CONSTANT CRISIS

Deconstructing the Civil Wars in Norway, ca. 1180-1220

Hans Jacob Orning

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Map of Norway and sections of Denmark and Sweden. Shown are principal towns and regions in Norway, ca. 1180–1220.

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Acknowledgments and Abbreviations

This book is an offshoot of a research project at Center for Advanced Studies in Oslo. In 2017–18 my colleague Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and I were granted funding for a project called "The Civil Wars in Medieval Scandinavia in a Comparative Perspective." The funding allowed us to gather a group of scholars for one academic year in the marvelous surroundings of an old villa in Oslo set far away from any mundane disturbances. The group of scholars assembled there for shorter or longer intervals—Frederik Rosen, Henrik Vigh, Jenny Benham, Helle Vogt, Øyvind Østerud, Gerd Althoff, Stephen D. White, Kim Esmark, Bjørn Poulsen and Lars Hermanson—provided a stimulating environment for discussing civil wars in medieval Scandinavia and comparing them with civil wars in other medieval settings as well as with modern civil wars. The present book expands the themes and timeframe of the article "Constant Crisis in Norway, 1202–08," which was published as part of the project in the anthology *New Perspectives on the "Civil Wars" in Medieval Scandinavia* (Brepols 2024).

Together with Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, I also led a project on related themes, funded by the Research Council of Norway, in which Max Naderer, Hilde Nysether and Louisa Taylor were employed. All these scholars deserve huge thanks for inspiration and ideas that were vital for the emergence of this book. Special thanks go to Øyvind Østerud, with whom I co-wrote the book *Krig uten Stat* (War without the State; translation into English forthcoming), which provided me with many ideas and inspiration for this book; to Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, who has been my closest colleague for the last decade; and to Knut Arstad, who with his profound knowledge of this period has read and commented on a full draft of this book.

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OSLO, 14 JULY 2023

Abbreviations

Bögl = *Böglunga sögur*
Hák = *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*
Sv = *Sverris saga*

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> For us Birchlegs, it will always remain so that we will have a threat hanging over us, and it will not be long between each time (*Sverris saga*).[1]

> And if it be said that these are strange means—to hear constantly the cries of the people furious against the Senate, and of a Senate declaiming against the people, to see the populace rush tumultuously through the streets, close their houses, and even leave the city of Rome—I reply that all these things can alarm only those who read of them, and that every free state ought to afford the people the opportunity of giving vent, so to say, to their ambition; and above all those republics which on important occasions have to avail themselves of these very people (Machiavelli, *Discourses*).[2]

Most people associate conflict with trouble and disorder. This is understandable, as the term is derived from Latin *com* = together + *fligere* = to strike. Medieval historians are no different from anyone else, categorizing periods of violent conflicts as civil war, rebellion, anarchy and so on. The present book, however, will argue that this negative view of conflict is incomplete and flawed. Conflicts are very often productive, serving as a vehicle to stimulate growth and strengthen social order. The principle that

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[1] "Þann veg vill vera um oss Birkibeina at nökkurr ótti vill yfir oss vera, og verðr þess skammt í milli" (Sv 147).

[2] *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, part 1, 4.

competition breeds an environment where "best practice" wins out has been acknowledged in economics ("the rise of capitalism"), in non–violent politics ("the rise of democracy") and in inter–state rivalry ("the rise of the west"). However, applying the same principle to violent intra–state conflict has been eschewed. Since Hobbes, political theorists have shared an aversion to violence performed by parties other than the state, as non–state violence automatically implies an encroachment on the monopolist institution of violence (as famously formulated by Max Weber). It is the contention of this book that a distinction along these lines is counterproductive if we are to understand the significance of violent conflict historically. The period of study is ca. 1180–1220 in Norway, with a particular focus on the interval 1196–1208. My main goal is to show that this period, which has usually been considered as a violent climax of the Norwegian "civil wars," was not a sociopolitical breakdown, but to the contrary was an interval where struggles between opposing parties constituted a balance of power which was more stable than it seems, and which served to contain violence. Moreover, I argue that conflicts did not play out only on a national / dynastic level, but on multiple levels ranging from local to trans–national ones.

In order to approach the issue of conflict from another angle I will introduce the concept "constant crisis," which I have developed in cooperation with the Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh.[3] A constant crisis is in a way a contradiction in terms, since a crisis is usually conceived of as a rupture, whereas here it is envisaged as permanent. Yet it is precisely such a dissonance I want to highlight by applying the term, as it brings out two salient properties of conflicts in Norway around 1200: first, that a society of endemic power struggles has a system to it, though one which differs from those found in states / monarchies by having a balance of power—not sovereignty—as its basic principle; and second, that the permanence of such struggles makes these rivalries a "normal" occurrence—not a welcome condition, but still one in which it is possible to maneuver and make plans and strategies.

The historical context of this investigation is the "civil wars" in Norway, which raged from 1130 to 1240. In Norwegian

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[3] See Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity"; Orning and Vigh, "Constant crisis."

historiography, this period has been viewed as a decisive transitional phase leading toward the formation of a stronger state in the later thirteenth century.[4] The period can be divided into three phases. The first one, from 1130 to 1161, was characterized by feuding between loosely structured parties. It started when King Sigurd Jorsalfare died in 1130, and conflict broke out between his son Magnus and Harald gille, an alleged brother of Sigurd. They fought five battles, leading to the downfall of them both in 1136. Subsequently, the three sons of Harald gille ruled together, ending up as bitter enemies in the 1150s. One son, Inge, managed to kill his brothers before he himself lost his life in 1161. In the second phase, from 1161 to 1208, hostilities intensified, and group formation became more stable. Erling skakke established a *flokkr*—an armed group—with his son Magnus as king, which managed to drive out rival claimants. Father and son bolstered their position through an alliance with the Church—epitomized in Magnus' coronation in 1163/64, the first such coronation in Scandinavia. After 1177, they were challenged by King Sverre Sigurdsson, leading to intense fighting until Erling and Magnus lost their lives in battle in 1179 and 1184 respectively. However, struggles continued, and from 1196 onwards they were conducted between two armed groups: King Sverre's Birchlegs (*birkibeinar*) and the Croziers (*baglar*). In the final phase from 1208 to 1240, the Birchleg group was clearly dominant and fighting more intermittent. A peace treaty between Birchlegs and Croziers was concluded in 1208 in which the Birchlegs had the upper hand. However, rivalries persisted with the Croziers (until 1217), later with the Ribbungs (1221–27), and finally with the Vårbelger led by Earl Skule Bårdsson, until the latter lost a decisive battle against King Håkon Håkonsson in 1240. After 1240, Norwegian kings ruled uncontested, facing no internal rivals, consolidating their power organizationally as well as expanding it

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[4] The literature on this period is vast. The most up-to-date English version is in Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*; more traditional in Helle et al., *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. For older historiography, see i.a. P.A. Munch, *Det norske folks historie*, vol. 7; Bull, "Borgerkrigene i Norge"; Paasche, *Kong Sverre*; Helle, *Norge blir en stat*; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten;* Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling". For a more critical approach, see Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia;* Orning, Esmark and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *New Perspectives on the 'Civil Wars' in Medieval Scandinavia*.

territorially. The period from 1240 to 1319 has been called “the period of greatness” in Norwegian historiography.

Among Norwegian historians the civil war period has been viewed as an extremely violent period, witnessing something of a sociopolitical breakdown—not so dissimilar to the French tradition of the “feudal revolution / mutation.” I have previously criticized this view by arguing that the civil war period is more similar to both the period preceding it and the period succeeding it.[5] In this book, I will put forward an alternative view, one in which the civil war period is characterized by a sociopolitical order of a different kind than the one focused on sovereignty that was to evolve later. The civil war order was one in which conflicts and rivalries helped to keep society together in spite of their often violent expressions. The book is largely based on a close reading of two kings’ sagas, *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*, which will be introduced more thoroughly later in this introduction. A major reason for choosing this time frame is that these sources go into unusual detail about the military maneuvers of the various groups in this period. Another reason for choosing this timescale is that *Böglunga sögur* has been little explored by historians, often standing in the shadow of the two towering sagas (and historical figures) of *Sverris saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. This low reputation is undeserved. Finally, and most prosaically, there are few sources other than these sagas that can shed light on the details of political history in this period.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will first discuss what I term the Civil–war paradigm, which has been a dominant mode of interpreting past and present violent conflicts. In my view, this paradigm is highly problematic, primarily because it operates with a strict separation between war and peace and thus construes violent conflict as an aberration from a normal—and viable—condition of peace. This criticism forms the basis for introducing the concept of “constant crisis,” which can help bring an alternative understanding of conflicts in decentralized societies as integral to—not opposed to—social order. Finally, the concept of segmentary oppositions developed by the anthropologist E. E. Evans–Pritchard will be

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[5] On the civil wars and the preceding period, see Orning, “Conflict and Social (Dis) order”; on the subsequent period, see Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*.

explained, as it provides a key to the organization of the book in chapters that analyze conflicts at various levels of society: conflicts between the armed groups (chapter 2), tensions within the groups (3), crisscrossing bonds between the groups (4), and the armed groups' relationship to local communities (5). The introduction ends with a presentation and discussion of the sources.

The Civil–war paradigm—two variants

"Civil war" has been a powerful figure in Western history and historiography since Antiquity, and it is also a central concept in contemporary conflict studies. In the following, I shall pursue these two inroads to civil wars, which for the sake of simplicity can be labeled the "historical" and the "contemporary" entrances to the Civil–war paradigm.

In *Civil Wars: A History of Ideas*, the historian David Armitage traces a long timeline from the Romans to the present day in discussing how civil wars became a "focal point or argument shaped and debated episodically across time."[6] The Roman republican era was plagued by endemic strife between various factions and classes to such an extent that the Romans considered civil wars to be cyclic phenomena intrinsic to the political system. This perception aligns well with the condition of *stasis*—which can be translated as "civil war"—in Greek city–states. According to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, *stasis* was a permanent possibility residing in the tension between *oikos* and *polis*, family and society. This latent tension could erupt into open conflict if the family was politicized so that the household extended into the *polis*, or conversely, if there was a depoliticization of the *polis*.[7] Armitage and Agamben see the Greek city–states and the Roman republic as constantly embroiled in civil war or the threat of it. However, the Romans attempted a new approach to this inherent tension in the establishment of the Empire, in which the emperor's prime responsibility would be to quell civil wars and obviate their causes. War would thereby be turned into an activity directed against external enemies, whereas internal relations

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[6] Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 25.

[7] Agamben, *Stasis*.

were in theory to be marked by peace, with the emperor as its guarantor. The Year of the Four Emperors (69 A.D.) and later wars over imperial succession showed, however, that internal conflicts would not be so easily abolished.

Armitage traces the development of this concept of civil war with an emphasis on how it was refined in England's century of civil war (the seventeenth century). For Thomas Hobbes, civil war was not the equivalent of war in the natural condition of "everyone's war against everyone," since it presupposed authority, but rather was a war in which authority was split in two. But can a condition of two legitimate contestants really exist in an internal conflict? To John Locke, having two legitimate sources of authority in a civil war was inconceivable, because each part would view the other as illegitimate. This dilemma has accompanied the concept of civil war ever since. Because the relationship between the warring parties in civil war is unresolved, civil war becomes a contradictory concept, and as a result, according to Armitage, it has been suppressed in favor of two related concepts in modern times: rebellion and revolution: rebellion if the initiators fail, revolution if they succeed. Revolution is thus a "happy" concept since it brings something new, but in essence it brings along the same atrocities as civil war.[8]

Armitage's book is a valuable contribution that demonstrates how powerful the *figure* of civil war has been as a shorthand in Western history and historiography for the breakdown of civilization and for drawing firm boundaries between war and peace, states and non–states, order and chaos. These are dichotomies with which we are familiar, and that we have used to approach and conceive of civil war for two millennia. However, exactly this long–standing tradition can also be an obstacle to analyzing the phenomenon of those conflicts we usually term civil wars, because by positing these dichotomies as premises for understanding societies, we presuppose that conflicts are best analyzed as a matter of whether there is conflict (chaos) or not (order), and we link the issue of order to the existence of a state. The big question is whether this is the only,

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[8] Burke viewed the French Revolution as a civil war (Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 153), and Abraham Lincoln insisted that the conflict of 1861–65 should be termed "a great civil war" in order to emphasize the unity between the warring parties (Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 166).

not to say the best, way to envisage civil wars, social order, and disorder. What if conflict is part of, not opposed to, social order, or if states might fuel disorder? What if the dichotomies between war and peace, chaos and order, are not neutral descriptions or conditions but rather ideological constructs camouflaging the contingent nature of conflict, order, and the state? In order to try to transcend the dichotomous mode of thinking so salient in Western political thought—and epitomized in Armitage's approach—I will draw inspiration from a second way of approaching civil war, the contemporary one.

In political science, civil war is a major field of study. Two databases have been established in order to classify civil wars in recent history: the Correlates of War (COW) established in 1963 by J. David Singer at the University of Michigan, and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) founded in the 1970s at the University of Uppsala. Both projects have produced vast data sets on contemporary civil wars, operating from precise definitions of civil war as armed conflicts that involve:

> (1) military action internal to the metropole of the state system member; (2) the active participation of the national government; (3) effective resistance by both sides; and (4) a total of at least 1,000 battle–deaths during each year of the war.[9]

The databases on civil war are extremely helpful for anyone who desires a broad picture of conflict development in modern times.[10] Moreover, for researchers interested in measuring violence over larger time spans, such as Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, big data have offered new opportunities to quantify the "civilizing process" that Norbert Elias formulated almost a century ago.[11] However, critics have argued that it becomes misleading to study violence over time without specifying what violence is and what cultural context it is performed in.[12] From a

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[9] Sarkees, *Resort to War*, 5. UCDP has operated with quite similar criteria.

[10] Strand et al., *Trends in Armed Conflict*.

[11] Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*; Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

[12] White, "The Feelings in the Feud"; Østerud, *Hva er krig?*; Dwyer, "Whitewashing history."

more methodological standpoint, precise definitions of civil war tend to create new problems, since concepts such as the state, parties, government, and violence are not neutral, but are also objects of contention in themselves. For instance, states tend to define conflicts within their territories not as civil wars, but as rebellions, terrorism, guerrilla warfare etc., while instigators of conflict on the other hand often will define their actions as part of a revolution, a liberation movement, etc. Moreover, the boundaries that qualify these conflicts as "civil"—i.e. internal—wars will very often be the object of conflicting views.[13] In line with such reservations, Nicholas Sambanis concludes that "the concept of civil war may mean different things to different people."[14]

A more profound criticism is that this research tradition links war to a concept of the state that is highly problematic as an approach to studying contemporary conflicts. Political science has often operated with a view of conflict inherited from Thomas Hobbes, seeing conflicts as sign of disorder, and the prime task and legitimation of the state to end such conflicts through a contract assigning to it a monopoly of violence. However, since the end of World War II, and particularly after the end of the Cold War in 1991, very few inter-state wars have taken place, as they have largely been replaced by intra-state conflicts.[15] A more fundamental question is whether it makes sense to call these wars inter-state or intra-state (civil) wars at all. In 1998, the British political scientist Mary Kaldor published the book *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, where she argued that globalization after 1989 has changed the nature of wars. [16] In her opinion, the Clausewitzian wars, which were fought between sovereign states, started by proclamation and ended by peace treaties, and in which a sharp distinction

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[13] In line with this, PRIO (Peace Research Institute Oslo) now operates with the category "internationalized intrastate conflicts" to account for civil wars with a high degree of external agents involved.

[14] Sambanis, "What is Civil War?," 856. For a medieval discussion on transcultural, intracultural and subcultural wars, see Kortüm, *Transcultural Wars*.

[15] Since ca. 1990, more than ninety per cent of the world's armed conflicts have been termed "civil wars" (intra-state wars) https://www.prio.org/Data/Armed-Conflict/UCDP-PRIO/ (accessed 18 October 2018). See also Gleditsch et al., "Armed Conflict 1946–2001," 620–23.

[16] Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*. For other important contributions, see Smith, *The Utility of Force;* Morris, *War: What is it Good For?*; Ucko and Marks, "Violence in Context"; Rolandsen and Kinderley, "The Nasty War."

could be drawn between war and peace, soldiers and civilians, no longer exist. Kaldor defined "new wars" as wars where distinctions between state and non-state actors, public and private domains, external and internal factors, economic and political dimensions, and even war and peace are breaking down.[17] Discussions after Kaldor have been heated, and critics have stated that wars have always been "new," and that Kaldor's "old war" is a straw man that has never materialized.[18] For this book, the crucial issue is not the labeling of the conflicts per se, nor arriving at a precise definition of them, but that Kaldor has introduced a new perspective on war. In their uneasy *mélange* of local and global factors, legitimate and illegitimate violence, state and non-state actors, wars from the last decades, whether they are termed "new" or "civil," have reminded historians that wars are extremely complicated—and have always been so.

For medieval studies, these debates serve as a warning against the rather simplified dichotomies that have underlain traditional views on warfare connecting war to states. Historians and sociologists such as Charles Tilly, Perry Anderson, and Michael Mann have studied the long-term European development from the Middle Ages until today as a process whereby war became differentiated from peace and became an increasingly state-initiated and state-developing activity. Here the Westphalian Peace of 1648 is a turning point, linking warfare to the state in a way that was given its scientific expression in the theories of Carl von Clausewitz.[19] But at what moment in time does it become misleading to connect war to the state? The German political scientist Herfried Münkler has analyzed the Thirty Years War (1618–48) as a "new war" and argued that the new wars actually are quite similar to very old wars, those fought before 1648.[20] In a book comparing medieval and modern wars, political scientist Øyvind Østerud and I argue that medieval warfare was more blurred and "messy" than the wars

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[17] Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 1–14; Kaldor, "In Defence of New Wars," 1–16.

[18] See e.g. Kalyvas, "'New' and 'Old' Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?"; Schuurman, "Clausewitz and the 'New Wars' Scholars"; Williams, "Relevance of Mary Kaldor's 'New Wars' Thesis"; Newman, "The 'New Wars' Debate."

[19] Clausewitz, *On War*; Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power.*

[20] Münkler, *The New Wars*; see also Østerud, *Hva er krig*, 33.

that succeeded it, and that medieval wars share these characteristics with new wars, in particular the relative weakness of the state in defining and dominating warfare.[21] So let us take a closer look at the Norwegian civil wars in conjunction with the perspectives critical to the Civil-war paradigm.

Deconstructing the Civil-war paradigm

It is not difficult to find examples of civil war that echo the Civil-war paradigm in the Middle Ages, not least since one of the main sources for the Roman concept of civil war—Lucan's *De Bello Civili*, was widely read and admired as the standard work for anyone writing on civil war in this period.[22] Around 1180, the Norwegian cleric Theodoricus Monachus wrote a brief history of Norway, which he chose to end with the death of King Sigurd Jorsalfare in 1130 for the following reason:

> I deem it utterly unfitting to record for posterity the crimes, killings, perjuries, parricides, desecrations of holy places, the contempt for God, the plundering no less of the clergy than of the whole people, the abductions of women, and other abominations which it would take long to enumerate.[23]

Following Theodoricus, later saga writers and modern historians have considered the death of Sigurd Jorsalfare as the onset of the civil wars. Theodoricus' version of a breakdown not only echoes Lucan; he pointedly goes on to quote Lucan directly: "Let no age learn from me in my poetry of evils such as these, nor of the full licence of civil war."[24] However, in his account, Theodoricus does not use the Latin term for civil war—*bellum civile*—even though it figures in Lucan's title. Instead, he uses words describing more

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[21] Orning and Østerud, *Krig uten stat*. An English translation of the book is forthcoming, to be published by Brepols.

[22] On Lucan as a standard reference, see Hiatt, "Lucan."

[23] "Nos quoque hujus schedulæ hic finem facimus, indignum valde judicantes memoriæ posterorum tradere scelera, homicidia, perjuria, parricidia, sanctorum locorum contaminationes, Dei contemptum, non minus religiosorum deprædationes quam totius plebis, mulierum captivationes et ceteras abominationes, quas longum est enumerare" (*Theodoricus monachus*, 53).

[24] *Theodoricus monachus*, 53.

specific misdeeds (*scelera*, *homicidia*, *perjuria*, *parricidia*, etc.), which together project an image of lawlessness and chaos.

Old Norse has no term for civil war; the closest we get is terms for battle (*bardagi*, *orrosta*) or literally 'un-peace' (*úfriðr*).[25] Yet in spite of the lack of a term for civil war, the experience of a condition of chaos in society as formulated by Theodoricus was elaborated and expanded upon by later writers. A major contribution was made by the anonymous author of *The King's Mirror*, writing in the mid-thirteenth century, when he compared the situation of conflict among various royal pretenders to the condition of famine in nature.[26] Here Theodoricus' view was further developed in three ways. First, chaos in society was aligned to chaos in nature. Second, the chaotic condition was related to a situation characterized by struggle among multiple contenders, i.e., a civil war in essence. Only by introducing a sole monarchy could the strife come to an end. Third, the erosion of order was connected to the people's natural inclination to commit wrongs when they have the opportunity to do so: "Everywhere where a population is split into numerous groups [...], the populace endeavors to act according to their own desires, and then the good customs of the realm are destroyed."[27]

The vision of a breakdown of society caused by strife between power mongers was perpetuated by the kings when formulating laws. Three years before his death, King Håkon Håkonsson promulgated a new law for the northern part of the realm (the newer Frostathing law, 1260), and he began the prologue by asserting that

> most men's lineages have suffered great and manifold damage from manslaughter and the execution of good men, something that has been more common in this country than in most other countries (*Frostatingslaw*, 1).[28]

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[25] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "bardagi," "orrosta," "úfriðr."

[26] Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, 3, on the dating and probable author. The work uses the term *uaran*, meaning a year that gives bad crops. See *Konungs skuggsiá*, 50–55 on the entire description of *uaran*.

[27] "hværvætna þærs er æitt folk er skipt ímarga staðe [...] þa dirviz þægar alþyðan æptir sinum girndum oc brigða þa alugat allum siðum lannzens" (*Konungs skuggsiá*, 53). This Augustinian conception of people as inherently evil and sinful was in many ways a novelty in society.

[28] "huersu mykin oc margfalldan skaða er flestra manna ættir í landinu hafa fengit af manndrápum oc hinna beztu manna aftöcum þeim sem her hafa meir í veniu verit en í flestum löndum öðrum" (*Frostatingslaw*, 1).

In King Magnus Lagabøte's *National Law* from 1274, this chaotic condition was simply referred to as "the great fog of falseness which has sadly blinded the greatest part of this country's people."[29]

Modern Norwegian historians have largely accepted this outline of the period from 1130 to 1240 as troubled by endemic, violent strife caused by struggles between contenders for the throne, and they have termed it "civil wars."[30] There have been disagreements as to what kind of state developed as the result of the struggles—Marxist historians have viewed the emerging state as the result of a union of the proprietary classes, whereas more constitutionalist historians have regarded the state as the outcome of an alliance between kings and peasants.[31] However, there has been a consensus that only a strong monarchy could create peace, replacing a "kin society" where violence and conflict were commonplace. For instance, Arne Odd Johnsen equated kin vengeance with "primitive human drives" that surfaced as an "Indian summer" in the twelfth century.[32] According to Fredrik Paasche, uninhibited kin vengeance was finally abolished when people "sought salvation in a stronger state."[33] Knut Helle states that the civil wars ended because conditions were intolerable and "the longing for peace was strong among common people." Here he cites a diploma, issued in 1202, as a reliable description of the reality: "Now neither clerics nor commoners fear God or good men. Instead, everyone lives as he wishes under lawless conditions."[34]

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[29] *Magnus the Lawmender's Laws of the Land*, p. 12. "þa miklu villu þoku er mesti lutr folks þessa landz hefir sua hormliga verit blindath" (*National Law*, part 2, 3). On this development, see Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence, 69–108*.

[30] P.A. Munch used the term civil war ("borgerkrig") in *Det norske folks historie*, vol. 7 from 1963. See also Bull, "Borgerkrigene i Norge"; Paasche, *Kong Sverre*, 117–33. For more recent examples, see Helle, *Norge blir en stat*; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten;* Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling"; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*. See Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies* for a critical overview.

[31] For the former view, see Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*; for the latter, see Helle, *Norge blir en stat*. This was one of the main issues of debate in twentieth-century historiography. See Bagge, "Utsikt og innhogg." Bagge tried to compromise in Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling."

[32] Johnsen, *Fra ættesamfunn til statssamfunn*, 76–84, 100, 136. See also Sunde, Kongen, lova og landet, 106-8.

[33] Paasche, *Kong Sverre*, 109–10.

[34] Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt*, 70. "Nå frykter verken lærde eller ulærde Gud eller gode menn. Snarere lever nå enhver som han lyster under lovløs ordning" (*Norske middelalderdokumenter*, 76–77). See Sunde, *Speculum legale*, for a similar view.

Civil wars were no Norwegian peculiarity, but also occurred among their Nordic neighbors: in Denmark in the intervals 1130–57 and (on and off) 1241–1340, in Sweden more vaguely between ca. 1130 and 1250, and in Iceland during the so-called Sturlung Period (1220–64).[35] Such periods of unrest and upheaval took place in other European countries as well. For instance, in medieval England, the period from 1135 to 1154 is usually referred to as civil wars or "The Anarchy," and in the Holy Roman Empire the period of the Investiture Contest (1073–1122), the dynastic disputes 1198–1215 and "The Great Interregnum" (1250–73) have been considered as periods of political turmoil.[36] Nowhere has the character of such periods of strife and dissent been debated more fiercely than in French history. The concept of feudalism was from the outset connected to a state of sociopolitical breakdown in the aftermath of the Carolingian empire, propelled by internecine strife and external attacks. Marc Bloch termed the period from ca. 900 to 1100 the feudal period, or "the feudal anarchy."[37] In his classic study of the Mâcon region, Georges Duby revised the chronology but not the basic outline of the development.[38] In the 1980s, a new generation of French historians launched the millennium as a revolutionary turning point in Western history, when remnants from Antiquity crumbled in a surge of violence and chaos, launching the chaotic era of feudalism.[39]

Voices critical of the theories of "feudal anarchy" appeared as early as 1968, when Fredric Cheyette wrote a short article arguing that so-called "feudal" conflicts, despite being solved out of court, were not guided by untrammeled violence but by the principle of compromise—"giving each his due."[40] In the 1970s and 1980s important contributions by such historians as Patrick Geary, Stephen D. White and Barbara Rosenwein broadened this perspective, which

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[35] See Sawyer and Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*; Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*; Sawyer, "The 'Civil Wars' revisited."

[36] On England, see King, *The Anarchy of King Stephen's Reign;* Crouch, *The Reign of King Stephen*. On Germany, see Leuschner, *Germany in the Late Middle Ages*. The larger picture is provided in Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*.

[37] Bloch, *Feudal Society*.

[38] Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles*.

[39] Poly and Bournazel, *The Feudal Transformation*; Bonnassie, *From Slavery to Feudalism*; most vehemently in Guy Bois, *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand*.

[40] Cheyette, "Suum Cuique Tribuere."

came to be termed the "American school," "conflict studies," or the "legal anthropological approach."[41] A vivid debate ensued in *Past and Present* in 1994–97 between the two camps, initiated by an article by Thomas Bisson in which he argued that the turn of the millennium was characterized by a breakdown of Carolingian court procedures that paved the way for predatory, arbitrary violence.[42] Stephen D. White objected that Bisson's oppositions between public and private, politics and violence, governance and castellanies, and so on, were anachronistic, and that violence could not be equated with anarchy, but to the contrary was a complex phenomenon that needed to be studied as a political and potentially legitimate response in ongoing conflicts.[43] According to Dominique Barthélemy, the "feudal revolution" thesis around 1000 was just a reframing of the old, largely defunct theory of the "collapse of the Carolingian empire" in the ninth century that brought little new to the table.[44] Timothy Reuter was critical toward the French focus of the debate, and called for a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to violence.[45] Finally, Chris Wickham sided with Bisson's view that there had been a change, but largely disagreed on the nature of that change.[46]

The "feudal revolution" debate did not bring final answers, although it somehow lowered the intensity of the debate.[47] Nevertheless, it was crucial in clarifying the two incompatible ways of studying violence and conflict in a medieval context. Should violence and conflict be viewed as threats to the social order or as constitutive

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[41] Dominique Barthélemy termed it "the American school" in *La société dans le comté de Vendôme*, 638; Brown and Górecki called it "conflict studies" in Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*, whereas in Esmark et al. it is termed "the legal anthropological perspective" (Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies*). Important studies include White, *Feuding and Peace-making*; Geary, "Living with Conflicts"; Rosenwein, *To be the Neighbor of Saint Peter*; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*. A central work of legal anthropology often cited by these historians is Comaroff and Roberts, *Rules and Processes*.

[42] See also final remark in Bisson, "The 'Feudal Revolution.'"

[43] White, "The 'Feudal Revolution.'"

[44] Barthélemy, "The 'Feudal Revolution.'"

[45] Reuter and Wickham, "The 'Feudal Revolution.'"

[46] Reuter and Wickham, "The 'Feudal Revolution.'"

[47] Among more recent contributions, see Cohen and De Jong, *Medieval Transformations*; Barton, *Lordship in the County of Maine*; West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution;* Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe*.

of it? What is the role of the state in conflict-solving, and to what degree can anthropological studies be used as a comparative framework in studies of medieval societies? The historiography on medieval conflict has become immense, and there is no doubt that conflict studies and the debates they triggered have been extremely productive in bringing out new perspectives on conflicts in societies with weak states.[48] In a particularly fascinating contribution, Yehangir Malegam has argued that the churchmen's conception of peace was actually very close to war, as "false peace" consisted in accommodating to wordly concerns, whereas "true peace" meant "the insurrection of spirit against flesh in self and society," and thus unremitting war.[49]

Conflict studies and the "feudal revolution" debate have had ramifications in Nordic historiography as well. Freestate Iceland (ca. 930–1262/64) is one of the most fertile places for studying conflict-solving in the absence of a state. William Ian Miller and Jesse Byock analyzed the Sagas of Icelanders as sources for examining a feuding society, arguing that Iceland was far from a "kin society," as kin was as much in play as it was a given, and even further from a Hobbesian "natural condition" of war, as violence was not arbitrary and not even very common.[50] According to Miller, "peacemaking" was as important as "bloodtaking" in this society, and power consisted not so much in the use of force as in the threat of using it. These investigations set in motion a major revision of the view on the Icelandic Freestate,[51] but their repercussions were slower to creep into studies of the other Nordic countries. A common reservation was to claim that whereas Iceland was a stateless society, Scandinavia had kingdoms with altogether different social conditions. Sverre Bagge went some way in *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (1991), where he applied many of the perspectives, in particular Miller's, to Snorre

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[48] See Brown and Górecki, "What Conflict Means," for an overview of the international discussions; Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies* and Netterstrøm, *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* for the Nordic region and connections to the international debates.

[49] Malegam, *The Sleep of Behemoth*, 6.

[50] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*; Byock, *Medieval Iceland*.

[51] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*; Helgi Þorláksson, "Feud and Feuding."

Sturlasson's famous saga about Norwegian kings.[52] However, Bagge was hesitant to grant this image of society an existence beyond the pages of *Heimskringla*, even if Snorre Sturlasson wrote about Norwegian kings and was firmly enmeshed in Norwegian society.[53] In the last two decades, however, some studies have been published that have tried to use the insights from legal anthropology to add nuance to the narrative of civil war and state formation in Nordic countries, including my own work.[54] This book should be viewed as part of that tradition.

Conflicts as constant crisis

Conflict studies have established a new perspective on conflicts in medieval society by analyzing them as feuds. While this approach represents a welcome corrective to the Hobbesian view of violent conflict as disorder, it has sometimes tended to go to the other extreme, regarding conflict as a beneficial part of the system.[55] Some of this tendency may stem from Max Gluckman's "The Peace in the Feud" from 1955, where he argued that feuds broke out less frequently than was generally supposed and often ended with settlements.[56] Another challenge with conceptualizing feud is that it is associated with small-scale conflicts, implying a contrast to large-scale conflicts linked to states. Accordingly, feuds tend to be seen as a distinctive phenomenon for a type of pre-state society that disappeared during the state formation process in the Middle Ages.[57]

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[52] Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*.

[53] On Norwegian-Icelandic interconnections, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship*.

[54] Hermanson, "Släkt, vänner och makt"; Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*; Orning, Esmark and Hermanson, *Gaver, ritualer, konflikter*; Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies*; Poulsen, Vogt and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 1; Esmark, Hermanson and Orning, *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 2; Jezierski et al., *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 3.

[55] See the criticism by Philippe Buc in *The Dangers of Ritual*. His criticism was particularly directed at Gerd Althoff and Patrick Geary.

[56] Gluckman, "The Peace in the Feud." The first medieval historian to adopt Gluckman's views was J.M. Wallace-Hadrill in "The Bloodfeud of the Franks," from 1959.

[57] This criticism is addressed in Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*; Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies*. Stephen D. White has argued against the functionalist assumptions in White, "The Peace in the Feud Revisited."

In this book, I will use the concept "constant crisis" inspired by, and developed in cooperation with, the Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh to analyze conflict in medieval society.[58] "Crisis" (*κρίση*) signifies "rupture" in Greek, which brings associations with disorder and decay. However, it can also signify "turning point," which suggests an unresolved state that may even contain new opportunities.[59] The German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) was a central theoretician on crisis.[60] As a proponent of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Koselleck traced the uses of the term historically. The ancient Greeks used the term κρίση in the fields of politics, law, and medicine. In Hippocratic medicine, the term had a double meaning, signifying both the objective condition of a disease and its assessment or diagnosis. This ambiguity extended into politics, where it "served both as a descriptive category and as a diagnostic criterion for political or military action."[61] However, the term was hardly used in politics before the eighteenth century, when it became a key term in describing and understanding the French Revolution. Koselleck shows how the term "by incorporating the theological idea of the Last Judgment, had been elevated into a concept marking a new epoch in the philosophy of history."[62] Thus, "crisis" came to be used to characterize major transitions in history, and this property became integral to Karl Marx's theory of crisis as the driving force in historical evolution.

Randolph Starn has noted how after World War II "notions of crisis have cropped up everywhere" as a sign of dramatic ruptures, also being linked to shifts in paradigms.[63] However, if the concept of crisis has become central in analyzing historical changes, the concept's political implications have been curiously under-theoreticized. Andrew Simon Gilbert draws attention to a conceptual blindness in that "framing events as crises allows one to read judgements into reality as if they are independently objective."[64] He continues:

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[58] Vigh in particular addresses this enigma in Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity." See Orning and Vigh, "Constant Crisis," for an attempt to use this concept comparatively.

[59] Starn, "Historians and 'Crisis.'"

[60] Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*. Here I draw mostly on his ideas condensed in the article "Crisis."

[61] Koselleck, "Crisis," 369.

[62] Koselleck, "Crisis," 375.

[63] Starn, "Historians and 'Crisis'," 14–19. Citation at 14.

[64] Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 11.

> To describe a crisis is to implicitly posit the question of "what went wrong?" Yet what grounds are there to suppose a "wrong"? In crisis narratives, this question is habitually obscured, and a crisis ontology is adopted instead. Crisis is treated as an a priori object which requires description, and from here the question of "what went wrong?" can be posed unreflectively.[65]

Janet Roitman follows up on this, asking why "this category of crisis, so integral to the production of new forms and the very intelligibility of the subject, is never problematized."[66] Her answer is that the term "crisis" brings situations "under conceptual control," but only at the cost of making "certain things visible and others invisible."[67] In that sense, crisis is a concept that "produces meaning," or in Gilbert's words, "using a concept like 'crisis' is always in part a political act."[68]

However, what happens in a situation where crisis does not signal a rupture, but rather is a permanent condition? Roitman refers to "freeing the concept from its temporal confines" as an "implosion" of the concept.[69] Yet the idea of "permanent crisis" was not alien to Koselleck, who drew on Heidegger in order to conceptualize crisis as "an ontological or existential concept—crisis is always a part of our life as it is a basic facet of Dasein."[70] It is precisely this property that comes to the fore when adding the epithet "constant" to crisis, and that lies at the heart of Henrik Vigh's fieldwork in contemporary Guinea-Bissau. This is a society where violent conflict is something that is always present and constitutes the very frame within which people's lives play out. Vigh argues that "social, political and existential crisis play [sic] a very real role as a constant in the lives of many people around the world,"[71] and drawing on the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he states:

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[65] Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 19.

[66] Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 35.

[67] Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 39.

[68] Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 218.

[69] Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 66.

[70] Koselleck and Heidegger referred to in Gilbert, *The Crisis Paradigm*, 71.

[71] Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity," 7.

> What we call disorder and ruin, others who are younger live as the natural order of things and perhaps with ingenuity they are going to master it precisely because they no longer seek their bearings where we took ours (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 23).[72]

This means that “the move from crisis in context to crisis as context entails stretching the notion of ‘rupture’ into a relative constant, making the concept somewhat self-contradictory in the process.”[73] I will call this situation where violence is always in the air a “constant crisis.” Living with conflict, in Vigh’s words, makes people “constantly attentive and alert, seeking to predict and move in relation to perceived and experienced social stimuli, oncoming movements and possibilities.”[74] In Patrick Geary’s assessment of early medieval France, “conflict was a constant and ongoing part of life.”[75]

This view of conflict as a driver of attentiveness and energy fits well with the premises of conflict theory. The founding father of conflict theory, Karl Marx, saw conflict as the prime driver of historical change in terms of class struggle. However, Marx did not regard conflict as a positive or productive force in its own right, only as a vehicle for historical change.[76] The sociologist Georg Simmel went further in emphasizing the beneficial social consequences of conflict. In his opinion, conflict or opposition is inseparable from the notion of society in the first place: “Opposition is not merely a means of conserving the total relationship, but it is one of the concrete functions in which the relationship in reality consists.”[77] Thus, contrary to Emile Durkheim, who underscored integration as the prime function of society, Simmel viewed conflict as equally important, and as integration’s necessary corollary. Conflict not only constitutes society; it is also a principle that in its essence is dynamic, as it “permits us to preserve a consciousness of energy,

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[72] Vigh, “Crisis and Chronicity,” 9.

[73] Vigh, “Crisis and Chronicity,” 9.

[74] Vigh, “Crisis and Chronicity,” 17.

[75] Geary, “Living with Conflicts,” 137.

[76] Turner, “Marx and Simmel Revisited.”

[77] Simmel, “The Sociology of Conflict I,” 493.

and thus lends a vitality and a reciprocity to relationships."[78] Yet as the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas reminds us, the fact that violence and conflict are ever-present, maybe even "normal," does not mean that they constitute a viable condition:

> civil wars are bloody not so much because people are inherently violent, but because they are not: most are repelled by the prospect of acting violently, and so they will not, unless someone else handles the gory details while shielding them.[79]

The concept of constant crisis aligns with the anthropological view of conflicts in societies with weak or no central states, where they are not viewed as inherently disruptive, but as forming an inherent part of the political culture, as formulated by Paul Richards:

> Anthropologists try to avoid becoming lost in this dangerous terminological terrain by denying 'war' any special status. They see 'civil war' as part of society. It is a normal rather than exceptional condition.[80]

Such a dynamic resembles the one studied by anthropologist Fredrik Barth among Swat Pathans in Afghanistan in the 1950s, where rivalry between various factions formed the basis of political life, and where the victory of one party typically led not to fusion or centralization, but to fissions within the winning coalition.[81] This is a society poorly suited to accept a state as a monopolist of violence, and so it has persisted. More than fifty years later, Barth found many of the same mechanisms in play in Afghanistan in spite of almost continuous external armed presence since 1979.[82] He is not alone in finding continuities. In 2009, David Kilcullen stated that "most Afghans have historically had little interaction with the central state, and they like it that way."[83] He went on to present what he termed "a self-regulating social system for governance without government":

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[78] Simmel, "The Sociology of Conflict I," 493.

[79] Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 14.

[80] Richards, "Anthropological and Ethnographical Approaches," 41–42.

[81] Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans, 19.*

[82] Barth, *Afghanistan og Taliban.*

[83] Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar," 233.

> Patterns of political authority in Pashtun tribes traditionally reflected a shifting internal balance of power, conditioned by these phenomena of balanced opposition, generalized reciprocity, honor (*nang*), extremely warlike behavior, the fusion-fission cycle of response to external threat, primary group cohesion, and a desire for partial or total independence from government control.[84]

Political scientist Fotini Christia has studied alliance formation in the Afghan "civil war" in the 1990s, which she termed "multi-party conflicts."[85] In conflicts where there are more than two opposing parties, boundaries and divisions become much more fluid and varying, and side-switching more common than in two-party conflicts. All parties opt for dominance but becoming a minority faction of a winning coalition is not a viable option, as one risks being dominated by the majority. Therefore, defections from winning coalitions are widespread, and the result is that a balance of power between roughly equal parties tends to prevail.[86]

The political dynamic in Afghanistan as studied by Barth has been used as a model for understanding the "pre-state society" in Norway prior to the civil war period.[87] Here discussions have focused on the arrangement of joint rulership, which was often practiced in the period 1030–1130. The dominant view was that joint rule was inherently unstable and sooner or later had to explode into large-scale conflict—the civil wars. However, Narve Bjørgo argued that joint rule was a functional arrangement, considering the vast distances in the Norwegian realm.[88] I have elaborated on this argument by stating that a sharing of power between co-rulers contributed to social stability, as it helped keep kings in check.[89] The relationship between co-rulers was usually strained, but their disagreements seldom rose to more than words. There was a contrast between an antagonistic culture of utterances and posturing on

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[84] Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar," 235.

[85] Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

[86] Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

[87] Barth cited in *Bagge*, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 158–59, and Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's* Heimskringla, 76 and 173.

[88] Bjørgo, "Samkongedøme kontra einekongedøme."

[89] Orning, "Conflict and Social (Dis)order." This led to a debate with Sverre Bagge in *Historisk tidsskrift* (N) 2015–16.

the one hand, and a quite peaceful way of solving conflicts on the other. This embedding of violence and conflict within the social order is reflected in Old Norse language, where the term for violence—*vald*—can be translated as "power."[90] Contrary to the Latin *violentia*, which underlies our modern notion of violence,[91] the term *vald* did not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and thus a *valdsmaðr*—literally a violent man—meant a man with authority or dominance over something.[92] This does not imply that all violence was legitimate. Drawing a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate *vald* was a crucial issue, but it was not decided on the basis of whether physical force had been applied or whether the state was involved. Indeed, one could argue that the modern concept of "violence" in the sense of illegitimate force by private individuals is rendered meaningless in a medieval context.[93] In concurrence with this view, Max Naderer has argued that in this period "the perceived legitimacy of violence was multipolar and contextual [. . .] a matter of ambiguity and contestation."[94]

There has been a common view that feuds turned into wars and parties became ossified during the civil war period.[95] However, in light of the resilience of "pre-state" mechanisms in modern cases such as Afghanistan, should we not be more wary in inferring large-scale changes in the Middle Ages? This book will argue that the conflicts during the civil wars were much more similar to the conflicts during the preceding period than has been alleged. Violent conflicts did not all of a sudden come to constitute breaks with normal conditions. On the contrary, they were integral to the political culture, and their significance was a continual target of interpretations and part of the maneuvering as described in the

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[90] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "vald."

[91] Steinnes and Vandvik, *Latinsk ordbok*, "violentia." Malegem emphasizes that the term violentia in a medieval context carried consistently negative associations. See Malegem, *The Sleep of Behemoth*, 15–20.

[92] Fritzner, *Ordbog,* and Hertzberg, *Glossarium* translate "valdsmaðr" as a man with authority or dominance over something, with government official as a more precise meaning. Heggstad, *Norrøn ordbok* adds "a powerful man."

[93] See Sandmo, *Voldssamfunnets undergang* for the construction of the concept of "violence" in the late seventeenth century. The concept of violence argued against here is the one made famous by Max Weber as connected to the state. See Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 28–29.

[94] Naderer, "Love and Fear," 278.

[95] Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling."

sagas. The term “constant crisis” is intended to catch this ambiguity and enmeshedness of conflict in society.

Conflict at multiple levels: segmentary oppositions

Historians have tended to regard the civil wars as internal wars occurring within national confines, a preponderance already implied in the term “civil” wars. The medieval civil wars in Norway were of course not “national” in a modern sense, but rather dynastic, centering on the succession to the throne. Yet the focus has been on analyzing these wars as conflicts mainly occurring within the Norwegian realm.[96] This book will argue that dividing between external and internal affairs in this period is basically flawed, as it reifies a monarchical view of society and presupposes that kings dominated society. Instead, I will study conflicts at a variety of levels, ranging from the local level to the regnal one.

