

Old Norse Theories of Society

From *Rígsþula* to *Konungs skuggsiá*

Sverre Bagge

The division of society in “the three orders”, *bellatores*, *oratores*, and *laboratores*, has been the subject of a number of studies since the 1970s, the most well-known of which is Georges Duby’s.¹ The apparently brief and conventional phrases about these categories, scattered around in various medieval sources, have been shown to give insight into explicit ideology as well as implicit mentality or what people in the period took for granted, or, in Duby’s case, the transition from the former to the latter: The tripartite division was originally used as a defence of the old, Carolingian social order against the reformed monasticism on the one hand and the unruly feudal aristocracy on the other. From the late twelfth century onwards, it became the ideological foundation of a society of estates and eventually the self-evident understanding of the social order during the *ancien régime*. As such, the tripartite division was finally abolished by the French Revolution, but not until it had made a last, dramatic and memorable appearance in the National Assembly of 1789.

According to Georges Dumézil, not only the division in three, but also the categories priests/religion, warrior, and farmer/labourer/workman are of common Indo-European origin.² Nevertheless, it does not seem to have been widespread among the Greeks, the Romans or the Germanic peoples, none of whom had a separate priestly class. It does, however, occur in Plato’s *Republic* in a somewhat different form, comprising the lords, the helpers, and the workers³. The earliest Christian version of the division is that of Augustine who divides the Church into three categories: The leaders (*praelati*), the chaste (*continentes*), and the married (*coniugati*), a division that became common during the following

¹ Duby, Georges: *Les trois ordres ou l’imaginaire du féodalisme*, Paris 1978.

² Dumézil, Georges: *The Rígsþula and Indo-European Social Structure*, in: Georges Dumézil: *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, Berkeley 1973, 118-125.

³ Oexle, Otto Gerhard: *Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit im frühen und hohen Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Wissens*, in: Frantisek Graus (ed.): *Mentalitäten im Mittelalter. Methodische und inhaltliche Probleme*, Sigmaringen 1987, 65-117: 77f.

centuries.⁴ The “classical” division into *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores* occurs for the first time in King Alfred’s Anglo-Saxon adaptation of Boece.⁵ There are some other Anglo-Saxon examples from the following period. Around 1030, the tripartite division turns up in Northern France in the two texts that form the theme of the first part of Duby’s book, the *Carmen* by Adalbero, Bishop of Laon (c. 1025), and a sermon by Gerard, Bishop of Cambrai (1036). According to Duby, the division disappeared for nearly 150 years, until it reemerged at the Angevin court in Northern France in the second half of the twelfth century.⁶ It did, however, spread to other areas of Europe in the meantime, and turns up at the curia by the mid-eleventh century (Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida, from Lorraine) and is used by several ecclesiastical authors in the following period. It does not occur in Germany until around 1200.⁷

In a comment on Duby’s book, Jacques Le Goff points to the fourfold division in *Kgs* as an early example of a change from threefold to fourfold.⁸ In the following, I shall try to examine more closely the view of society underlying this way of classifying its members and compare it, not only to Duby’s “feudal” division but also to the tripartite division found in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*. Let me begin with the latter.

Konungs skuggsiá and Rígsþula

Rígsþula tells the story of the god Rígr⁹ who, on his wanderings on earth, visits three houses. He sleeps with the wife in each of them, and in due

⁴ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 105; Oexle, Otto Gerhard: Die funktionale Dreiteilung der ‘Gesellschaft’ bei Adalbero von Laon. Deutungsschemata der sozialen Wirklichkeit im früheren Mittelalter, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 12 (1978), 1-54: 13.

⁵ Oexle, *Dreiteilung*, 33.

⁶ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 327ff.

⁷ Oexle, *Dreiteilung*, 50.

⁸ Le Goff, Jacques: Les trois fonctions indo-européennes, l’histoire et l’Europe féodale, in: *Annales ESC* 34 (1979), 1187-1215: 1210.

⁹ In the prose introduction to the poem, Rígr is identified with Heimdall, an identification accepted by Turville-Petre, Gabriel: *Myth and Religion of the North*. London 1964: 150f., while von Klaus von See: [Nachtrag zu] *Das Alter der Rígsþula*, in: id.: *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung. Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, Heidelberg 1981, 514-516: 84, 514 maintains that Rígr must be Óðinn. I have no definite opinion on the matter which is not of great importance in the present context.

time she bears a child, named respectively Þræll, Karl, and Jarl, who become the origin of the corresponding social classes: the slave (*þræll*), the commoner (*karl*)¹⁰, and the earl (*jarl*). Rígr really considers only the last of these his son; he returns to him, gives him his name, teaches him runes, and gives him lordship. He also intervenes in the next generation, electing one of *Jarl's* sons, Konr ungr, to even higher rank than his father. The author thus derives the etymology of the word *konungr* from this proper name. The poem ends by Konr ungr being urged by a crow to cross the sea in order to fight Danr and Danpr, most probably the Danes. It has been a widespread opinion that the end of the poem has originally contained an account of this expedition which has now been lost¹¹, but the present end, with Konr ungr's "vocation", also makes sense.

We here have to do with an etiological myth which, like many of its kind, does not really explain anything. The poet describes in vivid detail the three couples and how they entertained Rígr, and, with some exception for Jarl and his descendants, he gives no hint that the fact that Rígr became the father of the family's child made any difference. The slave and his woman (Ái and Edda = great grandfather and -mother) are old, ugly, poor, and dirty, and their work consists of the basest tasks on a farm. The commoner and his wife (Afi and Amma = grandfather and -mother) are middle-aged, respectable, clean, good-looking, and well-off. They have to work for life, but they confine themselves to respectable tasks. The earl and his wife (Faðir and Móðir = father and mother) are young, noble, beautiful, live in luxury and devote themselves to higher matters than working for life: hunting, warfare, and games. Rather than explaining the origin of the social classes, the poet apparently wants to point out the differences between them as clearly as possible.

Rígsþula's tripartite division differs from Dumézil's Indo-European as well as from Duby's feudal one. There is no priestly or religious class¹², while on the other hand the lower class of commoners or labourers are divided into two, making the *karl* middle class.¹³ It differs in a similar

¹⁰ Rígr's and Amma's son is called Karl, and the "karla ættir" are descended from them. *Karl* means man opposite woman but also the ordinary, free man without aristocratic rank. The term *bondi* which has a similar meaning, is alluded to in the names of some of Karl's descendants.

¹¹ *Rígsþula*, in: *De gamle Eddadigte*, ed. and comm. Finnur Jónsson, København 1932, 161; *Rígsþula*, in: *Eddadikt*, transl. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, Oslo 1985, 327.

¹² I use "class" here and in the following in the completely neutral sense of "social category", while "estate" is used more specifically about the divisions expressed in the feudal model.

¹³ Dumézil has tried to show that the classic division is after all present in

way from the division in *Kgs*. Before discussing the date of *Rígsþula*, let me compare it to this latter work.

The prologue to *Kgs* lists four classes: The merchants, the king and the secular aristocracy, the clergy¹⁴, and the peasants, whereas the extant work has three: the merchants, the *hirðmenn*, and the king. So what is really the author's view of society? The problem is apparently easily solved if we follow Holm-Olsen's opinion, that the prologue is a later addition.¹⁵ This, however, is not a solution, as an author writing in the mid-thirteenth century could hardly leave out the clergy and the peasants. Actually, they are both mentioned in the work, although they have not been assigned separate parts.¹⁶ According to the prologue, *Kgs* is a work about *siðir* and *íðróttir*, i.e. the skills of a moral and practical kind common to all mankind as well as their specific adaptation to various layers or estates of society. The author depicts the sharp contrast between good and bad *siðir*, letting the Son ask the Father to show him "the right mainroad" to a good life, so that he can avoid the wrong tracks (*villustigar*) leading away from it.¹⁷ In this way, the work becomes a

Rígsþula: As a magician, the king is closer to the priestly than the warrior class. Further, Dumézil finds an allusion to the colours associated with the classical division in the description of the three family members' appearances: the slave is black, the commoner red, and the earl white (Dumézil, *Rígsþula*). Dumézil's classification of the king does not seem convincing; he is actually both a warrior and a magician, and the poet hardly thinks in separate classes regarding this level of society. The allusion to the colours is suggestive, but two of them, the black slave and the white earl, are also easily explained from the aesthetic ideals present in the poem. Ursula Dronke, however, accepts Dumézil's arguments (*The Poetic Edda*. Vol. II. Mythological Poems. Edited with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary, Oxford 1997, 185-190).

¹⁴ *Konungs skuggsiá* (= *Kgs*), ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, Oslo 1945, 26-32. The older of the two manuscripts containing the prologue, dating from the fifteenth century and used in Holm-Olsen's edition, has "lendra manna", while the younger, from the sixteenth century, has "lærðra". The latter is clearly correct, as the *lendir menn* must be included in the secular aristocracy mentioned earlier.

¹⁵ Holm-Olsen, Ludvig: The Prologue to *The King's Mirror*: Did the author of the work write it?, in: *Speculum Norroenum*. Norse studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre, Odense 1981, 223-41.

¹⁶ This is also Holm-Olsen's opinion. He thus thinks that the author did treat the categories mentioned in the prologue, but not in the order indicated there, and, in the case of the clergy and the peasants, less detailed than one might expect from the prologue.

¹⁷ "At syna mier til vidsia ... villu stjiga ... at syna mier gengiligu gagnstigu þeim er aptur vilia huerfa af villu gotum til þjóduega" (*Kgs* 1²³⁻²⁶).

mirror in which all men, from king to commoner, can examine their own morality and manners.¹⁸

Holm-Olsen's main argument derived from the content of the prologue is based on a different interpretation of the work, that it is a kind of encyclopedia. In accordance with this understanding, he regards the moral interpretation of the mirror metaphor as a misunderstanding: Actually, *Kgs* is a *speculum* in the same sense as the contemporary *specula* of Vincent of Beauvais, condensing a large amount of knowledge in one work.¹⁹ Further, he finds the contrast between the *villustigar* and the *þioðgata* difficult to reconcile with the content of the work as a whole.²⁰ This allegory is rare, only found elsewhere in *The Speech against the Bishops*, which has clearly influenced *Kgs*.²¹ It does, however, also occur in the work itself, when the Father explains that addressing God in the plural might lead ignorant people away from the right *þioðgata* and on to *villustigar* (*Kgs* 49⁷⁻⁸). This would actually seem an argument in favour of the authenticity of the prologue. To Holm-Olsen, however, it is an argument against, partly because *villustigar* refers to moral error in the prologue but to doctrinal error in the work itself, and partly because the work contains no detailed description of people wandering astray on *villustigar*. As for the first argument, there was no sharp distinction between moral and doctrinal error in the Middle Ages. As for the second, the point in writing a prologue is surely not to anticipate everything that is said later. In the prologue, the son uses the allegory of the *villustigar* to give the background for his conversation with his father, and there is no need for him to repeat its details later on. His moral sincerity and the contrast between good and evil is, however, strongly present throughout the work.

Further, Holm-Olsen points to the vocabulary.²² Two words might suggest a late date, *studera* and *skrifa*. Loan-words ending in *-era* did not become current until the end of the thirteenth century; if the prologue is genuine, it contains the earliest example of the word *studera* in Norway.

