

Foreigners and Outside Influences in Medieval Norway

edited by

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Contents

List of Contributors	ii
Introduction	1
Stian Suppersberger Hamre	
Who were they? Steps towards an archaeological understanding of newcomers and settlers in early medieval Trondheim, Norway	7
Axel Christophersen	
The population in Norway, a long history of heterogeneity	33
Stian Suppersberger Hamre	
Foreigners in High Medieval Norway: images of immigration in chronicles and kings' sagas, twelfth and thirteenth centuries	53
Thomas Foerster	
The universal and the local: religious houses as cultural nodal points in medieval Norway	75
Synnøve Myking	
Foreign envoys and resident Norwegians in the Late Middle Ages – a cultural clash?	97
Erik Opsahl	
Scandinavian immigrants in late medieval England: sources, problems and patterns	111
Bart Lambert	

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Foreign envoys and resident Norwegians in the Late Middle Ages – a cultural clash?

Erik Opsahl

Some years ago, I contributed to an anthology, which was intended as an academic response to the new right-wing-extremism (Indregard 2012). I wrote about immigration to pre-modern Norway, up till 1814, and the editors chose to title the article ‘Norway has been homogeneous’ (Opsahl 2012b). I was a bit reluctant about the title because I feared some would read the title and the article like the devil reads the Bible. Unfortunately, I was right. A critical reviewer of the anthology characterised my article as the strangest contribution, because, according to him, I did not manage to undermine the fact that the pre-modern Norwegian farming community was one hundred percent homogeneous (Bakka 2012). Besides the fact that the reviewer appeared more self-confident than well informed, he missed the whole point in the article, or rather, he wrote it off. The immigrants were, overall, a colonising elite of officials, priests, and members of the bourgeoisie who influenced religion and language, the two most important cultural marks, according to the reviewer. The first mass immigration was the ca. 100,000 Swedes who came to Norway around 1900. They were foreigners, but not as foreign as a Kurd today, the reviewer asserted.

Firstly, it was obvious the reviewer had overlooked the fact that my article was about pre-modern Norwegian society *as a whole*, not only the farming community, even though this group represented the majority of society. Secondly, the reviewer seemed to look upon farmers as the only ‘Norwegians’ in pre-modern time; all other people in Norway during this

period were 'outsiders'. Thirdly, he seemed to presuppose that there was little or no interaction between the farming community and elites in Norway in this period, or at least only interaction of little importance.

All of this, I find historically naive and unfruitful. In this article, I will discuss the question of multiculturalism in Norway in the Late Middle Ages, focusing on potential cultural differences in the interaction between Norwegian farmers and foreign envoys or royal administrators.

Culture

'Culture' is a very complicated word, and carries many different meanings. An open and descriptive term for 'culture', useful in cultural history and the social sciences, is 'the form of human beings' lives'. 'Culture' here means the ideas, values, rules, and norms that a human being inherits from earlier generations and tries to impart – often slightly altered – to the next generation. 'Culture' is, in other words, what one learns is right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, useful or useless, about daily behaviour and the meaning of life (Klausen 1970: 10). 'Culture' can also be defined as the skills, opinions, and manners which people have acquired as members of a society (Eriksen 1993: 21). By this definition, 'culture' also includes functional and material manifestations like rituals and institutions (Kleinschmidt 2000: 8-9).

Cultural meetings presuppose cultural borders. It is an old ethnological observation, which has increasingly captured historians' interest that it is possible to define specific cultural areas, characterised by special material features, intellectual or mental culture, attitudes, and behaviour (Blomkvist 1998: 19). Such delineation must constantly be questioned with regard to what degree one may speak of cultural variations within the same cultural area (i.e. quantitative variations or differences), or of different cultural areas (i.e. mainly qualitative differences)? There is a long tradition of perceiving European medieval culture as one homogeneous culture. Nowadays, there is a growing tendency to recognise that European medieval culture contained more variation, as well as more tension and antagonism, than the original, more idealistic, uniform picture (Kleinschmidt 2000). A consequence is to speak about variations of the European pattern rather than to ask to what degree a country was integrated into, or part of, a European Medieval culture (Gelting 1999).

