

Nationalism in Norway in the Middle Ages

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1. Introduction

Norwegian nationalism in the Middle Ages has not been subject to extensive discussion. The idea of a nation has nevertheless been implicit in most of the historiographical tradition dealing with the period since the beginning of the 19th century. This tradition can be divided into three phases, each with a different attitude to the nation and nationalism. The first phase covers most of the period until 1945. The Middle Ages had a crucial function in the nation-building process after Norway had gained its independence in 1814. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Norwegian nation became the “protagonist” in the great narratives of national growth and decline, and historians attributed to medieval men the same national attitudes as they themselves held, or, at least, judged their actions according to such a standard. Despite numerous radical revisions in other fields, the Marxist school, which held a dominant position during the first half of our century, mostly continued this tradition. Admittedly, Edvard Bull was strongly opposed to nationalism and national interpretations, but he rarely treated such questions in his works on the Middle Ages. By contrast, Halvdan Koht, who sought to combine Marxism and nationalism, maintained that the origin of nationalism was to be found in the Middle Ages, not only in Norway but also in other countries.¹ The implicit nationalism of earlier generations is continued in Andreas Holmsen’s otherwise excellent survey of Norwegian history from 1939.²

The national tradition was not challenged until after World War II, which thus marks the beginning of the second phase in my division. During this period, the great national events of 1814 and 1905 were “demythologized”, and political historians adopted a more “realistic” or cynical interpretation of human actions and intentions, while rejecting idealism, dim emotions and organic communities as historical explanations. Jens Arup Seip’s “ironic” accounts of 19th century

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¹ H. Koht, “The Dawn of Nationalism in Europe”, *The American Historical Review* 52 (1947), pp. 265–280.

² A. Holmsen, *Norges historie. Fra de eldste tider til 1660* (Oslo, 1977 [orig. 1939]), particularly pp. 351–392.

politics are the main example of this trend.³ However, no explicit “demythologization” took place in historiography on the Middle Ages. The problem was more or less put off the agenda, like so many other big questions, under the influence of Knut Helle’s empiricist message that the study of the Middle Ages was, above all, in need of detailed research in order to find out “what we know and what we do not know”.⁴ Medievalists focused on classes and social groups, rather than nations, as objects of social identification, but rarely discussed explicitly the question of nationalism.⁵ Thus, the alternative to national interpretations has been to neglect nationalism rather than to examine its concrete content in various periods or to state explicit alternatives to national interpretations. Finally, the widespread revival of nationalism in practice as well as in scholarship in recent years has led to the third phase in my division. The main evidence of this revival in politics is the recent debate about joining the EU. In scholarship it has so far only been represented by Kåre Lunden.⁶ We can, however, expect more explicit studies of medieval nationalism in the future, probably also a revival of the idea that nationalism did play a role in Norwegian politics and society in the Middle Ages.

Modern theories of nationalism tend to emphasize its artificial and specifically modern character: nationalism belongs to the 19th and 20th centuries, and is closely linked to industrialism and the modern state.⁷ Attempts by modern national movements to trace their roots back to the past are mostly regarded as mythical, and the main trend is to regard the national communities acting politically during the last two centuries as “invented”. An important distinction, however, is the one between nationalism and group sentiments. While the former includes the wish to form a state and is a specifically modern phenomenon, the latter can be found in all periods. Further, despite the current tendency towards “demythologization” of nationalism, recent studies, notably Gellner’s, have regarded it as a necessary, indeed inevitable element in the modern state and its culture.

There is thus a close connection between the modern state and nationalism. But should every kind of identification with the state be regarded as nationalism? The question is to be answered in the negative if we define nationalism as the idea that a particular ethnic group, defined by language, culture, religion or other characteristics, should have its own state. This definition corresponds to the

³ For the term – derived from Hayden White – see F. Sejersted, “Den truede idyll. Om de vekslende perspektiver i studiet av moderne norsk historie”; S. Langholm et al., *Den kritiske tanke. Festskrift til Ottar Dahl på 70-årsdagen 5. jan. 1994* (Oslo, 1994), pp. 229–249.

⁴ K. Helle, “Tendenser i nyere norsk høy middelalderforskning”, *Historisk tidsskrift* 40 (1961), p. 370.

⁵ O. J. Benedictow, *Fra rike til provins, Norges historie*, edited by K. Mykland, V, (Oslo, 1977), pp. 438–444, forms an exception to this. Benedictow gives several examples of national attitudes in the Later Middle Ages, while at the same time pointing out the difference between such attitudes and modern “state nationalism”.

⁶ This volume, p. . . *. See also K. Lunden, “Fanst det ein norsk nasjonal identitet i mellomalderen?”, in M.-B. Ohman-Nielsen, ed. *Nasjonal identitet og nasjonalisme* (Innlegg på HIFO-seminaret i Farsund), (Oslo, 1994), pp. 22–39.

⁷ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1989); E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1991). A. D. Smith is more inclined to assume a continuity from preindustrial ethnic groups to modern nationalism; see his *Theories of Nationalism* (London, 1971) and *National Identity* (London, 1991).

German understanding of the nation, which is often in focus in modern discussions of nationalism, because of its disruptive effects on traditional states from the 19th century onwards. By contrast, according to the French definition, a nation is a community based on the will to live together under a common constitution. Should these alternative definitions be regarded as two varieties of nationalism, or is only the first one nationalism in the true sense? We need not answer the question in this context, as we can hardly expect to find nationalism fully developed, according to either definition, in the Middle Ages. However, the French definition seems to be more relevant than the German one. Although we may well find strong group sentiments in the period, the link between such sentiments and the idea of a state seems more problematic. By contrast, it would seem interesting and relevant to look for patriotic sentiments and examine the importance of the idea of a political community and to what extent the “state” or the monarchy depended on popular support. In this context, it must be pointed out that the national state of the 19th and 20th centuries is usually opposed to the dynastic state of the period immediately before, which often consisted of a conglomerate of ethnic communities and consequently discouraged all kinds of “national” sentiments. It is easy to conclude that the further we go back in history, the less chance there will be of finding political attitudes resembling modern ones. However, medieval political units were often smaller than the early modern ones, and the power of the prince weaker. Consequently, the possibility exists that the “antinational” political structures were more pronounced in the Early Modern Period than in the Middle Ages. At least, medieval Norway may form a fairly strong contrast to the Age of Absolutism.

