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# Tendencies in the Historiography on the Medieval Nordic States (to 1350)

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*Omkring 1900 skjedde det store endringer i historieforskningen i de nordiske landene. Innføringen av kildekritikken og diskusjonen omkring eiendomsforholdene til de islandske middelalderkildene medførte forsterket fokus på 1100-, 1200- og 1300-tallet, og utviklingen av den sterke staten. På Island, som ikke hadde noen kongemakt, kom fristatstiden med sin forfatning i sentrum, det borget for at Island også fikk sin middelalderstat. Historikerne har drøftet de fleste aspekter ved statsutviklingen, og de institusjoner som framveksten av staten medførte. Det institusjonelle aspektet dominerte diskusjonen til ca. omkring 1970, under påvirkning fra sosiologi, kulturhistorie og sosialantropologi, begynte historikerne imidlertid å drøfte det politiske spillet og den politiske kulturen, og dermed ble aktørenes handlinger og motiver trukket inn i forskningsdebatten. Antagelsen om den sterke middelalderstaten er framdeles sterk blant historikere, men i det siste er kommet undersøkelser som stiller seg kritiske til den, og det ser ut til at pendelen begynner å svinge i den retningen.*

The debate around the state and state formation in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland) in the period c. 900-1350 may be divided into two main traditions; the Danish-Swedish, and the Norwegian-Icelandic. This division has its origins in the regions' political development in the Middle Ages. Iceland, which was settled in the period c. 870-930, kept its 'independent' status until 1262/64, when the country became part of *Norgesveldet* (the Norwegian domain), which also included Orkney, the Shetland islands, Hebrides, the Faeroes islands and Greenland. In 1319 Magnus Eiriksson was both elected to the throne of Sweden and inherited the throne of Norway, with the result that Norway and all the countries that were part of the Norwegian domain entered into a union with Sweden. This was the beginning of the so-called 'four hundred years night' in Norwegian history. As a result of the dynastic problems in 1319 the king of Norway now had his residence in Sweden, and so the *riksråd* (council of the realm) became the most powerful institution in the country. Queen Margaret, wife of the late king of Norway Hákon VI (1355-80), and daughter of the late king of Denmark Valdemar IV (1340-1375), managed in 1389 to have her great-nephew Eric of Pomerania accepted as the heir to the throne of Norway by the council of the realm. In 1397 Eric became king of Denmark and Sweden as well. Sweden broke out of the union of the three nations around the middle of the 15th century, and in 1536, Norway became a Danish province and the council of the realm was abolished. Norway

entered into a union with Sweden in 1814, after the Danish had been defeated in the Napoleonic wars. This union lasted until 1905. Iceland, however, stayed in a union with Denmark until 1944<sup>1</sup>.

In the 19th century when historians started to write the history of the respective Nordic nations, they focused on what they considered to be the great achievements of their countries. In Norway and Iceland these achievements had taken place during the period of independence. In Iceland, this was the era from the time of the settlement to 1262/64<sup>2</sup>; while in Norway, the time of the 'real' past was considered to be the period prior to 1319<sup>3</sup>. Swedish and Danish historians also focused on the Middle Ages, but because their countries had kept their autonomy during most of the medieval period, they were under less pressure than their colleagues in Norway and Iceland to glorify the Middle Ages and the 'real' past<sup>4</sup>.

In the 19th century, it became an important task for Scandinavian historians (Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) to map the medieval political development in their respective countries, and especially the history of the crown and its institutions. The political situation in Iceland was different from the one in Scandinavia, in that before 1262/64 the country was controlled by a number of chieftains, not a king. In the 19th century the period from the foundation of the General Assembly at Þingvellir c. 930 to 1262/64 became known as the *þjóðveldi* ('peoples domination'), usually translated as either the Icelandic Commonwealth, or the Icelandic Free State. For scholars studying Icelandic history, it was important to stress that Iceland was also a state.

The focus in this chapter will be on the debate concerning the period before c. 1350. This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the nature of Nordic unions in the 14th and 15th centuries has caused a shift among historians from a nationalistic to inter-Nordic perspective, and this debate has been dominated by Danish and Swedish scholars<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, the arrival of the Black Death has provided another dividing line for research; for the epoch until 1350 historians have focused on growth and expansion, while after this date the emphasis has been on decline and contraction.

The following discussion will be divided into three main subchapters. The first will discuss the changes in the historiography which took place around the year 1900, the second will focus on Iceland and the discussion about the Free State Constitution, the third and last will deal with the dispute over state formation in the Scandinavian countries.

## THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE INTRODUCTION OF SOURCE CRITICISM

In Scandinavian countries there has been a strong tradition of beginning historiographical debate with discussion of the works of the so-called 'founding fathers'. Rudolf Keyser (1803-1864) and Peter Andreas Munch (1810-1863) are always portrayed as the founders of the 'Norwegian historical school', Kristian Erslev (1852-1930) is usually considered 'the founder of modern Danish historiography as a whole'<sup>6</sup>, and in Sweden

this position has been held by the Weibull brothers, Curt (1886-1991) and Lauritz (1873-1960). In Iceland, no historian has acquired the status of a 'founding father', but the person who was most influential around the middle of the 19th century was Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879)<sup>7</sup>. He, however, focused mostly on editing medieval sources, and is therefore usually considered to be a philologist, rather than a historian.