Traditionally Denmark has been characterised as being more ‘continental’ than Norway and Sweden in the Middle Ages when it comes to social structures and culture. The proximity and connections to northern Germany are often seen as the main reasons for this. There exists, on the other hand, an idea of Denmark as being on the European periphery in the Middle Ages (Gelting 1999). In a European perspective, Scandinavia and the northernmost parts of northern Germany, can be looked upon as a single cultural and economic region (Nicholas 2009). The Union of Kalmar united the main parts of this region – Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – into one political unit in 1397. My focus in this article will be potential cultural meetings or clashes resulting from that union. The point of departure will be the political riots and revolts of the period.

Nordic union and revolts

All Union monarchs appointed foreigners, in varying numbers, to administrative posts in Norway. The majority were Danes and Germans, but there were also some Swedes. This last group seems to have more often been genuine immigrants to Norway than the other groups. Both Queen Margaret (Margareta/Margrete), around the year 1400, and her successors must have found foreigners particularly well suited as royal administrators. Without any relatives or other connections, and with few or no estates in Norway, they had to depend more on royal favour for their career and success than did native aristocrats. Foreigners could therefore be more loyal and reliable men for the monarchs in building a strong central power base than native Norwegian aristocrats. On the other hand, if foreign aristocrats settled down permanently in Norway, they could be as ‘Norwegian’ in their interests and politics as native Norwegians. This is true for national and union politics, but also for their behaviour towards the Norwegian population in general. Here they could differ from foreign aristocrats who stayed in Norway only as long they held an administrative post.

A distinct feature of the Late Middle Ages, not only in Norway but also in Europe overall, are the so called ‘peasant revolts’. In Norway and the rest of Scandinavia, we know of riots, revolts, and perhaps even rebellions against the authorities and their representatives both locally and regionally, throughout the 15th century and during most of the 16th century. In Norway, it started with unrest and riots in the 1420s.

This must have been the tip of the iceberg and a result of increasing tension between the population and the authorities. In 1436, a revolt, which might be called a rebellion, broke out in the central part of southeastern Norway under the leadership of Amund Sigurdsson (Bolt), a Norwegian aristocrat. The rebels enjoyed success and made progress in the beginning, but over time their position appears to have become so severe and weakened that they had to surrender. Nevertheless, the rebels obtained a favourable peace treaty with the Norwegian Council of the Realm in 1437. Both in this treaty and the truce from 1436, foreigners in the administration were a central question. The truce declared that 'Danish men' should leave the country within a fixed time. The Council of the Realm promised in the peace treaty to instruct the King to never appoint foreigners to administrative posts, neither clerical or secular, in Norway again. According to the treaty, the population in Norway had agreed at all 'things' (assemblies) that foreigners should leave the country because of 'the great injustice and burdens' they had inflicted on cloisters and churches, as well as learned and lay people, in Norway. Exceptions to this were foreigners who were married to Norwegians. They could stay in the country as long as they lived but without any 'power', and had to swear loyalty to the King, the realm, and the men of the realm ('rikets men') (Taranger 2012: 176-177). The rebellion of 1437 began a series of rebellions and riots throughout the 15th century and long into the 16th century. However, the situation in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia was, in a European perspective, not particularly violent and there were no wide-ranging, system-threatening rebellions (Imsen 1990a).

