8

Early political organisation

(a) Introductory survey

THOMAS LINDKVIST

The late Viking Age and the early Middle Ages were a period of fundamental developments in Scandinavian political history. It was then that the three Scandinavian kingdoms originated – in chronological order: Denmark, Norway and Sweden – all of them precursors of the later national states. Norse communities were also permanently established in Føroyar and Iceland. Further north-west, in Greenland, and further south – in Shetland, Orkney, on the northern Scottish mainland and its western seaboard, in the Hebrides, the Isle of Man and Ireland – other Norse communities were the results of Viking Age expansion but were not destined to survive the Middle Ages.

This was also the age when Scandinavia entered the world of script. In the Viking Age foreign written evidence starts to shed light on the activities of Scandinavians abroad, and also provides glimpses of internal Scandinavian affairs. We have seen that the Scandinavian poetry of the Viking Age, in the form of Eddic verse and skaldic poems, was preserved for generations as part of an oral tradition that was recorded in writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These centuries were the heyday of a rich Scandinavian historical literature, dealing to a large extent with the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages (Chapter 15). But writing in the Latin alphabet had already started in the eleventh century as part of the process of Christianisation, and before the end of that century had led to the first but no longer extant recording of provincial laws in Norway. Thanks to the written evidence from the eleventh and twelfth centuries Scandinavian history can be said to emerge from the twilight of prehistory.

It should, however, be stressed that this written evidence is very scarce, partly conflicting, and often hard to interpret. Until the end of the eleventh century Scandinavian documents are conspicuous by their absence, and they are still rare in the following century. The first known is the Danish King Knud's charter in favour of the cathedral of Lund in 1085 (see Chapter 8(b)), but it is only preserved in a copy and its authenticity is disputed. The oldest

extant original document is a Danish fragment from 1135. This means that the written evidence for the formation of the three medieval Scandinavian kingdoms and the Norse island communities of the Western Ocean consists mainly of narratives.

Until about 1100 such narratives are exclusively foreign. Persons, events and conditions in Scandinavia are viewed from the outside by non-Scandinavians, for example in *The Royal Frankish Annals*, *Vita Anskarii*, *Irish Annals* and the geographical survey prefacing the Old English translation of *Orosius*. The last is exceptional in that it renders the account of the Norwegian Ohthere (Ottar) about his homeland and his travels (cf. Chapter 6), the oldest extant description of Scandinavia from the inside. The most comprehensive foreign work dealing with Scandinavian history before 1100 is Adam of Bremen's history of the archiepiscopal see of Hamburg-Bremen, written in about 1075. Adam's work should, however, be used with caution because of his bias and his meagre sources for the more distant past of Scandinavia.

The rich historical literature of medieval Scandinavia unfolded mainly after the three Scandinavian kingdoms had come to comprise most of their later territories and long after the Norse island communities of the Western Ocean had been established. History writing was particularly rich and varied in high medieval Iceland where it developed in close interplay with the far more limited Norwegian historiography. Icelandic skalds served Norwegian kings and composed poems on their deeds, and the works of Icelandic authors on Norwegian history, notably kings' sagas, were not only well received in Norway but were also partly commissioned there.

The Icelandic and Norwegian historical literature, most of it in the form of vernacular sagas, contains the bulk of the written evidence from which modern historians have tried to reconstruct the early development of political and social organisation in Norway, Iceland and the other Norse island communities of the Western Ocean. Modern accounts of the making of the Danish and Swedish kingdoms, too, have been partly based on saga evidence. Denmark did, however, develop its own Latin historiography from about 1100, whereas Sweden remained more of a literary and cultural backwater. Consequently, modern accounts of the political unification of Sweden are much more fragmentary than those concerning the parallel processes in Denmark and notably Norway.[1]

Until the end of the nineteenth century Scandinavian historians found it possible to render, on the basis of what they considered to be truly 'historical'

1 P. Foote, 'Icelandic historians and the Swedish image', in G. Dahlbäck (ed.), *Snorre Sturlasson och de isländska källorna till Sveriges historia* (Stockholm, 1993), pp. 9–39.