An important task for the 19th century scholars was to find the medieval sources and edit them. In this period, all the major medieval Nordic sources were edited, for example the law codes. Inspired by *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, scholars in all the Nordic countries, except Denmark, started to publish series of medieval letters and documents: *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, and *Diplomatarium Suecanum*. The first volume in the Danish equivalent, *Danmarks riges breve*, appeared in 1938.

In the 19th century, some of these medieval sources acquired a position of status as a national narrative. In Denmark it was *Gesta Danorum* [The Deeds of the Danes], by the 12th century author Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150-1220), while in Norway it was *Heimskringla* [The Circle of the World], by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). Both works start with the prehistory of the ruling dynasties, and stop c. 1180. In Iceland the Icelandic Family Sagas, which number around thirty and purport to describe people and events in the period c. 930-1030, acquired the same status. No medieval source obtained the status as the national narrative in Sweden, which resulted in lesser focus on the Middle Ages in the field of the historical research of the 19th and 20th centuries, compared to the other Nordic countries.

There is a crucial difference between the approaches to history taken by the various founding fathers. Keyser and Munch were under the strong influence of romanticism, historicism and nationalism, whereas Erslev<sup>8</sup> and the Weibull-brothers belonged to a group of scholars that brought historical criticism to the forefront of scholarship in the Scandinavian countries around the turn of the 20th century. Lauritz Weibull published his lectures on earliest history of Scandinavia in 1911, under the title *Kritiska undersökningar i Nordens historia omkring år 1000* [Critical studies of history of Scandinavia around the year 1000], a work that has been considered a milestone in Scandinavian historical research ever since<sup>9</sup>. The Norwegian Halvdan Koht (1873-1965) also belonged to this group of historians. In 1914 he published the article *Sagaernes opfatning av vor gamle historie* [The Sagas' Conception of our old History], based on a lecture he had given the previous year, where he presented a radically new view on the sagas, especially *Heimskringla*, as sources<sup>10</sup>. The Icelandic contribution to this discussion did not come from a historian, but from the literary scholar Björn Magnússon Ólsen, who in 1911 published the book, *Om Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu. En kritisk Undersøgelse*<sup>11</sup> [On Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga. A critical examination].

An important background for this debate was the influence from the 'German historical school'<sup>12</sup> and the source-critical discussion that stressed the difference between the laws and the sagas<sup>13</sup>. In this period, scholars had faith in the laws, and if the laws contra-

dicted the sagas, they placed their trust in the laws. Source criticism was also, at least in Sweden and Denmark, an attack on the nationalistic and old-school historians<sup>14</sup>.

This discussion reduced historians' confidence in the predominantly Icelandic sources from the 12th and 13th centuries, which describe events from the Viking Age to the end of the 11th century, and therefore reduced the number of sources available for the study of this period. For Danish history, for example, the only sources for the Viking Age which were 'contemporary, written and Danish [were] the runic inscriptions'<sup>15</sup>. Historical focus thus turned away from the Viking Age to the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries.

In the 19th and in the first part of the 20th century there was an intensive discussion about the ownership of the Icelandic medieval sources. The result of this debate had consequences for how history as a discipline evolved in the respective countries. German scholars claimed at the beginning of the 19th century that these sources were a part of the Germanic culture and should be used as such. Danish scholars reacted to this theory, by arguing that the texts were Scandinavian, and therefore reflected Scandinavian identity, while Norwegian scholars stated that this literature was Norwegian. For them, it was important to demonstrate the difference between Norway and the other Scandinavian countries, and by claiming that these sources were of Norwegian origin, they could also be used as a witness for the uniqueness of the Norwegian people. In Norway, Keyser and Munch had put forward a theory about the origin of the Norwegian people that was contrary to the idea of a common origin of the Scandinavian peoples. They claimed that the Danish and the Swedish peoples had arrived from the South, but that the Norwegian people had come from the North. Unsurprisingly Icelandic scholars reacted strongly to this discussion on the origin of the literature and stated that it was distinctively Icelandic. They argued that the people who settled in Iceland were not only of Norwegian origin, but also of Irish. The Icelandic people were a mixture of the best from the Irish and the Norwegian, and therefore constituted a new nation<sup>16</sup>. Icelandic scholars won the debate, and today, there is an almost undisputed agreement about the Icelandic origin of these sources. The result of the discussion, however, meant that Scandinavian historians became even less interested in studying the Viking Age period.

The turn of the 20th century therefore marked a significant watershed in historical research in the Nordic countries. There was a shift towards promoting history as a scientific subject by introducing rigorous rules of source criticism. This focus on source criticism has since been the hallmark of the Scandinavian discussion, and it caused a shift in the focus from the Viking Age to the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries.

## ICELAND: ALSO A STATE

The debate about Iceland differs in one important respect from the general Scandinavian discussion. The scholarly discussion about the Icelandic Free State has, for more than 250 years, been an international research field, involving scholars from all four

corners of the world. The reason for this is the unique source situation; few societies have so much extant medieval material.

In the 19th century, when Icelanders started fighting for their independence, they looked back at the glorious Free State period, and especially at two of its aspects: the Free State Constitution, described in a manuscript from c. 1250, and the Icelandic Family Sagas. In this struggle, the constitution and the sagas became a symbol of what free independent Icelandic people had achieved.

