

Medieval Societies and Historiography

Von

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In the following, I shall compare four historiographical traditions: (1) Byzantium, (2) feudal Europe, represented by Germany, (3) the northern periphery, represented by Norway and Iceland, and (4) Italy in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The advantage of such a comparison is that all four traditions are derived from or at least influenced by, ancient historiography, combined with Christianity, while at the same time the difference between the respective societies is sufficient to pose the question about the relative importance of intellectual traditions versus social conditions as the explanation of a particular historiographical tradition.

The answer, of course, largely depends on the aspect of historiography one wants to focus on. My focus is on ‚making sense of history‘, more specifically on the relationship between society and the individual. What is history really about? Is it just an account of individuals and their achievements, or is there some transpersonal structure or institution that serves to give such acts meaning? In order to answer this question, we cannot confine ourselves to key concepts or explicit statements in the texts; we have to deal with the narrative, not from a stylistic or literary point of view but as evidence of a particular mode of thought. William Brandt's analysis of medieval historical thought¹, long neglected but now the subject of increasing interest, is an important contribution to this field of research. Brandt distinguishes between a secular and a clerical „mode of thought“, and finds little understanding of the actors' aims and intentions and little connection between the various events narrated in either of them. The aim of the secular or aristocratic author is „to celebrate, not to explain“. The clerical author, who represents a different mental outlook from that of his aristocratic counterpart, does try to explain but hardly in a way that makes sense of the events from a political and military point of view. To a medieval clerical chronicler, the world is essentially static, and historical events are temporary changes in the normal order of things. The explanation of these changes is usually sought in particular qualities in the persons or objects that bring them about and therefore tends to be tautological.² In Brandt's opinion, both the aristocratic

1 *William Brandt, The Shape of Medieval History. New Haven 1966.*

2 *Brandt, The Shape (cited in note 1), 33 ff., 59 ff.*

and the clerical way of writing history are thus evidence of a „mode of perception“ totally different from our own.

Brandt's understanding of medieval narrative receives some support from recent studies in renaissance historiography. According to Donald Wilcox, the great difference between medieval and renaissance historiography is the renaissance historians' ability to combine vivid narrative of concrete episodes with overall meaning or „plot“. In the Middle Ages, both these qualities are to be found, but they are not combined.³ Mark Phillips applies the same understanding to the development of historical narrative from Villani via Brunetti to Machiavelli and Guicciardini⁴, in which he characterises the difference between the two epochs as one between „representation“ and „argument“, a distinction inspired by Erich Auerbach's characterisation of Gregory of Tours as opposed to classical, Roman narrative.⁵ Gregory's Latin is „barbarian“, his narrative episodic and, in addition, sometimes so obscure as to be incomprehensible, and it is difficult to make any sense of his chaos of detail. Observation of small, concrete details, often told in a vivid way, despite the barbarism, has replaced the overall view of great military and political events in Roman historiography. Thus, Gregory not only represents the ruin of classical culture but also the beginning of a new one.⁶ In a similar way, Phillips describes renaissance historiography as based on argument, i.e. instead of the vivid chaos of individual episodes in the Middle Ages – the representation –, we find a narrative organized in the Roman way, focused on the most important matters and presenting the events from one, single perspective.

Medieval historiography shows great variety, and the characterisations referred to above may easily be dismissed as exaggerated or superficial. Nevertheless, there is something to be said in favour of Wilcox's and Phillips' view of the contrast between medieval and renaissance historiography; at least, the distinction between representation and argument is useful as a starting-point. As for Brandt, he may with some justice be accused of falling in the same trap as the critical scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, regarding medieval accounts of politics as naive because they do not correspond to modern ideas of how politics is conducted. Brandt shows fairly well that medieval historiography does not make sense according to our modern criteria, but is less concerned with how it made sense according to

3 Donald Wilcox, *The Sense of Time in Western Historical Narratives from Eusebius to Machiavelli*, in: *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography*. Ed. Ernst Breisach. Kalamazoo 1985, 167–235.

4 Mark Phillips, *Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography in Florence*, in: *AHR* 84, 1979, 86–105; *id.*, *Representation and Argument in Florentine Historiography*, in: *StorStor* 10, 1986, 48–63.

5 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*. Bern 1946, 78–94.

6 To what extent this represents an adequate understanding of Gregory, is doubtful but shall not be discussed here. For a recent attempt to trace Gregory's understanding of history and the ultimate aims of his narrative, see Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours (538–594). „Zehn Bücher Geschichte“*. Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzeption im 6. Jahrhundert. Darmstadt 1994. As shall be illustrated later, e.g. in the discussion about Thietmar of Merseburg, ‚episodic‘ or ‚chaotic‘ narratives are rarely so devoid of coherence and ‚argument“ as they immediately appear. ‚Representation“ and ‚argument“ will therefore rarely appear in pure form in practice.

medieval criteria. The value of his work therefore lies more in its general approach than its conclusions. Moreover, although some medieval chroniclers may correspond to Brandt's description – and to Auerbach's of Gregory of Tours' „barbarism“ – they are hardly representative of the period as a whole. In particular, it would seem appropriate to look for changes in the writing of history in the high Middle Ages.

In order to compare the four historiographical traditions mentioned above, I shall take as my starting-point an example of a parallel situation within each of them, i.e. a change of regime. I shall start with the most classisitic as well as the most distant from the rest of Europe, i.e. the Byzantine. The tradition must also be considered the oldest, although the work to be discussed, Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*⁷, written in the first half of the twelfth century, is later than some of the Western works I shall discuss, as well as belonging to a politically more ‚advanced‘ society.

Politics in the Byzantine Empire: Anna Komnene

The first three books of the *Alexiad* may be termed biography in the sense that they deal with Alexios rather than with the history of the Roman Empire. Anna starts with three stories from Alexios's youth, before his accession to the throne, which show him distinguishing himself in the service of the Empire; they are the first three of his „labours of Hercules“. But they are not integrated into the history of the Empire; Anna only gives the names of the emperors under whom they took place (Michael VII Doukas and Nikephoros Botaneiates), adding some general references to the precarious state of the Empire. After these stories, however, Anna directly turns to imperial history, first describing the state of the Empire metaphorically as illness in the body, then introducing the villain of the first part of her story, Robert Guiscard, Alexios's main enemy during his first years as emperor. Thus, she gives a double background to her main story of Alexios's reign; she deals both with Alexios's youth and the crisis in the Empire, but does not immediately connect the two.

The second book establishes the connection between Alexios and the Empire, dealing with his coup d'état. The story is told in considerable detail and is one of the masterpieces of the *Alexiad*. Clearly, Anna's account is favourable to Alexios, and she is at pains to show that he behaves justly and honourably. She does not, however, exploit the possibility the story of Robert Guiscard has given her to show that Alexios acted according to the interests of the Empire. Instead, she defends his coup by presenting it as the only way for Alexios and his brother Isaak to escape the intrigues of the Emperor's two favourites Borilos and Germanos who plot to have the two brothers blinded. This justification may be an indication of the limits to Anna's ‚imperial perspective‘, but also reflects the fact that a coup d'état in Byzantium was not regarded in a very negative way; it was actually a fairly normal way of acce-

7 Anne Comnène, *Alexiade*. Ed. & transl. *Bernard Leib*. Vol. 1–4. Paris 1967–76 (references are to this edition, book, chapter and sub-chapter); English translation: *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*. Transl. *Edgar Robert Ashton Sewter*. Harmondsworth 1987. German translation, with comments: *Anna Komnene, Alexias*. Transl. *Diether Reinsch*. Cologne 1996.

ding to the throne.⁸ There were no very definite rules about how to succeed to the imperial office in Byzantium, in contrast to the prestige, power, and elaborate ceremonial surrounding the office itself. The attitude to the imperial power seems almost Hobbesian; the holder of the office was entitled to absolute obedience from his subjects, until he was deposed and replaced by someone else who had the same rights. It was important for Anna to point out that the Komnenoi brothers had sufficient reasons for behaving as they did, as they had previously been favoured by the Emperor Nikephoros Botaneiates, but she needed not go out of her way to justify them.

As for Anna's attempt to present the Komnenoi brothers as acting in self-defense, some objections may be raised against her story. She repeatedly asserts that the „slaves“ plotted against them and tried to blind them without any real attempt being made. Alexios is even able to free himself from their charges before the Emperor at the very moment when he is assembling troops to stage his coup.⁹ From a political point of view it is not always easy to follow the moves. There are digressions, and not all details are equally relevant. Nevertheless, it is a brilliant story, full of concrete and vivid detail, showing how Alexios and his brother manage to build up a network of allies inside and outside Constantinople, gather an army, and finally force their entry into the capital and depose Nikephoros.