2. The unification of the kingdom

The historiography of the “starting-point” of Norwegian history in the proper sense, “the unification of the kingdom” (Norwegian: “rikssamling”, cf. German: “Reichssammlung”) is laden with national teleology. The realm is there all the time, initially consisting of smaller units, which, from the late 9th century onwards, are united into a “whole” kingdom by a series of strong kings. In explaining this process, historians, in addition to tracing the actual conquest, have tried to pinpoint various factors uniting the population within the country and contributing to increasing contacts between its regions during this particular period: common language and religion, easy communications, the growth of trade, and so forth.⁸ Characteristically, the only problem to be considered has been how and why the various smaller units were united into a larger kingdom, while the equally important question, why this kingdom came to comprise this particular region, rather than, for instance, the whole of Scandinavia, eastern Norway together with Sweden or parts of it, southern and western Norway together with Denmark, or any other division, has been neglected. Factors like culture, language and to some extent communications, allegedly contributing to the unification of the Norwegian

⁸ Recent examples of this attitude are P. S. Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge og kristningen av landet* (Oslo, 1977), pp. 57–74; K. Helle, “Nordmennenes land”, in *Norges kulturhistorie* (Oslo, 1978), pp. 163–94; and “Tiden fram til 1536”, in R. Danielsen et al., *Grunntrekk i norsk historie. Fra vikingtid til våre dager* (Oslo, 1991) [English edition forthcoming], pp. 19–34.

kingdom, might equally well have contributed to the unification of Scandinavia as a whole.

Admittedly, Ottar's report to King Alfred of England from the end of the 9th century gives evidence that the terms "Norway" and "Norwegians" already existed before the political unification. However, common names and a sense of identity may well exist without predetermining later political unification.⁹ The present European states only partly correspond to such earlier regional or group formations. As for the linguistic aspect, the three Scandinavian languages were mutually intelligible, although differences existed between them, as well as dialects within each country. Even today, with linguistic standardization through compulsory education, radio and television, there are sliding transitions between the Swedish and the Norwegian language in the border regions. Moreover, "the Danish tongue" (*donsk tunga*) was frequently used in Old Norse as a common term for the language of all three countries in the literature of the 13th century and the subsequent period.¹⁰

Consequently, the "unification of the kingdom", which took place in approximately the same period in the three Scandinavian kingdoms – although somewhat later in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway, should be studied as one process.¹¹ The main factors in this process were expansion from various centres of power until they met and divided the region between them. The most important military power was the sea power; consequently, islands and coastal regions were the first to be united into kingdoms. The actual division into three kingdoms and the distribution of land among them must to some extent be explained by the centres from which the expansion started. Thus, the Danish expansion seems to have started in Jutland, which explains why Scania and its surrounding regions became part of Denmark, while Viken further north eventually became Norwegian. According to the same logic, western Norway would seem the most reasonable hypothesis for the origin of the unification of this country. Contrary to what has often been implied, Norway was not difficult to unite under early medieval conditions; it was more easily united than almost every other country in Europe, including Denmark, because most people lived scattered along the coast, in a way that made communications and military control easy, while at the same time no particular area was sufficiently strong and densely populated to resist the central power. The fact that Sweden in the Middle Ages had only a small opening to the sea in the west, in the area of present-day Gothenburg, between the Norwegian and the Danish borders, suggests that the Swedish unification ought to have started in Svealand rather than Götaland, contrary to the recent suggestion by Peter Sawyer.¹² Further, Sweden had the disadvantage, compared to Norway and Denmark, of being internally divided by large areas of forest and thinly populated land. This fact may possibly explain why Sweden was a latecomer in the unification process. However, the unification need not have had the same centre all the time. Furthermore, such

⁹ See, e.g., F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Oslo, 1969), in particular Barth's own article.

¹⁰ J. Fritznér, *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog* (Oslo, 1954, [orig. 1883–1896]).

¹¹ For attempts in this direction, see P. Sawyer, *När Sverige blev Sverige* (Alingsås, 1988) and N. Lund, "Rigssamlingen i Danmark", in *Rigssamlingen og Harald Hårfagre. Historisk seminar på Karmøy 10. og 11. juni 1993* (Karmøy, 1993).

¹² Op. cit., pp. 24–63.

general considerations normally only give a partial explanation. A full explanation must also take more personal and accidental factors into account.

As for the wider question, why Scandinavia was not united into one kingdom, there may have been certain limits to the extent of the areas that could possibly be controlled under contemporary conditions. Although the establishment of larger kingdoms was initially the result of military conquest, these kingdoms could not be held together solely by force. The conquering kings probably ruled through networks of “friends” and clients, which needed constant supervision and frequent presence to be held together. Large distances could be covered by ships in a short time, but long delays might also occur. Consequently, the whole of Scandinavia would probably be too much for any one king to rule.

3. State and nation in the high Middle Ages

Sea power and good communications thus seem sufficient to explain the unification of Norway in the first place. The next question is how the country was held together and was able to escape foreign domination for several centuries (until the 15th and 16th centuries) and what kind of solidarity and community existed between its inhabitants. Military force was not sufficient to create a permanent political unit, the conquering kings needed contacts and allies among the people, and the relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity was clearly important in this respect. In the present context, however, I shall pass directly to the 13th century, which is commonly regarded as Norway’s period of greatness in the Middle Ages. In this period, after a series of internal struggles, and partly as a consequence of them, we can with some justification speak of a Norwegian state, with public justice, taxation, a common military organization, and a network of royal officials with fixed districts throughout the country.¹³ Was this development accompanied by the formation of a nation? The answer to this question must be sought in two fields, in the fairly extensive literature produced during the 12th and 13th centuries, and in the evidence we have about the relationship between the authorities and the ordinary inhabitants.