¹⁸ “at huer er foruitnast vill vm goda sidu ... þá má hann þar finna og sia j bokinne. suo sem margar likneskiur edur allskyns smidir sem j skjirri Skuggsion. ... Suo a kongur huer sem eirn at siá j þessa skuggsion og lijta fyst a skiálfs sijns sidu. og þar næst allra annara þeira sem vndir honom eru” (*Kgs* 2¹³⁻²¹).

¹⁹ Holm-Olsen, Prologue, 224-226, 228f.

²⁰ Op.cit. 232-234.

²¹ Bagge, Sverre: *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, Odense 1987 (*Medieval Scandinavia. Supplements 3*), 143-153.

²² Holm-Olsen, Prologue, 1981, 231f.

Skriða occurs only in the prologue, while the rest of the work has *rita*. The word itself is hardly very late; it occurs in the older part of *Stjórn* which is probably not much later than *Kgs*.²³ Thus, the two words are not very strong evidence against the prologue being authentic. Moreover, they may have been introduced by a later scribe; after all, the oldest manuscript dates from the fifteenth century. The rest seem to be words for objects that are unusual in the literature – most of them are connected with the allegory of the *villustigar* – and give no impression of being particularly late. They would seem to be as difficult or as easy to explain in a false as in a genuine prologue. By contrast, Holm-Olsen's argument from textual transmission is stronger. He shows that the earliest manuscripts cannot have contained the prologue which is only to be found in some Icelandic manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁴ However, he does not attach decisive importance to this argument.

The main objection to Holm-Olsen's arguments is that he makes no attempt to support them by a proper examination of the content of the work. Such an examination shows that the prologue gives an accurate presentation of what the work is about. The moral aspect, general as well as estate specific, is obvious throughout the two last parts, dealing with the *hirðmaðr* and the king, and the difference between good and evil is brought forward drastically in the allegory of death; in the examples of the various sinners subjected to God's judgement, from which the king should learn; and, not least, in the picture of the good and the bad king standing before God's throne of judgement at the end of the work. The only apparent exception is the first part, about the merchant, which mainly deals with geography and nature. Even, here, however, the author constantly draws moral lessons, and the essence of this part, about God's government of nature and its harmonious arrangement, is explicitly presented as a lesson for the king in Wisdom's Speech in the third part. Whoever wrote the prologue shows a deep understanding of the work as a whole and can therefore hardly have committed such an elementary blunder as to say that it ends with a discussion about the peasants.²⁵ The only reasonable explanation of this statement is that the author himself

²³ Hofmann, Dietrich: Die Königsspiegel-Zitate in der *Stjórn*, in: skandinavistik 3 (1973), 1-40: 14ff.; Bagge, Sverre: Forholdet mellom *Kongespeilet* og *Stjórn*, in: ANF 89 (1974), 163-202: 196.

²⁴ Holm-Olsen, Prologue, 226f.

²⁵ For a further discussion of the unity of the work and its fundamentally moral approach, see Bagge, Political Thought, 86-97 and *passim*; Bagge, Sverre: Nature and Society in The King's Mirror, in: ANF 109 (1994), 5-42: 25-29 and Hamer, Andrew: Searching for wisdom: *The King's Mirror*, see below 47-62.

wrote it, intending to complete his work with a part on the clergy and one on the peasants.²⁶ Actually, the end of the extant work seems to prepare for a part on the clergy, as it deals with the relationship between the king and the Church.

The Model of Society in *Konungs skuggsiá*

Thus, we have to take seriously the description of society in the prologue, which, as we see, differs from both that of *Rígsþula* and the feudal one, not only in the numbers but also in the classes that are included. In contrast to *Rígsþula*, the slaves have disappeared and the peasants have become the lowest class, which corresponds to what seems to have been the actual social change from the Viking age until the thirteenth century. Further, the clergy has been added, as corresponds to the transition from the pagan to the Christian period, particularly the period after around 1150, when the clergy really became an estate, with great wealth and political influence. In this respect, *Kgs* represents a change in the direction of Duby's feudal model.

On the other hand, the tripartite division is replaced by a quadripartite one, of which, as mentioned above, *Kgs* seems to be an early example. In the following period, there were tendencies in the same direction in other countries as well, as a consequence of the increasing importance of merchants and trade. Nevertheless, the tripartite division continued to be the more widespread and had a revival in the Early Modern Period, when, in contrast to the Middle Ages, it also became a common object of art.²⁷

So why do we find a quadripartite division in *Kgs* and why has the merchant received such a prominent place? The reason can hardly be that merchants were more prominent in Norway than in other countries at the time. Admittedly, trade was important, particularly because grain had to be imported already by the time of *Kgs*, but there is little to suggest that Norway had a strong and wealthy class of professional merchants at the time. A more likely hypothesis is that the commoners held a somewhat higher status in Norway than in the rest of Europe; i.e. they were important enough to form separate categories, while according to the current tripartite division, they were simply lumped together as workers. An additional reason may be that the merchant forms a pretext for the

²⁶ Because of the large number of extant manuscripts, I agree with Holm-Olsen, Prologue: 236, that it is less likely that the end of the work has been lost.

²⁷ Le Goff, *Les trois fonctions*, 1201-1205, 1210; Oexle, *Dreiteilung*, 107.

author's discussion of natural science and the geography of the Nordic countries which actually fills most of the first part of the work. However, the most important reason lies on a different level, in the way the author distinguishes the merchant from the aristocrat: The merchant of *Kgs* is an aristocratic *farmaðr*, a young man of good family who wants to see the world by travelling around as a merchant, probably partly selling surplus from his farms. Socially and economically, he does not differ greatly from the aristocrat. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the two classes which becomes clearer in the next part of the work, dealing with the aristocracy.

Here the author differs from *Rígsþula* and to some extent also from the feudal model. Jarl in *Rígsþula* is an aristocrat by birth, physical and mental qualities, wealth, and way of life. The feudal aristocrat is most often a *bellator*, whose task is to defend the other estates, or he may be a knight (*chevalier*), distinguishing himself through a courtly lifestyle. But "civilian" tasks are also attributed to him, such as the administration of justice.²⁸ Generally, however, he was defined by a function which was actually also a way of life, as long training as well as considerable wealth was necessary to become a knight in feudal Europe.

Konungs skuggsiá's aristocrat also differs from the rest of the population by function and way of life. He is wealthy, or at least becomes wealthy, by serving the king. He should know how to fight – *Kgs* contains a section dealing with warfare and the use of arms – but his function can hardly be defined as that of fighting. He also performs several other tasks, such as the administration of justice and other matters in the king's service. What really defines an aristocrat in *Kgs*, is serving the king, formally through membership in the king's body of retainers, the *hirð*. This doctrine is emphasised in several passages in Part 2 of the work, in which the author points out that the *hirðmaðr* owes his position entirely to the king and should therefore always be loyal and obedient to him. One passage in particular is very explicit regarding the definition of aristocratic status. When rejecting the Son's suggestion that men of wealth and distinction in their local communities can hardly find it worthwhile to enter the lower levels of the king's service, the Father points out that all men are bound to serve the king. Entering the king's direct service is always an advantage and an honour, in contrast to remaining at home as a *kotkarl* (a cottar). Thus, a man who does not belong to the king's *hirð*, is not only a "commoner"; he is no different from the lowest and poorest peasant.²⁹

²⁸ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 329-332.

²⁹ "Nu mæð þvi at aller menn ero skyllder mæð konong til þionosto þeir sæm iero

This throws further light on the distinction between the *hirðmaðr* and the merchant and serves to bring home the author's main lesson even more explicitly. Despite the small difference in wealth or standard of living between the merchant and the *hirðmaðr*, the latter belongs to the aristocracy while the former does not, because of their different relationship to the king. Consequently, the king is the centre and the key to the whole system. Here *Kgs* differs radically from *Rígsþula* where the king is a kind of secondary extension of the class of earls; in other words, while in *Kgs* the king defines the aristocracy, in the *Rígsþula* the aristocracy defines the king. In the feudal model, at least as developed in the late twelfth century Angevin Empire, the king also has a crucial function.³⁰ He is usually outside the tripartite division, as the one who is responsible for upholding the whole system, by seeing that everyone keeps to his allotted place. In this area of Europe at least, the emergence of the tripartite model was not only the result of a clearer division of society into estates or a clearer notion of such a division, but also of the rise of the monarchy to a more prominent position. Thus, *Kgs* conforms to the feudal model, in contrast to *Rígsþula*. It not only conforms, however; it carries the feudal model one step further, in virtually making the king the origin and creator of the aristocracy: the *hirðmaðr* is defined, neither by birth nor by wealth or lifestyle, but solely by serving the king and being appointed by him.

On this point, there is a further difference between the prologue and the extant work. In the prologue, the Son says that he asked his father about "royal manners or those of other *hofðingiar* who follow and serve them".³¹ The work itself, however, is divided into one part dealing with the *hirðmaðr*³², followed by another about the king, and with a clear break

riki hans. hvi man þa æigi hværium vitrum manne þyckia mykell mun unnder því væra athann se ífullu konongs trausti oc hans vinatto. ... Hælldr en heita cotkarl oc være æ unnder annars stiom" (*Kgs* 42⁴¹-43⁵).

³⁰ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 343ff.

³¹ "kongliga sidu edur annara hofðingia þeira er þeim fylgia og þiona" (*Kgs* 1²⁹⁻³⁰).

³² Here again, the correspondence is not quite exact. In the thirteenth century, *hofðingi* normally means a man of the highest rank, king, duke, or earl, i.e. a prince with largely independent power (Helle, *Knut: Konge og gode menn i norsk riksstyring ca. 1150-1319*, Bergen 1972, 107-09). The second part, however, actually deals with all members of the king's *hirð*, the *hirðmenn*, the *gestir*, and the *huskarlar*, none of whom, not even the *hirðmenn*, can be called *hofðingiar*. As for the statement in the prologue, it would also seem strange to confine the account of the secular aristocracy to "kings and princes", and even to define the latter as those who serve the former. It is therefore a likely

between them.³³ Is this a condensed way of expressing that aristocratic status is derived from that of the king? Or has the author really planned a different arrangement and changed it while writing? Or, as may possibly be the most likely explanation of the problems posed by the prologue, has it been added in connection with a revision of the work, of which there is also other evidence?³⁴ Whatever the explanation, there is no contradiction between the prologue and the work itself regarding the central doctrine, that aristocratic status is derived from the king's service and bestowed by him.

The main difference in this respect between the prologue and the work itself lies in the attitude to the next category listed in the prologue, the clergy. According to the definition in the prologue, the king belongs to the secular part of society. By making the king a separate category, however, the work itself places him between the secular and clerical aristocracy. This largely conforms to what emerges from the discussion about the relationship between the king and the bishop. The king is not solely a secular official, he is the Lord's Anointed, imitating God, and he is the leader of God's people in the same way as Melchisedech, Moses, and David in the Old Testament.³⁵ A composition in five parts, with the king in the middle, would therefore make sense. Such a composition would make the king the centre and peak of the whole work: an ascending order: merchant – *hirðmaðr* – king, and a descending one: king – cleric – peasant. Leaving out the king, this arrangement would give two levels, aristocracy and people; with each level divided into two categories according to function: secular – spiritual and urban – rural. The inconsistency regarding the king and the clergy between the prologue and

hypothesis that an “ok” has been lost in the prologue's text, so that the author actually defines this category as “kings and princes and those who serve them”. This statement also corresponds to the introduction to the third part, see below n. 33.