One of the most memorable scenes in this story is when the old emperor has been persuaded to abdicate after Alexios's troops have entered the city. Having given up his imperial dignity, he hurries away from the palace to the cathedral Hagia Sophia, but forgets that he is still wearing the imperial robes: *Borilos, turning on him and touching the embroidered work fastened round his arm with pearls, wrenched it off, sarcastically remarking in his mocking way, „This sort of thing really fits us now.“* Botaneiates entered the great church of God, Santa Sophia, and there for a time he remained.¹⁰

Botaneiates is taken captive by Alexios's men and is forced to become a monk – the better of the alternative fates facing a deposed emperor; the worse was to be blinding. After a short passage on the shifts of fortune, Anna gives her last glimpse of him. Being asked by one of his friends if he finds the change tolerable, he answers: *Abstinence from meat is the only thing that worries me; the other matters cause little concern.*¹¹

This remark may almost be compared to Shakespeare's famous comic scenes in the midst of his tragedies. It not only serves as a relaxation, however, but sets the whole story of the coup in a kind of ironic perspective: such efforts, dangers, and bloodshed to depose a man

8 By contrast, Anna has greater problems with the fact that Alexios's troops sacked Constantinople after entering the city, and tells that Alexios took upon him a strict penance to atone for this sin; Alexiade (cited in note 7), III.5.1. Apparently, the rule of the game was to wait for the emperor's surroundings to come to an arrangement with the pretender or, at least, to keep the soldiers in stricter control after taking the city.

9 Ibid. II.4.3.

10 Ibid. II.12.6: ὁ δὲ Βορίλος ἐπιστραφεὶς καὶ ἀπάμενος τῶν περὶ τὸν βραχίονα κεκολλημένων διὰ μαργάρων πέπλων παραπλῦει τηρικαῦτα τῆς ἐσθῆτος φάμενος μετὰ τινοῦ μυκτῆρος καὶ σεσηρότος ἥθους ὡς „τοιοῦτον ἡμῖν ἐπ' ἀληθείας προσήκει νῦν. ὁ δὲ εἰς τὸν μέγαν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφίας εἰσελθὼν ἐγκαρτερῶν τέως ἦν ἐν αὐτῷ.

11 Ibid. III.1.1: „ἡ τοῦ κρέως με μόνον ἀποχὴ ἀνιᾶ, τῶν δ' ἄλλων ὀλίγη μοι ἡ φροντίς“.

whose only reason for keeping to the imperial throne was the opportunity to eat meat! The irony lies not only in these final words but in Anna's whole portrait of Botaneiates, who is described with a combination of pity and contempt. She recognizes his strength and ability in his youth, and she does not hold him responsible for the persecution of the Komnenoi. But towards the end of his life he is a pathetic figure, manipulated by the evil „slaves“, weak, and indecisive. In this way he also becomes a symbol of the disease in the imperial body which Anna has already described, and a striking contrast to the vigorous young man who now ascends to the imperial throne.

Anna gives a realistic and shrewd analysis of the various political moves that finally secured the Komnenoi's and Alexios's success. Anna clearly knows the Byzantine court and administration from within. She is able to describe it in a convincing manner and show why Alexios succeeded. Personal connections are essential. Alexios belongs to a distinguished family, whose members have won military glory, a connection that apparently explains his own military promotion at an early age. But the Komnenoi have no great influence in the capital. Here Alexios's great advantage is his connection with the Doukas family through his marriage to Irene. Most of the prominent men he persuades to join him are in one way or other connected to this family. The Doukas would also seem to be natural allies for a pretender trying to depose Botaneiates, as he had himself deposed a Doukas emperor, a fact Anna points out and her readers were no doubt well aware of.

However, family ties are not enough. Most of the leading men in Constantinople were in some way or other related by blood or marriage, which did not prevent them from fighting or plotting against one another. The crucial test for a pretender is how he is able to exploit his connections. In her detailed narrative Anna shows the Komnenoi's, and particularly Alexios's, ability in this respect, describing how the brothers secured the cooperation of various prominent members of the bureaucracy and the aristocracy in the capital. Alexios's most important qualities are his generosity and his sense of psychology. Anna devotes a long passage to the former quality, using it to explain concrete cases of people joining him. Ultimately, generosity is the quality in a leader that corresponds to a rational choice view of political allegiance and leadership: People follow the leader who will give them most in return. Anna shows convincingly that this „law“ applies in Byzantine society. Generosity is also a quality that can be said to have a more general appeal: the generous man is admired and followed, not only because such behaviour pays off, but because generosity is a noble quality that excites admiration. Anna implies that Alexios scores on both points. She gives a fairly detailed and sober account of the concrete promises he has to give in order to gain adherents. She refers to several direct promises of promotion to high office in the imperial bureaucracy, promises that entailed considerable expense once they had to be fulfilled. Nor were the promises always easily compatible. Thus, in order to achieve an agreement with his rival Melissenos, who was besieging Constantinople with a rebellious army at the same time, he has to promise him the rank of Caesar – the second to the emperor in the Byzantine status system. On the other hand, he had promised his brother Isaak the rank next to himself.

Alexios solves the dilemma by inventing a new title, *sebastokrator*, for Isaak.¹² However, promises have to be fulfilled at high costs, in prestige as well as in money, so it is important not to make more of them than needed to achieve one's aim. Consequently, both the power and resources of the person in question and the time of his 'conversion' is important. The latter point is illustrated by the case of Botaneiates, who starts negotiations too late, when Alexios's victory is secured and Botaneiates has nothing to offer.

Alexios's psychological skill is repeatedly stressed by Anna throughout the *Alexiad*. Not all the examples she adduces are equally convincing; Alexios is deceived several times. In many cases, however, she is able to show by concrete examples that Alexios's skill in this field is more than a general assertion. One of the best in the story about the coup is the dialogue with the Empress Maria Doukas, a Georgian woman, who had been married to Michael Doukas and after his deposition (1078) to Nikephoros. The Komnenoi brothers knew her in advance, as Isaak was married to her cousin. The decisive moment, however, comes when the two parties discover that they have common interests. Nikephoros, being old and childless and without hope of an issue, decides to appoint a relative as his successor, to the detriment of the Empress' own son, Constantine. The Empress is deeply worried by the rumours of this decision, not only because of the frustration of her plan to have her son made emperor but also out of fear for his safety. The Komnenoi brothers understand from the Empress' mood and behaviour that something grieves her, despite the fact that she has revealed her sorrow to no one. They approach her, asking what is the matter. She refuses to tell, pointing out that the fact that she lives in a foreign country, surrounded by strangers, that she has many worries and expect more to come, is sufficient to make her sorrowful. The brothers listen in deep silence and then leave. However, they return the next day, and, having already guessed the truth, urge her to confide in them. Anna explicitly points to their skill in divining people's secret thoughts from brief remarks – and in hiding their own thoughts and intentions. The brothers succeed and enter an agreement with the Empress.¹³

As appears even more clearly from Michael Psellos's *Chronographia*, hiding one's own motives and divining those of others were essential to success, often also to survive, in Byzantine courtly society. Without such qualities, according to Anna – and here there is every reason to trust her opinion – Alexios would never have been able to ascend the throne.

Thus, Anna gives a perfectly plausible and psychologically convincing account of intrigues and political manoeuvres in contemporary Byzantium. Her story as a whole, which consists of individual episodes, shows in detail how the brothers succeeded. The individual dramatic episodes gain their real meaning by being links in a chain of events leading to Alexios's installment on the imperial throne. In her account of Alexios's coup, Anna consistently writes political history.

