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Early state formation in Scandinavia

In contrast to many of the other countries discussed in this volume, the question of a break or continuity with the Roman or Carolingian past does not apply to the Scandinavian countries. The Scandinavian state was a completely new entity: the three kingdoms that emerged from the unification process of the ninth to twelfth centuries did not descend from any Roman province. To the extent that these kingdoms had state-like qualities in their internal organisation, these qualities were developed in the period after the unification and were not revivals from the past. From this point of view, the period of territorial state formation from about 800 to 1050 – and even later in the case of Sweden – can be compared to the formation of the Germanic kingdoms in the 4th to 6th centuries. There has been considerable discussion about whether or not we can use the term state in relation to the Middle Ages, particularly the early Middle Ages,¹ but as the present article mainly deals with territorial consolidation, I shall here use the term in the vague and broad sense of a larger territory permanently held together under one ruler.

The origin of a country is an important problem in historiography, and much time and effort have been spent in describing how and why the various present-day nation-states of Europe came into being. This is also the case in Scandinavian scholarship, where the ‘unification’ of each kingdom has had a prominent place. There is a certain national teleology in this concept. The country has been there from the beginning; its unification is an inevitable process, ending with the approximate present-day borders. Actually, the formation of the Scandinavian kingdoms is as much about division as about unification. The area was divided between three centres of power that eventually developed stable borders between them. Scandinavia was culturally and linguistically homogeneous. Even in the thirteenth century the term ‘Danish tongue’ was used for the language throughout the area. There were different dialects, but the lines of division between them did not correspond to the later national borders. Religion and customs were also similar, during the pagan as well as the Christian periods. Thus, no cultural or linguistic distinctions prevented unification of each country. Nor, on the other hand, did such distinctions give rise to natural borders between the kingdoms that eventually emerged.

It is hardly possible to present a general theory of state formation covering all known cases; nor can state formation be described as a continuous process. There may be trends in this direction that are broken off, permanently or temporarily, and there is dissolution of states as well as formation of them.² We can nevertheless point to some necessary conditions. A certain density of population and an economic surplus is necessary for the existence of a ruling elite, and the larger the population, the greater the likelihood of conflicts, which necessitate stronger government.³

Agriculture in Scandinavia goes back to around 4000 B.C., and large parts of what later became the three kingdoms were settled already by the beginning of the Viking Age. Evidence from place names

¹ See Johannes Fried, *Der karolingische Herrschaftsverband im 9. Jh. zwischen ‘Kirche’ und ‘Königshaus’*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 235 (1982) 1–43; id., *Gens und regnum. Wahrnehmungs- und Deutungskategorien politischen Wandels im früheren Mittelalter. Bemerkungen zur doppelten Theoriebindung des Historikers*, in: *Sozialer Wandel im Mittelalter. Wahrnehmungsformen, Erklärungsmuster, Regelungsmechanismen*, ed. Jürgen Miethke/Klaus Schreiner (Sigmaringen 1994) 73–104, bes. 92–104; Hans Werner Goetz, *Regnum. Zum politischen Denken der Karolingerzeit*, in: *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Germ. Abt.* 104 (1987) 110–189, at 113–116, 170–173 and 183–189.

² Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge 1986) 49–72.

³ *The Early State*, ed. Henri J.M. Claessen/Peter Skalnik (New Babylon studies in the social sciences 32, Den Haag ³1978); Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel. A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13000 Years* (London 2005) 276–279.

suggests population increase and expansion of agriculture during this period, which have been considered important factors in state formation. Although there is little evidence and much discussion about social structure in the pre-state period, there is now a tendency to regard the Scandinavian countries as relatively aristocratic already during the Roman and Merovingian periods and to assume the existence of large estates owned by great lords and with ordinary people as clients or even tenants.⁴ Place names as well as archaeological evidence suggest the existence of lordship and government within smaller areas than the later kingdoms, although it is difficult to know the exact location and extent of these units.⁵ 'Unification' clearly means the rise of larger political units, but does it also mean some qualitative change, like a more complex organisation or – perhaps most important – greater stability? Size is an important factor in discussions of the rise of kingdoms, in the Middle Ages as well as in other periods. Thus, France was created when Clovis conquered various smaller lordships and kingdoms around 500; England, when Alfred and his successors united the various Anglo-Saxon principalities against the Vikings in the late ninth century; and the kingdoms of Scandinavia and East Central Europe, through smaller principalities being merged into larger, normally by military conquest. There would seem to be a general tendency in the direction of larger and possibly more permanent political units in the whole area in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

