

The Making of the Scandinavian Kingdoms

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This paper has two main purposes. One is to give a brief account of our interpretation of the development of the medieval kingdoms of Scandinavia in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. The other is to argue that there has been a tendency on the one hand to exaggerate the power of earlier Scandinavian kings and the extent of their kingdoms, and on the other to underestimate the importance of the many powerful magnates on whose support they depended.

Before the eleventh century power was not in the hands of individuals ruling well-defined territories, but was shared between, or contested by, lords or chieftains who all had their own retinues of warriors. They tend to be obscured in contemporary sources, such as the Frankish annals and the *Vita Anskarii*, by the attention paid to more important kings. They do, however, figure more prominently in sagas written by Norwegians and Icelanders in the 12th and 13th centuries, although the best known of them, *Heimskringla*, has often been misleadingly described as *Sagas or Histories of the Kings of Norway*. Kings provided the chronological framework, but less attention is given to most of them than to jarls and other chieftains.

Until the 1260s, when the Icelanders submitted to the king of Norway, power in Iceland was divided between numerous chieftains called *goðar* (sing. *goði*). That title derived from the word for 'god', implying a priestly function, although in Old Norse it came to acquire a legal and administrative function.¹ It was also used in Denmark; three tenth-century runic monuments on the island of Fyn commemorate two men

¹ Malika Pande Rolfen, *Kvinner og menn i Heimskringla: eggensken og kongen* (Diss., Hist. Inst. NTNU Trondheim 2002)

² D. H. Green, *Language and history in the early Germanic world* (Cambridge 1998) 33-34.

and proclaimed king while Knud still lived. When Knud died in 1035, Danish hegemony in Norway and Sweden was ended although there were later attempts to revive it.

Sweden was the last of the Scandinavian kingdoms to be established.⁴⁵ During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Svear elected or acknowledged several kings who were Götar. This was an important factor in forming the medieval kingdom. The process was, however, hindered not only by the physical barrier of forest but also by religious disunity. An overlordship did not depend on religious uniformity; the unity of a kingdom required the formal acceptance of the same religion, at least by the leading men. It was not until the pagan cult at Uppsala was suppressed in about 1080, that Christian kings could claim direct authority over the whole of Svealand. Even after that Swedish kings only had direct control over part of the country; elsewhere they were little more than overlords, largely dependent on local rulers called jarls or, in Latin, *duces*. It was not until the latter part of the twelfth century that Swedish kings had to be members of a royal family. Many earlier kings were not, including Sverker, from Östergötland, who was king from about 1132 to his assassination in 1156, and his successor, Erik, who was killed in 1160 and soon regarded as a saint. For the next hundred years all Swedish kings were descendants of these two men. The first ruler to be called *rex Sweorum et Gothorum* was Karl Sverkersson in 1164, and the first who is known to have granted land and privileges in most parts of the kingdom, and who struck coins in both Götaland and Svealand was his successor, Knut Eriksson, who died in 1195 or 1196 after a reign of little more than three decades.

The Christian conversion of rulers was probably the most important factor in the consolidation of the kingdoms. The church brought many benefits. The clergy were literate and members of an international organization based on written law, that by the twelfth century had a relatively elaborate machinery to implement it. They emphasized the role

⁴⁵ Sawyer, *Die Welt der Wikinger* 251-67.

combat Sven's raids in 991 and 994 and, therefore, in 995 they encouraged Olav Trygvason, who claimed to be the son of a minor Norwegian king, to win recognition as king of Norway in order to keep the Danes occupied at home. At about that time Håkon, jarl of Lade, who was Sven's most important tributary in Norway, was murdered. This removed the main opposition to Olav's ambition. Håkon's young sons went into exile and Olav was recognized by many Norwegian leaders. He did not reign long. In 999 he was killed in battle against Sven who thus regained hegemony in Norway. He may have retained Viken in his own hands, but most of Norway was ruled, for Sven, by Jarl Håkon's sons.

After Sven's death the English king Æthelred adopted the same policy as he had done twenty years earlier, by supporting another Norwegian adventurer, Olav Haraldsson, to claim the kingship of Norway. In March 1016 he defeated Jarl Sven, who died soon afterwards in exile. By the time Knud had won England, Danish authority in Norway had been undermined. Knud still claimed to be the rightful Norwegian king, but it was not until 1028 that he invaded Norway, driving Olav with his young son Magnus into exile in Novgorod. Knud revived the custom of ruling through a native jarl. Håkon Eriksson, grandson of the Håkon who had submitted to Harald Bluetooth and Sven, was the ideal choice, but he was drowned in 1029. Olav believed that he could recover his kingdom but was opposed by the men who had rejected him in favour of Knud and was killed in a battle fought at Stiklestad at the head of Trondheim Fjord on 29 July 1030. He was soon regarded as a martyr, and became a symbol of Norwegian independence.

Knud then made the mistake of attempting to impose his own son, Sven, as king under the tutelage of the boy's English mother, Ælfgifu. Danish overlordship had earlier been exercised through native jarls who were happy to acknowledge the authority of distant Danes. The direct rule of an Anglo-Dane was less acceptable; Sven and his mother were soon very unpopular and were forced to leave Norway by 1034. It was in that year that Olav's ten year old son Magnus was brought back from Russia

of kings as upholders of justice and encouraged them to act as law-makers. What is more, the church played an important part in determining the limits of the kingdoms. The archiepiscopal provinces were, in effect, precursors of medieval Norway and Sweden. The province of Nidaros, created in 1152 or 1153, included Iceland and Greenland, and other Atlantic islands that had been colonized by Norwegians, although it was a hundred years before Iceland and Greenland were incorporated in the kingdom. Similarly, the Swedish archbishopric of Uppsala, founded in 1164, included the bishopric of Åbo in south-west Finland, some decades before that diocese was incorporated in the Swedish kingdom. The province of Uppsala, by joining the two Götaland sees with the three in Svealand, was an important factor in unifying these two original components of the kingdom. The provincial councils summoned by archbishops or papal legates were, indeed, the first national councils in both Sweden and Norway.