The background for the Scandinavian revolts was complex and shall not be discussed in full here. The Norwegian historian Steinar Imsen has roughly classified the explanations in three categories: class struggle, resistance to a growing state, and national protest. I will focus on the last explanation and the social character of the revolts. There has been a long tradition in Norwegian historiography of perceiving what has been called 'peasant revolts' as revolts against foreign rule. The Norwegian historian Oscar Albert Johnsen wrote in his book 'Norges bønder' ('Norway's farmers') from 1919 (my translation): 'The native officials could be both greedy and arbitrary, the farmers were, however, frequently more satisfied with them than with the foreigners who obtained power and authority in Norway under the union monarchs. The Danish and German

tax collectors ('fogder') who Queen Margaret and King Erik appointed aroused common displeasure because of their lawlessness and violence' (Johnsen 1919: 168). Another Norwegian historian, Halvdan Koht, emphasised that the rebellions had a national aim as well as a social one (Koht 1926: 25-37). Moreover, he pointed to the connection between the foreign administrators' official behaviour and their background: 'this [i.e. their official behaviour] had...a connection with their experiences from more feudalised countries, from Denmark and Germany' (Koht 1926: 26, my translation). Here, Koht suggests a cultural element as explanation, namely a resistance to the import of Danish and German social conditions in the interaction between population and authorities in Norway.

The Norwegian historian Halvard Bjørkvik argues however that both 'national' and 'social' uprising are insufficient descriptions of the revolt in 1437. The central cause was administrative injustice, according to Bjørkvik. However, because Danish and German tax collectors were the prime targets of the opposition, xenophobia took hold among the Norwegians. Nevertheless, he continues, 'it is right to perceive the revolts as results of a 'national' common feeling and unification against threats from outside. On the other hand, a revolt led by a nobleman [i.e. Amund Sigurdsson (Bolt)], with the support of the leading farmers, directed against arbitrary conduct by the tax collectors, cannot be characterised as social.' (Bjørkvik 1996: 166, my translation).

Steinar Imsen interpreted the resistance as primarily a negative variant of Norwegian patriotism or what he calls 'proto-nationalism' (i.e. resistance to and dislike of foreigners, Danes and Germans, in the administration) (about the existence of a national identity in Norway in the Late Middle Ages, see Imsen 2015, Opsahl 2008, Opsahl 2009, Opsahl 2012a, Opsahl 2014). As Imsen points out, the motive was the one most frequently cited by the rebels as their motivation for revolt at the beginning of the 15th century (and it was used later too). Therefore, concludes Imsen, the motive must have been widespread (Imsen 1998: 95). He finds what he calls a 'proto-national' element in the revolt of 1437, which he suggests should be perceived as 'a protest against how the political and administrative system in the union had developed under King Erik' (Imsen 1998: 96). The demand for a Norwegian national administration and a domestic central administration, which was also

promoted by the rebels in 1437, was, on the other hand, primarily a political programme of the aristocracy and the Council of the Realm. However, this programme could also have gained support in what Imsen characterises as ‘the traditional Norwegian rural elite’ (‘bygdeeliten’), at least in southeastern Norway where the structure and position of this group could be identified with such a programme, according to Imsen (Imsen 1998: 96).

Imsen sees the revolts in the 1430s as a conflict between a traditional domestic rural and farming elite and a partial foreign elite bound to the new administration of the union, consisting of royal servants and their clients. These clients were starting to place themselves between the King’s most prominent men and the rural elite, and they brought with them a political culture that challenged Norwegian political tradition (Imsen 1990b, Imsen 1998, Opsahl 2008). Kåre Lunden, Imsen’s antagonist in many ways, also discussed whether the revolts were the result of a conflict between a domestic and a foreign political culture. He criticised Imsen’s use of the German term ‘Kommunalismus’, (i.e. local self-administration, ‘bondekommunalisme’), regarding how public tasks were accomplished in Norwegian local societies in the Middle Ages. Studying the difference between Norwegian and Continental conditions is as important as to look for common features by using the term ‘Kommunalismus’, argued Lunden (Lunden 2002: 103-109).

‘Kommunalismus’ – domestic or continental?