This development is difficult to explain in terms of general social needs. In dry and densely settled river areas like in Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, and the Ganges region of India, state formation has been explained by the need to control and maintain irrigation systems ('hydraulic societies'), although even here, some scholars have objected, arguing that the actual political organisation by far exceeds what is necessary to maintain the irrigation systems. Northern and East Central Europe offer no parallel to these systems, with the possible exception of the dikes of Holland, which, however, only formed the basis of a very small political unit. Trade might be a factor, but the main centres of trade in medieval Europe, Northern Italy and the Netherlands, were also the most divided politically, and the most important transport artery, the Rhine, went through an area of extreme political division and was notorious for its many toll stations.⁶ Thus, the optimal size of a political unit is not determined by social and economic factors or the needs of its inhabitants, but by the size of other, competing political entities, a fact that once more points to the importance of division rather than unification. Nor can Scandinavia be isolated from the rest of Northern Europe; it is hardly a coincidence that the formation of kingdoms took place at about the same time in both Scandinavia and East Central Europe.

THE RISE OF THE SCANDINAVIAN KINGDOMS

The common factor uniting the whole of Northern and East Central Europe is the rising power of Germany, the neighbour of Denmark, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary. It seems a likely assumption that unification in all four countries was connected to pressure from this powerful neighbour. This pressure was political, military and religious; thus, there was a temporal as well as causal connection between Christianisation and state formation. Norway and Sweden, which did not border Germany, were affected indirectly by Denmark. From this point of view, political unification becomes a defensive measure. It can also, however, be understood against the background of an offensive from the peoples in the periphery against the settled areas of Western Christendom, namely the Slav and Magyar invasions in Germany and the Scandinavian Viking expeditions.

The Viking expeditions contributed to military specialisation as well as to the creation of an economic basis for stronger principalities by giving chieftains the gold, silver, and luxury items that could be used for gaining followers. Gift exchange was an important political and economic factor in the Viking age as well as later, and both royal generosity and the valuable objects that were given are

⁴ Bjørn Myhre, *The Iron Age*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia 1: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 60–93.

⁵ Myhre, *Iron Age 72–77*; Michael Bregnsbo/Kurt Villads Jensen, *Det danske imperium. Storhed og fald* (Copenhagen 2004) 14–39.

⁶ Michael M. Postan, *The trade of medieval Europe: the North*, in: *The Cambridge Economic History 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*, ed. Michael M. Postan/Edward Miller/Cynthia Postan (Cambridge²1987) 168–305, at 184.

celebrated in the skaldic poetry.⁷ The wealth from the Viking expeditions made it possible for chieftains to attach more men to their service than earlier – men who could in turn be used to gain further wealth. However, this wealth was likely to increase the number of chieftains as well as that of their followers, and consequently did not necessarily lead to larger political units. Nor did the surplus necessarily have to be spent on creating national kingdoms. Many chieftains preferred to establish themselves abroad, in the British Isles, Normandy, or Russia. Moreover, as long as it was easy to gain wealth from Viking expeditions, the principalities that emerged were likely to be unstable: new chieftains with fresh resources might easily expel the old ones. This happened repeatedly in Norway in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. Consequently, the Viking expeditions seem to have made available a greater surplus to be invested in lordship, created greater ambitions among the chieftains, and led to more intense struggles between them, but did not directly lead to consolidated kingdoms. This rather seems to have resulted from the end of the Viking expeditions. When the strengthening of feudal Europe in the eleventh century had put an end to the Viking expeditions, the only way for ambitious chieftains to gain wealth and power was within Scandinavia. In this respect, Scandinavia conforms to the kingdoms of East Central Europe whose emergence also coincides with the end of the raiding expeditions against Germany and other parts of Western Christendom: the Slavs were defeated by Henry I in 929 and 933, and a Polish duchy emerged a few decades later. The Hungarians were defeated by Otto I in 955, and the principality – from A.D. 1000, the kingdom – of Hungary was established towards the end of the century.

The division of Scandinavia between the three kingdoms that resulted from this unification process can largely be explained by geopolitical factors, above all the importance of sea power. The elegant, well-built Viking ships could move quickly over great distances. Moreover, they could carry provisions for considerably longer periods than an army moving over land, which was usually confined to three days.⁸ The Scandinavians could therefore plunder as well as build principalities throughout the entire area around the North and the Baltic Seas and were in frequent contact with its kings and princes.