As a framework for analyzing the conflicts at various levels, I will apply the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s notion of segmentary oppositions from his study of the Nuer in Sudan in the 1930s.[97] He developed this concept to account for the political interaction and coexistence of tribes, clans, descent groups, and territorial units, whereby minor political entities situationally merged into larger orders. Solidarity and cooperation among multitudes of allegiances were ordered through segmentary processes of fusion and fission:

> [. . .] the consistency we perceive in Nuer political structure is one of process rather than of morphology. The process consists of complementary tendencies towards fission and fusion which, operating alike in all political groups by a series of inclusions and exclusions that are controlled by the changing social situation, enable us to speak of a system and to say that this system is characteristically defined by the relativity and opposition of its segments.[98]

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[96] The influential Norwegian historian Jens Arup Seip differentiated between the “seed” (external factors) and the “soil” (internal factors) as potential causes for the civil wars in Norway, of which he held the soil to be far more important than the seed. See Seip, “Problemer og metode i norsk middelalderforskning,” 78.

[97] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*.

[98] Evans-Pritchard, “The Nuer of the Southern Sudan,” 296.

Segmentation is directly related to conflict in Evans-Pritchard's work, as the process of alignment and alliance is a response to conflict and hostility at shifting levels of communal and inter-communal life. As Evans-Pritchard notes, "there is... always a contradiction in the definition of a political group, for it is a group only in relation to other groups."[99] As such, families unite in conflict against other families, clans against other clans, and tribes against other tribes. Decentralized political formations may merge into larger, more centralized orders when dealing with an outside other, just as they may reconfigure in a more decentralized form when dealing with internal conflicts and legal issues.[100] The point is that conflicts instigate the fusion or fission of segmentary dynamics.

Evans-Pritchard's ideas have their point of departure in a specific time and place and are obviously not directly transferable to my empirical material.[101] First, the various political entities that he operated with among the Nuer—tribes, clans, descent groups and territorial units—do not make sense in a medieval Norwegian setting, where there were other social and political entities. Second, these political units are more distinctly demarcated groups in Evans-Pritchard's material than in medieval Norway, where boundaries between various groups were more blurred than among the Nuer. What is central with Evans-Pritchard's concept of segmentary oppositions, however, is that it denotes processes whereby decentralized orders become situationally centralized, and vice versa, which have a wider analytical application. Moreover, rather than being necessarily dysfunctional, such segmentary dynamics are adaptive and problem-solving phenomena.

In medieval Norway, I will operate with the following political units, without implying that they are easily distinguishable as political units in practical politics. The smallest one is the household. Households usually consisted of close family, but they typically

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[99] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 147.

[100] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*. Evans-Pritchard's studies have served as inspiration for anarchic archaeology, which underlines people's potential for self-governance without a central body. See Angelbeck and Grier, "Anarchism and the Archaeology of Anarchic Societies," with reference to Evans-Pritchard on p. 551.

[101] The anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson wrote *Nuer Dilemmas* in 1996 partly as a follow-up of Evans-Pritchard's study. Criticizing *The Nuer* for focusing too much on social harmony, she nevertheless found striking continuities with her own results from fieldwork in 1980 onward. See Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 30–44.

also included servants, and they were highly variable, ranging from *einvirki* consisting of one person to chieftains' households comprising distant relatives, often poor; servants; and up to fifty to sixty laborers.[102] Households were primary units in the sense that they seldom involved disagreements. That is one reason why we seldom encounter households in the kings' sagas.

The next level consists of personal networks based on kinship, alliances, and patronage. Kinship in medieval Scandinavia was bilateral, implying that it did not form the basis of close-knit and neatly bounded kin groups, but on the contrary was poorly demarcated and involved loosely defined obligations. The notion of a "kin society" has therefore yielded to a view that alliances and patronage played a crucial and perhaps more important role than kinship in establishing networks.[103] The difference between alliances and patronage, or between horizontal and vertical bonds, is a slippery one in practice as definitions, interpretations, and characteristics of such relationships were never fixed; but normally, patronage involved stronger obligations than alliances, which could more easily be broken.[104]

Local communities form the next political unit. Local communities were surely complex and disparate entities, reflected in the numerous terms used to describe them, such as *bygð* or *bygðalag*, *grend*, *manngerð*, *skipreiða*, *herað*, *þingsókn*, and *sókn*.[105] However, such communities were usually quite small, defined by natural boundaries that set them off from neighboring communities, and often they were formally entitled to perform certain tasks, such as participating in legal assemblies (*þingsókn*), military recruitment (*manngerð*, *skipreiða*), or religious services (*sókn*). We encounter such local peasant communities regularly in meetings between kings and peasants in the sagas, or with magnates as intermediaries.[106]

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[102] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship*, 109–10.

[103] Pioneering studies here are Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*; Vestergaard, "The System of Kinship in Early Norwe¬gian Law"; Hansen, "The Concept of Kinship." See however Sunde, *Kongen, lova og landet*, 106–8.

[104] Hermanson and Orning, "Lords and Followers: Patron-client Relationships," and "Friends and Allies: Networks of Horizontal Bonds," in Esmark, Hermanson, and Orning, *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 2; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*.

[105] See terms in Fritzner, *Ordbog*.

[106] Imsen uses the modern term "peasant communalism" to encompass all these variations. However the age of such communities is somewhat disputed. See Imsen, *Norsk bondekommunalisme*, 23–27.

Moving up the ladder, we encounter regions: Østlandet (the eastern part of Norway), Vestlandet (the western part), and Trøndelag (the northern part).[107] These are frequently mentioned in the sagas, partly because they are legal entities having their respective laws and assemblies (*Borgarthing* and *Haugathing* for Viken, *Eidsivathing* for Opplanda, *Gulathing* for Vestlandet, *Frostathing* for Trøndelag, and *Eyrathing* as the most important assembly for proclaiming kings), and partly because they figure as regions that were characterized by internal coherence and set off by boundaries with other regions. Norwegian historians for a long time considered these regions to be age-old entities clearly separated from one another and acting as separate political units.[108] Sverre Bagge has objected to this reification of regions and considers them much looser political entities that only became more differentiated during the civil war period.[109] I support this latter view, and a main point in the analysis will be that these regions were poorly equipped to form the basis of autonomous political groupings.

The realm or national unit needs no extensive discussion here. Norway provided the frame of reference for the kings' sagas, not as a national unity in the modern sense of constituting an area where all inhabitants identified themselves as Norwegian, but in a pre-modern sense as a dynastic unit. This unit was not set in stone, as various dynasties could merge or form alliances, something that happened frequently from the fourteenth century onward in Scandinavia.[110] Also in our period the interweaving of Scandinavian dynasties was profound, in particular in terms of Danish presence in the Viken area.[111]

Having briefly outlined the various political segments in medieval Norway, a major point is that these units were not homogenous

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[107] I use the Norwegian terms for these regions. Østlandet refers to the eastern part of Norway, consisting of coastal Viken (south to Göta river) and inland Opplanda. Oslo, Tunsberg, Borg, and Konghelle are the major towns of this region. Vestlandet is the western part of Norway, situated mainly along the coast and fiords, with Bergen as its biggest town. Trøndelag is the northern part of Norway, with Nidaros (present-day Trondheim) as its main town. Further north of Trøndelag is northern Norway, which was peripheral in the struggles in this period.

[108] See in particular Bull, "Borgerkrigene i Norge."

[109] Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling;" Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 57.

[110] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 236–50.

[111] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*.

or easily demarcated. In the chapters to come, the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts within, between, and across these segments will be a main theme. Far from being distortions of an image of bounded units, these overlaps and blurred transitions provide much of the gist of the argument for a constant crisis, which unfolds in the interplay between the tendencies of fusion and fission.[112] In the following, I will give a short outline of the various levels and segments of conflicts that form the basis of the chapters of this book.

The context in chapter 2 is the classic version of the Norwegian civil wars: the struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers for the throne. The chapter starts by giving an outline of the struggle year by year, partly to give the reader an overview of the main events (see also the timeline and detailed maps in the Appendix), partly in order to illuminate the inconclusive state of the struggle. In the next two sections, I explore the causes for why the political dynamic worked against one group's gaining dominance over the other. First, geopolitical factors and the disastrous effects when one group tried to expel the other are discussed. Second, I analyze the available military resources and technologies, ships, battles/ambushes, fortifications, and plunder—demonstrating that they worked poorly for a group intent on dominance, but on the other hand were conducive to a balance of power.

Chapter 3 investigates leadership within each group, which often is described in great detail, in particular in *Böglunga sögur*. Tensions and conflicts were almost endemic among the Croziers, as well as in the Birchleg camp after the death of King Sverre in 1202. Such dissent among the leadership has traditionally been considered a sign of weakness. Without totally rejecting this interpretation, my hypothesis is that these rivalries also had many beneficial effects. For one, they distributed responsibility and accountability more widely within the group. For another, rivalry among leaders allowed for debates that were conducive for finding the best solution.

Chapter 4 takes one step further and "deconstructs" the armed groups—the Birchlegs and Croziers—which hitherto have been assumed to be closed units. In reality, these groups were constructs of a double order: creations of kings in order to mobilize men for

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[112] The need to see group boundaries as permeable and shifting is a main point in Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 164–209.

their cause, and creations of the kings' sagas, which saw the past from a royal point of view. The chapter enlists three bonds that imputed obligations to the participants, which at times ran counter to the division into parties. First, there were personal bonds to relatives, friends, and patrons or clients, which influenced action on a number of occasions. A second community that transcended party lines was the warrior community, which sometimes made retainers share interests across group boundaries. A final community comprised the elites of both groups, whose commonality at times threatened to overshadow the political struggle.

The final chapter broadens the perspective on the political struggles by analyzing their repercussions for the wider society. I approach this issue by first looking at the peasants' participation at assemblies and in the *leiðangr* (naval force), concluding that they were not passive participants who could be commanded at will, and that infringements on their rights were often resisted. Second, I juxtapose the leaders of the armed groups with local magnates: were they identical, or different persons and roles? Here I argue that the extent to which the "civil wars" brought disorder and chaos to society at large is probably overstated.

The sources

This book is primarily a study of sagas, more specifically of the contemporary kings' sagas *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*.[113] The main cause for focusing on sagas is that they are the only sources that describe the political struggles of the period around 1200 in detail. The truth is that without kings' sagas, we would hardly know anything about the political development during the civil war period. The regional laws are central sources to this period, but they do not

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[113] For *Sverris saga*, I use *Sverris saga* in the Íslenzk fornrit series edited by Þorleifur Hauksson (abbreviated as Sv). Also *Böglunga sögur* has recently been edited in the Íslenzk fornrit series, see *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar 1; Böglunga saga*, edited by Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset. However, I will not use this edition, as it is impractical due to its division of the short and long versions into two separate parts, which make comparison between the versions complicated. For that reason, I use the edition by Magerøy, *Soga om birkebeinar og baglar* vol. 2, which presents the various manuscripts consecutively (abbreviated as Bögl). Sverris saga har been translated into English (see Sephton, *Sverrissaga*), but since the translation is very old-fashioned (it is from 1899), translations into English are mine. The same is the case with *Böglunga sögur*, which has not been translated into English before. References are to chapters.

add much information on political conflict. *Gulathingslaw* and *Frostathingslaw* are the only laws fully preserved from this period, sometimes references will be to the later *National Law* (1274) for reasons of comparison.[114] However, the law assemblies are central political arenas that are mentioned frequently in the sagas: the *Gulathing* for the western part of the country, *Frostathing* for Trøndelag, and *Eidsivathing* and *Borgarthing* for the eastern part of the country. The establishment of a Norwegian archdiocese in Nidaros in 1152/53 and the first coronation of a Norwegian king in 1163/64 produced a sequence of documents that can be found in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*.[115] This material is crucial for studying the alliance between the Church and the monarchy, as well as the royal ideology emanating from this concord. Yet, these incidents occurred prior to the period of this study, and they will therefore mainly figure in the background of the struggles following the advent of King Sverre. During Sverre's reign, several popes issued letters to Norway leading to the excommunication of King Sverre, and *A Speech against the Bishops* was written in Sverre's circle as a response to these attacks.[116] These struggles undoubtedly had profound effects on the power struggles between Sverre and his opponents, and the political implications of these battles will loom large in the analysis this book offers. Another central ideological work that will intermittently be referred to is *Konungs skuggsiá* (The King's Mirror), probably written close to royal circles in the mid-thirteenth century.[117]

The two main sources of this investigation are the kings' sagas *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*. Both are what we can call war narratives that describe in detail the political struggles at the top

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[114] The legal material has been published in the five volumes of *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*. For a new edition of Gulathingslaw in Old Norse, see Ulset, Rindal, and Eithun, *Den eldre Gulatingslova*. For a new edition of the National Law in Old Norse, see Rindal and Spørck, *Kong Magnus Håkonsson Lagabøtes landslov* vols. 1–2. For a new translation into English, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Magnus the Lawmender's Laws of the Land*.

[115] The diplomas are published in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vols. 1–23. The central Latin diplomas concerning Norway before 1204 have been published with Norwegian translations in Vandvik, *Latinske dokument til norsk historie*. A selection of Latin and Norse documents is also translated in Bagge, Helle, and Smedsdal as *Norske middelalderdokumenter*.

[116] Holtsmark, *En tale mot biskopene*. On *A Speech against the Bishops*, see Gunnes, "Kongens ære." The papal letters are preserved in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*.

[117] Holm-Olsen, *Konungs skuggsiá*. The standard analysis of the work is Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*.

level of society. *Sverris saga* follows King Sverre Sigurdsson's career from when he arrived in Norway in 1177 until his death in 1202. During the first two years, Sverre basically operated as a guerrilla leader of the Birchleg group, constantly on the move, as King Magnus Erlingsson and his father Erling skakke had superior forces and a firm grip on most of the country. In 1179, the Birchlegs managed to kill Erling skakke in the battle at Kalvskinnet and gained a foothold in the Trøndelag region. Five years later King Magnus and many of his men were slain in the battle of Fimreite, and Sverre emerged as sole king of Norway. However, in the years 1184–96, a number of armed groups arose to challenge the Birchlegs—the most important ones being the Kuvlungs (1185–88) and the Island Beards (1193–94)—but Sverre managed to defeat them. In 1196, the Croziers were established in Denmark, headed by Bishop Nikolas Arnesson and with the support of the Papacy, and they proved to be an even match. The struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers is the main theme of the latter part of *Sverris saga*. Fortunes shifted, but no group managed to oust the other. Shortly before Sverre's death in 1202, he gained the upper hand after a protracted siege of the Croziers, but other parts of the latter group continued fighting.

Böglunga sögur[118] start immediately after Sverre's death. The swift election of his son Håkon as king led the Croziers to give up their cause and have their own king killed. However, Håkon died early in 1204, and hostilities resumed. Both groups had frequent turnovers of kings. Among the Birchlegs, the minor Guttorm was elected king in 1204 only to die shortly thereafter, paving the way for Inge Bårdsson as king (1204–17) and his half-brother Håkon galen as earl (1204–14). The Croziers elected Erling steinvegg as their king in 1204, and following his death in 1207, they chose Filippus Simonsson as king. In 1208, a settlement was made between the two groups. Inge continued as king, whereas Filippus was made earl governing one third of the country—the eastern part. Among the Birchlegs, governance was divided between Inge and Håkon galen up to the latter's death in 1214, and their relationship was strained.

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[118] This saga is referred to in the plural—*sögur*—because it exists in two versions, a long and a short one. See below.

In 1217, both Inge and Filippus died, and we now enter the period of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar.* After much discussion at the assemblies and among the magnates, the minor Håkon Håkonsson was elected king with the adult Skule Bårdson as earl. The following year a final settlement was reached between the Birchlegs and the Croziers. However, King Håkon faced opposition from the Slittungs (1217–19) and the Ribbungs (1219–27), and rivalry persisted between him and earl Skule, which lasted until Skule rebelled openly late in 1239 and was executed in spring 1240 after a decisive defeat.

The challenges in using kings' sagas as historical sources are threefold, relating to the survival of manuscripts, saga bias, and blind spots. I shall deal with these three issues in turn. As is the case with all Old Norse literature, the kings' sagas are preserved in much younger manuscripts, which sometimes differ substantially from one another, partly because scribes had limited access to manuscripts, and partly because scribes were "interpreters" or "co-creators" more than copyists.[119] The new philological approach has taken the full measure of this, considering sagas in their extant manuscript context, and not according to their alleged "age."[120] Studying the kings' sagas in extant manuscripts takes us to late medieval Iceland. *Sverris saga, Böglunga sögur* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* are preserved in the Icelandic composite manuscripts *Eirspennill* (ca. 1300) and *Flateyjarbók* (ca. 1380–90), together with (parts of) *Heimskringla.*[121] *Sverris saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* also figure together in *Skálholtsbók yngsta* from the mid-fifteenth century.[122] In addition, *Sverris saga* is found in AM 327, 4° from ca. 1300, and *Hákonar saga* together with *Heimskringla* in *Codex Frisianus* from ca. 1300, and in several fragments.[123]

It is indeed legitimate to use these sagas as sources to their manuscript context on late medieval Iceland—an endeavor that I have

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[119] Jørgensen, "Om verdien av sagaavskrifter fra 1600-tallet."

[120] See Orning, *The Reality of the Fantastic*, 25–32 on new philology.

[121] *Eirspennill* also includes the latter part of *Heimskringla*, and *Flateyjarbók* the whole of *Heimskringla* in addition to other sagas. *Flateyjarbók* has recently been translated into modern Norwegian in six volumes (Titlestad, *Flatøybok*, vols. 1–6).

[122] Indrebø, Introduction, v–lxxviii; Introduction to *Sverres saga*," 7–17; Holm-Olsen, "Sverris saga," 551–58.

[123] See the introductions to the scholarly editions of the sagas for fuller discussions of the extant manuscripts and stemmas.

undertaken myself previously.[124] Yet this is not what I am going to do in this study, where I use them as sources for Norwegian history around 1200. The main reason for this approach is that these sagas are considered to be fairly reliable in their details. The sagas used here are usually classified as “contemporary sagas.” The label is inaccurate in that these sagas are not recounting contemporary events proper, but events from a few decades back in time. There has been a long-standing debate on the source value of the sagas, but it is primarily concerned with the sagas that recount events from several hundred years prior, such as *Heimskringla*.[125] Considering that the contemporary sagas were written not long after the events they recount, their authors probably had substantial knowledge of the past. Moreover, the fact that the authors wrote what were considered historical works (*saga* means “story” and is derived from *segja*—“to tell”), and that they retold events present in the minds of many in their presumed audiences, means that they probably had a limited scope for inventing the past or for significantly altering the course of events.[126]

A sign of the reliability of the preserved manuscripts of contemporary sagas is that there are no major divergences in these various manuscripts that stem from late medieval Iceland. However, there is a problem of variant manuscripts in the case of *Böglunga sögur*, where the Icelandic manuscripts differ substantially from a much more voluminous version in Peder Clausson Friis’s translation, published in 1633.[127] This latter version is generally wordier, and it alone describes events from 1210 to 1217—albeit in a section far less detailed than the one referring to events prior to 1210 and particularly 1208. We do not know what manuscripts—presumably in Old Norse—Friis based his translation on, apart from some small

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[124] Orning, *The Reality of the Fantastic*.

[125] See Mundal, *Sagadebatt* for important contributions to this debate. A brief and entertaining summary is given in the introductory chapter in Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 43–76, with an emphasis on the debate on Sagas of Icelanders.

[126] The lack of a clear division between fact and fiction has fueled a long list of scholarly literature which it is unnecessary to render in detail here. See O’Connor, “History and Fiction” for a summary of the debate. On the limited freedom to rewrite a recent past, see Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla*, 57–63, 237–40.

[127] The long version building on Friis’ translation will be termed “L” in the following, the short version “S”. The short version exists in two variants: *Skálholtsbók yngsta* (“81a”) and *Eirspennill* (“E”).

fragments.[128] There have been many discussions on the dating of these versions. The most widespread view, argued in most detail by Knut Helle, is that the shorter version is the older one, whereas Hallvard Magerøy thinks that the long version is more historically correct than the short one.[129] My own view would be closer to Helle's,[130] but given that this issue is unresolved and the source-related implications arising from this issue are limited, I will usually use both versions indiscriminately.

The second challenge with using contemporary sagas as historical sources relates to their bias. As accounts written in the heat of the present, their versions are not necessarily neutral or detached. The challenge thus relates not so much to the reliability of the information as to its framing. This is particularly the case with *Sverris saga*, and it invokes two sets of qualifications. A first question concerns authorship of the saga. The foreword to the saga states that Abbot Karl Jónsson from the monastery of Þingeyrar in Iceland wrote the first part, *Grýla*. This probably happened in connection with his sojourn in Norway in the period 1185–88. There has been much disagreement on how far *Grýla* goes, and when and by whom the last part of the saga was written. Nineteenth-century historians believed *Grýla* to include events up to 1184, whereas a more recent view argues for an earlier transition, in 1179 or 1178.[131] Concerning the second and larger part of the saga, opinions have differed on whether Karl Jónsson wrote it in the first decade of the thirteenth century, or whether it was written around 1220 by another author.[132] Despite the uncertainties concerning when *Sverris*

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[128] Helle, *Omkring Böglungasögur*; Magerøy, *Soga om birkebeinar og baglar*, vol. *1*.

[129] Helle, *Omkring Böglungasögur*; Magerøy, *Soga om birkebeinar og baglar,* vol. *1*, 47–58 and 178–209.

[130] I tend to disagree with Magerøy on the historical accuracy of the longer version. In his use of the term *lydighed* ("obedience") Friis departs so clearly from the pattern of the use of Old Norse equivalent term *lýðni* in the other sources that it seems doubtful whether he could have translated from an original written before 1220, as *lýðni* is very seldom used in any sources before 1220. The term is only used once in *Sverris saga*, a very few times in the kings' sagas and the provincial laws, and in one diploma.

[131] Koht, "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre," 181–87; Paasche, "Karl Jónsson," 228–29; Holm-Olsen, *Studier i Sverris saga*, 3. For a summary of the debate, see Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 15–16.

[132] On the former view, see Nygaard Brekke, *Sverre-sagaens opphav*; Holm-Olsen, "Sverris saga," 556–57; on the latter, see Koht, "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre"; Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 16–17. See also Þorleifr Hauksson's introduction to the Ízlensk fornrit edition of *Sverris saga*.

saga was written and by whom, I will treat the saga as a whole, as the divergences do not have serious implications for the status of the saga as a source. Sverre Bagge describes this approach as "unitarianism," arguing that sagas can largely be used as a source for ideology or mentality in their setting regardless of who wrote them and exactly when.[133]

Another pressing issue with *Sverris saga* is the degree to which we should assume that the saga author was biased in favor of his main protagonist, and what repercussions this has for the image he created of the past. The fact that the saga prologue specified that "King Sverre himself sat by and decided what should be written down" has made many historians conclude that the saga is a work of propaganda that yields little balanced information about the events it recounts.[134] Fewer historians have been willing to accept the second part of the prologue, which argues that even if what it tells might seem improbable, "everyone knows that it is all true and nothing added."[135] Yet Sverre Bagge has argued that if we exclude obvious exaggerations of Sverre's wisdom and importance, the saga is probably close to the truth in its details.[136] This is a view I find sensible and agree with. In the course of this book, examples of aggrandizing Sverre will repeatedly be discussed and accounted for, albeit without assuming that the events accounted for in the sagas were fictional.

The challenges concerned with *Böglunga sögur* are quite different. This saga, or sagas in plural as its name implies, has no main protagonist or hero comparable to King Sverre (or King Håkon in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*). However, this does not mean that the saga is unbiased, and discussions relating to this issue have centered on the two different versions of the saga, neither of which has a known author. It has been assumed that

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[133] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 18–19. Bagge's other arguments for this approach are that the saga authors' originality when they copy other works has been underestimated, and that it is methodologically most satisfactory to assume that the saga has an overall intention and composition.

[134] "yfir sat sjálfr Sverrir konunr ok réð fyrir hvat rita skyldi" (Sv prologue). On the propaganda aspect, see Koht, "Norsk historieskrivning under kong Sverre." See Bagge, "Ideology and Propaganda in Sverris saga" for a review of the debate.

[135] "vitu þó allir sannendi til at þetta er ekki aukit" (Sv prologue).

[136] Bagge, "Ideology and Propaganda in Sverris saga."

the longer version arose in a Birchleg context, considering that it is more detailed on Birchleg issues than the short version. Helle believes that the short version can be counted as neutral, whereas Magerøy sees it as pro-Crozier.[137] However, these viewpoints are mainly based on the amount of detail rendered in the various versions, and not so much on consistent biases in the text. I have discovered no systematic divergences between the two versions when it comes to describing the political struggles—they both seem to render a neutral, sober account of the events. Given the at least apparent neutrality of the various versions, I will assume that they are fairly reliable sources for the past. I will therefore treat the various versions of *Böglunga sögur* as one source in this book, not making a distinction between the short and long versions unless there are specific reasons for doing so.

A third challenge with using *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur* as historical sources relates to their blind spots, as both sagas are essentially war narratives that follow the political struggles at the top level of society. This means that the kings and their activities form the basis of their narratives, and that issues that fall short of relevance to the kings are skipped over. *Sverris saga* states this outright with respect to the fighting between Birchlegs and Heklungs: “There could be much more to tell about that. But we will limit ourselves to those events that we think were the most important, and where the kings themselves participated.”[138] This means that even if the sagas render a balanced account of the political struggles, they are biased in the sense that they privilege the struggles that involved dynastic issues and rivalry between the armed groups. The point at stake here is that there were other axes of rivalry and cooperation present in this society that do not receive equal treatment in the sagas. First, there were connections pointing toward inter-Scandinavian networks that are played down in the sagas. Second, the sagas pay less attention to personal connections between the armed groups, as well as to what

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[137] Helle, *Omkring Böglungasögur,* 80, 84; Magerøy, *Soga om birkebeinar og baglar*, vol. 1, 178, 188–93.

[138] “Væri þar ok mart frá at segja, en þó munum vér þá atburði mest flytja með frásögn er oss þykkja merkiligstir ok sjálfir konungar hafa verit við staddir” (Sv 71). See also Sv 163.

happened at the local level of society. There is no simple way to recover these perspectives, as it is unscientific to argue *ex silentio*. However, it is possible to search for such alternative perspectives in the sources by reading against the grain, looking for traces that are partly suppressed or camouflaged because the authors considered them unimportant or even threatening. Since such voices must be assumed to be weaker than the dominant ones, we cannot use statistical methods to measure the scope of conflicts. As Philippa Maddern formulates it, we need to look for norms rather than for the normal.[139] This endeavor will guide this book, in particular chapters 3–5, where these aspects of the conflicts are addressed explicitly.

In addition to *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*, I will also more intermittently use kings' sagas describing the adjacent periods. The fullest account of the period prior to 1177 appears in *Heimskringla*, probably written by Snorre Sturlasson around 1230.[140] Discussions of the historical reliability of this work have been heated, but the part dealing with the twelfth century has been regarded as fairly trustworthy, considering the proximity in time. In one way, the saga is less biased than *Sverris saga* in having no main protagonist. An expression of this is that Sverre's opponents are portrayed more positively in *Heimskringla* than in *Sverris saga*, in particular Erling skakke. The saga following *Böglunga sögur* is *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, which recounts the reign of King Håkon Håkonsson (r. 1217–63).[141] With this saga we find ourselves in the unusual situation of knowing both the author and the date, as the saga was written by the Icelandic chieftain Sturla Þórðarson, and information in the saga shows that it was written

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[139] Maddern, *Violence and Social Order.*

[140] For discussions of *Heimskringla* as a source, see Finlay and Faulkes, introduction; Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction*; Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, 1–63, 237–40. I use *Heimskringla*, Íslenzk fornrit vol. 26–28 for the Old Norse version, the edition by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (Viking Society) for the English translation. John Megaard has doubted Snorre's authorship of *Heimskringla*. See Meegaard, *Hvem skapte Heimskringla?*

[141] See Mundt, introduction, xii–xiii; Bjørgo, "Om skriftlege kjelder for Hakonar saga"; Helle, "Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. I will use the edition *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, edited by Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, and Tor Ulset (abbreviated as Hák).

in the period 1264–65.[142] The combination of the saga's detailed descriptions and Sturla's lack of first-hand knowledge of Norway makes it likely that he had access to archives when he wrote the saga.[143] Nevertheless, many of the same challenges of bias apply to this saga as to *Sverris saga*, since it is structured around one major king.

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[142] Hák 275.

[143] Halvdan Koht, "Um kjeldegrunnlage for soga um Håkon Håkonsson"; Bjørgo, "Om skriftlege kjelder for Hakonar saga," 227–29.

CHAPTER 2

Inter–group oppositions

This chapter will mostly focus on the struggle between the armed groups called the Birchlegs (*birkibeinar*) and the Croziers (*baglar*) in the period 1196–1208. The Birchlegs had been established by Øystein Møyla as an oppositional group to Magnus Erlingsson and Erling skakke in 1174. In 1177, Øystein was killed and the group dissolved, and when Sverre arrived that same year, he re-established the group with himself as its leader.[1] In seven years, Sverre managed to conquer and kill both Magnus and his father, and now it was his turn to face opposition. The Croziers were founded in 1196 in opposition to Sverre and the Birchlegs. However, precursors can be found in earlier oppositional factions, such as the Kuvlungs (1185–88), the Island Beards (1193–94), and several more ephemeral groups.[2]

In order to study these groups, it is necessary to take one step back and give an overview of the process of group formation earlier in the twelfth century. Norwegian historians have been in agreement that during the later twelfth century, group formations became more stable.[3] A crucial event in this process occurred when Håkon herdebrei's men managed to kill King Inge Haraldsson in

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[1] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 72–78; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 46–52.

[2] The continuity is traceable partly because the royal candidates were descended from Magnus Erlingsson, and partly through the identity and ancestry of leading men in the groups. See Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 90–93; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 42–46; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 46.

[3] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 32–38; Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 166–75; Moseng et al., *Norsk historie*, vol. 1, 750–1537, 111–21; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 42–53.

1161.[4] In the previous quarter of a century, Inge had built up a group that included a majority of Norwegian magnates, and this group widened further after he eliminated his brothers in 1155–57.[5] Håkon herdebrei's unexpected victory suddenly turned the tables. As Håkon had recruited his group from only a fraction of the magnates, accepting him as king was an appalling solution to most of those who had previously supported Inge. The problem was that no king's son was available behind whom to muster an alternative group to that of Håkon.[6]

In this volatile situation, the leading magnate from King Inge's faction, Erling skakke, took the initiative to establish what *Heimskringla* terms a "*flokkr,*" with the aim of overthrowing Håkon herdebrei and his group.[7] This venture is described in detail in the saga, probably because it was a political novelty. First, the term *flokkr* was a new one. It is only used only a few times before this occasion, and then probably not with the same intent.[8] Second, the creation of this group involved the swearing of oaths to stay united until the goal of eliminating the enemy had been fulfilled.[9] Third, the group broke with custom in choosing as its king a man (in fact a seven-year-old boy) who was not a king's son and in formulating a written law of succession. Fourth, henceforward groups seem to have become more close-knit, as armed groups from now on were given specific names, first the groups opposing Erling skakke, and from *Sverris saga* onward all groups.[10] Putting labels on political groups in this way is a peculiarity in Norway as compared to

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[4] "Hákonar saga herðibreiðs" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 16–19.

[5] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 53–57; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 34–38; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 45.

[6] There was in fact a king's son living, namely Harald, the alleged son of King Sigurd. However, he did not turn up in the saga until later, and then he was executed by Erling skakke ("Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 35).

[7] "Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 1–2.

[8] On the use of the term *flokkr,* see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Networks and *flokkar*: The Civil Wars in Norway ca. 1130–1163." Legally, a *flokkr* consisted of at least five persons. See *Gulathingslaw*, 154, 168.

[9] On sworn groups, see Althoff, "Political Networks in Conflict: A German Perspective."

[10] Opponents of Erling skakke were labeled "Markusmenn" "Hettesveinar" and "Birchlegs." The two first ones were ephemeral groups. See Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 69–72.

Denmark and Sweden, and the quarrel over names also hints that group names served as identity markers.[11]

In this chapter I shall study the relationship and struggles *between* groups, and therefore operate from a premise that these groups were relatively coherent, whereas in the next chapters I shall discuss their internal divisions and permeability. My aim is to show how intentions of achieving superiority repeatedly failed, not primarily due to lack of will among the participants or to incidental factors, even if such factors certainly could play a role, but because geopolitical and military structures made long-term dominance by one faction hard to achieve. These structural factors worked in favor of a balance of power, rather than the domination of one party over another. Moreover, I will argue that the fact that domination was not achieved by one group does not mean that the situation was out of control and that society was torn apart by conflict and war. The situation of power balance combined with intense struggles was one of constant crisis, wherein conflicts contributed to upholding social relations as much as to upsetting them.

Constant crisis: The power struggle year by year

When viewing the struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers from 1196 to 1208 from a bird's-eye perspective, the Croziers had their stronghold in Østlandet and the Birchlegs in Trøndelag, whereas the western part of Norway was more fluid in its affiliation. This pattern was formalized in a settlement between the two parties at Kvitingsøy

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[11] Labels brought with them expectations about how to behave and contributed in forming people's identities. The term *birkibeinar* ("Birchlegs") signifies "those using birch as shoes" ("Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla* vol. 3, 36). This humble origin Sverre used actively in his efforts to mobilize his men, and to remind them of their social climb and of the courage expected from them. *Baglar* ("bishop's staffs") referred to this group's close connection to the Church, a bond that they exploited actively in their fight against Sverre as a heretic. The Island Beards—*eyjarskeggjar*—were so called because they were established in Orkney, but the saga adds that "they wanted to be called Gullbeinar" (Sv 119), meaning "gold bones." In *Sverris saga*, Magnus Erlingsson's group was labelled *heklungar*, signifying "inheritors of a cloak," originating in the story that they had found the cloak of an old beggar woman after her death; a cloak that she had stitched full of silver (Sv 41). One might suppose that Magnus and his group were not very content with this association but given that *Sverris saga* was written from their enemies' perspective, we shall never know if they themselves protested against this name and labeled themselves differently.

in 1208, where the Birchlegs gained two thirds of the country (Trøndelag and Vestlandet), the Croziers one third (Østlandet).[12] However, even if the parties had a territorial basis in specific regions, seeing them as operating with a fixed territorial division does not give a satisfactory picture of the political struggles in this period, as the groups constantly tried to gain dominance by outmaneuvering each other. The distribution of power between the groups was not stable but was a continual target of challenge and conflict. The best way of demonstrating the dynamic whereby one group never achieved lasting dominance over the other is by analyzing the movements, tactics, and strategies of the parties.[13] In the following, I shall trace the movements of the Birchlegs and Croziers in the period 1196–1208 year by year. This will give the reader a synopsis of the main events in this period, and simultaneously provide an outline of the geopolitical factors working against the total victory of one party.[14]

In 1196, the Birchlegs had been the undisputed group in power since the Island Beards had been defeated two years earlier. However, the sky was not rosy in Viken. Sverre had appointed the magnate Nikolas Arnesson bishop of Oslo in 1190 in order to rally his support against the Norwegian archbishop, who had gone into exile the same year following a conflict with Sverre. Nikolas was compliant to begin with and played an important role in having Sverre crowned as king in 1194, but the following year Nikolas sailed to Denmark and joined the archbishop and other opponents of Sverre. The same year a man called Reidar sendemann came from Byzantium to Norway, where he met with Sverre and presented him with a letter urging the king to send troops to support the Byzantine

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[12] Bögl 35. See Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 97–98; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 158–65.

[13] Following Clausewitz, tactics can be defined as "the use of armed forces in the engagement", and strategy as "the use of engagements for the object of the war." See Clausewitz, *On War*, 146. Thus, strategy concerns plans for military activities, whereas tactics deal with how to implement plans. Whereas this division looks tidy in theory, in practice there is a sliding transition, which also Clausewitz acknowledged (*On War*, 147). Arstad underlines that the strategic aspect of medieval warfare has often been underrated. See Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 14–21. In this book, I will refer to guerrilla and plundering strategies in cases where these activities seem to be part of planned warfare, whereas the concrete implementation of military strategies will be referred to as tactics.

[14] I will not give saga references here, as events will be discussed more thoroughly in subsequent chapters.

emperor. Sverre responded hesitantly, but ended up turning the proposal down. As a consequence, Reidar travelled to Denmark with a group of men, and there he met with Bishop Nikolas, the archbishop and other Norwegian magnates. Together they formed the Crozier group in spring 1196 with the child Inge, alleged son of the deceased King Magnus Erlingsson, as king.[15]

Once the Croziers had been established, they sailed to Viken, where Sverre and the Birchleg fleet were positioned. Sverre tried to outmaneuver the Croziers militarily, but when he found they were too numerous to be conquered, he withdrew from Viken, admitting that it was improbable that he would receive any support from the local population there. Moreover, his own men were eager to go home to Vestlandet and Trøndelag. Thereafter, the Croziers established themselves in Viken without meeting resistance, whereas Sverre spent the winter in Nidaros.

The next spring (1197), Sverre mustered the fleet from Trøndelag and Vestlandet and sailed to Viken. This was probably not different from what he had done the year before, but this time he had a formal enemy to confront. Nikolas Arnesson prepared a defense, and a battle was fought in Oslo, which the Croziers lost. Sverre now sailed along the coast in Viken and demanded taxes and fines from the peasants. Most of the peasants paid, albeit unwillingly. Having the main Birchleg fleet in Viken was probably part of a strategy of Sverre to squeeze the Croziers and local peasants, but the strategy was time-consuming and had its costs. The Croziers had strong support in the region, and once Sverre was gone for the winter, they resumed control. Moreover, after the defeat in Oslo, the Croziers travelled over land to Nidaros, where they ambushed the Birchlegs there. The latter tried to take the town back, but the Croziers managed to ambush them a second time. As 1197 came to a close, Sverre had control only over Vestlandet, whereas the Croziers were in complete control in Østlandet, and had hijacked Nidaros for the time being.

The full consequences of this situation were disclosed the following year (1198), when Sverre sailed with his fleet from Bergen

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[15] The Birchlegs did not acknowledge Inge's ancestry and derided him as Torgils Tuveskitt (tuft sh*t), Sv 129.

to Nidaros, only to find that the Croziers now had more and larger ships than he did. The naval battle at Torsberg (15 April 1198) is described in *Sverris saga* as a draw, but the Croziers still had the upper hand at sea. Sverre could easily take back Nidaros, where the inhabitants were favorable to the Birchlegs in much the same way that the people in Østlandet favored the Croziers. However, with their better ships the Croziers now controlled Vestlandet in addition to Østlandet. In this situation Sverre put all his resources into regaining Bergen. During the summer of 1198, both groups had their main forces in Bergen. *Sverris saga* does its best to highlight Birchleg victories, but in the end they had to withdraw from Bergen over land without having gained control over Bergen or Vestlandet. The Croziers not only controlled most of the coast up to Trøndelag, but they also attacked Nidaros successfully during Sverre's absence.

The Birchlegs were in a critical situation as 1199 started, controlling only Nidaros and Trøndelag, where the Croziers did their best to harass them. During the winter the peasants in Trøndelag agreed to build ships so numerous and high-rigged that they could compete with the Crozier fleet. The testimony of this effort's success came in the battle of Strindfjorden on 17 June 1199, where the Birchlegs won. After the battle, the Birchlegs pursued the Croziers all the way to Denmark. Once again, the tide had turned completely, as Sverre looked like a complete victor.

However, whereas winning battles and having the largest fleet undoubtedly were crucial to gaining military control, the advantage could be ephemeral, as the strategies to follow up victories could easily ruin a splendid result. After having chased the Croziers to Denmark in 1199, Sverre decided to spend the winter of 1200 in enemy territory in Viken. He brought a large army and summoned local peasants to reinforce it during the winter. Yet the Croziers were not beaten, even if they were unable to prevent Sverre's sojourn in their core areas. First, they used the opportunity to search out places where Sverre was absent. Accordingly, they sailed from Denmark to Bergen and Nidaros, making speedy and successful attacks on the latter. Second, many Croziers must have stayed on in Østlandet. On 6 March 1200, more than 50,000 peasants arose against Sverre, according to *Sverris saga*. The number is improbable, and there are reasons to assume that the Croziers played a more active part in the rebellion than the saga admits. Once more, Sverre was victorious, but that did not mean that he gained any greater control over Viken, as the first thing he did after the battle was to retreat to Bergen. When the Birchlegs returned to Viken later that spring, they behaved as conquerors on foreign ground, burning and forcing the peasants to submit.

As 1200 came to a close, Sverre sailed back to Bergen, and the Croziers once more were in command in Østlandet. The next spring (1201), Sverre came back with a large fleet, allegedly forcing all peasants in coastal Viken into submission during the summer, whereafter he besieged the Croziers at Berget, a semi-natural fortification in the town of Tunsberg. The siege was the longest in Norwegian history, lasting for 20 weeks, and it ended with the defeat of the Croziers shortly before Sverre's death on 9 March 1202. However, the victory was less decisive than it appears from the saga. First, the main Crozier army was situated in Hamar in Opplanda, from where they conducted guerrilla raids. Second, even though Sverre had won Berget, the peasants of Viken were no friendlier than before, even though they were formally subjugated.

The death of King Sverre in 1202 could have dealt a major blow to the Birchlegs, but the swift and successful installation of his son Håkon Sverresson as king effectuated the opposite: The Croziers were dispirited and killed their own king, accepting Håkon as their king instead. As a result, in 1203 Håkon could travel safely all over the country, something that his father had seldom been able to do. From his winter base in Nidaros Håkon sailed to Viken, and from there to Bergen, where he spent the subsequent winter.

However, the Birchleg success was short-lived. On New Year's Day of 1204 King Håkon died under mysterious circumstances. After that, the Birchlegs quickly retreated to Nidaros, where they elected a new king, four-year-old Guttorm, grandson of King Sverre, leaving only a small delegation behind in Bergen. Some months later Guttorm died suddenly and Inge Bårdsson, Sverre's sister's son, was elected king. Under such calamitous conditions it turned out that the surrender of the Croziers was only contingent, and probably included only parts of the group, as many warriors had left for Denmark and Sweden after Håkon had been made king in 1202.

In Denmark, a reservoir of Croziers was evidently awaiting a favorable occasion to take action. After Sverre's death, they had tried to persuade Erling steinvegg, who claimed to be a son of Magnus Erlingsson, to become their king. Erling had refused to be king of the Croziers as long as Håkon was alive, but now that Håkon had died, Erling was made king of the Croziers, initiating what is usually called the second Crozier insurrection. The group headed for Viken, which they won easily. They continued to Vestlandet, where they ousted the Birchlegs in Bergen. As 1204 came to an end, the Birchlegs stayed in Nidaros and the Croziers in Viken, while Opplanda was populated by both groups, and Vestlandet was an intermediate zone—probably closer to the Croziers.

Early in 1205 the Croziers made a speedy attack on Stavanger, but they returned when the major Birchleg fleet came southward. The Birchlegs continued all the way to Viken, and the Croziers were forced to withdraw to Denmark—some going to Halland and others to Jutland. Thus, in spring 1205, the Birchlegs appeared to be victors controlling all of Norway. However, their success was short-lived, as the Croziers traveled incognito in smaller groups to Norway. Some of them launched guerrilla attacks at various places, while the majority conquered Nidaros, which was open for the taking with no Birchleg leaders present. The Birchlegs in Viken now sailed to Nidaros as fast as possible, while some remained in Bergen en route northward. Noting these movements, the Croziers headed back to their core areas in Viken and Opplanda and resumed control.

1206 began with an open scenario. The Croziers were once again installed in Østlandet. The spring before, they had been chased by a superior Birchleg fleet. This was not something they wanted to see repeated, and in winter they built twenty-two large ships in Viken. In April they raised sails with their new-built fleet, heading for Nidaros. The result was the Norwegian "blood feast" of 22 April 1206, where Birchlegs celebrating a royal wedding were taken by surprise and almost ninety men were killed. Unluckily for the Croziers, King Inge managed to escape, and as soon as he had gathered troops nearby, the Croziers left town and sailed southward. On their way, they crossed paths with the fleet of the Birchleg earl Håkon galen, Inge's half-brother, second in rank among the

Birchlegs, and effectively their strongest military leader. Håkon galen avoided battle and swiftly returned to Bergen, while sending the bulk of the fleet to defend Nidaros.