There was little debate about the constitution until the middle of the 19th century, when the topic began to preoccupy legal historians, with the impressive work of Konrad Maurer leading the way for later scholars.<sup>17</sup> Scholars came quickly to almost unanimous conclusions about the constitution's main features and elements<sup>18</sup>: when the General Assembly was established around 930, there were thirty-six chieftaincies (sing. *goðorð*), but around 965, when the country was divided into quarters (sing. *fiórðungr*) and the quarter courts were introduced, three new chieftaincies were established in the Northern Quarter. The latter, then, had twelve chieftaincies, while each of the other quarters continued to have nine. The chieftaincies were the basic unit of the system, and the chieftains (sing. *goði*) were the leading participants in the court system consisted of the spring assembly courts (sing. *várbingsdómur*), the quarter courts and the Fifth Court (sing. *fimtardómur*), all linked to the assembly arrangements. As their name suggests, the spring assembly courts took place at the spring assembly. Each chieftain nominated twelve judges, so that there were thirty-six in all. Unless thirty-one of these judges agreed on a judgment, the case had to go on to the Fifth Court, the highest court of the Free State, established around 1005. For this court, one man was nominated for each of the forty-eight chieftaincies. The defendant and the plaintiff could each reject six men. If the defendant waived this right, then the plaintiff had to reject all twelve, or else the case was dropped. A simple majority of the thirty-six judges was sufficient to decide the case. The chieftains had two main functions at the General Assembly. One was to participate in the work of the Law Council (*Lögretta*) with two assembly men (sing. *þingmaðr*) to advise him. The chieftains and their chosen men thus made up one hundred forty four of the members of the Law Council. The Lawspeaker (sing. *lögsögumaðr*), and later the country's two bishops brought the total to one hundred forty seven, but only the forty eight chieftains had the right to vote. The Law Council had three particular tasks: to make new laws, to interpret the laws when there was disagreement about them, and to decide on various kinds of exemptions from the laws.

The Free State constitution soon became a paradigm, which has influenced the historical debate for more than a century. In the 19th century scholars discovered that it was impossible to combine the information in the Icelandic Family Sagas with that in the constitution. The scholars solved this major problem in an elegant way; the laws presented history and the Icelandic Family Sagas literature and fiction, which could therefore not be used to discuss the political development in the Saga Age period (c. 930-1030). The Free State's two major symbols were thus, divided between historians

and legal-historians, who were preoccupied with the laws, and the literary scholars, who studied the sagas<sup>19</sup>.

This view of the constitution has steered scholars to study topics that might prove its existence, for example the settlement of disputes and the organisation of the local assemblies. The first person to deal systematically with the way conflicts were resolved in the Sagas of Icelanders and the Contemporary Sagas (sagas that describe the Icelandic society in the 12th and 13th century) was Andreas Heusler. He published two books on this topic in the early 20th century<sup>20</sup>. The next person to discuss punishments in the Free State period was Lúðvík Ingvarsson, in his doctoral thesis from 1970<sup>21</sup>. Like Heusler, Lúðvík Ingvarsson concludes that there was a great discrepancy between the laws and the sagas, and that the great majority of all disputes in the latter were resolved through negotiation. Both Heusler and Lúðvík Ingvarsson expressed great surprise that the discrepancy between law and practise was so great, as both had previously believed in *Grágás* and the court system it describes. The discussion about the local assemblies system, which received much attention around 1900, has not proved that this system ever existed<sup>22</sup>.

The notion of the Free State constitution has played an important role in the debate, at least among most Icelandic scholars. They claim that it gives a trustworthy picture of the political structure prior to c. 1120, when the system broke down. With that collapse, a process of concentration of power in fewer hands started, which eventually led to the subjugation of Iceland under the Norwegian king in 1262/64<sup>23</sup>.

Around 1970 significant changes took place in the discussion of the Icelandic Free State. Under the influence of social anthropology and social and cultural history, new topics were introduced into the discussion, and old ones took new directions<sup>24</sup>. One important consequence of this new approach was that discussion of the value of the Icelandic Family Sagas as sources started again. Scholars now began to disagree with the traditional source criticism, and pointed out that it could not solve scholars' problems in studying the Saga Age, nor could it give historians the security they desired, as there were too many subjective evaluations and uncertainties associated with such procedures. Most of the information in the Sagas of Icelanders appears in only one saga, so it is impossible to test its reliability, transmission and genuineness by comparison with other sources. In *Historisk teknik* (Historical method), Kristian Erslev wrote that where there is only one witness, we cannot rely on it, because even the best observer can make mistakes<sup>25</sup>.

The result of this discussion was that the Icelandic Family Sagas were once again interpreted as historical sources, especially among non-Icelandic scholars, but this time for 12th and 13th century Icelandic society. Icelandic scholars focused on the Contemporary Sagas when discussing this period, and criticised this new approach to the Icelandic Family Sagas. How should the information in them that does not accord with the Contemporary Sagas be judged? Moreover, why should we prefer the Sagas of Icelanders to the Contemporary Sagas in discussion of Icelandic society in the 12th and 13th centuries?

Another important result of this new approach can be seen in the discussion about the resolution of conflicts. For the first time this process was discussed without at the same time focusing on the laws and the constitution<sup>26</sup>. The conclusions from these studies underlined the fact that most disputes were settled through negotiation and arbitration, and only few cases were taken to the courts.

