

The Structure of the Political Factions in the Internal Struggles of the Scandinavian Countries During the High Middle Ages

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1. The problem

All three Scandinavian countries underwent longer periods of internal struggles after their initial unification in the 10th and early 11th centuries (Denmark and Norway) and the early 12th century (Sweden). Norway had the greatest internal stability, but even there, peace was broken by intermittent struggles during a period of more than a century (1130–1240). Denmark had two such periods, 1130–1170 and 1241–1340, the latter period ending in complete disaster: the country was without a king during the years 1332–1340, most of its territory being mortgaged to German princes and mercenaries. Then a revival took place, which made Denmark the dominant power in Scandinavia for the rest of the Middle Ages. Sweden experienced more or less continuous internal struggles throughout the Middle Ages, with shorter periods of stability and strong government in between.

In this article I will treat two main problems: first, the reasons for the struggles and the composition of the factions taking part in them, and secondly, how the internal struggles influenced the state formation. My main emphasis will be on the former problem.

2. Historiography

The internal struggles within the Scandinavian countries have rarely been treated as a general problem. Most historians have only dealt with one country – their own – and have been concerned with explaining particular conflicts rather than the general phenomenon. Nevertheless, there are some common trends in the historiography of this subject, the most important of which are the “two revolutions” at the beginning of our century, the “Weibull revolution” in Sweden and Denmark and the “Marxist revolution” in Norway. These revolutions represented a turn from a national interpretation, which regarded the conflicts from the point of view of the legitimate government of the country in question, to an interpretation in terms of conflicting class or group interests.

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The programme of the Weibull brothers, Lauritz (1870–1962) and Curt (1886–1990), was to make history scientific through strict rules regarding evidence.¹ All relevant sources should be carefully sifted, and only what was absolutely certain should be accepted. Applied to narrative sources – which form the major part of the written evidence until well into the 13th century – this meant that historians should only accept “naked” facts on battles, movements, treaties, and so forth, thereby rejecting the sources’ own interpretation of these events and their information about the actors’ motives and plans. The validity of this method is in a certain sense self-evident: bare facts are less likely to be distorted, and the motives medieval historians attributed to their protagonists were often based on the historians’ own reasoning or imagination rather than external evidence. Nevertheless, we are left with the problem of making sense of the bare facts in the sources. How are we able to interpret the motives behind the actions of people living in a different age? The Weibulls offer no explicit discussion of this problem. Implicitly, they base their conclusions on common sense, i.e. their own idea of what is rational: Men act according to their own interests, seeking power, wealth and benefit.² The Weibulls are usually sceptical about earlier historians’ ideas of people acting out of patriotism, idealism or religious conviction. On the other hand, they assume that individuals normally act in groups, which are linked together by individual interests as well as by a common ideology. In the Middle Ages these groups were the monarchy, the Church, the aristocracy and the peasants. Thus, historians would be able to explain the internal struggles by finding the basic conflicting interests and ideologies of these groups.

The “Marxist revolution” in Norway, led by Halvdan Koht (1873–1965) and Edvard Bull (1881–1932),³ was approximately contemporary with the Weibull one, and had similar, though not exactly the same consequences. The Norwegian tradition, even before the Marxists, was more sociological. Classes were of fundamental importance in the great synthesis of Norwegian history by Ernst Sars (1835–1917), although in contrast to the Marxist, Sars regarded the classes as formed by emotional ties and a sense of identity. The shift to material interests as the basis of the class formation in the Marxist tradition corresponds to some extent to the Weibulls’ turn from an idealistic to a more “realistic” approach. The Marxist classes are, however, bound together by more fundamental factors than simply the acknowledged self-interest of their individual members. Consequently, the Marxist tradition allows for a wider range of motives for individual action than the Weibull tradition: Class allegiance originates in a common identity, which may cause the individual to act according to norms and ideals and not only self-interest.

Despite these differences, both the Weibulls and the Marxist school tend to explain the internal struggles as conflicts between fairly stable parties with their

¹ The programme was first expressed in 1911, in L. Weibull, “Kritiska undersökningar i Nordens historia omkring år 1000”, *Nordisk historia. Forskningar och undersökningar*, vol. I (Stockholm, 1948), pp. 245–360. On the Weibull school, see B. Odén, *Lauritz Weibull och forskarsamhället, Bibliotheca historica Lundensis*, vol. 39 (Lund, 1975).

² S.-E. Liedman, “Den historisk-kritiska skolan i idéhistorisk belysning”, *Scandia*, 41 (1975), pp. 265–266.

³ O. Dahl, *Norsk historieforskning i det 19. og 20. århundre* (Oslo, 1959), pp. 236–242, 247–262.

particular ideology and social origin, not entirely different from modern political parties. The most ambitious of these “party explanations” occurs in Andreas Holmsen’s very influential synthesis of Norwegian history, published in 1939, in which he applies a strict Marxist model of basis and superstructure.⁴ Changes on the economic level lead to changes on the social level. In the case of Norway, population increase and land shortage from the 11th century onwards result in an increasing division between a class of wealthy landowners, the lay and ecclesiastical aristocracy, on the one hand, and a landless proletariat on the other. This social division then leads to changes on the political level. The landowners take over the political power, forming a strong state, in which the king serves as the instrument of the aristocracy. This take-over is met with strong resistance, resulting in more than a century of “civil wars”. The struggling factions during these wars largely correspond to the class division in society.

The great merit of Holmsen’s synthesis is just that it is a synthesis, not only explaining the motives of particular pretenders but placing the internal struggles within the context of social, economic and political change. The problem is that Holmsen’s theory is based on very little evidence and consequently that its separate elements can be fairly readily criticized.⁵ This criticism is, however, unsatisfactory as long as it does not offer an alternative explanation.

Such an alternative explanation has been developed by several scholars in recent years, under the influence of studies by social anthropologists of non-European societies and of European historians such as Jacques Heers. Heers regards the warring factions in the Italian cities and other places as “family clans”, loosely organized groups based on kinship (Heers is rather vague on this point), personal loyalty and patron–client relationships, the leaders being recruited from the elite, and ordinary members from the lower classes.⁶ Thus, there was no class distinction between the factions, and ideology played a subordinate part as a divisive element. A similar explanation has been applied to the Norwegian “civil wars”⁷ of 1130–1240 by Kåre Lunden and myself.⁸

This theory of the political factions is based on the general assumption that medieval society was not organized in such a way that divisions according to professions, class, social status and so forth were likely to occur. A long-term class struggle seems to presuppose a relatively centralized society. Wage labour and organized capitalism require the workers to be organized in order to make themselves heard. Generally, individuals in modern mass democracy have no other way of promoting their interests in public matters than to join a group or party. By contrast, in medieval society few nationwide institutions that could be taken over or influenced

⁴ A. Holmsen, *Norges historie. Fra de eldste tider til 1660* (Oslo, 1977), pp. 188–250.

⁵ See, for example, K. Helle, *Norge blir en stat* (Bergen, 1974), pp. 27–41, 158–162, etc., with references.

⁶ J. Heers, *The Family Clan in the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1977).

⁷ The term is clearly anachronistic in this epoch, implying an established state breaking apart. As it is conventional, however, I shall use it in this article.