narratives, quite detailed and coherent accounts of political events and conditions from the beginning of the Viking Age. But the early twentieth century saw a sharpening of historical criticism that has greatly reduced the confidence of historians in the historicity of the high medieval sagas and chronicles about the distant past.[2] The basis of this criticism has been to doubt the reliability of the oral traditions on which such narratives were based and to regard them as works coloured in various ways by the circumstances under which they originated. It is true that such principles have generally been less influential in practice than in theory. Nevertheless, it has become part of the medieval historians' craft to search for political and ideological bias in medieval historiography and to detect anachronisms and projections of contempory conditions into a more or less unknown past. Sagas and chronicles about a distant past should not be taken at face value unless there are specific reasons for doing so.

The more radical historical criticism of the twentieth century has made students of early Scandinavian history attach increasing importance to evidence other than sagas and chronicles. Legal, social and political structures are reflected in the medieval provincial law-codes of Norway, Denmark and Sweden, and in the laws of the Icelandic 'Free State', but they too are only extant in twelfth- and thirteenth-century versions. Some of the provisions appear to be older but this is in most cases hard to establish beyond doubt. It is therefore a matter of debate how far the extant law-codes will allow retrospective interpretations.

In these circumstances it is necessary to confront the later written material with what contemporaneous evidence there is. In addition to the foreign narratives already mentioned this consists of runic inscriptions, coins, place-names and a vast array of archaeological artefacts and *in situ* antiquities. Moreover, there is a good chance that skaldic poems composed by Norwegians and Icelanders in the Viking Age and the following century, due to their strict and intricate metres (see Chapter 6), had not undergone many alterations before they were written down.

The problem of sources briefly described here[3] necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to the study of early Scandinavian political and social

2 See particularly, L. Weibull, *Kritiska undersökningar i Nordens historia omkring år 1000* (Lund, 1911); H. Koht, 'Sagaernes opfatning av vor gamle historie', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 5:2 (Oslo, 1914), pp. 379–96; O. Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. århundre* (Oslo, 1990, 4th edn), pp. 195–206, 235–43; B. Odén, *Lauritz Weibull och forskarsamhället* (Lund, 1975); K. Helle, 'Norway, 800–1200', in A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), pp. 4–5.

3 See also the overall survey of sources for Scandinavian medieval history in B. and P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation* (*The Nordic Series*, 17, Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 1–26.

organisation. Different types of evidence and methodologies need to be combined in order to establish an overall picture. But it must be admitted that a picture based only on contemporaneous evidence will be fragmentary and incoherent, and that the apparent coherence found in later historical narratives may be false.

The Viking Age and early Middle Ages saw the beginning of political unification in the larger territories, leading to the creation of the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and the Free State of Iceland. Føroyar too became a separate legal and administrative entity, but on a smaller scale. In the south-west the Orkney earls and the Norse kings of Dublin and of Man and the Isles attempted to establish overlordships over more extensive territories. There are no written sources for social and political developments in Finland until the 'Age of Crusades' which started in the mid-twelfth century and led to the incorporation of Finland in the Swedish kingdom.

The early political unification was the outcome of political decisions made by individuals – and of military force. We are partly able to reconstruct this process, more or less reliably, with the help of the medieval narratives, supported by other types of evidence. It has traditionally been assumed that the political unification of the Scandinavian kingdoms was complete when they each had one king who was recognised as the head of, and controlled most of, each 'national' territory; nowadays, however, scholars stress the complexity of the unification process.

We have seen that in the Germanic Iron Age and the early Viking Age, chiefdoms and petty kingdoms existed in various parts of Scandinavia. The power of a ruler was partly based on his ability to acquire wealth by raids and pillage outside his own territory, so that a powerful position could be established and maintained and followers recruited. Plundering expeditions could also lead to the more or less permanent imposition of tribute on external territories that could not be directly controlled by a distant ruler because the means of administration were few in a mainly illiterate political culture.

