

⇒ INTRODUCTION ⇐

And when the tables were set, Ofeig put his fist on the table and said, “How big does that fist seem to you, Gudmund?”

“Big enough,” he said.

“Do you suppose there is any strength in it?” asked Ofeig.

“I certainly do,” said Gudmund.

“Do you think it would deliver much of a blow?” asked Ofeig.

“Quite a blow,” Gudmund replied.

“Do you think it might do any damage?” continued Ofeig.

“Broken bones or a deathblow,” Gudmund answered.

“How would such an end appeal to you?” asked Ofeig.

“Not much at all, and I wouldn’t choose it,” said Gudmund.

Ofeig said, “Then don’t sit in my place.”

IN THIS STORY FROM the Icelandic *Ljósvetninga Saga*, power is concentrated in a big fist in a way that recalls Hobbes’s characterization of primitive man, whose life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” There is constant competition and the physically strongest is likely to win, as in the competition for leadership among animals.

With increasing institutionalization, physical power is replaced by legitimate birth, specific qualifications, or formal election, and the fist by symbols of authority. Such symbols no doubt existed in Scandinavia from early on, but they assumed particular importance with the introduction of Christianity and the formation of kingdoms; in other words, with the introduction of the cross and the scepter. Bishops and archbishops were elected and consecrated and wore miters, staffs, rings, and crosses as signs of their dignity. Kingship eventually followed a similar path, the office being filled according to formal rules and by an incumbent who wore a crown and scepter. These leaders in turn had representatives of lower rank, who were supposed to carry out their commands. In theory, although not necessarily in practice, open competition was replaced by a formal hierarchy that was believed to have been instituted by God. Thus, from the tenth century onwards, a new concept of government and public authority was introduced to Scandinavia.

Can we use the term “state formation” when speaking of the Middle Ages? The term “state” is used in a different sense in different disciplines. While social scientists, particularly social anthropologists, are inclined to use the term when referring to any kind of lordship over larger areas or numbers of people, in some cases qualifying it as an “early state,” historians often have stricter criteria. One of these has been the word itself. The Latin *status* (“condition,” “state”) derived from the combination *status rei publicae*, which was current in the Middle Ages, began to be used from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century on as a technical term, meaning “state” in the modern sense. This terminological change is understood as expressing a new understanding of the state as an institution existing independently of the person or persons governing it, an understanding that incorporates the classical definitions of the state as a monopoly on violence or an impersonal and bureaucratic government. Although the im-

portance of such a terminological change should not be underestimated, it can hardly be regarded as decisive; a new name does not mean that the phenomenon in question cannot have existed before. In practice, *res publica* in the Middle Ages may have had at least some of the impersonal connotations associated with the early-modern *status*.

In the present context, I regard the terminological question mainly as a practical one. The great divide in Scandinavian history was the formation of the three kingdoms, two of which have continued to exist until the present, while the third, Norway, preserved enough of its identity under Danish dominance to reemerge as an independent unit in 1814. It would thus seem natural to use the term “state” for these kingdoms from this date on, despite the rudimentary character of their political institutions. The most important concept in the following, however, is “state formation,” which is a relative concept, implying centralization, bureaucratization, the development of jurisdiction, a monopoly or near monopoly on violence, and so forth, for it is more critical to decide whether a process is heading in this direction than to decide exactly how many of these criteria must be present before it is allowable to use the word “state.” The following discussion will deal with the changes that took place in Scandinavia from the formation of the kingdoms in the tenth century until the end of the Kalmar Union and the introduction of the Reformation in the early sixteenth century, and with how the three Scandinavian kingdoms compared with other countries at the time in terms of “stateness.”

Reflecting the strong link between historical scholarship and the nation state from the early nineteenth century onwards, state formation has been a central theme in Scandinavian historiography, as well as in that of other countries. The idea of the medieval state was further developed in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century by scholars like F. W. Maitland, Charles Homer Haskins, Joseph Strayer, and R. W. Southern. In contrast

to nineteenth-century scholarship which, for the most part, regarded the Middle Ages as dominated by Church and Empire, and by ideas of hierarchy and the supernatural rather than rational thought, this tradition—Southern was to some extent an exception—emphasized the rational and secular aspect of the period and regarded the development of law and administration as an attempt to solve the practical problems of government and the distribution of power. Thus, it was the Middle Ages rather than Classical Antiquity or even the Renaissance, that laid the foundations for the modern state, a view expressed most succinctly in Strayer's short but important book on the medieval origins of the state.

During the second half of the twentieth century, notably from around 1970 on, this view has been challenged from two directions. One is the historical sociology, which has generally sought the origins of the modern state in the Early Modern Period rather than the Middle Ages. This view turns on the importance attached to the military element in state formation, and a negative judgment of the state as mainly an instrument of oppression; in Charles Tilly's words: "War made the state and the state made war." Real states were created in the period of standing armies, guns and cannons, elaborate fortifications, and heavily armed warships, which were costlier and necessitated a larger and more complex administration than the simpler military equipment of the Middle Ages. The other challenge came from the medievalists themselves, partly from the French *Annales* School and partly from German historians of the interwar period who regarded medieval kingdoms and principalities as antitheses to the modern state rather than as its forerunners. This approach was revived in the late twentieth century under the influence of social anthropological research on stateless societies and has resulted in a series of successful studies of early-medieval society. However, there have also been reactions against these impulses. One

is Susan Reynolds's rejection of the concept of feudalism, which she replaces with the notion that a society not very different in kind from the modern one that was in place already in the early Middle Ages. Another is R. I. Moore's "First European Revolution," which sees the years between 975 and 1215 as crucial to the evolution of European society and to global history in general, a period when new and more intensive forms of government were established by the Church as well as the state. The gradual formation of the nation state in the Middle Ages is also a central theme in Michael Mann's analysis of social power.