The continental village was a co-operative working partnership that followed from the village as a form of settlement or dwelling place. This made it possible to further define the village as a judicial and administrative unit. In the continental ‘Kommunalismus’, the three aspects of settlement, working partnership, and judicial-administrative unit were three sides of the same subject, according to Lunden. In particular, the village as a judicial and administrative unit is a telling difference from Norway, argued Lunden. The continental village community grew out of interplay and conflict with the feudal, private estate. The estate and the villages constituted a political society under the feudal lord where the king had little or no influence or power. Both economically and politically the estate and the dominion of the feudal lord stood between the king on one side and the peasants on the other.

The peasants on the continent, therefore, had much less contact with the king and his administration when compared to Norwegian peasants or farmers. The latter were politically, judicially, and administratively far more directly connected to the 'state level'. They lived under a national code ('Landslov'), handed down by the king and not under a municipal common law authorised by a feudal lord (Lunden 2002: 106).

Like many others, Lunden sees a connection between the continental background of the Danish and German royal officials in Norway and their conflicts with Norwegian farmers in the 15th century. He proposed that the revolts were driven by both a class and a national motive. Lunden called attention to the repeated complaints of foreigners who did not know Norwegian law well enough. He also pointed out that the difference in language may have increased the distance between the authorities and the people in Norway. From the second half of the 15th century royal Norwegian letters from Denmark were written in Danish increasingly often (Lunden 2002: 114-115). More or less implicit in Lunden's argumentation is the opinion that there was a cultural conflict between the Norwegian and the continental, or Danish-German, political and social systems in the Late Middle Ages. Here Lunden followed Koht's opinion. Norwegian farmers had a tradition, at least in principle, of communicating with the king through royal officials. Danish and German aristocrats in Norway came from political and social systems where peasants, much more so than in Norway, were subjected to the power of feudal lords independent of royal power. In Lunden's view, the Norwegian farmers defended and upheld Norwegian law and the Norwegian political and social systems through opposition and revolts in the Late Middle Ages and, in doing so, pursued a tradition from the High Middle Ages (Lunden 2002: 15, see also Opsahl 2008; Opsahl 2012a; Opsahl and Sogner 2003). Imsen draws the same conclusion in many ways, but he speaks of the Old Norse municipal system, which included direct interaction with the king. This accords with Lunden's view. This system continued throughout the Middle Ages, concludes Imsen (Imsen 1990b: 193-203).

Cultural meeting or cultural conflict?

In what follows, I shall discuss to what extent the revolt of 1436-37 was a cultural conflict. Two years earlier an analogous revolt, with the same demands regarding foreigners, had broken out in Sweden, the third

kingdom in the union and one that shared the political satellite position of Norway in relation to Denmark. However, for our purposes, the fact that several peasants revolts broke out in Denmark in the years 1438-41 is more interesting. These revolts were reactions to severe impositions on Danish farmers' living conditions. Danish aristocrats pursued a strong offensive during the 15th century, with the result that Danish farmers became tied to landowners with feudal bonds of protection – both freeholders and the Danish form of tenants ('festebønder'). This implied, at the minimum, an increased formal privatisation and decentralisation of state-power in Denmark – primarily understood as jurisdiction. At the same time, a centralisation of power took place based on the fundamental principle that the king was responsible for the maintenance of the legal system. Typical, rebellious Danish farmers addressed their complaints directly to the king in 1438-41. The Danish historian Anders Bøgh has argued that the German term 'Kommunalismus' is relevant in Denmark where there was a genuinely autonomous farming society in the villages in the Late Middle Ages (Bøgh 1994, see also Würtz Sørensen 1983).