Bergen now developed into a center of attention for both Birchlegs and Croziers. When the Croziers approached Bergen from the north, the Birchlegs were ensconced in a fortified castle that they had recently erected. The numerically superior Croziers stayed in town, and in the end the Birchlegs withdrew from Bergen in what resembled an escape. The Crozier fleet sailed northward, and they caught the remainder of Håkon galen's fleet by surprise in Moldefjord, resulting in the largest slaughter of the period, with two hundred Birchlegs killed. As 1206 came to an end, the Croziers had the upper hand against the Birchlegs. The Croziers were firmly installed in Viken, and they even considered spending the winter in Bergen, a sure sign that they controlled Vestlandet. Håkon galen evidently realized the impending danger, and started a program of shipbuilding, emulating the successful Crozier strategy from the previous year.

However, early in 1207 the Crozier King Erling steinvegg died unexpectedly. After a disputed dynastic succession, the experienced Crozier earl Filippus Simonsson was elected as the new king. The Birchlegs acted on the news of Erling's demise by attacking Østlandet, forcing the Croziers to leave as they had done two years earlier. However, this time the Croziers sailed not to Denmark but to Bergen. Here they managed to win the castle from the Birchlegs and burn it down. Hearing news that Håkon galen was on his way, the Croziers went back to Østlandet, where they had some indecisive encounters with King Inge. Now Håkon galen sailed to the region to assist his brother Inge, whereas the Croziers sailed in the opposite direction, avoided Håkon galen, and came to Bergen, where they had no trouble in conquering the castle that Håkon had rebuilt for a third time.

Since all the leading Birchlegs were gathered in Østlandet, Nidaros was defenseless. The Croziers sailed there without encountering any resistance, and Filippus was acclaimed king at Eyrathing. After that they sailed southward, avoiding the northbound Birchleg fleet and continuing all the way to Viken. Now it must have seemed fairly evident that it was impossible for one group to conquer and expel the other. True, the Birchlegs had had the upper hand most of the time—and even supremacy in 1203. However, their efforts at hitting the Croziers at their home base had proven fruitless, and the attempts to pursue them in 1206–07 had been unsuccessful, even in a vulnerable situation of dynastic succession among the Croziers. The result was a settlement between Birchlegs and Croziers in 1208, dividing the country between the two groups.

One could argue that the settlement of 1208 ended the condition of constant crisis by formalizing the relationship between Birchlegs and Croziers into a territorial division between the two groups. However, this would be confusing formal arrangements with practical policies. The tug-of-war between Birchlegs and Croziers continued after 1208, and the struggle resurfaced in full when Håkon Håkonsson was elected king in 1217, giving rise to a new oppositional group in the Østlandet region—the Ribbungs. Finally, the struggle between King Håkon and his second-in-command, the earl Skule Bårdsson, should be interpreted as a constant crisis that would persist until Skule rebelled in 1239 and was defeated the following year.[16]

Constant crisis: The geopolitical factors

In the power struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers between 1196 and 1208, both groups aimed for dominance by routing and reducing their opponent as much as possible. Here we should make a sharp distinction between what applies to the intentional and what to the structural level of the struggles. People do not need to be peaceful to maintain a relatively peaceful society, because this is a matter of how violence *works* in society. On the level of intentions, both parties opted for victory and did their best to conquer the other. However, seen in a structural perspective, the dominant pattern that emerges from the struggle is one of balance between the two opposing forces. The Birchlegs usually had the upper hand, but it was a big leap from being *relatively* stronger to becoming *supreme*. The difference is vividly exposed in situations where the dominant group tried to expel the other from their core area. The

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[16] See Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 51–258 on the military and political threat and strength of the Ribbungs, and also Orning, "Feud in the State," on Skule's rebellion.

Birchlegs conquered Østlandet in 1197, 1199–1202, 1203, 1205 and 1207, and the Croziers did likewise in Trøndelag in 1198–99 and 1206. Yet the long-term success of such victories was quite limited, and the reasons for this were threefold.

First, ousting a group from an area could lead the expelled group to turn to guerrilla warfare. In 1197, after having lost a battle in Oslo, the Croziers were able to stay on in Østlandet. Here they shadowed the Birchlegs, hitting at them when they were unprepared, as when Sverre's brother Hide was slaughtered with most of his company (Sv 140). They also assisted the peasants in resisting the Birchlegs (Sv 138–39). On the one hand, the strategy was risky, as they did not have the strength to confront the superior Birchleg army head-on and therefore risked losing the local peasants' faith in their capacity to protect them. On the other hand, the peasants' support was not lost in a day, and Sverre was also in a bind, as after a lengthy stay in Østlandet his naval crews clamored to go home and even mutinied against him (Sv 139). Late in 1199, Sverre tried another strategy, staying in Oslo for the winter with his army. Then the full force of the resistance surfaced in the battle of Oslo, which in reality was a mixture of a massive, coordinated guerrilla assault and a peasant upheaval (Sv 162–65).

Thus, in both 1197 and 1199–1200 the Croziers and the peasants from Østlandet sought a battle to settle scores, and both times they lost. These Birchleg victories were not decisive in the long run, as they did not gain permanent control as a result of them, but they were surely detrimental to the Croziers and their supporters, who subsequently changed strategy, probably learning from previous mistakes. So far, they had adhered to the norms of conventional warfare seeking battle with the enemy. Now they started to cultivate an unconventional dimension of pragmatic surrender combined with guerrilla assaults. When the Birchlegs conducted a large-scale punitive expedition along the Viken coast in 1200–02, the Croziers never sought battle, apart from one instance when it was inescapable (Sv 168). Moreover, during Sverre's twenty-week-long siege of Berget in 1201–02, not only did the besieged Croziers avoid combat, but the main Crozier army in Opplanda repeatedly resisted the request to come rescue their besieged fellows. One of the leaders formulated the issue succinctly:

> We have ventured around in small groups now for a while, and whereas we have often lost men to King Sverre, we have also done harm to his men. Let us now not travel into the open hell even if Reidar [sendemann, Crozier leader] wants to show us the way (Sv 177).[17]

Instead, the Croziers focused their attention on conducting small-scale guerrilla raids at various places (Sv 173, 177–78; Bögl 1).

The guerrilla strategy was implemented in full when the Birchlegs came with a large fleet to Viken in 1205, albeit not without debate among the Croziers: "Bishop Nikolas said that the only option was to go south to Denmark, and not fight against the superior force" (Bögl 16).[18] Then they divided the group into smaller bands that inflicted damage in many places all over Norway by striking unexpectedly and brutally (Bögl 16).

On the one hand, this guerrilla strategy was not an altogether viable solution, as it was dictated by inferiority in military troops that made conventional open warfare doomed to defeat. The Birchlegs used their conventional superiority to try to squeeze peasants into obedience, demonstrating the Croziers' inability to protect them. On the other hand, the Crozier strategy was an efficient way of compensating for inferior military power by utilizing local knowledge and dictating the terms of combat against stationary Birchleg troops. Whereas a guerrilla strategy seldom was sufficient in itself to win popular support in an area, it contributed to undermining the basis of Birchleg support by demonstrating their inability to protect the population, as it was next to impossible to put up an efficient defense against such targeted attacks.

A second critical spin-off of subduing a group too harshly was that they could seek refuge abroad. In 1196, the Birchlegs were formally the only group in power, but troubles were not over for Sverre. Østlandet had been the main area for his opponents, and even in times of so-called peace, his hold over the region was

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[17] "Vér höfum vafizk í flokkum um hrið. Höfum vér jafnan látit menn vára fyrir Sverri konungi. Vér höfum honum ok gört mikinn mannskaða. Nú munum vér ok ekki rása í helina opna, þótt Hreiðarr vili þannig oss ávísa."

[18] "Sagði Nikólás byskup, at ekki var annat ráð en fara suðr til Danmerkr ok berjask eigi við ofrefli."

precarious.[19] This was epitomized in the actions of two leading men. First, Nikolas Arnesson, Bishop of Oslo who had crowned King Sverre in 1194, had subsequently traveled south to Denmark to become reconciled with Sverre's staunch enemies, the archbishops Eirik of Norway and Absalon of Denmark (Sv 128). A second ticking bomb was Reidar sendemann, the prominent man who had brought a letter from the Byzantine emperor to King Sverre urging him to send troops to Byzantium (Sv 127). Sverre had responded hesitantly, but ended up giving a negative answer, arguing, "I hear that the Danes are breeding wolves against us again [...] There are men dwelling in the land whom I do not trust in case a *flokkr* is established" (Sv 129).[20] Reidar was, however, granted permission to gather men for the project himself, which he did, taking them not to Byzantium but to Denmark. Here "Bishop Nikolas came with a large group of Norwegians, most of them from Viken," (Sv 129)[21] as well as a royal candidate in the person of Inge, the alleged son of Magnus Erlingsson. "There on the bank they raised *flokkr*, and there were many who joined the group" (Sv 129).[22] The project looks fairly coordinated and indicates that there was an almost permanent reservoir of opponents to Sverre situated in Denmark.

This pattern of establishing a group abroad was to be repeated after Sverre's death, though not immediately afterward, as in 1202 Håkon Sverresson was elected king so swiftly and successfully that the Croziers gave up resistance and "the whole group was then dissolved (Bögl 3)."[23] Yet the subsequent events would belie this assumption, as shortly thereafter a man called Erling steinvegg appeared in Skanør in Scania and claimed to be a son of Magnus Erlingsson:

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[19] From 1185 to 1190, Østlandet had been governed by Sverre's half-brother Eirik, and despite close kinship, this was a complicated relationship. See more in chapter 3.

[20] "Spyr ek þat frá at Danir myni enn ala oss úlfa [...] Sitja ok þeir sumir innanlands er ek trúi ekki vel þegar ef nökkurr flokkr hefsk."

[21] "þar kom Nikolás byskup ok mikill fjölði Norðmanna með honum ok flest Víkverjar."

[22] "Ok þar á eyrinni reistu þeir flokk. Réðsk til þess flokks mikill fjölði manna."

[23] "Eptir þat eyddisk flokkrinn allr." In L: "bleff da alt det Folck oc den hob adspred oc forstøret."

> There were many Norwegians there in Skanør. When they heard rumors that a son of King Magnus was there, those who previously had been with the Croziers tried to find him. When they met, they offered to raise a *flokkr* and take him as their leader. "We will not be short of men", they said, "when it is noticed that we have a son of King Magnus as leader" (Bögl 5).[24]

There evidently existed a pool of potential opponents outside Norway awaiting the right occasion to strike. They stayed calm as long as Håkon Sverresson was king, although the two versions of the saga differ as to why they did so. The shorter version attributed their passivity to the fact that Håkon had been elected king, and that they did not want to raise opposition as long as he was king (Bögl 5).[25] Compared to this legalistic thinking, the long version offers a more pragmatic reason for not rising against King Håkon, namely that Erling had far too little manpower to compete against the Birchlegs for the time being.[26] However, as soon as Håkon Sverresson died the following winter, the situation changed. According to the saga, the Croziers were re-established because the ex-Croziers who had formerly been granted quarter by Håkon Sverresson "did not expect to gain any peace from the Birchlegs" (Bögl 8)[27]—probably hinting at the unrelenting attitude they expected of Håkon galen.[28] Yet it must have been more important that the reason why Erling had refused the offer in 1203—namely the popularity of Håkon Sverresson—had vanished. As the Birchlegs were weakened by a

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[24] The citation is from L: "Der de adsprede Bagler, som vaare komne mange der til Marcket, det hørde, da sellede de sig til hannem, oc vilde tagit hannem til deris Høffding, oc sagde sig ville faa Folck nock, naar de hafde en Høffding som vaar Kong Magni Søn." This is shorter in S: "Buðusk honum þegar margir menn til fylgðar."

[25] E has the fullest reference among the short versions: "hann sagðisk eigi vilja reisa flokk móti Hákoni konungi eða gera óróa í landi meðan hann væri konungr yfir Nóregi."

[26] L: "Kong Hagen hafuer yndist oc venskab aff alt Folcket i Norrig, oc som mig er sagt, er Baglernis Høfdinger den største part gaaet hannem til haande; thi begynder jeg ingenlunde denne handel med saa liden mact oc styrcke." This pragmatic stance was much the same way that King Sverre had (allegedly) refused to become leader of the Birchlegs in 1177 (Sv 6–9).

[27] "þótti þeim þá sér ekki friðvænligt með Birkibeinum."

[28] A similar unrelenting attitude marked Erling skakke, and Snorre Sturlasson claims that it contributed toward keeping oppositional groups together ("Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 11). See Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 50–51.

pending succession, the prospect of Crozier success grew altogether larger, not least since the Danish king supported them.

The opportunity to go abroad, in particular to Denmark, was an important safety valve for conquered parties in Norway and served to maintain a power balance between contending parties, not only when armed groups were established as in the previous examples, but also when they were temporarily ousted by their opponents. The latter was the case in 1199 and 1205, when the Croziers were in a vulnerable position and sought refuge and possibly help in Denmark (Sv 160, Bögl 16).[29] We do not know how much help they received in terms of manpower, but just the possibility of having a safe haven was an important asset to the Croziers in these years.

A third disadvantage of a too-unrelenting attitude toward the enemy was that such behavior rendered unprotected areas particularly vulnerable. Even core areas were not secure without armed support. A recurring pattern in this period is that an armed group—usually the Birchlegs—that ventured into enemy territory left their core area with inadequate defenses. When the Birchlegs sailed with the main fleet to Viken in 1197, the Croziers not only resorted to guerrilla attacks and traveled to Denmark, as mentioned previously, but they also used the opportunity to travel to Nidaros, the Birchleg stronghold, where they had no trouble winning the town (Sv 137). As Sverre chose to stay in Bergen for the winter, the Croziers remained in Nidaros, in spite of local resentment. The local Birchlegs launched a surprise attack in which they managed to drive the Croziers out, but only for one and a half months, after which the Croziers hit back through another ambush (Sv 152). Without Sverre and the main bulk of the fleet present, even the Birchleg center of Nidaros lay open for the taking.

The following year, military efforts were concentrated at Bergen. Once more, while Sverre was absent Nidaros was easy prey. The Croziers, who now had the upper hand at sea, were able to ambush the Birchlegs there (Sv 152). In an almost identical raid, the Croziers ambushed the Birchlegs a year after, killing the leader with all his

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[29] The practice of seeking refuge and possibly obtain help from Denmark had been in operation for much of the 12th century. Both Magnus the blind, Harald gille and Magnus Erlingsson repeatedly sought to Denmark in times of trouble. See Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 42, 69–72; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 48–50.

followers (Sv 161). This pattern continued during the period of *Böglunga sögur*. In 1206, the Croziers made a surprise attack on Nidaros in which they came close to eradicating most of the Birchleg elite, including the king (Bögl 19–21).

So far, we have noticed an asymmetry between two armed groups, in that the Birchlegs attacked the Crozier home base seven times in the period 1196–1208, while the opposite happened only twice. Thus, the Birchlegs were more often the superior party, and took the offensive more often. However, this advantage did not put the Birchlegs in a different situation from the Croziers'. True, the Birchlegs had a comparative advantage in that they were more experienced after many years of guerrilla warfare during Sverre's early years.[30] Yet this advantage waned as their opponents learned to play the game, and after Sverre's death it evaporated. In *Böglunga sögur* there is no major difference between Birchlegs and Croziers in strategic or tactical moves, discipline and loyalty among the fighting forces, and technological level. Here the similarities between the groups are most striking. Each group had core areas that were not secure from attacks, each tried to conquer the opposing group in its core area, and both groups did so largely in vain. A balance of power and continuing conflict—a constant crisis—persisted, even if the groups did their best to annul it. Here one should also take into account that things look different in real time than in retrospect. *Sverris saga* was written with King Sverre as the main hero and protagonist, and with his rise from rags to riches as the leading motif. Still, his progress was neither inevitable nor cumulative. In 1199, Bishop Nikolas said to his men that "Sverre priest now has no more than a promontory of Norway" (Sv 155).[31] *Sverris saga* construed this as a sign of the bishop's arrogance, but in fact he had sound backing for his words. Since the group's origin two years earlier, the Croziers had enjoyed a remarkable success, crowned with the victory in the

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[30] The professionalism of the Birchlegs has been emphasized by historians. See Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 165–82; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 101–15. Sverre and Håkon Håkonsson referred to this in appeals for fighting bravely like "the old Birchlegs." However, this appeal was also a rhetorical figure, playing on the myth of Sverre's tribulations in becoming king.

[31] "Sverrir prestr hefir nú eigi meira af Nóregi en eitt nes." Sverre had been trained and ordained as a priest, according to his saga (Sv 1).

battle at Torsberg in 1198 where Sverre lost his superiority at sea (Sv 143). It was only through massive shipbuilding the next winter that Sverre was able to escape these troubles—just as the Croziers did in 1205–06 when faced by threat of extinction (Sv 154).[32] This struggle had no certain outcome: a decisive result would have been more remarkable than an inconclusive tug-of-war between the parties.

Constant crisis: The military factors

So far, we have seen that geopolitical factors made it very difficult for one armed group to subdue the whole realm of Norway, or more precisely the three regions of Østlandet, Vestlandet and Trøndelag simultaneously. In the following, I shall substantiate why supremacy was so hard to achieve by venturing into the military technologies that the groups had at their disposal. A convenient starting point is the three different forms of European warfare: battle, sieges and plundering / ravaging.[33] Of these, battles were least common in Europe, although their importance has been debated. Sieges were the dominant form of warfare in those parts of Europe that were fortified, which in the high Middle Ages included the most central and richest areas. Plundering and ravaging were also widespread in medieval warfare, but less visible than sieges, partly because ravaging was not so decisive in deciding outcomes, partly because it was an inevitable part of warfare that was not paired with military norms of honor in the same way as battles and sieges. When discussing warfare in Norway we should add naval warfare as a fourth factor. The main Scandinavian contribution to European warfare consisted of the Viking raids in the ninth and tenth centuries.[34] By around the year 1200, Viking raids belonged to the past. Europe had fended off the attacks and remained largely land-bound. In Scandinavia, though, ships continued to be of military importance, but in very different ways than during the Viking Age.

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[32] Sverre had experienced the same in 1182–83 (Sv 73).

[33] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 9; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 16. See more references to the specific forms later in this chapter.

[34] DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066*, 8.

Naval warfare

"The period's most important war machine was the ship," Kåre Lunden states.[35] Sverre Bagge considers the longship to be as important in Norwegian warfare as knights were in European warfare.[36] Norway has the longest coastline in the world, and its name derives from "the northern way," meaning the sailing route, which is documented in Orosius' world history written at the court of King Alfred of Wessex in the late ninth century.[37] Most people lived along the coast for reasons of resources and communication. Norway was a maritime culture, in which ships not only constituted the most efficient means of transportation but were also a formidable military resource.

Ships for military purposes were formally summoned by the king as leidang (*leiðangr*)—an organization allegedly established in the tenth century to counter Viking attacks and consisting of ships built and manned by peasants living along the Norwegian coastline.[38] The realm was divided into *skipreiðar*—districts where the inhabitants were responsible for building, maintaining and staffing one ship. It was a royal prerogative to summon this levy, but only for defensive wars within Norway, and for a maximum of two months a year.[39] According to the laws, kings could muster around 300 ships in total from the three regions of Frostathing (Trøndelag), Gulathing (Vestlandet) and Borgarthing (Viken).[40] However, in practice the leidang was a much more flexible body whose size depended on how strong the king was at any particular moment. Undisputed

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[35] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 106 (Tidens viktigste krigsmaskin var skipet); Bill, "Castles at Sea."

[36] Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 182–86; *Bagge, From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 104–05. A difference is that ships require peasant participation, and are therefore less apt to function as a means of extraction.

[37] Moseng *et al., Norsk historie*, vol. *1: 750–1537*, 51.

[38] Bull, *Leding*; Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, 263–72; Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 190–93.

[39] Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, 271–72; Helle, *Konge og gode menn*, 190; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 105. The obligation was extended to three months in the National Law from 1274. See *Gulathingslaw*, 300, and *National Law*, part 3, 9.

[40] Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*, 266; Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 191. See *Gulathingslaw*, 315.

and powerful kings like Harald hardrada (r. 1036–66) and Håkon Håkonsson (r. 1217–63) could muster impressive fleets and even go abroad for longer periods with the leidang fleet. On the flip side, kings in a weak position would have problems assembling the fleet, and some failed altogether in summoning people, even when they were formally entitled to their contributions.[41] Related to this, Niels Lund has argued that the Danish leidang well into the twelfth century comprised ships built and controlled by magnates, implying that magnates were much more important as intermediaries than the laws indicate.[42]

In this book, the leidang will not be viewed as a formal ship levy that kings could expect to obtain *qua* kings, but as a military resource dependent on their power in the area in question. Moreover, the leidang could be collected in manpower as well as in foodstuffs; i.e., it could be commuted into a tax.[43] In legal terms, this division was clear-cut: military leidang (*útfararleiðangr*) was opposed to tax (*borðleiðangr*), where the latter could be summoned in peacetime as half the size of the former. Yet in practice this division is not always clear, and the size of the levy remained contested and variable. In *Sverris saga*, the leidang is mentioned in forty-one instances, out of which thirty-one stem from the Crozier struggles, indicating that it was more central then than previously. Two thirds of these instances concern the military levy and one third the fiscal leidang, although in three cases the contribution might have been both or is uncertain. *Böglunga sögur* has fourteen references to leidang. Here the tax looms larger than the military duty, while three instances contain both meanings.[44] We should not put too much emphasis on these figures, which are too low to carry statistical significance. Nevertheless, it is interesting that both military and fiscal leidang appear in the sagas, and that sometimes they are indistinguishable.

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[41] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 191.

[42] Lund, "Lið, leding og landeværn." Lund's thesis was controversial and was criticized by Esben Albrechtsen, "Lið, leding og landeværn: Hær og samfund i Danmark i ældre middelalder." A more constructive criticism came from Gelting, "Det komparative perspektiv i dansk højmiddelalderforskning."

[43] On leidang commutation into tax, see Steinnes, *Gamal skatteskipnad*; Holmsen, "Nyere undersøkelser"; Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 196–97; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 297–304.

[44] The detailed references are given in chapter 5 in the section on the leidang.

This ambivalence indicates that the contribution was a pragmatic one, levied in situations where formal claims were not necessarily sufficient to obtain it. Indeed, leidang was often requested in hostile areas, where the contribution seems to slide into categories like fines and even plunder. This aspect will be taken up below.

According to Sverre Bagge, “the established king was [. . .] the strongest at sea, because he could command the leidang summon,” whereas rebel groups normally were land-based.[45] It is possible to find support for this statement in the sagas. After the battle at Torsberg in 1198, the Birchlegs were squeezed into Trondheimsfjorden (Sv 143–55). The Croziers had a similar experience when they were forced to leave Viken in 1205 after being confronted by a superior Birchleg fleet (Bögl 16–17). The gravity of losing naval battles can be seen after Sverre lost the battle at Nordnes against Magnus Erlingsson in 1181 (even if the saga does not admit the defeat, Sv 56–58). In the following winter, Sverre summoned his own men and the townspeople from Nidaros, stating: “now there is famine and misery here, as can be expected when such a large army shall be fed two winters in a row from one fjord” (Sv 73).[46]

One solution to such a problem was to build ships oneself and/or to ambush the enemy. In 1183, Sverre started building the *Mariasuden* (Sv 73, 80), a much larger ship than other ships, and he conducted a successful ambush against Magnus in Bergen, appropriating most of his fleet (Sv 77–78). After the defeat at the hands of the Croziers in 1198, Sverre summoned the peasants of Trøndelag to an assembly, where they agreed to build eight large ships (Sv 154), which gave Sverre the necessary strength at sea, evidenced in the victory at Strindfjorden the following year (Sv 159). Likewise, the Croziers in 1205 responded promptly to Birchleg naval dominance by building twenty-two ships during the subsequent winter in Viken (Bögl 17). These vessels proved to be a good investment, as in spring the Crozier fleet set sailed as fast as possible to Nidaros, where they arrived unexpectedly and managed to sack the town and kill ninety Birchlegs. The latter were quick to realize the imminent danger. The next winter King Inge made a ship with thirty-six rooms (i.e.,

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[45] Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling,” 186.

[46] “hér er nú sultr ok seyra, sem ván er at þar sem svá mikill herr hefir fæðsk í einum firði tvá vetr.”

rowing positions), and Håkon galen and Peter støype (a nephew of Sverre) one each of thirty-two rooms, and according to the saga, many more ships were built (Bögl 25). Upon hearing about the Birchleg shipbuilding, the Croziers intensified their own efforts, now putting more emphasis on the size of the ships: "King Erling built one longship, Reidar another, and Filippus a third one. They were much larger than any ships that had been built in Norway previously" (Bögl 25, with more specifications).[47] When building ships, it was not only numbers that mattered, but also size, not least to have a high rail. This factor was probably decisive in King Sverre's victory at Fimreite in 1184, and after the battle at Florvåg in 1194 he pronounced that never had anyone emerged victorious after having fought against such high ships (Sv 120). What would have been the outcome of this armament race in 1205–07 we will never know, as King Erling died that winter, and the Croziers had to concentrate on succession issues.

These instances show the importance of having a strong fleet, and that this race ultimately only had one winner, as part of naval dominance lay in appropriating the opponent's ships. It was more difficult to escape a naval battle than one on land after a defeat. We repeatedly see the winning side either taking over captured ships or burning them if they did not have the manpower to crew them, thus ensuring that their opponents would not take advantage of them in the future.[48]

Yet for all the importance that ships should be accorded, they had their limitations as a military force. First, even if ships were important for controlling the coast, they did not secure control over all of Norway. True, it was possible to use a fleet to conquer enemy territory. However, as was demonstrated in the previous section, even with a superior fleet it was impossible to control all three regions of Norway simultaneously for longer intervals. The Birchlegs tried to do so on some occasions, only to find that the Croziers

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[47] "Erlingr konungr lét reisa langskip, annat Hreiðarr, þriðja Philippus. Þau váru miklu meiri en fyrr hefði slík ger verit í Noregi."

[48] The burning of ships to avoid having the enemy recapture them figures often in the sagas. See Sv 16, 30, 62, 102, 105, 108, 136, 137, 141, 142, 45, 151, 164; Bögl 16, 19, 21, 31. This was often a strategic calculation. See discussions on whether to burn ships or not in Sv 142, 164.

either turned to guerrilla warfare, traveled abroad, or turned up in the region most unprotected by the Birchlegs. Control over all regions required a division of forces, which would be vulnerable the moment the opponent focused his military efforts on only one region. Ships could be decisive in controlling *most* of Norway, but not *all* of it.

Here we also have to take into account that descriptions of inferiority at sea often arose as part of very tense rhetorical situations in which the complaints provided the occasion for the king to urge his men and the locals to build ships. In such a situation, it was crucial to exaggerate one's own helplessness and the overwhelming power of the enemy. Sverre's appeal in 1198 "to help him save the country from the plundering of the Croziers" (Sv 154)[49] did its job ensuring that the peasants "gladly" volunteered to build ships. The peasants in Trøndelag no doubt disliked the Croziers, but what they wanted to avoid above all was to pay taxes twice, as they had been forced to do earlier.[50] In reality, the struggle concerned who should act as patrons and protectors of the peasants. In 1198 the Croziers were more powerful, and Sverre's call was motivated by the urgency with which the Birchlegs had to act in order to prove their value as reliable patrons and prevent the Croziers from installing themselves in that position in Trøndelag. The saga comment that the peasants volunteered to build ships was almost certainly a euphemism. Demanding resources on such a scale was never popular, and Sverre hints that the peasants were already rather fed up. When they accepted, it must have been because the Birchlegs had the power to squeeze them, and because the alternative of losing their goodwill was an even grimmer scenario (Sv 154). The protection racket was in motion, and it usually favored the group that traditionally had protected the peasants.

Second, it was normally an option to avoid pitched battles when commanding a fleet. Sverre Bagge claims that the element of surprise was less important in naval than in land-based warfare.[51] There are indeed instances where a naval force was unable to evade an

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[49] "gera honum til fulltings at frelsa landit af hernaði Bagla."

[50] This is referred to in Trøndelag (Sv 69) and Bergen (Sv 108–09).

[51] Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 185.

enemy fleet. In 1179 the Birchlegs unexpectedly ran into Erling skakke's fleet and turned to flight. Then a fog suddenly appeared and covered their escape. Sverre called this a miracle and credited Saint Olav for bringing it about (Sv 32). But the "miracle" was rather that Sverre was so negligent about his opponent's movements. Usually, Sverre had spies and scouts monitoring the enemies' moves, and this repeatedly saved the Birchlegs from extinction in this first critical phase.[52] The one large and almost fatal exception to this vigilance was when the Birchlegs were trapped by the Croziers in Sognefjorden in 1184, resulting in the battle of Fimreite—probably the most lethal battle in Norwegian medieval history, with allegedly 2000 casualties. *Sverris saga* describes the prelude as an ambush that found the Birchlegs totally unprepared, as they were about to burn down the farms of disobedient peasants in Sogn when Magnus Erlingsson suddenly arrived with an immense fleet (Sv 81–82, 88). However, Sverre Bagge has argued that there are strong indications Sverre was well aware of the approaching Crozier fleet and deliberately chose to confront it.[53] The element of surprise worked to aggrandize his ensuing victory, presenting him as a David-type of king facing an unsurmountable Goliath of an enemy.

In *Böglunga sögur*, it is noteworthy how often Birchleg and Crozier fleets passed one another unnoticed, sometimes because no one wanted a confrontation, but also on occasions when one of the parties wanted to avoid battle. A good example is a skirmish in 1207. Here the main fleet of the Birchlegs had sailed from Viken and stayed for a long time in Seløyene in southwestern Norway, probably due to bad weather. The Croziers were under way in the opposite direction and were intent on avoiding the Birchlegs. Once the Birchlegs got wind of the Croziers, Håkon galen led a smaller force and almost succeeded in targeting parts of the Crozier fleet, which nevertheless managed to get away during a tumultuous skirmish in the dark (Bögl 34). The detailed description is fascinating because it shows how well-informed the two parties were about each other's movements, but also because it demonstrates a prudence and unwillingness to start fighting without knowing the strength of

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[52] See Sv 33, 58, contrasting with the Heklungs in Sv 34.

[53] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 43–48.

the enemy in a situation where it was extremely difficult to get an overview. Tellingly, in spite of several intense encounters between the parties during this skirmish, only six men aboard one ship were separated from the main fleet and killed (Bögl 34).[54] This does not mean that the parties were soft if they had the chance to go hard. The relative scarcity of casualties demonstrates not a lack of aggression, but the prudence displayed by the armed groups. Tellingly, the most mortal battle in this period came when Håkon galen's main fleet had sailed slowly northward in 1206, thinking they were safe, and were taken completely by surprise by the Croziers, who killed two hundred Birchlegs (Bögl 23).

Ships were important military resources, channeled mainly through the leidang organization. Whereas this practice favored established kings and tended to reinforce their ascendancy, other factors worked in the opposite direction, toward a balance of power. Even with a dominant fleet, it was difficult to control all parts of Norway more than temporarily, and it was possible to avoid battles at sea. An illustration of the limitations of ships in bringing hegemony is the fact that Sverre hardly ever could summon leidang in the struggle against Magnus Erlingsson in the years 1177–84, apart from intermittently in Trøndelag (Sv 49, 53). Still, he succeeded in standing up against him and eventually conquering him. Ships could bring dominance, but they were also compatible with a situation of power balance and constant crisis.

Battles and ambushes

Battles were quite rare in medieval warfare in most parts of Europe. The main reason was the enormous risks they entailed for the losing party, since "fortune tends to have more influence than bravery," as the military theoretician Vegetius wrote on battle.[55] Hence, good planning and leadership were not sufficient to gain victory, as

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[54] Interestingly, this bloodshed is only mentioned in a sentence, whereas the Birchleg attack on the Croziers in Bergen shortly before with less than half as many killed is described in vivid detail (Bögl 21).

[55] Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*, 108. On the rarity of pitched battle, see Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War"; Bradbury, "Battles in England 1066–1154"; Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages*, 281, 305–08; Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 228–37.

there were always factors beyond human control at play in battles. Recently, this focus on battle avoidance, or the "Gillingham school," as Clifford Rogers calls it, has been challenged. Rogers argues that battles were important and frequent in medieval warfare for several reasons: battle was often unavoidable, it could be sufficient that one party wanted it, it could bring about the fall of castles, and it was an all-important aspect of noble honor.[56] In reply to this, John Gillingham made the crucial point that battle-avoidance is something completely different from battle absence, because battles were always in the air even if they were rarely fought.[57] Battles were present as a potentiality, and as the ultimate test of one's strength—and also of God's favor.[58] Insecurity not only applied to the prospect and outcome of battle, but also concerned its conclusiveness. John France remarks that battles were avoided not only because they could go either way, but also because they tended to be inconclusive.[59]

Both John France and J.F. Verbruggen have remarked that it takes two to make a battle.[60] If it takes two parties to make a battle, an ambush requires only one party, however. In fact, it is doubtful whether many of the battles in Norway in this period should be qualified as battles at all if we presuppose battles to be planned in advance by both parties. The only instance of a pre-arranged battle in Norway in this period is the one at Ilevollene in 1180, which was agreed upon by both parties (Sv 46–47).[61] Many of the so-called battles in the sagas are better classified as ambushes, and in cases where they had grave consequences, the surprise element was often coupled with tactical miscalculation, for instance at the battle at Kalvskinnet in 1179 (Sv 37). The battle

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[56] Rogers, "The Vegetian 'Science of Warfare' in the Middle Ages."

[57] Gillingham, "'Up with Orthodoxy!'"

[58] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 150; Morillo, "Battle Seeking: The Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Warfare."

[59] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 9.

[60] Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 327, with reference to Clausewitz. See also France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades,* 155: "it needed both sides to resolve upon battle, because running away was fairly easy."

[61] Two other examples come from *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*: when in 1226 the Birchlegs and Ribbungs agreed on fighting near Eidsvoll, and when Håkon's and Skule's men agreed to meet at Låke in March 1240 (Hák 131, 217). Tellingly, in both cases the agreement misfired (Hák 136, 218).

in Oslo in 1240 that ended the “civil wars” is probably the best example of both mechanisms. Here Skule Bårdsson was taken by surprise and believed the attackers were only local leaders who could be easily beaten, and both misjudgments precipitated his downfall (Hák 228–30). In line with this, Clifford Rogers argues that battles were often fought with one reluctant party.[62] In the following, I will distinguish between battles and ambushes while at the same time acknowledging that there is not a hard and fast distinction between the two. I will classify surprise attacks as ambushes only in instances where the attack was totally unexpected and the opponent’s goal was to flee the battlefield, whereas I designate as battles situations where combat was “in the air” and resulted in armed clashes.[63]

According to Sverre Bagge, warfare in Norway was characterized by high mobility and frequent battles, in contrast to the rest of Europe, with its stationary warfare dominated by sieges.[64] However, the statement needs to be qualified. Battles were frequent in the early phase of Norwegian unification in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, but from 1030 to 1134 no battles were fought in Norway.[65] After that battles became more numerous, with peaks in 1134–39 and 1161–67,[66] and then again under King Sverre, who fought four major battles against Magnus Erlingsson and Erling skakke in 1179–84 (Kalvskinnet, Ilevollene, Nordnes, Fimreite) and three more against parts of their army (Nidaros, Hatthammeren, Hørte bro).[67] Sverre had five battles against the Croziers during the two years of 1197–99 (Oslo, Torsberg, Jonsvollene, Nidaros,

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[62] Rogers, “The Vegetian ‘Science of Warfare’ in the Middle Ages.”

[63] The distinction is of course not watertight. The battle of Fimreite could be classified as an ambush because of its unexpectedness, but the ensuing battle, as well as the possibility that Sverre was more prepared than the saga admits, lead me to classify it as a battle.

[64] Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling,” 184.

[65] See figures in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Networks and *flokkar*: The Civil Wars in Norway ca. 1130–1163.”

[66] There were five battles fought during the period 1134–39 (1134 Fyrileiv; 1135 Bergen; 1137 Minne; 1137 Krókaskógur; 1139 Holmengrå), and seven battles 1161–67 (1161 Ekeberg; 1161 Tønsberg; 1161 Oslo; 1162 Sekken; 1163 Re; 1167 Rydjøkul; 1167 Stange).

[67] Major battles: Sv 37, 47, 54, 88; smaller battles: Sv 15, 28, 29.

Strindfjorden), as well as three against parts of the Crozier army in 1200 (Oslo, Bergen, Skarstad).[68]

Why were battles so much more frequent in some periods of Norwegian history than in the rest of Europe? One common factor in battle-dense periods is a breakdown of crisscrossing networks. Usually there were many overlapping bonds between various factions, which fostered a fairly stable situation even if the co-rulers themselves were not the best of friends.[69] Such crisscrossing bonds were much fewer and weaker in periods of numerous battles. It is probably no coincidence that in the three first battle-intensive periods, 1134–39, 1161–67 and 1177–84, one of the warring parties was led by an extreme outsider (Harald gille, Håkon herdebrei, Sverre Sigurdsson) who was either a foreigner or from the utmost periphery, and who recruited men who were positioned far from the political center. The result of such polarization was more determined efforts to eradicate the opponent, and not only to adjust the power constellation and prevent conflicts from growing too serious by allowing for the intervention of intermediaries. We see evidence of this intensified hostility in the reluctance to give mercy to opponents.

A second cause of the frequency of battles in Norway is that they did not produce so much change after all, and therefore they were not as risky an undertaking as it seems and as they were in Europe. Some battles—for instance in Jonsvollene in 1198 and in Nidaros in 1199—had inconclusive outcomes. They ended without either side winning or losing, and the number of casualties was not very high (Sv 148, 156). However, even with battles that ended with clear winners and losers, the value of victory was not always as great as it appeared. Normally the leaders on the losing side were able to escape. Leidangsmen, normally conscripted peasants, were seldom in the front line and were often spared. Thus, the group of potential

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[68] Major battles: Sv 134, 142, 145, 156, 159; smaller battles: Sv 163, 166, 168. The distinction between battles on the one hand and ambushes and skirmishes on the other can sometimes be hard to make. Battles were primarily fought between armed groups. The battle of Oslo in 1200 (Sv 163) was a major one, but the opponents to the Birchlegs were local peasants, even though many Croziers probably participated. To the major battles one should add the battle at Florvåg in 1194 against the Island Beards (Sv 120), and two battles against the Kuvlungs (Sv 120, 105, 109).

[69] This is a main conclusion in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Networks and *flokkar*: The Civil Wars in Norway ca. 1130–1163."

victims was limited to the full-time warriors in the armed groups. Given that conquered men were seldom executed or ransomed,[70] the only option was to pardon them. Pardons were of limited military value, as side-switching was normal and implicitly accepted (see more on side-switching in chapter 4). Thus, if a military victory could change everything, everything could change back just as easily.

After 1200, the number of battles declined significantly. In *Böglunga sögur*, no large-scale battles were fought, even if hostilities were no less fierce than previously and there were several ambushes in this period—to which I shall return later.[71] One reason why the parties stopped fighting battles might be that there were more overlapping networks than previously, making the goal of eradicating the enemy less probable. There had been a period of peace in 1202 and 1203 when at least some of the Croziers had formed close relationships to the Birchlegs as part of the settlement in 1202.[72] In my opinion, however, we should not presuppose that enmities between Birchlegs and Croziers changed radically between the first and second phase—probably the overlap of networks was substantial both times.

A more important reason, in my view, for the rarity of battles during the second phase is that the parties had become increasingly attentive to the movements of the enemy as the struggle wore on. The ability to stay attentive was a property that usually rested with the inferior party, for which it was an existential function, given the prospect of being wiped out in open battle. Inferior groups therefore had every interest in keeping track of the enemy. This situation characterized Sverre's career up to 1184, in particular until 1179, when the Birchlegs moved about in a hostile environment where they had to avoid the enemy army, and where the peasants were eager to exterminate them as a sort of vermin.[73] Moreover, as Magnus' goal was to maintain the position he had already attained

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[70] *Sverris saga* has only two references to ransom, see Sv 22, 102.

[71] The violent encounters in Nidaros and Bergen in 1206 (Bögl 21, 23) could be called battles, but they are not termed as such in the sagas (*orrusta*, *bardagi*). I have classified the one in Nidaros as an ambush, and the combat in Bergen I would rather call a chase.

[72] See for instance Reidar sendemann, who was taken up among the leading Birchlegs immediately and unconditionally (Sv 179–80).

[73] This is the typical situation in *Sverris saga* before chapter 37. See Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 60.

long ago as sole crowned king of Norway, he was less willing to suffer losses and hardships compared to Sverre. Sverre was probably the first of his kind in Norwegian history to act as a rebel leader for several years, and to cultivate a guerrilla strategy based on asymmetrical warfare with a tight warrior band, high mobility and high-risk scouting.[74] Facing such a challenge, it is easy to see that Erling skakke and Magnus Erlingsson made a series of beginner's mistakes, stemming from a combination of their lack of experience in handling rebel groups and their exaggerated self-esteem, which led to humiliating defeats in battle. Yet it is important to note that their strategy had worked well until then. Erling skakke and Magnus Erlingsson had faced numerous rebel groups before Sverre turned up, and they had conquered them through superior conventional forces, relying on the leidang.[75] Thus, Magnus' belief in his own superiority, which *Sverris saga* interprets as arrogance, was not totally unfounded, considering that he controlled most of the military resources in terms of the leidang, and that this had worked fine for fifteen years prior to Sverre's arrival.[76]

Against the Croziers, such easily won victories were over and done with for the Birchlegs. The Croziers were no less motivated to endure hardships than the Birchlegs, and they were quick to adopt efficient military strategies and tactics from them. Now both parties knew the importance of staying alert and were aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of distractions. In a situation where both groups made sound judgments of power relations, no one was willing to take the risk of fighting a battle that he might easily lose. The Croziers provide a good example of such a learning curve in their reactions to Birchleg aggressions toward their core

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[74] There might be a source bias here: many of Sverre's predecessors might not have acted all that differently, but without mention in the sources. For instance, Sverre's predecessor Øystein Møyla probably spent three years more or less in the field conducting guerrilla warfare ("Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 36–43). The challenge here is that *Heimskringla* is much briefer in its descriptions.

[75] See Magnus' speeches before Fimreite, where he referred to the continuous leidang obligation as something the peasants would be happy to be relieved of (Sv 84, 89).

[76] Magnus normally had the leidang and thus should have been the superior party. The problem was that Sverre compensated for the lack of traditional resources by expanding military resources in terms of guerrilla warfare with professional warriors. We can also add that Sverre had the advantage of the power of the weak in being prepared to suffer much greater losses than Magnus. Finally, Magnus clearly underestimated Sverre on several occasions.

area in Viken from 1197 onward. In 1197 they went for a pitched battle in Oslo, which they lost (Sv 134–35). The consequences were not necessarily very serious—probably few men lost their lives—but they lost much matériel as well as momentum and military prestige. The next time the Birchlegs came, the Croziers chose to withdraw, resorting to guerrilla tactics that proved to be much more efficient than conventional warfare (Sv 139–41). Thus, the war in *Böglunga sögur* (after 1202) resembles the European style of warfare in that battles were infrequent.