Given the fact that Alexios's coup takes place within a highly organised, bureaucratic state, its 'individualistic' character is surprising. The moral defence for Alexios's course of action is the danger to himself, not the deep crisis in the Empire. In the account of how he

12 Ibid. III.4.1–3.

13 Ibid. II.2.1–3.

persuades people to follow him, there is no mention of the need for a new leader. Having established Alexios on the throne, however, Anna turns to the political situation, systematically describing the problems of the Empire: an empty treasury and enemies in the East as well as in the West. The following account of Alexios's reign as a whole is largely focused on how he solves these problems. First, he defends the Empire against Robert Guiscard (Books III–VI, 1081–1085). Then he spends more than ten years mainly occupied by the threats to the northern borders from Hungarians and various Slavonic peoples (Books VI–X, 1085–1096). Finally, he turns his attention to the East, but then immediately afterwards has to deal with the crusaders. The relationship to the crusaders and the Turks forms the main content of the rest of the work (Books X–XV, 1097–1118). Here two external successes receive particularly great attention, the peace treaties with Bohemund in 1108 and with the Turkish sultan in 1116. Thus, the *Alexiad* as a whole deals with Alexios's restoration of the Empire. Towards the end of her work, Anna points to his success in carrying out this task, although her celebration is mixed with pessimism because of what she regards as the decline caused by her hated brother John II's reign (1118–1143).¹⁴

Politics in a Pre-State Society: Thietmar of Merseburg and Snorri Sturluson

While Anna Komnene's account of the coup represents a curious mixture of clientelism and politics in a highly developed bureaucratic system, the former dominates in the two examples to be discussed in the following, Thietmar of Merseburg's account of the election of Henry II in 1002 and Snorri Sturluson's account in *Heimskringla* of King Olav Haraldsson's (1015–30) conquest of Norway in 1015.¹⁵

Thietmar's story of Henry's way to the throne¹⁶ has the form of a detailed narrative, apparently listing everything of any importance that happened in Germany between the death of Otto III on 24 January 1002¹⁷ and the surrender of Hermann, the last of Henry's rivals, on 1 October the same year.¹⁸ Thietmar's narrative may be compared to the numerous narrative sequences found in medieval art, in the early Middle Ages in the form of book illustrations or reliefs on reliquaries or other valuable objects, later on in the form of glass paintings: A

14 The reason for this hatred was that Anna wanted her husband, Nikephoros Bryennios, to succeed her father instead of John; cf. *Alexiade* (cited in note 7), Introduction, xviii–xx; *Georgina Buckler*, *Anna Comnena*. Oxford 1968, 40–46. In contrast to Anna's view, John's reign is regarded by contemporaries as well as by modern historians as the peak of the Komnenoi revival.

15 For the following, see also *Sverre Bagge*, *Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture? The Case of the Kings' Sagas*, in: *Scandinavian Studies* 69, 1997, 418–442.

16 *Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon*. Hrsg. *Robert Holtzmann*. (MGH SS rer. Germ. [9].) Berlin 1955, IV.50–56, V.1–22. Thietmar (975–1018) was bishop of Merseburg from 1009 and composed his chronicle from then and until his death. It is a combination of a diocesan chronicle and a history of the German rulers from Henry I (919–936) until Henry II (1002–1024). I treat Thietmar as well as other German historical writers in greater detail in the forthcoming book: *Sverre Bagge*, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography 950–1150*.

17 *Chronicon* (cited in note 16), IV. 49.

18 *Ibid.* V. 22.

large number of sequences follow one another, all of them being the same size and presenting a static picture. The parts seem to be more important than the whole. This is clearly representation rather than argument. On the other hand, the narrative is not particularly vivid. We get concrete information about a number of details, but we hardly get emotionally involved.

Two features are particularly noteworthy in Thietmar's narrative. First, the story of the accession is broken off by a long digression after Thietmar's account of Otto's funeral.¹⁹ Admittedly, Thietmar makes it clear that he breaks off the story and that the beginning of Book V is a direct continuation of where he left off in Book IV. Second, there is no general connection between the length and detail of the individual episodes and their importance for the question of succession. This is particularly clear in the account of the murder of one of the two rival pretenders, Ekkehard. Thietmar insists that there was no connection between this murder and the struggle for the succession, which is relevant enough, given the fact that Henry is Thietmar's hero and that Thietmar wants to clear him of any suspicion of being guilty of the crime. However, he does not stop there, but gives a detailed account of the murder itself, as well as the ensuing conflicts between Ekkehard's family and the murderers.²⁰

Thus, the immediate impression of Thietmar's account is that a 'story' of the royal succession emerges almost accidentally, so that it takes a modern historian to arrange Thietmar's mass of detail in a way that makes clear how and why Henry triumphed over his rivals. This impression is not quite correct. Thietmar does indicate that he wants to tell a continuous story, even pointing to the main explanation of Henry's success, God's intervention. God wanted Henry to rule, in particular because He had elected him as His instrument in restoring the diocese of Merseburg – Thietmar's own – which, as the result of a terrible crime, had been abolished in the reign of Otto II (973–983). However, there are few direct references to God's intervention in Thietmar's concrete narrative. By contrast, if we read the story carefully, Thietmar emerges as a fine observer of contemporary politics, showing clearly how Henry moves systematically to secure the throne for himself. Henry gets hold of the royal insignia immediately after Otto's death; he works systematically on the princes and magnates by giving gifts and promises to gain their support, and instead of directly attacking his rivals, he moves around in the country in order to receive acclamation at as many local assemblies as possible. This strategy works; after Ekkehard's death, his other rival, Hermann, finds himself isolated and sees no other option than to seek reconciliation with Henry, which he gets, on quite favourable terms.

Snorri's story of Olav Haraldsson's succession²¹ is also episodic and is also based on an idea of divine intervention. On his way to Jerusalem, Olav has a dream, telling him to return

19 Ibid. IV. 55–75.

20 Ibid. V. 3–7.

21 Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla. Saga ins helga Óláfs konungs*. Ed. *Finnur Jónsson*. 2 vol. Copenhagen 1893–1900, ch. 29–53. For the following, see also *Sverre Bagge, Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford 1991, 90 ff. Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) is considered the greatest Old Norse historian. He was one of the most powerful Icelandic magnates and played a prominent part in the struggles for power in Iceland during the first half of the thirteenth

to Norway to become king there for ever.²² Olav breaks off his journey but does not go directly to Norway; he fights for some time in France and then in England, supporting the sons of King Ethelred against King Cnut. Seeing that their cause is hopeless, he finally leaves for Norway which at the time is ruled by members of another dynasty, the earls Svein and his nephew Håkon, under Danish supremacy. The following account of Olav's conquest of Norway is also episodic. However, instead of Thietmar's series of small 'vignettes', Snorri concentrates his narrative in a few great 'scenes' which he describes in vivid detail: (1) the ambush for Earl Håkon who is taken captive and forced to give up his claim on Norway, (2) Olav's meeting with his stepfather Sigurd Syr, gaining him the support of the petty kings of Eastern Norway, (3) the 'excursion' northwards to Trøndelag, (4) the battle of Nesjar in the southeast, where Olav defeats his second adversary, Earl Svein, (5) the final acceptance of Olav as king of Norway.

These great 'scenes' are all clearly 'representation', making the persons and their actions vivid and concrete. Details about dress and food are inserted, partly for vividness, partly to increase the drama by retardation, and speeches and dialogues are used for maximum effect: The young Earl is led before Olav, and the king touches his hair and praises his beauty, while hinting that he may have reached a point when he will neither have defeat nor victory any more. The speeches and dialogues between Olav, his mother, and his stepfather Sigurd bring out the contrast between the two former's ruthless ambition and willingness to die rather than give in, and the careful and prudent Sigurd. The deliberation scene between the petty kings of the East places the young pretender's claim in a wider political perspective: which is the more advantageous from point of view of the petty kings, being subordinated to a distant king who does not interfere much, or supporting the one who is likely to win and sharing the fruits of his victory?

However, these 'scenes' also form part of a larger story, showing how Olav gains hold of Norway step by step. This story is brought in perspective by Snorri's presentation of the relative strength of Olav and his adversaries: on the one hand Olav with his two ships, admittedly in the possession of plenty of gold, on the other the tight network between the earls and the greatest magnates of the country who are enormously wealthy and powerful.²³ This is a struggle between David and Goliath, and Snorri may well have intended his account of Olav's victory to demonstrate that Olav's victory, like David's, was the result of God's support. Nevertheless, his story is also intended to explain in purely human and political terms how Olav won. Capturing Håkon eliminates an important rival while at the same time demonstrating Olav's luck, which proves essential in gaining him the support of the kings, magnates, and people in the East. This support in turn enables him to defeat his enemies at Nesjar. The expedition to Trøndelag in between is less successful and rather serves as a kind of first skirmish between Olav and his enemies.

In this way, Snorri's use of representation to some extent serves the purpose of argument. Snorri writes political history, showing how Olav, through a combination of luck and skill,

century. In *Heimskringla* he treats the history of the Norwegian dynasty from its mythical ancestor, the god Odin, until 1177.

22 *Heimskringla* (cited in note 21), ch. 18.

23 *Ibid.* ch. 21–23, cf. ch. 46.

wins a sufficient number of victories to receive the support of the majority of the population of Norway. The amount of detail and vividness of the individual episodes describing this process is largely determined by their relative importance for the final result.

The similarity between the political systems described by Thietmar and Snorri is striking. There are no firm rules of succession, no central assembly with the right to decide, and no very firm loyalties. Most powerful men support the candidate most likely to further their interests, i.e. the one who is (1) generous, and (2) likely to win. Consequently, „nothing succeeds like success“, and when Henry and Olav have gained a significant advantage over their rivals, most men rally to their support.