³³ Admittedly, the main manuscript does not mark the division between parts two and three as clearly as that between the two earlier ones which are divided by an open space and a capital letter (see Finnur Jónsson's comment in *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1920, 94 compared to p. 183). However, the way the discussion of the king is introduced, suggests that it is intended as a separate part: The Son thanks the Father for patiently answering his questions, adding that he has even more to ask and that he wants to move to the very top level of society, to the king and “aðrum storfhofðingiom” (*Kgs* 72²³-73²⁰).

³⁴ Hoffmann, 24-37 points to evidence that the *Kgs* must have existed in different versions from very early on which may indicate that the author revised it.

³⁵ Bagge, *Political Thought*, 22-26, 43-49, 113-130.

the work itself may, however, correspond to a certain vacillation in the discussion about the king and the bishop between royal supremacy and equality between God's two servants. The clergy are not defined by their service to the king in the same way as the secular aristocracy, and the king himself is closer to the latter than to the former.

The picture of society emerging from the previous discussion, is amply confirmed by the content of the work as a whole. The king's central position in the whole system, as God's representative on earth, holding his power from God, is repeatedly pointed out throughout the work, as is also the people's as well as the aristocracy's duty of loyalty and obedience. The relatively brief discussion of the relationship between the king and the bishop shows that this doctrine also applies to the clergy, while a number of Old Testament episodes, mainly intended as examples for the king of just judgements, serve as additional confirmation of how the clergy should behave towards the king.³⁶ Although the peasants are not often mentioned, the author's attitude to them is clear: they should obey their superiors and be governed by them. If they are given independent power, the consequences will be disastrous, as is demonstrated in the most famous passage of the work, the allegory of death.³⁷

The distance between top and bottom of the social hierarchy is thus at least as great as in *Rigspula*, if not greater. There is an important difference, however. The hierarchy of *Kgs* is a functional hierarchy, based on a kind of organic idea of society, according to which all its members should work together for the common good. Despite being the lowest member of society, the peasant is not despised or ridiculed as the slave in *Rigspula*; he has his duties to perform in the service of the whole and deserves some respect as long as he knows his place. On this point *Konungs skuggsiá*'s doctrine corresponds to the feudal one; the three orders are also supposed to cooperate for the common good. The same idea is even more strongly emphasised in the use of the human body as a model of society which became popular particularly from around 1150 – a Norwegian example is to be found in *The Speech against the Bishops* from around 1200.

Here a number of different offices and ranks, secular and clerical, are mentioned, but they can be divided into a few main categories. The king is compared to the heart and the breast which should look to the welfare of the whole body; think and decide on its behalf; and courageously

³⁶ Op. cit. 113-130.

³⁷ Op. cit. 180.

protect it.³⁸ The author here depends on an anatomical theory similar to that of Aristotle who believed that the capacity to think was located in the heart. He thus attributes the same key position to the king as *Kgs*, and a more central one than in most other examples of the allegory.³⁹ Further, in *The Speech* the king is mentioned between the clerical aristocracy, which comes first, and the secular which follows. The skeleton and muscles are the secular aristocracy; the sense organs the secular clergy; the organs of digestion monks and nuns; and the feet the common people: “merchants and peasants”; the latter conforming to what seems to be the normal position attributed to the people in other examples of the allegory. This amounts to five categories if we include the king. The anonymous author may here have combined two versions of the tripartite division: the older, ecclesiastical one, dividing the Christian people into (1) monks and nuns, (2) secular clergy, and (3) the laity, and the feudal one of warriors, clergy, and people. He differs from *Kgs* in dividing the clergy into two categories, while having only one for the common people, but the general structure, the idea of a common function for society as a whole, and particularly the king’s strong position, are the same.

Kgs does not use the human body as a model but the universe.⁴⁰ The discussion about nature in the first part of the work, dealing with the merchant, is intended to show the order and hierarchy of the universe and the strong ruler’s – i.e. the sun’s – key position in it. In *Wisdom’s Speech* in the third part, the author explicitly makes this order a model for the king to follow in governing his kingdom. The parallel is also clearly brought out through the similarity between the allegory of the sun and the winds in part one and the allegory of dearth in part two. When the sun has

³⁸ “Hiarta ok briost þessa likams skilldu vera konungar þeir er bera skilldu ahyggiu ok ætlan ok radagærd dirfd ok vorn firir allum adrum limum” (En tale mot biskopene, ed. Anne Holtsmark, Oslo 1931 (Skrifter utgitt av det norske vitenskapsakademi i Oslo II. Hist.filos. Klasse 1930 No. 9), 1¹⁹⁻²²).

³⁹ One parallel is particularly close, so close that there must be some direct or indirect connection, i.e. a sermon, probably German, from the late twelfth century. Characteristically, the main difference between this sermon and *The Speech* lies exactly in the king’s role. The sermon does not mention him and identifies the breast with the knights (Gunnes, Erik: Kongens ære. Kongemakt og kirke i “En tale mot biskopene”. Oslo 1971, 367-371). For a comparison between *The Speech* and various European examples of the allegory, see also Gunnes, 73-83 and for the allegory in general, see Struve, Tilman: Die Entwicklung der organologischen Staatsauffassung im Mittelalter. Stuttgart 1978. Struve finds a more explicitly organological thinking from the mid-twelfth century, starting with John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* (ibid. 123-148).

⁴⁰ Bagge, Nature, 7-25.

its full force in summer, there is peace and harmony between the winds (“the chieftains”) and accordingly in nature as a whole. When the sun loses its force and even disappears in winter, peace is broken between the winds; gales make the sea impossible to cross; and nature suffers from frost and bad weather. In a similar way, a divided kingdom destroys peace and harmony in society, causes injustice and disorder to prevail, and eventually leads to full civil war.

The organological understanding of society, the parallel between nature and society by understanding both as a system, and the tripartite or quadripartite division all indicate a similar social and intellectual development in feudal Europe from the eleventh century onwards. Socially, the distinction between function and lifestyle, knight and cleric on the one hand, peasant or possibly merchant on the other, replaced an older distinction between free and slave.⁴¹ The clergy had been an estate since late antiquity, while the secular aristocracy became so from the eleventh century onwards. Warfare and carrying arms became a profession and a lifestyle; the real warrior, the *miles*, a word eventually used to denote the mounted knight, replaced the “free man” who combined agriculture with occasional warfare. On the other hand, the great expansion of agriculture and the wealth the two higher orders derived from it, may have made the peasants a somewhat more respected category than the earlier, unfree labourers – after all, there was competition among lords to attract peasants to take part in clearing land. And there was certainly a need for lords to legitimate their position by an ideology such as that of the three orders. Further, these doctrines are doctrines for the whole of society, thus intended to strengthen the central power; in their secular versions the king, in the clerical ones the pope. Finally, the doctrines must be understood against the background of the intellectual revival in connection with the Investiture Contest, the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, and the rise of the universities.

Kgs can largely be understood against a similar background: the division between the two higher estates and the “commoners” replaced that between freeborn and slave, and society was regarded as an integrated whole. Above all, *Kgs* argues in favour of the king’s central position as the leader of society, a doctrine that fits very well in with what we know about political thought and royal policy by the mid-thirteenth century, when the work must have been written.⁴² The monarchy worked systematically to strengthen the central government, particularly in the

⁴¹ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 72, 216, 327-343; Oexle, *Dreiteilung*, 98f.; see below 27ff.

⁴² Bagge, *Political Thought*, 71-85, 174-186, 210-218.

field of justice, where it banned feuds and revenge and insisted that conflicts should be brought before royal courts of law. Although *Konungs skuggsiá*'s picture of the king's exalted position is ideology more than reality, its insistence on the aristocracy as an aristocracy of royal servants makes sense in a contemporary context. The definition of aristocratic rank was membership in the king's *hirð* and the titles conferred by the king; although in practice, the king would mostly choose men of some wealth and standing.

Thus, there is a fairly close similarity between the quadripartite model in *Kgs* and the tripartite in feudal Europe, while both are opposed to the tripartite in *Rígsþula*. The two former give the king a crucial function in the model and contain an idea of society as an organic unity. Moreover, despite the difference between three and four categories, they have basically the same structure, a combination between hierarchy and functional difference: all categories have different functions, and there is in addition a difference of rank between the clerical and secular aristocracy on the one hand, and the commoners on the other. The quadripartite division is more logical in the sense that it contains two equal classes on both levels of the hierarchy. On the other hand, it might be argued that the functional difference between peasants and merchants was not sufficient to make them into separate categories; in contrast to "higher" activities like war and religion, there was no particular reason to distinguish between the "lower" categories of people who brought provisions to the whole body politic. This may explain why the tripartite division continued to be the stronger and more widespread of the two. As we have seen, the quadripartite division in *Kgs* may possibly have to do with a somewhat greater respect for the lower orders, but the author's main reason for choosing it was to point out as clearly as possible the contrast between the apparent similarity and the real difference between a wealthy commoner and an aristocrat, so as to bring home even more explicitly his message about aristocratic rank being conferred by the king.

Where does *Rígsþula*'s Society belong?

Thus, the division of society in *Kgs* fits very well in with the ideology of the work as a whole as well as with what we know about the Norwegian monarchy in the thirteenth century. On the other hand, we have already noted several differences between *Kgs* and *Rígsþula*. Where then, does the latter work belong in time and social context? Opinions have been strongly divided on this point, from the Viking Age to the thirteenth

century, and from the British Isles to Norway or Iceland. An early date, often combined with a Western origin, because of possible Irish influence on the vocabulary as well as on the name of the god, Rígr, was commonly accepted by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1906, however, Andreas Heusler argued that the poem was composed by an Icelandic antiquarian in the thirteenth century.⁴³ Later, Rudolf Meissner argued in favour of a somewhat earlier date⁴⁴, the late eleventh century, while Jan de Vries preferred the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. De Vries' arguments are the metre, which departs from the strict form in the old poems; a number of loan-words, such as *plógr*, that seem to have arrived late in the language; and the use of plural in the crow's address to Konr ungr.⁴⁵ Klaus von See went one step further, dating the poem to the reign of Hákon Hákonarson and interpreting it as an expression of the ideology current at his court.⁴⁶ Von See's view has been accepted by several later scholars, and generally, the most widespread opinion today seems to be that *Rígsþula* is a learned reconstruction from well into the Christian period.⁴⁷ Still, however, there are scholars who defend an early date, most recently Ursula Dronke.⁴⁸

⁴³ Heusler, Andreas: *Heimat und Alter der eddischen Gedichte*, in: id.: *Kleine Schriften*, vol. II, Berlin 1969 [orig. 1906], 165-194: 184-94.

⁴⁴ Meissner Rudolf: *Rígr*, in: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 57 (1933), 109-130.

⁴⁵ De Vries, Jan: *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, vol. II. Berlin 1967, 123-27.

⁴⁶ See, Klaus von: *Das Alter der Rígsþula*, in: id.: *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung. Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, Heidelberg 1981, 84-95 [orig. 1957]; id.: *Rígsþula Str.* 47 und 48, in: id.: *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung*, 96-98 and 514-16 [orig. 1960].

