

Centralization of Power in Viking Age Scandinavia

The Scandinavian nations, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, were slow to coalesce relative to mainland European kingdoms like France and the Holy Roman Empire. Also unlike their mainland contemporaries, the Viking Age Scandinavian countries did not adopt feudalism. To some extent, the Scandinavian power structure did resemble the feudal system through the presence of hierarchical lordships (Lindkvist, Introductory survey 164), but unlike in feudalism, there were no serfs; the common man was not seen as bound to the land or his lord, but was instead considered a “free man,” the alternative being slavery. Every free man had the right to attend and be heard at the *þing*, or council, which gave him a voice in governance (Derry 23-24).

The *jarls*, or lords, were owed allegiance by the free men they ruled, but their rank came “not on account of peculiar privileges, but of the greater credit and influence they enjoyed, because they were in possession of larger property, and descended from distinguished families” (Sinding 38). A man could attain such a rank through “his ability to acquire wealth by raids and pillage outside his own territory,” which enabled him to gain reputation and followers, and could bring about “imposition of tribute on external territories that could not be directly controlled by a distant ruler.” Power could also be achieved through “exchange of prestige products” and “control over ports of trade” (Lindkvist, Introductory survey 163).

Additionally, when kings ascended to the thrones of the Scandinavian nations, they were not considered to hold a divine right to the land. They were considered to have “no absolute authority” and the “monarchy was [not] hereditary in the modern sense” (Derry 24). Sinding describes the nature of Scandinavian succession as follows:

When a king died, the people convened to elect his successor; but, though heirship was not fully entitled to ascend the throne, the eldest son of the deceased king was generally chosen, in order to avoid disputes. Upon the failure of the blood royal, the election was entirely free. The government seems, on the whole, to have been almost an absolute monarchy, of a mixed, hereditary, and elective nature. (38)

As a result, the ruling of a king was dependent on the consent of those governed. When a king reigned over several polities, for instance, “the approval of each of their *þings* might at first be required to confirm the choice of the most important” (Derry 24).

The earliest inkling of centralization in Denmark was the rule of Godfred, who was called “King of the Danes” at the dawn of the tenth century. He fought with Charlemagne in 808, and was assassinated by Hemming, one of his retainers, in 810. His death was followed by political unrest in Denmark and infighting between claimants to his throne, leading to a refragmentation of the kingdom. Horik, one of Godfred’s sons, took the throne some time later as King of the Danes, but it is unknown how much of Denmark he ruled (Skovgaard-Petersen 173). Harald Klak, an exiled ruler, received the support of Holy Roman Emperor Louis the Pious to win kingship in Denmark and promulgate Christianity, and but he only had claim to Jutland (Sinding 53-55).

Denmark’s ultimate unification came about in the second half of the tenth century. The Jelling stones serve as a testament to this accomplishment, bearing inscriptions that read “King Gorm [the Old] made this monument in honor of his wife, Tyre, the pride of Denmark,” and “King Harald [Bluetooth] ordered these monuments to be made in honor of his father, Gorm, and his mother, Tyre – that Harald who won for himself all Denmark, and Norway, and made the

Danes Christian.” The dynasty founded by Gorm the Old rules Denmark to this day (Skovgaard-Petersen 168). Harald Bluetooth was ultimately overthrown by his son, Sven Forkbeard (Skovgaard-Petersen 176). Harald had lost Jutland to the Germans, but Sven regained it and conquered England by 1014, ensuring Denmark’s place as a regional power (Derry 30).

Progress toward unification in Norway was volatile, and did not begin to resolve until the beginning of the eleventh century (Krag 184). Much of Norway was first unified by Harald Fairhair, previously a petty king, around 900 (Derry 30). To gain historical legitimacy, later kings of Norway would claim descent from Harald Fairhair, but these claims are believed to be largely false; the first king of Norway to establish a lasting dynasty was Harald Hard-Ruler (Krag 185). Harald Fairhair rose to power with the help of alliances with powerful jarls, who were allowed to rule with considerable autonomy under him. There were other Norwegian jarls, however, that he was unable to bring under his control, and his regime was seen by some free men as abolishing traditional freedoms to which they were entitled (Krag 188). Upon Harald’s death, his son and heir Eirik Bloodaxe was forced to flee Norway and ruled in York and Northumbria until 954. Harald was instead succeeded by another of his sons, Håkon the Good, who established the Norwegian royal naval levy and improved the monarchy’s relationship with its subjects. Håkon the Good was killed in battle with Eirik Bloodaxe’s sons, who sought to reclaim the throne, led by Harald Grey-Fur. However, their combined reigns lasted less than a decade, cut short after they killed Jarl Sigurd, who had been one of Harald Fairhair’s original allies. Jarl Sigurd’s son, Håkon, killed Harald Grey-Fur and succeeded him to rule Norway as a Jarl under the Danes (Krag 189-190). Jarl Håkon ultimately achieved de facto independence from the Danes for most of Norway (Sinding 64). In 995, a rebellion broke out against Jarl Håkon, during which Olaf Tryggvason took the throne. Olaf was killed in battle against Sven

