). *Heimskringla* (3 vols.). Viking Society, 2011–2016.
- Hollander, Lee M. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*. Texas, 1964.
- Bagge, Sverre. *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. California, 1991.

- Whaley, Diana. *Heimskringla: An Introduction*. Viking Society, 1991.
- Ármann Jakobsson. *Sturla Þórðarson and the Making of History*. Routledge, 2021.

B. Archival or Online Sources

- Heimskringla.no: Full text (ON + NO) – <https://heimskringla.no>
- Snorri Portal: English excerpts & scholarship – <https://snorriportal.is>
- Handrit.is: Manuscripts (Kringla fragments, Codex Frisianus) – <https://handrit.is>
- Viking Society for Northern Research: Publications – <https://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk>
- Encyclopædia Britannica: Heimskringla – <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Heimskringla>