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson in his book *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* attacks the traditional notion of the Free State Constitution.<sup>27</sup> He argues that the Icelandic Family Sagas actually give a more trustworthy picture of the political system in the Saga Age than the constitution, and claims that the laws should be treated with the same methods of source criticism as the sagas. In a recent book, Gunnar Karlsson has argued against this view and given his support to the existence of constitution, as traditionally conceived<sup>28</sup>. The main problem in his discussion is that the information in the sagas does not tally with the laws, so one has to choose between two radically different views of the Icelandic state in the Saga Age, which stress either stability or instability.

One important result of the social anthropological turn in the 1970s was that the political culture came into focus. This discussion has focused on how the chieftains used gifts to build up their power base<sup>29</sup>. Friendship between chieftains and farmers is not different from the more familiar patron-client relationship as studied by other historians. The patron-client connection is a vertical dyadic alliance between two people of unequal status, power and wealth. Each finds it convenient to form an alliance with the other, and each has something to offer: the client gives loyal support and deference, the patron protection and help. These relationships are unstable and the disintegration of one group of friends can lead to other groups becoming larger and more complex.

The little discussion among historians on the period after the fall of the Free State in 1262/64 to 1350 has focused on the administrative changes that then took place, and the introduction of the new Norwegian administrative system<sup>30</sup>. An important element in the debate has been to underline the formal aspect of namely that the Free State with its constitution was founded at the General Assembly at Þingvellir in c. 930, and that it came to an end when the assembly men pledged to pay tax to the Norwegian king at the General Assemblies in 1262, 1263 and 1264.

## SCANDINAVIA: THE STRONG MEDIEVAL STATES

The unification process in Scandinavia started in the Viking Age, and resulted in the foundation of the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The chronology of this process is different for the three kingdoms. In Denmark the unification started in the first part of the Viking Age, in Norway it began around 850, and finally in Sweden c. 1000. Historians have focused on the periods of the 'strong' kingships in the respective countries; in Denmark the epoch of the 'Valdemarian' monarchy (1157-1241), and in Norway the period c. 1220-1319. Little is known about the unification process in Sweden, but the kingdom was consolidated around 1250, and the Swedish state emerged in the period before the beginning of the 14th century. The main feature of political



development in the period prior to c. 1319 is the 'centralisation and growth of public authority under the monarchy, the Church, and the secular aristocracy. As a result the three Nordic kingdoms grew into more state-like entities'<sup>31</sup>. The structure of the Nordic kingdoms in the Middle Ages was similar. They were all made up of provinces with their own laws.

Since the 19th century the state formation process has been the central topic in the historical debate in Scandinavia. The discussion has circled around a number of issues, of which the most important will be discussed below.

The struggle between the princes and their factions, and the integration of different regions into the kingdoms through the development of administration, is one such issue. The king was accompanied by a retinue of men (*lið* or *hirð*), whose duties were largely military. The growth of the administration in all the kingdoms was connected to development of this royal retinue and its increasing involvement in both the local and central government. In the debate about the central government, a great deal of attention has been paid to the development of the council of the realm, which, after the king, was the most important institution<sup>32</sup>.

Royal legislation and its significance for public justice have received much attention. It has been claimed that the kings of Denmark 'had no jurisdictional powers [in the Viking Age], and no rights of taxation, [and that] their authority could probably best be described as overlordship'<sup>33</sup>. This view is controversial, but most scholars agree that the growth in royal legislation began in the Viking Age and continued throughout the High Middle Ages, and that the judicial functions of the king and his representatives were decisive for the power, status, and economy of the crown<sup>34</sup>.

Much attention has been paid to the king as a military leader and how the development of the kingdoms in all three countries led to more formalised military organisation, namely the naval levy (*leding* (Denmark), *leidang* (Norway), *leiding* (Sweden)), that was based on provision of ships, crews, weapons and food by the peasantry<sup>35</sup>.

The material basis of the crown has also been an important topic, and it has been underlined that it was weak. In Sweden it has been shown that it was only after 1250 that the material foundation of the king changed and it was possible to build up a new administrative organisation. This topic has received the most attention in Norway, and the economic crisis in the late 14th century has been used to explain why the king moved out of the country<sup>36</sup>.

There has also been a focus on royal ideology. Again this has been of particular interest in Norway due to the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* [King's mirror] from c. 1250, a unique source in the Nordic countries, which stresses the *rex justus* ideology<sup>37</sup>.

The relations between the four major actors in the unification process – the king, the aristocracy, the peasantry, and the Church – have been an important topic in the discussion, and in particular the links between the king and both the aristocracy and the Church, have been contested. Scholars, depending on their political views, have argued that these

two social actors either competed or co-operated. It has also been stressed that the Norwegian aristocracy was, due to its weak material foundation, in a weaker position than the aristocracy in Sweden and Denmark, where the nobility appeared more independent and strong. In Norway, scholars agree that the local kin-based aristocracy was transformed into a service aristocracy during the Central Middle Ages<sup>38</sup>. In the discussion about the relations between the crown and the church, the emphasis has been on the ambivalent relations between these powers; they both co-operated and competed. In the discussion about the ties between the king and the people debate has focussed on the assemblies and to what degree the farmers could influence royal policy.