The challenges from the early medievalists and the early modernists serve as a starting-point for the following discussion. Without denying the importance of the early-modern military revolution or of military matters in general, the emphasis in the following will be on alternative paths to state formation and on the specifically medieval contribution to this process. The new ideas about personal relationships, rituals, feuds, and mediation will to a greater extent serve as a source of inspiration for this study. However, they have mainly been applied to the early Middle Ages and been based on the study of narrative sources. It is now time to apply them to the following period and to reexamine the question of change or continuity against this background.

In the late 1070s, Pope Gregory VII addressed the kings of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden with advice and admonitions in a series of letters that form some of the earliest examples of papal correspondence with the Scandinavian countries. One of his concerns was to prevent the king of Norway from meddling in the conflict over the succession to the Danish throne. The pope sternly warns the king of disasters that may follow from such a course of action, quoting Christ's words in the Bible about the division of a kingdom leading to its destruction (*Omne regnum in seipsum divisum desolabitur*, Luke 11:17). The saga of King Håkon of Norway records that more than 150 years later, in 1247,

during a period of frequent contact between the papacy and Scandinavia, Cardinal William of Sabina told the king that it was unheard of that a country should be without a king, thus allowing him to take steps to bring Iceland under his rule.

These two statements express what had by now become established orthodoxy at the papal curia and in fact throughout most of Western Christendom, namely that the world was supposed to consist of a number of separate territories, each governed by a king, and that these kings should respect each other's rights and not interfere in the realms of their neighbors. This was a radical change from the situation that prevailed both at the time when the Christian Church was founded and when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, which according to many contemporaries embraced the whole inhabited world (Luke 2:1). The breakdown of the Roman Empire and its Carolingian successor forced the Church to adapt to political division and gradually made it a force in upholding this division, which has proved one of the distinctive features of Europe compared to other civilizations, and which is still with us today, despite the increasing importance of the European Union. Exactly when this division was finally established is disputed and shall not concern us here, but an important stage in the process was no doubt the expansion of Western Christendom from the ninth century onwards to include Scandinavia and East Central Europe, whereby the idea of separate kingdoms spread to these regions.

A discussion of Scandinavian state formation is not only about more or less "stateness" in a comparative perspective, but also about the changing map of Western Christendom in the High Middle Ages. From the tenth century onwards, the European state—in the elementary sense of larger territories ruled by independent kings or princes—was exported to new areas, notably to the north and east. Western Christendom expanded greatly in the Mediterranean, in Scandinavia, and in East Central Europe,

an expansion that marks the beginning of the European conquest of the rest of the world. The process partly took the form of conquest and even colonization, parallel to what happened during the Great Discoveries from the sixteenth century onwards, but it also led to the formation of independent kingdoms and principalities, which is its most interesting feature from our point of view. Whereas the southeastern shore of the Baltic Sea was for the most part an object of conquest and colonization, independent kingdoms were established to either side of this region, namely the three Scandinavian kingdoms in the North and West, and Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary in the East.

If we regard a multiplicity of centers of political power as an essential feature of Europe, in contrast for instance to China and the Islamic world (as is commonly done), the expansion becomes as important as the internal changes. Whereas most of Western Christendom had been united under one ruler in the Carolingian period and a substantial part of it under the Ottonian and Salian emperors, the expansion, combined with the weakening of central power in Germany, made the territorial principality the normal unit of political organization of Western Christendom. In addition to the three kingdoms of East Central Europe and Denmark on Germany's border, territorial principalities like Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, and Pomerania made themselves independent of the emperor in most respects. Most of these entities would remain in existence until the great changes in the nineteenth century, under Napoleon and Bismarck. The expansion thus established the combination of cultural unity with stable political division that characterized Europe until the formation of the European Union in the second half of the twentieth century.

The following account of the three Scandinavian kingdoms can therefore be regarded as a kind of European history in miniature, showing the rise of kingdoms from their very beginning and how the borders originally established by military conquest

became part of the right order of the world. In addition to extending the geographical area normally covered in overviews of European medieval history, it may also contribute to the understanding of the European state system as such. Although of course no thorough-going comparison with other areas will be attempted, a study of one area may contribute to an understanding of the export of state formation from the old to the new areas of Western Christendom, of the relationship between the imported and indigenous elements of this process, and of the general relationship between the old and the new regions. It is my hope in this way to stimulate further research into these questions.

Living in a secularized society, we tend to identify the state with the monarchy, particularly in the Scandinavian countries with their long Protestant tradition. If we are interested in government, however, there is no reason to focus exclusively on the monarchy. The later state was a descendant not only of the monarchy but also of the Church, a point that is particularly obvious in Scandinavia, where at the Reformation the king took over most of the Church's lands and administration. From the point of view of the common people, it hardly mattered very much whether they were subject to the king, the Church, or a local lord, and the administrative and judicial systems employed by these power holders were not necessarily very different. Admittedly, rivalry within the governing elite might have serious consequences and might even lead to the dissolution of the country in question, or to its conquest by stronger and more centralized neighbors. As we shall see, however, Scandinavian, as well as European state formation was in general characterized by a certain balance between the various elements that made up the governing elite.