4. The kings’ sagas – expression of a national identity?

To Kåre Lunden the historical literature gives clear evidence, not only of national sentiments but also of the close link between such sentiments and the Norwegian state.¹⁴ Lunden regards this literature, most of which was produced during a short period, from around 1180 until 1230, as the expression of a kind of national mobilization during this crucial period in the development of a Norwegian state, and also, with some reservations, as evidence of popular attitudes. It is very difficult to draw conclusions on popular attitudes in this epoch, as we are only acquainted with written texts, which were by definition not popular in a culture mainly consisting of illiterates. There is also clear evidence of aristocratic or “non-popular”

¹³ For general surveys, see K. Helle, *Norge blir en stat* (Bergen, 1974); S. Bagge, “State Building in Medieval Norway”, *Forum for utviklingsstudier* (1989), pp. 129–46, and “Norwegen”, *Lexikon des Mittelalters* VI (Munich, 1993), cols. 1258–1270.

¹⁴ This volume, pp. 19–33.

attitudes in the saga literature (see below). Nevertheless, oral storytelling can to some extent be traced as a background to the written texts, which may indicate that this literature had a less exclusively aristocratic origin than the courtly one (see below). One might object that most of the kings' sagas were written by Icelanders, some of them even for an Icelandic audience and based on Icelandic narrative traditions. However, given the fairly close contact between the two countries and the fact that most of the events recorded in the sagas took place in Norway, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the oral background to the sagas was largely Norwegian.¹⁵ I shall not discuss directly Lunden's claim that the saga literature as a whole is the expression of contemporary "state formation" or "nation-building", confining myself to the remark that the concentration of this literature to the decades around 1200 may have to do with the fact that this was the period in which writing came in common use within the elite. Thus, the novelty was not the stories themselves and their ideology, but rather the fact that they were written down. By contrast, the fact that this literature was so short-lived, no doubt needs a social explanation (see below).

The 12th- and 13th-century sagas contain national-patriotic sentiments, celebrating the virtues of the Norwegians and despising their neighbours, particularly the Danes. One of the most frequently cited examples of this is to be found in the story of the battle of Svolder (AD 1000), where the Norwegian King Olav Tryggvason – one of the great heroes of the saga literature – was defeated and probably killed by an overwhelmingly superior force, consisting of Danes, Swedes and a Norwegian rival of Olav with his men. Before the battle, Olav stands on his ship, watching the enemy approaching. Being shown the Danes, he comments: "We have no fear of those cravens. There is no courage in the Danes." He makes a similar comment about the Swedes. When he is shown the Norwegians, however, Olav declares: ". . . we may expect a smart fight with that force: they are Norwegians like us."¹⁶

This story shows a clear awareness of the existence of the Norwegian people as opposed to the Danish and Swedish people and a pride in belonging to the former, thus indicating that "Norway" was not solely an artificial creation. However, the story does not meet the crucial criterion in modern definitions of nationalism, the idea that the "national community" should also be expressed in an independent state. On the contrary, it is directly opposed to this idea, containing no objection to the fact that the "good and brave Norwegians" were actually fighting their own king and country. The sagas give several other examples of such behaviour, usually without any negative comments from the authors.¹⁷ The difference between the "national" sentiments in this story and modern attitudes emerges clearly if we transfer the story to World War II. Can we imagine members of the Norwegian resistance before an encounter speaking with contempt about the Italians and the

¹⁵ The literature on this topic is extensive. For an excellent survey in English, see T. Andersson, "Kings' Sagas", in C. Clover & J. Lindow eds. *Old-Norse – Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 197–238. For my own opinions, see S. Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 14 ff., 232–247, etc.

¹⁶ Snorre Sturlason, *Heimskringla*, edited by F. Jónsson, vol. I, (Copenhagen, 1893–1900), The Saga of Olav Tryggvason, ch. 104; cf. *Heimskringla*, translated by L. M. Hollander (Austin, 1967). References are to chapters, which are the same in the original and the translation.

¹⁷ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 66–70, 106.

Germans, while expressing a high regard for Quisling and his Nazi herd, because “they are Norwegians like us”? The “nationalism” of this episode is the traditional group identification, which has no particular connection with the state and consequently can hardly be regarded as evidence of stronger national unity with the emergence of the state. The story is found for the first time in Odd Munk’s saga of Olav Tryggvason from the late 12th century,¹⁸ and may well date from a period before a very strong state was established. As for the numerous derogatory remarks about the military performance of the neighbouring peoples, it must be pointed out that similar remarks are directed at Norwegian peasants in *Sverris saga* (c. 1202–1230).¹⁹

The attitude of the Svolder episode seems to be fairly, although not wholly, representative of the saga literature. The closest link between such national sentiments and the state is the idea, commonly expressed in the sagas, that people prefer to be governed by a king from their own country and that it is difficult to gain the loyalty of a foreign people.²⁰ Such ideas may, at least in some cases, be evidence of national sentiments. On the other hand, they can largely be explained as the expression of a more general attitude, which is totally dominant in the saga literature, the idea of personal loyalty. Factions were formed on the basis of friendship or kinship, and a king could only rule by exploiting such ties.²¹ Lack of them in countries other than one’s own is the main reason for the “national” attitude of the sagas in this respect. Similar considerations can also be found regarding regional divisions.²² The fact that the occurrence of such personal links to some extent corresponds to national borders, may have contributed to some kind of national identification but should nevertheless be distinguished from nationalism in the real sense. Further, *Fagrskinna*, which serves as Lunden’s main example, is usually considered to have been written in close contact with the king and the court, thus representing a more patriotic attitude than works such as *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*.²³ Even in *Sverris saga*, which is in one sense strongly influenced by royalist ideology, the idea of a national community in which people should live in peace with one another under the government of one king, plays a very subordinate part.²⁴

Despite the fairly relaxed attitude to inner struggles, there seems to be some difference between the way of waging war at home and abroad, in the saga accounts as well as in real life. Contrary to modern conditions, internal wars were apparently less cruel and destructive than external ones. Normal procedure in warfare abroad

¹⁸ Oddr Snorrason munkr, *Sága Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, edited by F. Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), pp. 210 ff.