⁴⁷ This latter opinion, as expressed by de Vries, is mentioned as the present standard view by Harris, Joseph: *Eddic Poetry*, in: Carol Clover; John Lindow (eds.): *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, Ithaca 1985: 96. Von See's view has been accepted e.g. by Skovgaard-Petersen, Inge: *Vikingerne i den nyere forskning*, in: *Historisk tidsskrift (København)* 12. rk. 5 (1971): 651-72: 715; Simek, Rudolf; Hermann Pálsson: *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur*, Stuttgart 1987, 294f.; Mazo Karras, Ruth: *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, New Haven 1988: 60-63, and, at least partly, by Clunies Ross, Margaret: *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse Myths in Northern Society*, vol. 1: *The Myths*, Odense 1994 (The Viking Collection 7): 180f. See also Harris, 95-97 and 151 who refers von See's views extensively but also mentions a number of other scholars.

⁴⁸ Sveinsson, Einar Ólafur: *Íslenzkar bókmenntir í fornöld*, Reykjavík 1962, 291 finds a date in the tenth century most likely, pointing to parallels to other Eddic poems. Nerman, Birger: *Rígsþula 16:8 dvergar á oxlóm*, arkeologisk belyst, in: ANF 69 (1954), 210-213, and id.: *Rígsþulas álder*, in: ANF 84 (1969), 15-18,

As von See is the most prominent adherent of *Rígsþula* being a thirteenth century work and his arguments are further directly relevant to the present discussion of the dominant ideology at King Hákon's court, it is necessary to discuss them in some detail. Von See's arguments, a number of which corresponds to those already brought forward by Heusler, are almost exclusively based on textual and literary evidence, while he has only a few and fairly superficial comments on the social context. Apart from some comments on the allegedly "un-Eddic" vocabulary of *Rígsþula*, von See's main arguments are the following.

(1) The name Rígr is derived from Irish *ri* = king, of which *rig* is the genitive. The poet has thus rendered the word incorrectly and in addition does not seem to have understood its meaning, as he fails to connect the god's name with that of Konr ungr at the end of the poem. As Snorri in his *Edda* regards Rígr as a Danish king, von See concludes that he cannot have known *Rígsþula*, an argument he further supports by manuscript evidence: the reference to *Rígsþula* in Snorri's *Edda* is a later addition, as is also the poem itself in one of the three manuscripts of the work. Further, Rígr is represented in a similar, but not in exactly the same way as in Snorri's *Edda* in *Skjöldunga saga* which also dates from the thirteenth century. Further, Dan and Danpr, against whom Konr ungr is urged to make war, are also members of the Danish dynasty. Thus, both Snorri and the author of *Skjöldunga saga* seem to know the original meaning of *ri*, while the author of *Rígsþula* does not. The latter must therefore have transformed the original genealogy radically in order to create his own story. (2) The pair Danr and Danpr belong to the Gothic tradition and were originally personifications of the rivers Don and

argues for a date earlier than the year 1000 on the basis of correspondence between objects described in the poem and archeological finds from the Viking age. Dronke, Ursula: *The Poetic Edda II*, 174-208, finds old as well as more recent elements in the poem, concluding that the early eleventh century is the most likely period for the final redaction, while an earlier version may have originated at the court of Hákon jarl in the late tenth century (*ibid.*, 203-206). In an earlier article, *Sem jarlar forðum. The Influence of Rígsþula on two saga-episodes*, in: *Speculum Norroenum. Norse studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, Odense 1981, 56-72, she finds allusions to *Rígsþula* in poems quoted in some Icelandic sagas. Her similarities are suggestive without forming conclusive evidence. Besides, as she is herself well aware, the poems in question may have been composed by the authors of the sagas, i.e. in the thirteenth century. Her result may, however, suggest that *Rígsþula* was not as unknown in thirteenth century Iceland as von See assumes. Turville-Petre, Gabriel: *Myth and Religion of the North*, London 1964, 150f. is in doubt, but thinks that the poem must at least contain some ancient traditions.

Dnjepr. Their transformation into Danish princes must have been fairly late, as they are unknown to Saxo.⁴⁹ Consequently, the *Rígsþula* poet must build on late sources when making this identification. (3) The description of Konr ungr in *Rígsþula*, particularly his sharp eyes, which resemble those of the snake, and his knowledge of the birds' language, closely resembles that of Sigurðr in the poetic tradition about him. Two details indicate that *Rígsþula* depends on the latest version of the Sigurðr tradition, i.e. *Völsunga saga*, commonly thought to have been composed around 1260: the fact that Konr ungr is the youngest of Jarl's sons and the crow urging Konr ungr to attack Danr and Danpr. The crow is a lowly and despised bird and highly unusual in such a role.

This whole complex of arguments takes for granted a fairly rigid orthodoxy, changing step by step through later distortions and additions. What we know in general about the old mythology and the Eddic poetry, suggests an entirely different picture. Mutually contradicting traditions exist at the same time, and even in the same author. Thus, when Snorri needs a Trojan prince in order to link the Norwegian dynasty to the Trojan one, he picks Þórr, placing him twelve generations before Óðinn (*SnE* 4), while normally, Þórr is Óðinn's son. Even in the small material that is now extant, there are different versions of almost every myth. So why should there not have existed different traditions about Rígr, partly as king, partly as god? Or, like in the case of Óðinn, the original god can have been transformed into a king in the later tradition. Nor is it self-evident that Snorri and the author of *Skjöldunga saga* knew the original meaning of *rígr* while the *Rígsþula* poet did not. The existence of Rígr as a proper name for a king does not imply knowledge of the etymology of the word. Nor does *Rígsþula*'s use of the name Konr ungr exclude the possibility that its author was aware that *rígr* also meant king. When stating that Rígr gave Jarl his name, he may possibly allude to this name meaning lord or ruler. And his message at the end of the poem may well have been that *konungr* is an even nobler title than *rígr*. As for Danr and Danpr, the reference to Denmark is a modern interpretation, not explicitly indicated by the author. Nor does the author state that his poem takes place in Norway. Although his references are most probably to Norwegian society and conditions, he may well have intended his poem to take place in some unspecified part of the world or in the place in Inner Asia where Snorri located the origins of the Norwegian dynasty. The fact that neither Snorri nor Saxo seems to have known *Rígsþula*, may give some indication of a late date, but is not sufficient as evidence. In a

⁴⁹ Von See, Alter, 89; id., *Rígsþula*, 97f.

manuscript culture where texts only exist in very few copies, it is extremely risky to conclude from the lack of reference in other texts that a certain text did not exist at a given time. The same applies to an even higher degree in oral cultures.

As for Konr ungr being the youngest as well as the most high-ranking of Jarl's sons, von See seems to presuppose primogeniture as the normal way of transmitting political power. This, however, was not the case. Ordinary property was divided between the sons, and the same was often the case with the kingdom at least until the law of succession of 1163/64. As late as in 1255 *Hákonar saga* reports a discussion about the division of the kingdom among King Hákon's sons, a discussion which most probably forms the background of *Konungs skuggsiá's* violent attack on divided rule in the allegory of death.⁵⁰ However, the general equality between the sons did not necessarily mean that they would all receive an equal share. One of them might be preferred by their father or simply get hold of the major share because of his ability or charisma.⁵¹ This and not ultimogeniture must be the situation described in *Rígsþula*. Konr ungr knows runes and becomes a magician, even defeating his father in these practices, thus proving himself the most worthy successor. Other examples in the Eddic poetry of younger sons rising above their elder brothers because of their greater ability⁵² make von See's appeal to *Völsunga saga* superfluous. The succession described in *Rígsþula* certainly fits better with an early period than with the age of Hákon Hákonarson when attempts were made to regulate royal succession, ending with the triumph of primogeniture in the law of succession of 1260.

Last but not least, there is an internal and fairly obvious reason why the poet lets the youngest son be preferred. The poem seems to aim at explaining, not only the social divisions in general but the origin of kingship. As the poet generally plays on the connection between proper names and social terms, he would be likely to do so in the case of the king as well. Under such circumstances it would surely not demand a great imagination to find the etymology of the word *konungr* in an otherwise

⁵⁰ [Skálholtsbók yngsta], Det arnamagnænske Håndskrift 81 a fol., ed. A. Kjær and L. Holm-Olsen, Oslo 1947-86, ch. 338: 642-644; Bagge, *Political Thought*, 49-51; Bagge, *Nature*, 18-23.

⁵¹ For Icelandic examples of this procedure, see Jochens, Jenny: *En Islande médiévale: A la recherche de la famille nucléaire*, in: *Annales ESC* 40 (1985), 95-112.

⁵² Fleck, Jere: *Konr – Óttar – Geirroðr: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Throne*, in: *Scandinavian Studies* 42 (1970), 39-49.

unknown proper name Konr, meaning descendant or kinsman,⁵³ and the suffix *-ungr* meaning young, the more so as the poem in other contexts celebrates youth. There is therefore no need to explain this feature of *Rígsþula* by influence from other sources. As for the crow, it is not a lowly and despised bird, but a highly respectable one, known for its sharp eyes and intelligence, expressed in its great ability to find food. It is also commonly associated with Óðinn and well known as a messenger bird.⁵⁴ It is perfectly appropriate in *Rígsþula*'s context, and there is no need to look for any specific source for its role in the poem.

Rígsþula may possibly but not necessarily be influenced by the Sigurðr tradition; the similarity von See refers to may well belong to a common poetic repertoire, or, if there is any direct connection, von See has made no attempt to show that *Rígsþula* has borrowed from *Fáfnismál* rather than vice versa. In any case, even if von See is right on this point, there is no evidence for *Rígsþula* being influenced from any later version of the Sigurðr tradition than the Eddic poems themselves; which means that this alleged connection is of no importance for its date.⁵⁵

Nor do the "technical" arguments about vocabulary and metre⁵⁶ constitute very firm evidence. A metre different from the rest of the Eddic poems – hardly a very large collection – does not necessarily mean late origin. The word *plógr* occurs in Scaldic poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵⁷ Further, if *Rígsþula* was composed on the British Isles

⁵³ The word is, according to von See, Alter, 91, rare and forms one of his arguments for a connection with the Sigurðr tradition.

⁵⁴ Finnur Jónsson *ad loc.*, *Rþ.* 47; Bernström, John: Kráka, in: KLN 9 (1964), 483-485. Bernström quotes no evidence from the old poetry in support of his statement about the association with Óðinn. Most of his references are actually to Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* from the sixteenth century which may nevertheless contain important information about popular beliefs and ideas. Von See points to a few negative statements about the crow in the Eddic poetry, where it is rarely mentioned, e.g. *Hávamál*'s reference to "galandi kráku" in a list of what should not be trusted (*Háv.* 84-87). Despite the negative reference, this passage confirms the picture of the crow as a messenger bird. Further, there is the story in *Morkinskinna* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1932), 293-295 about the *bondi* who knew the birds' language and interpreted the crow's message to King Óláfr kyrrí. The story has no importance for the date of *Rígsþula*, as *Morkinskinna* dates from the thirteenth century, but it shows that the idea of the crow as a messenger bird was not confined to *Völsunga saga*.

⁵⁵ cf. Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, 206f.

⁵⁶ De Vries, 1967, 123-27; von See, Alter, 85.

