8 (c) The early unification of Norway

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The political history of Norway in the Viking Age and the early Scandinavian Middle Ages has been dominated by one great theme, the political unification (Norw. *rikssamling*) of the different parts of the country into one kingdom. With this as their perspective Norwegian historians have been working on the period's history for more than 150 years.[1] Most of them have agreed that the unification process did not gain real momentum until the beginning of the eleventh century. Already in the 1850s P. A. Munch (1810–63), one of the founding fathers of modern Norwegian historiography, maintained that 'a new chapter of Norwegian history' could begin only 'after the complete Christianisation and the elimination of the last remnants of Danish rule in Norway'.[2]

At the same time many historians have regarded events both of the ninth and tenth centuries as being decisive for the political consolidation of Norwegian territory. In the social development of the Viking Age, or even earlier periods, they have seen certain determining factors at work which made the unification of Norway natural or almost inevitable. Accordingly the historians of the last two generations have generally laid less stress on historical events and described the unification primarily as a 'social process'. This has implied a deterministic view that is not totally misleading for the period after 1035 when strong forces were working in the same direction. But in the preceding period a wide range of possibilities were open and determinism tends to obscure the fact that for a long time Danish kings made their presence felt in south Norway (see Chapter 8(c)). In dealing with ninth- or tenth-century history one should not let oneself be influenced by the later national borders of Scandinavia.

1 P. S. Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge og kristningen av landet 800–1130* (K. Mykland et al. (eds.), *Handbok i Norges historie*, 2, Bergen, 1977); O. Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. århundre* (Oslo, 1990, 4th edn), pp. 43–75, 156–79, 195–222, 229–56.

2 P. A. Munch, *Det norske Folks Historie*, 1:1 (Christiania, 1852), pp. 459–60.

Working within their different national traditions, Scandinavian historians have not been careful enough in this respect.

The description of Norwegian political unification as a prolonged and almost inevitable process, carried forward by inherent dynamics that were working when not hindered by special circumstances, has also to do with the character of the source material. The sagas and chronicles of Norwegian kings that were put into writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries consider Harald Halfdansson *hárfagri* (Finehair) as the first sole ruler – *einvaldskonungr* – of Norway who united 'all the land between Finnmark and the River' (Göta älv).[3] In spite of the saga writers' admission that Harald's kingdom disintegrated after his death they let the history of a separate Norwegian kingdom originate with him and endorsed the idea that this kingdom was the hereditary possession of Harald's descendants, their *óðal* or 'family property'. Thus, later kings such as Olaf Tryggvason, Olaf Haraldsson, and Harald Sigurdsson *harðráði* (Hard-ruler, the real founder of the later dynasty) were claimed as descendants of the first Harald, which they almost certainly were not.[4]

This long dynastic line was to become a keynote not only of the saga tradition but also of modern Norwegian historiography. Its original effect, and probably also the intention behind it, was to provide the ruling dynasty of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with a distinguished past as well as firm historical ties with the country.[5] This was particularly valuable at times when Danish kings claimed general supremacy over Norway, or more specifically demanded overlordship of certain regions, notably the Viken or Oslofjord area.

Harald Finehair's conquest of 'Norðweg'

Although posterity exaggerated the importance of Harald Finehair there are still good reasons for taking his reign as the point of departure for the political unification of Norway. It is true that we cannot exclude the possibility that earlier kings had also succeeded in bringing more than one region under their rule, but if so their realms disintegrated without leaving evidence of their existence. Moreover, the tendencies towards unification in the ninth and tenth

3 F. Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1. (København, 1912), p. 576; B. Einarsson (ed.), *Fagrskinna (Íslenzk fornrit*, 29, Reykjavík, 1985), pp. 58–65; B. Aðalbjarnarson (ed.), *Heimskringla*, 1 (*Íslenzk fornrit*, 26, Reykjavík, 1979), pp. 117–18.

4 C. Krag, 'Norge som odel i Harald Hårfagres ætt', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 68 (Oslo, 1989), pp. 288–301.

5 *Fagrskinna*, 58–9; Aðalbjarnarson (ed.), *Heimskringla*, 2 (*Íslenzk fornrit*, 27, Reykjavík, 1979), pp. 43–6; Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, pp. 84–8, 97–9.

centuries were connected with specific social and cultural conditions of the Viking Age, which continued to play a role in the eleventh century.

It is also possible that a need among the broader population for political cooperation throughout large areas contributed to the unification process. It has been suggested that the establishment of the *Gulaþingslǫg*, the law province of Vestlandet consisting of the districts of Fjordane, Sogn, Hordaland and Rogaland, was due to such a broader initiative, as was the foundation of the Icelandic *Althing* around 930 (see Chapter 8(d)). But the formation of the *lawthing* (ON *lǫgþing*) of *Gulathing* may still have owed more to royal initiative since royal power was particularly strong in Vestlandet in the mid-tenth century. Such a *lawthing* was different from earlier local public assemblies of all freemen in that it was a representative body for a larger area, consisting of specially appointed men who only met once a year; for a long time it was also the highest judicial assembly in the country and the only one that could ratify laws.