¹⁹ K. Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, Norges historie, edited by K. Mykland, III (Oslo, 1977), pp. 64 f.; S. Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord’s Anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga* (Odense, 1995), pp. 69.

²⁰ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 105; Lunden, this volume.

²¹ S. Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen”, *Historisk tidsskrift* (1986), pp. 148 ff.; *Society and Politics*, pp. 111 ff. and “The Structure of Political Factions in the Internal Struggles of the Scandinavian Countries during the High Middle Ages”, [forthcoming].

²² See the comment of Erling Skakke during a quarrel in Bergen between his men and those of his ally and rival Gregorius Dagsson, that it would be a shame to be defeated by men from the east when they themselves had relatives all over the place (*Heimskringla*, The Saga of Hákon Herdebrei, ch. 12).

²³ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 121–123, 143 f., 239 f. with references.

²⁴ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 65 ff., 80 ff.

was to burn and to lay waste to the country, kill the people, and take the goods one could get hold of. In internal wars, such behaviour was apparently exceptional, and is normally explained in the contemporary sagas as punishment for some crime or for some particular reason. The obvious explanation of this difference, however, is that internal wars were wars for control over the country, whereas external wars normally aimed at forcing the prince of the country to some concession. As the attacker did not expect to be able to hold the parts of the country he attacked, nothing prevented him from laying waste to it. Essentially, we are thus dealing with the difference between shearing and flaying the sheep.²⁵ The same difference can be found in internal as well as external wars in later epochs, for instance in the Thirty Years War. Clearly, we cannot exclude the possibility that there were also different norms in the two cases – there may even be some indications of this in the apologies for burning and terror in the sagas – but we cannot draw very definite conclusions about national sentiments from this observation.

Thus, the national ideology of the sagas is not usually very closely linked to the idea of a Norwegian state or national community. The sagas celebrate warrior heroes and great deeds and clearly regard the Norwegians as superior to their neighbours in this respect, whether they fight one another or other peoples, in a similar way as modern “sports patriotism” can be applied to national as well as to international competitions.

5. The strong monarchy and the courtly culture

Historians have normally taken for granted the existence of a stronger national consciousness in the 13th century than earlier, only disagreeing about how much stronger this consciousness was. However, the opposite possibility also exists. According to Gellner, the typical agrarian state was characterized by a great gap between an internationally oriented elite and a locally oriented people.²⁶ In the 13th century, there is clear evidence of an increasing difference between a central elite around the king and the leaders of the Church on the one hand and the rest of the population on the other. These elites developed their own particular culture in close contact with the international elite culture. Leaving aside the Church in this context, I shall focus on the secular aristocracy and the courtly culture. From the mid-13th century onwards, a considerable number of chivalrous romances, mainly French, were translated into Norwegian, probably largely at the initiative of the monarchy.²⁷ To some extent this literature may be regarded as a kind of “cultural rearmament” directed by the king. Such an aim is explicitly mentioned in some of the prefaces, e.g. that of *Strengleikar*, a translation of the *Lais* of Marie de France. Here the translator points to the importance of reading the stories of the past so as to learn virtues and the fear of God from them, adding that his translation was made on King Håkon’s initiative.²⁸ The moral message of this

²⁵ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 49–51, 139–146.

²⁶ Gellner, *Nations*, pp. 8–13.

²⁷ On the chivalric literature and the court milieu in Norway at the time, see R. Meissner, *Die Strengleikar*, (Halle, 1902); E. F. Halvorsen, “Norwegian Court Literature in the Middle Ages”, *Orkney Miscellany* vol. 5 (1973), pp. 17–26; M. Kalinke, “Norse Romances”, in C. Clover & J. Lindow, eds. *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 316–363.

²⁸ *Strengleikar*, edited by R. Keyser & C. R. Unger (Christiania = Oslo, 1850), pp. 1 f.

introduction does not appear entirely convincing, considering the fact that many of the stories included in the volume dealt with illicit love. The fact that these stories had their origin in a courtly and aristocratic culture was probably more important for their educational use than their content.

The widespread use of the vernacular in the Nordic countries is apparently an argument against the international orientation of the elite. But writing was exclusive to the elite, and the content of this imported literature was more different from the popular taste than the sagas – although it would be an exaggeration to regard the latter as a genuinely popular literature. One might even think that the chivalrous literature was attractive exactly by being foreign, thus contributing to a greater division between the courtly elite and the rest of the population.

The corresponding import of the norms and values of the European aristocracy is further testified by the descriptions in *Hákonar saga* of banquets and festivities, of royal embassies to other countries, and above all in quotations from foreign envoys speaking favourably of the manners of the Norwegians and their king. *The King's Mirror* contains a detailed description of etiquette at court, attaching great importance to such matters, and even declaring that the men who behave badly in this respect commit such a serious crime that they deserved to be killed, together with their families – probably an allusion to *crimen laesae maiestatis* in Roman law.²⁹ The most important aspect of the author's description of the rules of etiquette is his insistence on respect for the king and his distinction between those who belong to the court milieu and those who do not. The author repeatedly points out that manners at court differ from those elsewhere, even that courtly manners may appear ridiculous among ordinary people. He also makes a sharp distinction between the members of the court, who live in surroundings which ought to inspire them to true nobility, and all others, who are referred to as "cottars" (*kotkarlar*), whatever their actual wealth and standing.³⁰

The opposition between the "classical" saga literature and the translations has been pointed out in a sharply polemical form by the great Norwegian author Hans E. Kinck. According to his organical understanding of culture and society, he regarded the import from Europe as a decline, ironically contrasting the proud, taciturn and dignified heroes of the saga age with the conceited snobs at the court of Håkon Hákonsson.³¹ From a purely literary point of view, most present-day Norwegians would prefer the "classical" sagas to the courtly literature. From a social point of view, however, the cultural import from Europe forms part of a state-building process. Further, Kinck exaggerates the contrast between the two cultures and minimizes the original contributions of the imitators and adaptors, such as the author of *The King's Mirror*. And finally, the new regime was hardly as opposed to the saga literature as Kinck assumes.