If *Böglunga sögur* lacks battles, it has more ambushes, even if the dividing line between the two is not always very clear. This development also can be seen as the result of a learning curve. As mentioned, Sverre was a master of surprise attacks in his early guerrilla phase. Against the Croziers, he often found himself in the opposite role. The Croziers ambushed Birchlegs in Nidaros every year from 1197 to 1200 (Sv 137, 142, 152, 161), and they used small numbers of troops to launch surprise attacks in other places (Sv 177–78). This does not mean that the Birchlegs did not try to take the Croziers by surprise (see for instance Sv 142, 143, 157). However, their success was more limited, partly because the Croziers were no simple prey, as Magnus Erlingsson had often been; partly because ambushes usually were more important for the inferior party, which in this period normally was the Croziers. Typically, Sverre's attempts at ambushing the Croziers in Viken in 1197 as part of a conventional maritime attack failed, whereas the Croziers simultaneously succeeded with this strategy thanks to irregular tactics and local informants.[77]

There are only two successful large-scale ambushes in *Böglunga sögur*, both implemented by the Croziers. In April 1206, they managed to sail from Viken to Nidaros in little more than a week with a newly built fleet, the reward being ninety Birchleg fatalities (Bögl 21). Later in 1206 the Croziers sailed quickly northward along the coast after a siege of Bergen, ambushing a Birchleg fleet lying weather-bound in Moldefjord. Here two hundred Birchlegs lost their lives (Bögl 23). Yet even if successful, these ambushes did

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[77] This happened when Sverre's half-brother Hide was killed, and Sverre stated that the peasants in the harbors had been unfaithful (Sv 140).

not prove to be decisive. The attack on Nidaros could have been decisive if the Croziers had managed to kill King Inge, but he made a narrow escape. The ambush in Moldefjord is barely mentioned in the saga, probably because there were no prominent leaders among those killed. The Birchlegs who were ambushed in Nidaros in 1206 demonstrated a lack of modesty and caution that is fairly similar to the laxity of Erling skakke which led to his death in 1179 (Bögl 20). The stronger party was usually laxer in attentiveness, and this goes even for the experienced Birchlegs.

If a party really wanted to gain control in terms of annihilating the opponent, only battles would do. The problem was that battles seldom had decisive outcomes, as in order to really change power relations between the parties they had to eliminate enemy leaders. Decisive battles in that respect were the ones where Erling skakke was killed in 1179, Magnus Erlingsson in 1184, and the leaders of the Kuvlungs and Island Beards in 1188 and 1194 (Sv 37, 92–93, 109, 120).[78] As demonstrated in the ambush in Moldefjord in 1206, even two hundred casualties were not sufficient to make a difference in the power struggle between the parties, as no leaders were taken. *Böglunga sögur* report only one instance of the killing of a leader—the homicide of Inge baglerkonge in 1203 (Bögl 3). Typically, it was carried out by Inge's own men as part of an intra-group conflict in which the attentiveness was less developed. Thus, in spite of the unstable and antagonistic situation between the Birchlegs and Croziers in the period 1202–8, the parties were seldom in a position where they came close to gaining a total victory.

Clifford Rogers has stated that medieval warriors sought battle because doing so was the ultimate test of honor. A king had to inspire awe, and being a brave warrior was a crucial ingredient.[79] The problem with juxtaposing battle with honor is that honor had extremely fluid connotations. At times Sverre appealed to his men's honor and the need for a good reputation when urging them to fight (Sv 23, 29). On other occasions he argued that it would bring no good if he and his men were slaughtered like animals by their

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[78] The leaders of Brennemenn, Vårbelger, and Breiskjegger were killed by local peasants (Sv 110, 114, 116).

[79] Rogers, "The Vegetian 'Science of Warfare' in the Middle Ages." See the difference between Henry III. and Edward I's, and Richard 1.'s reputation for taking risks.

opponents (Sv 16). Sverre could wrap up his arguments for fighting bravely with high-sounding words about honor, but at the end of the day it was pragmatism that won out. Even flight or "withdrawal" from battle could be justified with regard to honor (Sv 143). Hence, what guided the behavior of Sverre was not honor per se, but the prospect for success, dressed in the lineaments of honor. Honor followed results, and results were constantly predicted. This follows the logic that Sverre Bagge described for the political struggles in *Heimskringla*: "nothing succeeds like success [. . .] nothing fails like failure."[80] In *Böglunga sögur*, no appeals to honor are mentioned. Probably this made no great difference. The decisive issue was that no one was willing to pursue honor if it meant defeat. In this phase, struggles had been going on for such a long time that an easy win was out of the question. The parties were always on the alert and did their best to minimize risks and losses. If a potential battle situation was complex, it was better to withdraw than to put one's fortune at risk for an uncertain victory. The vigilance worked in favor of a power balance between the parties. This was endemic rivalry, permanent stalemate—constant crisis.

Castles and sieges

King Sverre is considered the great innovator in Norwegian warfare, and the one who introduced fortified castles in Norway. According to Kåre Lunden, in building castles he was "ahead of his time,"[81] suggesting that Norway had now "caught up" with Europe and that castles from now on were to play a crucial role in military affairs. In medieval Europe, fortified castles are seen as a crucial element in warfare, determining its basic characteristic as a defensive type of siege warfare in which the aim was to conquer castles because they were accumulation points from which to control larger territories.[82]

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[80] Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, 96.

[81] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 105.

[82] See Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 44–45; Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 319–25; Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages*, 281, 296–97, for siege warfare. As underlined by Gerd Althoff, this often precipitated a non-military solution to armed conflicts in terms of mediation, arbitration or surrender. See Althoff, "The Rules of Conflict Among the Warrior Aristocracy."

Knut Arstad has emphasized that this model is based on Anglo-Norman warfare, and that it carries normative connotations by depicting this as the "ideal" form of warfare and alternative forms as "lagging behind" or in other ways being inferior.[83] In Arstad's opinion, castles played no crucial role in Norwegian warfare in the period 1217–40, not because Norwegians did not know how to build castles, but because they did not consider them to be an important part of warfare.[84] So we should not ask whether fortified castles *existed*, but how they were *used* in conflicts. Arstad's conclusion is that their role was very limited, due to the fact that warfare in Norway was more offensive and less aimed at conquering territories than in most of Europe.[85] It should not come as a surprise if similar conclusions can be drawn from the period before 1217.

Yet at least at first sight, castles figure predominantly in this period. The traces of Sverre's castle-building are ubiquitous. In Nidaros, there existed a wooden castle from the time of Archbishop Øystein (r. 1161–88) (Sv 58), which may also have been in use later (Sv 108). During the winter of 1182–83, when hostilities with Magnus Erlingsson were intense, Sverre began erecting a castle called Sion, Sverresborg or Steinberget (Sv 73). The castle was built in stone and situated on a hill west of town.[86] In 1188, the Kuvlungs attacked and destroyed the castle (Sv 105), but the Birchlegs rebuilt it, only to see it torn down by the Croziers in 1197 (Sv 137). The following year, the Birchlegs sought refuge from the

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[83] Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 536. On Anglo-Norman warfare, see Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 134–35, 198, 204–29; Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," 160; Gillingham, "Richard I and the Science of War," 206–07; Prestwich, "The Military Household of the Norman Kings," 60; Chibnall, "Mercenaries and the *Familia Regis*," 89; Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages*, 281, 296–97. See examples of such an approach in Ersland and Holm, *Norsk forsvarshistorie*; Heebøll-Holm, "Priscorum quippe curialum" for Denmark. Here the importation of "chivalry" is described as the wholesale adoption of one "package," implying progress as compared to "traditional" warfare.

[84] Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 386–92. As Jan Brendalsmo has shown, they certainly knew how to build in stone, as witness the frequency of stone church building in the twelfth century. See Brendalsmo, "Kirkebygg og kirkebyggere."

[85] Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 528–36. See also Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 49–51.

[86] Sverre also had palisades constructed outside the shore of Nidaros, to prevent attackers from an easy landing. Such defense structures are fairly similar to the ones in Viking towns such as Hedeby. See Helle, *Norsk byhistorie: urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*, 89–97.

Croziers in the castle (Sv 156). After Sverre's death, the castle in Nidaros played a less central role, partly because the town was not a major area of struggle between the Birchlegs and Croziers, partly because ambushes directed against the town did not involve the castle (Bögl 16, 21).

In Bergen there was also a castle prior to Sverre (Sv 105), but in order to be better prepared for the fight against the Island Beards in 1193–94, Sverre built a stone castle (Sv 120). The castle, called Sverresborg, was placed on the promontory Holmen at the entrance of the bay Vågen, facing northward, whereas the royal manor was situated at the entrance to the bay proper.[87] The castle is frequently mentioned in the struggle with the Croziers during the summer of 1198, the so-called Bergen summer, when the Birchlegs barricaded themselves there while the Croziers controlled the town (Sv 145–52). After 1204, much of the struggle between the Birchlegs and the Croziers focused on Bergen, with the castle playing a key role. From 1204 to 1208, the Croziers came five times to Bergen and every time encountered Birchlegs who had sought shelter in the castle.[88]

One final fortification was situated in Tunsberg, called Berget ("The Hill," Sv 171). The label is not co-incidental, as Berget was a natural formation more than a human construction, a steep hill that was fortified in the late twelfth century. We do not know who commenced the fortification, but it may have been the Croziers, considering that this area was their core concentration, and they used the castle in 1201–2.

A first observation concerning these instances of castle-building around 1200 is that castles are usually referred to in connection with disputed areas. A second is that the main trend was for the Birchlegs to build castles, whereas the Croziers mainly demolished them (apart from Tunsberg). Why this difference? Were the Birchlegs more "advanced," more "European" or more ambitious than the Croziers? Or was this strategy not "progress" but rather a blind

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[87] See map in Helle, *Norsk byhistorie: urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*, 90.

[88] In 1204, the Crozier fleet sailed twice to Bergen, engaging in some fighting before leaving (Bögl 13). In 1206, the same pattern was repeated until Håkon galen arrived and the Birchlegs managed to chase the Croziers off (Bögl 22–23). In 1207 the Croziers came twice to Bergen, and in both instances they managed to take over the castle, the first time as the result of mediation by the archbishop (Bögl 29), the second time after Dagfinn bonde realized that he would not be able to hold the castle for long (Bögl 33).

alley?[89] In the following, I shall approach this question through a discussion of the two main functions of castles: as nodes for controlling larger regions, and as safe places during enemy assaults.

In the fortified areas of medieval Europe, castles were places from which to control larger territories. As stated by Verbruggen, "as long as the castle or the town was not taken the district was still the rightful owner's."[90] In Norway, we repeatedly see the Croziers burning down castles, no doubt because they considered them as threats to their domination of a town or region. Moreover, in cases where castles were not conquered, as when the Birchlegs barricaded themselves in Bergen in 1198 and 1206, they used every occasion to attack the Croziers in town by surprise, and in both cases they succeeded in killing a substantial number of opponents (Sv 145–52, Bögl 22–3). Finally, being in charge of a castle could be profitable, as seen when the Birchleg leader Sverting outmaneuvered Dagfinn bonde as castle-holder in 1207 (Bögl 29).[91]

Yet we should not exaggerate the importance of castles in controlling territories. Even if surprise attacks launched from castles could be bothersome, they hardly made any larger impact on the political power balance. *Sverris saga* emphasizes that the Birchlegs harassed and decimated the Croziers during the Bergen summer of 1198, and it excels in depicting the wit and creativity of Sverre in leading the Croziers astray. Similarly, *Böglunga sögur* emphasizes Håkon galen's efforts against the Croziers in 1206. Nevertheless, Sverre's and Håkon galen's ingenuity did not change the basic situation, namely that the Croziers remained in control of Bergen. This was because as long as the Croziers had the superior fleet, the Birchlegs could do little to hamper their dominance, not even with an impregnable castle. Tellingly, both Sverre and Håkon galen ended up leaving Bergen by land (Sv 151, Bögl 24). The sagas do not depict this as a setback, but the fact stands out that they achieved nothing that altered the power balance in their favor. In *Sverris saga*,

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[89] Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 533.

[90] Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 318.

[91] However, the responsibility could also be a heavy weight. On giving up the castle in 1207, Sverting was subject to so much suspicion that he switched sides to join the Croziers (Bögl 30). The same happened to Torstein kugad, who twice in *Sverris saga* had to abandon the castle in Nidaros to the enemy (Sv 108, 137).

Sverre's opponent Torstein kugad expresses this succinctly when in 1198 he says that "the king had lost his army at the castle," and that "soon we will have more Birchlegs with us than they have themselves" (Sv 152).[92] This was not just propaganda, as the saga stated that "many Birchlegs switched sides to the Croziers" (Sv 146).[93] The lack of regional control implied in castle-holding is demonstrated when the Birchlegs tried to obtain provisions, which involved the highly risky maneuvers of ambushing the Croziers or forcing the peasants in the surrounding area to contribute (Sv 148, 151). Likewise, the Croziers besieged at Berget in 1201–02 had no way to keep contact with and obtain resources from neighboring peasants, even if the latter were not very kindly disposed toward the Birchlegs (Sv 172, 176).

The relative unimportance of castles as centers for controlling the town is attested in their physical placement. Berget in Tunsberg was not part of the town: naturally enough, considering its steep hills. But human-made castles too were erected in places that were not well suited to controlling the town. The castle in Bergen was situated not at the mouth of the bay leading into town, which would have been a natural placement in order to patrol the traffic to and from Bergen. The royal farm, however, had this strategic location, and the castle was placed farther north on a natural hill. The castle in Nidaros was even more peripheral from a strategic point of view, as it was erected some three kilometers away from the town center.[94] The limited role played by castles in controlling towns is revealed in the successful Crozier ambush on the Birchlegs in Nidaros on 23 April 1206, which is described in great detail in *Böglunga sögur* (Bögl 21). When the Croziers arrived in early morning, the Birchlegs were spread out in town, sleeping in private quarters after having celebrated a wedding the night before—King Inge and his brother Skule with concubines, totally unfit for fighting. The Croziers first took the royal farm without any trouble or bloodshed. Then the attack proper began, consisting of running up and

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[92] "konungr hafði látit lið sitt undir borginni", "at litlu höfum vér nú færi Birkibeina fengit en þeir hafa sjálfir eftir."

[93] "enn fleiri Birkibeinar fóru til Bagla."

[94] On the location of these castles, see Helle, *Norsk byhistorie: urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*, 89–97.

down the narrow streets between the harbor and Kalvskinnet, a field west of town, killing whomever they met. For the entrapped Birchlegs, the options were to seek shelter in church (which was risky for leaders),[95] to hide in town houses (which they could do for a while but not for long), to fight (which they tried unsuccessfully), or to try to swim across the river (as King Inge, Skule and numerous others did). Interestingly, the Sion castle is not mentioned at all during the attack. The main reason is that the castle was situated far away from the battle ground. Here we should note that no Norwegian town had walls surrounding the town proper. In the whole of Scandinavia, only Visby in Gotland had walls surrounding the town during the Middle Ages. The "modest constructions of town defenses in Bergen and Nidaros" serves as a strong indication that the main aim and function of fortified buildings was to provide not control, but shelter.[96]

Castles could provide safe places to shelter against enemies. In Nidaros, the Birchlegs were able to hold the castle against Heklungs, Kuvlungs, and Croziers (Sv 72, 105, 156). The same happened in Bergen against the Island Beards (Sv 120), against the Croziers in 1198 (145–52), and, as *Böglunga sögur* recounts, against the Croziers in 1204 and 1206 (Bögl 13, 22–23). Even in instances where the besieged eventually had to give in, one can argue that it was difficult to capture castles, since it took a long time to succeed (Bögl 29, 33). The most drawn-out siege occurred when the Croziers sought refuge at Berget in Tunsberg in the winter of 1201–02, leading to a twenty-week siege (Sv 171–79). Castles were important in this respect, as they could protect persons and valuables that the enemy wanted to acquire. The importance of material values emerges clearly in the first siege of Bergen in 1207. Here the archbishop mediated a settlement that allowed the Birchlegs to keep their lives and goods. Among the Croziers, the reaction was mixed, as many had hoped to enrich themselves. Contributing to their skepticism toward a settlement was a rumor that the besieged Birchlegs had few foodstuffs in the castle. It was not until the archbishop said

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[95] Less prominent men could do so, but as experience had proven—and this attack confirmed—churches were not safe places for enemy leaders (Bögl 21). On taking men out of churches, see Orning, "Mot statsdannelse?"

[96] Helle, *Norsk byhistorie: urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*, 92 (my translation).

that the Birchlegs had provisions for a two-year siege (which was a deliberate lie) that they yielded grudgingly (Bögl 29–30).[97]

However, the success of castles in providing safe places should be qualified. In 1198, Sverre stated that "[w]e can choose to remain in the castle, and that is a safe fortification as long as we have food" (Sv 147),[98] but even with sufficient food supplies it was difficult to hold a castle for long if the enemy really wanted to get control of it. A crucial factor was the prospect of rescue. The Croziers who were besieged at Berget in 1202 repeatedly appealed to their fellows to come to help them, but when no aid came, they surrendered to the Birchlegs (Sv 179). What saved the Birchlegs in 1206 was the arrival of Håkon galen (Bögl 22–23), and in 1204, a rumor that the main fleet was approaching (Bögl 13). Sverting and Dagfinn on the other hand did not get help in time in 1207 and had to give up the castle (Bögl 29, 33). The most striking example of a successful resistance to siege was when Sverre's advisor Aura-Pål managed to trick the Croziers into lifting a siege by sending false letters about Sverre's imminent arrival (Sv 145).

Moreover, the strategic advantages of appropriating men and goods from surrendered castles were quite limited. The quest for booty was an important aspect of conquering castles, but probably more so among the common soldiers than among the leaders. As for human captives, executing opponents after they had surrendered was normally out of the question.[99] Moreover, it is notable that

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[97] L: "Baglerne knurrede imod K. Philippus, oc sagde, at hand skilde dem ved deris Roff oc Byte, thi de hafde vel vundet Slottet, om hand hafde icke der kommet." Their discontent also stemmed from a suspicion that the Birchlegs carried with them valuables that did not belong to them (and that should count as booty), and male Birchlegs were therefore required to swear an oath that they carried only their own property. See more in chapter 4 on booty.

[98] "Sá er kostr várr at setjask í borgina, og er þat øruggt vígi meðan er oss vinnsk vist."

[99] The exceptions were killing in battle or when the besieged had already refused an offer of quarter. During the first siege of Bergen in 1207, the Birchleg leader Dagfinn bonde refused an initial offer of *grið* but after a time asked for it all the same. The Crozier retainers argued against it, and it was not until King Filippus pressed for it that they accepted. Here no goods were at stake—the vanquished left without weapons and outer garments (Bögl 33). In 1240, however, the Birchlegs executed Skule Bårdsson after he had surrendered. The saga author evidently considered this a break with norms and justified it with reference to *nauðsyn—necessitas*. See Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, 189–92, on this issue.

there was no tradition in Norway for collecting ransoms, which was a major impetus for capturing people in Europe (for instance the ransom paid for the release of King Richard I was two to three times the annual royal income in England). [100] This means that the economic motive for capturing people was largely absent in Norway.

Thus, the only option was to grant quarter (*grið*) to opponents. Granting *grið* implied that the recipient amassed a debt of gratitude to the giver. This obligation is inherent in the term itself, which signifies protection, literally taking the recipient into one's household.[101] Refusing to give *grið* to a man who asked for it was difficult.[102] However, *grið* obligations were often broken. In 1206, the Croziers gave mercy to numerous Birchlegs, but as soon as the Croziers were put to flight, their new converts ran into the churches as Croziers only to come out again as reborn Birchlegs (Bögl 23). King Sverre even criticized the Kuvlungs for being naïve in giving *grið* to the Birchlegs in the belief that they would thereby switch sides permanently (Sv 105). Typically, we see that leading men such as Torstein kugad and Jon Hallkjellsson switched sides several times (Sv 77, 78, 108, 137). The frequent breaking of *grið* should not lead us to infer that the obligations inherent in this relation were void. Torstein's side switching had its costs in that he had to humble himself in order to gain *grið* from Sverre (Sv 153). However, these examples show that giving *grið* was a strategy that could easily backfire, because such obligations could be bypassed or ignored by claiming the change of allegiance had been coerced.[103]

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100. *Sverris saga* has only two references to ransom, see Sv 22, 102. See Taylor, "Moderation and Restraint in the North," on the difference between Norway and England concerning ransom. One reason why ransoming was of little importance in Norway may be that there were no prisons or safe places to keep prisoners (there was a prison in Bergen, but it is uncertain how it worked and was used). A more central cause is that one could make one's defeated enemies switch sides. See more in chapter 4.

101. Bøe, "Grid," 463–64; Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "grið." On *grið*, see also Taylor, "Moderation and Restraint in the North."

102. Sv 125; Hák 112, 116, 117, 244.

103. The principle that an oath extracted under coercion was void was laid down in canon law in Pope Gregory IX's *Liber Extra* from 1234 (1.40.4). See Richard Helmholz, "Pope Innocent III and the Annulment of Magna Carta." The most famous instance of this in the kings' sagas is Harald Gille's oath-breaking in 1130 (Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 1). Thanks to Anders Winroth for these references.

Torstein kugad's example can illuminate the limits of using *grið* as a means of securing support, and through that, the fundamental causes for why castles played such a limited role in Norwegian warfare as well. Torstein twice commanded castles that were besieged, and both times he ended up surrendering them. In the first instance the Kuvlungs threatened to kill an uncle of King Sverre's if Torstein did not yield (Sv 108). The second time the Croziers threatened to burn down Torstein's farm (Sv 137). Torstein had networks exceeding the castle walls, and they undermined the efficiency of the castle in spite of its physical barriers. With their impregnable walls, castles expressed an enmity that was clear-cut and divided people living close to one another into antagonistic groups. Such an enmity was alien in this society of criss-crossing loyalties and networks.

As manifestations of the royal presence, castles promoted and built on a view that enmity should be steered by royal concerns. The difference between royal and private concerns emerges from Torstein's various justifications for his surrender. When the opponent threatened to kill a royal relative (an "official" cause), Torstein's surrender was legitimate (Sv 108), but not so when the target was his own farm (a "private" cause, Sv 137). A further sign of the illegitimacy of the latter "private" cause is that the deal was made in secrecy, and that Torstein subsequently switched to the Croziers. Secrecy is almost always a sign of illegitimacy in the sagas. However, after a while Torstein switched back to the Birchlegs, and Sverre accepted his rejoining even though Torstein had committed an offense against the king that qualified as high treason (Sv 153).[104] Torstein was too important to ignore. His networks were so valuable that the king would not put them at risk by pushing him too hard. Castles presupposed and created enmities that were too strong to be assimilated in a society where power constellations and social relationships were much more fluid. Attempts at transgressing this dynamic—most infamously in Bishop Nikolas' burning of Bergen in 1198 because of the town's wavering allegiance—were bound to fail (Sv 150). The endeavors to territorialize power by erecting fortifications did lead to few military successes.

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[104] High treason (*landráð*) is not much developed in *Gulathingslaw*, where it is related to supporting an enemy army (*Gulathingslaw*, 312). In the National Law, high treason was a more central concept. See *National Law*, part 4, 3.

Plundering

Plundering is a complex phenomenon, which can mean different things in different contexts. First, plunder was a sheer economic necessity in medieval warfare as a means to feed armed troops and more generally to acquire resources. From time immemorial, plundering has been a means for military elites to obtain resources. For Viking Age chieftains and kings, goods appropriated during Viking raids were crucial in order to build political leverage at home in terms of generosity. The Swedish historian Thomas Lindkvist has argued that Scandinavian kingship after the Viking Age transformed from one based on external plundering to one based on internal exploitation.[105] Georges Duby has posited a similar transition in eighth-century France.[106] Yet plundering did not disappear from medieval warfare. Wars were usually small-scale affairs conducted during the "campaigning season" in summer and fall.[107] Military logistics improved during the high Middle Ages, but it is safe to say that before 1648 armies were generally expected to feed themselves from what they could obtain during campaigns—which for all practical purposes means plundering and looting.[108] The increasing use of mercenaries probably made this problem even more acute, as they were involved in war basically for economic reasons.[109]

Second, plundering had a political function. Vegetius recommended plundering because it was relatively unrisky and carried the double advantage of enriching oneself while at the same time reducing one's opponent's resources and support.[110] As a method for reducing the resources of the enemy, plundering was a targeted strategy signaling that the prospect of gaining more voluntary

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[105] Lindkvist, *Plundring, skatter och den feodala statens framväxt*, 26–32.

[106] Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy*.

[107] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 10. For Roman elites, spring and summer were the seasons for expeditions to gain booty, which was a necessary supplement to estate production in providing for a fitting lifestyle and in rewarding followers.

[108] Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 319.

[109] Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 127–144; Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 90–101; Fowler, *Medieval Mercenaries: Volume 1*; Harari, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry*.

[110] Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," 149–50, 159.

support from the targets was either unattainable or uninteresting. Yet plundering could also form part of a deterrence strategy that aimed to frighten local populations into obedience. As part of such a strategy, it was not necessarily spoken of in terms of "plunder," but could be framed in terms carrying more legitimacy, such as "punishment" or "tribute."[111] Thus, the issue of plundering is intimately linked to the question of legitimacy.

In medieval Europe, ravaging typically combined with sieges as attempts to exhaust an enemy or bring him to the negotiating table.[112] The strategy was facilitated by the fact that peasants were despised and not regarded as part of chivalric culture, and therefore could be raided without any moral concerns arising.[113] In the previous section, we saw that fortifications were uncommon and a novelty in twelfth century Norway, and that they contributed to transforming warfare to only a very limited degree. Another crucial difference is that peasants generally were held in high esteem in medieval Norway. Tellingly, the main counselor of King Håkon Håkonsson was called Dagfinn *bóndi*. *Bóndi* means a peasant, but with a positive connotation.[114] *Bóndi*, and even more *hauldr*, were legal terms that secured high positions in society—it has even been argued that *hauldr* denotes nobles rather than peasants.[115] So is this one of the areas where contrasts between European and Norwegian medieval warfare are substantial? Was Norway already in the Middle Ages a more "democratic" or at least less stratified and more peasant-friendly society than most of Europe?

The image of a more egalitarian Norway has loomed large in older historiography. For instance, Ernst Sars drew a connection between the free peasantry of the high Middle Ages and the progressive national liberals in his own time, the late ninteenth century.[116] Yet even if such viewpoints are associated with nationalist and

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[111] Reuter, "Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire."

[112] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 7; Althoff, "The Rules of Conflict among the Warrior Aristocracy."

[113] Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 290. Note, however, that plundering peasants was not considered chivalric, and therefore was not a goal of campaigns.

[114] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "bóndi."

[115] Ugulen, "The Hauldr: Peasant or Nobleman?"

[116] Sars and Holmsen, *Udsigt over den norske historie*, 54. See a related perspective in Koht, *Norsk Bondereisning*.

populist parties nowadays, the question deserves to be explored according to academic standards. The various terms for plunder are not very common in the sagas. The term *herja* (verb) or *hernaðr* (noun) is used 12 times in *Sverris saga*, and 5 in *Böglunga sögur*.[117] The term *rán* (open assault) referring to more small-scale and personal encroachments, typically in connection with feuds, is slightly more common (22 instances in *Sverris saga*; twice in *Böglunga sögur*).[118] However, plunder could be framed within a wide array of other terms. Moreover, the author of *Sverris saga* admits that more plundering was done when warriors ventured out without leaders present, while confining himself to registering only major expeditions (Sv 71). Hence, the rarity of plundering in the sources could simply signify that it was so mundane that there was no need to record it.

Sverris saga sometimes refers to the economic necessity of plunder for survival, with a focus on two types of cases: plundering abroad, echoing Viking raids,[119] and plundering by rebel groups in an initial phase. The latter case is the more interesting one here, not least since the Birchlegs started out as a rebel group. Birchleg plundering in an early phase is surprisingly openly acknowledged and described (Sv 11, 16, 27, 32, 53), considering the saga's putative Birchleg bias. Plundering was evidently not something that the saga author tried to sweep under the carpet. Both Birchlegs and their opponents were described as being plunderers, as the saga does not distinguish between the early phase of Sverre's Birchlegs (see above) and the behavior by other rebel groups such as the Brennemenn, Vårbelger and Breiskjegginger (Sv 110, 114, 116). Such plundering was a part of life that peasants had to accept as largely beyond their control. A reputation as plunderers followed the Birchlegs even after they had come into power (*ran*: Sv 40, 53, 82, *herja*: 90, 96, 131).

Still, the need of plunder for subsistence should not be seen as limited to rebel groups. One very concrete description of the

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[117] Sv 27, 90, 96, 113, 113, 117, 125, 131, 146, 154, 155, 174; Bögl 9, 35, 39, 39, 40.

[118] Sv 11, 16, 27, 32, 40, 53, 63, 82, 108, 109, 110, 114, 116, 117, 125, 131, 137, 153, 154, 154, 158, 159; Bögl 29, 39.

[119] This was more legitimate (though not wholly accepted) Sv 27 (Ireland), 113 (east), 125 (Orkney); Bögl 9 (Valdemar in Norway), 35, 39, 40 (Hebrides, including criticism!).

dynamics of plundering and its connection to the need for material resources among established armed groups can be glimpsed during the so-called Bergen summer of 1198. From the outset, the Birchlegs were on the defensive, taking refuge in a castle built by Sverre against the superior Crozier army. The Croziers controlled the town and the surroundings, paying fairly little attention to the Birchlegs, in spite of the saga's attempt to amplify the effects of Birchleg sallies. The really interesting part comes when Sverre and a small group of Birchlegs managed to dodge the Croziers and search out peasants in the vicinity to acquire resources, as they were running out of supplies in the castle. It then turned out that the peasants had already given substantial amounts of cattle to the Croziers and were not very intent on doubling the contribution. Now the fight against the Croziers openly turned into a struggle for the cattle (Sv 148). The armed groups might call the contributions tax, fines, tributes etc.; for the peasants this was plunder or protection money, regardless of what terms were used.

Yet the extent of plundering as part of warfare, or more generally as embedded in the political system, should not be overestimated. Plunder might have been an economic necessity for rebel groups, but they knew perfectly well that plundering was not a viable strategy if their goal was to achieve more lasting support from peasants. When Torleiv Breiskjegg led a rebel group in 1190, he started out buying foodstuffs, but "soon they ran short of money, and then many stole, since they were not allowed to loot" (Sv 116).[120] By resorting to looting, a group sawed off the branch it was sitting on. Moreover, rebel groups were relatively uncommon in society as a whole, partly since such groups mainly operated in peripheral areas, partly because they could not operate through plundering for long if they were to survive. A more pressing concern was the behavior of the established armed groups. Preparing a major expedition against the Croziers in 1197, King Sverre gave a speech in which he reproached the armed men for ravaging the peasants, urging them not to do so by stating that there was no honor in attacking defenseless peasants

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[120] "þeim varð brátt féfátt. Váru þeir þá sumir í flokkinum er stálu er þeim var bannat at ræna." On the difference between theft and robbery, see the specific part of *Gulathingslaw* devoted to theft with harsh punishment, *Gulathingslaw*, 253–64. More generally on secrecy, see Althoff, "Openness and Secrecy."

(Sv 133). The need for such a warning tells us that such behavior was so widespread that it was noticed as a problem, and probably it did not cease with the royal command. However, the statement also demonstrates that kings viewed it as a goal to limit the ravaging of peasants. That in itself is noteworthy, as it attests to a concern for peasant welfare not often found in European sources.

An objection to taking Sverre's warning against widespread plundering at face value is that it was ideologically infused, and even if a peasant-friendly ideology is noteworthy in its own right, this need not tell us very much about the actual behavior toward the population. A more pervasive argument against widespread plundering in Norway stems from the fact that the parties made a distinction between active participants and locals, and usually tried to spare the latter. In 1199, the Croziers caught a man in Trøndelag whom they strongly suspected to be a Birchleg but who would not reveal his identity. He evidently did not manage to convince them, as they cut off one of his feet (Sv 157). We never encounter such punishments toward peasants. In *Böglunga sögur*, the Croziers never resorted to plundering in Trøndelag, not even after they realized that their surprise attacks in Nidaros would not gain them any permanent support. In 1205 they placed men in the local areas as bailiffs, "but they obtained little goods in the localities" (Bögl 16).[121] After the attack in 1206, they gathered as much booty as possible from the armed opponents, but outside Nidaros they "summoned leidang and took all the men they could get" (Bögl 22).[122] Evidently they distinguished between participants and bystanders, using outright force only against armed opponents while leaving the local townsmen and peasants in peace. A similar distinction emerges in battle, where it was uncommon for peasants to be in the forefront risking their lives (Bögl 27, 28, see more in chapter 5).[123]

A telling expression of the limited scope of plundering in Norway comes in the form of one instance which evidently shocked everyone, namely the activities of the Ribbalds. These were warriors sent by King John of England to assist Sverre, and they acted extremely

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[121] "Váru menn þá sendir í sýslur, ok fengu lítit fé ór heruðum."

[122] "Var þá boðit út leiðangri, ok tóku hvern mann, er þeir fengu."

[123] This is in line with Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus."

violently wherever they turned up: “They plundered homesteads no hostile force had ever before visited, and committed outrages the like of which no man knew” (Sv 174).[124] The surprise and shock they elicited serve as a reminder of the relative rarity of plundering and brutality in Norwegian civil wars.

Yet even if plundering was probably less widespread as part of warfare in Norway than in much of Europe, it would be wrong to contrast the atrocities of European warfare with a peasant-friendly Norwegian climate. Here we should take into account that the Ribbalds were not ordinary warriors, but *routiers* who were also feared for their brutality in England.[125] John France has argued that it is easy to exaggerate the devastations caused by plundering in European warfare, and he sees limited destruction as ingrained into the very nature of what he terms medieval “proprietary warfare”:

> Its leading combatants were landowners who were commonly neighbours and kin. In a situation of frequent conflict, the victor of today might be the vanquished of tomorrow, so self-preservation inclined men to mercy.[126]

The fact that the war leaders were acquainted with one another had repercussions for their behavior, as it made them show restraint toward the non-combatants as well:

> The obvious victims of war were the peasants, but even they were spared the worst horrors because conflicts were usually about control of land and the people on it, and nobody wanted to rule over a desert [. . . .] The Church inveighed against the horrors of war, and doubtless this had some influence, but it was the economics of landowning that really mitigated the horrors of war.[127]

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[124] “þeir ráku þar hernað í þær byggðir er aldri fyrr hafði komit herr ok gerðu þau hervirki er engi maðr vissi dæmi til sliks.”

[125] Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 291–329; Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, 243.

[126] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 10.

[127] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 11. Strickland refers to restraint, but with more emphasis on norms of chivalry. See Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 132–203.

In order to get a grip on the extent and function of plundering, it needs to be contextualized within a broader sociopolitical framework. In the previous section I discussed attempts at territorializing Norwegian warfare in terms of fortifications, which in many respects failed. However, the new trend in building stone castles is itself interesting, as it testifies to a more ambitious goal of political control, which has repercussions for discussing the role of plundering. In winter 1198–99, the Croziers had a superior fleet and controlled most of the Norwegian coastline. This is how *Sverris saga* refers to their behavior:

> The Croziers took all taxes and leidang in both Møres and Romsdal, some places they plundered, and this they did for half a month. They traveled all the way to Hålogaland, where they visited every fjord and behaved badly, and they obtained lots of goods and included in their group all the best men there (Sv 154).[128]

However, there are reasons to be cautious about this statement in *Sverris saga* about the Croziers plundering in this situation where they had the upper hand. First, it contrasts with the more sober description of a similar situation in 1205–6 referred to above in *Böglunga sögur*, where there is no mention of plunder. Second, it is noteworthy that on the expedition, the Croziers not only amassed goods, but also "recruited to their group all the best men that were there (Sv 154)."[129] It is unlikely that such recruitment would have been effective by using brute force, and it is therefore likely that the Croziers obtained more voluntary support from the areas they visited in 1198–99 than *Sverris saga* is willing to admit. Here it is significant that the plundering report was given in a context where Sverre was trapped in Nidaros and appealed for support for a massive shipbuilding effort by painting the Crozier behavior in the gloomiest of colors (Sv 154). It is likely that this very critical situation for the Birchlegs colored the description of the Croziers

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[128] "Baglar tóku allar útvinnur ok leiðangra um Mæri hváratveggju Raumsdal, en ræntu í stödum ok dvöldusk í þessi ferð hálfan mánud. Þá rákusk þeir allt norðr á Hálogaland, fóru þar í hvern fjörð ok með margri óspekð ok fengu þar ógrynni fjár ok höfðu í flokk með sér alla ina beztu menn þá þar váru."

[129] "höfðu í flokk með sér alla ina beztu menn þá þar váru."

as "bad guys."[130] If the Croziers were in control, as there is every reason to believe they were at this point, they were probably less brutal than the sagas describe, since as the stronger party they were in a good position to gain support regardless.[131]

Third, *Sverris saga* framed similar situations of plundering very differently when the Birchlegs were in command. In 1199 the Birchlegs tried to gain a foothold in Viken in much the same way that the Croziers had tried in Trøndelag a year before. Both groups were well aware that they operated in hostile territories, and that spending the winter in such areas was risky.[132] However, their endeavors were very differently framed. Whereas the Crozier strategy was termed "plunder" and "*ran*," the Birchlegs' demands for goods were formulated as claims for taxes (Sv 162), and later also for fines (Sv 167–69, 171). Yet if we ignore the terminology of looting Croziers and taxing / punishing Birchlegs, the behavior of the two groups appears quite similar. There is no reason to assume that the Viken peasants felt they were dealing with a punitive king. Rather, they experienced an armed group trying to squeeze them into submission. Conversely, the Croziers probably did not simply plunder in Trøndelag, as their recruitment of many men suggests an element of voluntariness. The two instances of plundering / punishing illuminate

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[130] It is typical that statements about enemy plundering in *Sverris saga* are delivered in heated situations—often as part of battle speeches—and as such they tell less about actual plundering than about a strategy of discrediting opponents by associating them with plundering. On the Birchlegs, see Sv 78, 110, 84, 124. On the Croziers, see Sv 146, 154. See also Torstein kugad in Sv 153.

[131] See a similar situation in 1181, when the Heklungs are said to have plundered in Trøndelag from a strong position: "They behaved violently everywhere where they could get, all the time they were in Trondheim" [Trøndelag] (Sv 63). Earlier it is mentioned that they took leidang all along the coastline up to Trondheimsfjorden (Sv 61). The reason was that after the battle at Nordnes, they were in possession of almost all ships (Sv 54–58).

[132] Normally the armed groups would choose winter residence in their core area, as in wintertime they usually remained in one place. This required substantial resources for their livelihood and rendered them vulnerable to attack. Birchlegs would usually winter in Nidaros, and in Bergen if they had a strong position, and Croziers in Oslo or Tunsberg. The prudence on this issue is revealed when Erling steinvegg, after a successful campaign in Vestlandet in fall 1204, wanted the Croziers to stay on in Bergen to await the Birchlegs (the previous winter Håkon Sverresson had stayed there). He was countered, however, by Bishop Nikolas, who had his way. Soon after, the Birchlegs came with "many men and big ships" (Bögl 13) but returned to Nidaros upon not finding the Croziers there. Erling steinvegg evidently learned his lesson. In 1206, he sailed around on the western coast demanding leidang in men and foodstuffs, "taking the crew that he needed" all the way up to Christmas (Bögl 25) but ended up spending the winter in Tunsberg.

the ambiguous character of plundering, where the transition between deterrence and reducing the opponent's resources becomes blurred. Probably both armed groups applied a combination of coercion and persuasion in order to obtain support from the peasants.

The best example in the sagas of the floating legitimacy accorded to the royal case for acquiring resources comes from Sverre's dealings with peasants from Sogndal in 1183–84, because here the peasants are heard from. For Sverre the circumstances were legitimate enough: In 1183 he had ambushed Magnus Erlingsson in Bergen, whereupon the latter had fled to Denmark with his men (Sv 77). Now leading men at Vestlandet sought his support, and as part of his royal endeavor, Sverre installed *sýslumenn* in the districts north of Bergen, amongst other places in Sogndal (Sv 79). The peasants however had another opinion of what was going on, as they called the Birchleg officials "thieves and criminals" ("þjófa ok illmenni") and held them to be "*óbotamenn*" (Sv 79)—a legal term denoting someone whose offenses are so serious that he cannot obtain a settlement even by the payment of a fine (*bót*).[133] Hence, for the peasants, the royally appointed *sýslumenn* were not only unreasonable, but they were also operating illegally. They shared with King Sverre a legal understanding of the conflict; the difference lay in whom they granted legitimacy. This dual legality of the conflict persisted as it went on. Sverre insisted that what he did was to demand fines or *gjöld* from the peasants (Sv 81). *Gjöld* can however also signify vengeance or retribution,[134] and it is no doubt that this latter meaning is closer to the peasants' perceptions, as what actually happened was that Sverre commanded his men to burn down all the farms in Sogndal after the peasants did not come to an appointed meeting. "This was previously a wealthy community," the saga concludes laconically (Sv 82).[135]

It was difficult to recruit in enemy areas, but it was not impossible. The distinction is subtle but crucial. If peasants would

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[133] As with treason (see above), the notion of "*óbotamál*" is far less developed in *Gulathingslaw* than in the National Law. In *Gulathingslaw* it is only mentioned in the so-called "Magnus-text" (*Gulathingslaw*, 22), indicating that it was a fairly recent concept. See Orning, "Mannhelgebolken."

[134] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "gjald."

[135] "var þat allt fögr byggð."

never switch sides, plundering would be the logical response, as plundering both increased a combatant group's own resources and reduced those of the opponents. However, in these cases, even if the prospect of ousting the opposing group permanently was not huge, it was enough to be worth a try. The different outcomes of the Birchlegs' and Croziers' attempts to gain control illustrate this. Crozier superiority in Trøndelag proved to be short-lived and had no long-term results, whereas Sverre returned to Viken in two subsequent summers with a large fleet and forced the peasants to choose between surrender and resistance (Sv 167–72). These repeated expeditions to Viken were intended to show the locals that it would be unwise to oppose the Birchlegs, and probably they succeeded at least partially in demonstrating that the Birchlegs were the most efficient protectors of the realm. Here one should also remember that the core areas were not unconditional in their support of "their" parties. In 1181–83, and again in 1198–99, Sverre and the whole Birchleg army spent the winter in Trøndelag, and Sverre admitted that this was a significant strain on the loyalty of the people there, since they had to furnish the Birchlegs with food and drink (Sv 73, 154). This description of the dilemma is probably accurate. Draining home resources was as risky as it was in enemy territories—simply the scope was different. The limited extent of plundering and its ambiguous significance along a sliding scale of legitimacy from outright sacking to taxing testify to a condition of constant crisis, where violent behavior was embedded within the fabric of societal norms, and where attempts at seriously upsetting the balance of power were high-risk enterprises.

Conclusion: A war without winners and losers

The military power struggles between Birchlegs and Croziers in 1196–1208 have traditionally been viewed as a climax in the civil wars in Norway, characterized by extensive violence and sociopolitical breakdown. The aim of this chapter has been not to downplay the violent conflicts in this period, but to frame them differently than has been done previously. Rather than being signs of chaos, the conflicts testify to a fairly stable system in which no group attained a lasting hegemony, the reason being that the available military resources were more conducive to a power balance than to the domination of one party.

King Sverre made a precise analysis of the catalogue of available military resources in a speech to his men when they were barricaded in the castle in Bergen in 1198:

> We can choose to remain in the castle, and that is a safe fortification as long as we have food. But when we run short it is not easy to obtain more. Or we can decide to flee to the mountains. The Croziers will then pursue us and take anything they want from us, and men falling when fleeing never get a good reputation. Or we can choose to do what the Birchlegs have done so many times previously, attack them and let the weapons decide the outcome (Sv 147).[136]

Staying in a castle could be safe enough—at least for a while—but it would never win the war. It would not even win the town or region. The reason was that in Norway warfare, and more generally power, was built only to a limited extent on territorial strongholds.[137] This is not to say that territorial preferences or tendencies did not exist. They did, and they increasingly did so, as the Birchlegs' hold on Trøndelag and the Croziers' on Viken attest. Yet the shortcomings of the territoriality of power are the most striking aspect of Norwegian warfare in a comparative perspective. This peculiarity is probably what lies behind the relative rarity of plundering in Norway. Given that loyalties were wavering and side-switching was accepted (however grudgingly), the transformation of a contextual superiority into permanent dominance was a tricky one. Plundering certainly did occur, but the blurred boundaries between core and peripheral areas made armed groups less prone to large-scale devastations, as today's target could very well be tomorrow's ally. There were efforts at countering this fluid situation, most concretely in Sverre's castle-building aimed at establishing strongholds for shelter and

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[136] "Sá er kostr várr at setjask í borgina, og er þat øruggt vígi meðan er oss vinnsk vist. En er þat þrýtr þá mun illt til viðfanga. Annarr er sá kostr at flytjask á fjöll upp, munu þá Baglar reka oss ok henda af allt slíkt er þeir vilja, ok fá þeir menn aldri orðstír er í flótta falla. Så kostr er enn, sem Birkibeinum var fyrr tíðr, veita þeim árás ok lata skípta odd ok egg."