In the early Viking Age, or perhaps even earlier, there was also a *lawthing* in Trøndelag that met at Frosta, but at that time the province of *Frostuþingslǫg* included only Trøndelag proper, not the adjacent regions of Nordmøre and Romsdal to the south and the rest of Norway to the north as it did later. Thus, the establishment of the *Frostathing* cannot be seen as part of a unification process.[6]

The first phase of the consolidation of Norwegian territory, then, is associated with the name of Harald Finehair. In accordance with the saga tradition, in particular the account of the Icelander Snorri Sturluson of around 1230, the battle of Hafrsfjord in south-western Norway in the late ninth century has been recognised as Harald's last and decisive victory over local petty kings and chieftains who opposed his conquests. On the basis of ambivalent saga evidence the battle has been dated to 872 or close to that year. The more radical saga criticism and historical discussion of the 1920s called in question the dating and the importance of the Hafrsfjord battle as well as the whole process of Harald's conquests, described in great detail by Snorri.[7] For various reasons a somewhat later but still uncertain date has been suggested for the battle, but there is no evidence to link the battle with any particular stage of Harald's conquests. It is, however, described in considerable detail in a contemporary skaldic poem, *Haraldskvæði*,[8] and there can be no doubt that it actually took

6 Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, pp. 97–101; Krag, *Vikingtid og rikssamling* (K. Helle (ed.), *Aschehougs Norges historie*, 2, Oslo, 1995), pp. 97–8.
7 Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning*, pp. 235–43, 250–4.
8 Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1, pp. 22–5.

place. It may be considered to be the first major event in Norwegian history for which there is fairly reliable written evidence.

There is some information on Harald Finehair's background although the extant sources leave much unclear. His father was Halfdan *svarti* (the Black), probably a petty king in Ringerike–Hadeland in Opplandene ('the uplands'), the interior part of Østlandet. His mother's name is said to have been Ragnhild. According to the earliest extant saga tradition she was the daughter of a certain Harald *gullskeggr* ('Goldbeard'), petty king of Sogn in Vestlandet, whereas later and more comprehensive sagas paint her as east Norwegian and a descendant of the legendary royal family of the Danish *Skjǫldungar*. This was most likely a view that was developed later; it provided Harald with a more distinguished maternal ancestry, and linked him more closely with Østlandet.[9]

The older texts make Sogn the point of departure for Harald's conquests. But this does not solve the problem of the geographical origin of the unification, since all the saga information dates from a much later period. It is more important that the relatively few occasions when Harald is mentioned in contemporary skaldic poetry tie him and his rule to Vestlandet, notably the southern parts of this region. According to the saga tradition he had several estates at his disposal in this area, and he is also said to have been buried at Haugesund.

When interpreted independently of the later saga texts *Haraldskvæði* seems to indicate that Harald did not, as related by Snorri, come to the battle of Hafrsfjord from the north, attacking the remaining petty kings. Rather he was himself attacked in a south-western kingdom that was already in his possession.[10] The attackers may have come from Agder and Viken, probably as Danish allies. There may have been a connection between the temporary weakening of the Danish kingdom in the decades around 900 and the establishment of a new kingdom in Norway. At least there was a later connection between the loss of power by Harald's descendants in the second half of the tenth century and the restoration of the Danish monarchy under Gorm and Harald Bluetooth (Chapter 8(b)).

The relative strength of Harald's rule is indicated by his contact with the English king Athelstan who fostered his son Håkon, but there is no clear and reliable information of the internal structure of Harald's kingdom. Nevertheless, the tradition that he cooperated with various *jarlar* (earls) may have

9 Ó. Einarsdóttir, 'Harald Dovrefostre af Sogn', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 50 (Oslo, 1971), pp. 163–6; Krag, 'Vestfold som utgangspunkt for den norske rikssamlingen', *Collegium Medievale*, 3 (1990), pp. 183–4, 190–3.

10 K. von See, 'Studien zum Haraldskvæði', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 76 (1961), pp. 105–11.

some substance. One family appears to have played a special role, the so called *háleygjarlar* (earls of Hålogaland, i.e. Norway north of Trøndelag), who in the late ninth century settled at Lade, across the mouth of the river Nid from the later town of Nidaros (Trondheim). In the formation of a new political order in Trøndelag and north Norway Earl Håkon Grjotgardsson was perhaps more important than Harald.[11] Another earl whose name is known is Ragnvald, earl of Møre in northern Vestlandet. Harald's relationship with such earls would probably entail their formal recognition of the king as their overlord but in such a fashion that they would keep a relatively strong and independent position in their own territories. The core of Harald's kingdom appears to have been central and southern Vestlandet.