Denmark is the earliest of the Scandinavian kingdoms, which seems likely for internal as well as external reasons. Denmark was actually the leading country in Scandinavia until the ascendance of Sweden in the seventeenth century, because of its wealth in agricultural land and its large and densely settled population. There is evidence of powerful Danish chieftains from the first centuries A.D. onwards,⁹ but we do not know to what extent their realms corresponded to the later borders of Denmark. It is also uncertain whether the Danish kings mentioned in Carolingian sources from the early ninth century imply the existence of a kingdom of Denmark or if the kings in question were simply chieftains with whom the Carolingians came in touch.¹⁰ It is possible to follow a series of rulers until the middle of the century, when there seems to be an eclipse for about a hundred years, either because the kingdom dissolved or because of the decline of the Carolingian Empire, which put an end to its attempts to christianise and subordinate the Danish rulers and thus to information about Denmark in Carolingian sources.¹¹ A revival seems to have occurred in the mid-tenth century with Harald Bluetooth who, in the inscription on the Jelling stone, boasts of having conquered the whole of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian. It is uncertain whether Denmark was united from Jutland or from the islands, but the Bluetooth dynasty is most likely to have had its basis in Jutland. A power controlling Jutland could of course easily conquer the surrounding islands as well as the coast on the

⁷ Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers* (Odense 1997) 117–132.

⁸ Mann, *Sources of Social Power* 9 f. and 137–139.

⁹ See note 4.

¹⁰ Ildar Garipzanov, *Frontier identities. Carolingian frontier and gens Danorum*, in: Franks, Northmen and Slavs. *Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Patrick J. Geary/Ildar Garipzanov/Przemysław Urbańczyk (Turnhout 2008) 113–143, at 113–125.

¹¹ For the following, see Peter Sawyer, *Da Danmark blev Danmark. Fra ca. år 700 til ca. 1050*, in: *Gyldendal og Politikens Danmarkshistorie* 3, ed. Olaf Olsen (Copenhagen 1988) 105–129; Niels Lund, *Scandinavia c. 700–1066*, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History* 2: c. 700–c. 900, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1995) 202–227; Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, *The Danish kingdom. Consolidation and disintegration*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* 1: *Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 353–368.

other side of Øresund, Scania. This area was separated from the core areas of the Swedish kingdom by forest and thinly populated land. The Danes might also expand further north along the coast and were as likely to get control of the Oslofjord area as the Norwegians.

The rise of the Danish kingdom in the early ninth century may well have had its background in Frankish pressure. The conquest of Saxony by Charlemagne made the Carolingian Empire Denmark's neighbour to the south and opened up Denmark for Carolingian conquest or penetration, while at the same time presenting a model for an ambitious conquering king. In a similar way, the final conversion of the country to Christianity around 965 is clearly connected to the rise of Ottonian power to the south, coming just after Otto I's victory over the Hungarians at the Lech in 955 and his invasion of Italy and imperial coronation in 962. It also coincides with the conversion of Poland, traditionally dated to 966, and is preceded by the conversion of Bohemia some decades earlier and followed by that of Hungary some decades later. Soon war broke out between Harald and Otto II. After Otto I's death in 973, Harald attacked Saxony. Otto made a counterattack the following year, conquered Haithabu and Dannevirke and possibly larger parts of Jutland, which, however, Harald was able to regain after Otto's defeat against the Saracens in 983.¹²

The Christianisation of Germany's neighbours, on which we have very little information, may alternatively be regarded as the result of increasing German influence or as a countermeasure to avoid being absorbed by German power – thus in both cases as provoked by increasing German strength. The unification may be regarded in a similar way. Germany may have served as a model for the conquering king, who at the same time could use German pressure to gain support for himself: that is, the magnates and petty kings would have to choose between submitting to the Germans or to a 'national' conqueror. However, the rise of the Danish kingdom under Harald and his successors was not only a defensive but also an offensive measure. The Vikings gradually operated on a larger scale, and under Harald's son and successor, Sven Forkbeard, the raids on England developed into systematic conquest, which was completed by Sven's own son, Cnut the Great, who for a short time (1028–1035) ruled a North Sea empire comprising England, Denmark, and Norway.

The kingdom of Norway is the next in the series.¹³ The sagas depict Harald Finehair (late ninth century to c. 930) as its founder, and either state or imply that he conquered various smaller principalities until he had made himself lord of the whole country. The most widespread opinion today is that Harald's kingdom was confined to Western Norway, with suzerainty over or possibly an alliance with Trøndelag and Northern Norway. Meanwhile the southeastern part of the country belonged to the Danish sphere of influence, and the inner parts were ruled by local magnates. Very little is known about Harald: most of the details in the later sagas are unreliable. Although nothing much is known about Danish power at the time, Harald's unification may possibly be a reaction against Danish dominance during the previous period, and his victorious battle at Hafrsfjord, south of present-day Stavanger, may have checked an attempt at Danish revival, although without Harald being able to conquer the areas more firmly under Danish control or suzerainty. The following period, until the mid-eleventh century, was characterised by struggles among Harald's descendants and also between them and various other pretenders, in which the Danish kings frequently interfered and during longer periods were able to establish a more or less direct control over the country.