⁵⁷ It is found in the poems of Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, d. 1066, and Rognvaldr kali, d. 1158 (*Skjaldedigtning* A 1: 375 and 511). — My best thanks to Else Mundal for

or was influenced by Irish or Anglo-Saxon models, the loan-words may even be compatible with a fairly early date.⁵⁸ Further, the main explanation of the unusual vocabulary in *Rígsþula* is that the poem treats subjects that were unusual in an Eddic context, above all daily life.⁵⁹ Nor is it an argument for a late date that the crow addresses Konr ungr in the plural; there are parallels in the Scaldic poems.⁶⁰

Thus, we must conclude that neither von See nor others have brought forward any firm philological evidence for a late date of *Rígsþula*. The loan-words and the metre may possibly give some indications in this direction. On the other hand, an evaluation of the “technical” evidence must also take into account Nerman’s arguments from dress and objects mentioned in the poem which in his opinion indicate a period not later than the early eleventh century. These arguments have not been considered by the philologists. Nerman’s arguments include references to a female ornament called *dvergar*, to rings of silver or gold cut into pieces as gifts or payment, and to coins being used as ornaments, all well

this information. Not only the word *plógr*, but also the object was imported at a comparatively late date; the traditional tool for preparing the soil was the *arðr* (ridging plough) which was lighter and lacked a mouldboard. See Stigum, Hilmar: Plov (Norge), in: KLNLM 13 (1968), 348-350, and Sølvsberg, Ingvild Øye: Driftsmåter i vestnorsk jordbruk ca. 600-1350. Oslo 1976, 90-105.

⁵⁸ Von See’s rejection of this hypothesis (id., *Alter*, 85) seems too rash, as Jean Young argues convincingly for Irish influence on the main story of the poem, the god sleeping with the three women. According to Irish poems and narratives of the early Middle Ages, it was customary for kings to sleep with the wives of their vassals or clients when visiting them (Young, Jean: Does *Rígsþula* Betray Irish Influence?, in: ANF 49 (1933), 97-107: 101f). A similar custom is reported to have existed in the Hebrides (Chadwick, Nora: Pictic and Celtic Marriage in Early Literary Tradition, in: Scottish Gaelic Studies 8 (1955) 56-115; Dronke, *The Poetic Edda II*, 190f.)

⁵⁹ Although aware of this, von See points out that all other examples of the expression “breiddu blæjur” are late (von See, *Alter*, 85 n. 2). But how often are bedclothes mentioned in the Eddic or scaldic poems? The only way this expression could possibly form an argument in favour of von See’s thesis would be if there were a parallel case in the Eddic poems where another term was used.

⁶⁰ E.g. *Ragnarsdrápa* by Bragi Boddason (first half of the ninth century) opens with the passage: “Vilit hrafnetill heyra” (*Skjaldedigtning A 1: 1*). — Information from Else Mundal. The passage in *Rígsþula* runs as follows: “Á Danr ok Danpr/ dýrar hallir,/ œðra óðal/ an ér hafið” (*Rígsþula* 48). Earlier in the same passage, the crow addresses Konr ungr in the singular (“heldr mætti þér [dat.]/ hestum ríða”, *Rígsþula* 47).

attested in archeological finds from the Viking age.⁶¹ The problem with his results is that we cannot exclude the possibility that these objects were also in use after the Viking ages, as burials from the Christian periods are far simpler and poorer than during the period before. Nevertheless, there seems to be little or nothing in the description of dress or other objects in the poem indicating a date later than the Viking age. The “technical” evidence is thus inconclusive, being compatible both with the Viking age and later periods. Let us now turn to the historical evidence: in which social context is *Rígsþula* most likely to belong?

Rígsþula is no direct description of the poet’s own society. It takes place in a distant past and may contain deliberate archaism.⁶² However, it does not really deal with the past but with the present. Or more correctly: it tells a story about the past as an explanation of the present *structure*. Thus, the story about Rígr and his relationship to Jarl and Konr ungr belongs to the past, while the structure, the three categories of men, belongs to the present. There would be no point in describing a society long gone when the message in the poem is that the division of society found and transmitted by the god Rígr is permanent and unchangeable.⁶³

The strong presence of the slaves in *Rígsþula* makes it difficult to date the poem as late as the thirteenth century. In the *Landslög* (1274-1277) the slaves have almost completely disappeared, while they are frequently mentioned in the regional laws which mostly date from the first half of the twelfth century.⁶⁴ Exactly when the slaves disappeared, is difficult to tell; they may have existed towards the end of the thirteenth century but can hardly have formed an important part of the population after around 1200. It is significant that they are absent from the social categories, not only of *Kgs* but also of *The Speech against the Bishops* from around 1200. And *Rígsþula* clearly implies not only the existence of slaves but also that they were an important category. They were important from a practical point of view, through their work which included all the

⁶¹ Nerman, *Rígsþula*, and Nerman, *Rígsþulas alder*.

⁶² Cf. Heusler, 189f.

⁶³ My emphasis here differs from Dronke’s insistence on the evolutionary aspect of *Rígsþula*. Starting from the correspondences between the age of the three couples (great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents) and their status, she concludes that the poem deals with the evolution of man, describing a steady rise in skills and refinement (Dronke, *The Poetic Edda II*, 179-185). However, the poem also states that all three classes still exist and describes the children’s conditions of life as similar to those of the parents, with the exception of Konr ungr.

⁶⁴ Iversen, Tore: *Trelldommen. Norsk slaveri i middelalderen* (Historisk institutt i Bergen. Skrifter vol. 1). Bergen 1997, 275-278.

tasks a free person refused to perform, and they were important ideologically, by forming the despicable contrast to the free man or woman.

It has been objected⁶⁵ that *Rígsþula* does not really describe a slave but rather a serf or a poor tenant, because the slave lives in his own house. There is, however, nothing unlikely in imagining slaves living under such conditions in Viking age or early medieval Norway. The widespread idea of slaves normally living in large households or as gangs is based on exceptional cases in a global context: the highly developed urban civilizations of Greece and Rome and the proto-capitalistic American South in the nineteenth century. Elsewhere, it was perfectly normal for slaves to live in separate households.⁶⁶ If we imagine *Rígsþula*'s *karl* as the owner of a large and extensively cultivated farm, which seems likely under contemporary conditions, it would also be practical to have slave households spread over the area.⁶⁷ Moreover, the narrow range of the slave's tasks seems to suggest that he must have belonged to a larger household. One could hardly maintain an independent farm only by performing the tasks attributed to the slave in *Rígsþula*: gathering sprigs, probably as fodder for animals, making fences, manuring fields, raising pigs, herding goats, and digging turf. The fields must also be plowed and harvested, but these are "higher" tasks, performed by free men. Some of them are directly attributed to the *karl* in *Rígsþula*. It is difficult to imagine a farm with no other animals than goats and pigs, but they fit well with the slave, because they have the lowest rank within the livestock.⁶⁸ Thus, the poet's point is that the slave performs the most menial tasks within a larger household. Finally, the narrative structure of the poem presupposes three different houses.

The division between noble, free, and slave also occurs in European Christian sources.⁶⁹ It is based on Noah's condemnation of Ham in *Genesis* 9,25-27: because of his disrespectful behaviour when seeing his father naked, he is condemned to be his brothers' slave, while his brothers will prosper. The oldest example of this interpretation dates from the Anglo-Saxon period, but it is also found as late as by the end of the

⁶⁵ Von See, Alter, 93.

⁶⁶ Iversen, 6-22.

⁶⁷ Iversen, 127-46, 235-240.

⁶⁸ Teuscher, Simon: Islendingenes forhold til dyr i middelalderen. En mentalitetshistorisk studie av noen ættesagaer, in: *Historisk tidsskrift* (Oslo) 69 (1990), 311-337: 322, 331 etc.

⁶⁹ Hill, Thomas D.: *Rígsþula*. Some Medieval Christian Analogues, in: *Speculum* 61 (1986), 79-89.

thirteenth century.⁷⁰ Whether there is any connection between *Rígsþula* and this division, is difficult to tell; Hill thinks that *Rígsþula* or the social thought underlying it may have inspired the exegesis of *Genesis*.⁷¹ An alternative, more in line with von See's ideas, would be that *Rígsþula* was inspired by this particular version of the tripartite division. If so, we have no evidence of a late date, as Anglo-Saxon ideas may have been transmitted to the Vikings already in the ninth or tenth century. The occurrence of this division in later sources may be an objection to my argument about the slaves indicating a date earlier than the thirteenth century. However, the clear reference in *Genesis* makes it more likely for a commentator to mention them in this particular context. Moreover, slavery did exist in the Mediterranean area throughout the Middle Ages, and slaves were often imported from Africa, the continent considered to be inhabited by Ham's descendants. Finally, most peasants in England and Continental Europe were serfs (the English word is derived from Latin *servus*), while Norwegian peasants, even if tenants, were personally free. Consequently, the fact that slaves occasionally form a separate category in Biblical exegesis in other parts of Europe does not make it more likely that a thirteenth century Norwegian or Icelandic poet would have included them in a didactic work about the division of society.

Turning from the slave to the *karl*, we find further arguments for an early date of *Rígsþula*. The *karl* representing the middle class fits well in with what we know about early medieval society, but not with the thirteenth century. The regional laws, probably dating from the first half of the twelfth century, contain an elaborate classification – somewhat different from region to region – of ordinary free men, from the *hauldr* at the top to the *leysingi* (the manumitted slave) at the bottom.⁷² By contrast, the *Landslög* (1274-1277) omits most of this classification and seems to regard the majority of *bændr* as tenants and thus belonging to the lowest class, in accordance with the picture in *Kgs*. Admittedly, wealthy and important *bændr* as described in *Rígsþula* still existed – the *hauldr* also occurs in the *Landslög* – whether they owned their land themselves or were tenants, but ideologically it would seem very strange in a royal or aristocratic milieu in the thirteenth century to represent such people as the

⁷⁰ In the Later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period it was transformed into the then current division of the three orders, clerics, knights, and peasants (Le Goff, *Les trois fonctions*, 1207).

⁷¹ Hill, 87.

⁷² Holmsen, Andreas: *Nye studier i gammel historie*, Oslo 1976, 180f; Andersen, Per Sveaas: *Samlingen av Norge og kristningen av landet* (Handbok i Norges historie vol. 2), Oslo 1977, 212-20.

normal, average individual. Conversely, already at the time of the regional laws, the *hauldr* may not have been a particularly numerous category. From an ideological point of view, however, *Rígsþula*'s picture is certainly closer to that of the regional laws than to that of the *Landslog*. A tripartite or quadripartite division of society can of course never reproduce exactly all social divisions; its aim is to point to those that are most important. By contrast, the laws are concerned with the specific rights of particular categories of people, notably the right to compensation in case they are killed.

One aspect of the description of the *karl* may, as von See points out⁷³, suggest a late date. Nothing is said about the *karl*'s military activity. If we take this literally as a criterion for the date of the poem, however, we must move to an even later period than the age of Hákon Hákonarson, probably around the middle of the fourteenth century. Hákon used the *bændr* extensively in his military campaigns, not least in his great expedition towards Scotland in 1263, and his successors continued this practice. The explanation of the poet's silence on this point is therefore more likely to be a certain schematisation. Rather than telling everything about the activities of his three figures, he concentrates on some essential features. According to them, the *jarl* is a warrior in a different sense from the *karl*, because his life is devoted to such "higher" tasks and he gains his wealth without working with his own hands. The exclusive focus on the *karl*'s agricultural work serves to make this difference even clearer.