There is a later saga tradition that Harald appropriated the *óðal*, i.e. the right of landed property, from the free-holding peasants of Norway and turned them into his tenants. This has been interpreted as reflecting the inner structure of Harald's kingdom. He may have kept large bands of warriors whom the peasants had to entertain. The sustenance of those men was probably in the form of *veizlur*, i.e. contributions in kind, either for the king and his men when touring the country, or for his warriors distributed throughout the countryside for more permanent residence. These onerous and repressive measures may have made the freeholders feel that they were no longer the masters of their own land. Håkon, the son of Harald, is supposed to have reversed the development and given the peasants their *óðal* back.[12]

The important role attributed to Håkon Grjotgardsson is largely due to the story told at King Alfred's court in England in about 890 by the Norwegian Ottar (OE Ohthere, cf. Chapter 6). Ottar said that he lived 'northernmost of all *norþmen*' (Northmen or Norwegians), a term that is also known from *Haraldskvæði*, and that he and the other magnates of Hålogaland had large incomes from their taxation of the 'Finns' or Sami as well as from their own arctic hunting and catching. Walrus ivory and other costly products were brought along the Norwegian coast by ship, first to the trading port of Skiringssal (*Sciringesheal*) in Vestfold and from there to Hedeby at the base of Jylland. In the account of this journey Ottar professes to have sailed along the coastal country of *Norðweg* ('north way' or Norway) which he also called 'the land of the *norþmen*'. Ottar's account is proof of the fact that coastal Norway – most probably the western and northern part of present-day Norway, extending northwards from Lindesnes – was at that time

11 A. Holmsen, *Norges historie fra de eldste tider til 1660* (Oslo, 1977, 4th edn), pp. 131–4; Holmsen, *Nye studier i gammel historie* (Oslo, 1976), pp. 61–70.
12 Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, pp. 87–90; Holmsen, *Nye studier*, pp. 84–96.

recognised as a geographical and to a certain extent also as an ethnic unit. The communication along the coast and the probable intermingling of powerful families in the same area may have created conditions favourable to political unification.

The Finehair-successors and Danish supremacy

According to later Icelandic chronology Harald Finehair died around 932,[13] leaving several sons by different women. Two of them had a more prominent position than the others: Eirik, who killed several of his brothers and thus earned the name 'Bloodaxe', and his younger brother Håkon.[14] Eirik was probably the son of Harald's Danish queen and became co-ruler during Harald's last years. Håkon's importance is demonstrated by the fact that he was sent to England to be brought up there so as to forge a link between Harald and King Athelstan. Shortly after Harald's death Eirik was forced to abandon his kingdom and flee Norway. He was active later as a Viking king in York, and fell in battle in 952 or 954 (cf. Chapter 5). When Eirik left Norway the rule passed to Håkon who cooperated closely with Earl Sigurd, the son of Håkon Grjotgardsson.

During his long reign (c. 934–61) Håkon appears to have been on better terms with the Norwegians than his father and brother. Skaldic poems name him 'the Good', and emphasise his positive relations with the farming population. On the basis of saga evidence Håkon is in modern historiography given credit for organising the *leidang* (ON *leiðangr*), corresponding to the Danish *leding*, a naval defence system by which the population put ships and manpower at the king's disposal;[15] it could be mobilised when the country was threatened by attack. The naval levy was probably the reason why Håkon was able to reduce the size of the king's retinue, which had burdened the population economically as well as politically in the reigns of his father and brother.

It may have favoured the establishment of the *leidang* that Håkon and his subjects felt a common need for defence against the sons of Eirik, who, supported by the Danish king Harald Gormsson, perhaps their mother's brother, claimed kingship in Norway; they represented a more repressive kind of rule which it was in the interest of the population to resist. That Håkon had to a large extent to rely on poorly trained peasant soldiers seems to be implied by

13 Ó. Einarsdóttir, 'Dateringen af Harald hårfagers død', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 47 (Oslo, 1968), pp. 30–4.
14 H. Koht, *Harald Hårfagre og rikssamlinga* (Oslo, 1955), pp. 71–8.
15 Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, pp. 262–72; Krag, *Vikingtid og rikssamling*, pp. 97–100.

certain details of wording in the skaldic poems dealing with his battles.[16] In 961 he was defeated at Fitjar on the island of Stord in Hordaland by the sons of Eirik, led by Harald *gráfellr* ('Gray-fur') and supported from Denmark. Håkon died from his wounds when withdrawing from the battle.

The rule of Harald Grey-fur and his brothers only lasted for a period of between five and ten years. They killed Earl Sigurd, who had supported Håkon, but in the long run this brought about their own downfall. Sigurd's son Håkon succeeded in making a deal with King Harald Gormsson who turned against Eirik's sons, most likely because they had been acting too independently. A skaldic poem confirms that Håkon killed Harald Gray-fur in a battle in Limfjord in northern Jylland. After that Håkon (c. 965/70–95) was in control of Vestlandet, Trøndelag and Hålogaland, initially as the earl of Harald Gormsson. In Viken it appears that subordinate petty kings ruled under Harald's overlordship.

