

PRE-CHRISTIAN SCANDINAVIAN ROYALTY. FROM THE LEGENDARY KINGS TO THE 11TH CENTURY KINGSHIP

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Abstract:

This article focuses, as the title already expresses it, on the Pre-Christian Scandinavian Royalty, not from a political point of view, but from the perspective of what we nowadays call ideology of power. This means that we will try to identify the whole system of beliefs regarding the ideal ruler and the concepts that support his right to the throne and to the exercise of his authority . The ideas used to build the image of the perfect kingship in the pagan Scandinavia continued to exist long after the difficult process of christianisation, thing which meant in fact that the conversion was never fully completed and that this area remained distinct from the rest of the continent during the Middle Ages and even later. Even if the article refers to the Northern monarchy up to the 11th century, we included in our references a 13th century work allegedly written by the king Håkon Håkonsson, “Konungs Skuggsja”, to show this particular aspect: the fact that the pagan ideas were deeply rooted in the endemic society, the fact that they still shaped the concept of the perfect king and that there was no breach between the Christian period and the previous one, but rather a balanced continuity.

Rezumat:

Acest articol se concentrează, așa cum o exprimă și titlul, pe regalitatea scandinavă precreștină, dar nu dintr-un punct de vedere politic, ci din perspectiva a ceea ce numim noi astăzi ideologia puterii. Aceasta însemna că könungr (termen din vechea limbă nordică ce îl desemna pe rege) avea un statut special în cadrul ierarhiei sociale și, mai mult decât atât, avea anumite responsabilități în conformitate cu sistemul de credințe păgân. Ideile folosite pentru a construi imaginea regalității perfecte în Scandinavia păgână au continuat să existe mult timp după complicatul proces de creștinare, lucru care a însemnat, în esență, că fenomenul de convertire nu a fost niciodată deplin și că această zonă a rămas diferită de restul continentului pe parcursul Evului Mediu și chiar mai târziu. Deși articolul se referă la monarhia nordică până în secolul al XI-lea, am inclus în referințele noastre și o lucrare de secol XIII, atribuită regelui Håkon Håkonsson, „Konungs Skuggsja”, pentru a arăta

întocmai acest aspect: faptul că ideile păgâne erau profund înrădăcinate în societatea autohtonă, că ele conturau în continuare conceptul de rege perfect și că nu a existat nicio ruptură între perioada creștină și cea anterioară, ci mai degrabă o echilibrată continuitate.

Keywords: ideology of power, pagan Scandinavia, kingship, sacred responsibilities

Before going straight to the subject, we thought it appropriate to explain the two concepts composing the central perspective of this article: „ideology” and „power”. Of course, there were many books written on these concepts, because they evolved along with the political thinking and they were used to legitimise every single form of authority, be it entitled to power or not, but we will stick to the basic definitions as found in the Explicative Romanian Dictionary and in Encyclopædia Britannica. The first source defines the ideology as “the aggregate of philosophical, moral, religious ideas and conceptions that reflect, in a theoretical manner, the interests and aspirations of certain categories during an era” and as “the totality of ideas and concepts that compose the theoretical part of a current, system etc”¹, while the latter defines it as “a system of ideas that tries to explain and to change the world at the same time. [...] Frequently, the power is exerted according to certain ideas or beliefs that sustain it”². As far as the last definition is concerned, it already makes the connection between the two terms, making obvious the fact that often, any form of power or authority need the support provided by an ideological frame. The second word in our key phrase is “power”, explained by the Romanian Explicative Dictionary, among others, as “authority, governance, domination”³, while the Encyclopædia does not give us a certain definition of it as a political concept. Associating the definitions and extending them to the phrase “ideology of power”, this key concept reveals itself, briefly, as the system of ideas and beliefs that support and make legitimate a form of government – in our case, the Scandinavian kingship. We must point out the fact that during the Middle Ages, the concept was never used, being a modern invention. Nowadays, it is analysed from the perspective of a body of symbols and metaphors that constantly evolved during the history.

The historical context in which we can talk about the development of this system of ideas concerning the *könungr* is related to the centralization of the royal power, to the manner in which the succession to the throne was made, to the exercise of authority and last, but not least, to the limits of the royal power. To imagine the growth of the royal power in the Danish and Norwegian territories⁴,

¹Academia Română. Institutul de Lingvistică „Iorgu Iordan”, *DEX-Dicționarul Explicativ al Limbii Române*, Ediția a II-a (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 1998), 470.