[137] Arstad, "Rex Bellicosus," 528–36.

possibly also for regional control. One could interpret the Croziers' lack of interest in building castles as part of a defensive strategy for perpetuating a more fluid power struggle. Yet it is a striking contrast between the Croziers' lack of interest in castles and their learning curve when it came to shipbuilding and surprise attacks, suggesting that Sverre's castle-building must be judged a failure. It has been claimed that there was less scope for compromise at sea than on land, as either a party dominated or was dominated there. However, even if the party with superior ships could control the core area (Trøndelag for the Birchlegs, Viken for the Croziers), and use ships to control a second place (normally, but not always Vestlandet), it could not control the whole country. Moreover, it was possible to avoid battles at sea just as it was on land. Hence, an inferior party could remain inferior without succumbing.

I have termed this condition a constant crisis. Warfare had developed into perpetual stalemate, where very little normally changed, unless one party managed to catch the other off guard, either by surprise or by arriving stronger than the opponent expected (for instance, as a result of a massive shipbuilding effort). And the prospect for succeeding in breaking the stalemate was waning. Moreover, an overly ambitious policy of seeking dominance by trying to expel the opponent often had the adverse effect of strengthening the enemy, who could retaliate harder by employing guerrilla strategy and obtaining foreign aid. I have argued elsewhere that joint rulership in the period 1035–1157 should not be regarded as a sign of a society on the brink of civil war, but to the contrary as characteristic of a particular dynamic that worked toward the groups' keeping one another in check.[138] The same goes for the constant crisis characteristic of this period, as the inconclusive power struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers in effect constituted a power balance that was quite stable, despite the intensity of struggles and the intentions of the parties involved.

One does sometimes have the impression, in particular from castle sieges, that people were rather relaxed and had close relationships with one another across group boundaries, making the struggle at times resemble a mock trial. The parties were definitely intersected

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[138] Orning, "Conflict and Social (Dis)order."

by crisscrossing bonds, which I will explore further in chapter 4. However, there was a time for feasting, and there was a time for fighting. When it came to serious business, people stayed attentive, for if they did relax, the consequences could be devastating. The condition of constant crisis between Birchlegs and Croziers that had lasted for more than a decade had made the parties more similar to each other, for better or for worse. The "warm war" of *Sverris saga* with battles and honor was replaced by "cold war" in *Böglunga sögur*. There was no talk of honor, as pragmatism was so natural that it did not need to be stated, and there were no pitched battles in the period 1202 to 1208, in spite of the high level of hostilities. No one would fight against superior odds, and no locals were expected to resist an armed group even if it was not their preferred one.

CHAPTER 3

Intra–group oppositions

So far, the struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers has been scrutinized as a constant crisis involving two armed groups. While my conclusions so far diverge from the usual account of this period as an unstable and chaotic one, they are in line with the traditional view of armed groups as the main constituents of political action. Yet the armed groups were not exclusive entities, and in the following chapters I will argue that group coherence in this period should be qualified, for several reasons. First, the armed groups were not in themselves free of tension and conflict, which is the theme of the present chapter. Second, such armed groups were not the sole identity markers. What constituted the basic glue of the group was having a common leader and enemy. Yet people were bound not only to leaders but also to other men, and their enmities did not necessarily run along the same lines as group affiliations. This means that the groups were not easily circumscribed, in two respects. For one thing, there were overlapping bonds that transcended group boundaries (to be analyzed in chapter 4). In addition, there was a spectrum from “hawks” to “doves” in terms of commitment to the cause of the armed group (chapter 5). These chapters (3–5) will focus more on tensions and rivalries than on overt, violent conflict. Yet they are written from the viewpoint that distinguishing too strictly between various forms of conflict—such as violent versus non–violent, or open versus covert—would miss the overarching point that conflicts usually were part of normal group dynamics, even if they could play out in a plethora of forms.

Tensions and conflicts within groups have usually been interpreted as signs of weakness. To be sure, internal rivalry can have catastrophic consequences, making a group vulnerable to strife and impairing its resistance to external pressures. However, it is the contention of this book that this need not be the case. Tensions, even overt conflict, can also serve productive purposes, for two reasons. First, tensions can often be seen as an expression of a situation where multiple contenders struggle for influence. Allowing numerous people to have their say in political decisions is a way of involving them, of making them part of the political project, and possibly also for making more people more accountable.[1] Second, conflicts are often indicative of contested decisions. Whereas discussion is no guarantee that a good solution will be reached, lack of debate is often a sign of an authoritarian regime dependent on the wisdom of the ruler. The dilemma that without checks on power there is no guarantee that rulers will act wisely has troubled Western thought since Aristotle. In modern political thought, there is consensus that democracy provides the best structure for sound political decision–making.[2] However, paradoxically, "[i]n democracies there is quite broad agreement that a 'strong leader' is a good thing," as Archie Brown states in his book *The Myth of the Strong Leader*.[3] The paradox is not only that the beneficial effects of strong leadership are usually overrated, but also that we normally associate cults of strong leaders to be a distinguishing mark of authoritarian regimes.[4] Brown argues that although a weak leader is seldom advantageous, and that in some situations there is an urgent call for a strong leader, strong leaders should be criticized and not lauded, since governance based on a strong leader can be dangerous, unstable, and ego-centered.[5] Leadership can be classified on a continuum ranging from autocracy, via consultation and joint

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[1] For such a perspective on European history, see Watts, *The Making of Polities*.

[2] This is the gist of the argument in Jürgen Habermas's thought: open, rational discussions provide the best milieu for finding optimal solutions. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, 295–305. For a more general theory of the connection between democracy and growth, see Acemoglu et al., "Democracy Does Cause Growth."

[3] Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, 1.

[4] Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, 359–60.

[5] Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, 4–9, 359–62. Brown holds up Harry Truman as the quintessence of a good but not strong leader (343–44). He also drily observes that also for a leader, one day lasts for 24 hours. See also Sørhaug, *Managementalitet og autoritetens forvandling*, 202.

decisions, to delegation.[6] Participatory leadership brings the potential advantages of better decision quality, wider decision acceptance, more satisfaction with decision processes, and improved development of participatory skills.[7] One can distinguish between decision quality and decision acceptance.[8] Gary Yukl argues that delegation increases commitment, but that the correlation between participatory governance and better solutions is not scientifically proved.[9] In the following, the issues of decision quality and decision acceptance in the sagas will be explored.

In medieval research, there has been a strong tendency to associate order with strong monarchs, and inversely, contested rulership with civil war or other forms of political unrest. *Konungs skuggsiá* (The King's Mirror) from ca.1250 was clear on the catastrophic effects that will ensue if leaders start quarrelling among one another:

> each of these lords will then try to draw friends about him, as many as he can. Thereupon each will begin to survey his realm as to population and wealth; and when he recalls what his predecessor possessed, each will feel that he has too little [....] and it seems as if in every suggestion each one tries to urge his lord to seize upon more than he already has. After that these lords begin to treasure those riches that are of the least profit to the kingdom, namely envy: trivial matters are carefully garnered and great wrath is blown out of them. Soon the love of kinship begins to decay; he who was earlier called friend and relative is now looked upon as an evil-doer (*Konungs skuggsiá*, 36).[10]

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6. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 132; Sørhaug, *Managementalitet og autoritetens forvandling*, 204.

7. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 135–36.

8. Sørhaug, *Managementalitet og autoritetens forvandling*, 204.

9. 9. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 151, 160, 386. See also Jenks, *Don't Do. DELEGATE!*; Bang, "Delegering—en nøkkel til effektivt lederskap."

10. Translation from Larson, *The King's Mirror*. "þvi næst hyggr hværr þeira at sinu riki oc fiolmenni eða auðæfum oc sva leiða þeir at huga hvat sa hafðe er næstr var þeim oc þyckiz þa hværr þeira of litit hafa [....] er næsta ihværri aminning sæm hværr æggi sin hofðingia at hann mætti mæira unnder sec koma en þa hæfir hann. En æptir þat tæcr hværr þæssara hofðingia at draga til sinnar fehirðzlu þann auð er minnzt er rikis bot í þat er ovvnd. Oc þvi næst værða saman læsnar smar sacar oc gor af mykel reiðe oc tæcr þa frænndzemi at spillaz, oc er þar þa ætlaðr u þurfta maðr sæm fyrr var kallaðr vin oc frænnde oc byr þvi næst hværr um grun við annan" (*Konungs skuggsiá*, 52–53). On the dating of *Konungs skuggsiá*, see Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*, 12–18, 209–10.

According to *The King's Mirror*, multiple leadership is destined to breed internal conflict, which again will destroy fundamental social norms and bring out the most evil tendencies in man. This view has numerous adherents among medieval historians. Joseph Strayer used, as one of the defining criteria of a state, "agreement on the need for an authority which can give final judgments, and acceptance of the idea that this authority should receive the basic loyalty of its subjects."[11] The idea that there was a need for justice, and that this could only be handled by a state, is very explicit in Knut Helle's statement that "medieval society [. . .] had a fundamental need for an executive authority that saw that justice was provided in conflicts of interest between its members and that violators were punished. The kingdom increasingly performs this executive role."[12] The civil wars made this peacemaking role all the more attractive, as conditions were chaotic and "the longing for peace was strong among the common members of society."[13] The solution, according to Fredrik Paasche, lay in "seeking salvation in a stronger state."[14]

However, alternative opinions have been voiced as to the connection between order and a final authority. Fredric Cheyette stated it this way: "There is no reason to believe that individuals (any more than collectives called 'nations') prefer neutrality to partiality in their own favor."[15] In Norwegian historiography, this issue has been most ardently discussed in relation to the practice of joint rule. In 1970, Narve Bjørgo launched the theory that joint rule was a stabilizing political arrangement because it allowed for the sharing of power, which was both a material necessity considering the vast territory of Norway and the limited possibilities for ruling without being personally present, and a functional solution in that power was dispersed and balanced.[16] Bjørgo was criticized by Bagge for being functionalist and for underestimating the potential for stability in a sole monarchy. For Bagge, the Law of Succession from 1163/64

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[11] Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 10. See Fenger, "Freds- og retshåndhævelse i middelalderen" for a similar view.

[12] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 179.

[13] Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt*, 70.

[14] Paasche, *Kong Sverre*, 109–10.

[15] Cheyette, "Suum Cuique Tribuere," 290.

[16] Bjørgo, "Samkongedøme kontra einekongedøme."

epitomized this stability, in that it constituted the first written rule for succession and allowed for only one king, thus eliminating the threat of several contenders fighting one another.[17] I have myself argued that joint rule could be more stable than it appears to be, because there is a contrast between the martial saga culture of antagonistic posturing and the actual outcomes of conflicts, which were usually quite peaceful and reconciliatory.[18] Recently, Ian Grohse has argued along the same lines to demonstrate that the joint rule of the Haraldssons from 1136 to 1157 was fairly stable because of a balance of power among different factions.[19]

So far, discussions about the potential beneficial effects of sharing power have been limited to the period prior to the civil wars or to their early phase before ca.1160. In this chapter, the theme of internal tension and rivalry will be investigated in the most intense phase of the civil wars, the period 1196–1208, when Bagge and others have claimed that "stable parties" were in place. The inquiry will need separate investigations for *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*, because they are so differently situated. *Sverris saga* has the towering namesake as its main character, and even if—as has been argued—the saga does not radically depart from reality,[20] it is obvious that it regards incidents from the perspective of its chief protagonist to a much larger degree than *Böglunga sögur* does. The latter saga is polyphonic in that it has no chief protagonist and no fixed vantage point from which to regard the Birchleg and Crozier maneuvers. The saga's inherent ambiguity is also reflected in its preservation in two different versions. These versions should not be viewed as determined by party affiliations, but rather as variants within a common pool of stories emanating from the two environments, and as previously mentioned, I will therefore not discuss the two versions separately from each other.[21] Thus, the monophonic *Sverris saga* needs different treatment from the polyphonic *Böglunga*

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[17] Bagge, "Samkongedømme og enekongedømme." Recently, Bagge has further emphasized the importance of the Law of Succession in creating the conditions for political stability. See Bagge, "The Decline of Regicide."

[18] Orning, "Conflict and social (dis)order"; Orning, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling."

[19] Grohse, "Fra småbarns munn."

[20] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed.*

[21] See introduction on the differing versions of *Böglunga sögur*.

sögur if we are to tease out the function of internal tensions and rivalries in them. To put it simply, it is only in *Sverris saga* that we will need to adopt a thoroughly deconstructive perspective on the events in order to transcend its obvious source bias in favor of King Sverre. A final difference between *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur* relates to their degree of detail. In addition to having less bias, *Böglunga sögur* is overall more detailed than *Sverris saga*, which allows for more thorough investigation of the inner workings of armed groups.[22]

King Sverre and the failure of delegation

King Sverre is the main protagonist in *Sverris saga*, by virtue of both occupying the center of attention and consistently being described as the wisest person. While the saga undoubtedly exaggerates Sverre's role, it is equally clear that his leadership was decisive for the remarkable success of the Birchlegs, first in overthrowing a seemingly solid alliance of magnates all over the country, and subsequently in rebuffing challenges from a series of oppositional groups. The main issue here, however, is not only that the strong leadership provided by Sverre did not always constitute an advantage, but that it even can be viewed as one of the serious weaknesses of the Birchleg faction. Simply put, the strong and dominating position of King Sverre made the delegation of power and authority problematic. First, this goes for his sons. Sigurd lavard repeatedly proved himself unable to live up to the standards of his father. Sverre did nothing to hide his contempt, but on the contrary made Sigurd a scapegoat and contrasted him with the true Birchleg spirit, which he fittingly located in himself. [23] The younger son Håkon did better than his brother, probably because the saga author had to take into account that he later acceded to royal office, but Håkon's military skills are not highly esteemed in *Sverris saga* (Sv 135, 159, 164).

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[22] *Sverris saga*, however, gives relatively more detail in describing conflicts with the Croziers than during the previous conflicts. The struggle against the Croziers for six years takes up more than twice as much space in the saga than do the struggles with various contenders during the previous twelve years. Nevertheless, the seven-year-long fight against the Heklungs is the most detailed section in *Sverris saga*.

[23] Sverre reproached him after the skirmish in Seimsfjorden in 1196, and during the battle of Oslo in 1200 (Sv 130, 164).

The problem of delegating authority also applied to other relatives. Sverre's half-brother Hide sometimes acted on his own, but he was not particularly successful, and in 1197 he was ambushed and killed by the Croziers (Sv 140). Sverre demonstrated superior wisdom in foreseeing the ambush, but he arrived too late to prevent the damage. Similarly, his in-law Filippus, son of the Swedish king Erik, lost his life when he was on his own. Once more, Sverre was one step ahead, as he had warned Filippus about not being careless in his love affairs—to no avail (Sv 160).

One could perhaps dismiss at least some of these accounts as exaggerating Sverre's superior wisdom and political shrewdness, but the Birchlegs' difficulty in operating efficiently without the great leader present is also demonstrated in various less ideologically and psychologically loaded incidents that included a wide array of persons. In the years from 1197 to 1200, Sverre tried to conquer the eastern part of Norway by bringing the main bulk of the fleet there, leaving a lesser—but substantial—portion to defend Nidaros from attacks by the Croziers. The latter strategy was a failed one, as the Birchlegs in Nidaros were ambushed four times by the Croziers during these years, sometimes with large losses (Sv 137, 142, 152, 161). Conversely, they only succeeded in ambushing the Croziers in Nidaros once (Sv 142), even though they enjoyed the considerable advantage of having the allegiance of most peasants and townsmen in the region.

The only successful delegation of authority among the Birchlegs in fighting against the Croziers happened when Aura-Pål was able to hold the besieged castle in Bergen in 1198 (Sv 145). *Sverris saga* excels in highlighting the ingenuity of Pål in misleading the Croziers, but as instructive as this episode is for showing the cunning of Birchlegs other than Sverre, it stands isolated in the saga. Moreover, it is contradicted by a series of other contemporary incidents during the so-called Bergen summer of 1198. For one thing, the saga grossly exaggerates Sverre's success, as in spite of all his cleverness, the Birchlegs ended up leaving Bergen on foot, a sure sign of misfortune (Sv 152). For another, the dependence of the Birchlegs upon Sverre's presence is demonstrated in less ideologically loaded situations, as when Sverre ventured beyond the fortified castle to fetch livestock from the peasants in the wider region, and the Croziers used the opportunity to successfully attack the remaining Birchlegs in the castle (Sv 151). Considering that *Sverris saga* had no problem depicting successful Birchlegs without their king, their misfortunes without Sverre are likely to reflect actual conditions.

Was the Birchleg dependence on Sverre unavoidable? The Birchleg dynamic is not fully understood until we compare it with that of the Croziers. During the Bergen summer, the Croziers operated in several different bands. One armed group was led by Sigurd jarlsson (Sv 145), another by Hallvard of Såstad (Sv 146), and a third one by Bishop Nikolas Arnesson (Sv 150). Even if they were not wholly successful, operating as smaller groups made them more flexible and less dependent upon the decisions of one leader. This was no isolated instance. The Croziers had at least three men who acted as leaders within the group at various times in the period 1196–1202: Nikolas Arnesson, bishop of Oslo and half-brother of the deceased King Inge Haraldsson; Reidar sendemann, a magnate who had made his fortune in Byzantium and had become powerful enough to be a crucial person in the establishment of the Croziers; and finally Sigurd jarlsson, a son of Erling skakke and therefore half-brother of King Magnus Erlingsson. The relationship among these leaders was not always harmonious, and historians have been eager to show how they struggled for supremacy.[24] It is true that internal strife among leaders could constitute a major problem and reduce the efficiency of an armed group. However, there are not many signs that the Croziers were weakened by strife among these major figures. The only potential instance is their internal discussions on tactics before the battle of Strindfjorden in 1199 (Sv 158). However, the resulting tactics was probably the best one (to try to flee; the failure of this is another matter). The split leadership Crozier carried the advantage that it allowed smaller groups to move about quite freely.

Moreover, the existence of several sub-groups made it more difficult to entrap the whole group. This was demonstrated when Sverre besieged the Croziers at Berget in 1201. A two hundred-man-strong army was there under the leadership of Reidar sendemann (Sv 171). However, another large force was positioned near Hamar, led by Sigurd jarlsson. Reidar desperately appealed to Sigurd to help them

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[24] Arstad, “Kongsemner og maktkonstellasjoner,” 73–78.

against the Birchlegs when they were about to run short of supplies. The saga hints that Sigurd was cowardly in refusing to come to his companion's aid. However, as Sigurd himself formulated it: "Let us now not travel into the open hell even if Reidar wants to show us the way" (Sv 177).[25] *Sverris saga* depicts the Croziers as almost extinct when Reidar finally gave up resistance after twenty weeks' siege in late winter 1202. However, Sigurd was able to conduct efficient military operations without this branch of the army, and in *Böglunga sögur* the image of the discordant and weakened Croziers finds little support (Bögl 1). It was probably not the surrender at Berget that put an end to the first phase of conflicts between Croziers and Birchlegs, but the death of King Sverre and the subsequent successful installment of Håkon Sverresson as his successor.

The pattern discovered so far in the struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers is confirmed if we venture further back in time. From the very start onward, Sverre managed to rid himself of potential troublemakers in the Birchleg group by scrutinizing who was concerned with booty and who was willing to bleed for the cause, and then ousting the former (Sv 11). The saga surely exaggerates the discipline that Sverre was able to exert over the Birchlegs, and the obstinate and persistent reputation of Birchlegs as robbers indicates that his efficiency in disciplining the Birchlegs was more modest (Sv 131; see more in chapter 4). Nevertheless, when the saga never recounts any direct challenge to Sverre's authority, it is probably right. Sverre must have been an unusually strong leader, whom the followers knew they were dependent on for their positions.

Yet there is one exception to this impression of an all-powerful leader, namely Sverre's half-brother Eirik. Eirik appeared on the scene in 1180, and from the very first instance, Sverre harbored ill will toward him. Eirik demanded the right to prove his ancestry by ordeal, in much the same way that Sverre's grandfather Harald gille had made his way into royalty. Sverre agreed to the ordeal, but refused to share power if Eirik succeeded in proving his kinship (Sv 59). Simply the fact that Sverre was willing to allow Eirik an ordeal indicates that Eirik must have had a strong position, as Sverre never

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[25] "Nú munum vér ok ekki rása í helina opna, þótt Hreiðarr vili þannig oss ávísa." As underscored by Arstad, Sigurd jarlsson often operated in smaller bands away from the main force of the Croziers. See Arstad, "Sigurd Erlingsson Jarlsson."

allowed another man to rise as close to him as this. His skepticism was well grounded, as Eirik grew discontent with not gaining any further advantages from his royal pedigree, in particular after having played a major role in defeating Magnus Erlingsson at Fimreite (Sv 92). Sverre, however, must have been uncompromising, as Eirik achieved nothing until he returned from a journey outside Norway, where he had amassed great riches and formed a bond with the Swedish king Knut Eriksson (Sv 113). What this alliance amounted to is hard to tell, but in any case it fueled a further elevation of Eirik, now to the position of earl (Sv 113). Shortly thereafter Eirik and his whole family died under mysterious circumstances, suspicion pointing toward Sverre (Sv 115). The reason why Sverre wanted to get rid of Eirik is not hard to understand. Bente Brathetland argues that Eirik might have had a stronger connection with the future leader of the Croziers, Nikolas Arnesson, than the saga concedes, and therefore can be reckoned among Sverre's opponents more than being his ally.[26] In line with this, having a strong position in Viken was very atypical for the Birchlegs and more usual for their opponents, and in the end Eirik also had in common with Sverre's opponents that Sverre treated him as an antagonist. However, formally Eirik can be viewed as a co-leader who could help Sverre overcome the protracted opposition against him in Viken. It was only Sverre's uncompromising attitude that obstructed such a rapproachement, and in the end came to define Eirik's endeavors as part of a long tradition of resistance in Viken.

Once again, the contrast with Sverre's opponents is striking. Magnus Erlingsson's main commander in the eastern part of Norway was Orm kongsbror, the deceased King Inge Haraldson's half-brother. Orm was a highly efficient leader with close connections to leading strata in Viken and Opplanda, and this made it extremely difficult for Sverre and the Birchlegs to settle there during the first two years of their career (Sv 16, 17, 25, 29, 30). The relationship between Orm and Magnus was not uncomplicated. At Fimreite, Orm offerered an alternative tactic against the Birchlegs that Magnus rejected, in spite of Orm's superior experience as compared to Magnus' (Sv 89, cf. Sv 53; see more later in this chapter). Co-leaders were not easy to handle, and the balance between allowing for

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[26] Brathetland, "Nettverksmakt," 241–43.

different opinions and maintaining authority could be difficult to strike. Nevertheless, Orm always stood by Magnus, and a structure of multiple leadership secured the Heklungs' ability to combat the Birchlegs and other oppositional groups not only in one place, but also in several, including Opplanda with its complex inland topography. The later oppositional group known as the Island Beards had three able leaders from the outset, and this probably served to strengthen the group, as it never became too dependent on one faction. It also made it more difficult to conquer. It is probably no coincidence that after the group was defeated, one of its leaders (Sigurd jarlsson) continued straight into the next oppositional group (Sv 120, 122, 131), another (Nikolas Arnesson) supported Sverre at the time only to change sides at the first crossroad (Sv 123, 128), and Sverre only managed to pacify a third one (Earl Harald Maddadsson) after a court trial (Sv 125).

Rivalry among group leaders could be detrimental, in particular in vulnerable situations where common action was required. However, a too-strong leader could also pose a problem, not only in cases in which a leader made mistakes, but—paradoxically—also if he was an able one. King Sverre was definitely an efficient leader who achieved remarkable success. Yet he also attracted protracted resistance, and this has usually been explained with reference to strong group cohesion and continuity among Sverre's opponents. Whereas this is probably part of the explanation, it is not sufficient to explain the opposition against Sverre, given that it receded immediately after his death, when Håkon Sverresson was elected king (Bögl 2–3). A supplementary cause is related to Sverre's strong leadership. We have repeatedly seen that the Birchlegs were dependent on Sverre, and only in rare cases were able to act successfully without him present. While some of this might be explained through saga bias, the dependence upon Sverre is probably historically true to a considerable extent. This explains why it was difficult for the Birchlegs to be efficient in more than one region at a time, and therefore why oppositional groups could establish themselves so easily. The Birchlegs here form a contrast to the Croziers, Heklungs, and Island Beards, who were less centrally structured. Having multiple leaders could create problems of dissent, but delegating power and authority to more people was a way of making them more involved and committed to the cause of the group.

When the king always knows best

So far, we have seen that delegation could facilitate operations in more than one place at a time. A second potential gain from divided leadership relates to the role of advice. Medieval rulers were expected to consult their men on important decisions, which—given the low authority of kings in general—was much of a practical necessity.[27] Sverre Bagge has emphasized that King Sverre always had to persuade his followers into action: "He appeals to individual wishes for gain, not to loyalty or patriotism, not even to the emotional ties that must undoubtedly have existed between himself and his men."[28] Bagge contrasts this to King Håkon Håkonsson, who to a much greater extent could take it for granted that men would follow his orders.[29] However, we should not overestimate the difference between Sverre and Håkon. As John France says of medieval European warfare, "any monarch or leader had to consult, because persuasion, not command, was the only way to get things done."[30] Moreover, it is an overstatement to say that Sverre always sought advice, partly because this is a commonplace not peculiar to Sverre, partly because the role of advice in *Sverris saga* is filtered through the lens of a biased author, and probably also varied over time and according to context. Even if *Sverris saga* is not a wholesale piece of propaganda for King Sverre, the saga has some blind spots concerning advice. The saga's author, Karl Jónsson, had no problem acknowledging that Sverre was highly unpopular among the public (Sv 99), and he even went so far as to suggest that Sverre was not an imposing character physically—although he did so only indirectly ("he was tall when he sat but had short legs," Sv 181)[31]—and to admit that he could exhibit rather unwarriorlike behavior in battle—although not so egregiously that he should have been convicted for cowardice, as Gathorne-Hardy proposed.[32] Thus, Karl's depiction of King Sverre

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[27] On the importance of advice, see i.a. Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers*; Hermanson, "*Släkt, vänner och makt*"; Helle, *Konge og gode menn*.

[28] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 26.

[29] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 143–46.

[30] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 141.

[31] "Han var hár í sætuni en skammr fótleggrinn."

[32] Gathorne-Hardy, *A Royal Impostor*. For a vehement criticism of Gathorne-Hardy, see Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 113.

in some respects is far from the image of the charismatic leader, which is how kings such as Håkon the Good and Olav Tryggvason are portrayed in *Heimskringla*.[33] But there was one area where Karl was unwilling to give in: concerning Sverre's wisdom and cunning. King Sverre was per definition the smartest guy in the room. And since he could not be wrong, mistakes had to be attributed to other people. This is very salient in the one battle that Sverre lost according to his saga—at Hatthammeren in 1178 (Sv 28; he probably also lost at Nordnes and Torsberg, but the saga is less willing to admit that, and we can only grasp it from the subsequent events; see Sv 56–58, 143–44). Here the defeat, according to the saga, came as a result of Sverre's listening and giving in to his men's wishes to fight, while he himself had discouraged encountering the enemy on this occasion (Sv 28). The obvious response to this saga bias is to acknowledge that Sverre too could make unwise decisions. The loss at Hatthammeren was probably the result of Sverre's own misjudgment of the situation, not his giving way to his men, but this was impossible for the saga author to admit.

However, even if Sverre always knew best, he had to persuade his men in order to obtain their support, and this process was often quite reciprocal and negotiatory. In 1196, when the Birchleg fleet had sailed to Viken to counter the imminent Crozier threat, Sverre asked his men for advice on whether they should stay on in Viken to await a suitable occasion for battle or retreat to safer areas in Vestlandet (Sv 132). The magnate Nikolas from Vestnes responded: "We do not like to lie here without provisions. Either we want to have battle with them or go someplace where we can get food" (Sv 132).[34] Sverre answered that "since you want to retreat now, we shall do as you wish" (Sv 132).[35] One reason for his compliance was probably that he had little choice on what to do in a situation where most men wanted to go home. In the following year's campaign to Viken, when the expedition made slow progress, some men in the leidang secretly planned to desert from the army, and Sverre had to execute a man in order to terminate the mutiny (Sv 139). Shortly before that, he had to become demonstrably angry to get his way in

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[33] Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, 129–35.

[34] "Illt þykkir oss at liggja hér við matleysi. Viljum vér nú leggja at þeim ok berjask, en at öðrum kosti fara í brot ok þangat er vér fám oss mat."

[35] "með því at þer vilið nú í brot þá skal þat vera."

the sharing of booty (Sv 136). Thus, Sverre walked a thin line and had to be utterly pragmatic on where to yield and where to stand firm in relation to the warriors.

The need to obtain advice in these situations was not only a pragmatic concern in order to gain the support of other men, but also a matter of finding good solutions. In the situation above where Sverre ended up giving in to his men's wish to retreat from Viken, he also tried to argue that if they waited a little longer, they would get a good opportunity to beat the Croziers. Yet he made no effort to counter the two main arguments of Nikolas from Vestnes: that they lacked provisions and that the population was hostile (Sv 132). Sverre's lack of counterarguments makes his case look very elusive, and we should not rule out the possibility that Nikolas actually had a stronger case.

Sverris saga is a poor source for investigating the limitations in Sverre's wisdom. An alternative strategy for elucidating the beneficial effects of obtaining advice is to look at Sverre's opponents, who are less idealized than Sverre. Erling skakke is described as an extremely able leader in *Heimskringla*, where Snorre Sturlasson makes the observation that men spent much time trying to foretell what he would do, as he would never reveal his true opinions in advance.[36] Also in *Sverris saga*, Erling is depicted as an effective ruler at the beginning of the saga:

> At that time, Magnus and Erling had strong support from the powerful men in the country and the whole populace; the king was friendly and well liked, and the earl was powerful and wise, uncompromising and victorious; it was he who governed the realm (Sv 3).[37]

However, after his death, his closest ally, Archbishop Øystein, claimed that "Erling earl was a wise and powerful man, but many held him to be so arrogant that it was hard to bear" (Sv 39).[38]

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[36] "Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla* v. 3, 35.

[37] "Magnús konungr ok Erlingr jarl höfðu í þenna tíma mikinn styrk af ríkismönnum ok af allri alþýðu. Var konungr vinsæll ok ástsæll, en jarl var ríkr ok vitr, harðráðr ok sigrsæll. Váru þar öll landráðin er hann var."

[38] "En þó at Erlingr jarl væri vitr maðr ok ríkr þá þótti mörgum hans ofsi svá mikill at þungt þótti at bera."

After Magnus had fallen at Fimreite, Sverre focused his speech on his arrogance and pride in a Biblical fashion (Sv 99). These are of course ideologically loaded statements made in the setting of Sverre's decisive victories. Yet they also find support in Erling's and Magnus' behavior prior to battle. Erling's death is described as a consequence of his carelessness in keeping watch contrary to his men's wishes (Sv 34). Also Magnus' fall came as a result of poor judgement. According to the saga, he wanted to put all his energies into winning Sverre's ship, *Mariasuden*, the extremely high-boarded ship that Sverre had constructed following the loss to the Croziers' higher ships at Nordnes in 1183 (Sv 89). Orm kongsbror replied:

> My advice, lord, is that we rather attack the smaller ships first, because there we will meet little resistance. I think the large ship will be difficult to conquer as long as they have plenty of manpower and boats to help them (Sv 89).[39]

"I think all ships are won if the biggest is won," Magnus answered (Sv 89).[40] This ill-grounded decision of Magnus was probably the decisive factor for why he did not win at Fimreite, as conquering a higher-boarded ship was next to impossible.[41] Moreover, as the battle proceeded, the Birchlegs adopted Orm's tactic of clearing smaller ships first, and this probably secured them the victory (Sv 92). *Sverris saga* would of course never allow Sverre to be exposed in the way that Magnus is on this occasion. Tellingly, it was Eirik, not Sverre, who initiated the counteroffensive in the battle, but without belittling Sverre's role in the victory.

Interestingly, Sverre's arrogance also came into play in this battle, but in an altogether different fashion. When Sverre had initiated construction of the unusually large ship *Mariasuden*, "it was said that the king showed ill will and arrogance (ágirnd ok ofsa) when

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[39] "þat væri mitt ráð, herra, at vér legðim at inum smærum skipunum fyrst, ok mun þat verða lítil viðrtaka, en it mikla skipit ætla ek oss verða torunnit meðan er þeir hafa gnógan bæði liðs kost ok skipa af öðrum skipunum fulltingja sér."

[40] "Mér þykkir sem öll skipin sé unnin ef it mikla skipit er unnnit."

[41] See the saga comment after the battle of Florvåg: "It has been said that never has anyone won victory in a battle against an enemy with so much higher ships than in Florvåg" (Sv 120).

he wanted to build such a ship" (Sv 80).[42] Thus, what others interpreted as Sverre's arrogance turned out to become decisive for victory. We do not get any closer to Sverre's lack of attentiveness to his men than in this instance where he proved his farsightedness. *Sverris saga* could not openly admit that Sverre needed to consult others in order to gain wisdom. It could only make it a practical exigency that he had to resort to for the sake of getting support. However, as I have shown here, much of the vulnerability of the Birchlegs rested in the dominating position of King Sverre. He was no doubt an unusually clever leader who was decisive in order to gain a foothold in the first place, and subsequently to ward off threats. Yet his brilliance also made other people dependent on him, perhaps also suffering from a lack of self-esteem, as can be glimpsed among his sons. The saga does not give any definite answer as to how detrimental this was to the group as a whole, as it operates with the superiority of Sverre as a premise. However, the protracted resistance to the Birchlegs as well as the Birchleg faction's inability to operate efficiently without their king present are strong indications of the costs of having a dominating leader.

Multiple, contested leadership among the Birchlegs after 1202

Böglunga sögur is without the bias that makes an analysis of King Sverre's political wisdom in *Sverris saga* so complicated. Not only was King Sverre dead, with no leader obtaining a similar position of power and authority thereafter; but also, the saga has no fixed focus or set heroes comparable to those in *Sverris saga*. Yet the saga by no means launches a different universe from that of *Sverris saga*. The dilemma of a too-strong leader also surfaced during the brief reign of Sverre's son Håkon (r. 1202–04). Electing a new king necessarily had to involve discussions that could weaken a group, especially a group facing external pressures, as in this case where the Croziers were in action and the Birchlegs were suffering under a papal interdict. However, Sverre himself had prepared for the future scenario by writing letters making his son Håkon his successor,

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[42] "kölluðu men at konungr lýsti í þessi skipgerð mikla ágirnd ok ofsa." *Ágirnd* can be translated as "over-determination," "ill will"; *ofsa* as "arrogance," "exaggeration." See Fritzner, *Ordbog*.

declaring that he had no sons alive other than Håkon (Sv 180). Sverre's plans were fulfilled with remarkable success. Immediately after Sverre had died in Tunsberg on 9 March 1202, his sister's sons Håkon galen and Peter støype sailed as quickly as possible from Tunsberg to Nidaros carrying Sverre's letters to his son Håkon (Bögl 1). The threats against Birchleg leadership were imminent, not only from the Croziers, but also from fellow Birchlegs. Upon arriving in Nidaros, Håkon and Peter were immediately asked by curious Birchlegs about the king's health, and they responded that the king was feeling much better (Bögl 1). When able to speak with with Håkon alone, they told him about his father's death and gave him the letters. After that, Håkon gathered the retinue, told them the news and was proclaimed leader of the retinue. Subsequently the Eyrathing was summoned and Håkon was formally acclaimed king (Bögl 2). A king's death created a scenario in which conflict could erupt at any level, and as this episode illustrates, the innermost circle encompassed only the king's closest relatives. Even the retinue could turn against the king at vulnerable moments. On this occasion, the Birchlegs managed to end uncertainties quickly by making Håkon king before anyone had time to protest. Håkon Sverresson's smooth accession must also be reckoned as a huge success because it succeeded in fending off the Crozier threat. Seeing that the Birchlegs had been able to regroup and even obtain the support of the Church shortly thereafter, the Crozier leaders realized that their prospect of challenging the Birchlegs was diminished. Some of them joined forces with local peasants and killed their own king, Inge, on Helgøya (Bögl 3).[43] In a brief time, Håkon Sverresson had succeeded in what his father had never accomplished: to become voluntarily accepted as king by the whole country.

Yet tensions within the Birchleg camp were not ended once and for all with the election of Håkon Sverresson. Sverre's widow, the dowager queen Margrete, was not content with the situation. Margrete, the daughter of the deceased Swedish king Erik Jedvardsson, traveled from Nidaros to Oslo with the intention of going to her relatives

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[43] The joining of forces is clearest in L: "Bønderne paa Opland forsamlede sig met nogne aff Kongens suorne Mend." However, S also has both groups contributing to the homicide: "þar var hann svikinn af sínum mönnum sjálfs [....] Ingi var drepinn af bóndum..." It specifies that a certain Gunnar betrayed Inge.

in Sweden. Even more critically, she brought along Sverre's and her daughter Kristin. Peter støype sailed to Oslo to interrupt these plans, as "the Birchlegs did not think it was advisable that the king's daughter should leave the country" (Bögl 3).[44] Peter managed to separate Kristin from her mother, to the latter's frustration. Disagreements like this should be regarded as fairly typical of medieval dynasties. Widowed queens were potentially fraught figures, unless they ended up as regents for their minor sons.[45] Margrete could not hope for such a scenario. For one thing, Håkon Sverresson was 23 or 24 years old upon his ascension, and therefore no puppet to be manipulated. Still more serious was the fact that Håkon was not the son of Margrete, but of Sverre's concubine Astrid Roesdatter. Hence, she could not hope for any personal favors as a mother.

The split between Håkon Sverresson and Margrete turned out to be fatal, as according to the saga Margrete poisoned Håkon and caused his death only a year and a half after he had acceded to the throne (Bögl 6). *Böglunga sögur* goes a long way in attributing the guilt to Margrete, not only for the actual poisoning, but also for the underlying conflict, as King Håkon had written a very friendly letter to her urging her to come to his court, stating that she "should receive the largest honor from him" (Bögl 4).[46] Margrete accepted the invitation and came back to the Birchlegs together with her niece Kristin Nikolasdatter before Christmas 1203. Here Håkon tried to please her. He had prepared a separate table for her, but "the queen seldom ate together with the king," not even on Christmas Eve (Bögl 6).[47] Thus, Margrete was obviously the party to blame for the rift between them.

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[44] L spells out the dangers inherent in Margrete's taking Kristin out of the country: "Birkebenerne siuntis det icke være raadeligt, at Kongens Daatter skulde drage aff Landet." S only refers to the forced seizure of Kristin: "tók hana at nauðigri dróttningu."

[45] See for instance Queen Ingrid Ragnvaldsdatter, who was the real leader of the country after Harald gille was killed in 1136 and played a prominent role for many years to come. See Ringvej, *Dronning Ingerids land*; Hervik et al., *Dronning Ingerid og bisp Nikolas*.

[46] This is only referred to in L: "de skulde blifue holden i største act oc ære hos hannem."

[47] The formulation is from L: "det skede sielden at hun gick til Bords med Kongen." It also adds that "hand lod holde hende et besynderligt Kiøcken oc Bord," underlining the break of norms. S is shorter, focusing on the bad relationship between the two of them: "Lagðisk heldr þungt á með þeim Hákoni konungi." On norms for feasting, see articles in Jezierski et al., *Rituals, Performatives, and Political Order in Northern Europe*.

However, Margrete had good grounds for being skeptical about King Håkon, because she had been forcibly separated from her daughter by the use of trickery. By highjacking Kristin from Margrete, Håkon Sverresson averted the threat that she might be used as a potential weapon against him from Sweden. Yet at the same time, he became the target of Margrete's enmity. Her fury is described in detail in the saga in order to emphasize her uncompromising nature (Bögl 3). Considering the outcome—his own death at Margrete's probable instigation—it is easy to conclude that he made the wrong decision. Moreover, the subsequent events would show that Margrete's faction was stronger than King Håkon acknowledged, and that the common consent among the Birchlegs on having him as king was just an illusion.

Margrete's political resources were of two kinds. First, she had powerful relatives in Sweden because she belonged to Erik's lineage. Since 1195/96 a member of the competing royal dynasty—the Sverkers—had been in power, but Erik's descendants had not succumbed, and only a few years later they returned to power with King Erik Knutsson (r. 1208–16).[48] Second, Margrete had powerful allies at Håkon Sverresson's court, as demonstrated in the aftermath of her forced departure from the court. Since Margrete had been the source of conflict in the Birchleg camp, one might imagine that her departure would cool down tensions among the Birchlegs. The long version of *Böglunga sögur* links the persisting enmities to her own personal feelings after the abduction of her daughter: Margrete "harbored great hatred toward Peter støype and all those who had come to take the maiden, but she made herself good friends with Håkon galen and put her trust in him in all cases that she considered important" (Bögl 6).[49]

Yet the rift was not simply a function of Margrete's personal feelings, in which case it would have subsided following her departure. Margrete was a symptom rather than a cause of the Birchleg tensions, as the conflict within the Birchleg camp continued after the dowager queen was out of the game, now with Håkon galen and Peter støype as the main protagonists. The prospect of conflict between Håkon and

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[48] See Line*, Kingship and State Formation in Sweden,* 104–07.

[49] "Dronningen hafde stor had oc vrede til Peter Steiper, oc alle de andre som hafde værit med hannem Øster til Oslo oc hente hendis Dotter fra hende, Men hun maatte saare vel lide Hagen Galin, oc hafde aldhendis trøst til hannem." S has nothing on this.

Peter is not in itself very surprising, even if both of them were closely related to Sverre and had previously cooperated without problems.[50] For one thing, relatives as close as brothers showed no hesitation to fight one another for the throne, as with the sons of Harald gille in the 1150s or the grandsons of Svend Estridsen in Denmark in the 1130s.[51] For another, it probably helped fuel the conflict that the brothers came from different branches of Sverre's already disputed family. Peter støype was the son of one of Sverre's sisters from the Faroes (Sv 1). This maternal tie attached him more securely to Sverre, but it gave him less power and fewer networks in Norway than Håkon had.[52] Håkon galen was son of Sverre's sister Cecilia from Trøndelag and a Folkvid lawman in Vermland.[53] Håkon seems to have cultivated his Swedish connections, not only through his close affiliation with Margrete, but also by forming a tight bond with her sister's daughter, Kristin Nikolasdatter, whom he married in 1205 (Bögl 14). Kristin was the child of King Erik Jedvardsson's daughter and the Swedish magnate Nikolas Blake.[54] We cannot ascertain whether the coalition between Håkon galen and Margrete had been established before Håkon Sverresson's

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[50] Håkon and Peter operated in tandem to secure the smooth transition from Sverre to his son Håkon, as well as working together against the Croziers in 1199 (Sv 155). Peter was leading the guests in 1201 (Sv 171).

[51] See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Networks and *flokkar*: The Civil Wars in Norway ca.1130–1163," and Kim Esmark, "Messy Conflict: Socio-political Competition and War in Denmark ca.1128–1137."CΩ

[52] Peter's grandfather was Unas the comb-maker from the Faroes, and his grandmother Gunnhild's relationship to King Sigurd was openly disputed even in Sverre's presence. Peter is mentioned first in 1193 as a Birchleg leader, possibly as early as 1184, if he is the Svina-Peter mentioned who had the same by-name as his father (Sv 96). See Helle, "Gunnhild 1" ("en av hans yngre søstre ble gift med en Svina-Stefan og med ham fikk sønnen Peter Støyper, kanskje identisk med den Svina-Peter som i *Sverris saga* opptrer som en fullvoksen mann 1184"). At some point, Peter strengthened his networks by marrying Ingeborg, the daughter of the former rival king Magnus Erlingsson (Bögl 12), but the political implications of this marriage are never explicated.

[53] Cecilia had divorced Folkvid after Sverre became king and had then gone to Norway and married the magnate Bård Guttormsson from Rein in Trøndelag, with whom she had a son, Inge (Bögl 11). Folkvid is unknown in Swedish sources and is possibly a literary invention. Bård's family was very powerful in Trøndelag, but this benefited Håkon's half-brother Inge and not himself.

[54] Both Margrete and Kristin came from the lineage of Erik in Sweden. This branch had little power in Sweden after the ascension of Sverker the Younger in 1195/96, and particularly after the death of Earl Birger brosa in 1202. However, in 1208 Erik Knutsson defeated Sverker in battle and became Swedish king. See Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden*, 104–07.

death or not, but considering how strong the alliance was afterward, I consider it likely that it had been formed prior to King Håkon's death.