According to *Hákonar saga* King Håkon had books read to him at his deathbed, first Latin ones – most probably religious books, as becomes a learned and Christian king. When growing weaker and finding the Latin language difficult to understand,

²⁹ S. Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror* (Odense, 1987), pp. 195 f., 203 f.

³⁰ Bagge, *The Political Thought*, pp. 179 f.; and "The Norwegian Monarchy in the Thirteenth Century", in A. Duggan, ed. *Kings and Kingship in Medieval Europe* (London, 1993), pp. 168 ff.

³¹ H. E. Kinck, "Storhetstid", in *Samlede essays* vol. I, (Oslo, 1982 [orig. 1922]), pp. 323–87, particularly pp. 351, 365 f.

he asks for books in Norwegian, first the stories of saints, then *Konungatal* from Halvdan Svarti onwards – probably what is today known as *Fagrskinna* – and finally *Sverris saga*. “Near midnight the saga of Sverrir was finished. And just after midnight, God the Almighty called King Håkon from the life in this world”.³² Kinck might see a kind of nemesis in this passage – the king who had destroyed his own national culture in imitating Latin and French examples in the last moment of his life being left with the remains of the culture he had destroyed. The symbolism of the saga is a different one: Håkon descends from the Norwegian royal line through his great and brilliant grandfather Sverre, and he dies symbolically at the moment Sverre’s saga is finished. Add to this the fact that Håkon’s son and successor Magnus commissioned his father’s saga to be written, this symbolism suggests an attempt in court circles to unite the national and the foreign traditions.

The result of this mixture, *Håkonar saga*, written in 1264–1265, nevertheless shows how much the classical saga has changed as a result of the influence of the new monarchy and its foreign examples. The picture of Håkon in the saga is vague and impersonal, while earlier sagas present very vivid portraits of their protagonists. In contrast to most earlier scholars, I do not regard this as the result of the author’s, Sturla Tordarson’s inadequacy as a writer, but of his different purpose. The portrait of Håkon is mainly a portrait of *rex iustus* and head of state. The social context of *Håkonar saga* is a more hierarchical society, in which the king governs as the representative of the dynasty and in virtue of his divine election. In contrast to *Sverris saga* and other earlier sagas, 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.³³

In his account of foreign policy, Sturla is clearly patriotic, but is primarily interested in the King of Norway’s position within an international system of heads of state. Without being neutral, Sturla is fairly moderate compared to earlier saga writers when describing Norwegian performance against other peoples in war. By contrast, he emphasizes very strongly that the King of Norway is right in conflicts with other kings, that he conducts just wars, and that he does not use more violence than is necessary. Håkon manages to secure the friendship of the Swedes, while refusing to pay compensation for his just punishment of Värmland in 1225. He stages a harsh but just retribution against the Danes, but by behaving in a chivalrous way in the negotiations with King Christoffer, he secures his friendship. He acts with the same firmness towards the Scots, which then necessitates his last, great expedition (1263). Once peace is concluded, he behaves as a faithful friend and ally towards the Danes as well as the Swedes. He is also concerned with the welfare of the peoples in the countries under his rule, or on which he lays claim, as in the case of the Hebrides and Iceland. Håkon’s aim is most clearly defined in the case of Iceland. Here Sturla makes no attempt to conceal that Håkon tries to

³² “Nær miðri nátt var úti at lesa Sverris-sögu. En heldr at miðri nótt liðinni kallaði almáttigr Guð Håkon konung af þessa heims lífi, *Håkonar saga*, edited by G. Vigfusson, *Rerum britannicarum medii ævi scriptores*, 88.1–2. (London, 1857, repr. 1964), ch. 329. Cf. *The Saga of Hakon and a Fragment of the Saga of Magnus with Appendices*, translated by G. W. Dasent, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores*, vol. 88.4, (London, 1894, repr. 1964). References are to chapters, which are the same in the original and the translation.

³³ Bagge, “Norwegian Monarchy”, pp. 166 ff. and *From Gang Leader*, pp. 116–119.

conquer a country which has never before been under Norwegian rule. However, in contrast to King Alexander II of Scotland, who attacked Norwegian possessions in the West, Håkon does not attempt this conquest out of ambition and love of “the glory of this world” but because the right order of the world demands that every country should obey a king. Moreover, the Icelanders are constantly struggling among themselves, whereas the King of Norway represents the hope of peace and good government. Being a mild and just ruler, Håkon insists that Iceland should be gained without unnecessary violence and that the Icelanders should not be burdened with immoderate taxes. In addition to the reference to the right order of the world, there may be a certain national point in showing that it is the duty of just the King of Norway to introduce monarchy in Iceland, since the Norwegians and Icelanders are closely related. Thus, Håkon is depicted as the just and peaceful king, who refuses to give up his rights, while at the same time respecting those of others.³⁴

The most specifically national cultural tradition of Norway thus belongs to a period before the strong monarchy of the 13th century was established. This literature expresses national attitudes in the sense that it celebrates Norwegian heroism and “group identity” but without such attitudes being strongly linked to the idea of a political community. When such a community was established, Norwegian culture became more exclusive and dominated by the elite, and came under greater foreign influence, while the elite preferred to imitate the leading European countries rather than cultivating Norwegian traditions.

6. State and society in the 13th century

Thus, there is some evidence, even in Norway, for Gellner’s idea of an increasing distance between the elite and the people, and correspondingly of less “nationalism”, with the emergence of the great agricultural civilizations and their hierarchical states. On the other hand, this distance was less in Norway than in most other countries at the time. The Norwegian king depended more on popular support than most other contemporary kings, notably because of the importance of the popular levy, the *leiðangr*, which until well into the 14th century formed the main military force of the country.³⁵ Consequently, the king was normally moderate in his demand for taxes, tried to protect the peasants against greedy officials, and largely expanded his power through “service functions” to the people, above all justice and legislation. These political realities are expressed in the official ideology, which contain an “authoritarian welfare ideology”. When arguing for a strong royal power, sources like *The King’s Mirror* and the *National Law* frequently refer to the importance of the king and the royal government for the welfare of the people.³⁶ In contrast to *Sverris saga*, which reflects the attitude of the “professional warriors”, who brought the upstart Sverre to the throne, *Hákonar saga* is eager to demonstrate Håkon’s good relationship to the peasants and even emphasizes their good performance in war.³⁷ Whether corresponding to the actual relationship between the

³⁴ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 121–128 .