⁸ K. Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, *Norges historie*, edited by K. Mykland, vol. 3 (Oslo, 1977), pp. 14–138; S. Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen”, *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norwegian), 65 (1986), pp. 145–197 and “State Building in Medieval Norway”, *Forum for utviklingsstudier* (1989), pp. 129–147.

by organized groups existed, and people mainly confronted one another person to person or within restricted areas. Furthermore, we have to do with societies with little surplus, which was open to competition for only the very few, i.e. the social elite. The common people might join together against the elites when being suppressed, but from the point of view of the individual, becoming the client of some leader would normally offer the best opportunities. Political conflicts would then take place between factions rather than classes in the Earlier Middle Ages, and factional divisions were “arbitrary”, based on kinship, personal friendship, or local commitments.

However, political power became more institutionalized from the 13th century onwards. Thus, national taxation or legislation in favour of landowners (e.g. in England in 1351) led to large-scale peasant rebellions. And within the social elite, the emergence of assemblies on the national or provincial level made conflicts between monarchy and aristocracy, or bourgeoisie and nobility, or other social groups more likely to occur. Still, “arbitrary” divisions continued to exist even in the more centralized monarchies between the 13th and 17th centuries. The king could not favour all the great men in his realm, at least not equally. Discontented elements would then be likely to form an “opposition”, and there would be “in” and “out” factions, according to which group received the king’s favour. Able kings or a certain material surplus might prevent open conflicts, while economic crises or weak kings might lead to rebellions and factional strife. The most obvious examples of this pattern are the Wars of the Roses in England and the internal struggles in France in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Factions based on personal loyalty also played a considerable part during the struggles between King John and the barons in England in 1215, which led to the Magna Carta being issued.⁹ Even the Wars of Religion in France in the 16th century have been interpreted as struggles between “arbitrary” factions.¹⁰

3. The Norwegian “civil wars”

In what follows, I will try to discuss these alternative explanations of internal struggles, using the “civil wars” in Norway of 1130–1240 as my main example, while confining myself to briefer notes on Danish and Swedish history. However, I hope at least to give a preliminary picture of the formation of factions and their struggles at two different stages in the development of the medieval state in Scandinavia.

Holmsen’s theory not only seeks to explain why internal struggles took place, but also to some extent the dividing lines between the parties. On the one hand, the great magnates gradually united and allied themselves with the Church, i.e. the bishops and prelates, on the other, the new landless proletarians, the result of overpopulation and exploitation, opposed the landowners, but were not strong enough in themselves to overturn them. However, the proletarians had other allies. The ordinary peasants, who dominated within Trøndelag and the inner parts of Eastern Norway, united with the proletarians against the landowners, who had

⁹ J. C. Holt, *The Northerners. A Study in the Reign of King John* (Oxford, 1961) and *Magna Carta* (Cambridge, 1965).

¹⁰ J.-M. Constant, “Les partis nobiliaires et le développement de l’État moderne: le rôle de la noblesse seconde”, *L’État moderne: Genèse*, edited by J.-P. Genet (Paris, 1990), pp. 175–184.

their stronghold in Western Norway and the Oslofjord region. In this way Holmsen takes over the “regional” explanation of his teacher Edvard Bull¹¹ and combines it more directly with his general Marxist interpretation.

If Holmsen’s picture is correct, we should expect to find a fairly constant composition of the factions and clear differences between them, in social origin, ideology and regional allegiance. By contrast, if the division between the factions was arbitrary, we would expect them to be approximately equal in power, numbers and social status and to show little continuity over time, frequent defections taking place between them. According to the general model of Fredrik Barth, based on game theory, there are two opposing principles behind faction formation.¹² On the one hand, the actors will tend to join the faction which has the best chances of winning, on the other, they will seek maximum gain from victory. The larger the majority of a faction, the better chances of winning, but the least to gain from victory for each participant, and vice versa. In the long run, these opposing considerations will lead to factions of approximately equal numbers and strength, or, if one faction wins a complete victory, it will split later on. Usually, awareness of these consequences of total victory and fear that the opposing faction, if risking to lose, might encourage defections by offering one of the defectors the leadership of their faction, will ensure a certain balance between the struggling factions. We cannot expect Norwegian conditions of the 12th and 13th centuries to correspond perfectly to this model. Imbalance between the factions may occur over shorter and longer periods, and special conditions may in one way or the other modify the model. An important difference between medieval Norway and the society from which Barth derives his model, mid-20th century Swat in Northern Pakistan, is that the conflicts in the latter region mainly concerned land ownership within a fairly limited and densely populated area, without a central government, while the contested prize in the Norwegian struggles was kingship over the whole country. This prize was not subject to open competition; one had to belong to the royal family to be able to compete. Admittedly, since legitimate birth was not necessary to become king, it was fairly easy to fake royal origin, and this was probably done to some extent. But such fake kings usually came from obscure families; it was difficult for a member of a great aristocratic family to claim that he was the illegitimate son of a king. As there was no real central government apart from the king and a rudimentary political organization, there was no well-defined prize to be gained by the victorious king’s adherents. Such men could be rewarded with gifts or royal land as “fiefs” (*veizlur*). They also obtained the king’s support in becoming the mightiest men in their local regions, and generally, they were considered the king’s “friends” or counsellors, or, if they were very close to the king, they were married to one of the king’s daughters or female relatives.

These circumstances may to some extent modify our expectations of finding Barth’s model of perfect balance in 12th- and 13th-century Norway. Kingship was not always subjected to competition. Life and death in the royal family and the number of heirs to the throne to some extent determined whether or not there was to be an internal struggle. There was no “complete government” to be conquered.

¹¹ E. Bull, “Borgerkrigene i Norge og Haakon Haakonssons kongstanke”, *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norwegian), 5 series, vol. 4 (1917–1920), pp. 177–194.

¹² F. Barth, “Segmentary Opposition and the Theory of Games”, *Process and Form in Social Life*, vol. 2 (London, 1981), pp. 55–82.

Consequently, the victorious king's political skill might determine whether he would be able to enjoy his victory or whether a new faction would arise. By contrast, in the Italian cities, from which Heers draws most of his examples, the government changed by regular elections, which could then give occasion for open fighting between the factions. Furthermore, in contrast to Barth's Pathans, there was a more clear-cut division in Norway between the real participants in the struggles, i.e. the pretenders and some of the magnates and their retainers on the one hand, and the peasant population on the other. Some of the latter might be clients of pretenders or magnates but the majority of them usually had little to gain or lose from the outcome of the contest. On the contrary, the peasants had every reason to want the struggles to end, because they disturbed normal life and put the lives and property of the peasants in danger. The worst situation from the peasants' point of view would be a prolonged struggle between two factions of approximately equal strength. Then they risked having to pay taxes or being plundered by both factions. Consequently, the peasants would be likely to support the stronger faction, which means that the former of Barth's two principles applies better to the Norwegian situation than the latter. Total victories and the changing between periods of peace and internal struggles are therefore as compatible with the theory of arbitrary divisions as with Holmsen's class theory.

The Norwegian "civil wars" can be divided into four phases.¹³ During the *first phase*, 1130–c. 1160, there were intermittent struggles between factions formed by allegiance to different pretenders. No significant difference in social and regional adherence or ideology can be detected between the factions. Nor was there any continuity between the division in the 1130s and the new ones of the period 1155–c. 1160, in the sense that the leading men or their descendants were divided between the factions in the same way during both conflicts. The struggles during the second phase, c. 1160–1208, became more prolonged and bitter and the factions more permanent. At this phase the factions started to choose their kings, instead of the kings taking the initiative. The factions acquired names, and there are traces of ideological differences. Whole regions tended to support one particular faction, and, at least temporarily, there was also a divisions between an established faction, including the majority of the aristocracy, and rebels of proletarian origin. During the *third phase*, 1208–1227, a reconciliation took place between the two conflicting factions, first in 1208 and then more permanently in 1217. Shortly after the latter reconciliation, new rebellions broke out, led by discontented magnates. These rebellions were confined to Eastern Norway, mainly its inner parts, and were finally put down in 1227. In the *fourth and last phase*, 1239–1240, a rival pretender rebelled against the established king and was defeated. The majority of the people and the aristocracy supported the king, and there was no significant social and ideological division between the factions. This situation thus presents a parallel to the 1130s.