Böglunga sögur does its best to minimize Margrete's role, but it cannot conceal that she was part of a much larger court faction with strong supporters. This implies that the murder of King Håkon was less a personal act of vengeance stemming from a dowager queen's feelings of resentment than it was part of a power play at court, where King Håkon evidently had underestimated the strength of his opponents. His obvious rival was Håkon galen, not only because of his prominent position and close affiliation to Margrete, but also because he was the one who benefited most from the king's death, after which he emerged as the strong man at court. Given Håkon galen's close relation to Margrete, it is tempting to interpret the lack of accusations aimed at him for complicity in the murder of King Håkon as a sign of his strong position.

After King Håkon's death, Peter støype was Håkon galen's main opponent at court. Peter had loyally carried out King Håkon's order to abduct the king's daughter against the dowager queen's will, and probably he had much to lose from the king's death. To be sure, *Böglunga sögur* does not record outright strife between Håkon's and Peter's factions, as it records the election of the infant Guttorm Sigurdsson as king in a neutral manner decided by the bishop, the retinue, and the "best men" in Bergen (Bögl 7). The shorter version refers to six magnates participating in the election, with Håkon and Peter as the leading ones (Bögl 7).[55] In the longer version, a more detailed arrangement is described: Håkon galen was to govern the realm and the retinue on Guttorm's behalf, and Peter støype and Einar kongsmåg were to foster the king and have watch over him (Bögl 7).[56] Moreover, a letter was sent to Nidaros stating that Inge Bårdsson—Håkon galen's half-brother—should govern Trøndelag (Bögl 7). However, the tensions at court are revealed in

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[55] "þat sama sumar [E: vár] tóku Birkibeinar sér konung þar í Björgvin, son Sigurðar lávarðs, þann er Guthormr hét. Hann var þá barn at aldri. En fyrir flokkinum váru þessir höfðingjar: Hákonn galinn, systursonr Sverris konungs, Pétr steypir, annarr systursonr hans. Hann átti Ingibjörgu, dóttur Magnúss konungs. Þessir váru ok höfðingjar með flokkinum; Sigurðr konungsfrændi, Eyvindr prestsmágr, Einarr konungsmágr, Hróarr konungsfrændi ok mart annarra ríkismanna."

[56] "skulde Hagen Galin regere Riget oc det Kongelige Hof paa hans vegne, oc Peter Steiper oc Einer Kongens maag skulde opfostre oc take vare paa Kongen."

the concluding remark about the election in the longer saga: "In this way they managed to keep the group united" (Bögl 7).[57]

There is no doubt that Håkon galen was now the most powerful man, as no one could match his combination of lineage and military experience as leader of the retinue. Peter støype had similar experience, but a weaker pedigree (due to the lesser legitimacy and power of Sverre's maternal line), whereas Guttorm and Inge were in better dynastic positions but with much weaker experience than Håkon. The election of the infant Guttorm as king shows that not everyone was comfortable with Håkon's strong position, and that these people were able to unite to form a counterpoise. On the one hand, Håkon galen was granted a prominent position, which was necessary in order to satisfy him, as well as to counter the military threat from the Croziers. On the other hand, checks were put on his power, first in the appointments of Peter støype and Einar kongsmåg as guardians to the king, and second in making Inge governor in Trøndelag.

This fragile balance of power turned out to be short-lived, as Guttorm died after only a few months (Bögl 10). Once again, suspicion of poisoning came to the fore, now with Kristin Nikolasdatter, Håkon galen's close accomplice and future wife, as the prime suspect. Unlike the case of Margrete, this time the suspicions never resulted in any trial. Maybe suspicions in this case were less tenable. Yet a more probable scenario is that Håkon galen now had so strong a position that no one dared to challenge him openly. The main reason for suspecting Håkon's involvement is that after Guttorm's death there were no king's sons around, which paved the way for more distant relatives. In effect, everything pointed toward Håkon galen as the next king at this juncture. The short version of *Böglunga sögur* records that "most retainers and peasants wanted to elect Håkon as king" (Bögl 12).[58] But once again, the countervailing forces mustered against Håkon. The saga attributes the dissent to Archbishop Eirik Ivarsson (Bögl 12), partly over an unspecified conflict, partly as a result of Håkon's close connection

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[57] "i saa maade holt de Krigsfolcket til sammen."

[58] "Vildu flestir liðsmenn ok bændr Hákon til konungs kjósa." In L, however, only the magnates favored Håkon: "den første part gafue deris stemme oc samtycke paa Hagen Jarl Galin."

with Kristin Nikolasdatter.[59] Formally the election was an open one, as there were five candidates: Håkon galen, Inge Bårdsson, Sigurd kongsfrende, Roar kongsfrende and Peter støype (Bögl 78, the long version). Out of these, all but Roar had the same position as King Sverre's sister's sons,[60] but they were mentioned in two rounds: first, offspring of Sverre's paternal line (Håkon, Inge, Sigurd), then those from his maternal one (Peter, Roar).[61]

The magnates failed to find a consensus candidate, and the decision therefore passed to the peasants at the assembly (Bögl 12; see more in chapter 5). One could argue that this move strengthened Håkon galen's case, as the list was now reduced to the three contenders who were offspring from Sverre's paternal line: Håkon, Inge and Sigurd. However, the peasants ended up electing Inge as king, according to the saga because they preferred a man whose father came from Trøndelag. The longer version adds that they did not want a man with Gothic lineage as king (Bögl 12). This result may be less unexpected than it seems, as the assembly was held in Trøndelag, where Inge Bårdsson had his power base. At least it is a plausible hypothesis that the tactics of involving the popular assembly were instigated by Inge's supporters in order to remove the decision from the retinue, where a majority favored Håkon (Bögl 12).[62] Their fear of Håkon galen was not unfounded, because when the retainers were to renew their oath of allegiance to the king [Inge], there was "murmur among Håkon earl's friends and followers" (Bögl 12),[63] who claimed he was better suited to lead the army than Inge. They evidently had the power to back their claim,

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[59] The conflict might have to do with the reconciliation that Håkon Sverresson, Håkon galen's rival, had made with the Church in 1202 (the reconciliation is specified in *Norges gamle love*, vol. 1, 444–45). Coming from a magnate family in Trøndelag, Eirik probably also had personal reasons for supporting a candidate who came from the same region, and therefore favored Inge at the expense of Håkon.

[60] We do not know for sure about Roar's pedigree, but he might have been the son of one of Sverre's halfsisters in the Faroes, putting him on a par with Peter. See Brathetland, "Roar kongsfrende."

[61] Peter støype had the potential advantage of being married to Ingeborg, daughter of the former rival king Magnus Erlingsson (Bögl 12)—at least the relationship was worth considering in the context of the forthcoming election.

[62] This is formulated most strongly in L: "Lænshøfdingerne vilde icke andet, end at hafue Hagen til Konge." S has a more modest version: "var þat ráð liðsmanna, at Hákoni bræðr sínum gæfi Ingi konungr jarlsnafn."

[63] "ny knur for Hagen Jarls skyld."

because the result was that Håkon was appointed earl and leader of the army and was to have half of the income of Norway.

Thus, three royal elections in three years resulted in the formalization of a power balance within the Birchleg group: Whereas Inge had the highest formal position, Håkon had the military command, and economically they were on equal terms. Neither Håkon Sverresson's nor Håkon galen's efforts at eliminating rival factions had succeeded. A situation of constant crisis in the long run was more stable than having a dominant leader monopolizing power.

After 1204, the Birchlegs entered a more stable period in which King Inge served as king until his death in 1217. However, in practice nothing changed very much, because up to Håkon galen's death in 1214 the Birchlegs for all practical purposes had a divided leadership, which from the settlement with the Croziers in 1208 onward was supplemented with the Crozier leader Filippus Simonsson. Håkon married Kristin Nikolasdatter in 1205, thus strengthening the link to Sweden—reinforced by the presence of Erik Knutsson, future king of Sweden, at the wedding (Bögl 14). One cause for the marriage taking place then after several years' close relations might be that Archbishop Eirik, who had been an opponent of the connection between Håkon and "the Swedish lady," had resigned earlier in 1205, and his successor Tore Gudmundsson proved to be a more pragmatic man (Bögl 24).[64] Moreover, Håkon's rival Peter støype moved on to Stavanger that year as *sýslumaðr* after Einar kongsmåg, who had been ambushed and executed by the Croziers (Bögl 15). This installment was no promotion for Peter, as it removed him from the power struggle, where he (and Einar) had played central roles as foster fathers for King Inge.

Yet between 1204 and 1208 no outright tensions appear in the relationship between Inge and Håkon. The reason is probably that the saga is focused on the fight against the Croziers in this period, and the threat from the Croziers encouraged internal cohesion. We see a clear pattern in the Birchleg camp in these years, in that Håkon galen acted as supreme military commander and spearhead against the Croziers while Inge stayed behind as a backup, mostly on home ground in Trøndelag. The division of forces could render

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[64] Brathetland, "Nettverksmakt," 292–97.

the Birchlegs vulnerable. After the Croziers had been chased to Denmark in 1205, they returned to Norway in winter and managed to pass Håkon unnoticed and ambush Inge in Trøndelag (Bögl 21–23). Also, in 1207 the Croziers had ample scope for operating in between the Birchleg armies positioned in Oslo and Bergen. Yet even if the Birchlegs were not altogether successful in fighting the Croziers, being able to split into two fairly strong and coherent armies was a strength, not a weakness. In both 1205 and 1207 the division into two groups—an offensive one led by Håkon galen and a more defensive one with King Inge in charge—worked well (Bögl 16, 28).

Joint or divided leadership created many tensions that made for dramatic encounters. However, this condition of constant crisis within the Birchleg group constituted an efficient form of governance, partly because it kept power-hungry leaders at bay, partly since it allowed for spreading forces. In the following, more detailed accounts about the Croziers we shall see that it also was conducive to arriving at sound political solutions.

Multiple, contested leadership among the Croziers

Constant crisis in terms of inner-group tensions and conflicts was not limited to the Birchlegs after 1202, as it was equally prevalent among the Croziers. Here too, royal elections are good occasions for studying this dynamic, because they elucidate underlying power struggles. Parallel to but somewhat later than the Birchlegs, the Croziers experienced disputed royal elections in the years from 1204 to 1207.

Håkon Sverresson's sudden death in 1204 opened up a rift not only among the Birchlegs, but also among the Croziers, where a rivalry surfaced between Erling steinvegg and Nikolas Arnesson that was to persist with varying intensity until Erling's death in 1207. Erling's main asset was that he was a king's son, namely the son of Magnus Erlingsson, though this was disputed among the Birchlegs.[65] This made him a candidate for royal power—a candidacy that was

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[65] *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* makes a huge point of "proving" the falsity of Erling's ancestry (Hák 139). However, this doubt was probably not very different from the one attaching to King Sverre.

warmly embraced by the Croziers from the outset. Erling refused to become king when Håkon Sverresson was alive, but after his death, he accepted: "Then a *flokkr* was established. When this news was spread, many of the men came who had previously followed the Croziers" (Bögl 8).[66] The group was set up in Copenhagen, and its members then sent for their friends in Viken, who came to them. Nikolas Arnesson was not a king's son, but as the son of the dowager queen Ingrid Ragnvaldsdatter and the magnate Arne from Ståreim he was part of the uppermost Norwegian elite, with close bonds to the royal family (King Inge Haraldsson, d. 1161, was his half-brother). He was also related to the Danish King Valdemar 2.[67] Nikolas was appointed bishop in Oslo in 1190, a position he later combined with the royal office of *sýslumaðr* (Sv 111, Hák 99). As a bishop he was excluded as a royal candidate, so he supported his nephew Filippus Simonsson, the son of his sister Margrete. Nikolas was thus a major political player by virtue of his lineage, offices and networks, including trans-national ones, and a man firmly situated on the anti-Birchleg side.[68]

The opposition between Erling and Nikolas / Filippus certainly was an acute political issue of power that could easily weaken the Croziers. Erling's disputed descent gave Nikolas a weapon that he did not hesitate to seize, and *Böglunga sögur* explores at great length the ensuing conflict in which the contenders did their best to outmaneuver each other (Bögl 9). The internal conflict definitely troubled the Croziers as a group, and Nikolas' intrigues are laid

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[66] S: "þá hófsk flokkrinn. En er þat spurðisk þá dreif mart manna til þeira, þat er áðr hafði fylgt Böglum." L: "Der denne Tidende spurdis til Danmarck, da vaar Erling Stenveg i Kiøbenhafn, oc strax søgte alle Baglerne til hannem som hafde værit hos hannem om Vinteren tilforn, oc fick hand snart en Flock forsamlet." When Erling first appeared in Denmark in the summer of 1203 and claimed to be a king's son, the Croziers offered him the throne (Bögl 5). At that time, he refused the offer, arguing that Håkon Sverresson was king of Norway (S), or that he was too strong in Norway (L).

[67] Valdemar's grandmother Kristin was the sister of Nikolas' grandfather Ragnvald, and the two were children of Inge Stenkilsson. Thus, Nikolas and Valdemar were second cousins. Nikolas referred to this kinship. However, Valdemar was equally closely related to Erling, as Valdemar's mother Ingeborg was a sister of Erling's great- grandmother Malmfrid.

[68] See Brathetland, "Nettverksmakt," 294–97, 305–10 on clerical networks. Bishop Nikolas is atypical for Norway in combining a high clerical office with strong political affiliation. The warrior-bishop type is more usual in Denmark, with the archbishop Absalon as the most prominent example. See Naderer, "Love and Fear," 243–54.

bare in the saga in a rather unflattering fashion (Bögl 9).[69] However, if we leave aside the details of the power struggle and instead focus on the *result* of these entanglements, the interpretation changes. The intrigues were not futile, because Erling and Nikolas / Filippus had and brought along complementary legitimizing resources that served to strengthen the Crozier position. Erling profited from his royal blood, but his descent was disputed. Here Nikolas in his capacity as bishop possessed the spiritual means for deciding the issue through an ordeal.

Erling was eager to undergo an ordeal, but Nikolas postponed the case several times, because he wanted it to take place in the presence of the Danish King Valdemar, whom he expected to back him up. Valdemar initially declared that he would support Erling, but as a result of Nikolas' insistence that Erling was an impostor who would only arouse dissent in Norway, Valdemar agreed to come to Norway to support Filippus, provided that the Croziers themselves consented to this. Arriving in Norway, however, Valdemar discovered that the Crozier leaders and the local peasants objected to Filippus, as they wanted a king's son as their king. Whereas Nikolas had intended Valdemar to intervene as arbiter in the royal election, the king's support for Erling now forced him to change tactics. This involved seeking out Erling in private, telling him that Valdemar would not support him unless he succeeded in proving his royal lineage, and making this approval conditional on Nikolas' cooperation, which again was made conditional on Filippus being appointed earl (Bögl 9). King Valdemar, who had grown increasingly suspicious of Nikolas and was keen to see Erling succeed in the ordeal, had the church guarded by armed followers. Yet Nikolas was still in control, as he was the one checking whether Erling's hand was affected by the hot iron. Erling managed to undergo the ordeal successfully, and as a result he became king. In addition to confirming Erling's controversial royal pedigree, Nikolas managed to muster the Danish king for the Crozier cause. The compromise solution thus signaled Crozier cohesion, not fragmentation, and showed that a situation of constant crisis could be a productive one.

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[69] Both versions of *Böglunga sögur* go into much detail on this issue. There are no significant differences, although L is as usual more detailed than S.

A new potential crisis emerged with the death of Erling steinvegg in March of 1207. Just as with King Sverre's death in 1202, Erling's death was kept secret. Meanwhile a ship sailed quickly to Filippus in Bergen to tell the earl the news, "but to the public it was said that the Danish king wanted to meet with the earl" (Bögl 26).[70] As with the death of King Sverre, only the core group was trustworthy in such a situation. Yet in contrast to the aftermath of Sverre's death, the Croziers did not manage to arrive at a rapid agreement concerning the succession. On the one hand, Erling had two minor sons, who received the support of Reidar sendemann and the retinue. On the other hand, earl Filippus was next in line to Erling, and a relative of Nikolas Arnesson. The internal division no doubt rendered the Croziers vulnerable in a situation where a veritable arms race was going on with the Birchlegs. Yet the strife was not entirely a bad thing. For one thing, arriving at a premature agreement could have been fatal, as it had been in the case of Håkon Sverresson's instant success—which proved to be short-lived because it only temporarily put a lid on opposing forces whose conflict later came to the fore. For another, the conflict contributed to grounding the election more solidly locally, as Nikolas traveled to Tunsberg and held a secret meeting with the mightiest peasants and obtained everyone's consent to the election (Bögl 24). Moreover, it is interesting to note that as soon as the leaders realized that internal factionalism could end up destroying the group, they quickly rallied behind one candidate—Filippus. To be sure, discussions within the Crozier camp continued after Filippus became king (see for instance Bögl 28), but there was a profound difference between conflicts putting the existence of the group in jeopardy, and ongoing tensions between leaders about which strategies and tactics to adopt. And the Croziers were still able to compete with the Birchlegs afterward.

As discussed earlier, an advantage of having several leaders (who might also be rivals) is that this circumstance facilitated delegation of power and the spread of accountability. The advantage was aptly demonstrated after the Birchlegs chased the Croziers from Norway

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[70] S: "En alþýðunni var sagt at Danakonungr vildi hitta hann." L: "lode sig høre for Almuen, at Dane Kongen vilde tale med Grefuen."

in 1205, and the Croziers split the group into three operative units led by Erling, Nikolas and Filippus. Erling's faction traveled up north to Nidaros, where he was acclaimed king. Another group went to the western part of Norway to conduct surprise attacks, while a third faction traveled more slowly from Denmark (Bögl 16). These operations were not equally successful, and none of the sub-groups had the power to confront the Birchlegs openly. However, operating in small bands carried the advantage that they could travel covertly and launch devastating surprise attacks on the Birchlegs in many places simultaneously. A precondition for this guerrilla warfare was divided leadership, combined with an element of military professionalism.

A similar situation in which an internal split proved to be beneficial for the group as a whole occurred in 1202, when King Sverre besieged the Croziers led by Reidar sendemann at Berget, and Reidar sent desperate messages to the faction in Opplanda to come to their rescue. However, his pleadings were to no avail, as the group in Opplanda considered the prospect of conquering Sverre to be slight (Sv 177). Instead of aiding their companions, which would probably have led to defeat, the Opplanda faction opened new fronts in other places. *Sverris saga* depicts the Crozier maneuvers as a failure (Sv 177, 178), but the less biased *Böglunga sögur* shows that they were quite successful, as when the saga starts, immediately after Sverre's death, the Croziers were in power on the western coast all the way from Bergen to Trondheim (Bögl 1).

Disagreements, factionalism and sustained negotiations could at times be catastrophic to a group, but under normal conditions these processes were not symptoms of fragmentation within the armed groups, but an inherent property of their functioning well. They serve as a reminder that a condition of constant crisis among leaders was often more beneficial for military and political success than strong leadership, partly because power struggles were a way of balancing various groups against one another without one dominating the others, partly because spreading out responsibilities allowed for broader participation and commitment. A final advantage is the possibility of better-grounded decision-making, which the last section will explore.

Finding the optimal solution

Until now, we have focused on the tensions among the Crozier leaders during royal elections. However, leadership rivalry was not limited to such occasions, but on the contrary formed part of the constant crisis that characterizes Crozier leadership in this period. We have seen that shared leadership allowed the Croziers to divide their forces into smaller parts that worked effectively by themselves. Yet the sharing of power also impinged on the political decision-making itself at pivotal moments, and in the following I shall demonstrate that it could also be conducive to finding good solutions to complex issues.

In the fall of 1204, just after the election of Erling steinvegg as king, the Croziers sailed to Bergen. Here, according to the saga, Erling made a quite comic figure, and his opinion was disregarded in favor of Nikolas at a meeting among the ships' commanders (Bögl 13). Thus, Erling's overwhelming support at the royal election did not guarantee him the dominant voice thereafter. Nevertheless, Erling's faltering authority was not necessarily a symptom that the Croziers were impaired, because Nikolas was a much more experienced war leader than Erling, and there are good reasons to assume that his alternative was the better one. Nikolas' superior advice emerged more clearly the following spring, when the Birchlegs sailed to Viken with a large fleet and many Croziers were intent on resistance. Nikolas argued contrarily that "there was no other option than to withdraw to Denmark and not fight the superior Birchleg force" (Bögl 16).[71] This was probably the right judgment, as it was not until they had built ships in the winter of 1205–6 that the Croziers were able to compete with the Birchlegs at sea. Moreover, as Erling grew more experienced, he also received more support for his opinions.[72]

A unique insight into the decision-making process among the Croziers is given in the saga description of their expedition from

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[71] Here S and L are fairly similar. S: "Sagði Nikolás byskup at ekki var annat ráð en fara suðr til Danmerkr ok berjask eigi við ofrefli." L: "Bisp Niclaus raadde dennem at drage til Danmarck, oc stride icke mod Ofuermacten."

[72] Arstad, "Kongsemner og maktkonstellasjoner" considers Erling to be an excellent military leader.

Viken to Nidaros in April 1206, which came as a result of intense shipbuilding during the winter of 1205–6. The saga author must have had first-hand knowledge about the raid, as he specifies each place where they stayed overnight, and brings details about discussions on tactics en route. First, the strategy of sailing northward was discussed, and four ship commanders refused to go, in spite of Erling steinvegg's request (Bögl 18). Even a king could not command his men to act against their own will. Near Bergen the ship leaders had a meeting in which the majority, including the king, wanted to launch a surprise attack on Håkon galen. However, Reidar sendemann objected, and his view won approval (Bögl 19).[73] Approaching Nidaros, Arnbjørn Jonsson and Reidar wanted to wait for two ships that were delayed, but now Erling received support for attacking while they were still unnoticed. In the following meeting, Lodin stallare suggested a tactic for the attack that passed uncontested (Bögl 19).[74]

The constant haggling among the Croziers over decisions during this campaign might look like a sign of weak leadership, in particular since there seems to have been no predictability as to who had the final say. King Erling sometimes got his way, but other times not, and the same goes for other leaders. However, this is a premature conclusion. In my opinion, what this campaign demonstrates is that discussing matters without one person's having the final say was probably a good way of making optimal decisions. On a general level, one can say that this is confirmed by the result, as the Crozier tactic of ambushing the Birchlegs in Nidaros on 22–23 April 1206 resulted in almost 90 Birchlegs killed, which ranks second in battle deaths in the period 1204–8. We cannot be sure what would have happened had different decisions been reached. Still, there are good reasons to believe that the rejected options in this campaign—to attack Håkon galen in Bergen and to postpone the attack on Nidaros—would have been less efficient than the course taken, because they would almost certainly have diminished the surprise

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[73] The issue came up once more when they heard that Håkon galen wanted a fight, with the king urging a confrontation, but once again Reidar won out (Bögl 19).

[74] However, once again agreement was not unanimous, because as soon as the attack started, two Crozier leaders disagreed and almost started a fight between themselves (Bögl 21).

effect of the attack. In order to kill enemies, it was decisive to catch them by surprise, since an inferior force would always try to escape, and norms in favor of giving mercy to opponents were strong if they asked for it. The fact that the Croziers did not manage to trap King Inge was due to coincidence, not to failed tactics.[75]

In support of the beneficial effects of the "open" Crozier leader climate, the long-term trend after 1204 was that the Croziers never made any serious tactical blunders, and managed to mobilize resources so that they could compete on equal terms with the Birchlegs, even if their core area was smaller. The death of Erling steinvegg in the winter of 1207 put a halt to the Crozier expansion. What would have happened had he lived longer we shall never know, but it might be that the advantageous effects of the multiple leadership of the Croziers could have been fully realized if he had lived on. At least, the last we hear before Erling died is that upon receiving news that the Birchlegs were building ships, Erling, Reidar and Filippus began to build ships "that were much bigger than anyone that had been built in Norway previously" (Bögl 25)[76]—promising start for a future that would never materialize.

Conclusion: The enigma of a strong leader

Sverris saga is the story of a strong leader. King Sverre embodied all the advantages of strong leadership: he was able to act efficiently, and he always had wise solutions. The proof of the pudding lies in the successes of the Birchlegs. However, the Birchlegs never came to enjoy uncontested dominance. This has usually been explained with reference to the continuity in resistance against Sverre. Whereas it is not wrong that there is a consistency in the opposition mounted against Sverre, this is not completely correct, either. To put it plainly, why should Sverre necessarily have to meet with protracted resistance? Magnus Erlingsson before him and Håkon Håkonsson after

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[75] The saga depicts in vivid detail how close they came: Inge had to flee under chaotic conditions; he was close to being revealed by the townspeople; and he barely managed to swim across the Nidelv to reach safety on the other side. It is also possible that he obtained a permanent injury during the flight. Yet he escaped, and the loss of ninety men did not change the power balance between the parties in any significant way (Bögl 21).

[76] Here the two versions are in accord. S: "þau váru miklu meiri en fyrr hefði slík ger verit í Nóregi." L: "de vaare større end nogen skib hafde værit før bygt i Norrig."

him were able to govern the whole country without strong opposition. It has been a contention of this chapter that an important reason why Sverre never succeeded in controlling the whole of Norway lies in the fact that he lacked the ability to delegate power to others. A strong leader was a Damocles' sword to a group. On the one hand, a good military leader was crucial for winning victories; on the other hand, a dominant leader tended to disenfranchise the remainder of the group. Contrary to their opponents, who often operated in numerous sub-groups, the Birchlegs always relied on the presence of their leader. This served as a factor preventing the Birchlegs from controlling the whole realm, because in the absence of delegation they were unable to operate efficiently without the presence of their leader. The dynamic is visible on a psychological level in Sverre's harassment of his elder son Sigurd Lavard for not living up to the standards of martial conduct. However, the problem ran deeper, as the Birchlegs without Sverre were unusually feeble against enemy attacks. A strong leader tended to cultivate ineffective followers. There is one exception to the Birchleg inefficiency in Sverre's absence, namely Eirik Sigurdsson, who was able to control Viken without Sverre's help. However, Eirik's destiny illustrates the darker side of strong leadership, as Sverre perceived him as a threat and probably had him eliminated. Among the Birchlegs, there was no room for leaders comparable to Sverre in wisdom and power. This contrasts with the situation among the Croziers, where multiple leadership allowed them to withstand Birchleg aggression in spite of having fewer resources at their disposal.

Böglunga sögur lacks the propagandistic perspective of *Sverris saga* as well as its all-pervasive leader and depicts a situation of persistent tensions and conflicts among leaders within both the Birchleg and Crozier groups. The phase the saga covers in most detail, 1204–8, has been regarded as the climax of the civil wars. There were indeed many conflicts and hostilities in this period. However, it is my contention that this phase was far more stable than has been acknowledged. For one thing, the scope of the atrocities should not be exaggerated. This aspect will be further explored in chapter five, where the impact of the struggle on local conditions will be pursued. For another—and this is the main theme of this chapter—power struggles within the groups were not so chaotic or detrimental as has been stated. The detailed account of *Böglunga sögur* allows us to scrutinize the dilemmas of leadership in amazing depth. In line with modern theories of leadership, the narrative shows that participatory leadership carried at least two potential advantages. First, it secured more commitment to decisions than did decisions taken by a leader alone. In contrast to Sverre, who basically discouraged his followers from acting independently, the Birchlegs after 1202 and the Croziers had several leaders. This certainly created a lot of fuss, as the leaders contended for influence. On the other hand, it enabled the factions to operate more efficiently by deploying subgroups, for instance in guerrilla warfare, or by maneuvering rapidly to ambush opponents. In short, distributed leadership fostered increased commitment and accountability among group members.[77] Second, there are good reasons to assume that divided or participatory leadership was conducive for arriving at better solutions. Even though King Sverre was an unusually wise and able leader, he made mistakes, mistakes that even his own saga was unable to camouflage. The disadvantages of strong leadership for good decision making are more visible with King Sverre's opponents (even if they were probably not such strong leaders as Sverre). Much of Sverre's initial success was a consequence of beginner mistakes made by his opponents Erling skakke and Magnus Erlingsson, who were unaccustomed to guerrilla warfare, and who moreover insisted on having the final say against more experienced war leaders such as Orm kongsbror (in addition to demonstrating the deadly sin of arrogance, according to *Sverris saga*).

The decline of easy victories caused by obvious military mistakes in the period covered by *Böglunga sögur* has usually been interpreted as a result of the increased experience of the parties. Without ignoring this aspect, my view is that it also has to do with the style of leadership among the Birchlegs and Croziers in the period after 1204. The power struggle among leaders within each group created a tense environment of constant haggling and discussions about what decisions to take. This has often been regarded as a sign of weakness within the groups, which threatened to dissolve them. This is wrong.

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[77] Interestingly, accountability signifies both trust and measuring. See Sørhaug, *Managementalitet og autoritetens forvandling*, 141.

The groups never split up as the result of internal disagreements. To the contrary, they remained intact, and in cases where internal animosities persisted so long as to threaten to weaken the group, the group members normally stopped fighting and arrived at common solutions. These decisions were on the whole good and sound, which can be assumed from the fact that no group made obvious blunders in the period 1204–8. No major battles were fought, and only two ambushes were successfully undertaken, neither of which proved decisive. The absence of large-scale slaughter in this period is the more remarkable, as this was a period of intense power struggle between the Birchlegs and the Croziers.

The constant crisis *between* the Birchlegs and the Croziers (chapter 2) had as its counterpart a constant crisis *within* each group for power and influence, with the exception of Sverre's uncontested leadership of the Birchlegs. This situation of permanent tensions and rivalries, which to us seems so chaotic and unpredictable, was not so much so. There is no reason to romanticize the condition of constant crisis. No one operating in this situation was content or safe, and both groups aimed at dominance. However, the resulting social order was far more stable than the parties intended.

CHAPTER 4

Connections across groups

In the previous chapter, I analyzed conflicts within the Birchleg and Crozier groups, showing that such tensions can be interpreted as a constant crisis of more or less permanent power struggles. I argued that discord within the very core of the groups should not necessarily be viewed as a sign of weakness but can just as well be seen as an indication that leadership was dynamic, inclusive, and oriented toward finding optimal solutions. So far, however, we have operated from the premise that Birchlegs and Croziers were fairly exclusive entities clearly separated from each other. Yet there is no reason to assume that the boundaries between the groups were more solid than their internal cohesion. In this chapter, I will scrutinize tensions that crossed group boundaries. Birchlegs and Croziers were in themselves constructs of a double order. First, as we saw with Erling skakke's formation of an armed group—a *flokkr*—in 1161, such groups were established as part of a project of creating unity among people with diverging interests by emphasizing their common bond to a leader as well as their common cause against an enemy. Yet for the men participating in these groups, other concerns impinged on their behavior and choices that could shatter the cohesion and unity of the group. Second, the armed groups can also be viewed as products of the kings' sagas. The sagas were written in order to celebrate royal deeds, and even if they were also historical accounts, they must be regarded as vehicles for a royal way of regarding politics.[1] This perspective is true in a very concrete sense,

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[1] The prologues to *Heimskringla* and *Sverris saga* state these royal goals explicitly.

in that the sagas primarily relate events that directly or indirectly involved the king.[2] On a more general level, the sagas adopt a royal perspective in that they privilege dynastic struggles, and hence focus on divisions between friends and enemies, and between insiders and outsiders, that were based on royal criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The aim of this chapter is to circumvent this perspective. As Robert Bartlett has argued, state violence in the Middle Ages is "private violence writ large."[3] In other words, apart from scale, state conflict was no different from private conflict.

In medieval society, it was beyond a king's realistic and even theoretical ambition to act as the sole protector within his realm: ideological claims for a monopoly of royal power did not appear until after the Middle Ages with Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes. Still, medieval kings aimed at establishing the primacy of the bonds linking other men to them over bonds to anyone other than themselves based on kinship, friendship, and patronage.[4] Such efforts at privileging royal bonds ran counter to the social logic of networks guiding people's lives, where it was the totality of bonds and networks each person established and maintained that was decisive for determining his or her welfare and fortunes.[5] In this mélange, royal bonds enjoyed no privileged position. This means that a king's attempts to establish his bonds as superior to other bonds necessarily met with resistance, passive or active. *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur* do not have very many examples where royal obligations were in conflict with other obligations. One could interpret this situation as a sign that the royal bond was increasingly successful in gaining primacy, but given that the kings' sagas see events from a royal point of view, it is no wonder that struggles are usually described as being fought between contending parties led by kings and motivated by their mortal enmities. What is surprising,

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[2] The royal perspective in kings' sagas is revealed in statements that they only recount incidents in which kings were involved ("Magnúss saga Erlingssonar" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 11, Sv 71, 163, Hák 82).

[3] Bartlett, "Mortal Enmities," 210. See also Taylor, *The Shape of the State in Medieval Scotland*, on the anachronistic division between public and private agents.

[4] This is also known from Europe, for instance in the social institution of "liege homage." See Bloch, *Feudal Society 1*, 214–18.

[5] For studies applying this perspective, see Esmark, Hermanson, and Orning, *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 2; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship;* Hermanson, *Friendship, Love and Brotherhood*.

given this bias, is that the sagas occasionally depict episodes in which other bonds based on kinship and friendship run counter to royal ones, since doing so could in effect undermine the image that both the kings and the saga authors wished to project. The inclusion of such episodes shows that the sagas' royal bias is a tendency in approaching the past, but not a vehicle for inventing the past.

In the following, I will distinguish between three forms of bonds or interests other than those based on affiliation with the armed groups. Each of these could potentially threaten the image of hard and fast group boundaries in the sagas. First, I shall discuss the role played by personal bonds based on kinship, friendship and clientelism, which could make men who were summoned more interested in exploiting struggles for their own personal benefit than for "official" reasons.[6] Second, the material motive of gaining booty and spoils will be investigated. The quest for booty has always accompanied warfare, but it is often concealed because the glory of fighting thrives better on prowess than on greed.[7] It is therefore also important to discuss which people this more mundane motive appealed to most, and to what degree it transcended group borders. A final intersecting bond to be analyzed is the community of the social elites—the *miles* or *nobiles* in Latin terminology—who took pride in demonstrating restraint and civilized conduct.[8] This elite culture in many respects included the king, but it clashed with royal aims on two points: it was inherently a(nta)gonistic, individualistic, and self–assertive—contrasting with the image of the king as the peacemaker—and it was international and without fixed borders, and thus did not divide groups on a national /regnal basis. These three alternative motivations for fighting are almost certainly underrepresented in the kings' sagas as compared to the kings' own motives. We should therefore focus not on representativity or statistical significance when exploring them, but rather on their exemplary character, as tips of the iceberg.[9]

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[6] For such a perspective on modern warfare, see Cramer, *Civil War is not a Stupid Thing*.

[7] See Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe*, 49–51; more generally in Christie and Yazigi, *Noble Ideals and Bloody Realities*.

[8] See Duby, "The Origins of Knighthood," 158–70; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 132–58, 334–40.

[9] See Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, 39–40, 326–29; Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, 24–25.

Split families?

In April 1206, the Croziers ambushed the Birchlegs in Nidaros and chased them relentlessly, and in the heat of battle, the saga author tells us, one Crozier discovered that he had killed an opponent who was his brother. A cursory interpretation of close family members' fighting for opposing groups would be that the obligations inherent in family bonds were not very strong. However, the reaction of the killer in effect rules out this possibility: "Then he threw away his sword and behaved badly" (Bögl 22).[10] The despair of the slayer leaves no doubt that the killing was done unknowingly, and that to him family ties were more important than royal ones.[11] On the other hand, the fact that close kin joined opposing groups indicates that families were not close–knit entities whose members were in total agreement. The prime evidence of intrafamilial tensions comes from royal families, where close kin regularly struggled with one another for dynastic preeminence, and the Sagas of Icelanders show that these tensions also applied to lower levels of society.[12] Yet we should be careful not to confound tensions among close kin with a view that obligations within these circles were weak. Even if obligations toward close kin and friends were not neatly defined and varied according to context, they were definitely important. We can see this in other situations where personal and royal concerns clashed. After the battles of Fimreite (1184), Strindfjorden (1199), and Oslo (1240), the sagas tell that the Birchlegs gave mercy to their friends and relatives in the defeated group (Sv 93, 159; Hák 236). Traces of this personal dimension can also be found in other situations, such as during negotiations between Sverre and Magnus in Nidaros in 1181, when men from the two groups "sat down

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[10] L: "thi kastede and Suærdet fra sig, oc gremmede sig ynckeligen."

[11] At this ambush we also notice that the help given to the Birchlegs was highly variable among the locals (a concubine of Inge threatening to reveal his hideout) and even professionals (a man refusing to help Inge flee).

[12] The intra-royal tensions and the artificiality of positing royal "dynasties" in the twelfth century is the topic in Orning, Esmark, and Sigurðsson, *New Perspectives on the 'Civil Wars' in Medieval Scandinavia*. The last decades of research have deconstructed the notion of a "kin society" in medieval Iceland and Norway. See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 139–78; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*, 141–50; Hansen, "The Concept of Kinship."

and drank together at Brattøra, because even if they served in two armies, many of them were related or in–laws or had been friends previously" (Sv 60).[13] Even if we cannot measure the importance of personal bonds directly, it seems safe to assume that they were important. It is difficult to know how common a strategy for close family members to join opposing groups was, and it is of course impossible to measure statistically. Since kings' sagas were about kings and what was deemed relevant to them, we must assume that they did not register incidences of such intersecting bonds unless they were significant for the king.

So why did close family members choose to join opposing groups, when they risked putting one another at peril? One reason might be that this was a way for a family to hedge its bets, as it would ensure that parts of the family would be on the winning side whoever won out. A prime example of this is the Bjälbo lineage in Sweden, where the offspring of the brothers Birger brosa and Magnus minnisköld sat on both sides of the table in the conflict between Sverker the Younger (r. 1195/96–1208) and Erik Knutsson (r. 1208–16), and ended up becoming the ancestors of the Swedish royal lineage from 1250.[14] The advantage of having relatives in the opposing camp is discernible in mercy–granting situations after battles, as mentioned above. Moreover, intersecting bonds could be exploited in order to mitigate antagonism in conflict situations. When the Birchleg leader Dagfinn bonde was besieged in Bergen in 1207, he contacted Gyrd, his brother–in–law among the Croziers, who then acted as a mediator to negotiate favorable conditions for Dagfinn (Bögl 33).[15]

Another reason why close family members joined different groups is that the risk involved in this strategy was normally not very high. *Sverris saga* relates an episode in which Magnus Erlingsson told a local peasant who had a Birchleg son that he would kill him unless the son switched sides (Sv 45). When Sverre heard about this, he responded with a letter threatening to kill other people "whose sons

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[13] "Settusk allir saman út á Brötteyri, drukku þar ok töluðusk við, þó at þeir væri í tvennum flokkum. þá váru þeir margir frændr eða mágar eða höfðu fyrr verit vinir."

[14] Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden*, 104–13. I shall return to the topic of Norwegian magnates switching sides later.

[15] For other examples, see "Haraldssona saga" in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 10, Sv 145, Hák 217.

are with you" as retaliation if Magnus implemented his threats (Sv 45).[16] Sverre's answer infuriated Magnus, but he could do nothing, as his men argued that "they did not want to put their relatives' lives in danger" (Sv 45).[17] It all boiled down to nothing, demonstrating that kings who tried to prioritize the royal bond over kinship bonds were clearly acting unwisely and against common opinion. Forced to choose between king and kin, anyone would go for the familial ties, and that would be perfectly legitimate and understandable.

If personal bonds among his men were something that the king had to take into account, to what degree did such bonds pose a threat to royal power? On the one hand, as argued in the introduction, distinguishing too sharply between private and public bonds in the Middle Ages can easily become anachronistic. For King Sverre, vengeance was a major motive in becoming king, one that he did not conceal or regard as different from the motives of his men. To the contrary, several times in the sagas he compares himself to his men in terms of losses that await revenge.[18] Hence, for King Sverre, royal or state violence was "private violence writ large." Moreover, kings played on their men's personal wishes for vengeance in battle speeches, and more generally the king had to appeal to the men's own positive motives for following him, as he could not expect that they would obey him through thick and thin.[19]

On the other hand, personal bonds could interfere with obligations inherent in the bond to the king. Such bonds and interests often clashed in the aftermath of battle, when the warriors were typically most intent on avenging men who had inflicted harm on them or conversely, on sparing opponents to whom they were related, whereas kings who had incited their men to fight relentlessly before and during battle would typically turn completely around and proclaim a general amnesty after the enemy had been

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[16] "Ef þu Magnus konungr gerir Afla mein eða grand. þa scal drepa Eilif epla-stong. Scudu-Eiric oc Eindriða slandra fyrir þui at synir þeira ero þar með yðr."

[17] "eigi vilia hætta lifi feðra sinna."

[18] Sv 4, 16, 179. This changed with King Håkon Håkonsson, who no longer would refer to "private" motives of vengeance. However, as I have argued elsewhere, this is probably an ideological change more than a practical one. See Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, 151–53.

[19] On Sverre's speeches, see Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed*, 25–33; more generally in Knirk, *Oratory in the Kings' Sagas*.

conquered. When Sverre took counsel on granting general quarter to the Croziers after a lengthy siege in 1202, his men objected to the idea that they would "accept our father's or brother's killer and give him mercy and seat him beside us" (Sv 179).[20] Sverre then gave a speech emphasizing his own tribulations, including an appeal to give mercy in order to receive God's mercy (Sv 179).[21] After that, the king had his way. The saga mentions no active resistance to Sverre's order but given that it ran counter to the men's urge for vengeance, it is reasonable to infer that not all were willing to comply. In *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, a similar general quarter was granted to the Ribbungs in 1227, and here the saga stated openly that there were some men among the Ribbungs "whom the quarter could not protect" (Hák 170).[22] For them the royal decree had no value, and they had to flee the country.

In these situations, the king operated with a clear separation between conditions of peace and war, and between friends in his own group and enemies in the opposing group. After the battle in Oslo in 1240, the saga says this about King Håkon: "Just as uncompromising as King Håkon had been in attacking his enemies earlier that day, so merciful was he in granting quarter to those who came in his custody" (Hák 237).[23] Both of these absolutes—total war or total peace—were alien to most people fighting for the king, because they would also have their own personal motives for engagement. To them, the distinctions between war and peace, and

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[20] "nú skyli taka föðurbana eðr bróðurbana sína ok gefa grið og skipa síðan í hálfrými hjá oss."

[21] "You have a soul you as well as I, and that you must not forget. No man will call you cowards for that sake" ("Eigu þér ekki síðr sálur en ek ok eigið þess at minnask. Engi maðr mun kalla yðr at heldr bleyðimenn fyrir þessa sök").

[22] "er sér væntu engra griða." After the battle in 1240, Håkon was afraid the Birchlegs would break the church asylum to get at "those with whom they had most conflict" ("þeim [. . .] er þickiazt mestar sakir vid eiga," Hák 237). According to the English chronicler William of Newburgh, King Sverre's seal had the formulation "ferus ut leo, mitis ut agnus"—cruel as a lion, mild as a lamb. See William of Newburgh, *History*, book 3, chapter 6. The slogan was similar to Sverre's request to the Birchlegs to be "as lambs in peacetime, but cruel as lions when it is war" (Sv 104). Moreover, it resembles the description of King Håkon: "Hann var bliþr þa er hann var gott i skapi enn grimligr þa er hann var reiðr" (Hák 332).

[23] "Ok sua grimur, sem Hakon kongr hafdi verit vm daginn at fyrirkoma sinum ouinum, þa var ok eigi hitt midr fra moti, huersu miskunsamur hann var j gridagiofum vid alla þa, sem aa hans valld gengu."

between friends and enemies, were far more blurred (to be fair, we should acknowledge that kings were no strangers to this idea and often pursued it themselves in practice). On the one hand, men often had relatives and friends in the opposing camp, which made the war less total and uncompromising than the king wanted it to be, as they would almost certainly not try to injure their relatives in battle. Conversely, there could be men among the opponents (or in their own group) with whom enmity for personal reasons was more bitter than with the rest, which made it difficult to put an end to enmities from above (Hák 70, 237). This dilemma is vividly exposed after the battle at Strindfjorden in 1199. Before the battle, that saga says, Sverre had specified that only he was to decide who would be granted quarter. Yet after the battle, men gave mercy to their own friends and relatives, and when other men complained that their own enemies were protected, the only way for the king to have his will was to allow for everyone's personal vengeance to play out, so that one person's friendships were annulled by another's enmity (Sv 159).