This similarity is confirmed by other passages of the two works we have compared, as well as by other historical works within the two traditions. Both traditions belong to a period prior to the introduction of the fully developed ideology of Christian kingship. This is quite clear in the case of Iceland which was without a king until 1262, whereas royal unction was not firmly established in Norway until 1247. With some exceptions, the idea of Christian kingship is not very prominent in the kings' sagas.²⁴ Ottonian Germany had behind it a long tradition of Christian monarchy, and royal unction had been firmly established since the accession of Otto I in 936. Nevertheless, the idea of the king as the Lord's Anointed, holding an office on God's behalf, has only partially penetrated Thietmar's work and is of slight importance in his predecessor Widukind. Thus, Widukind describes Otto the Great as an enormous, lion-like man whose strength, warlike qualities, and sharp, piercing eyes terrorise his enemies, whereas his kindness and generosity to his friends have no limits.²⁵ This is the Germanic chieftain and charismatic warlord, not the Christian *rex iustus*, and parallels are easily to be found in the sagas. The description of the „game of politics“ between these warlords also resemble that of the sagas. In Widukind and even more so in Thietmar, there is an awareness that the king has the just cause in internal conflicts with rivals and aristocratic rebels. Nevertheless, these latter are noble and respectable men who fight for their legitimate interests, in the same way as the king's rivals in the sagas.

Thus, in both cases we have to do with the idea of politics as a competition between individual actors who fight for concrete, personal interests and who attract friends and allies through generosity and a charismatic personality. In both cases we also have to do with a community transcending these individual interests, expressed in the contrast between internal and external struggles. In Widukind, the Saxons stand united against the barbarian Slavs, fighting them ruthlessly.²⁶ The difference from the neighbouring peoples, the Danes and the Swedes, is less in the sagas, but there are many expressions of Norwegian superiority over

24 Sverre Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*. Odense 1996, 52–85, 94–106, 147–160.

25 Widukindi Monachi Corbeiensis Rerum gestarum Saxoniarum libri tres. Hrsg. Paul Hirsch. (MGH SS rer. Germ. [60].) Hannover 1935, II. 36, 96 f. Widukind's work was most probably composed in 967/68; cf. Helmut Beumann, *Widukind von Korvey. Untersuchungen zur Geschichtsschreibung und Ideengeschichte des 10. Jahrhunderts*. Weimar 1950, 178–205.

26 Beumann, *Widukind* (cited in note 25), 205–207; Bagge, *Kings, Politics* (cited in note 16).

them, although the Norwegians do not always present a united front against these external enemies.²⁷

As for the narrative form of the two stories, both are heirs to Gregory of Tours' „barbarisation" of Roman historiography. They have an episodic structure, they are more inclined towards representation than argument, and, closely related to these features, they lack an impersonal protagonist. On the other hand, Snorri's story is clearly more successful as representation, containing vivid story-telling and concrete and memorable ‚scenes'. It is also more successful as argument; the representation serving to emphasize the main stages in the political ‚plot' about Olav's rise to power. Thus, although the understanding of the political mechanisms is largely the same in Thietmar's and Snorri's stories, they are made far more explicit in Snorri's account.

The vivid narrative and the ability to tell a good story is common to most writers of the kings' sagas as well as the sagas of the Icelanders. There is greater difference as to what extent they are also able to integrate the episodes in longer narrative sequences. It is not difficult to find examples of episodic or even – from a modern point of view – chaotic narrative in the sagas. Nevertheless, the most mature and elaborate of them, such as *Heimskringla*, by far surpass the early medieval German historiography in this respect. Thus, the integrated narrative of Olav's life and reign in *Heimskringla* is not confined to stories like the one we have just examined; the whole saga is constructed as a plot, showing Olav's increasing power during the first ten years of his reign and its decline during the last five. Furthermore, Olav's fall is prepared by a number of episodes, reaching back to his successful years and showing how he ran into conflict with the most important magnates of the country one by one, until he faced the overwhelming strength of his enemies at Stiklestad and was killed.²⁸

However, the integration stops at a certain level. Tactics is more important than strategy in the sagas. The actors have no great political or ideological project they want to achieve; they fight for their own power within a fairly static system, not in order to bring about a new constitution or a new social order or bring a new class or social group into power. Consequently, the sagas have no impersonal protagonist; the largest unit organising an integrated story is the life or reign of an individual king. *Heimskringla* is not the history of the Norwegian nation and even less of the Norwegian ‚state'; it is the history of the Norwegian dynasty, in which the connection between the individual reigns depends on the personal relationship between the rulers and their men. Joint rule or struggles between pretenders may create a continuous story from one rule to the other, but normally, the reign of a king is a self-contained unit which may even be divided into a number of fairly separate stories.

In a similar way, the episodes from Thietmar are fairly representative of Ottonian historiography. Generally, Thietmar's chronicle is not only episodic; it is full of the most fantastic stories of dreams, miracles, and portents, and in some cases, as the account of Henry I's reign (919–936), the politics is almost drowned in devotion and piety. On the other hand, all

27 Bagge, *Society and Politics* (cited in note 21), 100 ff.; *id.*, *Nationalism in Norway in the Middle Ages*, in: *ScanJH* 20, 1995, 1–18.

28 Bagge, *Society and Politics* (cited in note 21), 34–43.

these references to the supernatural do not prevent Thietmar from giving a lot of information on contemporary politics, and his account of the rest of Henry's reign gives similar information on the Ottonian political system as the story of his succession to the throne.²⁹ Widukind's work has greater thematic unity, dealing respectively with the early history of the Saxon people (first half of Book I) and its two great rulers, Henry I (second half of Book I) and Otto I (Books II and III). Digressions and religious comments are few, but the structure is basically episodic. Some episodes are vivid and dramatic, others more dry, but there are few longer, integrated stories of wars and political confrontations and no attempt to give an integrated account of a whole reign or of the main features of the development of the Saxon political community.

Surely, medieval, and particularly early medieval historiography rarely offers explicit explanations of why people behaved the way they did, and when it does, usually explains the actions in terms of 'private' and 'individual' motives: anger, pride, hatred, or love. The reason is hardly that the writers were primitive and did not understand what went on around them, but (1) that historiography was exemplary and that the 'quality' of individual acts was consequently more important than their motives and consequences, and (2) that contemporary politicians were actually governed largely by 'private' or 'individual' motives. In this way, historical texts can form an important corrective to the conclusion „constitutional historians“ have often drawn on the basis of charters and documentary evidence of an impersonal, long-term, and bureaucratic behaviour in the Middle Ages, similar to more recent periods.

The account of political manoeuvring in the western tradition, represented by Thietmar and Snorri, resembles the way in which Anna Komnene describes Alexios's coup. In both traditions, the emphasis is on personal relationships, and the throne is a 'prize' the pretenders seek to gain by building up alliances and outmanoeuvring their rivals. By contrast, the political community and its interests play a subordinate role. Admittedly, Byzantium had a tradition of 'stateness' and bureaucracy going back to late Antiquity. 'Bureaucracy' should not, however, be understood in a Weberian sense; it was rather a kind of clientelism masked as a hierarchy of officers in the service of the state.³⁰ Byzantinists have also noted an increasing emphasis on individuals rather than the state in Byzantine historiography³¹ which is also prominent in Anna's account of Alexios's coup.

29 *Chronicon* (cited in note 16), V–VIII. For early medieval German politics, see *Gerd Althoff*, *Otto III. Darmstadt 1996*; *id.*, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter*. Darmstadt 1997; *Bagge*, *Kings, Politics* (cited in note 16).

30 *Hans-Georg Beck*, *Ideen und Realitäten in Byzanz*. *Gesammelte Aufsätze*. (Variorum Collected Studies, vol. 13.) London 1978, no. XI, 1–32; *id.*, *Das Byzantinische Jahrtausend*. München 1978, 33–86.

31 *Jakov Ljubarskij*, „Writers' Intrusion“ in Early Byzantine Literature, in: XVIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Moscow 1991, 433–456; *id.*, *Man in Byzantine Historiography* from John Malalas to Michael Psellos, in: *Homo Byzantinus*. Papers in honor of Alexander Kazhdan. Ed. Anthony Cutler/Simon Franklin (Dumbarton Oaks Papers 47, 1992.), 177–186; *Roger Scott*, *The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography*, in: *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*. Ed. Margaret Mullett/Roger Scott. Birmingham 1981, 61–74.

If we look at our three stories within the overall context of the works to which they belong, the difference becomes greater. What strikes an observer familiar with Western historiography when reading Anna Komnene, is her concern with the state or the Empire. When eventually having brought Alexios on the throne, Anna continues by describing the deep crisis in the Empire and how step by step Alexios managed to overcome it. For all its personal emphasis, the *Alexiad* is certainly a portrait of a great statesman, not of a chieftain fighting for individual glory. The idea of a crisis in the Empire is strong in Anna Komnene, and she clearly regards Alexios's reign as an – at least partly – successful attempt to solve it. Consequently, she must also have regarded the coup in this perspective, despite her failure to mention this aspect directly in her account of it.