²***, *Enciclopedia Universală Britannica*, Vol. 8 (București: 2010), 21.

³DEX, 875.

⁴ At that time, there was no Denmark or Norway, but rather scattered territories that were further to be unified into a single kingdom.

we have to cast our attention on medieval Iceland, where the chieftains (*goðar*) did not have territorial power, but a personal one. People would willingly join the ranks of their liegemen. Slowly and in the context provided by the fights between the *goðar*, new leaders made themselves known: the so-called *rikir*, who began to acquire territorial power as well. The king, as a dominant factor in the social hierarchy, emerged by successively overpowering the other chieftains: in the Danish territories, Godfried was allegedly the first to assert himself as *könungr*, while in the Norwegian ones the medieval written tradition mentions Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair).⁵

The monarchy was both elective and hereditary and the responsibilities were more of a supernatural nature than of a practical one; the pagan king had to be arbitrator and a peace-maker and he did not have legislative responsibilities, these being carried out by the *þing* (an assembly that integrated the regional chieftains – *jarlar* and some of the free men). The king only assembled the army and the fleet and received the legation of a foreign kingdom.⁶ Even in the 13th-century work, *Könungs Skuggsjá*, written during the Conflict of Investitures⁷ in Norway, it is clearly stated that the Norwegian royalty did not have absolute power and the people played an important role in the government.⁸ It is not very clear in what manner did the medieval people assumed the functions of this assembly, but it is certain that the king's authority was limited during the Iron Age (which, according to most scholars, extended in Scandinavia until christianisation) and this state of things continued until the Middle Ages. The election of the new *könungr* also took place at the *þing* and it was done using a practice called *vaþnatak* ("hitting the weapons"). Saxo Grammaticus, in his monumental work *Gesta Danorum*, describes the process of election as following: "The ancients, when they were to choose a king, were wont to stand on stones planted in the ground, and to proclaim their votes, in order to foreshadow from the steadfastness of the stones that the deed would be lasting."⁹ We may see here

⁵ Niels Lund, "Scandinavia c. 700-1066", in Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. II 700-900 (Cambridge Histories Online, Cambridge University Press, 2008, hosted by www.4shared.com/office/fw94T8a_/new_cambridge_medieval_history.html, accessed March 5th, 2013), 205-206.

⁶ Lucien Musset, *Invaziile*, Vol. II *Al doilea asalt asupra Europei creștine*, Traducere de Ovidiu Cristea (București: Corint, 2002), 96.

⁷ The Conflict of Investitures was the struggle for supremacy over the Christian world between the papacy and the German kings, at the end of the 11th century and in the first half of the next one. The pretext was the appointment of bishops by the king and the prohibition cast on this act by Pope Gregory VII. This important historical phenomena extended in the Norwegian kingdom as well but here the struggle ended with the victory of the lay authority over the Church.

⁸ ***, *The King's Mirror*, Translated from the Old Norwegian by Laurence Marcellus Larson (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1917), 44.

⁹ Saxo Grammaticus, *The Nine Books of Danish History*, In two volumes, Vol. I, Translated by Oliver Elton (London: The Norrena Society, 1905), 92.

that the nature of this process does not have only a legislative nature, but also a divinatory one. After being elected, the heir was bound to take a vow related to the main goals of his reign. For example, it is said that Sveinn tjuguskæg (Forkbeard), after succeeding to the Danish throne after the death of his father Haraldr blátǫnn (Bluetooth), sworn that he would conquer England, which he actually did in 1013.¹⁰

After these observations have been made, we can now proceed to the actual subject of the article: the ideology of power, as we identified it in the reign of Scandinavian pagan kings. To understand the whole system of manifestations behind the Norse royalty, we have to cast our attention to Iceland's most famous chronicler: Snorri Sturluson. He situates the beginnings of the Norwegian pagan ruling dynasty - Ynglingar - at Uppsala (on Swedish ground), an important royal, political and religious centre related to the *Svear* (old name for Swedish people) kings in Birka (in Svealand). The scholars agree on the fact that there, they practiced a religious function, while the others appeared to be dramatically diminished.¹¹ Sturluson, as we have previously mentioned, traces the beginnings of the Norwegian Ynglingar dynasty back to this area in which, he said, the first to rule was Oðinn himself. Allegedly, his responsibilities were both religious and judicial.¹² They will be transmitted to the later kings as well who will consequently have odinic attributions, with roots in the king himself who was deified as a result of his deeds.¹³ What is more important is the fact that the throne was occupied, after Oðinn, by Freyr (the Norse god of fertility; in *Heimskringla* he is also called Yngvi). His union with Gerð, a female Jotnar (mythological creatures seen as the main enemies of the gods), gave birth to Fjölfnir, the first of the Ynglings.