At first sight, this outline of the civil wars contains elements lending support to both Holmsen's class theory and the theory of arbitrary divisions. Let us consider the various explanations of the factional divisions one by one.

¹³ For general accounts of the wars, see, for example, Helle, *Norge blir en stat* and Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*.

4. Social divisions

Holmsen is correct in stating that there were differences in the *social composition* of the factions during at least a part of the period of the civil wars but he probably exaggerates their importance. He attempts to trace the social divisions back to the struggles between the three sons of King Harald Gille, Sigurd, Øystein and Inge, from 1155 onwards. According to the sagas, Inge, who was a cripple, was weak and easy to lead and at the same time very generous, which eventually made the majority of the aristocracy join him. In the course of the conflict between Inge and his brothers, some prominent men defected from the latter to join him. But there were also defections in the other direction, and generally the lines of division between the factions were vague. After the death of Sigurd in 1155 and Øystein in 1157, Håkon, son of King Sigurd, became the leader of the faction opposing Inge. Contrary to Holmsen's opinion, Håkon's faction did not mainly consist of "proletarians". It was an "ordinary" faction, led by prominent men and with considerable support in various parts of the country.¹⁴ It suffered some crushing defeats in the beginning, which according to the sagas were due to the superior military skill of the leaders of the Inge faction, Gregorius Dagsson and Erling Skakke. After the death of Gregorius and Inge himself, early in 1161, the position of Håkon's faction improved markedly. The defeat and death of Håkon in 1162 and of several other pretenders during the subsequent years, gradually turned the tables. The new leader of Inge's faction, Erling Skakke, succeeded in uniting the majority of the aristocracy behind his son Magnus, the grandson of the late King Sigurd Jorsalfare (d. 1130), who was acclaimed king in 1161 and crowned in 1163, at the age of seven. The factions opposing Erling and Magnus increasingly drew their adherents from the lower strata of society, which meant – with one exception – that they were also unsuccessful and relatively marginal.

The most important of these factions were the Birchlegs (Birkibeinar). The name was originally derogatory: the men were too poor to have shoes, so they had to use birch around their legs instead. After three years of fighting, the Birchlegs were apparently completely defeated in the beginning of 1177. However, a new and brilliant leader, Sverre Sigurdsson, took over the remains of the faction and fought his way to the throne, defeating and killing Erling in 1179 and Magnus in 1184. *Sverris saga*, the first part of which was commissioned by Sverre himself and written under his supervision, gives a vivid account of Sverre's rise from poverty and despair to complete victory.¹⁵

¹⁴ H. Koht, "Kampen om makten i Noreg i sagatiden", *Innhogg og utsyn* (Kristiania, 1921), pp. 117–118; S. Bagge, "Samkongedømme og enekongedømme", *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norwegian), 54 (1975), pp. 253–254; Bagge, "Borgerkrig", p. 166 and *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley, etc., 1991), p. 216, no. 46. For a more thorough examination of the problem, arriving at basically the same conclusion, see K. Arstad, *Kongsemner og maktkonstellasjoner i innbyrdesstridenes Norge*, cand. philol. thesis (manuscript, Oslo, 1994) and "Ribbungopprør, riksenhet og enekongedømme", *Collegium medievale*, 8 (1995), pp. 63–90.

¹⁵ *Sverris saga*, edited by G. Indrebø (Oslo, 1920); [*Sverris saga*], *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, translated by J. Sephton (London, 1899). References are to chapters, which are the same in the original and the English translation. See also S. Bagge, "Ideology and Propaganda in *Sverris saga*", *Arkiv for nordisk filologi*, 108 (1993), pp. 1–18 and *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Håkonar saga* (Odense, 1996), pp. 13–88.

Although the saga probably exaggerates the miraculous character of Sverre's victory, including the proletarian composition of his faction, it seems likely enough that Sverre, during his first years as a guerrilla leader, was mainly supported by men of low origin. However, after some years of successful fighting, and particularly after Erling's defeat and death in 1179, Sverre received support from the leading men and the peasants of one region, Trøndelag, and his faction changed accordingly. Although the meagre sources hardly allow us to give a very distinct picture of the social divisions during this period, Sverre seems, except for Trøndelag, to have had little support from the old aristocracy, which was united under Erling and Magnus in the 1160s. In other words, there were few defections in his favour; at least few of those who defected became his permanent adherents. From his victory over Magnus in 1184 and until his death in 1202, Sverre had to put down a number of new uprisings, their leaders recruited from old adherents of Magnus and their kings claiming to be his descendants.

Sverris saga states that many men who had formerly been paupers and robbers were promoted to high rank under Sverre but gives no examples that this actually happened.¹⁶ The saga rarely gives information about the ancestral background and relationship of the leading men of Sverre's faction mentioned by name, a fact that does not necessarily indicate that these men were of low origin.¹⁷ Furthermore, membership of the aristocracy is not readily identified. The only criterion in the sources is whether the person in question holds the office of *lendr maðr*, i.e. had entered the king's service in return for receiving the incomes of royal estates for a period, usually his lifetime. This office was not hereditary, although there was a certain tendency for men of the same families to be appointed, and the king normally chose wealthy and powerful men. Consequently, Sverre's faction may have included many men of equal wealth and power as those who were known as *lendir menn*, but who had not been appointed, perhaps since they had chosen the wrong side at an earlier stage of the internal struggles. Sverre himself seems deliberately to have avoided appointing *lendir menn*, except for very prominent men, belonging to families who had usually held this office. Instead, he used a new kind of royal official, *sýslumenn*, who were more directly subordinate to the king. This policy may then to some extent explain the imbalance between the number of *lendir menn* among Sverre's adherents and among the adherents of his adversaries.¹⁸ On the other hand, the fact that Sverre did appoint some *lendir menn* indicates that he might have appointed more if his adherents had included a high number of men belonging to families whose members were used to being promoted in this way.

¹⁶ *Sverris saga*, ch. 40. The only possible example is the *lendr maðr* Ulv of Lauvnes, who is called *þorparasaur* (= son of a cottar) by one of Magnus's men (*Sverris saga*, ch. 90), but such abuse need not imply more than that he lacked a social background that suited his rank of *lendr maðr*. See Bagge, "Borgerkrig", p. 169.

¹⁷ We know, for example, from *Heimskringla* that Sverre's *lendr maðr* Ulv Fly was the son of one of King Sigurd Haraldsson's leading men, and could trace his ancestry back to a prominent court official of the mid-11th century. See Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, edited by F. Jónsson, (Copenhagen, 1893–1900), vol. 3, p. 130; *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, translated with introduction, etc., by L. M. Hollander (Austin, 1967), p. 608. These facts are not mentioned in *Sverris saga* (Bagge, "Borgerkrig", p. 168).

¹⁸ Only 11 *lendir menn* are mentioned on Sverre's side, against 40 on that of Magnus; see Bagge, "Borgerkrig", pp. 167, 169.