Ideas of state, empire, or political community are far weaker in Thietmar and Snorri. Neither Henry II nor Olav Haraldsson are saviours of the realm in a period of crisis, nor do Thietmar and Snorri regard internal struggles during an interregnum as a disaster. Admittedly, we do find the idea of the ruler being responsible for a larger community in both works, but this community is less institutionalised than in Anna, and the difference between the community as a whole and its individual members is consequently less.

On the other hand, the idea of God's election of the ruler is stronger in Thietmar and Snorri than in Anna. Anna occasionally refers to God's protection of Alexios, but not to God's election of him in connection with his rise to power. By contrast, Thietmar and Snorri explicitly refer to God's election of respectively Henry and Olav. The idea of kings and emperors as God's elected was of course widespread in Byzantium as well as in the West throughout the Middle Ages. In both areas it could be combined with 'rational choice' politics and clientelism. Generally, however, this latter aspect was stronger in connection with the actual succession in Byzantium. Dynastic continuity had greater importance in the West; firm rules for the succession were eventually laid down, so that struggles for the throne became rarer. In contrast to Byzantium, it became the exception that a king was deposed or killed by his rivals or subjects. The two examples discussed above both took place before this development. Thietmar's account clearly shows that there was no fixed procedure for royal elections, apart from the political reality that the king must have the support of a majority of the great and influential men in the realm. Nor was kingship hereditary in any direct sense, although direct descendants of the previous king in practice had a strong claim.³² The reason for the open situation in 1002 was that the previous king, Otto III, had suddenly died without issue. Henry II, who succeeded him, was his second cousin. In early eleventh

32 There is an extensive literature on German royal elections. Some important contributions are collected in *Eduard Hlawitschka*, *Königswahl und Thronfolge in ottonisch-frühdeutscher Zeit*. Darmstadt 1971. See also *Ulrich Reuling*, *Die Kur in Deutschland und Frankreich. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung des rechtsförmlichen Wahlaktes bei der Königserhebung im 11. und 12. Jahrhundert*. (VMPiG, Bd. 64.) Göttingen 1979; *id.*, *Zur Entwicklung der Wahlformen bei den hochmittelalterlichen Königserhebungen im Reich*, in: *Wahlen und Wählen im Mittelalter*. Hrsg. v. Reinhard Schneider/Harald Zimmermann. (VuF, Bd. 37.) Sigmaringen 1990, 227–270.

century Norway there was apparently no real royal dynasty at all³³, although Snorri, writing under the influence of the thirteenth century ideology of dynastic continuity, clearly believed that there was, without suppressing the fact that there were also frequent struggles between pretenders.

Thietmar's account, however, gives evidence of an important difference from Byzantine conditions, a difference that became greater during the following period: having first ascended to the throne, the king has a fairly protected position, as the Lord's Anointed. He can be opposed, even through armed rebellion, but he cannot be replaced as easily as the Byzantine emperor. There is no Hobbesian situation, neither in the sense that the ruler is absolute, nor in the sense that his legitimacy depends on his actual power. These two aspects are clearly connected. The king's limited power and the possibility of opposition reduce the need for deposing him. The idea of the king ruling on God's behalf and under his protection is therefore combined with a relative weak royal power.

This idea is also, in what to us seems a curious way, combined with a clientelistic attitude. God resembles a great patron, favouring his earthly clients; He is not the representative of a strictly objective justice known from later ages. It is therefore no coincidence that Thietmar combines the idea of God's election of Henry with an account of his tactical manoeuvring on his way to the throne. In Snorri, the idea of God as the king's protector is generally not strongly present; Olav, the national saint and the eternal king of Norway, forms an exception as the one who is chosen to complete the Christianisation of the country. By contrast, *Sverris saga* which is slightly earlier than *Heimskringla*, resembles Thietmar in its strong emphasis on God's 'personal' election of its protagonist, without the corresponding emphasis on the ruler of an organised community.³⁴

Transpersonality and the State

Larger and more impersonal political structures did eventually emerge during the Middle Ages, even in Western Europe, and were reflected or anticipated or both in the historiographical tradition. The main ideological foundation for the idea of the state or the political community in the early Middle Ages was the Christian religion, with its ideas of the king as God's representative on earth; it was not existing bureaucratic structures or classical ideas of *res publica* or *bonum commune*, although the latter admittedly did exist already during the Carolingian Empire, together with the religious ideology. In the following period, there was a decline, of which Widukind and Thietmar may serve as examples. A new breakthrough came in mid-eleventh century Germany, with Wipo's *Gesta Chuonradi* (c. 1040), in which

33 *Claus Krag*, Norge som odel i Harald Hårfagres ætt. Møte med en gjenganger, in: *Historisk tidsskrift* [Oslo] 68, 1989, 288–302; *Bagge*, Society and Politics (cited in note 21), 130.

34 *Sverris saga*. Ed. *Gustav Indrebø*. Kristiania (= Oslo) 1920; *Bagge*, From Gang Leader (cited in note 24), 52–65.

the hero, Conrad II (1024–1039), is portrayed as the representative of what in Tellenbach's terminology can be termed „the right order of the world“.³⁵

Wipo represents a radical shift from his predecessors, from the idea of the king as a charismatic warrior and great patron to the fully developed Christian ideal of the *rex iustus* which penetrates the whole work. Wipo's initial statement of the crisis as a consequence of the interregnum not only forms the background of Conrad's election but of the whole work. Royal government means a systematic effort to restore or establish *cosmos* against the threatening forces of *chaos*, and Wipo's work deals with how Conrad carried out this task. The challenge facing him is to establish peace, order, and objective justice. Further, there is a close connection in this respect between God and the king, both representing objective justice. When Conrad occasionally fails, Wipo consistently seeks the explanation in some sin the emperor has committed for which he receives his just punishment. In this way, Wipo not only lays the foundation for future defense of the monarchy; he also exposes it to attacks from a potential opposition. His strong combination of God's protection of the king with the idea of objective justice raises the question of what would happen to an unjust king, and his distinction between the royal office and the king's person gives room for playing the two off against each other. Both were to happen during the Investiture Contest.

In the field of historiography, Lampert of Hersfeld's *Annales*, written around 1080³⁶, presents the foremost example of the dangers inherent in Wipo's doctrine. Lampert takes over Wipo's general ideology of the king as God's representative on earth and responsible for objective justice. His problem is that, in his opinion, the actual king, Henry IV, does not exercise this function. Consequently, he can no longer be king, but has to be replaced by someone else. However, this ‚someone else‘, in the shape of an individual person, i.e. the anti-king Rudolf of Rheinfelden, only emerges at the very end of Lampert's work, at the meeting in Forchheim in March, 1077. In Lampert's actual narrative, which mainly deals with the dramatic events 1073–1077, „the right order of the world“ is represented by a collective group, the princes and magnates, first of Saxony, then of Germany as a whole. This is not only the result of an emergency situation; in Lampert's view, the *res publica* is represented, not only by the king, but by the king together with the „people“, i.e. the aristocracy. In this way, Lampert takes a considerable step forward in the direction of an ‚impersonal‘ or ‚institutional‘ understanding of the state. From a historiographical point of view, the consequence of this step is that Lampert is able to create a consistent narrative with „the right order of the world“, expressed in these constitutional principles, as the ‚protagonist‘, in which the individual episodes become moves in the great struggle between this order and its adversaries.

35 Wipo, *Gesta Chuonradi*, in: *Wiponis Opera*. Hrsg. Harry Bresslau. (MGH SS rer. Germ. [61].) 3th ed., Hannover/Leipzig 1915, 1–62. For the term, see Gerd Tellenbach, *Church, State, and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Contest*. Oxford 1959 [German original 1936], 1 and passim.

36 *Lamperti Annales*, in *Lamperti Monachi Hersfeldensis Opera*. Hrsg. Oswald Holder-Egger. (MGH SS rer. Germ. [38].) Hannover/Leipzig 1894, 1–304.

Otto of Freising's *Gesta Frederici*³⁷, written in 1157–1158, forms a kind of synthesis of the various trends represented by his predecessors. Otto tries to unite the opposing parties of the Investiture Contest, the pope and the emperor as well as the monarchy and the aristocracy. He develops further the ideas of the right order of the world, the king as God's representative on earth, and objective justice, arranging them in a mighty system and placing them within the history of salvation, while in addition using them to show Germany's superiority over its neighbouring countries. Like Lampert, he regards the *res publica* as being ruled by the king in cooperation with the „people“, but to his great satisfaction, there is no opposition between the two, as Frederick Barbarossa is a thoroughly just and constitutional king. Otto develops further his predecessors' idea of the right order of the world, showing in greater detail how it corresponds to the hierarchical society of contemporary Germany which forms the golden mean between the tyranny of Hungary and the anarchy of Italy.