As already mentioned, there was a chronological shift in the focus of historical debate around 1900, away from the Viking Age and toward the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. This can clearly be seen in the work of the Danish historian Kristian Erslev<sup>39</sup>, who published the second volume in the series *Danmarks Riges Historie* (The history of the kingdom of Denmark) in 1898 under the title *Den senere middelalder* (The later Middle Ages). In his work, Erslev focused on feudalism and the aristocratization of Danish society. His opinion was that feudalism was a negative phenomenon, and that one important feature of the Danish society was that it was not feudal, at least in the European sense of the term. Erslev considered the feudal system as a 'state system', where the king granted land to the aristocracy in return for military support<sup>40</sup>. It was important to Erslev and many of his contemporaries to underline the difference between the Nordic countries and Europe, a tendency which was rather strong in the years before the Second World War.

Erslev argued that the Danish monarchy was a significant actor in shaping society during the Viking and the Early Middle Ages, and in his 'interpretation of history the state seems to develop independently of other factors and almost acquires the status of the ultimate explanation for historical progress in his optimistic view of historical development'<sup>41</sup>.

Erik Arup, Erslev's successor, rejected this idea in his *History of Denmark*<sup>42</sup>, and claimed instead that the Church was the most important social actor in this period. This theory together with Arup's materialistic and anti-nationalistic views, provoked not only the conservatives, as well as a wide range of Danish scholars<sup>43</sup>. Arup's *History of Denmark* became, however, the most important work by a Danish historian in the last century; it was a compulsory textbook at Danish universities until c. 1970 and had a significant influence on numerous generations of Danish historians.

Later generations of Danish historians have, however, criticised Arup and stressed that the Church needed protection from the crown. The viewpoint that the secular leaders had significant influence over the church has dominated the discussion in all the Nordic countries<sup>44</sup>.

Norwegian historiography differs from Danish and Swedish in one important way: a rather strong Marxist influence in the period from c. 1910-1970. It was Halvdan Koht and Edvard Bull senior (1881-1932), who introduced the Marxist approach in opposi-

tion to their teachers, for example the liberal Ernst Sars (1835-1917). Koht and Bull were members of the Labour Party and active politicians, and both became foreign ministers, Bull in 1928, and Koht in 1935-1941.

Koht and Bull stressed the alliance and co-operation between the king and the aristocracy, in opposition to Sars, who emphasised the struggle between these actors<sup>45</sup>. This was developed further by Andreas Holmsen in his 1939 survey *Norges historie. Fra de eldste tider til 1660* [Norwegian history from the earliest times until 1660]<sup>46</sup>. In this he saw the tension between the classes as the cause of the struggle in the 12th and 13th centuries. This antagonism was between the great landowners on the one side (the king, the Church, and the aristocracy) and the peasantry on the other, and resulted in a complete victory for the magnates, who used the king as a tool. Holmsen's book is, without doubt, the most important one written by a Norwegian historian in the last century and was used as a textbook at Norwegian universities until around the turn of the century.

In an article from 1940 Jens Arup Seip (1905-1992) criticised the Marxist approach and especially the notion of the king as an instrument of the landowning classes<sup>47</sup>. He argued that the king was more independent than was previously thought, and that his main task was to balance the interests of different groups in society. This article first influenced historians in the 1960s, especially Knut Helle, who also argued for a stronger empirical approach<sup>48</sup>.

Norwegian historians have debated almost every aspect of the state formation process. There is almost unanimous agreement, however, that the power of the king was relatively weak in the Viking Age, and that it grew in the High Middle Ages, a development reflected in the expansion of the local and central administration, from the second half of the 12th and throughout the 13th centuries. In the second half of the 13th century the king of Norway had gained control over the whole country, so for the first time, it is justifiable to apply the term *stat* (state) to describe the situation<sup>49</sup>.

Swedish historians have paid little attention to the Viking Age and the period to c. 1250. The main reason for this is a lack of sources, and the lack of importance ascribed to this period in Sweden. There is, however, a general agreement that Sweden was divided into a number of petty kingdoms in the Viking Age, that these were more or less isolated from each other, and that this provincial particularism was a main feature of the political development in Sweden<sup>50</sup>.

The 1970s, and furthermore the 1980s, have marked a shift in the historiography of the Scandinavian countries. Under the influence of social anthropology, social and cultural history and the debate about the Icelandic Free State society, new topics were debated among younger scholars. This is especially the case in Norway. There Kåre Lunden and especially Sverre H. Bagge initiated studies of political culture in the High Middle Ages. One important aspect was the focus on the gift-giving process, and the ways in which kings used gifts to build up their power base. This new approach moved the focus of attention from institutions and social structures, to individuals and their behaviour and how politics was actually carried out. This aspect has dominated the discussion

among younger scholars over the last fifteen years, but the older generation has hardly mentioned it in their publications<sup>51</sup>.

Hans Jacob Orning was influenced by this approach in his thesis from 2004, *Uforutsigbarhet og nærvær. En analyse av norske kongers maktutøvelse i høymiddelalderen* [Unpredictability and Presence. An analysis of the exertion of power by Norwegian kings in the Central Middle Ages]. In his study, Orning attacks the notion of the strong state in Norway in the 13th century. He argued that the royal administration was both small and relatively weak, and that the king could only rule through his unpredictability and overwhelming personal presence, thus keeping the local magnates on their toes<sup>52</sup>.

Another scholar inspired by this approach is the Swedish scholar, Lars Hermanson. In his study *Släkt, vänner och makt: En studie av elitens politiska kultur i 1100-talets Danmark* [Kindred, Friends, and Power: A Study of the Elite's Political Culture in Twelfth-Century Denmark], Hermanson analyses the Danish power structure from a socio-political perspective, in order to explain how members of the elite attempted to shape, enlarge and consolidate their political role in Denmark, which to a large extent lacked institutional means for exercising power. The main conclusion is that a prerequisite for a position in the Danish elite was the existence of alliances between relatives and friends<sup>53</sup>.