Violence and plunder was not the only basis of lordship and power. Exchange of prestige products was important and control over ports of trade (emporia) was a significant instrument of power. Lordships were unstable and the rivalries among chiefs and petty kings hard and bitter. Some of them went voluntarily or were forced into exile in western Europe or Russia, where new lordships and social positions could be established. Others became landless Vikings. The colonisation of Iceland, mainly from western Norway, can in part, but only in part (see Chapter 8(d)), be explained in these terms. The political structure of the Icelandic community in the age of settlement, with chieftains (*goðar*) who

exercised personal but not territorial lordship, might, with caution, give some idea of the political structure of Scandinavia proper before the making of the kingdoms.

The early process of political unification involved the gradual development of overlordships; increasingly lordships were ranked into hierarchies. One important way of establishing and maintaining political power was to have subordinate allies in outer districts and distant areas. The underlords were usually local magnates, the most prominent of them were themselves chiefs or petty kings who recognised an overlord by paying tribute or supporting him in other ways. An overlord could gain greater control over external territory by putting his own agents in charge of it. The Danish circular strongholds from c. 980 (Chapters 6 and 8(b)) may have been instruments for a more direct subjection of territories by a royal overlord.

The formation of the kingdoms involved the development of a more elaborate and formalised military organisation. This was required for defensive purposes and eventually also for more advanced offensive enterprises. In all three kingdoms a naval levy – the *leding* (Danish), *leidang* (Norw.) or *ledung* (Swedish) – was put at the king's disposal; by this system the population contributed ships, men and provisions. The professional core of the royal military force was the king's retinue of men that owed him fealty and special service, his *lið* or *hirð*.

The chronology and tempo of the political unification differed from kingdom to kingdom. Danish territories, the richest and most densely populated in Scandinavia, were the first to be united into one kingdom. At a time when land divided and sea united, almost every part of the Danish realm could be easily reached by water. It was thus easier to control Denmark than the much larger and topographically divided landmasses of Norway and Sweden. Moreover, rulers of Denmark were in control of the waterways between the North and Baltic Seas, and their country faced the North Sea and the more advanced and wealthy societies of Western Europe, providing good opportunities to raid and pillage as well as to exchange goods.

In Denmark a strong Jutish kingdom existed from the eighth and into the ninth centuries. Little is known of the extent and nature of this kingdom, but at the beginning of the ninth century its rulers were overlords of Viken, the Oslofjord area of present-day Norway. It may also have controlled other Danish territories than Jylland; at least we know that geographically Denmark then included the Danish islands as well as Skåne, Halland and Bohuslän in present-day Sweden. Later in the ninth century the Jutish kingdom appears to have suffered a period of division and decline, lasting into the early tenth century.

But from about 940 the Jelling dynasty of Jylland expanded its power so that in the late tenth century it ruled most of medieval Denmark and exercised overlordship of at least part of Norway. Its conquest of England in the early eleventh century resulted in a North Sea empire which under the rule of King Knut the Great for some time included overlordship of both Norway and part of Sweden.

At that time, the establishment of separate Norwegian and Swedish kingdoms within their later, high medieval borders would probably not have seemed to be the most likely course of future events. Consolidation of Danish rule over most of southern Scandinavia, combined with an indirect overlordship that reached even further, was an alternative line of development that must have looked, and still looks, at least as natural as what eventually happened. But Knut died in 1035 without having transformed his overlordship of Norwegian and Swedish territories into more permanent direct rule, and the dissolution of his empire followed rapidly.

The breaking up of the Danish North Sea empire and the consequent weakening of the Danish kingdom made it possible for Norwegian kings to establish a more permanent rule over most of their later territory. Now for the first time they managed to control Viken effectively, and pushed the southern border of their kingdom as far south as the 'River' (Göta älv), where, later, the three Scandinavian kingdoms met.

It is true that there had been earlier tendencies towards the consolidation of a Norwegian kingdom, starting at the latest in the days of King Harald Finehair in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. But this was a kingdom whose rulers did not for long exercise direct control over much more than its core territory in the coastal districts of western Norway. Viken appears to have been generally ruled by petty kings, mostly under Danish overlordship, and the rich agricultural districts of interior Østlandet and Trøndelag were beyond the reach of the west Norwegian kings. The situation changed when the Vikings Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson won recognition as kings in Norway in the last years of the tenth century and the early eleventh century, respectively. Their ambition was clearly to establish a new and Christian kingdom, comprising most of Norway. But their reigns were only intervals in the period of Danish domination in Scandinavia. It was only when this ended following the death of King Knut in 1035 that the ambition to bring most of Norway under royal rule was fulfilled by Olaf Haraldsson's son Magnus and his half-brother Harald Hard-ruler.