Thus, we cannot exclude the possibility that Sverre's followers were recruited from somewhat lower strata of society than Magnus. No doubt, Sverre contributed to social mobility, not only by his choice of men to be promoted but also by the fact that so many prominent men died during the intense struggles and fierce battles, particularly of the period 1179–1184, causing a considerable vacancy in the top ranks of society. The “new men” who filled the top ranks under Sverre may have included some former proletarians but the majority of them were more likely to have been recruited from higher social strata. The particular composition of Sverre's faction has also been explained by long-term social change: the old aristocracy primarily consisted of local leaders. During the 11th and 12th centuries, these leaders became increasingly attached to the king, developing into an aristocracy of the realm and losing touch with the local communities, while at the local level new leaders of somewhat lower rank emerged, who might be used by Sverre and others against the old aristocracy.¹⁹ It is doubtful whether such a change actually took place. First, the role of local leader and member of the central elite around the king may not have been as incompatible as the adherents of this thesis assume. After all, the central elite around the king did not form a government in the modern sense and probably still derived much of their wealth and power from their local communities. Second, there were probably fairly permanent rivalries on the local level and a constant supply of “new men” seeking to take over the position of the old leaders.²⁰ Even if there was no long-term change in the position of the aristocracy, there were thus tensions in the local communities which Sverre could exploit, and it seems likely enough that he relied on men just below the top aristocracy to build up his more authoritarian system of government.

As for the more general composition of Sverre's faction, we can safely exclude the possibility that he led a broad popular uprising against the old aristocracy. Whatever the number of proletarians in Sverre's army, such men should not be identified with the people. They were first and foremost warriors, fighting for themselves and their leader and not in any way identifying themselves with the social stratum to which they had originally belonged. The attitude of such professional warriors, whether being recruited from the proletariat or not, seems to be reflected in *Sverris saga*, which shows greater contempt for and hostility towards the peasants than any other of the Old Norse sagas. By contrast, *Hákonar saga* (written 1264–1265), which expresses the authoritarian view of the strong monarchy of Sverre's successors, reveals a more sympathetic attitude towards the peasants.²¹ The same applies to the earlier *Boglunga ogur*.²² The bias against the peasants in *Sverris saga* should therefore not be understood as the aristocrats' contempt of the common people but rather as the “professional” warriors' contempt of the non-professionals. Even if the saga is probably correct in presenting

¹⁹ E. Sars, *Udsigt over den norske Historie*, vol. 2 (Christiania, 1893), pp. 15–26, 67–71; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, pp. 39–40.

²⁰ The sagas mainly focus on conflicts on the central level, between the kings, but *Heimskringla* gives some glimpses of local conflicts and of rivalries between traditional leaders and new men, particularly when dealing with the age of St. Olav in the early 11th century. See Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 72, 136–137.

²¹ Bagge, *From Gang Leader ...*, pp. 132–133, 148–150, 154–155.

²² E. Bjørsvik, *Ideologi og tendens i Baglersagaen*, cand. philol. thesis (manuscript, Bergen, 1994).

Sverre first and foremost as a warrior leader and less popular with the people than his adversaries, it clearly exaggerates both the antagonism between Sverre and the people and the military incompetence of the popular levy. Sverre must have had sufficient support among the ordinary and wealthier peasants to be able to mobilize large fleets year after year. Consequently, whatever social differences may have existed between the two factions, these differences hardly correspond to a general division in the people.

The united aristocracy which Sverre fought in the beginning of his career, was apparently the result of a long series of struggles, during which the faction of Erling and Magnus eventually gained the upper hand. There is thus nothing to suggest an aristocratic unification as the *origin* of the new series of conflicts from the mid-1150s. This unification seems more to be an example of the “law” of the sagas, notably *Heimskringla*, that “nothing succeeds like success”.²³ The leading men of society find that they have little to gain and much to lose by resisting Erling and Magnus. Eventually, only proletarians, who have little to lose in any case, find it worthwhile to make a new attempt. Once this attempt has proved successful, however, defections among the leading men take place, although not on the same scale as in the earlier phases of the struggles.

To some extent, this pattern repeated itself in the early 13th century. A reconciliation took place between the two warring factions, who were united under Sverre’s grandson, Håkon Håkonsson, in 1217. Some discontented elements among the *Baglar*²⁴ stirred up a new rebellion, which lasted for several years until it was finally put down in 1227. The new factions of the 1220s have usually been regarded as fairly weak, mainly consisting of proletarians, who conducted guerrilla warfare in Eastern Norway. Recently, however, Knut Arstad has given good arguments that the rebels had a stronger basis among the ordinary population than has hitherto been believed, thus posing a serious threat to the established order.²⁵ The rebellion was, however, confined to Eastern Norway.

Proletarian uprisings may well, as Holmsen maintains, have been caused by increasing social stratification and impoverishment of the lower classes, but may also be the result of the civil wars themselves. Victims of plunder and destruction may have sought revenge and new wealth, and war and the possibility of booty is likely to have appealed to poor but able-bodied men. The sagas are fairly outspoken on this point. The general rule, however, is that the proletarians alone were never capable of creating really important divisions in society. Only factions with adequate support from the aristocracy and the peasants were able to make serious attempts to conquer the throne and control larger parts of the country.

²³ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 90–100.

²⁴ I.e. the anti-Sverre faction, formed in 1196. The name is derived from *bagall* = staff, usually the bishop’s staff (Lat. *baculum*), a reference to the alliance of this faction with the prelates during their struggle against Sverre.

²⁵ Arstad, *Kongsemner*, pp. 119–146 and “Ribbungopprør”.

5. Geographical divisions

Thus, social divisions cannot explain the formation of the factions. Do *geographical divisions* offer a better explanation? We can fairly safely rule out the possibility of antagonism between regions as the *origin* of the civil wars. Consistent regional divisions only occur at a relatively late stage, partly from the 1160s and then more permanently during Sverre's first years as a pretender. A further argument against Bull's "regional explanation", brought forward by Halvdan Koht, is that many of his examples of regional solidarity can equally well be explained by kinship solidarity.²⁶ The sagas mainly focus on the great men, and it is in practice difficult to distinguish between the personal support of these men and regional loyalties. Nor is it very likely that Sverre received support from Trøndelag because of the more egalitarian social structure of this region, as Holmsen maintains. There is no evidence that this region was more egalitarian than the allegedly "aristocratic" ones in the southeastern and western part of the country.²⁷ Furthermore, regional divisions are an almost inevitable consequence of any prolonged war, the warring parties consolidating their hold on particular areas. Warfare during the Norwegian civil wars was very mobile. The towns were few and small, and the first castles were not built until the 1180s. Particularly during the first phase of the wars, but also to some extent later, the opposing armies moved around, trying to challenge the enemy and win a decisive victory. As a consequence of these movements, they frequently changed the areas under their control. When, during the more intense struggles from Sverre's uprising and onwards, the factions became more closely attached to particular regions, these divisions can easily be explained by strategical considerations.²⁸

Western Norway was always held by the stronger faction or "the established king", by Erling and Magnus during most of the time until 1184 and by Sverre afterwards. This region could only be controlled from the sea, which necessitated a large fleet. A fleet was costly to build and maintain and needed a large crew, in practice drawn from the peasant levy, the *leidangr*. Tactical skill and better quality of the men could largely compensate for numerical inferiority in land battles. At sea, however, it was more difficult to catch the enemy by surprise. Furthermore, in a land battle a small but well-trained army could easily bring a numerically superior but qualitatively inferior enemy to flee, while in a similar situation at sea such an enemy would have no other alternative than to fight. Finally, it was more difficult to avoid battles against superior enemies at sea than on land, and consequently more difficult to conduct guerrilla warfare.