³⁵ Bagge, “State Building”, pp. 138–141.

³⁶ Bagge, *The Political Thought*, pp. 179 ff.

³⁷ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 132 f.

monarchy and the people or not, this propaganda clearly shows the importance for the political elite of popular support.

Further, the 13th-century sources show attempts to link the people more closely to the state and create greater loyalty to its central institutions. The idea of treason against the country (*landráð*) occurs already in the regional laws, written down in the early 12th century, but is vaguely defined. It appears in a clearer form in the National Law: “If a man acts so as to deprive his king of the country or its inhabitants . . .”,³⁸ Apart from a few scattered comments in the earlier sagas, such as *Heimskringla*,³⁹ the first – though not wholly consistent – attempt to characterize inner strife as a rebellion against the king in the sagas is the description of the pretender Skule Bårdsson’s war against King Håkon Håkonsson 1239–1240 in *Hákonar saga*.⁴⁰ Slightly earlier, *The King’s Mirror* elaborates in great detail on the sacred character of the royal office, the obedience the people owe to the king and the terrible crime of rebelling against or disobeying the king.⁴¹

In these sources, and generally in the ideology of the 13th century, the main emphasis is on the king, rather than the country. In one sense, kingship became more impersonal during this period, the royal office being emphasized more than the individual king. The king’s portrait appeared on seals and coins, and his officials, with fixed districts and relatively well-defined tasks, acted in the king’s name and with his authority.⁴² In this way traditional ideas of loyalty to a person might be exploited to create loyalty for an institution. Thus, we should not draw too sharp a line of division between loyalty to the king and loyalty to the nation. *The King’s Mirror* seems on occasion to assume a fairly close connection between the two. Commenting on the disasters resulting from the division of the country between several kings, the author states that this division is not only a geographical one, it “divides the people’s loyalty”.⁴³ There are also further examples pointing in the same direction.⁴⁴

During his conflict with Denmark in the 1160s Erling Skakke, according to *Heimskringla*, skilfully exploits nationalistic sentiments. At a meeting with the people of Viken in Tønsberg, he declares himself willing to fulfil the treaty he has entered with Denmark, to cede the region to the Danish king, if the people prefer “to be subject to the king of Denmark, rather than to the king who has been consecrated and crowned to govern this land”.⁴⁵ To this leading question he receives the expected answer, the people flatly refusing to serve the Danish king. During the

³⁸ “ef mann ræðr undan konungi sinum lond eða þegna”, *Landsloven IV 3, Norges gamle Love II*, edited by R. Keyser & P. A. Munch, (Christiania =Oslo, 1848), p. 49.

³⁹ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 134 f.

⁴⁰ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 112 f.

⁴¹ Bagge, *The Political Thought*, pp. 22–37, 156–165.

⁴² S. Bagge, “Kingship in Medieval Norway. Ideal and Reality”, in H. Durchhardt et al., eds. *European Monarchy. Its Evolution and Practice from Roman Antiquity to Modern Times* (Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 41–52 and “The Norwegian Monarchy”.

⁴³ “þviat þeir sma konongar er þa hafa sunndr slitit ríki þa slita þeir þægar í iam marga staðe astunndan folksens”, *Konungs skuggsía*, edited by L. Holm-Olsen (Oslo, 1945), p. 52; cf. Bagge, *The Political Thought*, p. 193. The Old Norse term *astundan*, which means attention, desire or aim, must here refer to emotional ties linking the people in a country together, in a similar sense as the idea of friendship or the common will as the foundation of a political community in ancient thought.

⁴⁴ Bagge, *The Political Thought*, pp. 192–194.

⁴⁵ “at þjóna Dana-konungi heldr en þessum konungi, er hér er vígðr ok kórónaðr til landz”, *Heimskringla*, *The Saga of Magnus Erlingsson*, ch. 24. See Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 104.

war against the Swedish Dukes in 1308–1309, King Håkon V in a letter expresses his gratitude to the people of Trøndelag for their brave defence of their region, adding that they will be rewarded for their efforts. Having given instructions for the coming expedition against the enemy, the king ends by urging them to defend “the country and their own peace and freedom”.⁴⁶ In both these examples, there is a fairly close connection between the king and the country. When the king is considered responsible for the welfare of the people as a whole, existing for the sake of the country and its people, the step from loyalty to the king and “nationalism” is not too great.

As the sources almost exclusively express the “official” attitudes of the king and the elite, we know very little of the effects of these patriotic or “national” ideas. The detailed description of the expedition against Scotland in 1263 in *Håkonar saga* may serve as a warning against exaggerating the peasants’ enthusiasm for fighting for their king and country. King Håkon several times had to change his plans as the result of his men’s unwillingness to do what he wanted, and a part of the fleet left the expedition and went home before Håkon himself withdrew.⁴⁷ The fact remains, however, that the Norwegian king did manage to mobilize the peasants for foreign expeditions, and that such mobilizations took place more frequently in the late 13th and early 14th century than both earlier and later.⁴⁸ I have previously used this fact as an argument that the Norwegian king depended on the peasants for support to a greater extent than most other contemporary kings.⁴⁹ There thus seems to be a certain “democratic” basis for some kind of patriotism on the part of the peasant population.

7. The Later Middle Ages: defence of Norwegian interests

In 1319 the last male heir to the Norwegian dynasty, King Håkon V, died, and Norway entered a personal union with Sweden, the first in a series of unions with the neighbouring countries, which eventually led to the complete loss of Norwegian independence in 1537. The unions were partly the result of dynastic conditions, partly of the emergence of a more international elite in closer contact with the neighbouring countries – to which the unions also contributed. Eventually, the demographic and economic weakness of Norway resulting from the Black Death (1349–1350) and subsequent outburst of the plague, made it impossible for the country to maintain its own king, and led to increasing dominance by the stronger partner in the union, which from 1380 was Denmark. Compared to the preceding period, the Later Middle Ages are of special interest exactly because of the unions. The nation could not as easily be identified with the king as in the previous period, and we must therefore look for a clearer concept of the “nation” or the “country” apart from the king. On the other hand, the feeling of loyalty to the king was not abolished once the king became a foreigner. We can therefore imagine a certain split in the sentiments of the population, compared to the previous period.