On the top of *Rígsþula*'s society, the *jarl* also seems to point more towards the Viking age or the early Middle Ages than the thirteenth century. While in the late twelfth and first half of the thirteenth century, the *jarl* was either a kind of "second in command" after the king, or, in the case of a minor or a weak king, the real ruler of the country, *Rígsþula*'s *jarl* seems simply to be a member of the aristocracy, as was probably the case in the Viking age and the early Middle Ages.⁷⁴ In other Eddic poems, *jarl* simply seems to mean free man.⁷⁵ His aristocratic status in *Rígsþula* might therefore indicate a somewhat later date for this poem than the rest of the collection, but the distance from the High Middle Ages is still considerable. An alternative explanation is that we have to do with a deliberate exaggeration of the earl's nobility. After all, the poem is not a sociologist's observation of contemporary society, but a celebration of the elite addressed to its members. There can hardly be any doubt that individual members of the elite differed as much from the common

⁷³ Von See, *Rígsþula*, 516.

⁷⁴ Bøe, Arne: *Jarl*, KLN 7 (1962), 559-564.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 559f.

people as Jarl from Karl in *Rígsþula* already in the Viking age and even before; what is open to discussion is to what extent such people formed a hereditary aristocracy, formally distinct from the rest of the population.⁷⁶ The idea of the king being a descendant of the class of earls would certainly have seemed strange in the thirteenth century. If *Rígsþula* was presented to the royal court at the time when Hákon and Skúli ruled as king and earl respectively, i.e. before Skúli's rebellion in 1239 or, more likely, before Skúli was appointed duke in 1237, one might wonder at the reactions of the two leaders. Hákon might suspect the poet of reducing his own status, while Skúli might be offended by being depicted as just one in a large category and by the honour attributed to the king. Nor is a date after Skúli's death, which von See seems to regard as the more likely, without problems. The chapter on the earl's dignity in the *Hirðskrá* largely takes the form of a warning against giving him too much power and pointing out that his position is entirely dependent on the king's decision. It ends with the statement that it is best for the people that there is no earl at all.⁷⁷ Admittedly, this source dates from the 1270s, but it is a likely hypothesis that this particular passage represents the attitudes prevailing at Hákon's court after Skúli's rebellion. So a poem celebrating the earl would hardly be very welcome at the time; we might imagine the scald lurking away from the royal hall without being burdened with much of the customary gold or silver.

Even more important than these particular points is the whole understanding of society in *Rígsþula*. There is not a word about the king's central position in society. The king is a kind of secondary extension of the class of earls; the emphasis is on his magic power and warlike qualities, not on his government of society. There is no idea of society as a whole or of the three classes cooperating for the common good; the distinction between the classes is there only to benefit those who are best off. While the feudal model as well as that of *Kgs* contain a division of function as well as of rank, that of *Rígsþula* has only the latter. Moreover, the brief glimpse *Rígsþula* gives of how society is organised, corresponds exactly to the society *Kgs* condemns in the allegory of dearth. *Jarl* is a kind of Viking chieftain. Having been educated by Rígr, he rides far away

⁷⁶ On the aristocratic character of early medieval Norwegian society, see most recently Skre, Dagfinn: *Herredømmet. Bøstening og besittelse på Romerike 200-1350 e. Kr.*, doctoral thesis (typewritten), Oslo 1996, 364-486.

⁷⁷ "þætt er hitt fiorða sem liosazt er at oft hœuir longum stundum ængi iarll veret i Noreghi oc hœuir þar almuganom hœgazt veret. þui at sealldan hœuir retrr smælengsins uið þar batnat at marger hafa yfirboðarnar veret i senn" (*Hirðskrá* ch. 14).

to wage a war of aggression. He wins land and rich booty which he distributes to his friends (*Rg.* 37-38). And the poem ends by suggesting that the king do the same on an even greater scale (*Rg.* 47-48). The expedition against Danr and Danpr is described as a Viking raid, occasioned by the fact that they are wealthier than Konr ungr. By contrast, *Hákonar saga* insists that Hákon's expedition against Denmark is a just war waged by a Christian king and generally, that Hákon only goes to war when he has a just claim and there are no alternative ways of solving the conflict.⁷⁸

Thus, there seems to be no particular link between *Rígsþula* and Hákon Hákonarson's court or thirteenth century Norway in general. We cannot exclude the possibility that different attitudes to society and monarchy than that of *Kgs* existed in the thirteenth century; actually, *Heimskringla* seems in many respects to be closer to *Rígsþula* than to *Kgs*.⁷⁹ But there are no positive arguments in favour of this period.

How old can *Rígsþula* be? Can the poem be pushed as far back as to the Viking age, and, if so, can it tell us anything about social thought in this distant period? I shall not go into the whole of this complex matter here; after all, my main subject is the relationship between *Rígsþula* and *Kgs*, not *Rígsþula* in itself. I shall confine myself to one problem, i.e. to what extent the poem shows any Christian influence.

Such an influence has been assumed by von See⁸⁰ who points to the fact that all three classes are descended from the same god. Thus, humanity is essentially one, an idea that can only be derived from Christianity. T. D. Hill makes the same observation and finds a connection with Christian texts of British origin, but is more reluctant to draw conclusions as to which way the influence has gone.⁸¹ On the other hand, both von See and Hill note the brutal caricature of the slave, but do not reflect on its relationship to the alleged idea of a common humanity. In such a case, it seems to be a good method not to start from the consequences we would be likely to derive from the biological information presented in the poem but from those the poet himself derives from them. We then have to conclude that there is no trace of the idea of a single humanity or a human brotherhood. According to the poem, divine

⁷⁸ Bagge, Sverre: From Gang Leader to The Lord's Anointed. Kingship in Sverris saga and Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar (The Viking Collection vol. 8), Odense 1996, 127f.

⁷⁹ Bagge, Sverre: Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla, Berkeley etc. 1991, 123-145.

⁸⁰ Von See, Alter, 94.

⁸¹ Hill, 80, 87.

origin does not mean that all men are essentially similar but on the contrary that the differences that exist are so deep-rooted that not even divine descent can abolish them. What kind of biological theory is the basis for this view? Does the poet mean that a child takes its qualities from its mother, in contrast to the learned theory of Christian Europe, derived from Aristotle, that the father was decisive? There are indications, albeit vague, in Old Norse sources that the mother was considered important⁸², but surely not to the exclusion of the father.

Rather than imagining a consistent biological theory underlying the story told in *Rígsþula*, we should look for an *ad hoc* explanation based on the poet's practical experience, as would fit in with the kind of oral society which, according to the arguments presented so far, seems the most likely place of origin for the poem. This practical experience can be well illustrated by the regional laws, according to which the child takes its mother's status, unless officially recognised by the father.⁸³ This is exactly the rule expressed in *Rígsþula*. Rígr leaves the two lower households never to return, and the poem does not even tell whether he was aware of the consequences of his short stay. By contrast, he returns to Jarl, calls him his son, gives him his name, teaches him runes, and sets him on the path to glory and conquest. Thus, in human as well as in divine society, paternity is not a question of biology pure and simple but of the father's attitude to his son.

We may imagine *Rígsþula* being presented to an audience similar to Jarl, all having a number of subordinate men and women under their command, from *karl* to slave. The situation described in the poem of a lord and master having a sexual relationship with his subordinate women must have been familiar to all of them. And they would certainly have been very surprised if told by some learned twentieth century philologist that such light amusements, past or present, contributed to the essential unity of mankind. In any case, the common descent is clearly insufficient as an argument for a Christian background. If we assume such a background, we also have to explain the curious fact that not only does humanity and its social classes descend from a pagan god; they are even the result of his adulterous relationship with various married women! As already mentioned, this particular feature may be the result of Irish influence. The general attitude to paternity, however, is easily explained against a Norwegian or Icelandic background.

⁸² Mundal, Else: *Kvinnesyntet og forståinga av biologisk arv in den norrøne kulturen*, in: Asbjørn Årnes (ed.): *Atlantisk dād og drøm*, Oslo 1998, 153-170.

⁸³ Iversen, 104f. See also Clunies Ross, 179f, who draws the same parallel as I do here.

Thus, there is no reason for assuming Christian influence on *Rígsþula*. Are there also arguments against such an assumption? Here we once more have to consider the relationship between past and present. Even a Christian poet and his audience had to admit that the distant past was pagan, and the relatively rich material preserved about the ancient mythology forms evidence of its survival as a recognised tradition which learned and educated people should know. Further, the pagan elements belong to the story in the poem. The celebration of contemporary kingship, which seems an important element, does not imply that the contemporary situation was in any way similar to the one described in the passage about Konr ungr. The poet as well as his audience must have imagined Konr ungr as a person in the distant past, possibly, but not necessarily related to the present dynasty, whose main purpose was to add to the glory of the title of king. The poet may therefore have imagined this “eponymous hero” as a person of different character and different tasks from the contemporary king. If we compare with the sagas, we also find a surprisingly tolerant attitude to the pagan past. Thus, Hákon góði is depicted in a very favourable way, despite his alleged apostacy from Christianity, and even Hákon jarl, the leader of the pagan reaction in the late tenth century, is described as a great ruler and chieftain who did not really become evil until the end of his life.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, there is a certain tendency in the saga literature, most prominent in the accounts of Haraldr hárfagri, the first ruler of all Norway, to play down their paganism. Haraldr is not a great *blótmaðr*, persecutes magicians⁸⁵, and is even in one passage said to believe in an unknown, highest god.⁸⁶ In a didactic poem like *Rígsþula*, where the description of the past is very much intended to explain the present, or in other words, the story is closely connected to the structure, we should expect some anticipation of Christianity even in a story taking place in the pagan past. Instead of describing Konr ungr as a magician, the poet might have provided him with features anticipating Christian kingship or at least “neutral” in relationship to Christianity, as a great leader and warrior, as a protector of his people, as a judge and a legislator. It would not be impossible for a Christian poet to use the pagan mythology in a laudatory poem for a king,

⁸⁴ Bagge, Society, 156-158.

⁸⁵ *Heimskringla. Haraldz saga ins hárfagra*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, vol. I: 98-164. København, 1893-1900 [= *Hkr.Hhárf*], ch. 34.

⁸⁶ In a passage, believed to be a later addition to *Fagrskinna*, Haraldr bans *blót* to the present gods, declaring his belief in one, highest god, the sole ruler of the world in the same way as Haraldr himself is the sole ruler of Norway (*Fagrskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1902-1903, 386).

nor to imagine the king having supernatural powers. But to combine the two would come dangerously close to celebrating the very qualities the twelfth and thirteenth century laws strongly condemn.⁸⁷ Not paganism in itself, but the way in which paganism is presented in *Rígsþula*, forms an argument against *Rígsþula* belonging to the Christian period, even if it does not make it impossible.

What can be the purpose of a poem like *Rígsþula*? The etiological aspect does not seem very convincing. And besides, what can be the question answered by such an etiology? The question underlying most theories of estates from Christian and feudal Europe, possibly including *Kgs*, seems to be a that of legitimation. How can inequality between human beings be defended? The need for such a defense may either be understood against the background of peasant protest against the great landowners, secular and clerical, or of conscience troubling particularly the clerical aristocracy; after all, they were the successors of Christ and the apostles who had lived in great poverty and rejected this world in favour of the kingdom to come.