In modern times, when land communications are the most important, the Norwegian landscape presents formidable obstacles to communication, whereas Norway in the Middle Ages had the advantage of excellent sea communications, with a long, protected coast that could be used throughout the year, since the sea in the area rarely freezes in winter. Under such conditions, Norway was one of the easiest countries of Europe to unite. The country had the further advantage that no single part of it could be easily defended against the rest. Once united, the country might more easily remain united. On the other hand, if all powers along the coast are equally strong, what are the odds for one of them conquering the others? Normally, unification would seem to have its origin in one centre of particular

¹² Lund, *Scandinavia* 218; cf. somewhat differently in Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, *The making of the Danish kingdom*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia 1: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 175f.

¹³ For the following, see Claus Krag, *The early unification of Norway*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia 1: prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 411–420 with references.

strength, either economically or militarily, or to be imposed from abroad. In the case of Norway, the western coast would seem the most likely starting-point, both because it was the part of the country that could most easily be controlled by a fleet and because it was well located for conquests to the east and north. The first stage of the unification also conforms to this reasoning but not the following ones. Actually, all the main regions of the country except Northern Norway were at some point the stronghold of the central power, and during the last and decisive phase, Western Norway apparently played a subordinate role. Thus, external factors would seem to have been particularly important in the case of Norway. Two such factors are the Viking expeditions and Danish expansion.

The Danish king from early on had a firm basis in cultivated land, probably also in the trading centre of Haithabu, and was able to combine these resources with surplus from Viking expeditions to embark on ambitious projects of foreign conquest from the late tenth century. Viking surplus probably also had some importance in the rise of the kingdom of Sweden, although, given the inland character of this country, the degree of its importance is more doubtful. By contrast, Norway is the Viking kingdom par excellence, as all of its rulers between around 930 and 1066 had a Viking or mercenary background and most of them came directly from abroad to take power in the country. Norway had less agricultural land than its two neighbours, but the Norwegians had access to highly valuable merchandise – the furs of Northern Norway and the Kola Peninsula – and were also well placed, together with the rest of Scandinavia, to act as intermediaries on the trade routes between Russia and Byzantium and Western Europe. The first Norwegian mentioned by name in history was actually engaged in the fur trade. This was Ottar of Hålogaland, whose narrative of his journey from Northern Norway to King Alfred's court in Wessex was written down in Anglo-Saxon as a preface to a translation of Orosius.¹⁴

Danish support largely seems to have decided the struggle for power in Norway in the tenth century. The Danish king may also have controlled the southeastern part of the country, although the relationship between his overlordship and the regional magnates is unclear. In the early eleventh century, the fall of the two missionary kings, Olav Tryggvason (995–1000) and even more importantly St Olav Haraldsson (1015–1030), led to more direct Danish control, which finally turned out to backfire. The break-up of Cnut the Great's empire after his death in 1035 must certainly have contributed to this, but the more fundamental fact was that lordship over the country was based on a combination of military pressure and alliances with local chieftains. The period 1030–1035 would then seem to illustrate the problems in establishing direct rule. Its introduction might easily unite the local aristocracy in opposition to the intruder, as well as secure that this opposition rallied around an alternative ruler over the whole country, which was actually what happened when Olav's friends and enemies joined together in an alliance against the Danish rulers. Thus, first Danish support and then reaction against Danish dominance were important factors in the creation of the kingdom of Norway.

From a Danish point of view, controlling the whole of the Norwegian coast would imply long lines of communication. This would in turn necessitate that this aim was given high priority, which does not seem to have been the case during the period in question. Moreover, attempts at conquest also led to reactions from the Norwegians and to the emergence of a rival power. Once such a kingdom was established, it would be able to compete with the Danes for the control of the Oslofjord area. The outcome was uncertain for a long time, and the Danes tried to gain it as late as in the mid-twelfth century. There is hardly any geopolitical inevitability in the Norwegian victory in this case, but it may be explained by the fact that the king of Norway was likely to give higher priority to this problem than was the king of Denmark who had other fields of expansion, notably Northern Germany and the southern shore of the Baltic Sea. This was particularly the case under Olav Tryggvason and his successors who had their core area here.