These ideas form the basis of an integrated historical narrative which differs considerably from Lampert's. Where Lampert's narrative, with some exceptions, is fairly straightforward and ‚literal‘, emphasising causes, effects, and motives, Otto's is largely based on allegory and typology, intended to bring out the moral and eschatological aspect of the events. Thus, Frederick's and his ancestors' justice and wisdom are emphasised through a series of contrasts with the members of the old, Salian dynasty; God's intervention in Frederick's favour is expressed in episodes of a half-miraculous character; and the account of the first four years of his reign – the only Otto managed to cover – is built up according to the moral challenges facing him: healing the division between God's two servants on earth, the pope and the emperor, creating peace among the princes of Germany, and introducing the right order of the world in the chaos and anarchy of Italy.

The development of the Old Norse saga literature later in the thirteenth century forms a parallel to eleventh and twelfth century Germany. The trends in *Heimskringla* towards the idea of the king as God's representative on earth are fully developed in the saga of Hákon Hákonsson (*Hákonar saga*), written in 1264–1265, shortly after the king's death in 1263.³⁸ This saga still retains important elements of the ‚classical‘ saga tradition in language, narrative style, and, to some extent, content. The saga mainly deals with political and military action, rather than government and administration. There are glimpses of a patron-client relationship between Hákon and his men, admissions of Hákon's imperfect control of his army in the descriptions of warfare, and a clear awareness of the importance of generosity and success in gaining adherents and winning political and military confrontations. However, the Christian and royalist ideal of the *rex iustus* determines the presentation of the king to a far greater extent than in the earlier sagas, including the one about Hákon's grandfather and predecessor Sverre.³⁹ The picture of Hákon in *Hákonar saga* is mainly a portrait of the *rex iustus* and head of state, while the real man remains an elusive figure. The social context of

37 Ottonis et Rahewini Gesta Frederici I Imperatoris. Hrsg. Georg Waitz/Bernhard von Simson. (MGH SS rer. Germ. [46].) Hannover/Leipzig, 1912. For the following, see Sverre Bagge, Ideas and narrative in Otto of Freising's Gesta Frederici, in: JMedH 22, 1996, 345–377.

38 Bagge, From Gang Leader (cited in note 24), 89–160.

39 Ibid. 13–88, and, for an explicit comparison with Hákonar saga, 156–160.

Hákonar saga is a more hierarchical society in which the king governs as the representative of the dynasty and by virtue of his divine election. His authority does not depend on his performance in open confrontations with other men; on the contrary, such confrontations would endanger the royalist ideology and are therefore suppressed in the saga.

Thus, the difference between *Sverris saga* and *Hákonar saga* demonstrates the decline of individualism accompanying the growth of the state and the new concept of the royal office. Instead of focusing on the king's personal performance and dramatic episodes in war, *Hákonar saga* applies a 'general staff perspective'. And while the king's personality is often hidden behind the royal office and the *rex iustus* ideology, the concept of a collective royal government offers new possibilities of analysing strategy and politics in a long-term perspective and thereby of focusing more closely on the plans and intentions of kings, political leaders, and generals. Although the narrative of *Hákonar saga* is also fairly episodic, these features imply a clearer concept of the political community or 'state' than in the earlier saga literature. Hákon Hákonsson is portrayed as God's instrument in making a particular area of Christendom, the kingdom of Norway, conform to the right order of the world.

It seems likely that we can trace a similar development in other European countries with the emergence of a more organised monarchy. Still, some kind of intermediate level between the lofty concept of the right order of the world and the individual leader seems to be lacking, i.e. the concept of a particular state or nation. To find such an entity, we have to turn to the Italian Renaissance.

The Florentine Republic as an Impersonal Protagonist

The *Historia Florentini populi*, by Leonardo Bruni (1374–1444), written around 1440, deals with the history of the city from its foundation until the year 1402. In the following I shall discuss a parallel example to those discussed earlier, i.e. the 'revolution' in Florence 1293–1295, when the 'people' (*popolo*) barred the magnates from political office and introduced the constitution that still existed during Bruni's lifetime. Bruni begins his story by pointing to the Florentine people's external triumphs during the previous years. Having defeated Arezzo and shown themselves superior in the war against Pisa, the Florentine people begin to regard themselves more highly, and to turn from external wars to internal liberty.⁴⁰ Thus, the self-esteem of the Florentine people is enhanced by the external successes, and they start to assert themselves in internal matters as well.

According to Bruni, the nobility had for a long time oppressed the people and created internal struggles and unrest. After a description of these evils, Bruni introduces the man

40 *Maiora de se se populus sapere coepit, ac ab externis bellis ad intestinam libertatem respicere*; Leonardo Bruni, *Historiarum Florentini populi libri XII*. Ed. E. Santini. Vol. 19. (Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, vol. 3.) Città di Castello 1934, Lib. IV, 81. For the following account of Bruni, see *Sverre Bagge, Medieval and Renaissance Historiography: Break or Continuity?*, in: *The Individual in European Culture*. Ed. Sverre Bagge (The European Legacy 2, 1997), 1336–1371. For Bruni as a historian, see also *Donald Wilcox, The Development of Florentine Humanist Historiography in the 15th Century*. Cambridge/Mass. 1969, 32–129.

who started to remedy them, Giano della Bella. Giano, himself belonging to the nobility, sympathises with the people and takes the initiative to reform the city of Florence.⁴¹ Bruni attributes to Giano a long speech in which he outlines the problems facing the city and the reforms he proposes to remedy them, reforms that were actually introduced when Giano came to power.⁴² Rather than focusing on the sufferings and difficulties of individual citizens, Giano places his proposals within the framework of a republican ideology, concerned with the city as a whole. A good citizen should place his city before his own private interests, as Giano does when taking this initiative, and which he urges his fellow citizens to do when reforming the republic. It will no doubt improve the conditions even of individual citizens if they are liberated from the tyranny of the nobles, but some of them may have to make great sacrifices in order to achieve this aim. However, such sacrifices are necessary for the sake of the city as a whole; the liberation of the city is not only a benefit but a moral duty.

Through this initiative, Giano succeeds in liberating the people and introducing a new constitution. However, his own career as the leader of Florence is of short duration. A conflict arises because of the acquittal of a noble accused of a crime, and friends and foes of Giano confront one another arms in hands. The confrontation would no doubt have resulted in a major battle, had not Giano refused to shed the blood of his fellow citizens, instead choosing voluntary exile. Bruni attributes to him the noble words that he cedes to the calumnies of his adversaries. He, who has been the author and the promoter of judgements, will never act against them, and he will not use arms for fear of setting an example for men who want to usurp power in the republic by the use of arms. He leaves the city, trusting that his innocence and the benefits he has conferred on the people, will bring him back.⁴³ Despite this noble gesture, the city is still at the brink of civil war, until some wise and moderate men manage to cool the tempers. Afterwards, steps are taken to bring about the return of Giano, but his adversaries manage to make Pope Boniface issue a letter forbidding it, and Giano dies in exile.⁴⁴

If we compare this story with those discussed previously in this article, its idealistic character is striking. Politics is not – or should not be – about the interests of individuals, but about those of the community as a whole, and Bruni's story of Giano is intended to show how the good citizen should place the community above his own interests and those of his class. In this respect, Bruni resembles authors like Wipo and Otto of Freising, but unlike them, his criterion for good government and correct political behaviour is not the religious concept of the right order of the world, but a concrete, human community, the republic of Florence. Bruni has almost completely eliminated God from his historical account, not because he did not believe in Him, but because his protagonist was the Florentine people and

41 *Historiarum Florentini populi libri* (cited in note 40), IV, 81.

42 *Ibid.* IV, 81–83.

43 *Ibid.* IV, 86.

44 *Ibid.* IV, 86 f.

its achievements.⁴⁵ Not only is God eliminated but also His traditional representative on earth, the king. This, however, is no novelty in Bruni but is there also in his medieval predecessors, and goes back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the Italian cities gained their independence from the largely nominal superiority of the Emperor. The republican constitution and the absence of a single, permanent ruler must nevertheless have contributed to the ‚personification‘ of the Florentine republic which is prominent in Bruni’s work.