On one hand, this fact was essential for the attributions of the future kings, who became responsible for the crops, whether good or bad, for the poverty or good fortune of their people and for the natural disasters. These were inseparable from the *könungur's* duty towards the gods: offering sacrifices at the feasts. For example, the Swedish king Domald was faced during his rule with a famine that

¹⁰ Henry Bedford-Jones, *The Cross and the Hammer: A Tale of the Days of the Vikings*, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1912), 7.

¹¹ Thomas Lindkvist, "Kings and Provinces in Sweden", in Knut Helle, ed., *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, Vol. I *Prehistory to 1520*, (Cambridge Histories Online, Cambridge University Press, 2008, hosted by www.4shared.com/office/Ib-k39Rr/cambridge_history_of_scandinav.html, accessed October 12th, 2013), 222.

¹² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla (The Stories of the Kings of Norway Called the Round World)*, Vol. I, Translated by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1883), 12.

¹³ According to Snorri Sturluson's Christian outlook, the Norse pagan pantheon was made up of real characters who were deified due to their actions. His intent was to explain the beliefs of his forefathers without demonizing the objects of their worshipping (as the Church used to do after converting new peoples).

could be tamed not even by the offerings of the people. As a result, they decided to sacrifice the king himself.¹⁴ Another example provided by the chronicler is that of Óláfr Ingjaldsson, who offered few sacrifices to the gods. He was also faced with bad crops and famine and the outcome was exactly the same: he was sacrificed in the name of Óðinn.¹⁵ In our opinion, these two cases are relevant both for the nature of the pagan Scandinavian kingship and for the responsibilities of a royal leader. As far as the Norse mentality was concerned, bad crops were caused by the indign behavior of the *könungr* toward the gods. Not only his function was taken away, but also his life, managing to carry out postmortem what he could not carry out during his life. A similar idea can be found in the 13th century Norwegian work, *Könungs Skuggsjá*. It is said there that the rule of the iniquity, as a consequence of breaking the laws and passing-by the right punishments, can cause chaos, but also a decline in crops¹⁶

On the other hand, the descent from Fjölfnir – the result of the unnatural union between a god (symbol of the universe) and a Jotnar symbol of chaos) – marks the exceptional origins of the ruling dynasty, revealed through destinies always controlled by both Eros and Thanatos, precisely like the rulings, while the king's good luck (*gipta*) would be scarred by dark elements.¹⁷ An example to illustrate the idea is provided, again, by *Heimskringla*, in which the deaths of the Ynglings until Halfdan svartí (the Black) – Haraldr harfagr's father – are presented as ignoble, humiliating, often in dishonourable contexts. Still, keeping this genealogical line in plain Christian period shows us that the new monotheistic religion changed, in some aspects, the ideology of power (God becomes the new source of authority) but it could not profoundly change the mentalities. Regarding the fact that the gods were initially demonized and turned into historical characters later, the only source of mythical legitimacy for the kings, the only way to justify their authority by connecting the past to the present remained their descent from the giants (Jotnar), untouched by *furor christiani*. As far as this idea is concerned, the legitimacy was made not only from a dynastic perspective, but also from a territorial one. For example, certain Scandinavian sources (*Heimskringla*, *Hálfðanar þáttur svarta*) tell us that, after the death of Halfdan svartí, his body was split whether in three, whether in four pieces that were then buried in different mounds, inside the territory ruled by the deceased king.¹⁸ Halfdan's son, Haraldr

¹⁴ Sturluson, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁶ ***, *The King's Mirror* [...], 202.

¹⁷ Gro Steinsland, "Origin Myths and Rulership. From the Viking Age Ruler to the Ruler of Medieval Historiography: Continuity, Transformations and Innovations", in Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal and Ian Beuermann, ed., *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

harfagr was the traditional forefather of a new dynasty – Hárfagri –, founded by conquering Norway (according to the *sögur*¹⁹). He justified his actions using his affiliation not only to the Ynglingar ruling family on paternal line, but also to the Dane dynasty Skjöldungar on maternal line. The founder of the latter was Óðinn himself.²⁰

Regarding *gipta*, the *könungr*'s good luck, we have found a historical and ideological pattern: the king assumed it from the subdued chieftains in the legendary process of territorial unification.²¹²² Later, during the process of christianization, it was rendered to Jesus Christ.²³ Therefore, *gipta* had been gradually transferred to an authority higher than the one before it: the *könungr* gained it from the other chieftains by defeating them in successive battles; Jesus Christ would later be endowed with warrior-like features, consequently absorbing the king's good luck. Hence, *gipta* appears to be a quality transmitted to leaders only and exclusively through conquest.