Thus, whereas we tend to see a battle as a fight between two antagonistic groups, the reality was far more complex, as the groups were permeated by personal relationships that could work either against fighting or in favor of fiercer fighting.[24] A typical example comes in saga description of the battle of Låke in 1240. Here one faction managed to capture a scout from the opposing side and brought him to their leader to make him reveal valuable information about the movements of his group. However, he never got that far, as on his way he coincidentally ran into "a man he had offended against, and [the man] cut his head off" (Hák 217).[25] Another captured man was freezing and asked for permission to get his clothes from his group. As he had a brother–in–law among his captors, he was granted this wish, which he used to run off to his own group again (Hák 217).

The sagas only reveal the significance of such intruding personal influences when they affected royal politics. During Sverre's early years as a guerrilla leader in Opplanda, the saga gives the impression that the Birchlegs encountered enmity everywhere. Yet some were more hostile than others. On one occasion, Sverre sent his men to

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[24] The overlapping relationships between the armed groups is the theme of a Ph.D project undertaken by Hilde Andrea Nysether.

[25] "þar var sa madr fyrir, er sakir atti vid hann, og giordi hann halshogguinn." Traces of such internal feuds are visible in Hák 102, 157.

rob the farm of Ottar Hisle (Sv 16). We do not know why they picked out Ottar, but probably the king held some grudge against him. The result was clear enough, however, as shortly thereafter Ottar attacked the Birchlegs with a fleet (Sv 18). On other occasions the cause of the personal enmity is disclosed. During the battle at Hatthammeren in 1178, a man called Serk injured King Sverre slightly in his foot. After the battle, a group of Birchlegs searched out Serk's farm and killed him and eleven others (Sv 28, 29). On another occasion, Øyolv Avlesson refused to join Magnus Erlingsson, and this did not pass unnoticed: somewhat later King Magnus sent men to rob his father Avle's farm (Sv 63). Enmities between groups could seem lethal, but compared to personal aversions they were superficial.

Personal hatred could also play out within the same army. At the battle of Fyrileiv in 1134, a peasant from Harald gille's army stabbed one of his commanders, the king's brother Kristrød, in the back, explaining his deed this way: "Now he suffers from having robbed me of my livestock and everything I owned last summer and having forced me to participate in this army."[26] When an Icelander called Hall Kodransbane ("the killer of Kodran") was praised for his strength, he was instantly killed by Kodran's nephew, who overheard the praise and realized that this was his uncle's killer, although he had never met Hall and had been only a year old when Kodran lost his life.[27] No royal case could overrrule enmities that touched the core of family obligations.

More indirect evidence of blurred boundaries between the armed groups comes from saga episodes in which the groups were assembled in the same town. We saw that Birchlegs and Heklungs could sit and drink together in a cordial manner while their leaders discussed terms of settlement after one of the allegedly bloodiest battles in this period (Sv 60).[28] During the Bergen summer of 1198, the Birchlegs and Croziers were both residing in Bergen, the former in a castle at the northwestern edge of town, the latter on their ships or in

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[26] "Nú veit hann þat, er þeir hjoggu bú mitt í sumar, ok tóku alt þat er heima var, en höfðu mik nauðgan í her með sér" ("Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla" in Heimskringla,, vol. 3, 3).

[27] "Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar," in *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 72. Another example is to be found in Sv 142.

[28] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 84 on the ferocity of the battle of Nordnes.

Jonsvollene, a plain a bit south of the town. *Sverris saga* describes the enmity between the groups as unrelenting: "Both groups took men from one another and killed them wherever they could do it" (Sv 149).[29] This is revealed indirectly in the following passage:

> The Birchlegs were often in town: they had many errands there; some had wives / women [*konur*] there; and some wanted something to drink. The Birchlegs often shot at the Croziers from the houses, and the Croziers did not dare to stay in town because they were assaulted by Birchlegs (Sv 146).[30]

However, the enmity was not always so strong. We do not know whether the *konur* were wives of the Birchlegs or if they were concubines like those who almost betrayed King Inge Bårdsson and his brother Skule during a Crozier attack in 1206 (Bögl 21).[31] Tellingly, the term *kona* can mean "wife," "concubine" or simply "woman."[32] In any case, the town center of Bergen seems to have been an area visited by both groups. Moreover, the fact that Birchlegs shot at the Croziers from within the houses does not exactly indicate mortal enmity. The saga states that the Birchlegs chased the Croziers from town, but that was hardly the case, as the saga later reports that "many [Croziers] went out to have fun and play; in that way they showed that they did not care about /were not afraid of the Birchlegs" (Sv 146).[33] An important sub–theme in the saga's description of this summer is playing and drinking. Sometimes the playing (*leik*) was done to provoke the opponent, but probably most of these social activities took place in town as part of the normal life of a retainer. Once, the Birchlegs planned a secret attack on the Croziers. They arranged to meet in Church of St. Olav in town, and they were to go there "two

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[29] "Tóku hvárir menn af öðrum ok drápu æ sem við kómusk."

[30] "Birkibeinum váru jafnan í bænum, og urðu mörg ørendi þannig. Sumir áttu þar konur, en margir leituðu sér at drykk. Skutu Birkibeinar jafnan undan húsveggjum at Böglum. Baglar þorðu eigi at vera í bænum fyrir áhlaupum Birkibeina."

[31] During the Crozier ambush on Nidaros in the same year, some women told the Croziers that King Inge was hiding in the church. Another concubine hinted that the Croziers would not pass by her lodging so quickly if they knew that the king's brother was inside it (Bögl 21).

[32] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "*kona*." See also the same urge to visit *konur* and to drink in town among the Heklungs (Sv 70).

[33] "gengu þá margir í leika ok skemmtu sér, sýndu þat at þeim þótti einskis vert um Birkibeina."

by two, or in groups of four or five" (Sv 147).[34] The tactics reveal that the two groups moved about rather freely, and that an efficient way of going unnoticed was by appearing in smaller groups. By contrast, when the allegedly cowardly Croziers wanted to remain safe, they walked around in town in groups of fifty or sixty, only to run away when meeting ten to fifteen Birchlegs (Sv 149). The atmosphere in town was undoubtedly tense, but we should not exaggerate the level of enmity in skirmishes between the groups. The saga describes it this way: "Sometimes the Birchlegs came upon the Croziers by surprise. Then they [the Croziers] were thrashed and ran headlong back to the ships and attained neither prestige nor honor" (Sv 149).[35] This looks more like shoving and punching in a competitive, antagonistic setting, not very dissimilar from instances of brawling and quarreling that could escalate into violent behavior when many members of the same retinue sat drinking and feasting together for longer intervals.[36]

Even if the sagas only intermittently reveal the importance of personal influences, there is reason to assume that this was the rule, not the exception. Normally the support that a king could recruit was bound to be contingent and limited by contextual constraints. Armed groups were not unitary forces subordinated to one will and aim. They were complex bodies of men with various motives that ran along as well as across the interests of the group as a whole—John France compares medieval armies to onions.[37] This complexity is even reflected in normative sources. *The Law of the Retinue* from 1277 opens with the following scenario: "Now it happens that a man finds his father in the battle, or his son or his brother, and helps him. Then no one shall injure them unless on the king's advice."[38] Would this passage have been added if intrafamilial allegiances crossing group boundaries were an altogether improbable scenario?

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[34] "tveir ok tveir en stundum fjórir eða fim."

[35] "þat var ok stundum at Birkibeinar kómu at þeim óvörum, ok fengu Baglar þá illt slag, fóru þá hrapalliga til skipa sinna með engarri virðingu né frama."

[36] Sv 63, 103. In a similar stalemate in Bergen in 1206, the mixture of alcohol and violence is vividly exposed: "Often it happened late at night when the Croziers were drunk that they ran up to the castle. Then some were injured, and some killed" (Bögl 22). Sverre tried in a speech to stop his men from drinking excessively (Sv 104), but it probably came to naught.

[37] France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades*, 135.

[38] "Nu ber sua til at maðr finnr foður sinn i barðaga eða sun sinn eða broðor oc fær holpet þæim þa skal engi þæim meinn gera eða granða fyr en með konongs raðe" (Imsen, *Hirdloven*, 53).

The spoils of war

The desire to acquire booty is not a motive much referred to in the sagas. One reason for this is that its importance went without saying. Moreover, plunder and looting for material gain were not desires that anyone wanted to proclaim loudly, either from a Christian vantage point, where riches counted as vainglory, or from a more secular angle where honor, not material needs, should guide one's actions. As Matthew Strickland writes concerning high medieval England:

> One is left with the impression that while the harrying of the countryside was a crucial, highly profitable and totally commonplace element of war with which the knighthood was occupied for a greater proportion of time than with sieges or open engagement, this form of conflict was not where the highest honour or the greatest praise of one's brothers in arms was to be won.[39]

In chapter 2, we saw that harrying was probably not as common in medieval Scandinavia as in England. Yet the same dilemma applied to it there as in England. Plunder was an important part of warfare, but not one to speak loudly about. This ambiguity comes to the fore with the Birchlegs, because they were a group originally consisting of plunderers who turned into the governing body of Norway. What is interesting about this motive is not only that it is repeated so often in *Sverris saga*, but also that it is repeatedly undermined. According to the saga, King Sverre "solved" the problem of plundering in the first phase of his career when he set up a test "of whether the men would follow him in activities other than robbery and misdeeds" (Sv 11).[40] The test consisted of traveling widely without opportunities for plundering, and seeing how many would continue to follow him after that. It turned out that only eighty out of 300 men remained. However, shortly thereafter, Sverre had to admit that even this hard core "would arouse people through their plunder and misdeeds rather than following him unconditionally" (Sv 11).[41]

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[39] Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 290.

[40] "ef þetta folk vildi honum til nökkurs annars fylgja en til rána ok óspekðar einnar."

[41] "þóttu þeir heldr vilja eggja alþýðu í höfuð sér af ránum ok mikilli óspekð en fylgja honum í mannraunum."

A new phase allegedly emerged with the battle at Kalvskinnet in 1179. So far, the Birchlegs had struggled to obtain bare necessities for survival: "But now something more is at stake than previously," namely power: acquired partly by controlling the town of Nidaros, partly by taking over the positions formerly held by the opponents (Sv 35).[42] After the battle, King Sverre proclaimed an epochal change, as he now held the positions of king, earl and archbishop, and the struggle had turned from economics to politics, from necessities to power (Sv 38). The saga emphasizes the transformation that occurred: "many in Sverre's army had previously been day laborers or plunderers; now, after they had emerged as victorious in battle, they carried vestments and scarlet and good weapons" (Sv 40).[43] The image of the transformed Birchlegs was invoked again after the battle at Fimreite in 1184, here in the Birchleg leader Svina-Peter's speech to people in Bergen to prepare them for the arrival of King Sverre the conqueror:

> He is gone now, the Sverre who came with the looting of many a town [lit. trading place]. Gone now too are those Birchlegs who swarmed around in town and swept with filthy hands in people's chests and cabinets. Now there will come mild and meek retainers with our king; they will be like lock and key to peace and freedom in this as in other towns (Sv 96).[44]

Although in his speech Peter emphasized the changing nature of the Birchlegs' behavior, he also inadvertently gave a precise, unvarnished description of the persistent accusations against them that indicates the transformation was not so thorough. Sverre's opponents continued to call them plunderers, not only Magnus Erlingsson (Sv 86, 87, 90), but also ordinary peasants (Sv 79).

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[42] "En nú liggr þó nökkuru meira við en vér hefim oft átt um slíkt at leika."

[43] "þeir inir sömu er verit höfðu verkmenn en sumir ránsmenn eða ribbungar, en eftir þetta, er þeir höfðu verit í liði Sverris konungs ok vegit sigr, báru þeir skrúð ok skarlat ok góð vápn."

[44] "Nú er í brotu sá Sverrir er við hernaði fór til margra kaupstaða. Brautu eru nú ok þeir sömu Birkibeinar er hér sveimuðu um bæinn ok sópuðu óhreinliga höndum um hirzlur yðrar búanda. En hér munu nú koma með konungi várum mjúkir hirðmenn ok hógværir, er vera skal láss ok lykill fyrir frelsi ok friði þessa kaupstaðar ok annarra." See also Sverre's speech when he arrived in Bergen, where he openly acknowledged the hostility people felt toward him and the Birchlegs).

Moreover, these accusations would not stop after Magnus Erlingsson lay dead, as they were taken up again by the Croziers (Sv 131). There is even a tone of irony in the saga statement that after Kalvskinnet "they [the Birchlegs] hardly remembered their previous lives" (Sv 40).[45]

What runs through this narrative is a close association between the Birchlegs and plunder. Some of this was probably peculiar to the Birchlegs, in part because they were outsiders who had conquered the established elites and in part because Sverre's story fitted with the Biblical motif of the underdog David who miraculously rose to power.[46] Nevertheless, the association between power and plunder runs deeper than this particular juxtaposition. We have seen that the Old Norse term for "power"—*vald*, in contrast to the Latin *violentia*, which underlies our modern notion of violence—did not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate violence.[47] Hence, the duality and ambiguity of power lay at the heart of the terminology. Thus, plunder was not something specific to the Birchlegs, nor something that the king could put a stop to once and for all. The aim of acquiring material goods was normally fully compatible with fighting for the king, and for armed followers it was an important motivation for attaching themselves to the king in the first place, as seen in the example of the early Birchlegs. The spoils of plunder constituted a key source of remuneration for the army, and were moreover one facet—if not a very sympathetic one—of maintaining power (*vald*), in that they served as a reminder of the consequences of resisting the king, of being outside his law.

However, the hunt for booty could sometimes be in conflict with the interests of the king. The background lay in different goals: Whereas the king wanted to use plunder politically (to gain resources, to control people), armed retainers had a personal goal in looting, namely enrichment. On one occasion in 1178, the Birchlegs had to leave Nidaros in a rush so as not to be caught by Erling skakke, and King Sverre afterward proclaimed that "he was most proud that the men departed from the ships and everything they

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[45] "varliga sjálfir þeir mundu muna þá ina fyrri ævi sína."

[46] For the most recent interpretation on the David motif in *Sverris saga*, see Orning and Rosén, "*Sverris saga*: A Manifesto for a New Political Order."

[47] Fritzner, *Ordbog*, "vald."

owned; it had not happened often with men on the run" (Sv 33).[48] The implication is that it was an altogether unusual situation for men to behave contrarily to their material interests. More typical is a situation where the Birchlegs lost track of a leading opponent because he threw out money while fleeing, and the Birchlegs prioritized collecting the money over catching the opponent (Sv 57). *Sverris saga* also refers to one outright quarrel over the distribution of booty in which Sverre flew into a rage after his followers contested the way he wanted to divide the spoils (Sv 136).

The most significant clash between the king's and the men's attitude to plunder surfaced in 1197, when King Sverre was on his way eastward with a large fleet and stopped in Bergen for an extended period while awaiting the rest of the fleet. Here many of the troops behaved in an undisciplined way, and the king summoned an assembly "and said approximately this":

> It is not fitting for sons of good peasants to come from Trondheim or Hålogaland or Møre or maybe shorter distances to fight against peasants' tools or other things on the farms, cut them down, and destroy whatever comes in your way. This is no feat or something to brag about for you (Sv 133).[49]

Keeping a large army waiting was a problem, as it could easily run out of resources, and without the prospect of action the warriors could become restless. In this concrete instance of standstill in Bergen, the king was opposed to the army's looting neighboring farms, as the peasants were already supporters of the Birchlegs, whose good will Sverre would not put at risk. However, in enemy territory there was less risk in giving free rein to the army, and kings who urged untrammeled plunder were never contradicted. When Sverre encouraged full–scale looting in Sogn in 1184, or when King Håkon Håkonsson on expeditions in Vermland, Denmark and

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[48] "hann mátti því helzt hælask at eigi myndu mörg dæmi til þess vera at flóttamenn hefði svá skilizk við fjárhlut sinn eða skip sem þeir gerðu."

[49] "Ófallit er góðum búandasonum at fara til þess ór Þrándheimi eða af Hálogalandi eða af Mæri, ok þó at skemmra sé at komnir, at berjask við búgögn búanda eða keröld eða við aðra bús búhluti, högga þat eða meiða, þó at fyrir yðr standi. Er yðr þat engi snilld eða framkæmð."

Scotland did the same, no protests were voiced (Sv 82, Hák 117, 293, 320). Such looting was probably the ultimate dream of most warriors. The attitude of the armed retainers is particularly revealing in situations where the king requested his men to stop plundering. King Håkon Håkonsson set a ban on plundering during armed expeditions in Denmark in 1257 and in Satiri in Scotland in 1263. Both prohibitions were highly unpopular among the warriors, who urged for—and probably persisted in—further harrying.[50] A similar clash came in the spring of 1207 when the Croziers besieged the Birchlegs in the castle in Bergen, and as the latter had only few men and provisions, the Croziers considered their prospects of success in a siege to be good (Bögl 29). However, when Filippus agreed that the Birchlegs should have free passage of all their weapons and possessions, "the Croziers murmured against King Filippus for taking away from them all the booty that they could have shared, because they would certainly have won the castle if he had not come" (Bögl 30).[51] In line with what we saw concerning *grið* and mercy, the king operated with a clear divide between war and peace. For the warriors, the divide was much less stark, because their concern with material enrichment implied that peace was not always welcome, at least not peace at any price.

On a more general level, the armed followers' concern with booty necessitated the perpetuation of a certain level of conflict and war, because that was a precondition for extracting resources from others—directly as plunder or more indirectly as protection money. The interest in maintaining a condition of fighting and enmity is demonstrated in the aftermath of the settlement between Birchlegs and Croziers at Kvitingsøy in 1208, most fully exposed in the long version of *Böglunga sögur*:

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[50] Denmark 1257: "they urged the king to plunder in the Danish king's realm" ("fysandi Hakon kong at heria j rike Danakongs," Hák 293); Satiri 1263: they "disliked this (the ban) very much" ("likadi þeim þat storilla," Hák 321).

[51] L: "Baglerne knurrede imod K. Philippus, oc sagde, at hand skilde dem ved deris Roff oc Byte, thi de hafde vel vundet Slottet, om hand hafde icke der kommet." As a response to the discontent, Filippus made the men swear an oath that they had not taken out more than what they owned (Bögl 30). The terms were stipulated by Archbishop Tore, and his peacemaking capacities were honored. However, the fact that they were built on a blatant lie (Tore having argued that the Birchlegs had provisions for two years, which he knew was not so) was not commented upon by the saga author.

> Now there was murmur in both groups among the men who had little money but still had honors. They then decided that the next spring they were to plunder in the Sudreys [Hebrides] to win goods. People from both groups declared that they would join in this venture (Bögl 35).[52]

The king might assert in solemn language that the struggle was for the throne, but for many of his armed retainers, fighting was an end in itself. When the condition of armed struggle was threatened by conclusive peace agreements, previous divisions into friends and enemies dissolved, giving way to a new division between peacemakers and warmakers. Such a realignment could in the final instance erode the existing bipolar political structure of contending parties and thus reveals the shallowness of group enmities.

One way of minimizing the role of this potentially disruptive force in the saga was to attribute it only to the lower segments of the army—to the rank–and–file warriors as opposed to the "noble" leaders who fought for something larger than material gain. However, the leaders who wanted peace were less concerned with a general peace than with obtaining pardon for their own friends and relatives. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the men who opposed peace and settlement came only from the lower classes. To the contrary, this assertion should be viewed as a rhetorical strategy of the saga author, and an indication of his own class bias. Let us therefore turn to the "nobler" aspects of plunder in its chivalrous form.

Elite community / rivalry

The Norwegian historian Kåre Lunden has argued that King Sverre's most important role in Norwegian history was that his reign served as "a 25 years' permanent political and military

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[52] The formulations are from L: "Der bleff et stor bulder blant Birkebenerne oc Baglerne, fordi der vaar mange ypperlige Mænd som hafde mist alt deris Gods oc Pendinge I den Feide, da bleff det Raad paafundet, at om Someren der efter skulde de drage Vester til Suder Øer I Røfuerii at forhuerfe sig Gods oc Pendinge igien, oc de lafuede skibe til paa begge sider." S has more briefly: "þat sumar fóru þeir í víking í Suðreyjar." However, it specifies that three Birchlegs and five Croziers prepared the expedition. A related mechanism can be seen after the settlement between Croziers and Birchlegs in 1217, when men from the Croziers who had not obtained new honors / offices were frustrated, but in this case they joined a new rebel group (Hák 57).

shock," which taught the magnates that "it created strife and destruction, not peace, if one single faction [. . .] too relentlessly strove to monopolize all the resources of the kingdom for itself."[53] Lunden's frame of interpretation was a Marxist one. For him the civil wars brought the ruling classes together, as this cohesion served as a lesson that it was better to extract resources from the working population by uniting under a king who could collect contributions legitimately than to fight internally over them.[54] Lunden's class perspective on the civil wars was a welcome corrective to the then–prevalent interpretation of the period as a condition of lawless order that could be rescued only by the intervention of monarchy and Church to create peace. [55] Lunden clarified that peace did not come for free, but had its costs, most concretely because the peasants now had to yield a third of their produce to the non-working class of secular and clerical magnates.[56] However, I think that his view that the upper class now finally "understood" how much they had in common is flawed, partly because it conflates royal and elite order, and partly because it exaggerates the novelty of such a union. In the following I shall argue that king and elites had a fundamentally ambiguous relationship throughout this period. On the one hand, the king belonged to the elite and shared its values and norms. On the other hand, the elite diverged from the monarchy in two opposite but complementary ways: The

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[53] "et 25-årig, permanent politisk og militært sjokk," that taught the magnates that "det skapte strid og ødeleggelse, ikke fred, om én enkelt fraksjon [...] altfor overmodig forsøkte å monopolisere alle kongedømmets ressurser for seg." He continues: Peasants and townsmen learnt that "det kunne være det minste av to onder å akseptere regulære oppofrelser til en statsmakt som var sterk nok til å sikre noenlunde orden og fred." Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 137–38.

[54] Elsewhere Lunden formulated the lesson of the upper class as "learning political action" (Lunden, "Det norske kongedømet i høgmellomalderen," 210). Here he built on his teacher Andreas Holmsen, who argued that the civil wars were a crucial phase in establishing a class identity among the landowners, "even if it was not consciously perceived, and it still could not be so" (Holmsen, *Norges historie: Fra de eldste tider til 1660*, 199).

[55] For such a view, see for instance Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt*, 70; Johnsen, *Fra ættesamfunn til statssamfunn*, 91–92; Paasche, *Kong Sverre*, 109–10. Helle cited the letter of reconciliation between King Håkon Sverresson and the Church from 1202, where he painted the present situation in gloomy colors, as a reliable description of the contemporary realities.

[56] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 268–312.

elite had a community of interests that transcended royal divisions into friends and enemies; and conversely, members of the elite had rivalries that broke with the notion of the king's peace. In short, my viewpoint is that whereas kings wished to distinguish between war and peace, and between friends and enemies, the elite lived under a condition of constant crisis in which such strict divides were basically alien. Let us review the two issues of elite community and rivalry in turn.

An elite community between the Birchlegs and the Croziers was to some extent grounded in personal bonds, reviewed more fully in the previous section. For instance, in a critical phase of a siege in 1207, the Birchleg leader Dagfinn bonde contacted a brother-in-law among the Croziers, who acted as a mediator to negotiate favorable conditions for Dagfinn (Bögl 33). The reconciliation at Kvitingsøy in 1208 was probably facilitated by the fact that the leaders Birchleg Peter støype and Crozier Reidar sendemann were brothers-in-law, both married to daughters of Magnus Erlingsson (Reidar to Margrete, Peter to Ingebjørg, Bögl 12, 33, 35). Yet the elite community went beyond personal connections in terms of kinship. In 1207, the Croziers received news that the Birchlegs were nearby, and they attacked and killed most of them. The Crozier leader gave mercy to two Birchleg leaders who were *sýslumenn*, "but when the armed followers heard about this, they killed them" (Bögl 29).[57] Two years earlier, a quite similar course of events unfolded when the Croziers ambushed the *sýslumaðr* Einar kongsmåg in Stavanger, who fled into a church: "The leaders wanted to keep the *grið*, but the armed followers were in charge," and Einar was executed (Bögl 15).[58] In these instances, we hear nothing about kinship relations between the enemy leaders. Still, they were more reconciliatory than the commoners were.

One reason why the Crozier leaders wanted to pardon Einar might be that Einar had sought refuge in a church, and killing him there would violate norms of church asylum, which is what Einar addressed in his famous last words on being executed: "Dirty and

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[57] Only in S: "Nikolás af Lista gaf grið hvárumtveggja Óláfi. En er liðsmenn urðu þess varir þá veittu þeir þeim atgöngu ok drápu þar."

[58] "Vildu höfðingjar halda grið við hann, en liðsmenn réðu."

deceitful is the Crozier *grið* becoming now" (Bögl 15).[59] The norm of pardoning opponent leaders certainly had a class dimension.[60]

Another reason why the leaders were more reconciliatory than the ordinary fighters might be that they hoped Einar would switch sides and thus become a resource for the Croziers in the future, which was not an unrealistic scenario (see below on side-switching).

Finally, a class-related explanation connects to the material resources in play. In the previous section on booty, we saw that rank-and-file Croziers were less willing to give mercy to the Birchlegs barricaded in the castle in Bergen in spring 1207 than the Crozier king Filippus, and they accused him of "taking away from them all the booty that they could have shared" (Bögl 30).[61] This episode is one of Kåre Lunden's major examples of an incipient class formation, evident in the description of the way in which the Birchlegs came out of the castle door with their goods, with Croziers standing on each side: "He [Filippus] took the maiden Kristin, daughter of King Sverre, by her hand and led her out of the gate" (Bögl 30).[62] For the saga writer and his audience, the whole episode was a foreshadowing, as one year later Filippus and Kristin would share a marital bed as part of the Kvitingsøy settlement. However, the parties involved could not know the future. For them, the incident served as a reminder that shared elite interests could at certain times trump group antagonism. In this concrete instance, the prospect of seeing rank-and-file warriors appropriating wealth belonging to elite members triggered the activation of class unity across party boundaries. Better to keep wealth among equals.

Moreover, this class identity across group divisions among the elite was not new, but was an intrinsic part of the elite culture throughout the period, with varying manifestations. The noble community that surfaced in Bergen in 1207 had also been evident three years earlier in a siege in Bergen, when the Crozier king

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[59] Only in L: "Kranck oc suigfuld er Baglernis fred oc lejde." This has been reckoned as one of the few "saga-worthy" utterances in the saga (Magerøy, *Soga om birkebeinar og baglar: Bǫglunga sǫgur*, vol. 1, 272).

[60] On mercifulness and elites in Norway, see Taylor, "Moderation and Restraint in the North"; in England, see Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 330–40.

[61] L: "hand skilde dem ved deris Roff oc Byte."

[62] L: "hand tog Jomfru Christin Suerris dotter ved haanden, oc ledde hende ud aff porten."

Erling steinvegg tried to prevent fighting by arguing that "they [the Birchlegs] are my men." (Bögl 13)[63] However, on this occasion he received only ridicule in response. Why do we see these opposite reactions to the manifestation of an elite community across groups? Probably because its significance was highly contextual and ambiguous. In 1207 the elite worked in the same direction as the king—toward reconciliation, contrasted to the unrelenting attitude of the armed followers demanding booty and strife. In 1204, however, such a rapprochement undermined the rivalries among the elites.

The more basic point here is that elite community constituted only one side of the coin, the necessary counterpart being that elites were also constantly vying for power and prestige. In chapter 3, we saw that rivalry between leaders was almost endemic among both Birchlegs and Croziers, with a partial exception in the case of King Sverre. Elite rivalry could be helpful to a king trying to motivate his men to fight, in that he could direct their aggression toward opposing elite factions. However, in instances when kings urged for peace, such rivalries could pose a threat. This possibility is particularly evident after 1208, when the conflict between the Birchlegs and Croziers was formally settled at Kvitingsøy (Bögl 35).[64] In my view, this settlement did not put a lock on elite rivalries; it simply promoted a variant form of constant crisis consisting not of openly declared hostilities but of endemic tugs-of-war among the leaders.

One such tension arose as a result of the frustrations among the weaker party at the settlement—the Croziers—as the former Crozier King Filippus had to renounce the royal title. According to *Böglunga sögur* he resigned without protest, but his wife Kristin Sverresdatter was more uncompromising,[65] and former Croziers insisted on calling Filippus king after 1208. Filippus probably did not protest very

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[63] L: "de ere mine Mend."

[64] The country was separated into three parts: two for the Birchlegs and one for the Croziers—of which the Birchleg part was divided between Inge and Håkon galen. That in reality meant a three-part separation of Norway, with one king and two earls.

[65] The description in the saga might have been stylized so as to represent Kristin as a strong-willed independent woman in the vein of the Icelandic family sagas. On the other hand, Kristin's objections do make sense considering the other strong female agents in this period.

vehemently against this.[66] Typically, we here see a compromise that balanced the various concerns: Filippus was still called king among the Croziers—only unofficially, but openly enough that this was known to the saga author (Bögl 38, 42). Intra-group tensions also persisted within the Birchleg camp after 1208 in the rivalry between King Inge and Håkon galen. This was nothing new, as this power struggle had in reality had been going on since 1204. After 1208 it crystallized on three occasions. First, Håkon galen tried to gain the royal title for himself (Bögl 41). Inge resisted this attempt, but Håkon achieved an agreement that whichever of them lived longer should inherit from the other, and that when both were deceased, the one son born in wedlock should inherit the throne (Bögl 41). In reality this arrangement acknowledged Håkon's superiority, since in contrast to Inge, he had children born in wedlock. Second, according to the saga, Håkon galen encouraged the peasants in Trøndelag, Inge's core area, to rebel against him (Bögl 43).[67] The rebellion became so powerful that Inge had to retreat, and it was only after Håkon's death in 1214 that Inge was able to suppress the peasants (Bögl 45). Third, the saga refers to Håkon galen as instigator of an assassination attempt against the king (Bögl 44). These tensions have often been seen as a consequence of Håkon galen's intrigues.[68] I think this is a too narrow and individualistic an explanation. It is doubtful that the saga is trustworthy in these accounts, as it has a decidedly anti-Håkon tone.[69] Moreover, similar tensions between brothers played out among the Croziers, when Filippus' brother Andres came from Denmark and led a rebellion which Filippus managed to suppress (Bögl 46). Finally, a more general objection is

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[66] A more formal aspect of this tension was Filippus' unwillingness to part with the royal seal (Bögl 38).

[67] This is referred to in the long version: "Håkon earl and Archbishop Tore were strongly suspected of having goaded the peasants into rising against the king." L: "Denne opreisning imod Kongen bleff Hagen Jarl oc Erckebisp Tore megit misstencke fore, at de skulde hafue opvect hannem aff Bønderne."

[68] Arstad, "Håkon galen"; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 148–54.

[69] After Håkon's death in 1214, his widow Kristin immediately traveled back to Sweden, indicating that the network around Håkon disintegrated after his death. This meant that when *Böglunga sögur* was written, there was no one to defend Håkon's reputation. Moreover, Kristin's son Håkon became a rallying point for opposition to King Håkon Håkonsson before 1227, and this probably also complicated the matter of how to present his father in the saga.

that by attributing the strife solely to Håkon galen, we exaggerate the influence of the Kvitingsøy settlement on the sociopolitical structures. The year 1208 has been considered a watershed in Norwegian history, ending the civil wars and launching a period of peace and prosperity.[70] Yet the drawing of such a contrast tends to confirm the royalist viewpoint of history as alternating between periods of war and peace. What the settlement primarily did do was to put an end to open strife sanctioned by kings. What it did *not* do was to change the fundamental tensions in society, whereby various elite factions vied for power and influence. Now such rivalries went below the surface, but they did not change in substance. The tensions after 1208 were not merely "echoes" from the previous period of strife that threatened to overthrow the fragile peace arrangement; they were inherent to society.

The Marxist interpretation of the civil wars as a pivotal stage in class formation represented a great leap forward as compared to the view that monarchy and the Church saved the country from chaos. However, by lumping all members of the elite together into one dominant class, and by viewing internal strife within this upper class as superficial compared with inter-class conflicts,[71] this view in my opinion conflates royal and noble interests. In the foregoing, we saw that a noble community could sometimes be consistent with royal peacemaking (as in 1207), but not always (as in 1204). The same goes for noble self-assertion, which could be nicely attuned to royal warmaking when the king wanted to have people fight for him before 1208, but contrarily could pose more of a problem in times of peace, such as after 1208.

With their enigmatic combination of aggressive self-assertion and shared values, the elites promoted a condition of constant crisis that was alien to the king's aim to have either peace or war, and to serve as its guarantor himself. For the king, before 1208 the threat

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[70] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 161–65.

[71] Andreas Holmsen called internal conflicts within the upper class "surface waves" ("overflatekrusninger"), see Holmsen, *Norges historie: Fra de eldste tider til 1660*, 274. Kåre Lunden drew attention to the fact that elites needed to show moderation, and that the king was useful in order to curb tensions within the elite (Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 137–38). For criticism of this perspective on the grounds that it tends to posit a self-fulfilling system where both harmony and conflict show the system at work, see Hay, *Albion's Fatal Tree*; Lacey, *The Royal Pardon*.

was that magnates rallied for communal interests in situations of conflict, whereas after 1208 it was that they opted for conflict during conditions of peace. In reality, ambiguity always characterized the relationship between kings and elites.

The ambiguity of the elites—constant crisis

So far, the emphasis has been on the "double bind" of elite orientation—community *cum* rivalry in a condition of constant crisis that transcends the separation between periods of war and peace, such as before and after 1208. However, the fact that elites could be allied or opposed across group boundaries does not imply that everything was in flux. What it means is that the criteria for deciding when a relationship was friendly or hostile cannot be determined on a general basis or a priori but need to be considered in context. The absence of a fixed point or frame of reference signals not chaos, however, but a greater acknowledgment of the varieties and fluctuations of allegiances and identities. In the following, I will explore three manifestations of this fundamental ambiguity among the elites with respect to community and rivalry: the scope for magnates to maneuver within the interstices between friends and foes, the contextual character of rivalry and community, and side-switches between groups.

Great men were fascinatingly free to move between groups in this period, and their status as friends or enemies could change overnight. For all the drama of such switches, the safety of these men was seldom at risk. The most prolific side-switcher in this period is undoubtedly Nikolas Arnesson. He was the son of the dowager queen Ingrid Ragnvaldsdatter, and therefore had links to the royal dynasty. Nikolas' position made him a mighty man in his own right, thanks to his private resources. His networks' connections within Norway and in Denmark made him an even more powerful and valuable ally. His position as bishop added a new dimension to his networks, as they included leading Danish bishops and the Pope. Nikolas is famous for his resistance to the Birchlegs, which was in great part a result of his networks being firmly situated on the Inge / Magnus side in the civil wars. As early as 1180, he participated in Magnus Erlingsson's army (Sv 44), and he became a leading figure with the Croziers, as he was among the initiators of the first Crozier rising and crucial in securing Danish support to the group (Sv 129). Moreover, Nikolas continued to make trouble for the Birchlegs after the final settlement with the Croziers in 1217 when he supported the Ribbungs, albeit not so openly as he did the Croziers (Hák 46, 67, 83, 109, 118, 133, 138).

Yet for all the hostility that Nikolas mustered against the Birchlegs, he also had strong interconnections with them. In the first place, it was King Sverre's decision to install him as bishop. According to the saga, Queen Margrete pushed for the election whereas Sverre opposed it, but that is most likely a retrospective rationalization, as the choice turned out to be detrimental to Sverre (Sv 111). Moreover, Nikolas also had ample opportunities to re-enter royal circles later on. He was reconciled with Sverre in 1194 after the Island Beard rising and played a decisive role in Sverre's coronation (Sv 123). Even after he had established the Croziers, the bonds were not broken. After a battle in Oslo in 1197, Sverre was willing to enter negotiations if Nikolas would come to him (Sv 136). Finally, in spite of Nikolas' important role as Crozier leader, in 1207 he appeared in a new role together with Archbishop Tore as a mediator between the Birchlegs and Croziers (Bögl 34).[72] The role shift could be explained along a secular-clerical divide, as he was now acting as bishop. However, these roles were not clearly separated. As an opposition leader, Nikolas acted as both a secular leader and a bishop, and people acknowledged this double role. What is telling, then, is that Nikolas was not hindered from serving as a go-between, despite his clear stance in the previous struggle.

There is no lack of denunciation of Nikolas in the sagas. King Sverre characterized him and his kin as particularly unreliable, and King Håkon said that Nikolas had never been completely loyal to him (Sv 133, Hák 133, 138). However, these negative statements did not stop the same kings from negotiating with Nikolas and keeping the door open to him. This open door is particularly evident in the

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[72] In the summer of 1207, Nikolas had visited Archbishop Tore Gudmundsson, who had become archbishop in 1206 after the controversial Eirik. "Then there were exchanges of letters between [Birchlegs and Croziers]" (Bögl 35 / S: "Hófusk þá upp bréfsendingar millum manna"). On the importance of clerics in this phase of the conflict, see Brathetland, "Nettverksmakt," 294–97. For a more secular view of Nikolas, see Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, 214–19.

case of King Håkon. His statement about Nikolas' unfaithfulness was not only contradicted in his funeral speech over the bishop (Hák 138), but it also runs counter to his actual behavior toward him, as Nikolas never suffered any punishment for his alleged disloyalty (Hák 67, 83, 118 on disloyal behavior). On the contrary, King Håkon let Nikolas keep his position and even promoted him to the office of *sýslumadr* (Hák 99). Håkon's attitude of course reflected power relations. Nikolas was a powerful man, and the king had limited capacity to coerce others into subordination. Above all, these incidents reflect a view that great magnates could operate quite freely and occupy a position between friendship and enmity (for instance in initiating settlements on their own, Hák 133), or fluctuating between these poles, without this conduct being regarded as awkward or condemnable. The king even had to accept that Nikolas refused to invite him when he turned up at the bishop's in Oslo (Hák 109).

Nikolas Arnesson was not the only great magnate to operate within the interstices between the armed groups. Eirik Sigurdsson and Reidar sendemann are parallel and opposite examples of the same flexibility in how magnates alternated in acting as allies, opponents and in-betweens in the political field. Both started out as too mighty for the king to command. Eirik wanted acknowledgment as co-ruler, Reidar assistance to collect men into an army to support the Byzantine emperor (Sv 59, 127). In these situations, Sverre had to try to strike a balance. On the one hand, he had to give the two men something. He thus allowed Eirik to perform an ordeal to prove his ancestry, and Reidar to gather men himself for the imperial army. On the other hand, Sverre had to make sure that they did not grow too powerful. Sverre refused to accept Eirik as his co-ruler, and he was unwilling to send his own men with Reidar because of the unsettled situation with the Danes (Sv 60, 129). The state of the realm was precarious, and the boundary between war and peace a fragile one. Through his measures, Sverre managed to keep the friendship of Eirik, while Reidar ended up recruiting men not for the Byzantine emperor but for the Croziers. Thus, they ended up at opposite ends, as the king's friend and enemy respectively. However, these positions were not stable. Eirik built up his own power base in Viken, strengthened by an alliance with the Swedish king, and he probably had contacts with groups opposing Sverre, possibly including Nikolas Arnesson. When he asked for more power, he ended up dead by poison, probably at the instigation of King Sverre (Sv 113, 115). Reidar, on the other hand, who was a Crozier leader in the years 1196–1202, turned into an esteemed friend of Sverre's as soon as he submitted to him in 1202 (Sv 179). Eirik and Reidar operated in a gray zone where allegiances and roles shifted. This zone was problematic to kings insofar as they wished to decide on issues of war and peace themselves. However, to elites that viewed alliance and rivalry as two sides of the same coin, this gray zone of constant crisis was a natural condition. And ideology aside, kings knew that constant crisis was one of the realities of power; therefore, it was natural to them too.

Second, the ambiguities of constant crisis also relate to the contexts in which social relations were activated. The men who fought in the civil wars were seldom complete strangers to one another, with some exceptions, like the Birchlegs who started out as a guerrilla band of marginalized men from marginal regions. Most oppositional groups were recruited from a pool of powerful men who were closely interrelated. The Island Beards, who were active in 1193–94, are a good example. The group had three or four major leaders. Sigurd jarlsson was a son of Erling skakke, who had joined Sverre's household after Magnus Erlingsson died in 1184. Sigurd later referred to Sverre as his "food-giver," implying that he had broken a close relationship (Sv 131). Hallkjell Jonsson came from the Blindheim kin group, and was almost as close to royalty as was Nikolas Arnesson (Sv 77, 78, 118). I shall return to their fortunes below, but here it suffices to state that these men operated in between the armed groups with amazing ease. A third leader was Olav jarlsmåg, an in-law of the Orkney earl Harald Maddaddsson (a possible fourth leader). Only shortly before the rebellion Olav had been staying in the household of King Sverre, and the latter allegedly said, "You should be loyal to me now, Olav" (Sv 118).[73] The statement is probably an invention of the author, intended to signal the wisdom of the king in predicting the future. Regardless, it shows how closely intertwined men in the leading strata were, and

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[73] "Trúr skyldir þú mér nú, Óláfr."

also how much resistance could be bred in the midst of the royal following. Conversely, on one occasion in the saga Sverre stated that he held the allegiance of all magnates in the realm in his purse apart from Nikolas Kuvung's, and the saga explains: "By this he meant to say that all the lendmenn of King Magnus had sent secret letters to King Sverre asking for *grið* and friendship" (Sv 50).[74] Loyalty could indeed be traded, maybe because it was considered such a malleable concept in the first place.

The ambiguous relationship between community and rivalry is also revealed in the violent conflicts that intermittently erupted in the retinue, particularly when they were drinking.[75] King Sverre tried to abolish such calamities by giving a famous speech in which he condemned the consumption of alcohol (Sv 104). However, in reality he could accomplish little, as feasts constituted one of the most important public arenas in this society, and the roots of the trouble lay not in the drinking per se, but in the rivalry among various groups within the retinue, which also surfaced without alcohol in play.[76] This rivalry was not something that kings wanted to abolish entirely, as it contributed to making the retinue an attractive place where ambitious young men could gain a reputation and thereby the opportunity to rise in the social hierarchy.[77] Therefore, we repeatedly see that even though kings tried to moderate and mediate tensions and conflicts when the retinue was gathered, they never seriously tried to stop them or punish the instigators. The feasts undermined and strengthened royal power simultaneously, just as they demonstrated both the community and the rivalry between the men involved.

Finally, perhaps the clearest expression of the constant crisis

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[74] "En þat bjó í þessa máli at allir lendir menn Magnúss konungs höfðu sent Sverri konungi leyndarbréf ok leituðu til hans griða ok fullkominnar vináttu." Lendmenn were royal officials in an early phase before they were replaced as officials by sýslumenn in the late twelfth century.

[75] For references to conflicts and tensions while drinking, see Sv 47, 60, 64, 70, 103, 104, 164; Bögl 44; Hák 49, 50, 157, 171, 311.

[76] On feasts, see Orning, "Festive Governance"; Viðar Pálsson, *Language of Power: Feasting and Gift-Giving in Medieval Iceland and Its Sagas*.