An important factor in this context is the late unification of Sweden, which also has its own geopolitical explanation. Admittedly, Rimbert mentions a Swedish king in the mid-ninth century, but he was

¹⁴ Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Othere and Wulfstan, ed. Niels Lund (New York 1984); Else Roesdahl/Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, Viking Culture, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia 1: prehistory to 1250*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 121–146, at 122f.

probably a local ruler in the area near Birka in the Mälär region.¹⁵ Sea power was important in Sweden as well, but the political unification seems to have centred around the great lakes rather than the coast. Sweden naturally falls into two parts, Götaland in the west around the lakes of Vänern and Vättern, and Svealand in the east, around Lake Mälaren. The two regions were divided by dense forests, and few kings were able to exert control over both of them before the mid-thirteenth century.¹⁶ By that time, the coastal region of Götaland had already been divided between Norway and Denmark. Only in the mid-thirteenth century was the king of Sweden able to gain a tiny corridor out to the sea at the mouth of Göta Älv, near present-day Gothenburg. Dense forests also separated both regions from Scania, which therefore came to belong to Denmark. By contrast, there was less foreign competition in the east, so that the principality of Svealand was not only able to reach the coast but also to expand on the other side of the Baltic Sea, in the southern and western part of present-day Finland. In the inter-Nordic struggles, however, the Swedish king for a long time had to confine himself to supporting the weaker power in the Danish-Norwegian struggles in order to prevent the unification of both countries under one king. Thus, Swedish intervention may have been of some importance, both in separating Norway from Denmark and in securing Norwegian control of Viken, which from a Swedish point of view had the advantage of preventing the same power from controlling both sides of the Göta Älv.¹⁷

There is also a correspondence between the formation of the Scandinavian kingdoms and the new religion, Christianity.¹⁸ As far as we know, religion and political power were closely connected in the pagan period. There was apparently no professional priesthood; the chieftains acted as cultic and religious leaders. We may imagine that the position of chieftain was not particularly stable; there was probably competition between several leading men for local power. Nor would it be impossible for a newcomer, returning from abroad with booty and armed men from Viking expeditions, to establish himself as the leader of some area. It would probably also be possible, although more difficult, for him to become the overlord of a larger number of such chieftains, as apparently Harald Finehair did when he “united the whole of Norway”, or at least made himself the lord over the western coast. However, nothing in the pagan religion gave any support to this kind of lordship. By contrast, Christianity was a unitary religion, with one cult, one God and a professional cult organisation that immediately abolished the religious importance of local chieftains. The sources occasionally draw the parallel between the rule of one king and the belief in one God, thus indicating the logical connection between the new religion and larger political entities. Further, although the king was not necessarily the head of this organisation, he had considerable control over it in the early Middle Ages, notably in a country where Christianity was a new religion. Admittedly, the ecclesiastical organisation must have been too weak in the beginning to add very much to the king’s power. Nevertheless, Christianity had a centralising effect in virtue of being a new religion. The struggle for this religion gave the king the opportunity to

¹⁵ Rimbart, Vita Ansgari (ed. Werner Trillmich, Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches. Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, Darmstadt 2000) 16–133, chapter 11, 19 etc.

¹⁶ There is less evidence for the early history of Sweden than for that of the two other countries, and opinions about the process have been widely divided. It is clear that there was a strong division between Svealand and Götaland and that few kings controlled both regions until the second half of the twelfth century, probably not really until the Earl Birger around 1250. See Peter Sawyer, *När Sverige blev Sverige* (Alingsås 1991); Thomas Lindkvist, *Kings and Provinces in Sweden*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia 1: prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003) 221–234; Nils Blomkvist, *The Discovery of the Baltic. The Reception of the Catholic World System in the European North, A.D. 1075–1225* (Leiden 2005) 579–623.

¹⁷ Krag, *Unification of Norway* 200f.

¹⁸ For the following, see Sverre Bagge, *Christianization and state formation in early medieval Norway*, in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30 (2005) 107–134, at 114–116; Michael Gelting, *The kingdom of Denmark*, in: *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge 2007) 73–120, at 80–97; Sverre Bagge/Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, *The kingdom of Norway*, in: *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge 2007) 121–166, at 135–141; Nils Blomkvist/Stefan Brink/Thomas Lindkvist, *The Kingdom of Sweden*, in: *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge 2007) 167–213, at 179–189.

replace a number of powerful chieftains with men loyal to himself who, as protagonists of the new religion, needed his support.