Overall, the contemporary Swedish, Norwegian and Danish revolts had many features in common with their European counterparts. The farmers' living conditions were improved during this period and their military significance increased in many places. The results probably included greater self-confidence and self-respect among the farmers and a growing ability and determination to defend, and even improve, their living conditions. The American historian Samuel Cohn has labelled this growing political consciousness and activity among the people of late Medieval Europe as a 'lust for liberty' (Cohn 2008). All this is in accordance with the American sociologist James Chowney Davies' theory of political revolutions. Davies is perhaps best known for this theory, which seeks to explain the rise of revolutionary movements in terms of rising individual expectations and falling levels of perceived well-being. According to Davies, revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal. People then subjectively fear that ground gained with great effort will be lost; their mood becomes revolutionary (Davies 1962).

All in all, living conditions for the common people did become better in the Late Middle Ages. At the same time, at least from the 15th century on,

tenants experienced a growing pressure from property owners precisely because they felt their position threatened. Over time the peasants' overall conditions worsened in several regions of Europe during the Late Middle Ages. Moreover, state and church increased their tax demands to compensate for their losses in land rents and to finance new and ambitious political projects. As already mentioned, in a long-term perspective, the Late Middle Ages was a period of growing state power and an important precursor to the expansive state power that characterised early modern Europe.

In all three Scandinavian kingdoms, we see robust resistance in the 1430s to what the farmers argued were illegal taxation and ruthless behaviour from officials in the administration. The revolts took place within a common political organisation, certainly loose at this time: the Union of Kalmar. The fact that the new king, Christopher, issued almost identical decrees of the King's peace in each kingdom at the beginning of the 1440s, illustrates the Scandinavian political commonwealth. The decrees were a reaction to the riots and revolts in the 1430s and were directed at both the King's and aristocrats' officials who claimed too much, including illegal taxation and other services, as well as at a population that was unwilling to pay what the King had the right to demand according to the law (Taranger 2012: nr. 106).

However, the Danish revolts lacked some interesting elements which those in Norway and Sweden had. The Danish rebels voiced no criticism regarding foreigners in the administration or about the fact that foreign officials did not know the domestic Danish laws (Würtz Sørensen 1983). The reason could not be a lack of foreigners in the Danish administration in the period. On the contrary, approximately one third of all fief holders in Denmark between 1400 and 1440 were German or of German ancestry. It is difficult to decide how many of these men were permanent immigrants to Denmark or descendants of such men, but a considerable number of them do not seem to have taken up permanent residence in Denmark (see below) (Lerdam 1996: 27-31). Unfortunately, we have no systematic overview of who held fiefs in Norway in the Late Middle Ages. A preliminary and uncertain estimate assumes that the number of foreigners was approximately the same in Norway during the reign of King Erik (1389-1442) (i.e. one third). However, in Norway there were

Danes and some Swedes in addition to Germans (Opsahl and Sogner 2003: 144). On the other hand, the immigration of aristocrats seems to have been much larger in Norway in the first half of the 15th century than in Denmark in the same period. For the latter country, the 15th century seems to have been an exception to the usual pattern of considerable immigration of German aristocrats during the Middle Ages (Dahlerup 1971: 55, see also Opsahl and Sogner 2003: 148-160 and Lerdam 1996: 27-31).

The other element the Danish revolts lacked compared to those in Norway, was aristocrats as rebel leaders. There was one exception, and this exception can probably be explained as a reaction against the expansion of other aristocratic families in the region (Würtz Sørensen 1983: 124-126). The motivation behind the fact that Norwegian aristocrats like Amund Sigurdsson (Bolt), took leadership of riots and revolts, was probably frustration at being increasingly replaced as fief holders in Norway. The Norwegian Council of the Realm raised this political dissatisfaction at national and union level by insisting a monopoly on fiefs and other administrative posts in Norway for the domestic aristocracy. There was a similar situation in Sweden. Even in Denmark, the Danish Council of the Realm justified their dethronement of King Erik with the king's policy of giving many fiefs to Germans or minor Danish aristocrats with no connection to the Council of the Realm. The King's goal was to increase his power at the expense of the Council of the Realm. The policy gave fewer fiefs to the members of the Council and thereby reduced their political power. In addition, by appointing Germans and minor Danish aristocrats, the king created fief holders who were more dependent on the King's favour for their position and career, and thereby more loyal to him than the Councillors of the Realm (Lerdam 1996: 49-55). As we have already seen, the same motivation underlay the king's appointment of foreigners as fief holders in Norway and Sweden.