A fleet was important in Trøndelag and the region around the Oslofjord as well, but both these regions could also be attacked from land. By contrast, the inner parts of Eastern Norway had to be conquered by land warfare, although ships could be used in the great lakes. The difficult terrain of this region, with its large forests and mountainous areas, was ideally suited for guerrilla warfare. In addition, the border

²⁶ Koht, "Kampen om makten", pp. 111–123.

²⁷ Lunden, *Norge under Sværrätten*, p. 53; P. S. Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge og kristningen av landet* (Oslo, 1977), pp. 215–216.

²⁸ For the following, see Bagge, "Borgerkrig", pp. 162, 184–188.

regions towards Sweden offered the possibility of retreating into another country. Consequently, rebellions would normally start in the inner parts of Eastern Norway. After some successful fighting, the rebels would then try to gain a foothold in one of the wealthier and more central regions, either Trøndelag or the Oslofjord area, but would find it difficult to control both of them at the same time. These regions would therefore normally be controlled by different factions. Having gained control of one of these regions, the faction in question would then try to assemble a fleet and conquer Western Norway. This pattern is confirmed by a number of examples during the civil wars, particularly from the rebellion of Sverre onwards. Thus it is significant that the Birchlegs started their rebellion in the inner parts of Eastern Norway,²⁹ while the last rebellion against the Birchlegs took place in the same region.

While the regional divisions can explain neither the outbreak of the civil wars nor the faction formation, they point to a significant change in the power basis and political importance of the factions. The conflicts clearly originated within the elite, and for a long time the fighting mainly took place between the members of the elite and their retainers and “volunteers”. However, the sagas also give a glimpse of the magnates as local leaders, who were able to mobilize the people of their districts. During the more intense and prolonged wars from Sverre’s period onwards, such mobilization became a normal phenomenon, and larger regions were involved on different sides. The kings and pretenders were not only faction leaders, they became dependent on popular support, which again gave the people more influence on “matters of state”, as shown in the royal elections among the two warring factions in 1204 and 1207, respectively, when the “people’s candidate” won against the one of the warriors on both occasions. Characteristically, as a result of this development, the country was divided between the two factions by a formal settlement in 1208, the first division of the country between rulers since the early 12th century. Earlier – and fairly frequent – periods of co-rule had not led to territorial divisions. Thus, such divisions are a significant phenomenon during the second and third phases of the civil wars, but they are the consequence rather than the cause of the wars.

6. Ideological divisions

During the period of Erling Skakke and Sverre the war was also waged in the *ideological* field. The ideological differences concerned three main issues, the first of which was the attitude towards the Church.³⁰ Magnus’s faction concluded an agreement with the Church in the 1160s, granting it privileges, while in return, Magnus received unction and coronation, the first occurrence of this ceremony in Norwegian – and perhaps even Scandinavian – history. The Church also supported

²⁹ According to *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, pp. 481–487; Hollander, pp. 815–819, the Birchlegs were confined to the inner parts of Eastern Norway and the Oslofjord region during the first two years of their existence. Then they got hold of ships in the Oslofjord region, went north along the coast and conquered Nidaros. Although they received many new followers in the Trøndelag region, these facts clearly show that they had no original connection with Trøndelag. Sverre differed from the original Birchlegs in moving north instead of south from the inner regions of Eastern Norway, eventually establishing himself in Trøndelag.

³⁰ Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, pp. 57–69, 85–90; E. Gunnes, *Kongens ære* (Oslo, 1971), pp. 269–283.

Magnus's faction against rebels, including Sverre. Sverre made his peace with the Church, even before his final victory over Magnus. However, a new and more bitter struggle broke out in the 1190s. The prelates eventually came to take an active part in the struggle against Sverre, from 1196 siding with the faction of the *Baglar*. During this conflict, Sverre clearly stood for a traditional "national" Church, headed by the king, in opposition to the Gregorian ideas of the prelates. In *A Speech against the Bishops* from the end of Sverre's reign, Gratian is used very ingeniously to argue for this point of view.³¹ A certain anticlericalism, or at least anti-Gregorianism, continued to exist among Sverre's successors and adherents during the subsequent period.³² Sverre's anticlericalism in the 1190s may have had some connection with his local attachment to Trøndelag. For a long time, the conflict did not concern the Church as a whole, only Archbishop Eirik (1189–1205), who resided in this region. The issues included lay control over local churches, fines to the Church and the number of men in the Archbishop's service. On all these issues Sverre was likely to have the support of the local population and might appear as their champion against the encroachments of the Archbishop. Consequently, the fact that the Church became involved in the civil wars may be an indication that the war between the factions was influenced by more general social conflicts.

However, the attitude to the Church was a significant line of division between the factions only during a limited period, even of Sverre's reign. Immediately after Sverre's death, his son Håkon made his peace with the Church. In the following conflict between the Birchlegs and the *Baglar* (1204–1208), Bishop Nikolas of Oslo, whose diocese was a *Baglar* stronghold, was one of the leaders of the faction. But the Church as such was not involved, and Archbishop Tore, Eirik's successor, tended to favour the Birchlegs, apparently having made his peace with his opponents in Trøndelag. The alliance between the Church and the Magnus faction was thus temporary and did not form an essential part in the formation and continued existence of the faction.

The second ideological issue concerns the opposition between "traditional" monarchy or monarchy "of the people", and the new, authoritarian and ecclesiastical ideas of kingship by the grace of God. The latter ideology is clearly expressed in Magnus's unction and coronation and the alliance between his faction and the Church in the 1160s, and further, in the speeches *Sverris saga* attributes to Magnus to defend his right to the throne against Sverre's attacks. Logically, Sverre ought to embrace more traditional ideas, of which there are also traces in his propaganda, notably his defence of the traditional principle of succession, allowing all sons of a king, whether or not they were legitimate, to ascend to the throne. This idea also accords with the more general attitude in *Sverris saga*, of the king as the "best man", i.e. the reason for choosing a king from the royal line is that this line is likely to produce the men with the best qualifications, and thus that Sverre's

³¹ Gunnes, *Kongens ære*; S. Bagge, "Oratio contra clerum Norvegiae", *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, edited by Ph. Pulsiano (New York, 1993), p. 455.

³² S. Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, *Medieval Scandinavia. Supplements 3* (Odense, 1987), pp. 113–154.

victories become evidence of his royal descent.³³ However, Sverre also takes over the authoritarian and monarchical ideology, applying it far more consistently than his adversaries, in the form of explicit propaganda in *A Speech against the Bishops*, and in actual practice in his new organization of local government. In this field, we are dealing with an “ideological escalation” rather than with two factions fighting one another with different ideological weapons.³⁴

The third issue may be regarded as a subdivision of the other two, Sverre defending the principle of agnatic succession, Magnus that of legitimate birth and coronation. The former principle corresponded – more or less exactly – to traditional ideas, the latter to the new ideas introduced by the Church and expressed in the documents issued in connection with the alliance between Magnus’s faction and the Church in the 1160s. The opposition between the two principles is brought forward very clearly in *Sverris saga*. However, even this ideological division proved temporary. Magnus’s faction later acclaimed a number of alleged illegitimate sons of Magnus as kings, while Sverres’s faction in 1204 chose as its king a son of Sverre’s daughter. Moreover, Sverre himself was crowned in 1194 and afterwards seems to have used his coronation as an argument for his right to the throne. Both he and his grandson and successor Håkon Håkonsson made great efforts to obtain divine support in this way.³⁵

Despite the number of ideological issues involved during the struggles of the second half of the 12th century, there are no permanent ideological distinctions between the factions, and it is difficult to see that ideology could be an important factor in keeping a faction together and distinguishing the factions from one another. The only really constant line of division between the factions has to do with dynastic allegiance: the Birchlegs favoured the line of Sigurd and Øystein, their adversaries the line of Inge or, mostly, they supported kings who were said to descend from Magnus Erlingsson. Fortunately for both sides, Sigurd and Magnus were both known for their many affairs with women, so it was not difficult to make a convincing claim for some obscure boy being the son of one of them. We thus seem to be left with some kind of personal attachment linking the factions together. What was the exact nature of this factor?