There is no trace of apology in *Rígsþula*. Most of the poem consists in a vivid and concrete narrative of different types of human beings and their different living conditions. If, as is likely, the poem was addressed to an audience of similar status as the earl, it reads like a celebration of these people and their lifestyle and an immediate satisfaction with both, without any indication that these benefits are the payment for some service to society and mankind as a whole or involve any obligation of such a kind. Should the poem be understood as a warning to the lower classes against trying to rise above their station? Is it intended as a defense of a hereditary aristocracy?

Certainly, the poem does emphasise birth as the origin of aristocratic status. But it is even more concrete and vivid in its description of the physical and mental qualities of the members of the aristocracy. They are young, handsome, heroic, brave, and clever. The classical theory of a hereditary aristocracy from the Later Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period might also point to the greater personal "nobility" of its members. Legally, however, noble status depended on descent, not on personal qualities. What did the *Rígsþula* poet and his audience think about this question? What if a noble child was as ugly as þræl or a slave child as handsome as Jarl? The normal attitude in *Rígsþula*'s milieu would probably be to believe in a close correspondence between descent and personal qualities. Occasionally, however, exceptions or apparent

⁸⁷ Halvorsen, Eyvind Fjeld: *Trolldom* (Norge), *KLNM* 18 (1974), 657-661.

exceptions might turn up, some of which are dealt with in the saga literature. *Sturlunga saga* opens with a story of a queen who bears two hideous sons and exchanges them with the son of a slave woman who is very handsome. As the children grow older, however, their true nature is shown, the twins are accepted as the queen's sons and in turn become great kings.⁸⁸ Here orthodoxy is proved right, after some initial doubt. By contrast, Rognvaldr Mœrjarl is proved wrong when stating that his son Einarr will hardly bring any honour to his kinsmen because his mother was a slave. Einarr actually drives the Vikings away from the Orkneys and becomes earl there and a mighty ruler.⁸⁹ In both cases, it is clear that the criterion is not legal right, but personal qualities. This is also the point of the story of Sverrir's rise to kingship in *Sverris saga*. His childhood and youth demonstrate that he has a royal character, quite different from his humble or clerical surroundings, which is finally explained when his mother reveals that he is actually a king's son.⁹⁰ When descendants of kings and great men should be preferred as kings or chieftains, the reason is not that such people have any legal claim, but that they come from the best breed and consequently will make the best leaders. The logic is the same as Carol Clover has pointed out regarding the relationship between men and women who – at least in some respects – are evaluated according to personal rather than gender specific criteria.⁹¹

Rígsþula contains no indications that the poet imagined that a slave or a commoner could rise above their status and become like the earl. In the account of the earl, however, the emphasis is clearly on personal qualities. Rígr's education of Jarl enables him to conquer land and thus to become a real aristocrat, and Konr ungr becomes a greater chieftain than his father and brothers because of his abilities and achievement. *Rígsþula* thus gives the same impression as the sagas, that "noble blood" is not important in itself but is a means to produce people who have the right qualities. Both in the sagas and in *Rígsþula* there seems to be a compromise between

⁸⁸ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kr. Kålund, I-II, Copenhagen 1906-11: I, 1-3; cf. Bagge, Society. 126 and n. 24.

⁸⁹ *Hkr.Hhárf.* 26; Bagge, *ibid.* However, Rognvaldr's statement should perhaps be understood, not as his actual opinion of his son, but as a provocation, intended to make Einarr want to disprove his father's prophecy (Mundal, Else: The Orkney Earl and Scald Torf-Einarr and his Poetry, in: *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, ed. Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris. Edinburgh 1993, 248-251).

⁹⁰ *Sverris saga*, ed. Gustav Indrebø, Oslo 1920, ch. 1-4; Bagge, *Gang Leader*, 52-61.

⁹¹ Clover, Carol: *Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, in: *Speculum* 68 (1993), 363-387.

heredity and personal achievement to the effect that commoners or low-born people cannot rise to aristocratic status, at least not directly, but that rank within the aristocratic class is mainly determined by personal qualities and achievement.⁹²

We may wonder whether *Rígsþula* is really a poem about estates, as it has been commonly understood. To von See, this is one of the arguments for a late date: an idea of estates could hardly exist in the small chieftancies of the Viking age.⁹³ However, the three figures described in the poem could all be easily found in a petty chieftaincy, which the poet actually seems to have in mind when stating that Jarl, after his raid, became the lord of eighteen farms or manors.⁹⁴ The connection between the raid and the land indicates that Jarl should be understood as a kind of independent prince rather than a great landowner within an organised kingdom. Further, apart from the title *jarl* which may possibly not be very significant if the poem actually dates from the Viking age, there are no formal criteria distinguishing between the *jarl* and the *karl*; no office, no symbols of dignity, no political structure determining the relationship between the classes. The *jarl* is a nobler character and enjoys a better life and a higher standard of living than the *karl*, and, above all, he is under a god's special protection. The poem may well reflect a wish among the aristocracy to form a permanent class, distinct from the rest of the population – after all, the *jarl* is intended as a example of a general category – but there is no evidence that the poet or his audience took such an arrangement for granted.

Thus, *Rígsþula* describes a society that fits very well in with what other sources tell us about the Viking age, a society of petty chieftains among whom the king is gradually emerging as the greatest and the most powerful; and a society where social status was the direct expression of wealth and personal qualities and the powerful felt no need to apologise for their prominence. However, many features of this picture continued to exist for centuries after the Viking age and may even to some extent have coexisted with the views expressed in *Kgs*. There is a vast gap between *Rígsþula* and *Kgs* in milieu and general outlook, although not necessarily in time. Nevertheless, when taking all arguments together, there is more to suggest an early than a late date. The society described in the poem fits very well in with the Viking age, although many of its features may also be found later. We cannot exclude the possibility of a date as late as the

⁹² Bagge, *Society*, 124-129.

⁹³ Von See, *Alter*, 93.

⁹⁴ “Réð einn at þat/ atjan buum”, *Rþ.* 38.

end of the twelfth century, but there is no firm evidence pointing in this direction.

From *Rígsþula* to *Konungs skuggsiá*

Social divisions, as represented by *Rígsþula*, *Kgs*, and the feudal doctrine of the three orders, must be understood in light of “real” social conditions and changes in them. But we cannot simply distinguish between “real” society on the one hand and “ideology” on the other. Society is not an objective structure which the historian can observe through a microscope; it is also what contemporary people thought about their own society, or, in other words, people’s actions and behaviour are not determined by how things “actually” were but by how they were perceived.⁹⁵ Still, we have to ask: perceived by whom? and further: can such perceptions be explained, at least partly, by certain “objective” conditions of whose importance for a particular perception the perceivers may themselves be unaware, but which the historian may observe?

While the whole philosophy of society expressed in the learned culture of the High Middle Ages, of which *Kgs* forms part, may have had relatively little influence outside learned circles, the tripartite or quadripartite division is potentially a powerful instrument in forming people’s ideas. In real life, there is a large number of social categories, in the Middle Ages as well as in contemporary society. Any kind of systematic social thought must simplify, and this simplification will, if generally accepted, express the really important social divisions. An ordinary priest may not be very different from a peasant – at least, there is an enormous difference between him and the bishop or pope – but the tripartite division nevertheless makes him a member of a higher estate and a representative of the ideas and values of this estate in local society. As has been pointed out particularly by Duby, the emergence of the tripartite division must be understood against the background of social change and the interests of the members of the two higher estates.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it is not simply a matter of instrumental use of an ideology; such divisions are also the expression of a deeper need for an ordered world⁹⁷ and influenced

⁹⁵ Duby, Georges: *Histoire sociale et idéologies des sociétés*, in: Jacques Le Goff; Pierre Nora (eds.): *Faire de l’histoire*, vol. 3, Paris 1975, 147-168. cf. Oexle, Dreiteilung, and id., *Deutungsschemata*, 67-76.

⁹⁶ Duby, *Les trois ordres*, 327ff. and *passim*.

⁹⁷ Douglas, Mary: *Purity and Danger*, London 1966, and Douglas, Mary: *Natural Symbols*, New York 1970.

by a long Christian tradition of the universe as governed by God and serving as a model for human society as well. At least at the later stages of its development, the tripartite division thus seems to be a good example of Bourdieu's concept *doxa*, an opinion or ideology originally developed by the leading members of society which has been universally accepted to the extent that it is no longer considered an opinion but a self-evident truth.⁹⁸

It is fairly easy to identify the interests involved in *Konungs skuggsiá's* division of society, i.e. those of the king and the central government around him. Its message is that society is hierarchically organised and consists of different estates who are mutually dependent on one another, and that this whole arrangement must be held together by a strong ruler. Last but not least, the relationship to the king determines where a person belongs. To some extent, this picture also corresponded to actual conditions. The ecclesiastical hierarchy had been established as an estate since around 1150. By contrast, the secular aristocracy was undergoing this process in the period of *Kgs*, having been divided into factions around various kings and pretenders during most of the period of the "civil wars" (1130-1240). The solution to these conflicts was not only the victory of one dynasty and the principle of individual succession, but also the unification of the aristocracy in the king's *hirð*. From the king's point of view, creating an *esprit de corps* among this group was essential to the stability of the government.

The controversial aspect of these new doctrines can be detected, not only through a comparison with *Rígsþula* or the saga literature, but in *Kgs* itself. When the Son asks why men who are prominent locally are willing to enter the king's service only as houscarles, he probably expresses common opinion. A man's position in society depended on his wealth, descent, and personal qualities, and even in the thirteenth century there must have been prominent men who preferred to be the first in their local communities to serving the king at his court. Nor was the idea that all rank and power was granted by the king and that the members of the aristocracy had to obey him unconditionally, generally accepted. Nevertheless, the existence of these doctrines in *Kgs* can be understood in light of contemporary conditions. By the mid-thirteenth century, the consequences of the great renewal of the aristocracy through the blood-letting during the civil wars and King Sverrir's (1177-1202) introduction of new men and families, promoted by the king and dependent on him, were still to be felt. In the long run, the aristocracy also did remain fairly

⁹⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre: *Le sens pratique*, Paris 1980: 44f.

loyal to the monarchy, because its individual members lacked the resources of their counterparts in the other Nordic countries. Uniting around the monarchy was the main road to success or even to the preservation of aristocratic status.

The doctrine of *Kgs* may also have been a challenge to parts of the commoners. As the treatment of the merchants shows, the author was lumping together widely different categories under the heading “people” or “commoners”. The sagas clearly indicate that there was a fairly thin line of division between the aristocracy and the most prominent commoners (*bændr*) – thinner than *Rígsþula* would let us suppose – and the ideas about aristocratic status and the commoners’ duty of obedience were hardly likely to appeal to this group.⁹⁹ *Kgs* clearly regards the “third estate” from above. The aim of the royalist ideology was to underline its subordinate position but also that it was an integrated part of the body politic which performed a necessary function for the rest of the body.