As mentioned above, there is a consensus among Danish scholars that the king's position in the Viking Age was relatively weak, and that Valdemarstiden (1157-1241) was the turning point for the development of a strong state. In his book *Gammel dansk rett*, from 1983, Ole Fenger argues that the documents from this period do not support this interpretation, and stresses the co-operation between the king and the magnates<sup>54</sup>.

One important difference between the discussion in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden is that there is more consensus in Denmark about the main lines in the discussion. There have been few controversies there, and the temperament in the discussion is calmer than in Norway. Another difference between the Scandinavian countries is that Swedish, and partly Danish, historians have since the end of the World War II advocated a more 'scientific' way of writing history, while the Norwegians' has been more 'rooted in a nationalistic context in which nation building is apparent'<sup>55</sup>.

Many tasks lie ahead for historians in the Nordic countries. Probably the most important is to analyse political culture and how the political game was played, along with the role of networks in this game. Another important field to study is the relationship between the local communities and the central government. State formation, at least in Norway and Iceland, reduced the importance of friendship in the relationship between the local chieftains and the farmers, and the paradox is that neither the new ideology nor the kings' administration managed to replace it. Therefore it can be argued that the ties between local communities and the central authority were actually weakened as a consequence of the state formation process in the 13th century. It is also important to analyse how the changing images of God influenced the ideologies involving the king.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> K. Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, Cambridge 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> I. Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar*, “Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar” 15, Reykjavík 1986.
- <sup>3</sup> S. Bagge, *The Middle Ages in Making a Historical Culture*, in W.H. Hubbard et al. (eds.), *Historiography in Norway*, Oslo 1995, p. 112; J. Rosén, *Tiden före 1718*, “Svensk historia I”, Stockholm 1962.
- <sup>4</sup> A number of articles and books discuss the historiography of the Nordic countries, for example: for Denmark: K. Hørby, *Den nationale historieskrivning i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1978; H. Paludan, *Conceptions of Danish Society during the High Middle Ages*, “Scandinavian Journal of History”, 4, 1979. M.H. Gelting, *Mellem udtørring og nye strømninger. Omkring en symposierapport om dansk middelalderhistorie*, “Fortid og Nutid”, 32, 1985; A. Bøgh, *Mellem modernisme og middelalder. Dansk middelalderhistorie før og nu*, in E. Christiansen - J.C. Manniche (eds.), *Historiens Ansigter*, Århus 1991; P. Ingesman, *Rundt om krisen - dansk senmiddelalderforskning 1965-95*, “Den jyske Historiker”, 75-76, 1997; B.E. Jensen, *In the footsteps of a father. The handling legacy in the 20th-century Danish debates on method and theory*, in F. Meyer - J.E. Myhre (eds.), *Nordic historiography in the 20th century*, “Tid og tanke”, 5, 2000; P.O. Larsen, *Erik Arup og de liberale historikere en tradition i dansk historieskrivning 1840-1940, undersøgt med udgangspunkt i 1970-ernes historiografiske debat*, Copenhagen 2004. For Sweden: B. Odén, *Lauritz Weibull och forskarsambället*, Bibliotheca historica Lundensis, 39, Lund 1975; T. Lindkvist, *Swedish Medieval Society: Previous Research and Recent Development*, “Scandinavian Journal of History”, 4, 1979; C. Trenter, *National history in Swedish historiography 1960-1990*, in F. Meyer - J.E. Myhre (eds.), *Nordic historiography the 20th century*, “Tid og tanke”, 5, 2000; H. Gunneriusson, *Det historiska fältet. Svensk historievetsenskap från 1920-tal till 1957*, Studia historica Upsaliensia 204, Uppsala 2002. For Norway: K. Helle, *Norge blir en stat 1130-1319*. [2. utg.] ed., *Handbok i Norges historie* [1], 3, Bergen 1974. K. Helle, *Norway in the High Middle Ages*, “Scandinavian Journal of History”, 6, 1981; O. Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. århundre*, 4. utg. ed. [Oslo] 1990; S. Bagge, *The Middle Ages*, in S. Bagge, *Udsigt og innbøgg*, “Historisk Tidsskrift”, 75, 1966. For Iceland: I. Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar*. J.V. Sigurðsson, *Noen hovedtrekk i diskusjonen om det islandske middelaldersamfunnet etter 1970*, “Collegium Medievale”, 18, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> See the bibliography in Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit.
- <sup>6</sup> Paludan, *Conceptions of Danish Society during the High Middle Ages* cit., p. 269.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Sigurðsson, *Om Islands statsretlige forhold. Nogle bemærkninger i anledning af etatsraad*, professor J.E. Larsens skrift *Om Islands hidtilværende statsretlige stilling*, Copenhagen 1855. I. Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar*, pp. 20-22.
- <sup>8</sup> In 1911 he published the book *Historieskrivning* [The Writing of History] (K. Erslev, *Historieskrivning. Grundlinier til nogle Kapitler af Historiens Theori*, Copenhagen 1911), where he stressed the difference between writing/narrative and research/science. N. Fulsås, *Norway: The strength of national history*, in F. Meyer - J.E. Myhre (eds.), *Nordic historiography in the 20th century*, “Tid og tanke”, 5, 2000.
- <sup>9</sup> L. Weibull, *Kritiska undersökningar i Nordens historia omkring år 1000*, Lund 1911. Cf. L. Weibull, *Historisk-kritisk metod och nordisk medeltidsforskning*, Lund 1913; L. Weibull, *Historisk-kritisk metod och nutida svensk historieforskning*, Lund 1918; K. Erslev, *Grundsætninger for historisk kildekritik*, Copenhagen 1892; K. Erslev, *Historisk teknik. Den historiske undersøgelse fremstillet i sine grundlinier*, Copenhagen 1911; Fulsås, *Norway: The strength of national history* cit.; Jensen, *In the footsteps of a father* cit.; Trenter, *National history in Swedish historiography 1960-1990* cit.; Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit.
- <sup>10</sup> H. Koht, *Sagaens oppfatning av vår gamle historie*, “Historisk tidsskrift”, 5, 2, 1914; K. Helle, *Hovedlinjer i utviklingen av den historiske sakakritikken*, in L. Eriksson, *Helge Ingstad og Vinland: kjelder og tradisjonar*, edited by J.R. Hagland - S. Suphellen, *Det kongelige norske videnskabers selskab I*, Trondheim 2001.
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- <sup>12</sup> Jensen, *In the footsteps of a father* cit.