The political aristocratic revolt in Denmark came from the upper strata of the aristocracy because King Erik's fief policy challenged the position of aristocratic families who contributed members to the Council of the Realm. Interaction and co-operation between the Council of the Realm and the rebels did not take place in Denmark. Why then, did Danish peasants not complain about foreigners in the administration and

demand their expulsion from the country as did their Norwegian and Swedish counterparts? Furthermore, during the rebellion in Jutland in 1439 the rebels appealed to an enemy of the kingdom of Denmark, Count Adolf (or Alf) VIII of Holstein, for protection after King Erik had fled to Gotland and was, therefore, no longer able to fulfil his role as peacekeeper of the Realm. Count Adolf let himself be acclaimed by the Jutes and took them under his protection as a means of promoting his political interests in Schleswig and the Kingdom of Denmark (Würtz Sørensen 1983: 42-46). Obviously, a German lord did not frighten Danish peasants. One obvious reason for the lack of antagonism to Germans among Danish peasants in this period must be the cultural, political, geographical, and social similarities between Danish and German conditions.

Conclusion

Both social, economic and political conditions underlay the Nordic revolts in the first half of the 15th century. Steinar Imsen has pointed to opposition to the process of political and economic modernisation as underlying the Norwegian rebellions and revolts in the 1430s (Imsen 1998: 103-107). However, by comparing the Danish revolts with those in Norway and Sweden, we can discern elements of a cultural conflict in Norway and Sweden. The basic social conditions in Denmark had much more in common with the situation in northern Germany than did the conditions in Norway and Sweden. Consequently, Germans were much less foreign for Danes than for Norwegians or Swedes; the cultural differences were fewer and smaller. Geographical proximity was, of course, important here. A German could act more German in Denmark without being provocative than he could in Norway and Sweden. On the other hand, a Swede was obviously perceived as much less foreign in Norway in the 15th century than a Dane was. It is revealing that the peace treaty from 1437 determined that the Council of the Realm should ask King Erik to defend the Realm against the Danish and other foreign men who had to leave the country because of the treaty (Taranger 2012: nr. 90, paragraph 6). The fact that Danes were explicitly mentioned was probably due to the numbers of them in Norway and the Danish domination in the union. However, we know there were Swedish aristocratic immigrants in Norway in the period (Opsahl 2008). It is, therefore, probably illustrative of their lack of foreignness, in both background and behaviour, in Norway that

Swedes are not mentioned explicitly in the peace treaty of 1437. As far as I know, there are no examples of Swedes being criticised by Norwegians as foreigners in the 15th century.

We can conclude with something perhaps obvious: that Norwegians and Swedes looked upon themselves as the peoples of Scandinavia in the Late Middle Ages who had most in common. In other words, the Norwegian and Swedish cultures were quite similar. Norwegian farmers expressed this view during the struggle for the Norwegian throne in 1448-50, when they declared in favour of the Swedish King Charles (Karl Knutsson Bonde). Norway and Sweden had, for a very long time, been allied on the basis of agreements made in confidence. God had made the two kingdoms so geographically linked, with a common border of more than 400 or 500 hundred Norwegian miles (some 4000 km – today's border is 1630 km), that a destruction of the alliance between Norway and Sweden would have led to a great deal of suffering for the people of both kingdoms (Johnsen et al. 1934: nr. 6, Opsahl 2008). Nevertheless, my experience tells me that sometimes it might be necessary to be reminded of the obvious when analysing different aspects of the social development in Scandinavia in the Late Middle Ages.

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