7. Personal relationships: kinship and friendship

Kinship was adduced by the other great Marxist historian, Halvdan Koht, as an additional explanation of the class struggle, instead of the regional one (see above). A more extreme variation of the same theory is to regard the period of the civil wars as essentially a development from a “society of kindred” to a “society of state”, inevitable tensions between kindred groups or family clans leading to civil war, which is finally remedied by the victory of the state and the suppression of the

³³ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 130 and *From Gang Leader*, p. 57.

³⁴ S. Bagge, “Kingship in Medieval Norway. Ideal and Reality”, in H. Duchhardt et al., eds. *European Monarchy. Its Evolution and Practice from Roman Antiquity to Modern Times* (Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 41–52.

³⁵ S. Bagge, “Herrens Salvede. Kroning og salving i Norge 1163–1247”, in M. Blindheim et al. eds. *Kongens makt og ære*, (Oslo, 1985), pp. 29–34 and *The Political Thought*, pp. 43–49.

“society of kindred”.³⁶ Nowadays, “the society of kindred” is clearly out of fashion, and recent studies tend to play down the importance of kinship,³⁷ the argument being that the Norwegian kinship system was bilateral and consequently did not lead to the formation of great clans. Nevertheless, the importance of kinship should not be underestimated. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the importance of kinship in general and its importance for the formation of nationwide political factions. During the civil wars relatives on different sides tried to avoid killing one another and to get one another released when taken captive.³⁸ Close relatives, fathers and brothers, were usually on the same side. But there is no evidence that the factions were based on strong family networks. Although Koht points to several examples of even fairly remote relatives and in-laws belonging to the same faction, he does not take into account that there are several examples of such relatives belonging to different sides.³⁹ Most members of the traditional aristocracy of a small country like Norway were actually related. Further arguments against Koht are the frequent shifts of sides, and the lack of continuity between the factional divisions in the period 1130–1135 and after 1155, and – above all – the division within the royal family itself.

Kinship is thus not sufficient to explain the formation of factions. *Friendship* seems to be at least equally important. Friendship was partly based on “rational choice”, i.e. desire for gain, partly on emotional attachment. The sagas, such as *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*, give a good impression of both. Personal qualities determine the success or failure of a king. In the 1130s, Magnus, the son of the last king, Sigurd, is harsh and arrogant, while his uncle and rival Harald Gille is friendly, generous and easy to lead. Consequently, Harald receives sufficient support to challenge Magnus, despite the fact that Magnus is the legitimate son of a popular and respected king, while Harald is a foreigner – not even able to speak correct Norwegian – the offspring of his father’s casual affair with an Irish woman.⁴⁰ *Heimskringla* gives a similar explanation of why King Øystein’s men left him to join Inge in 1157. Øystein speaks to his men to encourage them to fight for him, but receives little response. Then one of the men says: “Let your gold chests follow you and defend the country for you”.⁴¹ Øystein is mean and keeps his wealth to himself, therefore, he can expect no loyalty from his men. By contrast, *Heimskringla* contains vivid pictures of great heroes, who attracted other men through the force of their personality.

The saga authors attach similar importance to the personal appeal of the leaders even during the period of more stable factions from the 1160s onwards. The

³⁶ A. O. Johnsen, *Fra ættesamfunn til statssamfunn* (Oslo, 1948).

³⁷ P. M. Sørensen, *Saga og samfund* (Copenhagen, 1977); P. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings* (London, 1982); D. Gaunt, *Familjeliv i Norden* (Malmö, 1983); T. Vestergaard, “The System of Kinship in Early Norwegian Law”, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 12 (1988), pp. 160–193; E. Sjöholm, *Sveriges medeltidslagar* (Stockholm, 1988).

³⁸ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 112–117.

³⁹ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 115–116. A recent study of the problem, B. Opheim, *Med stonad frá frendur og vener*, cand. philol. thesis (manuscript, Bergen, 1996), arrives at the same conclusion.

⁴⁰ Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 156–157.

⁴¹ “Fylgi gullkistur þinar þér nú ok veri land þitt”, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, p. 394; Hollander, p. 765.

factions rally around two great leaders, Magnus's father Erling Skakke and Sverre. Erling is no traditional hero but an extremely clever politician and general. He is a strict but just and efficient ruler, and is therefore popular with the people. Snorre gives in *Heimskringla* no detailed description of how he held his faction together, but he implies that trust in Erling's skill and fear of having him as an enemy were important factors. In Snorre's opinion, Erling also contributed to the permanence of other factions than his own: he was a hard man, who did not readily grant pardon. His enemies therefore fought to the bitter end, instead of surrendering.⁴² Although the sagas are vague on this point, Erling probably showed considerable diplomatic skill in uniting the aristocracy in an "in faction" around himself. In Sverre's case, his saga presents a fascinating picture of a great man and leader, which at least gives some clues to his and his men's success. In his numerous battle speeches, as rendered in the saga, Sverre consistently appeals to his men's desire for gain, of material as well as immaterial kind. But the saga also gives an impressive portrait of the man Sverre, which suggests the emotional ties between him and his men: Sverre's extraordinary ability as a leader and his appeal to other men, his sensitivity to his men's reactions, his courage, tactical skill, endurance in difficulties and sense of humour, explained why he was able to gather his faction around him, hold it together and lead it from victory to victory.⁴³

This picture of how Sverre's faction was kept together seems psychologically convincing. The sagas offer a description of a social system in which personal relationships were of crucial importance. People sought a leader whom they believed would further their own interests through generosity and successful leadership, while at the same time a strong emotional attachment developed between such a leader and his men, i.e. at least the "hard core" of his followers. Can we accept this picture? It is definitely worth being considered seriously. From a methodological point of view, to accept this picture implies a different evaluation of the sources than that of the Weibulls, Koht and their successors. In my opinion, we should not confine ourselves to the "hard facts" contained in the sources, but also to some extent accept their interpretations of the events, or rather, their general analysis of human actions and motives. This conclusion is based on the conviction that the saga writers, and particularly the authors of *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga*, were very acute observers of politics and – evidently – that they were much more familiar with the political system of their own days than we are, which again means, contrary to the opinion of the Weibulls, that the "game of politics" is not the same in all epochs.

These considerations are not, however, intended as a general principle of evaluating medieval sources, as these sources contain numerous examples of analyses of motives and political manoeuvres which seem very unlikely to us, and hardly only because of our modern prejudices.⁴⁴ An obvious objection to the descriptions in the sagas is that they mainly focus on individual persons and mainly

⁴² *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, p. 484; cf. Hollander, p. 816; Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 93–94, 197.