Danish supremacy had long traditions in this part of Scandinavia. We have already seen (Chapters 5 and 8(b)) that in 813 Danish kings had gone to Vestfold, a province that according to the *Royal Frankish Annals* was situated on the north-western border of the Danish kingdom. The 'chieftains and people' of Vestfold had rebelled and were now forced back into obedience.[17] Later in the ninth century the Danish overlordship of Viken was apparently no longer effective. But until the thirteenth century Danish kings from time to time made claims to be kings of Norway or at least of Viken. The early kingdom of Harald Finehair seems to have consisted primarily of Vestlandet; this was the case not only during Harald's own reign but also under Håkon and the sons of Eirik. In Trøndelag and further north the earls at Lade were mostly in control.

On account of his upbringing in England King Håkon was a Christian. We have already seen that he tried to encourage Christianity in Norway but abandoned the project when it met with strong opposition (Chapter 8(c)). In the coastal districts of Vestlandet the custom of furnishing graves with grave goods gradually petered out, which suggests that Christianity was tolerated even earlier. But in Trøndelag and some other inland regions the situation was different. Earl Håkon, who succeeded Harald Gray-fur, was according to the skalds a vigorous defender of the traditional religion. It was his resistance to Christian missionary activity that allegedly provoked the breach between him and Harald Gormsson. The ensuing conflict ended with the defeat of a Danish military expedition, led by the famous Jomsvikings, in the battle

16 Holmsen, *Nye studier*, pp. 97–100.

17 R. Rau (ed.), *Annales regni Francorum*. (*Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte*, 1, Darmstadt, 1968), p. 102.

of *Hjǫrungavágr* (possibly a fictive name) in Møre in the northern part of Vestlandet. Earl Håkon's devotion to the ancient gods would seem to indicate that his father, Sigurd, the close friend and supporter of King Håkon, was just as firmly attached to the old religion. This may have been the reason why King Håkon did not resort to force in his efforts to impose Christianity on his people, and in the skaldic poem of *Hákonarmál* it is implied that he died as a follower of the traditional religion, though not a very eager one. Conversely, his enemies, Harald Gray-fur and his brothers, are portrayed as Christians and violent destroyers of pagan worship.

The Finehair (*hárfagri*) dynasty ruled western Norway for three generations with Harald Grey-fur as its last king. The arguments put forward by modern historians in support of the saga tradition that later kings too belonged to the Finehair family are not conclusive.[18] For instance, when several skalds provide Olaf Haraldsson with the epithet 'heir of Harald' or equivalent appellations they hardly refer to Harald Finehair. What we know of skaldic convention, with its fixed patterns of phrasing, rather indicates that the Harald mentioned is Olaf's own father, the petty king Harald *grenski* (from Grenland, south of Vestfold). In the saga tradition Harald Hard-ruler is also said to be descended from Harald Finehair as the eventual result of a love affair he had with a Finn (Sami) girl named Snæfrid. But the story of Harald Finehair and Snæfrid is just a fairy tale which leaves Sigurd, their son and the alleged great-grandfather of Harald Hard-ruler, in even greater obscurity than Harald Finehair's several other sons.

Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson

The events outlined above hardly leave room for the idea of a continual and systematic process of unification as early as the tenth century. This was realised by P. A. Munch when he preferred to write of Harald Finehair's 'conquering together' of various parts of the country rather than his 'unification' (*samling*), taking account of the fact that Harald's conquests did not last.[19] Neither did they cover geographically the whole area that was later to become the kingdom of Norway.

Compared with earlier developments the reign of Olaf Tryggvason (995–1000) appears to have been different. His origins were not in Vestlandet but in Viken where his father is said to have been king under Danish overlordship. In

18 Krag, 'Norge som odel', pp. 296–300.
19 Munch, *Det norske Folks Historie*, 1:1, p. 459.

the first half of the 990s *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions a certain *Anlaf* as an ally of King Sven Forkbeard in England;[20] he is probably the later Norwegian king though we cannot be completely certain. In that case Olaf Tryggvason created a platform for himself in affiliation with the Danish kingdom, now the central political force not only in Scandinavia but also in the North Sea region. At the same time Olaf's Norwegian background and ambitions placed him in the periphery of the vast area which King Sven tried to control, and this may have allowed him a certain independence.

Olaf arrived in Norway in 995 just as a rebellion against Earl Håkon was under way, and succeeded in being recognised as king. Very little is known about him or his kingdom. In the later literary tradition Olaf is portrayed both as a Viking hero and a Christian king, in accordance with heroic and hagiographic stereotypes.[21] In spite of his origin in Viken contemporary skaldic poetry connects him primarily with Vestlandet and Trøndelag. It is possible that he already had a certain foothold in Østlandet and concentrated on building up his power in other parts of the country, but he may also have wished to avoid provoking the Danish king in that sensitive area. Olaf's mother was a certain Astrid from Jæren in south-west Norway and his sister, also named Astrid, married Erling Skjalgsson of Sola in the same district. Erling's wealth and family connections made him the possibly most powerful man of the whole coastal area.