- <sup>13</sup> See for example A. Heusler, *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas*, Leipzig 1911; Id., *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit*, Berlin 1912.
- <sup>14</sup> For example H. Hjärne - E.G. Geijer - R. Torstendahl, *Källkritik och vetenskapssyn i svensk historisk forskning 1820-1920*, *Studia historica Upsaliensia* 15, Uppsala 1964.
- <sup>15</sup> N. Lund, *Viking Age Society in Denmark - Evidence and Theories*, in N. Lund - N. Skyum-Nielsen (eds.), *Danish medieval history. New currents*, Copenhagen 1981, p. 24.
- <sup>16</sup> E. Mundal, *Sagadebatt*, Oslo 1977.
- <sup>17</sup> K. Maurer, *Die Entstehung des Isländischen Staats und seiner Verfassung*, Munich 1852; K. Maurer, *Upphaf allsherjarríkis á Íslandi og stjórnarskipunar þess*, translated by S. Sigurðarson, Reykjavík 1882; K. Maurer, *Vorlesungen über altmordische Rechtsgeschichte I-V*, Osnabrück 1907-1938.
- <sup>18</sup> E.g. V. Finsen, *Om den oprindelige ordning af nogle af den islandske fristats institutioner*, Copenhagen 1888; Ó. Lárússon, *Yfirlit yfir íslenska rjettarsögu*, Reykjavík 1932; A. Gregersen, *L'Islande et son statut à travers les ages*, Paris 1937; E. Arnórsson, *Réttarsaga Alþingis*, "Saga Alþingis I", Reykjavík 1945; J.L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power*, Berkeley 1988; W.I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, Chicago 1990.
- <sup>19</sup> Sigurðsson, *Noen hovedtrekk i diskusjonen om det islandske middelaldersamfunnet etter 1970* cit.
- <sup>20</sup> Heusler, *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas* cit.; Id, *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit* cit.
- <sup>21</sup> L. Ingvarsson, *Refsingar á Íslandi á þjóðveldistímanum*, Reykjavík 1970.
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- <sup>23</sup> See for example: J. Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga I*, Reykjavík 1956; G. Karlsson, *Godamening. Staða og ábrif godorðsmanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga*, Reykjavík 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> Sigurðsson, *Noen hovedtrekk i diskusjonen om det islandske middelaldersamfunnet etter 1970* cit.
- <sup>25</sup> Erslev, *Historisk teknik. Den historiske undersøgelse fremstillet i sine grundlinier* cit.
- <sup>26</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power* cit.; W.I. Miller, *Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England*, "Law and History Review", 1, 1983; Id., *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland.*; J.V. Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, translate by J. Lundskaer-Nielsen, "The Viking collection", 12, [Odense] 1999.
- <sup>27</sup> Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* cit.; cf. P.P. Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway. Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts*, "The Northern World", vol. 17, Leiden 2005.
- <sup>28</sup> G. Karlsson, *Godamening. Staða og ábrif godorðsmanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga* cit.
- <sup>29</sup> See for example: H. Þorláksson, *Snorri Sturluson og Oddaverjar*, in G. Karlsson - H. Þorláksson (eds.), *Snorri. Atta alda minning*, Reykjavík 1979; Byock, *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power*; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society* cit.; Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* cit.
- <sup>30</sup> One exception is Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway. Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts* cit.
- <sup>31</sup> Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit., p. 345.
- <sup>32</sup> See for example: Rosén, *Tiden före 1718* cit.; Lindkvist, *Swedish Medieval Society: Previous Research and Recent Development* cit.; T. Lindkvist - M. Sjöberg, *Det svenska samhället 800-1720. Klerkernas och adelns tid*, Lund 2003; Helle, *Norge blir en stat 1130-1319* cit. K. Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt: 1130-1350*, Aschehougs Norgeshistorie III, Oslo 1995; E. Arup, *Danmarks Historie I. Til 1282*, Copenhagen 1925; O. Fenger, *Kirker rejses alle vegne 1050-1250*. O. Olsen (ed.), *Gyldendal og Politikens Danmarks Historie 4*, Copenhagen 1989; Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit.
- <sup>33</sup> Lund, *Viking Age Society in Denmark - Evidence and Theories* cit., p. 29.
- <sup>34</sup> Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit.