With the exception of some wealthy merchants and local magnates who might even have the option of joining the king’s service, this part of *Konungs skuggsiá*’s doctrine may not have been very controversial to the majority of the population whose reduction to the status of tenants may have been a long and slow process; a considerable part of them probably lived in various kinds of subordination to great lords during the Viking age, if not before. What was new and controversial in *Kgs*, was hardly subordination in itself, but the way it was organised; i.e. that instead of the individual peasants having a lord or patron above him, the peasants as an estate were subordinated to the king and the central government, represented by a local official. Consequently, the author had to insist, not only on subordination but on the common people being an estate with a particular function for society as a whole. While there is no doubt about the royal or aristocratic origin of this doctrine, nor about its usefulness to the social elite, it should not solely be understood as propaganda and illusion. The monarchy really needed the peasants, not only for cultivating the soil but also as a military force, and a number of royal ordinances show that the kings actively sought to protect them from exploitation and serve their interests. How far this policy succeeded, is another matter, but despite the deterioration of their power and status, the peasants were hardly at the mercy of the aristocracy.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Bagge, *Society*, 123-129, 137-145.

¹⁰⁰ There is an extensive literature on this subject and widely different opinions. For my own view, see Bagge, *Sverre: Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen*, in *Historisk tidsskrift* (Oslo) 65 (1986), 145-97, and id.: *State Building in Medieval Norway*, in: *Forum for utviklingsstudier* (1989), 129-46;

While the transition from *Rígsþula*'s view of society to that of *Kgs* can largely be understood, partly in light of actual social change, partly in light of the aims of the monarchy by the mid-thirteenth century, it cannot be regarded simply as a "reflection" of "objective conditions" or as subtle manipulation on the part of the governing elite. On the contrary, it is intimately linked to a long Christian tradition seeking order and meaning in the physical as well as the human world, and it may also have some connection to earlier divisions of society, such as that of *Rígsþula*. "Objective" social development influenced the way men regarded their own society, and the intellectuals around the king were in need of a doctrine that could promote the aims of the monarchy. However, they had to find the material to formulate this doctrine in a world-view the contemporary elite, to some extent even ordinary people, had in common and took for granted.

Did the author of *Kgs* and his milieu actually manage to transform their message into a *doxa*? Can a model of society similar to theirs be traced in later sources? Explicit discussions of society are rare after *Kgs*, but a basic division between clergy, lay aristocracy, and commoners seems to be implicit in the sources from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards. The clergy was even more clearly recognised as a separate estate by the fact that the king concluded a formal concordate with the Church in 1277. At about the same time, the secular aristocracy, formally defined as members of the king's *hirð*, got its own law and special privileges in the *Hirðskrá*. In this as well as in other sources, a sharp line of division was drawn between the aristocracy and the commoners. During the Later Middle Ages, this division became even more pronounced. The secular aristocracy developed into an aristocracy of birth which distinguished itself from the commoners through special titles and symbols.¹⁰¹ The council of the realm (*rikis ráð/rigsraad*) which, during the period of unions with the other Nordic countries, became the highest political institution of the country, consisted of a number of prelates with *ex officio* membership, plus members of the highest secular aristocracy, appointed by the king. The official political documents from

cf. also Holmsen, 159-180 and Helle, Knut: Norway in the High Middle Ages, in: Scandinavian Journal of History 6 (1981), 161-189. For a different view, stressing the exploitation of the peasants, see Lunden, Kåre: Det norske kongedømmet i høgmellomalderen, Oslo 1978 (Studier i historisk metode 13).

¹⁰¹ Benedictow, Ole Jørgen: Den norske adel in senmiddelalderen, in: Den nordiske adel i senmiddelalderen. Struktur, funktioner og internordiske relationer (Rapporter til Det nordiske historikermøde i København 1971), Copenhagen 1971, 9-44: 21-23.

the fifteenth century onwards do not systematically list the three estates, but pay particular attention to the clerical and secular aristocracy and clearly implies a distinction between them and the commoners.¹⁰² We know less of how the common people regarded these distinctions, but we may note that despite a number of protests and even rebellions against unpopular royal officials and taxes that were considered unjust, there is little to indicate opposition against the system as a whole. The common people, consisting mainly of peasants, most probably accepted their role as commoners ruled by their betters of the clerical and the secular aristocracy.

The transition from *Rígsþula* to *Kgs* is not only the expression of a social change but also of an intellectual one. In contrast to *Rígsþula*, *Kgs* does not confine itself to depicting different quality, status, wealth, and power as seen from the top of society, it expresses an explicitly developed ideology that can be opposed to others. Admittedly, a poem is not easily compared to the kind of learned discussion represented by works like *Kgs* and *The Speech against the Bishops*. Poetry is not normally the place for systematic thinking and discussion. And for obvious reasons only poetry has been preserved from the pre-Christian – i.e. pre-literate – period. With this reservation we may nevertheless point out some differences that are

¹⁰² Thus, in his coronation oath from 1450, King Christian I. promises to protect Holy Church, including clerics of different rank, and further knights and squires and various categories of commoners (“sanctam ecclesiam Dei, episcopos, prelatos et omnes personas ecclesiasticas, milites et militares, burgenses, mercatores, rusticos et communitates per totum regnum nostrum constitutos”). Towards the end, referring to his forthcoming election charter (“haandfestning”), the king promises to issue such provisions as will benefit “prelatis et militaribus” (Norges Gamle Love, 2 rk. II no. 17). By contrast, the two older coronation oaths that have been preserved, Magnús Erlingsson’s of 1163/64 (Latinske dokument til norsk historie, ed. Eirik Vandvik, Oslo 1959, No. 8) and Eiríkr Magnússon’s of 1280 (Diplomatarium norvegicum I no. 69), only list the clergy and the people in general. The election charters – the oldest of which dates from 1449 – generally give the same impression as Christian’s oath, mainly containing provisions serving the interests of the clerical and secular aristocracy which clearly form estates distinct from the rest of the population. Thus, Christian I. refers to his election by the archbishop, bishops, knights and squires, i.e. the council of the realm, and further “free men”, burghers, and the common people (“her erchebiscoppen, biscooper, riddere oc swenne, rirckens [sic!] raad i Norge, ffrriimen, kïepstadz men oc menige almwuge”, NGL 2 rk. II no. 3 a), while his son and successor Hans in 1483 confines himself to mentioning only the two higher estates which constituted the council of the realm (NGL 2 rk. III no. 1).

probably significant for the development from the Viking age until the thirteenth century.

First, there is the difference between appearances and some kind of inner structure. In *Rígsþula*, the social differences are visualised; the “identity” of a particular status group is immediately visible, from clothes, skin, appearances, living conditions, and way of life. A certain abstraction is certainly involved; the poet confines himself to three kinds of individuals while he neglects intermediate types, and he very aptly picks out the characteristics that are best able to give the “essence” of the particular category. By contrast, the author of *Kgs* seems to think that appearances are deceptive and that the real social differences are of a deeper nature. The difference between the merchant or the wealthy farmer on the one hand and the *hirðmadr* on the other does not depend on cost or quality of food and clothes, but on the two estates’ different relationship to the king. The king’s own dignity is not expressed through his bodily strength and beauty or his fine clothes, but through his relationship to God and the character of the office he holds. In so far as external matters are considered important – and *Kgs* is actually very detailed regarding dress and manners – the author’s point is that there are particular ways of dressing and behaving at the king’s court which differ from the rest of society. Thus, such external matters are not the expression of the individual’s wealth or good taste; they serve as a symbol of membership in a particular, exclusive group.¹⁰³ In a similar way, the symbols of the king’s office, crown, scepter etc., are emphasised in contemporary sources, written or material, rather than, as earlier, his beauty or personal wealth and dignity.¹⁰⁴

Second, no alternative to *Rígsþula*’s society is presented or even hinted at. Rígr finds three widely different couples, and despite his involvement in their propagation, he leaves them essentially as he has found them. The only change is the emergence of Konr ungr which is, however, more a question of individual promotion than of social change; there is no mention of monarchy as a new institution which changes society. Neither does *Kgs* present alternatives to its own view in the same sense as we are used to when discussing different political ideologies or programmes. The author is not a representative of a political ideology or a political party trying to convince his “electors” by empirical or practical

¹⁰³ Bagge, Sverre: The Norwegian Monarchy in the Thirteenth Century, in: Anne Duggan (ed.): Kings and Kingship in Medieval Europe, London 1993, 159-177: 168-172.

¹⁰⁴ Monclair, Hanne: Forestillinger om kongen i norsk middelalder gjennom ritualene og symbolene rundt ham, Oslo 1995 (KULTs skriftserie no. 44).

arguments that his ideas are to be preferred to those of his rivals. He appeals to an eternal order, willed by God, and presents the alternative as chaos and injustice. This alternative, however, is not simply a society where everything is wrong, but conforms fairly well to the old order, taken for granted in *Rígsþula* as well as in large parts of the saga literature, which the contemporary monarchy sought to change. It is difficult to imagine a discussion about different ways of organising society in Viking age or early medieval Norway, in the same way as it is difficult to imagine a utopia, with the possible exception of *Völuspá's* description of the new world after Ragnarok. *Kgs* has elements of both, a precise contrast between two social orders as well as an ideal organisation that the author wants to introduce.

This difference is related to a third one, the explicit and systematic argument of *Kgs* as opposed to the narrative of *Rígsþula*. The latter should most probably be understood as an evocation of the social differences that were already well-known to the audience and for which no elaborate arguments were necessary. The poet reminds his audience about what they all know, emphasises particular points, and presents the whole in a poetic language intended to delight his audience as well as to show the dignity of the subject he is treating. By contrast, the author of *Kgs* deduces his social doctrine from first principles, the Christian understanding of the world as the expression of God's will and of man's role in it. He knows that his message will meet with opposition or incomprehension and therefore carefully selects the arguments he finds most likely to convince his audience. The difference between the two works is of course closely connected to the two authors' different "political programmes" but also to different kinds of learning and intellectual style. *Rígsþula* belongs to an oral culture; *Kgs* to a literate one. Although one should not characterise oral cultures as primitive and pre-logical,¹⁰⁵ the level of abstraction and systematic argument in *Kgs* is more likely to be found in a literate than an oral culture. Not only script in itself is important in this respect but also the impulses introduced into

¹⁰⁵ For the view that the introduction of writing was a great divide in the intellectual evolution of mankind, see Goody, Jack: *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge 1977, and above all Ong, Walter: *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. London 1982. A somewhat more sceptical attitude in Bloch, Maurice: *Literacy and Enlightenment*, in: Karen Schousboe; Mogens Trolle Larsen (eds.): *Literacy and Society*, Copenhagen 1989, 15-39. I agree with Bloch that literacy does not necessarily mean more systematic or coherent thought or greater individual freedom, but it nevertheless opens up a lot of possibilities that are difficult to imagine in a purely oral society.

Norway through Christianity and the contact with the European literate culture. Further, an important social consequence of this development was the emergence of a literate intellectual elite who considered their learning superior to that of the illiterate masses, as expressed in the words in *Konungs skuggsiá* about the wisest man being the one who had taken his learning from books.¹⁰⁶ Although no real scholastic, the author had sufficient bookish learning and intellectual training to know explicit models of society, morality, and politics that were different from actual conditions in Norway and use them to formulate the reform programme he expresses in his work. There is thus a close connection between the development of an explicit political programme and the introduction of a literate culture. Not only the *content* of the social doctrine of *Konungs skuggsiá* is new compared to *Rígsþula*, but the very existence of a doctrine, based on systematic arguments and rejecting alternative solution.

¹⁰⁶ “þvi at þar er raunar at alra annarra er vit minna en þeirra er af bokum taca monvit” (*Kgs* 4⁴¹-5¹).