The sagas stress Olaf's role as a missionary king and name three localities where he built churches and negotiated for the conversion of the whole population: Moster in Sunnhordland (southern-central Vestlandet), Selja–Dragseid by the promontory of Stad (northern Vestlandet), and Nidaros (Trondheim) in Trøndelag. There is no contemporary evidence linking Olaf with these localities, but they all appear to be obvious choices for a ruler whose strategy was to consolidate a new kingship and a new faith. Moster and Selja–Dragseid were strategically situated on the shipping route along the coast of Vestlandet, and Nidaros, named after the river mouth where it was situated, across from the earls' residence at Lade, was a natural meeting place between the coastal 'north way' and the rich agricultural districts of Trøndelag. All the three localities mentioned would be natural bridgeheads for a royal power seeking to establish a firmer rule over Vestlandet and Trøndelag, and were to play important roles in the subsequent history of the Norwegian church.

20 D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, I (London, 1979, 2nd edn), p. 234.
21 S. Bagge, 'Helgen, helt og statsbygger: Olav Tryggvason i norsk historieskrivning gjennom 700 år', in S. Supphellen (ed.), *Kongsmenn og krossmenn: Festskrift til Grethe Authén Blom* (Trondheim, 1992), pp. 22–31.

The main factor in bringing about Olaf's downfall after a reign of only a few years was the growing enmity between him and King Sven Forkbeard, who was also influenced by Earl Eirik, son of Earl Håkon Sigurdsson. Håkon had been killed when Olaf seized power and Eirik had formed close ties with King Sven, marrying his daughter Gyda. The final clash was most likely provoked by Olaf's aggressive policy when he interfered in the struggle for Baltic supremacy between the Polish ruler Boleslav and Sven. According to the sagas Olaf assembled a large fleet in Norway with which he sailed south to Danish waters and from there into the Baltic. The king himself was on board the *Ormrinn langi* ('the Long Serpent'), said to be the largest ship ever seen in the north.

All that we really know about the final battle is that it was fought in the year 1000 (or 999), at 'Svoldr' or in Öresund (cf. Chapter 8(b)), and that Olaf fell after having fought against 'two kings and an earl'.[22] Sven Forkbeard now succeeded Olaf as king of Norway. The rule over Vestlandet and Trøndelag was transferred to Eirik Håkonsson in his capacity of Sven's earl, possibly together with his brother Svein. In Viken petty kings seem to have continued their rule under Danish overlordship.

In 1015 Olaf Haraldsson (1015–28) returned to Norway from England. There he had most of the time fought in Danish armies against the English, a fact that the later saga tradition tries to play down or even suppress.[23] But he had also served under King Æthelred and is supposed to have followed him in 1013 into his exile in Normandy. During their stay there (1013–14) Olaf converted to Christianity and was baptised in Rouen.

The political circumstances behind Olaf's arrival in Norway are not fully known. The saga tradition mostly has it that he came as an opponent of Knut who was then fighting for his English kingdom. But there is also some skaldic and saga information suggesting that Olaf had reached an understanding with Knut that allowed him to seek power in Norway. At the start of his reign Olaf met with no real opposition from Earl Eirik Håkonsson or his son Earl Håkon, both of them closely connected with Knut. Eirik was already in England assisting Knut, his brother-in-law, and for one reason or another the encounter between Olaf and Håkon on Olaf's arrival in Norway ended peacefully. But Earl Svein, Eirik's half-brother, raised forces to fight Olaf. They met in a naval battle at Nesjar (Brunlanes) at the southern edge of Vestfold on Palm Sunday 1016. Svein was defeated and fled.[24]

22 Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1, 150–1.
23 Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, p. 116; O. Moberg, *Olav Haraldsson, Knut den store och Sverige* (Lund, 1941), pp. 53–70.
24 Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1, pp. 217–20.

After the battle of Nesjar the new kingdom seemed secure, particularly in Østlandet, and for the time being Olaf was also supported by the magnates of coastal western and northern Norway. He was probably the first king to rule over most of the territory of later Norway. He continued the missionary efforts of Olaf Tryggvason with the help of bishops and priests he had brought with him from England. Christianity was now established among a larger part of the population to the exclusion of other beliefs, and the first elements of church organisation and church law were introduced.

In the 1020s there was increasing tension between Olaf and Knut of which we are not informed in detail, but the skalds confirm that Knut, who was now in control of both England and Denmark, claimed supremacy over Norway in some form or other, a demand that was rejected by Olaf. Olaf now joined forces with the Swedish king Anund Jakob against the overwhelming Danish royal power, after having married Anund Jakob's sister. The two kings attacked Denmark jointly in 1025/26. Knut came from England with a large fleet and counterattacked. In the battle of Helgeå in Skåne (or Uppland, see Chapter 8(e)) Olaf and Anund Jakob had, according to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, control of the battlefield whereas skaldic poems suggest the opposite outcome proclaiming Knut victorious.

At any rate, Knut now entered a policy of actively seeking alliances with members of the Norwegian coastal aristocracy against Olaf. The policy was successful and led to increasing antagonism between Olaf and many powerful Norwegian magnates. A crisis was reached when Erling Skjalgsson was killed in a minor sea battle in December 1027. Olaf now lost support to the degree that his reign collapsed completely when Knut arrived in Norway with a fleet in the spring of 1028. He left the country to seek refuge with his brother-in-law Prince Yaroslav of Kiev–Novgorod. Knut was recognised king of Norway and did what Danish kings had done before in similar situations: he reinstalled Håkon Eiriksson, who was also his nephew, as his earl of Norway.