The ‚idealism‘ as well as the novelty of Bruni’s account become even clearer if we compare it to earlier accounts of the same events, by Dino Compagni (d. 1324) and Giovanni Villani (d. 1348), the latter of whom was also Bruni’s main source.⁴⁶ Both Compagni and Villani refer to God’s intervention in human affairs and judge people’s actions in terms of Christian morality, but they are also, like Bruni, concerned with what serves the political community. What is most striking in their actual narrative, however, is their greater realism and emphasis on concrete interests. The revolution of 1293 is the result of discontent among a considerable part of the people who react spontaneously against the magnates; they have no need of Giano to remind them of what is wrong. Giano does become their leader and he does sacrifice his own interests to those of the people, but he is a less central figure in Compagni’s and Villani’s accounts than in Bruni’s. While Bruni regards the revolution of 1293 as the awakening of the Florentine people and the new constitution as the one that serves the interests of the community as a whole, Compagni and Villani regard it more in terms of a class struggle, although their sympathy with the people make them give a largely favourable account of Giano and his followers.

There is thus no question of medieval naïveté and moralism being replaced by a deeper understanding of society and political behaviour in the Renaissance, at least not in the early Renaissance, represented by Bruni. If we regard the description of individual interests and tactical manoeuvring as a more realistic account of politics than attributing to people idealistic motives, then surely Compagni’s and Villani’s accounts surpass that of Bruni. Admittedly, modern historians may tend to exaggerate these ‚realistic‘ aspects of politics and neglect the importance of patriotism, honour, and great ideological programmes in history. In this case, however, there is little to suggest that Bruni has given a more correct account of the events of 1293–1295 than his predecessors, as the changes he has made in Villani’s account are not the result of any new information but solely of his patriotic and moralistic aim with his work.

However, Bruni’s patriotic idealism has important consequences for the way in which he creates a *story* out of the numerous events he includes in his work. As Phillips has pointed

45 On the gradual elimination of God from Florentine from the early fourteenth century onwards, see *Louis Green*, *Chronicle into History*. Cambridge 1972; *Bagge*, *Medieval and Renaissance Historiography* (cited in note 40), 1349–1351.

46 Dino Compagni, *Cronica*. Ed. *Gino Luzzato*. Torino 1968; English translation: Dino Compagni, *Chronicle of Florence*. Transl. with intr. *Daniel E. Bornstein*. Philadelphia 1986; Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*. Ed. *Giuseppe Porta*. 3 vol. Parma 1990/91; English translation: Villani’s *Chronicle*. Being Selections from the First Nine Books of the *Croniche Fiorentine* of Giovanni Villani. Transl. Rose E. Selfe. Ed. *Philip H. Wicksteed*. New York 1907.

out, Bruni's narrative represents a radical change compared to that of his medieval predecessors, a change from 'representation' to 'argument'. He drastically reduces the amount of detail, thus making his narrative clearer, but also less vivid and emotional. Villani's and particularly Compagni's account of the events around 1300 gives a fascinating picture of clans, families, factions, and classes and their mutual enmity and friendship, struggles and alliances – a description resembling the day-to-day report of a journalist about a society with which he is deeply familiar. By contrast, Bruni is always at a distance, regarding the events in a long-term perspective. This change forms a close parallel to the change taking place in contemporary art, from the crowded pictures, full of picturesque detail, of the Middle Ages, to those of the early Renaissance which are characterised by the central perspective and by strict economy in the number of figures and objects. However, the change is not only the result of new aesthetic ideals but has to do with a new understanding of society and politics, expressed in Bruni's focus on the city as an institution on the one hand, and a limited number of individuals on the other. In this respect, Bruni represents the reversal of the change from Roman historiography introduced by Gregory of Tours; the state once more becomes the central subject of historical narrative and the criterion for what is relevant.

These features of Bruni's narrative appear even more clearly towards the end of his work, which forms its climax and where Bruni deals with Florence's struggle for her existence against the tyrant Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan. In contrast to what is usually to be found in medieval historiography, the war against Giangaleazzo is consistently described from a 'general staff-perspective': Bruni focuses on strategy rather than tactics, battles are fairly briefly described, no individual episodes are included, and the main emphasis is on the skill of the leaders.⁴⁷ Diplomacy and politics receive an equally prominent treatment as the war itself. Giangaleazzo attempts a 'salami tactics', encircling Florence by allying himself with various smaller cities in its vicinity or establishing pro-Milanese governments there through coups. In his account of the war itself, Bruni repeatedly stresses the importance of keeping a stronghold in Lombardy; if Giangaleazzo has peace at home while the Florentines have to carry the burden of war in Tuscany, the city will sooner or later be worn out and be forced to sue for peace. Consequently, Bruni shows in detail the efforts of the Florentines to aid their allies in Lombardy and keep a constant pressure on Giangaleazzo in this region.

Considering Bruni's generally patriotic-idealistic attitude, his account of the republic's desperate struggle for its existence is surprisingly sober and matter-of-fact; Bruni usually leaves the events to speak for themselves and emphasizes the tactical and strategic moves from both sides. In some cases, however, notably in speeches, he expresses his own understanding of the significance of the conflict. When Florence's ally Bologna despairs about the city's ability to continue the war, sending an embassy to Florence with this message, Bruni attributes to the Florentines a speech that puts the war into the right patriotic perspective: when freedom is destroyed, everything is destroyed, and the pain the Bolognese suffer now is comparable to the pain a patient has to suffer to be cured.⁴⁸ At the same time, the Floren-

47 *Wilcox*, *The Development* (cited in note 40), 94–98.

48 *Historiarum Florentini populi libri* (cited in note 40), X, 251f.

tines as well as the Bolognese are aware of the importance of money for waging war, as *wars are nowadays fought, not with muscles but with money (...)*⁴⁹, i.e. the soldiers are mercenaries, not the citizens themselves. Bruni sees no opposition between the exalted republican values and the down-to-earth question of the economic resources necessary to wage war. The Florentines do not deny the importance of wealth for waging war, but they refuse to believe that the resources of such a great and wealthy city as Bologna are really exhausted. The Bolognese's defeatism must be the result of lack of will, of not seeing the crucial importance of the war they are waging. Bruni's account thus contains a close connection between republican patriotism and political realism. The Florentine republic is not an assembly of idealists praising patriotism, sacrifices, and republican virtues; it is led by experienced and astute politicians who combine their occasional references to ideals and principles with concrete and realistic advice on how to act in political and military contexts.

Bruni develops further the problems as well as the advantages of republican government by drawing attentions to two individuals, Rainaldo Gianfigliuzzi and Donato Acciaiuoli. In a speech, the former points to the difficulties facing a republic when fighting a tyrant⁵⁰: the Florentine people refuse to consider the future, and more clear-sighted leaders dare not come forward, fearing to be accused of being warmongers. This is less dangerous when fighting another republic but very dangerous when fighting a tyrant who can act secretly and prepare for the future without fearing popular opinion. The latter, Donato Acciaiuoli, is a man of high integrity. Being disillusioned by his fellow citizens' low moral standards, he attempts a coup against the government towards the end of 1395 but fails.⁵¹

Gianfigliuzzi's speech in a certain sense forms a contrast to the previous one by the Florentines, directed to the Bolognese. He has no doubt with regards to the virtues of republicanism, but is aware that a tyranny has certain advantages. In particular, he is concerned with a problem Bruni touches upon in several passages of his work, the relationship between the individual and society in a republic. A republic will inevitably limit the possibility of individuals to assert themselves, as is evident in the case of Donato Acciaiuoli. If there is too much of such limitation, however, the republic will suffer. In his Florentine history Bruni gives a sufficient number of examples that individuals put themselves forward on behalf of the republic to modify Gianfigliuzzi's thesis, the latter's own action and analysis of the situation being one of them. As usual in the speeches composed by Bruni, the general patriotic or constitutional discussion is accompanied by an analysis of the concrete political and military situation and recommendations for further action.

Bruni quotes no direct counterargument to Gianfigliuzzi's admittance that tyranny has certain advantages in foreign policy. However, the end of his work forms an eloquent comment on it. In 1402, Giangaleazzo has finished his encircling of Florence, inflicted a crushing defeat on a Florentine army, and captured Bologna. Florence is in a desperate situation when suddenly an embassy from Milan arrives, suing for peace. Later, the Florentines learn the reason for this surprising step. Giangaleazzo has suddenly turned seriously ill and fears

49 *Cum igitur bellum per hoc tempus non lacertis sed pecuniis geratur (...)*; *ibid.* X, 251.

50 *Ibid.* IX, 276–278.

51 *Ibid.* XI, 268 f.

for the future of his two little sons in case of his death. He is actually dead when the peace treaty is concluded. The Milanese are plunged into a succession crisis and have to give up all thought of war and foreign conquest. A government by one man has the advantage of quick decisions and secrecy in foreign policy, but is disastrous when such a man suddenly dies. By contrast, republics may be slow, but they never die. In this way, Bruni ends his work by once more emphasizing the transpersonal character of his protagonist, the Florentine republic.