It may be argued that this explanation completely ignores religious and cultural factors and regards people at the time as acting solely out of rational self-interest. The answer to this is that such considerations are fully compatible with a religious attitude. First, there was hardly a sharp distinction between the religious and secular spheres in the early Middle Ages, certainly not in paganism and considerably less in Christianity than in later ages. We must assume rather a close connection between religious and political considerations that made kings seek the most powerful ally on earth as well as in heaven; success in the secular field might easily be transferred to the religious one. Second, contemporary religion was not an objective system of dogma, but rather intensely personal, so that there was a strong connection between attachment to a leader and attachment to his gods.

The kings' role in Christianisation was particularly strong in Norway, corresponding to the fact that most Norwegian kings in the period had a Viking background. In this respect, England was equally important or even more so than Germany; the main impulses in Norway and Sweden came from England, and even Denmark was influenced by England. English kings and ecclesiastical leaders eagerly supported the mission, but politically, England was too weak to exert any pressure on the Scandinavian countries. The missionaries therefore had to seek protection from indigenous kings. Thus, the first attempt to introduce Christianity to Norway was made by Håkon Haraldsson the Good (king c. 930–960), who had been brought up at the English court, and the final conversion was achieved by Olav Trygvason and St Olav Haraldsson, who each had a background as a Viking or mercenary in England. Although the sagas may have exaggerated the importance of the kings, there can hardly be any doubt of their role in organizing the Church and establishing Christianity as the only lawful religion. However, the kings' attitude can hardly be the whole explanation of the Christianisation of Norway. It is difficult to imagine that a king could get sufficient support for introducing Christianity unless there already were a number of Christians in the country. There are few written sources about the Christianisation of Sweden, but it seems to have been a more gradual process than in Norway, from Ansgar's visit in the mid-ninth century to the final victory of Christianity in the late eleventh and early twelfth century. Foreign missionaries are also more prominent in the sources on the Christianisation of Denmark, in addition to the fact that pressure from abroad, from the powerful ruler south of the border, played an important part. Although Harald Bluetooth boasts at having converted the Danes to Christianity, it is probable that he had to share the honour with a number of German and English missionaries in the previous period, as well as Emperor Otto I.

THE EARLY SCANDINAVIAN STATE

As there was no dynastic, institutional or other continuity from the Roman Empire to the Scandinavian kingdoms, the main carrier of Roman tradition was the Church. A royalist ideology, the concept of office and a bureaucratic or quasi-bureaucratic administration were introduced following the formation of the kingdoms. Although the medieval Church was far from being a Weberian bureaucracy, its introduction to Scandinavia marks a decisive step in the direction of bureaucratization. The Church, particularly the post-Gregorian Church, introduced the idea of office and hierarchy. The ecclesiastical organisation consisted of officers, from the local priest to the pope at the head of the whole organisation, who were supposed to act, not on their own behalf, but on behalf of the organisation to which they belonged. Through common rules of behaviour and of rights and duties, through education and also, from the eleventh century – or the late twelfth or thirteenth century in Scandinavia – through celibacy, the Church tried and at least partly succeeded in introducing an esprit de corps among its servants. In its capacity as an organised hierarchy, the Church could insist on obedience from inferiors to superiors in a way that might serve as a model for the secular organisation. Even as late as in the mid-thirteenth century, the Norwegian treatise *The King's Mirror* uses the ecclesiastical hierarchy as an example when teaching the king's men the importance of obedience: if the priest disobeys his bishop or the bishop his superior, they are to be deposed from their offices. And Saul's sin is worse

than David's, not because it is worse in itself not to kill the Amalekites than to commit adultery and kill in order to cover up the sin, but because Saul's sin was the result of disobedience.¹⁹

The influence of the Church on the organisation of society was probably modest until well into the twelfth century, as its own organisation was slow to develop.²⁰ Three Danish dioceses were established already in 948 but probably did not function in practice. An effective diocesan organisation was not introduced until the 1020s, under Cnut the Great. In the following period, there were rivalries between the archdioceses of Canterbury and Hamburg-Bremen over the superiority over the Danish Church, which ended in the victory of the latter in the 1050s. The first Norwegian dioceses were formed in the late eleventh century and the Swedish ones probably at about the same time; the Florence list from the 1120s mentions six Swedish dioceses. The parish organisation is later in all three countries. The foundation of the Scandinavian Church provinces seems to be a good expression of the maturity of the ecclesiastical organisation: Lund in Denmark for the whole of Scandinavia in 1104, Nidaros (Trondheim) for Norway in 1152/1153, and Uppsala for Sweden in 1164. By this time, the Church had become wealthy, bishops were often recruited from the country's aristocracy, and the Church had become a valuable ally for the kings, not least during conflicts over the throne. In Norway, a close link was formed between the faction around King Magnus Erlingsson and Archbishop Øystein, which resulted in a violent struggle between Church and monarchy when Magnus was deposed by Sverre. In Denmark, there were conflicts between King Valdemar I (1157–1182) and Archbishop Eskil that were partly related to the papal schism from 1159 onwards, whereas a close alliance was formed between Valdemar and Eskil's successor, Absalon (1177–1201), and their successors.