- <sup>35</sup> See for example: N. Lund, *Lið, leding og landeværn. Her og samfund i Danmark i eldre middelalder*, Roskilde 1996; G.A. Ersland - T.H. Holm, *Krigsmakt og kongemakt 900-1814*, Oslo 2000. Lund provides a thorough discussion of this organisation in Denmark, and detailed information about the Scandinavian discussion.
- <sup>36</sup> S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang. Utsyn & innsikt*, Oslo 2002; E. Lönnroth, *Statsmakt och statsfinans i det medeltida Sverige. Studier över skatteväsen och länsförvaltning*, Göteborgs Högskolas årsskrift 46:3, Göteborg 1940; T. Lindkvist, *Plundring, skatter och den feudala statens framväxt. Organisatoriska tendenser i Sverige under övergången från vikingatid till tidig medeltid*, [Ny utg.], "Opuscula historia Upsaliensia", 1, 1990.
- <sup>37</sup> S. Bagge, *The political thought of The King's mirror*, "Mediaeval Scandinavia supplements", 3, [Odense] 1987.
- <sup>38</sup> Helle, *Norge blir en stat 1130-1319* cit.; Id., *Under kirke og kongemakt: 1130-1350* cit.
- <sup>39</sup> K. Erslev, *Dronning Margrethe og Kalmarunionens Grundlæggelse*, Copenhagen 1882; K. Erslev, *Valdemarernes storhedstid*, Studier og Omrids, Copenhagen 1898; Id., *Den senere middelalder*, vol. 2, Danmarks riges historie, Copenhagen 1898; Id, *Erik af Pommern. Hans Kamp for Sønderjylland og Kalmarunionens Opøsning*, Copenhagen 1901. An intensive discussion did take place between the Danish historian Johannes Steenstrup and the Norwegian philologist Gustav Storm around 1880 about the nationality of the first Vikings in Ireland, and both of them claimed that the first Vikings came from their respective countries. T. F. Strøm, *Peaceful Traders or Plundering Barbarians? A Study of the Norwegian and Irish perceptions of the Vikings in Ireland* (Hovedfagsoppgave, Oslo 2000). This debate reflects much of the tension in the discussion about the Viking Age in this period.
- <sup>40</sup> Paludan, *Conceptions of Danish Society during the High Middle Ages* cit.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.
- <sup>42</sup> Arup, *Danmarks Historie I, Til 1282* cit. The second volume came in 1932.
- <sup>43</sup> B.E. Jensen, *Danmarkshistorie - en genre i opløsning?*, in B.E. Jensen et al.(eds.), *Danmarkshistorier - en erindringspolitisk slagmark 1*, Frederiksberg 1997.
- <sup>44</sup> Lund, *Viking Age Society in Denmark - Evidence and Theories* cit.; N. Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde og slave*, "Scandinavian university book", Copenhagen 1971; C. Breengaard, *Muren om Israels hus. Regnum og sacerdotium i Danmark 1050-1170*, Kirkehistoriske studier, Copenhagen 1982; J.V. Sigurðsson, *Kristninga i Norden 750-1200*, Oslo 2003.
- <sup>45</sup> J. E. Sars, *Udsigt over den norske historie*, 4 b. vols. Christiania, 1873-1891; E. Bull, *Det Norske folks liv og historie gjennem tidene. Fra omkring 1000 til 1280*, Oslo 1931; Bagge, *The Middle Ages* cit.
- <sup>46</sup> A. Holmsen, *Norges historie. Fra de eldste tider til 1660*, 4. utg. ed., De tusen hjem's bibliotek 4, Oslo 1939. One of his students developed this approach further, K. Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten, 1177-1319*, Oslo 1976.
- <sup>47</sup> J.A. Seip, *Problemer og metode i norsk middelalderforskning*, "Historisk tidsskrift", 32, 1940.
- <sup>48</sup> K. Helle, *Tendenser i nyere norsk høymiddelalderforskning*, "Historisk tidsskrift", 40, 1960.
- <sup>49</sup> Helle, *Norge blir en stat 1130-1319* cit.
- <sup>50</sup> Lindkvist, *Swedish Medieval Society: Previous Research and Recent Development*, Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* cit.; Lindkvist - Sjöberg, *Det svenska samhället 800-1720. Klerkernas och adelns tid* cit.
- <sup>51</sup> C. Krag, *Vikingtid og rikssamling: 800-1130*, "Aschehougs Norgeshistorie II", Oslo 1995; Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt: 1130-1350* cit.
- <sup>52</sup> H.J. Orning, *Uforutsigbarhet og nærvær. En analyse av norske kongers maktutøvelse i høymiddelalderen*, Unipubavhandlingar [Oslo] 2004.
- <sup>53</sup> L. Hermanson, *Slåkt, venner och makt: en studie av elitens politiska kultur i 1100-talets Danmark*, "Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg", 24, Göteborg 2000.
- <sup>54</sup> O. Fenger, *Gammeldansk ret. Dansk rets historie i oldtid og middelalder*, Viby 1983.
- <sup>55</sup> Trenter, *National history in Swedish historiography 1960-1990* cit., p. 83.

## FURTHER READING

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