Now that we have clarified the genealogical problem of the Swedish and Norwegian ruling dynasties as the Scandinavian medieval written sources present it, we need to move further to the most important attribution of a king: the religious one. In Iceland, the leaders of the *Alþing*²⁴ (*goðar*) had both religious and political responsibilities. The latter seemed to issue naturally from the former. As far as the two kingdoms (before, the many petty kingdoms on their territory) are concerned – the Swedish and the Norwegian ones – their situation is exactly the same: the kings, as descendants of the Ynglingar dynasty at Uppsala, therefore as direct descendants of Óðinn and Freyr, combined in a single person the two functions: high priest and political leader. Uppsala itself was a higher expression of this principle: it was both an administrative and a cult centre. The remembrance of its famous temple made it through the centuries, as seen in Adam of Bremen's work, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*.²⁵ This idea can be best illustrated by the temple in Mæri (Sparbyggjafylki district, Norway),

¹⁹ The plural form of word *saga*.

²⁰ Claus Krag, "The Early Unification of Norway", in Knut Helle, ed., 187.

²¹ I called the process legendary because the unification of the territories by Haraldr harfagr in the 9th and 10th century was registered only in the medieval chronicles and the *sögur*. The historical reality is different: the act was the work of the first Christian kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson at the end of the 10th century and in the first half of the next one.

²² Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Kings, Earls and Chieftains. Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland, c. 900-1300", in Gro Steinsland *et al.*, 81.

²³In fact, the image of Christ was adapted to the Scandinavian particularities in order to make Christianity more appealing to the locals: the king's *gipta* became Christ's grace and he was portrayed not as a peace-maker, but rather as a warrior who challenged the Roman authorities.

²⁴ The equivalent of the *þing* we have already talked about.

²⁵ Bertha S. Philpotts, "Temple Administration and Chieftainship in Pre-Christian Norway and Iceland". *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*, Vol. VIII (1913-1914), 264-266.

which was allegedly administered by a king who fell in battle in 866²⁶. Another example is king Turges, recorded in the Irish Annals for settling in Armagh. He transformed the local cathedral in a pagan temple, with him being the high priest. Generally, the kings in Uppsala had an important ritualistic role during the public sacrifices²⁷: both *Heimskringla* and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* mention the fact that the sacrifice was performed by the *könungr* himself. This was a source of legitimacy as well and a way of permanently renewing his binding with the gods not only for his own benefit, but also for the well-being of his people: a king unable of offering them happiness was to pay the ultimate price (as we have seen in the case of Domald and Óláfr Ingjaldsson). Some kings in Svealand continued to officiate pagan rituals even after the conversion to Christianity, as the region became known for its hostility toward a centralized, Christian monarchy. This is the case of king Inge who, according to *Hervararsaga*, was dethroned by the pagan Blot-Sven (around 1080) because he refused to perform public sacrifices in the temple at Swáríki (probably Uppsala).²⁸

As a rule, the pre-Christian Scandinavian kings were portrayed having more numerous qualities than their people, while the common ones were often more profound. This observation becomes obvious after a careful lecture of the sources. For example, Saxo Grammaticus portrays the Dane kings as the embodiment of wisdom, bravery or battle skill. In our opinion, the most representative case could be that of Skjöld (the founder of the Skjöldung dynasty) who, at a young age, managed to kill a "monstrous" bear. Skjöld was also incredibly tall, had a perfect physical constitution and a strength which exceeded that of normal men.²⁹ But the *könungr* had to be morally remarkable as well. Among the moral traits, we can distinguish as representative wisdom and generosity.

If the former must be proven only in certain situation, the latter must be proven everyday by the pagan ruler. In our opinion, by doing so, he could direct the foreign policy according to his own interests and, as far as the ideology of power is concerned, he would reassert his status as descendant of the gods. Furthermore, he would secure himself with the loyalty of his court, paid from the war prize. In this way, the more generous a king was, the more friends he had; once they accepted to be bound to the ruler's person, they became *vinsælir* (later, in the Christian period, *hirð*). The liability of being generous continued to exist in the next centuries: the second major Christian king, Óláfr Haraldsson (who later

²⁶ Ibid., 272-275.