Forkbeard of Denmark, who succeeded him, in 1000. In 1015, Olaf Haraldsson arrived in Norway and took power after defeating one of the jarls appointed by Sven (Krag 192-193). Denmark and Norway were again united under Magnus the Good in 1042 (Sinding 82-83). Harald Hard-Ruler became co-ruler of Norway alongside Magnus in 1046, and became the sole king when Magnus died in 1047. With Harald's ascension, the monarchy was stabilized, and the establishment of the Kingdom of Norway was achieved (Krag 197).

Sweden also navigated a complicated path to unification, and its early history is steeped in legend. Sweden was traditionally composed of two peoples, the Svear and the Goths. The Svear controlled coastal provinces and islands, including Blekinge, Öland, and Gotland, while the Goths held the mainland, which was divided into Östergötland and Västergötland. It was the Svear who initially opened up trade through expeditions to the East (Derry 31).

The Svear monarchy was founded by the Ynglings, who ruled from Uppsala (Fryxell 13). Erik Segersäll (the Victorious), who reigned until 995, was the first king of the Svear about whom a semblance of historical detail survives (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 223). He is known for his conquests, adding great swathes of eastern land to the kingdom of the Svear (Fryxell 128). Erik was succeeded by his son, Olof Skötkonung, who held the throne contemporaneously with Olaf Tryggvason's reign in Norway, around the dawn of the eleventh century (Fryxell 135). Olof ruled until 1020, and was Sweden's first Christian king (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 223). He was the first to call himself the King of Svealand, the land of the Svear, instead of the Uppsala king (Fryxell 148), but as king he was associated with both Svealand and Götaland, the land of the Goths, making him the first king of a united Sweden (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 224). Olof Skötkonung's dynasty went extinct in 1061, and was succeeded by the Skenkil dynasty, which originated in Västergötland (Fryxell

164). In the years that followed, there were many violent succession crises, perhaps most notably that between the Swerker and Erik dynasties (Fryxell 189). These succession crises tended to be regional, with one part of the country electing one king and another part electing a different one (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 224). Karl Swerkerson was the first king to bear the title “King of Sweden and Götaland,” which comprised the majority of the modern kingdom; this purported unity did not protect him from wars of succession, during which he was killed in 1168 (Fryxell 196). As the Viking Age drew to a close, the Kingdom of Sweden could still be viewed as a federation of provinces, in which regional concerns and disputes could be profoundly destabilizing (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 227).

Unlike the other three nations, Iceland did not need to develop a unified government organically, since the nation was established through colonization over a short period of time. Power in the country was divided among *goðar* (regional chieftains) of equal rank. There were originally 36, and their numbers were later swelled to 39 (Derry 32). Legislation and adjudication was conducted by nominees of the *goðar*; if the conclusion reached did not satisfy the parties involved, feuds could and did break out. In 930, around 50 years after Norse settlement of Iceland began, the annual *Alþing* was formed for the entire island. All free men were eligible to attend the *Alþing* (Derry 33). The lawspeaker, who chaired the *Alþing* and was responsible for reciting one-third of the laws each year, was Iceland’s only nation-wide official, and served a three-year term. The country was quartered around 965, with each quarter having its own *þing* and court (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 214). Each *goði* would send one-ninth of the men who attended their quarter’s *þing* to the *Alþing*, making it functionally a representative government. As the Parliament of Iceland, the *Alþing* still forms the legislative body today (Lindkvist, Kings and provinces in Sweden 215).

The disparities between the rates and nature of unification of the Scandinavian nations can be partially explained by geography. Denmark's relatively homogenous topography made it easier for a single ruler to exercise control over it, aided by the high proportion of its land that lay within a short distance of the coast "at a time when land divided and sea united" (Lindkvist, Introductory survey 164). Norway and Sweden, both larger landmasses, were divided by geographical features that hampered communication and spurred the development of rival power centers in different parts of the countries. Norway's forests and mountains left two pockets of arable land, and Sweden was divided between two rival peoples occupying different land types. As a result, the unifications of Norway and Sweden occurred later than Denmark's, and both were followed by years of turbulence as rival claimants fought over the throne. Once again, the fate of Scandinavia is guided by its geography.

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