In 1029 Håkon Eiriksson was lost at sea when returning to Norway from England. Apparently the political vacuum in Norway, with neither king nor earl present, looked promising to Olaf, who late in the winter of 1029/30 started his journey back from Russia to reconquer his kingdom. He was given a Swedish force of considerable strength by King Anund Jakob, and was also joined by his half-brother Harald Sigurdsson (the later King Harald Hard-ruler) and his men. But when Olaf entered Trøndelag in July 1030 he was opposed by a far greater force. The Norwegian magnates allied with Knut had brought with them fighting men from the coastal areas and were joined by a massive levy of men from Trøndelag itself.

The universal resistance to Olaf in Trøndelag may have been caused by his earlier policy of establishing a more 'modern' and European type of kingdom. Most likely, land confiscations which were aimed at the king's opponents were a major cause of this resistance. A particular chapter of the law of *Frostathing* (IV, 50), the provincial law of Trøndelag, presumably deals with land confiscations by the king as a special case of *atfǫr* or *heimsókn* (assault on a person in his home), and lays down the right of resistance to such infringements of the law.[25] In addition, Olaf's royal policy may in general have brought him into conflict with popular feeling and a traditional sense of justice, and this may have contributed to bring about his final downfall. In the battle of Stiklestad in the interior of Trøndelag, on 29 July 1030, King Olaf met his death.

For Knut and his Norwegian kingdom the battle of Stiklestad was a complete victory, but it was only a few years before Danish power in Norway suffered a total breakdown. In 1035 Olaf's son Magnus (1035–47), at that time a boy of eleven, was brought back to Norway from his exile in Russia and made king. Several factors are likely to have contributed to this dramatic change. Knut had in 1030 broken with the traditional Danish policy of ruling Norway through native earls and in accordance with the interests of the Norwegian aristocracy. After the battle of Stiklestad he had sent his own son Sven to be king in Norway under the tutelage of his English mother Ælfgifu (ON Álfifa). According to a contemporary skaldic poem several Danish men arrived with them and contributed to the building up a of new regime.[26] Under the new rule the much hated 'Álfifa laws', as they were later called, moulded on English patterns, were enforced; they expanded the power of the king and the financial basis of the kingdom. The ground was now cleared for a new alliance: between on the one hand the former enemies of Olaf who felt themselves pushed aside by the Danish regime, and on the other the newly established Church which, after an interlude with a Danish bishop as its leader, was again headed by Bishop Grimkell, an Englishman who had been King Olaf's close associate in his missionary efforts and the establishment of the first elements of a Norwegian church organisation.

The two most powerful men in Trøndelag, Einar *þambarskelfir* (one who causes the bowstring to tremble) and Kalv Arnesson, both of them leading men in the former coalition against Olaf, went to Russia in 1034 in order to bring back Olaf's young son and have him accepted as king. Sven and Álfifa now left the country without fighting. According to the later sagas the change in power

25 R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (eds.), *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, I (Christiania, 1846), pp. 172–3; Holmsen, *Nye studier*, pp. 101–19.
26 Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1, p. 300.

was prepared by miracles at the grave of King Olaf, leading already in 1031–2 to an increasing belief in the fallen king's holiness. However, these accounts are vague, inaccurate and self-contradictory. Taken together the evidence seems to indicate that the idea of Olaf's holiness was developed and corroborated by miracle stories in the last part of the reign of Sven and Álfífa, and that it was connected with the accession of King Magnus Olafsson.[27]

The eleventh-century unification

After the official Christianisation of most of the country in the reigns of Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson and the establishment of an elementary church organisation, Norway was on the threshold of finding its way into the family of more established European kingdoms. The presence and expansion of the Church and its services, from which kingship could benefit, laid the foundations for a firmer and more stable political power. Only at this stage could political unification of the country seriously begin. But even if such eleventh-century conditions were generally decisive for the structure and character of political organisation they did not determine the geographic extent of the Norwegian kingdom and its strength in relation to the neighbouring kingdoms. Other forces were at work in moulding the political units that were taking shape in Scandinavia, and as late as the 1030s the situation was still very open with opportunities for other political units to develop.

In this situation the changes that occurred in 1035 were of paramount importance.[28] This was the year when Sven and Álfífa had to flee the country and Knut died in England. The Danish North Sea empire now dissolved rapidly and royal power in Denmark was substantially weakened, enabling the new Norwegian regime to consolidate its power. Had the Danish kingdom been as strong in the 1030s as it was in the previous decade it would probably have benefited from cooperation with the Church in Norway, thereby consolidating its position. But in the event Magnus and the succeeding kings of Norway were the ones to gain from the situation.