²⁷ Olof Sundquist, "An Arena for Higher Powers, Cult Buildings and Rulers in the Late Iron Age and the Early Medieval Period in the Mälars Region", in Gro Steinsland *et al.*, 166.

²⁸ Thomas Lindkvist, "The Emergence of Sweden", in Stefan Brink and Neil Price, ed., *The Viking World*, (Taylor&Francis e-Library, 2008, hosted by <http://ge.tt/6OPFNpe/v/8R1>, accessed March 25th, 2013), 672.

²⁹ Saxo Grammaticus, 93-94.

became St. Olaf, Norway's patron saint), would become *rex perpetuus Norvegiae*³⁰ precisely for this reason³¹: the goodness shown toward his court and the priests. The king's gifts were mainly weapons and pieces of jewelry: helmets, swords and bracelets with rich ornamentations (animal motifs in general) that expressed the rank of the receiver.³²

Also, the war campaigns in themselves were considered a way of assertion in pagan Scandinavia, because they represented a constant source of wealth and, as a result, a form of approaching the king's kinsmen and of making them more loyal.

At a material level, the ideology of power was manifested by ostentatiously exposing the king's wealth. This fact is also narrated in *Könungs Skuggsja*: "It was the custom of old at the time when the royal office was established and enjoyed its greatest splendor, that, when a king no longer stood in fear of his enemies but sat in complete security among his henchmen, he selected a splendid house where he could set up his high-seat, which was also to serve as his judgement seat; and his throne he adorned with every form of royal decoration. Then the king sat down upon it and observed in what glory and splendor he sat". Later on, the work provides us with an insight of the king's duties: he must be a fair judge and in his spare time he must "meditate on the source of holy wisdom and study with attentive care all its ways and paths"³³. What we find remarkable here is the perspective of the author (presumably the medieval king Håkon Håkonsson) regarding the material goods: they are a result of the ruler's fight for power (whether he eliminated his opponents in battle or not) and a way of maintaining a balance in his realm (making use of his skills as a judge).

As far as the king's residence is concerned, the archeological findings are the ones that can shed light on this matter. They distinguished themselves even by geographical setting: the halls were placed in a central locus, predominantly on a high cliff connected to the main lines of communications (commercial routes mostly) and they could be seen from the public roads.³⁴

Connected to the material manifestation of the ideology of power are also the Jelling runestone monuments in Denmark. Being remarkable in size, their symbolic value is clear: they stand for keeping the local identity, tradition and continuity despite christianisation. They were raised in the 10th century by the first Christian king (actually, the first who adopted Christianity in his native territory), Haraldr blåtōnn (Bluetooth) Gormsson, in the memory of his parents,

³⁰ Latin phrase for "Norway's Eternal King".

³¹ Sigurdsson, 79.

³² Bjørn Myhre, "The Iron Age", in Knut Helle, ed., 83.

³³ ***, *The King's Mirror* [...], 298-299.

³⁴ Sundquist, 188.

king Gorm the Old and his wife Thyra. They are also a symbol of a new beginning: a new dynasty and a new religion.³⁵ Even so, the pagan nature of these runestones remains obvious both through the runic inscriptions and through the grandeur of the monuments.³⁶

Conclusions

In this paper we have tried to identify the main components of an entire system of symbols and beliefs used to create the metaphysical image of the ideal ruler in pagan Scandinavia. Our research, based mostly on written sources, has revealed the fact that the key-idea behind the right to power is the *könungr's* descentance from the gods Óðinn and Freyr. As a result, he assumes some of their attributes as judge, high priest and fertility agent (the good or bad crops are his direct responsibility) and he acts as a mediator between the deities and the people. Even so, his authority is not absolute and he can pay the ultimate price in case of failure.

Furthermore, starting from the subject of this article, the research can be extended to other matters regarding pagan and early Christian Scandinavia as well. Given the fact that this period has been somewhat neglected, it would be useful to focus on the remains of paganism after the conversion to Christianity at every level of the social hierarchy and also on the forms of pagan resistance after the 11th century.

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³⁵ Haraldr Gormsson assumes the christianisation of Denmark, but his statement is not true. Until the 11th century, the vast majority of the Danes remained pagan (some of them even in the next period).

³⁶ Else Roesdahl, "The Emergence of Denmark and the Reign of Harald Bluetooth", in Stefan Brink and Neil Price, ed., *op. cit.*, 657.

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