In Sweden the tendencies towards political unification came later and were weaker than in Denmark and Norway. In the years around AD 1000 the Swedish

king, Olof Skötkonung, seems to have had the same ambition to establish a Christian kingdom as his contemporary Norwegian namesakes, and he is the first king to be associated with both of the two main regions of medieval Sweden, Svealand and Götaland. But for periods it appears that he had to succumb to Danish claims of overlordship. It is not until the late twelfth century that there is evidence of a kingship that was accepted in both Götaland and Svealand and that exercised rudimentary control over both regions. Clearly it was difficult to establish effective control over the vast territories of medieval Sweden.

In the process of political and social transformation Christianity and the Church were of crucial importance (cf. Chapter 7). The establishment of Christianity to the exclusion of other beliefs among most of the populations of Scandinavia proper and Iceland is described in the narrative sources mainly as a result of political decisions. The kings or chiefs who converted and led the propagation of the new creed did not do so for religious reasons alone; Christianity and its ecclesiastical organisation were also means of enhancing their power and prestige, their control over men and land.

Little is known of the social foundations of pre-Christian religion in Scandinavia, but it appears that cultic functions were intimately connected with local social and political power. The new creed and ecclesiastical organisation then served to break down the old pagan organisation of society wherever it stood against the Christian kings, not least by undermining the position of local leaders who opposed the expansion of royal power. In Iceland, however, the leaders of the pre-Christian community, the *goðar*, were also responsible for the official conversion to Christianity which they exploited to their own advantage.

Ideologically Christianity and its clergy provided new and more effective ways of legitimising kingship. As the protector of the Church, and in the early phase also its virtual head, the king acquired an exalted position in society, professed by the clergy to be sanctioned by God in order to promote His will. The clergy were the first and for a long time the only literate royal agents in Scandinavia, in close contact with other countries and familiar with their more advanced systems of government. They consequently played an important role as counsellors and administrators. In Iceland we shall see that the proprietary church organisation, in which chieftains and well-to-do farmers were the administrators of local churches, became a strong base of secular economy and political power.

The political structures that evolved in the three kingdoms and in Iceland had some essential traits in common. There was a gradual transformation

of lordship over people into lordship over territories. In Scandinavia proper, power came increasingly to rest on the internal resources of the three kingdoms. The royal demesnes were enlarged, mainly through confiscations. The populations were put under the obligation of performing particular duties such as sustaining the king and his retinue and contributing to the naval levy. Later, the duties connected with the levy were partly or completely converted into a regular tax, and so were other duties, but to varying degrees in each of the kingdoms.

An administration with incipient tendencies towards specialisation emerged in all three kingdoms, largely within the expanded framework of the royal retinue. The judicial functions of the king and his representatives increased and were of crucial importance for the status, power and economy of the kingdom. Later, royal legislative functions became a basic element in the state formation of the high Middle Ages (see Chapter 12). The *things* were political as well as legal assemblies, and constituted important meeting places between the king and his representatives on the one hand and the local or regional élites and broader population on the other. But the relative influence of the two parties varied from kingdom to kingdom. In this and other respects the local élites of Sweden appear to have kept their influence to a higher degree and for longer than was the case in Norway and Denmark. In Norway the regional *lawthings* were obviously instrumental in paving the way for royal and ecclesiastical reforms whereas the Swedish monarchy was probably in general confronted by a stronger opposition within the framework of provincial *things*.

In so far as Iceland was a political unit in the Free State period it was because the Icelanders accepted a common body of law, and had a hierarchy of *things* with the *Althing* at its summit. It was within this framework that the *goðar* exercised their judicial and administrative functions. Power was, however, increasingly concentrated in the hands of a diminishing number of chieftains and families and was converted into territorial lordships over extensive regions. But no single chieftain had the resources to extend his rule over the whole of Iceland, and the increasingly bitter and destructive power struggle among a handful of leading chieftains and their families paved the way for the inclusion of Iceland in the Norwegian realm.