Bruni's Contribution to the Development of Historiography

Bruni's account of the war against Giangaleazzo gives a similar impression as his treatment of the events around 1300. From a literary point of view, his account is clearer, contains less detail, and is less vivid than those of his medieval predecessors. From a historical point of view, Bruni plays down Compagni's and Villani's emphasis on groups, focusing on the one hand on a few, prominent individuals, on the other on the city as a whole. This emphasis on the city as a whole is probably Bruni's most original achievement compared to his medieval predecessors. It enables him to create a more integrated and continuous story, with the Florentine people as the protagonist. As for the individuals, Bruni's aim is not to depict them in their uniqueness and show the complexity of their character, but to show their importance, positively or negatively, for the republic. The crucial question to Bruni is how the individual can contribute to the welfare of the republic, not the actual motives that may explain his actions. Like his medieval predecessors, Bruni is of course fully aware that individuals often act to serve their own interests, as for instance Giangaleazzo Visconti, but he regards these interests as opposed to those of the community, in a similar way as his medieval predecessors regard them as opposed to the right order of the world. However, his stricter arrangement of his narrative and greater selectivity in the material he includes, allow him to focus more explicitly on the relationship between these interests and those of the community. Consequently, a number of examples of individual behaviour are shown as models or as warnings.

The war against Giangaleazzo offers a better opportunity for Bruni to show his ability for consistent narrative than the episodes examined earlier. This war was sufficiently close in time for Bruni to rely on his own memory and oral sources, while in the former case, he depended almost exclusively on Villani. Consequently, he is able to represent the war as one, continuous story, mixing a terse account of political and military events with speeches and episodes which show the fundamental republican values at stake. In this part of his work, he develops further his idea of the transpersonal republic of Florence which gives his history a coherence that his medieval predecessors lack. However, Bruni is, with some justice, criticized by Machiavelli for playing down the internal struggles in the city.⁵² By contrast,

52 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*. Ed. Francesco Flora/Carlo Cordiè, in: *Tutte le opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*. Vol. 2. Verona 1950, 3–434, proemio, 5; English translation: *Florentine Histories* by Niccolò Machiavelli. Transl. Laura F. Banfield/Harvey C. Mansfield jr. Princeton 1988. See Bagge, *Medieval and Renaissance Historiography* (cited in note 40), 1356–1365; *id.*, *Actors and Structures in Machiavelli's Istorie Fiorentine* (forthcoming).

Compagni and Villani show more realism and a more 'sociological' approach. It is therefore no coincidence that Machiavelli builds heavily on Villani. Machiavelli reintroduces classes and groups and makes the changing relationship between them the key to the understanding of the changing regimes in the city. He regards the relationship between the city and its individual citizens not primarily in moral terms, but in terms of how the city should be arranged so as to make the best possible use of their qualities, including their pride and egotism. And finally, he reintroduces the grotesque and emotional detail and the element of chance of his medieval predecessors in his narrative, in order to emphasize the limits to human and rational control over historical events. In short, he turns away from Bruni's republican optimism and gives his history of Florence a darker shade, in accordance with the precarious existence of the Italian city states during the invasions of the European great-powers in the early sixteenth century.

Between Ancient Tradition and Contemporary Society

From a literary point of view, the four historiographical traditions discussed in the previous pages derive from the same source, i.e. ancient historiography. Quotations and allusions to various Latin historians are common in authors like Widukind, Thietmar, and Lampert, and to Greek ones in Anna Komnene. By contrast, there is little to indicate direct influence from any particular Latin historian in the Old Norse sagas, but the genre as a whole shows influence, direct or indirect, from the classical tradition, for instance in the characterisations and the use of speeches. To the last author discussed here, Bruni, the whole tradition of classical historiography, Greek as well as Latin, was available. His main model was Livy, whom he and his contemporaries considered the greatest of the ancient historians.⁵³

The relationship between the authors discussed here and ancient historiography has not been much in focus in the preceding pages. No doubt, such an examination would be an important contribution to understanding the similarity as well as the difference between them. Nevertheless, it will hardly be able to give a complete explanation. Such an explanation must be sought, not in the classical tradition itself but in the classical tradition as seen through the eyes of people with their background in a particular society. Anna Komnene must have acquired much of her literary skill from reading ancient Greek historians⁵⁴, but the main source for her account of Alexios's coup must have been her familiarity with the Byzantine political system, if not directly eyewitness reports from the event. Whatever their dependence on Roman models, the German historians of the tenth and eleventh centuries and the Icelandic saga writers of the thirteenth show an understanding of society and political behaviour which they could hardly have derived from ancient sources but which fits well in

53 *Wilcox*, *The Development* (cited in note 40), 34 ff.

54 On Anna's reading and literary models, see *Buckler*, *Anna Comnena* (cited in note 14), 165–208. Of historians, she seems to have used Thucydides, Polybios, and Plutarch, although there is no question of direct borrowing (ibid. 205–208). For an extreme version of the view that Byzantine writers depended on classical models rather than personal observation, see *Cyril Mango*, *Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror. An Inaugural Lecture*. Oxford 1975.

with early medieval society in Western Europe. While the actual political manoeuvring shows considerable similarity to the one described by Anna, their understanding of society is different. The emphasis on the pretenders' as well as their 'elector's' individual interests is stronger, and the idea of an organised state or society weaker. There are collective interests, but they are not qualitatively different from individual ones. When an idea of an organised society eventually did develop in the west, it had less to do with a particular country than with Christendom as a whole, expressed in the concept of the right order of the world.

Our last author, Leonardo Bruni, who uses Livy as his main model, is probably the most direct heir to the classical tradition. Once more, however, the source is insufficient to explain the arrangement of his work. Although there is clearly a similarity between the way Livy and Bruni make their respective cities the protagonist of an integrated story, showing their external expansion and internal growth, this way of reading Livy presupposes an understanding of history nurtured in the particular environment of republican Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century. This can be shown by a comparison with another 'Luvian' historian from the eleventh century, i.e. Lampert. Lampert was thoroughly familiar with Livy's First Decade, and his Latin style was largely inspired by Livy.⁵⁵ He may also have derived some of his republican or constitutionalist ideas from him. But Germany or Saxony is not represented as an organic unity in the same way as Rome in Livy's account. Nor is the narrative organised in the distanced, Livian way, although there are some trends in this direction compared to his predecessors.

By contrast, all these elements are there in Bruni. His love for Livy as well as his real source of inspiration should therefore be sought in the republican patriotism of contemporary Florence, or, in Hans Baron's much discussed concept of „civic humanism“.⁵⁶ On the one hand, fifteenth century Florence was more of an organised state than the city in the thirteenth century and even more than the kingdoms dealt with by the German and Old Norse historians discussed above. On the other hand, Bruni's 'organic' concept of Florence and his message about the city as the main object of its inhabitants' loyalty may be an ideology intended to support the prevailing oligarchic government. Bruni achieves this aim partly by depicting its leaders as the representatives of the city as a whole, partly by emphasizing the common duty of all the inhabitants towards their fatherland, so as to avoid internal divisions which had been a major problem throughout Florentine history.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This article has briefly discussed four historiographical traditions between the eleventh and the fifteenth century on the basis of a small number of examples and consequently cannot claim completeness or representativity. Nevertheless, I hope to have focused on some

55 *Tilmann Struve*, Lambert von Hersfeld. Persönlichkeit und Weltbild eines Geschichtsschreibers am Beginn des Investiturstreites, in: *HessJbLG* 19, 1969, 13–21.

56 *Hans Baron*, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. Princeton 1966. Cf. e.g. *Quentin Skinner*, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 1: *The Renaissance*. Cambridge 1978, 69–112.

57 *Bagge*, *Medieval and Renaissance Historiography* (cited in note 40), 1367 with ref.

characteristic features that can be discussed and developed further. I also hope to have shown the relevance of historiography for comparative research about medieval societies. Admittedly, there has been an increasing and largely well founded scepticism towards the factual information contained in narrative sources since the breakthrough of modern, critical scholarship in the early nineteenth century. Historiography is nevertheless a goldmine of information about ideas, attitudes and mentalities, including views on politics, the political community, and political behaviour. Despite a number of important studies, particularly in Germany, much remains to be done with this rich material. State formation is not only a matter of institutional change, but also of changing attitudes. While lawyers and political theorists are excellent sources for the more explicit aspects of these changes, the challenges facing a historical writer when organising his narrative may often give important information about more vague and implicit notions. By analysing historical narrative, we may therefore gain a better understanding of the more fundamental changes accompanying the rise of the medieval and renaissance state.