The new Norwegian regime was closely associated with King Olaf and his saintly status. Magnus had ascended to the throne as his son, and the next king, Harald Sigurdsson Hard-ruler (1046–66), won his royal position as St Olaf's half-brother. After the defeat at Stiklestad in 1030 he fled east, first to

27 S. Hellberg, 'Kring tillkomsten av Glælognskviða', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 99 (1984), pp. 18–22; Krag, *Vikingtid og rikssamling*, pp. 158–65.

28 K. Helle, 'Norway 800–1200', in A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (eds.), *Viking Revaluations* (London, 1993), p. 10.

Russia and then to Byzantium, where he served in the emperor's Varangian guard, rising to the rank of commanding officer.[29] In this capacity he obviously enriched himself; his gold and silver was an important asset when he entered Scandinavian politics. Arriving in Sweden and Denmark in 1045 Harald seems at first to have contemplated an alliance with the Danish pretender Sven Estridsen against Magnus Olafsson who was at that time king of both Norway and Denmark (cf. Chapter 8(b)), but he changed his mind and worked out an agreement with Magnus in 1046. They agreed to share the Norwegian royal power, both of them with the title of king.

At the death of Magnus in 1047 Harald became sole ruler of Norway. He was succeeded by his son Olaf Kyrre (ON *kýrri*, 'the Quiet', 1066–93) who was in turn succeeded by his son Magnus Bare-leg (ON *berfættr*, 1093–1103). Magnus left three sons: Olaf (1103–15), Eystein (1103–23) and Sigurd Crusader (ON *Jórsalafari*, 'Jerusalem-farer', 1103–30); they shared the kingdom until Sigurd, as the only surviving brother, became sole ruler (1123–30).

Royal and ecclesiastical cooperation helped to consolidate the kingdom at both a national and an international level. The Norwegian kings came to belong to the group of north European princes who were in various ways seeking contact with each other – by diplomacy, negotiations and political agreements as well as by intermarriage. The relations of the Norwegian kings with the international Church were generally satisfactory, with the exception of a protracted conflict between Harald Hard-ruler and the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. The latter complained, apparently with good reason, of Harald's disrespect of his supreme ecclesiastical authority over the churches of the north and of Harald's ruthless treatment of the Church in order to increase his royal income. One of the main issues was that Harald refused to respect the archbishop's metropolitan right of consecrating Norwegian bishops, and had them consecrated elsewhere. On one occasion Harald is said to have answered the protesting envoys from Bremen that he 'knew of no other archbishop or master in Norway than the king himself'.[30] However, the conflict never disturbed the internal development of the Norwegian church. Throughout the eleventh and the early twelfth centuries there was a steady growth in ecclesiastical activity, supported by the kings as well as by magnates and rich freeholders.[31] The building of a great number of centrally located churches

29 S. Blöndal, 'The last exploits of Harald Sigurdsson in Greek service', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 2 (København, 1939), pp. 1–26.

30 Adam of Bremen, in W. Trillmich (ed.), *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches* (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 348.

31 Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, pp. 301–37.

throughout the country was of special importance, laying the foundation for the later division into parishes.

The king was in fact head of the eleventh- and early twelfth-century Norwegian church. The bishops of the missionary period had been members of the royal *hirð* or body of retainers, and continued to be appointed by the king when, from the reign of Olaf Kyrre, they began to take up permanent residences in the most important of Norway's young towns – Trondheim, Bergen and Oslo – in which the kings too resided to an increasing degree. Eventually the Church was able to strengthen its finances with the help of donations of land to churches and ecclesiastical institutions by kings, magnates and wealthy freeholders, supplemented by contributions from the broad mass of the population in the form of building and upkeep of local churches, fixed annual dues for the sustenance of bishops and priests, and fees charged for ecclesiastical services. Particularly important was the first introduction of tithe which probably took place towards the end of the period treated here, during the reign of Sigurd Crusader.

Some of the Norwegian historians under the influence of the Marxist approach to history have suggested that the eleventh-century kingdom was totally different from that of the previous Viking Age, mainly because the economic basis for political and social power had changed. In their view political power in the Viking Age was built on riches from abroad and commercial wealth, whereas in the following period it had to be based on what the land of the country itself could produce.[32] Consequently, the kings had to rely increasingly on the contributions of the peasants and relate to a land-owning élite that gradually replaced the old trading and warring coastal aristocracy. Royal power had to be based on the interests of peasant society and its leaders as a peaceful 'people's kingdom'. This perspective has been fruitful inasmuch as it has drawn attention to the importance of the inclusion of the rich inland agricultural districts in the eleventh-century kingdom, notably those of Opplandene, which were brought under royal control by Olaf Haraldsson and finally by Harald Hard-ruler. Nevertheless, it seems too simple and disregards some fundamentally important facts.