⁴³ Bagge, *From Gang Leader*, pp. 11–26.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 225–230 and "Propaganda, Ideology and Political Power in Old Norse and European Historiography: A Comparative View", *L'Historiographie médiévale en Europe. Paris 29 mars–1er avril 1989* (Paris, 1991), pp. 199–208.

on the elite. Clearly they may exaggerate the importance of personal friendship and attachment and underestimate social differences. We can never know for certain how far they are to be trusted. But the picture they give of 12th century Norwegian politics is clearly compatible with the kind of society Norway seems to have been in the period, as may be further illustrated by comparisons with social anthropological studies in Third World countries and the outskirts of Europe or historical studies of other traditional or archaic societies, such as Homeric Greece, and, to take a much closer and fairly well documented example, medieval Iceland.⁴⁵

The conclusion to be drawn from the preceding observations must be that the factional divisions were essentially “arbitrary”, based on “friendship”, personal loyalty and the desire for gain. Even the more permanent factions formed during the second phase of the civil wars may to some extent be explained in this way, i.e. by the ability of Erling Skakke and Sverre as political and military leaders. It is more doubtful, however, whether these factors offer a complete explanation of the duration and bitterness of the struggles. Why was Sverre unable to get a larger following among the aristocracy when he became more established? And why did the leaders of the opposite faction fight him to the bitter end, long after the death of both Erling and Magnus? The saga underlines Sverre’s generosity and clemency towards defeated enemies. But he did not succeed in coming to terms with them. Was he too violent or authoritarian, did he introduce a new style of government too ruthlessly, did he too consistently favour his own friends of low origin against the members of the old aristocracy? Was he a better general than politician, a man who was used to winning by brutal force, rather than by concessions to powerful and influential men, who might win him the support of the people? If so, Sverre’s leniency towards his enemies may have been counterproductive. He neither eliminated them by killing them, nor reconciled them by fully including them in his leading circle, a behaviour that may have left them humiliated but still dangerous. An additional factor, making it difficult for Sverre to come to terms with his enemies, was, as Lunden has pointed out, that they would want to take revenge for the killing of their relatives by Sverre and his men.⁴⁶ An argument for attaching importance to Sverre’s person as a cause of the continued resistance of Magnus’s faction is the fact that his son Håkon succeeded in ending the conflict shortly after Sverre’s death in 1202. Admittedly, the conflict flared up once more after Håkon’s death in 1204, but the worst phase was over, and permanent peace was concluded between the Birchlegs and the *Baglar* in 1217.

⁴⁵ Examples of such studies that I have found useful are A. Knudsen, *En ø i historien. Korsika. Historisk antropologi 1730–1914* (Copenhagen, 1989); M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London, 1962); B. Qviller, “The Dynamics of the Homeric Society”, *Symbolae Osloenses*, 56 (1981), pp. 109–155. For medieval Iceland, see J. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: History and Sagas* (Berkeley etc., 1988); W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Chicago, 1990); and J. V. Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense, 1999).

⁴⁶ Lunden, *Norge under Sverreätten*, pp. 40–41.

8. “Arbitrary” divisions and social change

The king’s personal qualities may thus, at least partly, be an explanation for the continued struggles after Sverre’s victory over Magnus and their sudden end after Sverre’s death. But we also seem to need a “structural” explanation. A “social” explanation in the manner of Holmsen may be adequate in so far as it accounts for the animosity between the old aristocracy and Sverre and his new aristocracy consisting of upstarts, but, as we have seen, there is little evidence that the civil wars developed into a class struggle during Sverre’s reign. A more likely explanation of the bitterness of the struggles is an economic crisis within the central elite by the mid-12th century. After the first unification of Norway in the early 11th century, the victorious king apparently had a large surplus of land and wealth with which to reward his adherents. This surplus was then gradually reduced during the next century, not the least as a consequence of the establishment of the Church, which had become a large landowner by the mid-12th century, apparently largely as a result of royal donations.

An economic crisis of this character would then have been likely to intensify the competition within the elite, a fact that may serve to explain the intensity and bitterness of the struggles.⁴⁷ Such a critical situation might also make the members of the elite seek to exploit the peasants, partly individually, by raising land rents and trying to convert freeholders to tenants, partly collectively, by raising taxes and fines, which may also have intensified the conflicts. Some peasant rebellions, notably against the Birchlegs, suggest conflicts along these lines. In so far as these conflicts affected the struggles between the factions, the pattern seems to have been that the factions established a working relationship with the peasants in some regions, while exploiting those held by the enemy.⁴⁸ At the same time the factions might become involved in local tensions and conflicts, such as the one we can suppose to have taken place between the Archbishop and the peasants of Trøndelag. Thus, various social and ideological conflicts may have intensified the struggles between the factions, without the dividing lines in such conflicts corresponding to those between the factions. Generally speaking, the “fundamental” causes of the civil wars and the long-term social change taking place during the period must be distinguished from the factors determining the formation of the factions.

The outcome of the civil wars was a strong, stable and centralized government, which permanently brought an end to the internal struggles – a clear evidence that the system had changed. In contrast to Holmsen, I believe that this change should not only be explained by long-term social development, but also by the conflicts and the factions themselves. The crisis for the aristocracy was apparently solved, partly by the elimination of a considerable part of the elite during the struggles, partly by extending the financial basis of the state through the introduction of fines and regular taxes – the latter clearly as a result of the wars. The new administrative system with officials called *sýslumenn* seems to have been introduced nationwide because of the need to gain firm control of recently conquered areas. And so, the

⁴⁷ Bagge, “Borgerkrig”, pp. 162–165.

⁴⁸ Bagge, “Borgerkrig”, p. 177.

greater coherence and permanence of the factions, notably the Birchlegs, from Sverre's time onwards, together with the "ideological escalation", contributed to the formation of a new elite, more directly attached to the king's service than the old one, and showing greater loyalty to him.

9. Denmark and Sweden

Since the Weibulls, there has been a strong tendency in Danish historiography for opposing two kinds of monarchy during the internal struggles of the 12th century, one violent and authoritarian with absolutist tendencies and one peaceful and "constitutional", in alliance with the Church and the aristocracy. This opposition is largely based on analysis of historical and hagiographic texts. In a recent book, Carsten Breengaard rejects this idea of opposing kinds of monarchy and offers a reinterpretation of the role of the Church, i.e. as an organization in need of royal protection rather than an opponent of strong monarchy.⁴⁹ Breengaard bases his revision on a detailed criticism of the traditional interpretation of the texts, concluding that there is no consistent opposition between two ideals of monarchy. This conclusion implies that the struggles for the throne must have taken place between factions based on family and personal loyalty rather than on ideology and different social composition or institutional connections, a conclusion partly drawn by Breengaard himself. However, Breengaard gives no independent analysis of faction formation, and he gives a fairly simple picture of Denmark as a "society of kindred". We should therefore not draw too definite conclusions about the Danish struggles of the 12th century from Breengaard's study, apart from noting that there at least seems to be some similarity to the situation in Norway at the same time.⁵⁰

The second period of strife in Denmark, between 1241 and 1340, has largely been regarded as a conflict between monarchy and aristocracy by Axel E. Christensen (1945), while a more recent analysis by Kai Hørby emphasizes dynastic strife.⁵¹ It appears quite clearly from Hørby's account that the conflicts between the different lines of the royal family and other personal conflicts must have been very important for faction formation. Nevertheless, a "constitutional" programme, in favour of the aristocracy and intended to limit the royal power, was directly expressed in official documents during these struggles. Further, Denmark in the late 13th and early 14th centuries differed markedly from Norway a hundred years earlier. A sharper line of division was drawn between the aristocracy and the ordinary people. The aristocracy was now in reality a distinct class or estate, having

⁴⁹ C. Breengaard, *Muren om Israels hus. Regnum og sacerdotium i Danmark 1050–1170* (Copenhagen, 1982).