Although Scandinavian society was probably relatively aristocratic already before its Christianisation, the Church contributed to greater concentration of landed wealth and the strengthening of the elite. The Church eventually became the greatest landowner, possibly with around forty percent of the income from land in Norway and somewhat less in the other countries. It also had incomes from tax and fines. The bishops were the greatest magnates of the realm, and prelates, abbots, canons, and even monks and nuns in the most important monasteries belonged to the aristocracy. The clergy might thus have been regarded as a parasitic class, and even believers might have thought that they gave little in return for the wealth they received. However, this wealth did not exclusively benefit the clergy: parts of it were returned to broader strata of the population in the form of hospitals, alms, salaries, gifts, cultural and intellectual activities, and numerous opportunities for laymen to make careers in the service of the ecclesiastical aristocracy. Moreover, the clerics were not only parasitic; they also constituted an organised bureaucracy with a well-defined purpose, in which office-holders were appointed and certain skills were necessary for appointment. This in turn is the consequence of the fact that Christianity, in contrast to pagan religion, is a religion of the book, with a set of dogmas that the believers have to be taught and in which they are supposed to believe, and with a set of ethical rules whose practice the clergy is supposed to supervise. The establishment and expansion of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy thus formed a major step in the direction of organised government, which expanded further as a consequence of Christian doctrine as well as ethics. The professional clergy not only appropriated a substantial part of the surplus of the agricultural production, but also to a great extent interfered in people's behaviour through its detailed rules about holidays, attendance at religious services, confession, penance and so forth. It is doubtful whether it would have been possible to bureaucratize any other social field than religion to the same extent under contemporary conditions. As Halvdan Koht puts it, the Church gained control over fields that had not earlier been under the control of any public authority, such as marriage and sexuality, thus not reducing the king's power, but

¹⁹ Konungs skuggsiá (ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *The King's Mirror*, Oslo 1945) 109; Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of 'The King's Mirror' (Medieval Scandinavia. Supplements 3, Odense 1987) 122.*

²⁰ For the following see Michael Gelting, *The kingdom of Denmark*, in: *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge 2007) 73–120, at 81–84 and 95–98; Bagge/Nordeide, *Kingdom of Norway* 149–51; Nils Blomkvist/Stefan Brink/Thomas Lindkvist, *The kingdom of Sweden*, in: *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge 2007) 167–213, at 192–199.

extending the field of the central authority. Consequently, the Church could gain without the state losing.²¹

A number of other examples may be added to those of Koht. The Church introduced writing, for liturgical and literary as well as administrative purposes. It also introduced the first general tax in Scandinavia, the tithe. Finally, it probably had a major share in introducing public justice. Whereas the old judicial system, as far as we can see, was concerned with conflicts between individuals and kindred, the Church introduced the idea of crimes against God and society, and took steps to punish them. For a long time, this had to be done within the framework of the old judicial system, where the bishop or his representative acted like any other individual who felt himself wronged; but in practice, this meant the gradual development of ecclesiastical prosecution and courts of law. The Church also influenced legislation, partly by developing its own legislation, based on international canon law, and partly by contributing to national legislation. In sum, the Church contributed to a considerable amount of bureaucratization, which eventually made the Scandinavian kingdoms more state-like. The establishment of a kingdom is no irreversible process; we need to explain not only why it was united but also why it did not dissolve. The bureaucratization resulting from the conversion to Christianity forms an important part of this explanation, the more so in Scandinavia, because contrary to what was the case in most other parts of Europe, the Church provinces largely coincided with the national borders.

SCANDINAVIAN STATE FORMATION – A SUCCESS STORY?