Kingship was, as before, mainly built on armed force. This was most obvious during the reign of Harald Sigurdsson, who gained his nickname 'Hard-ruler' because of his violent regime. In reaction to a rebellion in Opplandene he burnt down large areas while his skalds mocked the victims in scornful verses.[33] Thus

32 Holmsen, *Norges historie*, pp. 158–61; Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning*, p. 275.
33 Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B:1, pp. 343–4.

he turned out to be the same ruthless 'Bulgar burner' (a skaldic epithet) at home as he had been in the Balkans. He also confiscated large quantities of land, which later partly ended up in the possession of the bishop of Oslo. In Trøndelag he demonstrated his brutality by arranging for the murder of two of his chief opponents, Einar *pambarskelfir* and his son Eindride, when they arrived for negotiations.

The Viking Age concept of Denmark, Norway and Britain as constituting to some extent one and the same political and military scene was still influential in the mid-eleventh century. Magnus Olafsson was elected Danish king in 1042 and Harald Hard-ruler tried to uphold this position by annual campaigns in Danish waters until he finally made a truce with King Sven Estridsen in 1064. Harald's expedition to England in 1066, where he fell in the battle at Stamford Bridge, was intended to carry into effect his claim to be Knut's lawful successor to the English throne. The campaigns of Magnus Bare-leg in Ireland (1098–9 and 1102–3) are also best understood as Viking enterprises, and the same goes, to some extent, for King Sigurd's crusade of 1108–11 and his campaign in southern Sweden in 1124.

The comparative strength of the Norwegian kingdom in relation to the Danish after 1042 had a stabilising internal effect. For a considerable period it was not possible, as it had been before, for the Norwegian aristocracy to seek support in Denmark against the Norwegian king. The aristocracy became more closely attached to the king as his liegemen, organised in his *hirð* or retinue. From an early stage the *hirð* had been the king's suite of warriors, his personal bodyguard and the core of his military force, consisting of young men of prominent families and others who were good fighters. To some extent the Christianising efforts of the missionary kings and the building up of church organisation changed the character of the *hirð*. Bishops were included as influential advisers in the inner circle surrounding the king, and on a lower level a clerical element made itself useful in the *hirð*, taking care of religious services and dealing with administrative tasks requiring literacy.

In the reign of Olaf Kyrre the *hirð* was reorganised in a way that reveals a more court-like, civilian character:[34] a new group of *hirð*-members is mentioned, the so-called *skutilsveinar*, a name which derives in part from Old English *scutel*, 'dish'. The *skutilsveinar* were responsible for serving at the king's table and were soon to be separated as a formal group that outranked the ordinary *hirð*-men. Among the *skutilsveinar* were appointed a cupbearer (*skenkjari*) and a seneschal (*dróttseti*); they constituted a new group of *hirð*

34 F. Hødnebø (ed.), *KLNM*, 6 (Oslo, 1961), cols. 568–77.

officials together with the old leaders, the marshal (*stallari*) and the standard bearer (*merkismaðr*).

The top layer of the *hirð* came to consist of the so-called *lendir menn* ('landed men'),[35] local magnates who were attached to the king and owed him fealty and service. A *lendr maðr* received crown land from the king as a personal fief but at the same time enjoyed a substantial income from his own land; it was his prominent social position that made him a particularly valuable ally of the king. In contemporary skaldic poetry *lendir menn* are first mentioned in the reign of Olaf Haraldsson. Their importance increased throughout the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, but their number is a matter of debate; the estimates vary from about forty to about one hundred c. 1100. The *lendir menn* had a wide range of political, military, legal and administrative responsibilities. One of the most important was their leading role in the *leidang* system which was now better organised, and they also represented the king in judicial matters.

In these tasks the *lendir menn* were supplemented by the king's *ármenn* (stewards).[36] The Norwegian provincial laws, which were probably first written down in the late eleventh century but are only known to us in later compilations, confirm the increasing interest and role of the king in judicial affairs. The *lendr maðr* or *ármaðr* of a district had the right of *ýfirsókn* ('higher right of prosecution') on behalf of the king and in this capacity brought cases to the appropriate *thing*, either the local assembly or the higher provincial *lawthing* which functioned as a court of appeal. It was also his duty to see that fines and compensations were paid by people convicted, to the king as well as to private injured parties.

The internal stabilisation and the legal and administrative expansion of the kingdom went hand in hand with the outward consolidation in relation to the neighbouring kingdoms. The kings, not least Sigurd Crusader, did much to strengthen their control over Viken and Bohuslän where Danish power had traditionally been dominant. The Norwegian border was now pushed south to the River (Göta älv) where the town of Konghelle was established, at the latest, in King Sigurd's days.

At the same time the dynastic relations between the Norwegian and Danish kingdoms remained unclear. The fact that in the long run both a Norwegian and a Danish dynasty managed to retain their positions was primarily due to geographical circumstances. It proved difficult if not impossible for one king

35 *KLNM*, 10 (1965), cols. 498–505.
36 *KLNM*, 20 (1976), cols. 446–50.

to extend sufficient power and influence across both Norwegian and Danish territory for a long period. The policy of the Swedish kings also played an important role. Generally they supported the Norwegian or Danish kings or pretenders who opposed actual or potential rulers over both Demark and Norway. This policy of power balance was particularly effective in the period 1020–64, a crucial stage in the process that resulted in three separate Scandinavian kingdoms.