⁵⁰ See the reviews by I. Skovgaard-Petersen, *Historisk tidsskrift* (Danish), 84 (1984), pp. 95–108, H. Paludan, *Historie*, Ny række 15.3 (1984), pp. 510–13, and my remarks in S. Bagge, "Kristendom og kongemakt", *Festskrift til Historisk institutts 40-års jubileum*, in G. A. Ermland et al, eds. etc. (Bergen, 1997), pp. 41–86. For a recent attempt to understand 12th century Danish society as dominated by aristocratic clans and factions, see L. Hermanson, "Släkt, vänner och makt i det tidiga 1100-talets Danmark", *Historisk tidsskrift* (Danish), 98 (1998), pp. 241–275.

⁵¹ A. E. Christensen, *Kongemagt og aristokrati* (Copenhagen, 1968), pp. 71–101; K. Hørby, *Status regni Dacie* (Copenhagen, 1977). See also H. Paludan, "Tiden 1241–1340", in A. E. Christensen et al, eds. *Danmarks historie* (Copenhagen, 1977), pp. 443–476, who places the main emphasis on the opposition between monarchy and aristocracy.

some common interests, for instance tax exemption, and limitation of the king's expenses – if these were too high, the aristocracy in one way or other would have to pay the deficit. The members of the aristocracy were also appointed to posts in the king's local administration, i.e. as commanders of castles and their surrounding regions, a new phenomenon from the second half of the 13th century. Finally, political institutions existed through which the aristocracy might limit an expanding monarchy, first the assembly (*Danehoff*), then the council (*Rigsråd*).

In Swedish historiography, Erik Lönnroth has attempted to find an opposition between an aristocratic and a “popular” party in Sweden in the first half of the 13th century.⁵² After the victory of the former, a split occurred between the monarchy and the Church on the one hand and the lay aristocracy on the other, which was reflected by the struggling parties of the early 14th century. Furthermore, Lönnroth and his successors have analysed the conflicts in connection with the unions between the three Scandinavian kingdoms in the period 1397–1523 in terms of two conflicting political programmes, a strong monarchy (*dominium regale*) and constitutionalism (*regimen politicum*).⁵³

The most profound and detailed examination of one particular struggle is Jerker Rosén's study of the conflict between King Birger of Sweden and his two brothers in the beginning of the 14th century.⁵⁴ Rosén's book represents the Weibull school at its very best. He gives a careful analysis of the scarce and difficult source material, making a great effort in tracing exact dates, circumstances and the sequence of events and, above all, he always tries to give a plausible and consistent account of the extremely complicated events, wars, negotiations, treaties and shifting alliances. His main focus is on the three protagonists, King Birger and his two brothers, Erik and Valdemar, whose actions he explains as motivated by self-interest, according to the “realistic” assumptions of the Weibull school. But Rosén also gives a careful analysis of their followers. He pays some attention to kinship and marriage but mainly in order to identify the loyalty of individuals. The main constellation during the struggles is the king, the Church and the royal servants, including foreigners, versus the dukes and the lay aristocracy. These parties are shown to have been fairly constant. Nevertheless, a general rebellion against King Birger broke out in 1318, after he had taken his brothers captive by treason in 1317 and let them starve to death. In a short time, the opposition took over the power and expelled the king. Rosén offers no very explicit discussion of these events. He does not consider the possibility that the rebellion was a reaction against Birger's horrible crime, nor does he discuss contemporary moral reactions to this act, although such reactions are actually to be found in the pro-dukes chronicle of Duke Erik. An alternative explanation is that Birger's position was weakened when his ally King Erik of Denmark withdrew his troops, so that Birger's adherents despaired about his chances, rushing to join the opposition when there was still time.

Whatever the explanation of the events of 1318, they seem to indicate that Rosén has exaggerated the coherence of the factions and the social difference between

⁵² E. Lönnroth, “De äkta folkungernas program”, in *Från svensk medeltid* (Stockholm, 1959), pp. 13–29.

⁵³ E. Lönnroth, *Sverige och Kalmarunionen 1397–1457* (Göteborg, 1934/1968).

⁵⁴ J. Rosén, *Striden mellan Birger Magnusson och hans bröder* (Lund, 1939).

them. If there was a widespread aristocratic defection from King Birger, then the great majority of the aristocracy could not have been against him during the previous period. And if the dukes had the general support of the aristocracy throughout the struggles, how could the king possibly have defended his position against them during most of the period 1302–1318? The overall conclusion to be drawn from Rosén's own account of the meagre information in the sources must be that the aristocracy was divided during most of the period and that the general support of the dukes' faction after their death was an extraordinary phenomenon. Furthermore, Rosén clearly implies that the Church was also divided, the Archbishop favouring the king, while some other bishops supported the dukes. It thus seems that here we are largely dealing with personal ties, or with "in" and "out" factions similar to the ones described in European historiography dealing with the same period.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Rosén is no doubt correct that the end result of the struggle was the victory of the aristocracy, which found expression in the "constitutions" of 1319–1320, in which Sweden was declared to be an elective and not a hereditary monarchy. There is thus clear evidence of an aristocratic political programme, opposed to the monarchy, in Sweden as well as in Denmark. In future research, the idea of constitutional conflicts should not be rejected in favour of opposing factions based on personal adherence. We should rather try to distinguish between the two lines of division in each particular case. How far can actual, day-to-day struggles be explained by different political programmes? And where should the lines be drawn between the family and personal loyalty of individual members of the aristocracy, their allegiance to the king, and their consciousness of being members of an estate or a political elite?⁵⁶

10. Conclusions

The present article is first and foremost an analysis of the Norwegian "civil wars", with some suggestions, based on secondary literature, on the other two Scandinavian kingdoms. If we are to draw general conclusions from these observations, it seems that the factions in the earlier struggles, before the mid-13th century, were largely formed by personal ties, i.e. that the lines of division between the factions were "arbitrary" in relationship to social stratification. This conclusion is primarily based on the narrative sources, not only their basic facts but also their interpretation of them, which, it is argued, is likely to represent considerable insight in contemporary politics, even if it can be contested in particular cases.

The internal struggles contributed to the formation of a more centralized state, which to some extent changed the game of politics, creating a new basis for constitutional struggles. Factions, dynasties, personal attraction and patron–client

⁵⁵ This at least seems to be the understanding of the conflict in the contemporary or slightly later *Erikskrönikan*; see T. E. Fagerland, *Arme riddere og halte helter – Erikskrönikans politiske mentalitet*, cand. philol. thesis (Bergen, 1995).

⁵⁶ For some observations on these problems, see O. J. Benedictow, "Norge", in *Den nordiske adel in senmiddelalderen. Rapport til Det nordiske historikermøde i København 1971 9–12 august* (Copenhagen, 1971), pp. 25–26, 29–33 and *Fra rike til provins, Norges historie*, edited by K. Mykland, vol. 5 (Oslo, 1977); S. Bagge & K. Mykland, *Norge i dansketiden* (Oslo, 1987), pp. 59–60, 69–71.

relationships were still important. However, the emergence of an aristocracy with some common, organized interests led to the formulation of a constitutional programme, although strong individual interests could still bind individual members of the aristocracy to the king. Thus the conflicts between “in” and “out” factions, as well as between different constitutional programmes must be taken into account, and the exact relationship between these two lines of conflict should be the subject of further research.