The formation of the Scandinavian kingdoms is an example of the export of the European state from the centre to the periphery. Europe was never an empire after the Fall of Rome, with the exception, perhaps, of Charlemagne's short-lived empire. Instead, European civilisation expanded partly through the expansion of individual states; partly through the foundation of new kingdoms based on conquest, such as the kingdom of Jerusalem or the lands controlled by the Teutonic Order; and partly through the foundation of new Christian kingdoms, dominated by converted kings and elites. Together with the kingdoms of East Central Europe and kingdoms and principalities in the Celtic and Mediterranean world, Scandinavia forms an example of this. Admittedly, Christianity had first become the official religion in an empire, and there was for a long time a strong connection between the Roman Empire and the Christian religion. There was also a strong connection between mission and political power in the Carolingian and Ottonian kingdoms: the mission was often a means to expand the political power of Christian rulers. Nevertheless, the existence of a strong ecclesiastical organisation whose ideology and interests were distinct from those of the secular power presented an opportunity for the pagan peoples to embrace Christianity without submitting to the rule of a foreign, Christian king. To what extent this opportunity was actually exploited varies considerably between the different parts of Europe. In this respect, Scandinavia, together with East Central Europe, form the main success story of the missionary period.

Part of the explanation of this lies in geographical distance. This applies particularly to Norway and Sweden, which were both well protected against non-Scandinavian intervention; Denmark was the only threat. Moreover, Scandinavian sea power was superior to the continental one in the early period; this changed from the thirteenth/fourteenth century onwards. Denmark was less protected, since it bordered Germany to the south and in periods was subject to German pressure. This pressure also contributed to the rise of the Danish kingdom as well as to its Christianisation. In the long run, however, Denmark became more of a threat to its German neighbours than vice versa. From the eleventh and twelfth century onwards, the German imperial power became increasingly oriented towards the south rather than towards the north. This first paved the way for a great principality in the north, under Henry the Lion, but his fall in 1180 resulted in a division into smaller principalities that opened the way for Danish expansion. Thus, until the rise of Prussia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, first Denmark and then Sweden held the status of a great power in Northern Germany.

Geography, together with political division in Northern Germany, thus explain the greater success of Scandinavia than the Celtic polities in maintaining their independence (see the contribution of

²¹ Halvdan Koht, *Innhogg og utsyn* (Kristiania 1921) 271.

Wendy Davies, in this volume). However, the success of the kingdoms of East Central Europe in the period until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cannot be explained in the same way, as they were exposed to potential enemies on most sides. Here time is an important factor that also applies to Scandinavia. In both of these areas, Christianisation and the formation of kingdoms or principalities took place early, before the great political, economic and military strengthening of Western Christendom from the twelfth century onwards. The importance of this can be illustrated by the fate of the lands along the southern shore of the Baltic, most of which were conquered by Christian powers during a series of crusades from the mid-twelfth century onwards.

In this way, the formation of the Scandinavian kingdoms forms part of the greater story of the development of European civilisation as a combination of cultural unity and political division that characterised this part of the world until the late twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The main emphasis in the above account of the first phase of Scandinavian state formation has been on external factors. These include the Viking expeditions, the surplus from which might be invested in clients and political power at home; the pressure from Germany, which contributed to the unification of Denmark and thus indirectly influenced the two other kingdoms; the competition between the centres of power in Scandinavia, which eventually led to the division into three kingdoms; and finally the importance of Christianity as an incentive to conquest and an instrument in the monopolisation of power. Moreover, the combination of distance and early Christianisation explains that the external pressure from Germany did not result in conquest, but acted as stimulus to internal consolidation. The conversion to Christianity took place at about the same time as the formation of the kingdom in all six 'new countries' of Western Christendom, but the causal relationship between the two phenomena is not easy to ascertain. Most probably there is an interrelationship between the two factors rather than a strict division into cause and effect. In Norway, however, the importance of the Viking kings coming from abroad points to Christianity as more likely to be the cause of the unification than vice versa. Whatever the answer to this question, the greatest importance of Christianity probably lies in the following period, partly in contributing to the continued existence of the kingdoms, and partly in its importance for their further development.

The most important internal factors, population increase and expansion of agriculture, contributed to the Viking expeditions, not in the sense that lack of arable land forced the Scandinavians to establish themselves abroad, but in the sense that it created the necessary manpower for the foreign expeditions. A certain population density is also a factor in state formation and may be regarded in the Scandinavian case at least as a necessary condition, although it is hardly in itself able to explain the rise of the three Scandinavian kingdoms and the division between them at this particular time.

Scandinavian state formation forms part of the larger process of the export of religion, ideology, law and organisation from the old countries of Western Christendom to the northern and eastern periphery, a process that contributed to the characteristic combination of cultural and religious unity and political division in this civilisation.