⁴⁶ *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* I, edited by C. C. A. Lange & C. R. Unger (Christiania = Oslo, 1849), no. 121.

⁴⁷ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, p. 142.

⁴⁸ Lunden, this volume, pp. 19–33.

⁴⁹ Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling”, pp. 192–194 and “State Building”, pp. 138 f.

In the nationalist historiographical tradition dating back to the last century, the political history of these centuries is largely the history of Norwegian resistance against the encroachments from mightier neighbours, first and foremost the Danes. The strength of this resistance has been assessed somewhat differently but there has been a widespread tendency to regret that it was fairly weak. In the post-war period, the conflicts have more often been explained in terms of class or group differences, notably the conflict between the aristocracy fighting for a “constitutional” government and the absolutist aspirations of the king.⁵⁰

My general impression is that we can distinguish between two lines of conflict: First, the Norwegian “national” elite, mainly the secular aristocracy, was interested in some kind of Norwegian state – though generally not with its own king – and resisted attempts by the Danish king to submit the country to a central government seated in Denmark. The political programme of this group was that Norwegians should be appointed to posts in local government, the central administration seated within the country, and that the king should rule in cooperation with the council of the realm,⁵¹ i.e. a combination of a “national” and a constitutional programme. The prelates, who played an increasingly important part in the council, with the gradual extinction of the leading families of the secular aristocracy, fought for a similar programme, notably free elections of bishops and against the king’s attempts to give Danes or other foreign favourites ecclesiastical benefices in Norway. Second, the Norwegian peasant population resisted high taxes, and demanded just government, respect for old customs, and so forth. They even on some occasions demanded to be governed by Norwegians, claiming that Danish men had little understanding of local conditions and little respect for the people. This may to some extent have been a correct observation. Norwegian peasants had a freer position and were probably used to being treated with greater respect than their Danish counterparts. However, Norwegian peasants did not consistently oppose Danish officials, they might equally well turn against Norwegian ones. Two oppressive officials who were killed by the peasants in the 1490s were both Norwegian, while the main representative of the Danish king in Norway around 1500, Henrik Krummedike, was praised by the peasants for his fair treatment of them.

The urban population was an important element in national revivals in the 19th century, as well as in earlier ages. Trade became relatively more important in the

⁵⁰ This tendency was stimulated by contemporary Swedish historiography, particularly Erik Lönnroth’s studies of the struggle between the monarchy and the aristocracy in late medieval Scandinavia. See E. Lönnroth, *Sverige och Kalmarunionen 1397–1457* (Gothenburg, 1934) and *Statsmakt och statsfnans i det medeltida Sverige*, second ed. (Gothenburg, 1984). For the political history of Norway in the Later Middle Ages, including the problem of nationalism, see L. Hamre, *Norsk historie frå omlag 1400* (Oslo, 1968) and *Norsk historie frå midten av 1400-åra til 1513* (Oslo, 1971); Benedictow, *Fra rike*; Steinar Imsen, “Norsk politisk senmiddelalderforskning ca. 1965–80”, *Nye middelalderstudier. Kongedømme, kirke, stat*, Norske historikere i utvalg VI (Oslo, 1983), pp. 30–36; S. Bagge & K. Mykland, *Norge i dansketiden* (Oslo, 1987), pp. 11–82; Knut Helle, “Tiden”, pp. 92–106; B. Sawyer & P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia* (Minneapolis, 1993), particularly pp. 63–80, 95–99. Most of the facts referred to in the following can be found in these works.

⁵¹ This council was originally a vaguely defined circle of men whom the king consulted. With the unions in the Later Middle Ages, it developed a clearer institutional identity and a more aristocratic character, consisting of the bishops and a few other prelates, and the most prominent members of the secular aristocracy. By contrast, greater assemblies or “parliaments”, which had existed in the High Middle Ages and played a prominent part in many other countries, including Sweden, in the Later Middle Ages, are not to be found in Norway in this period. See K. Helle, “Rigsråd”, *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, 14 (Oslo, 1969), cols. 223–230.

Later Middle Ages than in the period before. However, this development failed to create an important class of merchants in the Norwegian towns, because the economically most important trade, the export of fish from northern Norway to markets in western Europe and the Baltic, was completely dominated by the Germans. While Norwegian merchants had a clear interest in gaining control over this important trade, they were far too weak to do very much about it or to play a significant “national” role.

The problem of Norway in the Later Middle Ages was that the country was economically and militarily much weaker than the neighbouring countries, and, furthermore, that the “national” interests that did exist were rarely united. Not even within the aristocracy was there sufficient unity to create an effective and continuous resistance. The members of the aristocracy depended for their income and status on posts in local government. Individually, they were thus faced with the dilemma of whether to maintain a good relationship to the king in the hope of being rewarded with an attractive post, or to show solidarity with the group as a whole, to maintain as many posts as possible in Norwegian hands. Members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy might also have different interests or priorities from their counterparts within the secular aristocracy. It was therefore very easy for the king to play the aristocrats off against one another, and aristocratic solidarity was mainly confined to royal elections and other special occasions. Thus, the interests of the aristocracy were nationally relevant, but had too weak a basis. The peasants generally seem to have strengthened their position within Norwegian society during the Later Middle Ages, in a certain sense forming a stronger basis, but they were very difficult to mobilize on a national scale. It also seems that the distance between the state and this group was greater than in the preceding period. They largely lost their military function, and while the essential features of the traditional legal and administrative system were maintained, the elite was probably less interested in mobilizing the peasants. Because of the weakness of the elite, the result of this development was not that the peasants were more oppressed, but rather that they were left alone. Consequently, the aristocracy and the peasants had few interests in common.

However, historians may have underestimated the links between the peasants and the aristocracy, in the form of patron–client relationships, of which the popular support for the aristocrat Knut Alvsson’s rebellion in 1501–1502 is perhaps one example. The neighbouring country Sweden is a prominent example that it was possible to create such an alliance under medieval conditions. Sections of the aristocracy, in alliance with some strong peasant communities, resisted the Danes and their allies within the Swedish aristocracy fairly successfully during the period 1470–1520, and this alliance also initially formed the basis of the new monarchy of Gustaf Vasa (1523–1560). I will not in this context speculate on the differences between Norway and Sweden. However, Swedish historians have pointed to the link between the rebellious peasant communities and international trade. As exporters of iron, these peasants resented the Danish kings’ anti-Hanseatic policy, which endangered this trade.⁵² Their link to international markets may also have made them more vulnerable to exploitation by Danish kings and officials, who –

⁵² J. Rosén, *Svensk historia* vol. I (Stockholm, 1962), pp. 285 f.

like most such persons – were constantly in need of cash. By contrast, apart from some individual cases and particular areas, Norwegian peasants were apparently not very oppressed during the Later Middle Ages, nor during the rest of the 16th century. One possible factor explaining the relative passivity of Norwegian peasants may thus simply have been that they had few reasons for complaining about the Danish regime.

Despite sentiments that can clearly be characterized as national, among the aristocracy as well as the peasants, there was thus no strong resistance to the Danish regime, and Norwegian independence was easily abolished in 1537. A force of 200 men was sufficient to suppress the only centre of resistance, Trøndelag, where the Archbishop tried to mobilize against the Danes, more in order to protect the Catholic Church than to protect Norwegian independence. There were no significant protests against the decision of the Danish king and council, that Norway was from now on to be a province of Denmark.

Thus, the question of nationalism in Norway in the Later Middle Ages cannot be easily answered by “yes” or “no”. National interests did play a part in the politics of the period, notably as conducted by the aristocratic council, to some extent even in the demands of the peasants. These national interests were closely related to the concrete interests of particular groups and persons, and they were rarely united for a common purpose. There was no continuous fight for Norwegian independence, not even a rebellion against the Danish decision finally to suppress the Norwegian state and its central political institutions. At least *quantitatively* Norwegian nationalism of the Later Middle Ages was very different from the modern one.

8. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to steer a middle course between the unreflected nationalism of traditional Norwegian historiography and current ideas of nationalism as a specific phenomenon of the 19th and 20th centuries, thus contributing to the second as well as the third phase in the historiographical development, mentioned above. Some national myths need to be exploded in order to reach an adequate understanding of the establishment and further growth of a separate Norwegian kingdom, and it must be emphasized that the growth of the state was not unequivocally linked to “cultural nationalism”. The cultural life of the country was more specifically Norwegian before the rise of a strong and united monarchy, which largely tried to adapt to European models.

On the political and ideological level, I am inclined to emphasize the monarchy and the state, rather than the nation, as objects of identification in the 13th century. However, the ideology of the epoch also includes ideas of the people as a community, and the distinction between the monarchy and the nation may easily be exaggerated. In so far as significant parts of the population felt loyalty to the king or identified their interests with his, there is no great difference between this attachment and national sentiments. To some extent, the Later Middle Ages may serve as further evidence in the same direction. During this period, the percentage of the population who identified themselves with the state probably declined. On the other hand, when the king was a foreigner, a national political programme – or

rather, several programmes – linked to the country and its inhabitants and Norwegian political institutions was developed in opposition to the Danish king. Despite the fact that these programmes had little political importance and were eventually unsuccessful, they show, more clearly than the ideology of the High Middle Ages, the idea of a national community apart from the king. Thus, there seems to be a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind between nationalism in the Middle Ages and in the contemporary period.

This conclusion implies that I regard nationalism as less “irrational” than has often been maintained. It has a close connection with “real” interests; the Marxists are wrong in maintaining that class represents real, “objective” interests, while nationalism is ideology, invention and manipulation. Consequently, the interests and sentiments of people in the Middle Ages were not necessarily *qualitatively* very different from the modern ones. When nationalism was less prominent in earlier ages, the reason is that the state mattered less to the majority of the population, and that they had less influence on it. One of the main reasons for the rise of nationalism since the early 19th century is that the state affected the interests of far larger groups than before. It must be added, however, that this “quantitative” difference probably also had certain “qualitative” consequences. Modern nationalism served and serves to unite different individual and group interests, and its emotional and often highly-strung expressions cannot be directly explained by concrete interests. Medieval attachment to the state and the nation seems to have been less emotional and all-embracing, having to compete with a number of other identifications.

The case of Norway, and particularly the fate of the country in the Later Middle Ages, may also illustrate the point made in the beginning of this article about the Early Modern Period as particularly opposed to nationalism. Medieval Norway was a relatively small and homogeneous unit, which, during its period as an independent kingdom, developed laws, traditions and institutions that were fairly different from Denmark, of which it became a part, at least in theory, for nearly 400 years. The Danish–Norwegian state was considerably larger and less homogeneous, including, in addition to Norway, a small, but wealthy and densely populated German-speaking region to the south. Thus, the distance between state and nation became greater, and the ruling elite would be even more inclined than in the Middle Ages to insist on the king, the dynasty and the state, rather than the people or the nation, as the subject of loyalty and identification. Although it would clearly be an exaggeration to regard medieval kingdoms as nationally homogeneous, a similar change as in Denmark–Norway in the direction of larger and more conglomerate states took place in other areas of Europe during the Early Modern Period, making the early modern state more opposed to nationalism than its medieval predecessor. Thus, there is no unilinear development from the “dynastic” or “authoritarian” to the national state. The considerable regional differences in Europe must also be pointed out. There was probably a more gradual development in the direction of national states in old, fairly well-defined and homogeneous countries such as England, France, and the Scandinavian countries, than in Germany, Italy or Eastern Europe. Modern studies of nationalism have focused too much on this latter group, thus creating a picture of nationalism as more radically new, more revolutionary and more extreme and irrational than it actually

was. Medieval Norway was not a “modern nation state”, but a modified version of the traditional authoritarian state with some national features, probably more so than most other medieval and early modern states.