[77] For an interesting glimpse into this aspect of the royal retinue, see *Þorgils saga skarða*, which depicts Þorgils' young years in the retinue of King Håkon Håkonsson. See Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, 338–42. The competitive dimension of the retinue is discussed in Naderer, "Love and Fear."

among the elite during the civil wars is the frequent side-switching during and after the fights. Side-switching was common on the battlefield. A conquered or outnumbered party was not expected to fight until the bitter end. It went without saying that if one's group had been decisively conquered or the alternative was to be killed, side-switching was acceptable. This goes both for individuals, such as Jon Hallkjellsson and an unnamed man who received *grið* thrice during the battle in Oslo in 1200 (the latter was killed the fourth time, Sv 77, 78, 165), and groups, such as the Birchlegs after they were beaten by the Kuvlungs (Sv 105). Yet it is timely to ask how valuable the support was from conquered opponents who had been more or less forced to change sides, or at least did so for obvious tactical reasons. For one thing, men who had been forced to swear an oath of allegiance could plead that the oath had been extracted under coercion and was therefore void. More importantly, men who had changed sides for tactical reasons would often return to their flock. An illustrative example of this in *Böglunga sögur* comes from the siege in Bergen in 1206, where the Birchlegs stayed in the castle with 600 men, and the Croziers had 2000 men in town. The saga implies that many men from the Birchlegs switched sides to join the Croziers, presumably because the latter had the upper hand in town and in the region (Bögl 23). However, their new loyalty did not prove long-lasting, because when the Birchlegs made a surprise attack and chased the Croziers through town, former Birchlegs who were now fighting for the Croziers ran into churches, only to run out again a moment later as Birchlegs (Bögl 23). The shallowness of the side-switching can be seen when the former Birchleg horn blower (*lúðrsveinn*) openly sabotaged his Crozier companions by not blowing the horn until he had rejoined the Birchlegs and recaptured his breath to blow (Bögl 23).[78] The confused state of affairs created by side-shifting is illustrated by an occasion when the Birchlegs started to beat up a group of Croziers in a narrow pass, and it turned out that there were many Birchlegs among the targets

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[78] The motif of horn-blowing was probably a saga cliché, but that does not make it less significant. Horn blowers had an important function in signaling battle, see for instance Sv 51, and Sv 77 on problems of fighting without a horn blower. For another poor horn blower who improved upon royal goading, see Hák 232.

(Bögl 23). In such a situation, the best tactic was probably to avoid engagement and stay alert.[79]

The frequency and apparent ease of side-switching could prompt the conclusion that group or royal affiliation was unimportant, or more generally that norms of loyalty were of no worth. In my opinion this would be a premature conclusion. First, to say that side-switching was common is not the same as saying that it was without costs. A man who had received mercy had acquired a debt to the grantor, which normally required reimbursement. The most effective way of repaying a debt was to turn into a supporter of the debtor.[80] However, as with gift-giving more generally, a debt could be handled in various ways, including ignoring it. Yet that would come at a price, and the sagas give ample evidence that side-switching was a delicate issue that impinged on the evaluation of a man's moral character and therefore had to be carefully framed so as not to be "misunderstood" as stemming from cowardice or cynicism.[81] Second, there was a paradox in side-switching. On the one hand, any leader would prefer that defeated enemies join his own ranks rather than having to kill them because they would remain disloyal. On the other hand, leaders would denounce the same mechanism if it worked in favor of the opponent. The crux of the issue is that as long as conquered parties were pardoned, party affiliation remained superficial, as it did at least not exclude other allegiances.

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[79] A similar situation occurred during the so-called Bergen summer of 1198, which we discussed earlier in this chapter. Here too the saga belittles the Croziers and focuses on describing skirmishes in which the Birchlegs proved their cunning and superiority. However, this treatment cannot hide the fact that the Croziers were stronger than the saga suggests. The proof of this is that many people switched sides to join them (Sv 146), and they continued to do so even after the alleged successes of the Birchlegs (Sv 149).

[80] On the obligations inherent in gifts, see Mauss, *The Gift*. More specifically in a medieval Scandinavian setting, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship*. This is the gist of the argument in Bagge's analysis of *Heimskringla*: as todays's enemy might be tomorrow's ally, one might just as well give quarter. See Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*, in particular 64–110.

[81] An example from *Sverris saga* is Torstein kugad, who switched sides twice (Sv 137, 153). On the one hand, such persistent side-switching attests to the weak allegiance and ample opportunities for maneuvering. On the other hand, Torstein had to frame his side-switches carefully in order not to be interpreted as the sign of a coward or unreliable man. See also King Harald hardrada's side-switching in *Morkinskinna*, where he took great care to qualify and legitimize it so that it did not impair his moral character (*Morkinskinna*, 14).

Conclusion: Intersecting bonds and enmities

Kings trying to implement their understanding of who were friends and enemies as the prime criterion for action could run into a lot of difficulties, as men had numerous, complex, and sometimes contradictory motives for behaving the way they did. Kings had to take into account the fact that personal bonds weighed more heavily than royal affiliation if the two should clash. Moreover, they had to accept that material motives were more crucial than adhering to lofty ideals of loyalty or honor. Finally, elite members across group boundaries shared values and norms that often were irreconcilable with a strict division into Birchlegs and Croziers. Usually, however, it was possible for kings to handle these varying concerns and to navigate their way through them. After all, reality is always more complex than ideal situations, and the fact that the bond to the king was not paramount—which no one, by the way, expected it to be—does not mean that it was not important. The crux is that it was not fixed as a focal point set above politics but was firmly enmeshed in politics.

Kings were expected to be "cruel as a lion, mild as a lamb." Warriors were also expected to be fierce in battle and cordial in times of peace. Yet whereas for kings the issue was war versus peace, for magnates the intersecting lines of friendship and enmity made the situation far more complex. At a skirmish at Tittelsnes in 1207, Peter støype's ship rowed straight at Reidar sendemann's. "Why are you devils rowing in our way tonight?" a man on Reidar's ship said (Bögl 34).[82] He then threw a stone onto Peter's ship, whereupon those on the latter ship decided to back away. They did not know—as the saga author did—that shortly thereafter a settlement would be made, and Peter and Reidar would join forces to go to Jorsal together (Bögl 35). However, what the opposing forces at Tittelsnes did know was that they fought men with whom they had much in common—for instance, the two leaders Peter and Reidar were brothers-in-law. Stephen Morillo distinguishes between intracultural wars where the opponents know one another fairly well and intercultural wars where the parties are strangers to each

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[82] Only in S: "Hví róa djöflar yðrir fyrir oss í nött?"

other.[83] These struggles in Norway clearly qualify as intracultural wars. Part of the warrior ethos consisted of knowing when *not* to fight, and in a chaotic situation as on this dark night at Tittelsnes, every measure was taken to minimize risk, at least until the situation became more perspicuous.

Intersecting bonds between armed groups have often been perceived as problematic and conflict-triggering, and royal attempts at implementing order by privileging the bonds to the king over other social bonds construed as a central strategy to build a state. However, there are good reasons to turn this viewpoint on its head. For one thing, intersecting bonds often served to limit conflict, as they ensured that many people were situated in the middle, interested in obtaining balanced solutions.[84] Even more central to the argument of this book, intersecting bonds can best be interpreted as building blocks in more or less permanent internal rivalries among the elites concerning matters of honor and the sharing of power. Medieval Norway's was a culture where the line between war and peace, and between friend and enemy, was much more blurred than the sagas—and the kings—would have it. One might think that these ambiguities promoted a situation of insecurity, chaos and disorder. How to protect from the calamities of war those who were not able to handle this complex game because they lacked the resources or wits? There is certainly no reason to romanticize this world of constant crisis, where violence was part of the system and therefore could hit hard and suddenly. Still, we have to keep in mind that there is a crucial difference between arbitrariness and unpredictability, between insecurity and flexibility. Endemic rivalries certainly created many tensions and conflicts, but these were not necessarily so detrimental or disruptive to the sociopolitical order as it may seem at first glance, when the noise of battle is the dominant impression. As formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, "It tends to be forgotten that a fight presupposes agreement between the antagonists about what it is that is worth fighting about; those points of agreement

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[83] Morillo, "A General Typology of Transcultural Wars."

[84] This is Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's explanation for the outbreak of hostilities after 1134. See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Networks and *flokkar*: The Civil Wars in Norway ca. 1130–1163."

are held at the level of what ‘goes without saying’.”[85] This culture was indeed one with no “final authority” in a “Strayerian” sense.[86] One issue that goes without saying in the sagas is that for all their tensions and struggles, the fighting parties had much in common that stopped them from pursuing power at any cost. And as we shall explore in the following chapter, insecurity might actually prevent conflicts from escalating into large-scale wars with disastrous effect for ordinary people. Because another issue that goes without saying is that armed groups relied on local support and had to take that support into account in their endeavors—even if the sagas are not particularly intent on highlighting this theme.

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[85] Bourdieu, “Some Properties of Fields,” 73–74.

[86] Cf. the state definition in Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, 10.

CHAPTER 5

Armed groups and local communities

So far, this book has dealt with men who had a vested interest in the political struggles between the Birchlegs and Croziers. Their motives for participation did not always coincide with those of their leaders, as most people had mixed reasons for their actions. Still, these men shared an interest in fighting and therefore can be said to belong to the community of fighters. But there was also an opposition to the fighting that goes beyond the varying affiliations, comprising those who wanted to stay out of fighting altogether—not to be engaged at all. For the neutrals, the crucial issue was not who won out, but avoiding being enmeshed in the struggles and the concomitant polarization of the political game that the groups cultivated and tried to uphold.

Sverris saga and *Böglunga sögur* are in essence war narratives, and therefore locals seeking to avoid war are not overwhelmingly present in them. The sagas do a great deal to demarcate and underline the coherence of the armed groups fighting for political dominance. This trend is above all visible in *Sverris saga*, where the Birchlegs are established as a group in the course of several years of very marginal conditions. The result was a group far more professionalized and united by *esprit de corps* than ever before. Without invalidating this development, we must also acknowledge that one of the main aims of *Sverris saga* was to legitimize—and in a certain way to construct—this Birchleg tradition, which easily crosses over into the realm of myth. In many ways the warring parties deserve to be the center of attention in the saga, as they were dominant in society at large. Yet their dominance was not uncontested. As shown particularly in this book's sections on the absence of plunder and the failed attempts at territorializing power, power in this society came to a large extent from support by local leaders and peasants, and this in turn served to limit oppressive behavior toward locals. Since the sagas follow the movements of the armed groups, local conditions are normally an irrelevant issue, unless they happen to influence the strategies and tactics within the armed groups. Thus, there is reason to believe that local considerations played a more important role in reality than the saga authors were willing to admit, and such traces in the sagas should therefore by mined in all possible detail. This is what I am going to do in this chapter.

In an analysis of Taliban power in the province of Kunar in Afghanistan in the 2000's, David Kilcullen argues that it was not sufficient for the Taliban to muster "full–time fighters" if they intended to control an area. In order to gain lasting control, it was crucial to form links with "village cells," local actors who were willing to support them—not unconditionally, and not if opposing groups were present, but in cases where Taliban were able to provide efficient protection.[1] Medieval Norway is of course far away from contemporary Afghanistan, but the two societies have in common prolonged, on–and–off fighting between armed groups for a hegemony that needs local grounding.[2] Recent research has emphasized that local communities in medieval Norway were led by chieftains, rather than being more egalitarian "kin societies."[3] Moreover, Norwegian historians have emphasized the military specialization and professionalization of war in this period.[4] Did this professionalization result in a clear divide between full–time

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[1] Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar," 239–31. See also Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* for a broader exposition of his views.

[2] For a fuller comparison of these two contexts, see Orning and Østerud, *Krig uten stat*, 105–18.

[3] A major proponent of this view is Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Viking Friendship*. See also Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* on the character of the political struggles, and Myhre, "Chieftain's Graves and Chiefdom Territories" on the archaeological evidence. A typical exponent of the kin-society view is Andersen, *Samlingen av Norge*.

[4] Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 173–76; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 79–85; Moseng et al., *Norsk historie*, vol. 1, *750–1537*, 201–4.

fighters and local cells, as in Afghanistan, or was the distinction more blurred, so that it was possible to be both a member of an armed group and a local leader? The overarching question here is what repercussions the civil wars had for society at large. Did they create general and widespread turmoil in the country, or was their societal impact less profound?

In order to investigate these questions, I will distinguish between what I term "hardliners"—those willing to go through thick and thin to support the group, and "softliners"—those with a more lukewarm allegiance, pragmatic stance or even indifference to the ongoing struggle. How tightly people were bound to a group is often a subject of strife and discussion in the sagas, and there is no plain or obvious division between hardliners and softliners. Just as no armed follower would be reproached for switching sides if the alternative was annihilation, no one would expect local populations to remain loyal to a group that proved unable to offer them effective protection. The softliners constituted a heterogeneous group that in the following will be divided into ordinary peasants, local leaders and townsmen. Even if it is sometimes difficult to distinguish leaders from peasants, I will nevertheless make a distinction between the two groups, because their roles are quite different in the sagas.[5] Townsmen were often peasants; the difference is that towns were key points of power and resources, and therefore many struggles crystallized around the issue of townsmen's allegiance.

Peasants

Norwegian historians have been in agreement that the civil war period brought more severe conditions for the peasants than in earlier times. However, they have disagreed on the extent and character of the oppression. According to Lunden, peasants became heavily exploited in the thirteenth century in terms of increased and more systematized contributions to the king and the Church, and land rent to landowners.[6] Helle and Bagge have argued to

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[5] Cf. the discussion on whether "big peasants" (*storbændr*) in medieval Iceland should be classified as part of the elites or as peasants. See Gunnar Karlsson, "Goðar og bændur," 5–57; Helgi Þorláksson, "Stórbændur gegn goðum," 227–50.

[6] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 268–311.

the contrary that the monarchy came to build on peasant support, shown in the modest level of taxation and the central function of justice and law enforcement.[7] Without entering fully into that debate, the question of exploitation remains relevant to the discussion of the constant crisis and its repercussions in the populace. How much did the struggles among the armed groups affect the peasant population, and to what degree did the increased rivalry also signal a higher level of elite dominance in society at the expense of the peasants? To answer this, we need to look at various forms of peasant cooperation, opposition and resistance in the sagas.

Local peasants did not themselves act as independent participants in the struggles described in *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*, but as a collective they could play important roles in three ways. First, in assemblies or in more informal meetings where groups sought support and resources in an area, they could accept or refuse the requests made by contenders among the groups they supported, or by inimical groups. Second, peasants played a distinct military role in that they manned the leidang fleet. In battle there frequently was a distinction between armed followers and leidangsmen, of whom the latter were normally conscripted peasants. Third, peasants could offer resistance in various forms—ranging from passive resistance and reluctance to carry out orders to full–scale rebellions. In the following, I will dicuss these three roles in turn.

Assemblies were crucial meeting points in a variety of settings: between kings and local communities, between kings and their own men (*húsþing*), between rival kings, and within local communities. Assemblies within local communities are referred to very seldom, only twice in connection with peasant resistance (Sv 167, Bögl 43).[8] Meetings between king and retinue or army were frequently arranged at pivotal moments, but these are not relevant here.[9] Most

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[7] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 179–89; Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling," 185–97. See also discussion between Lunden and Helle in numerous Norwegian journals in the 1970's and '80s. A summary of the debate is given in Moseng et al., *Norsk historie*, vol. *1: 750–1537*, 217–21.

[8] The connection between peasant assemblies and revolts is made explicit in *Konungs skuggsiá* on "samveldisþing." See *Konungs skuggsiá*, 50–55.

[9] *Húsþing* are referred to in Sv 27, 60, 81, 83, 94, 132, 134, 136, 139, 147, 159, 165, 176, 179; less frequently mentioned in Bögl: 33, 42; and only once in Hák: 224. Assemblies between contenders are referred to in Bögl 35, but less formal meetings are referred to numerous times in Sv.

of the instances of assemblies concern meetings between the king and peasants or townsmen, of which the latter will be treated in the next section. *Sverris saga* has far more references to such assemblies than *Böglunga sögur*.

Assembly meetings between kings and peasants from local communities can be roughly divided into two categories. First, there are instances where the king and his armed group were in a vulnerable position and the assembly meeting turned into a direct competition of force as to who was the stronger party: the armed group or the local peasants. Here the importance of meeting in superior numbers and surprising the opponent was decisive for the outcome. This situation was typical for Sverre's first years as a king, when his position was always precarious (Sv 16, 16, 26). Second, the king could be in a strong position and use the assembly as a vehicle to enforce his own conditions on local peasants. This was a tactic that Sverre used frequently in his attempt to gain a foothold in Viken in the years 1199–1202 (Sv 138, 139, 167). Magnus Erlingsson's meeting with the Orkdal peasants in 1182 forms an intermediate case: Magnus was a strong king but with a rather weak position in Trøndelag (Sv 69).

All these meetings between kings and peasants turned into dramatic confrontations. This is probably a saga bias, as the saga authors would not record meetings that proceeded with no drama. However, the assembly was definitely a place where shows of strength were decisive for the outcome. Thus, even if the assembly was a location for discussing and promulgating legal issues, it was far from an ideal public arena for free exchanges of opinion.[10] Nevertheless, the presence of power does not exclude an element of discussion and negotiation. The magnate Torstein kugad, notorious for his frequent side–switches, was a man valued for his verbal skills: "The king [Sverre] often let Torstein speak at assemblies and *hird* meetings and tell about the Croziers" (Sv 153).[11] Torstein was definitely valuable because of his first–hand knowledge about the Croziers, but probably even more because he was a great orator, attested by his success in persuading Sverre to change his mind about giving

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[10] Leidulf Melve attributes the origin of such institutions to the Investiture Contest. See Melve, *Inventing the Public Sphere*.

[11] "Lét konungr Þorstein oft tala á þingum ok hirðstefnum ok segja frá siðum Bagla."

him mercy (Sv 153). Actually, Torstein is one of the few people in *Sverris saga* from whom we have direct speech. The importance of the assemblies as places for forming public opinion is also demonstrated during the strife with the Church, as after the archbishop of Nidaros sent letters excommunicating Sverre, the king "often spoke at assemblies about this case and said that this was only something that the Danes had invented and not the Pope's words." (Sv 121)[12]

The assemblies' awkward juxtaposing of argument and force is vividly exposed in one of their most central functions: as legal arenas for electing kings. *Sverris saga* is quite terse in describing occasions when kings were elected at assemblies. The typical pattern was that a king was elected first at a local or regional assembly close to his power base, and then afterward at the king–making assembly proper: the Eyrathing in Trøndelag.[13] None of these instances is fleshed out enough for us to make inferences about the peasants' participation and contribution. This brevity of text changes in *Böglunga sögur*, which refers to three royal elections among the Birchlegs (in 1202, twice in 1204) and two among the Croziers (1204 and 1207) in much greater detail, in all probability because several of these elections turned out to be very complicated. Out of these, only the election of Håkon Sverresson in 1202 proceeded without problems. In two of the elections—of Guttorm among the Birchlegs and Erling steinvegg among the Croziers, both in 1204—there were disagreements within the groups, but only the election of Inge in 1204 and Filippus in 1207 directly involved the peasants of the assembly. In the following, I will concentrate on the two latter cases in order to investigate the peasant influence in these matters.

Among the Birchlegs, after King Guttorm's death in 1204, "most were in agreement that Håkon galen should be elected king" (Bögl 12).[14] However, the archbishop argued against Håkon's candidacy,

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[12] "talaði hann oft á þingum um þetta mál og sagði svá at þat var upplost Dana en eigi páfa orð."

[13] Sverre was first elected king at an assembly in Saurbø in Bohuslen, which otherwise is unknown as a king-making assembly in Norway (Sv 11). On their first visit to Trøndelag he was made king at the Eyrathing (Sv 16). The Kuvlungs repeated the pattern (Sv 101, 108), while other groups are mentioned in one of the two phases (Sv 119, 132).

[14] There is a discrepancy here. In S, Håkon had support from both warriors and peasants: "Vildu flestir liðsmenn og bændr Hákon til konungs kjósa." In L, only the magnates supported Håkon explicitly: "den første part gafue deris stemme oc samtycke paa Hagen Jarl Galin." In both versions, it was the archbishop who initiated opposition against electing Håkon galen.

and the absence of a consensus within the inner circles of magnates and prelates led to the summoning of the popular assembly at the Eyrathing. On the one hand, one can argue that the fact that the assembly was involved only after negotiations among the leading strata had failed suggests that royal elections would normally be pre–planned and were a matter for the elites.[15] On the other hand, peasant influence may have been greater than this scenario suggests. First, in this case one might suspect that the involvement of the assembly was not a last resort, but part of a deliberate strategy by Inge Bårdsson's camp. As they were fully aware that Håkon galen had widespread support in the retinue, involving the assembly would strengthen their case, since as the son of a magnate from Trøndelag, Inge could rely on more support than Håkon, who had a Swedish father. Second, peasants were more active than the sagas were willing to admit openly. After Erling steinvegg's death in 1207, most of the Crozier retinue wanted one of Erling's minor sons as king, but Filippus Simonsson, who as earl was next in the chain of command, also had strong support. In this situation, Filippus' uncle Nikolas Arnesson had secret meetings with local peasants and obtained their promise that they would not show obedience to anyone but Filippus (Bögl 24). The saga gives the impression that the peasants were easily swayed, but three years earlier Nikolas had failed in obtaining the peasants' support for Filippus against Erling steinvegg (Bögl 9).[16] Thus, the peasants were probably more resilient than they appear in the rather narrowly focused, elitist war narrative in *Böglunga sögur*. The peasants' preferences were based on a number of factors. They probably preferred men coming from their own region (Inge against Håkon in 1204), as well as candidates with royal blood (Erling against Filippus in 1204). However, these preferences could be outweighed by a concern to have an able and experienced leader (Filippus against Erling's sons in 1207), even though they did not want an overly retainer–based leader (Håkon galen in 1204).

The second field where peasants were present in the sagas was as

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[15] On the pre-planning of public meetings, see Althoff, "Openness and Secrecy."

[16] In 1204, Nikolas managed to have King Valdemar side with his candidate provided that this gained popular support, but when the *flokkr* and the peasants protested that they wanted Erling as their king, Nikolas changed tactics and started negotiating with Erling directly and secretly (Bögl 9).

crew of the leidang fleet or as payers of leidang tax. According to the law, peasants were expected to contribute to and man the fleet. In the latter twelfth century, the leidang was partially converted into a tax. According to the law, it could now be collected as a military contribution in times of war (called *útfararleiðangr*), and as a tax in peacetime in the form of foodstuffs (*borðleiðangr*), consisting of half the value of the military contribution.[17] However, the laws are normative sources issued at a later date, and there is every reason to expect that leidang in practice was levied more pragmatically, and that both its military reach and economic value varied, depending on context.[18]

The term *leiðangr* appears forty–one times in *Sverris saga* and fourteen times in *Böglunga sögur*. There are increasing references to leidang as *Sverris saga* wears on, which could indicate the growing importance of leidang contributions from the peasants.[19] In the saga, the military leidang figures roughly twice as often as the leidang tax (twenty instances compared to eleven, subsuming situations where the term is used more than once for a single occasion).[20] In *Böglunga sögur* the pattern is reversed: the term refers to military conscriptions only twice, whereas a clear majority of nine instances refers to leidang as a tax.[21] This reversal conforms to the tendency that the leidang tax grew progressively more important in the period. Still, the peasants' military participation continued to be central, and in many cases, it can only be inferred indirectly from the presence of numerous ships, which presupposes more combatants than armed retainers alone.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish "*leiðangr*" as signifying the provision of manpower from "*leiðangr*" in the sense of foodstuffs.[22] In some cases the imprecision may be due to lack of context for

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[17] *Gulathingslaw* 295–315, *Frostathingslaw* part 7, 1–27.

[18] This would also be in line with Niels Lund's results from Denmark in "Lið, leding og landeværn."

[19] An alternative explanation is that the increasing numbers are a consequence of the more detailed account as *Sverris saga* proceeds.

[20] Military leidang: Sv 34, 46, 62, 84, 89, 132, 133, 136, 139, 148, 154, 156, 157, 162, 162, 167, 170, 171, 176, 178; leidang tax: Sv 61, 69, 72, 137, 139, 142, 148, 160, 162, 167, 172.

[21] Military leidang: Bögl 16, 27; leidang tax: Bögl 13, 13, 15, 18, 18, 19, 19, 19, 27.

[22] This is the case in Sv 69, 137, 142, 154, 162, 167; Bögl 22, 25, 26.

the summoning; at other times it appears that the division is not clear–cut. For instance, having warded off the Birchlegs in Nidaros in 1198, the Croziers collected leidang in both manpower and food (Sv 142). After a victory at Torsberg in 1198, they proceeded to the northern part of Vestlandet and, according to the saga, appropriated leidang and taxes, and sometimes they plundered (Sv 154). In *Böglunga sögur*, after having obtained control over the western part of Norway in the autumn of 1206, Erling steinvegg "sent ships north to Møre and summoned leidang, both men and foodstuffs, and took the manpower that he wanted" (Bögl 25).[23] Hence, the distinction between leidang as a tax and as a military duty could be quite blurred in practice, and it might be that the agents did not always differentiate between men and food, rather using the institution to grab whatever they could. However, there is a marked tendency that military leidang was usually summoned in areas where the peasants were friendly, whereas fiscal leidang tended to be required in hostile areas.

In the following, I will first discuss the military aspect of the leidang, and then the fiscal aspect, where the latter will provide a transition to studying peasant resistance in various forms. The use of peasants as leidang crew implies that fleets comprised a mixture of professionals and peasants. It has been a commonplace in Norwegian historiography to posit a fundamental difference between professional warriors and amateur peasants in warfare, where a major aim of the battle formation known as the "swine phalanx" was to prevent peasants from fleeing the battleground.[24] Professional warriors who were part of a king's armed retinue and received payment from him were sometimes termed *lið*.[25] The split between this group and the conscripted peasants allegedly increased

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[23] Here L and S are in agreement. In 81a: "gerði skútur norðr á Mæri ok bauð út leiðangri at mönnum ok vistum." E, however, adds "ok tók af liðinu slíkt er honum sýndisk."

[24] On land, peasants were often a reluctant fighting force that had to be forced to fight, among other things by threatening them or by encircling them physically as one might drive a herd of swine, so that they had no possibility to flee. At sea, the difference between the professional and amateur elements was less pronounced, since there were limited opportunities for flight, and since the height of ships was so crucial. See Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 109–14.

[25] Lund, "The armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut."

with the "professionalization" of warriors in this period, most notably in the development of armed groups over time, with the Birchlegs as the prime example.

While there is no doubt that experienced warriors were more skilled in fighting than peasants, the contrast between the two groups might be overstated. As demonstrated previously, the professional warriors had limits to what they were willing to do, and no man was expected to risk his life for the king. Drawn–out expeditions aroused the resistance of not only peasants, but also full–time warriors. Once Sverre even had to execute warriors in order to prevent an impending mutiny (Sv 139). This fits well with the overarching tendency of *Sverris saga* to make the case that Sverre had to appeal to and convince his followers to support him rather than forcing them into obedience.[26] The best thing for the king to do in a complex situation or a protracted expedition was simply to withdraw, and that was probably as true for professionals as for peasants. Moreover, the conscripted peasants could take their places in wartime. At the battle of Jonsvollene in 1198, *Sverris saga* specifies that there was a majority of leidangsmen among the fallen men (Sv 148). When Sverre prepared the defense of Nidaros in 1199, he made an agreement with the townsmen and leidangsmen that they would be in charge of the defense (Sv 156), and even if they eventually failed, delegating responsibility to leidangsmen was evidently considered a sound tactic. More generally, Magnus Erlingsson on several occasions praised the peasants for following him against Sverre through thick and thin (Sv 84, 89).[27]

However, there was a substantial difference between professional warriors and conscripted peasants. We should not underestimate the impact that large numbers of reluctant peasants had on army maneuvers. In *Sverris saga*, the king repeatedly had to take into account that peasants were not intent on staying long in the field, but wanted to go home (Sv 132, 170, 176). The same goes for *Böglunga sögur*. In 1205, the Crozier fleet had been forced to go to Denmark, where they stayed over the summer, but "the army grew

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[26] Bagge, *From Gang Leader to the Lord's Anointed,* 20–51.

[27] Whether this type of almost unconditional loyalty pertained only to Magnus or also to Sverre (the saga firmly denies this), and whether it was a precise statement or rather a topos to frame a soon-to-be-killed king, is uncertain.

tired of lying there and went back to Viken" (Bögl 16).[28] The saga does not specify the identity of the men sailing back to Viken, but it is unlikely that they were Crozier leaders, as they would have been chased by the Birchlegs once they returned. Moreover, parts of the army—most likely the professionals—later returned secretly to Norway (Bögl 16). Therefore, the impatient men returning to Viken in all probability were peasants who could appear without being punished by the Birchlegs, and whose presence was all the more urgent since harvest was approaching.

Peasants were usually more eager to give up fighting in cases where the prospects for victory waned (Sv 62, 156). In spring 1207, the Birchleg fleet sailed toward Viken to attack the Croziers, and in southern Norway, branches of the fleets lost track of one another. None of the parties had secure information about one another, so there was a lot of back and forth until it was evident that the Croziers were the stronger party, and the Birchlegs tried to escape: "With the Birchlegs there were many leidangsmen, and many of them fell" (Bögl 27).[29] The unusual aspect of this episode was probably not the participation of peasants among the fighting men, but the fact that many of them were killed. The reason is that the conditions during the skirmish were so chaotic that it was difficult to distinguish peasants from warriors. This supposition is strengthened in the following episode, when the main Birchleg fleet reached Tunsberg and attacked the Crozier fleet. Now the latter withdrew to the harbor and left their ships and headed out of town. The saga states that they "lost only one man; his name was Torstein Skeiv and he was a leidangsman" (Bögl 28).[30] The fact that the Croziers lost a peasant was evidently a fact worth specifying. The context of an intense hunt indicates that Torstein fell because he was indistinguishable from the professional Crozier warriors with

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[28] This is only referred to in 81a: "þá leiddisk liðinu at liggja þar. Fóru þeir aptr í Víkina."

[29] This is only referred to in the shorter versions (81a and E): "Með Birkibeinum var mart leiðangslið. Fell þar mart manna af þeim." The sagas go on to mention the deaths of Svein nepe and Erlend tjovakappe, but it does not specify whether they were actually leidangsmen, or how many of the leidangsmen fell.

[30] This is only referred to in 81a: "létu þar enga menn nema einn, er hét Þorbjörn skeifr ok var leiðangrsmaðr." The other short versions do not specify that he was leidangsman, L calls him a "*bonde*" (peasant with a positive association).

whom he was fleeing. The complexity of the situation prevented the conscripted leidangsmen from pursuing their normal tactic of holding back in battle.[31]

The clearest indication of a divide between professionals and peasants comes from an episode in the winter of 1198–99, when the Croziers made attempts to gain a foothold in Trøndelag. As they traveled, they discovered an ambush, and on one farm they captured a man whom they suspected was a Birchleg complicit in the scheme: "He denied to them who he was, said he was a leidangsman and not a Birchleg. They cut his foot off" (Sv 157).[32] Cutting off a man's foot was a serious crime, incurring half the fine for killing a man, according to the law.[33] The fact that the Croziers used so much energy to find out the identity of their opponent indicates that there was a clear difference between full–time members of the armed groups and local peasant supporters. Moreover, the severe punishment of the target indicates that only full–time warriors were held accountable for resistance and punished accordingly, whereas local peasants were held to be less responsible, and normally subject to less harsh measures.

If there was a fairly clear separation between armed followers and local peasants, how did it impinge on the treatment of the peasants? Did the intense power struggles signal a higher level of elite dominance in society at the expense of the peasants, or did the competition within the elite give the peasants a better bargaining position? To answer this question, we need to look at various forms of peasant opposition and resistance in the sagas.

Chris Wickham has counted a total of fifteen peasant revolts in Europe during the period 600–1200, in contrast with the 1,112 revolts counted by Samuel Cohn for 1200–1425.[34] Wickham accounts for the scarcity of revolts prior to 1200 by saying that

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[31] An alternative, but less probable, reason why they were killed might be that the opponents were unwilling to pardon them, as hinted in the following sentence after the skirmish—"Some were given mercy" (Bögl 27)—implying that many were *not* granted mercy. Not pardoning peasants would be quite unusual, however, indicating that they were held to be as equally committed as the full-blown group members.

[32] "Hann dulðisk fyrir þeim, kvaðsk vera leiðangsmaðr einn en ekki Birkibeinn. Þeir hjuggu af honum fótinn."

[33] *Gulathingslaw*, 179.

[34] Wickham, "Looking Forward." Cf. Cohn, *Lust of Liberty*.

because that states were weak, resistance usually targeted local landowners rather than kings.[35] In light of this assertion, it is surprising to find as many as three instances that can be termed peasant revolts in *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur*.[36]

In *Sverris saga*, peasants rebelled openly against King Sverre twice, in 1184 and 1200. The contexts of these two revolts were quite different: In 1184 the Birchlegs were still minor opponents of Magnus Erlingsson, whereas in 1200 they were definitely the strongest group. Yet the prequels are not that different, as in both instances the Birchlegs had an insecure hold on the peasants, which they combined with quite provocative behavior, proceeding as legitimate rulers in areas where in reality they were perceived as intruders, or maybe even as outright plunderers. The flashpoint for the first revolt was an attempt by King Sverre's representatives to collect contributions from the peasants in Sogn for a Yule feast. The peasants refused to pay, and subsequently killed most of the tax collectors. According to *Sverris saga*: "the Sogn peasants had said that the slain people were thieves and criminals and were not men for whom wergeld should be paid [*óbótamenn*]" (Sv 79).[37] The peasants used the legal term *óbótamenn* to frame their dissent, thereby turning the issue of legitimacy on its head. The criminals were not the ones who refused to pay taxes, but those who collected taxes. The peasants perceived themselves as defenders of the right order, reacting against illegitimate encroachments by Sverrir and his men.[38] Accordingly, it is debatable whether "revolt" is a proper term for these chains of events, since it confers on the rulers a claim

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[35] Wickham, "Looking Forward," 156.

[36] Wickham counts three revolts in Scandinavia: against Olav Haraldsson in 1030, against Sverre in 1184 and in Scania in 1180–82, but not the revolts in 1200 and 1213 (Wickham, "Looking Forward," 159–61). Grohse has analyzed the three revolts in an article, arguing that they witness a transition from "peasant resistance" to "peasant uprisings," i.e. from actions as part of the armed groups' struggle to resistance to the "state." See Grohse, "Bonde og borgerkrig." While I find Grohse's arguments interesting, the following will demonstrate that I do not agree with him.

[37] "Sygnir kölluðusk hafa drepit þjófa ok illmenni ok tölðu þá óbótamenn."

[38] The Viken peasants' actual words in describing the resistance in 1200 are not recorded. Sverre accused them of treachery, but the saga hints at an alternative point of view: "they had made an alliance there [in the Church of St. Hallvard] against the duties that the king had imposed on them" ("bundu þar ráðit saman fyrir þær álögur er konungr hafði gört við þá," Sv 162).

of legitimacy that was highly dubious in the eyes of the so–called rebels. As such, they confirm Wickham's interpretation that pre–1200 revolts are difficult to classify as being directed against a "state."

Böglunga sögur refers to one peasant revolt, in 1213 in Trøndelag. The background was not atypical: Because of a famine, King Inge "could not get his dues from the peasants" (Bögl 43).[39] King Sverre had also experienced strains in Trøndelag resulting from a combination of famine and high demands for provisions for his men. The unusual element here is that tensions escalated to open enmity,[40] and the reason was probably that peasant resistance was coupled with rivalry among Birchleg leaders, as it states that Håkon galen and Archbishop Tore were strongly suspected of having goaded the peasants to rise against the king (Bögl 43). Apart from this instance, we do not hear about other peasant revolts in *Böglunga sögur*. One explanation, proposed by Lunden, could be that the peasants were more efficiently subdued than in Sverre's time.[41] However, a more plausible reason why no large–scale expeditions against hostile territories comparable to Sverre's in Sogn and Østlandet were carried out in this period is that such expeditions caused more harm than good. The king could put down peasants, but he could not force them to become loyal subjects.

This conclusion is in line with a more general remark by Wickham that there was a "wide grey area between this everyday violence and something sufficiently large–scale" to be considered a peasant revolt.[42] Revolts were not, in general terms at least, an antithesis or pathology of the political order, but rather in Patrick Lantschner's words, "intensifications of existing processes of negotiation that were ordinarily taking place around the multiple modes and players of the city's political structure."[43] Lantschner's context of late medieval Italian city–states is starkly different from that of high medieval Norway, but the dynamic is comparable. Moreover, Lantschner's results form part of a larger historiographical movement to interpret

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[39] Only in L: "icke kunde faa sin Rettighed aff Bønderne."

[40] King Inge and his brother came along with full army and fleet, but the peasants still refused to meet at an assembly and behaved in a very threatening manner. Finally, the king managed to conquer the peasants (Bögl 43).

[41] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten,* 166–71.

[42] Wickham, "Looking Forward," 158.

[43] Lantschner, "Revolts and the Political Order," 4.

revolts as integral parts of the medieval political culture, not as its counterpart or antithesis.[44] I shall return to the affinity between this strand of research and the concept of "constant crisis" central to this book in the conclusion. Here I will continue to pursue other ways of envisaging the relationship between armed groups and local communities of peasants as part of an ongoing bargaining process.

A more promising route for tracing peasants' presence—and potential voice—than searching for peasant revolts is to read between the lines in less dramatic encounters between kings and peasants.[45] The leidang tax is a good case, as most references to the collection of this tax occur in tense and heated situations. In 1182, Magnus Erlingsson summoned the local peasants in Orkdal in Trøndelag and reminded them that it had been three years [since Sverre's victory at Kalvskinnet] since they last had met at the assembly: "Now I want you to pay me leidang, the one you should have done for last year, and in addition leidang for two years previous to that" (Sv 69). [46] The peasants clearly experienced the royal claims as threats, as the saga relates that they feared for their lives. The tenseness of the situation was a result of the peasants living in an area that belonged to Birchleg support territory and of Magnus having the whole fleet for himself in this period, and therefore being capable of demanding leidang wherever he wanted (Sv 71). A similar mechanism is discernible when Sverre required leidang from the peasants in Viken in the years 1199–1202 (Sv 139, 160, 162, 167, 172). In these instances, the leidang formed part of a vocabulary of punishment, and whereas the kings could defend their measures in legal terms, the peasants in all probability interpreted them as threats intended to force them into submission.

The fact that leidang tax often is mentioned in cases where it signaled oppression could be taken as evidence that peasants were heavily squeezed in this period. Yet I would interpret it the opposite way. Peasants were definitely harshly treated on some occasions

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[44] Firnhaber-Baker and Schoenaers, *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*.

[45] On everyday resistance in the late Middle Ages, see Njåstad, "Grenser for makt." Njåstad builds on the "state formation from below"-project initiated by Blockmans, Holenstein, and Mathieu, *Empowering Interactions*.

[46] "Nú vil ek at þér greiðið ok gjaldið leiðangr, allan almenning þann er þér hafið átt at gera á þeima tólf mánuðum ok þar með tvenna aðra er þér skylduð gört hafa á tveim inum fyrrum sumrum."

during this period of intense rivalry between armed groups. However, such episodes are probably mentioned because they were atypical and because they usually failed in accomplishing their goals. Magnus' attempt to squeeze peasants in Orkdal was aborted through Birchleg intervention shortly thereafter (Sv 70–71), and while Sverre's coercive strategy in Viken was more successful in the short run, in the long run it proved inadequate in controlling the region (Sv 177; Bögl 1). In other instances, the collecting of leidang tax is mentioned as a routine operation (Sv 61, 142, 154), probably because the peasants were friendly and the contributions rather modest. Forcing hostile peasants to pay excessive amounts could bring additional income, but seldom on a lasting basis. It was primarily an ad hoc measure intended to get at opponents, and usually a failed one.

Peasants were as a rule treated fairly reasonably, because such treatment was the prerequisite for gaining stable dominion over an area. In fall 1205, the Croziers sailed to Nidaros, normally a stronghold for the Birchlegs, after the latter had left the region to pursue them elsewhere. Here they summoned the Eyrathing and had Erling acclaimed king and Filippus earl. "Men were sent out to the *sýslur*, but they got few goods from the area" (Bögl 16).[47] The passage reveals that even if the peasants could do little in terms of active resistance without their leaders present, they could still muster substantial passive resistance. In contrast to the Birchlegs in 1184 and 1200, who tried to squeeze unwilling peasants, the Croziers in 1205 seem to have accepted the limits of peasant contributions in hostile areas.

Moreover, controlling an area was not synonymous with being able to take whatever one wanted. Trøndelag was troubled by famine several times. When the Croziers returned to Trøndelag in 1207 to have Filippus acclaimed king, "there was then such a great famine in Trondheim that they could not feed many men there" (Bögl 33).[48] This famine was not (only) an excuse to resist the Croziers: six years later another famine prevented the king's officials from obtaining contributions from the peasants in the region (Bögl

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[47] This is referred to in both S and L. In 81a: "Váru men þá sendir í sýslur, ok fengu lítit fé ór héraðum."

[48] This is referred to in both S and L. In 81a: "þá var hallæri svá mikit í þrándheimi, at þeir máttu ekki fæða þar svá mikit lið."

43). King Sverre in his heyday also had problems with obtaining sufficient resources if he stayed too long in Trøndelag. (Sv 73,154). Such strains were everyday experiences in medieval society. Kings wanted to reap as much as possible from the peasants, who on their side tried to husband their resources as best they could. This inherent tension formed part of a negotiating culture, a constant crisis in the relationship between kings and peasants.

A divergence between the Birchlegs and the Croziers relates to the terms—and therefore perspective—used in the sagas to frame their approach toward peasants. *Sverris saga* depicts Sverre's naval expeditions to Viken from 1199 onward as punitive forays during which he demanded taxes and fines from the peasants (Sv 162, 167–71). Both demands were part of a legal repertoire: taxes as normal procedure, fines as punishment for acting against the king. When the Croziers sailed around in Trøndelag with a superior fleet in 1198–99, however, their requests were formulated by the saga not in the idiom of legal actions, but as plunder and harassment (Sv 154–55). Correspondingly, the Croziers' attempts to defend the peasants in Viken from the Birchleg fleet were framed as guerrilla tactics, whereas the Birchlegs are said to have "liberated" the peasants in Trøndelag from their illegitimate and brutal oppressors. There is no reason to assume that the peasants in question perceived the demands in the two cases as very different. The crucial issue was the presence of an armed group that was able to press for contributions regardless of legality. Here Charles Tilly's famous statement of "the state as organized crime" comes to mind.[49] Given this bias, there are reasons to assume that much of the difference between the Birchleg and Crozier strategies in enemy territories must be explained with reference to ideology and authorial strategies, and not attributed to divergences in actual behavior.

The peasants' limited ability to provide armed groups with material support was a constantly restrictive factor, and their will to do so also a very variable one, depending on how they viewed the strength and legitimacy of the collectors. The fact that armed groups sometimes did not accept these limits and tried to expand them should not make us conclude that this was normal practice. On the contrary, the reactions that such infringements provoked

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[49] Tilly, "War Making and State Making."

among the peasants serve as a reminder not only of the danger of a tactic of confrontation, but probably also of its rarity. Peasants did not live isolated from the political struggles, as they were connected to the armed groups and themselves also contributed to the military levy. Magnus Erlingsson was probably right when he said, “I know that many men say that it would be a good thing if Sverre and I did not need to ask for leidang anymore” (Sv 89).[50] Prolonged fighting definitely put a strain on supporters for extra resources. Yet the quite limited scope and character of this involvement should be kept in mind. Peasants were reluctant to go on long campaigns and to put their lives at risk, and the fighting did not devastate the countryside.

Townsmen

Towns were important places for meetings between kings and local populations. It is commonly held that towns became more central places for the kings during the twelfth century, when we see a transition beginning from royal farms to towns as nodes of communication between kings and the populace.[51] Towns were not only fewer than royal farms, signaling a centralization of royal power, but they were also more multifaceted centers and served as accumulation points for the Church, for elites, and for merchants. Thus, the increasing importance of towns can itself be interpreted as a step toward a territorialization of power. Still, the nature of territorialization needs to be specified, and this can only be done through an investigation of how towns functioned as centers connecting kings and localities. Were townsmen stable in their loyalty to armed groups, or did their loyalty waver according to which group was present at any particular time? Towns are representative for specifying the impact of the political struggles between armed groups on larger segments of the population, as more effort was put into gaining support from towns than from more isolated or sparsely

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[50] “veit ek at þat mun margs manns mál ok skaplyndi at sá órskurð þætti goðr, ef fengisk, at vit Sverrir þyrftim eigi oftarr báðir at krefja þessa leiðangrs ok starfs.”

[51] Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 121–25; Helle, *Norsk byhistorie: urbanisering gjennom 1300 år*, 74–77.

populated areas. However, the dynamic of the relationship need not be that different.[52]

Norway did not have many towns in this period, and unlike many other places in Europe, for example Denmark, there was no large-scale establishment of new towns.[53] In the sagas, only four towns are of importance in the power struggles: Oslo and Tunsberg in Viken, Bergen in Vestlandet, and Nidaros in Trøndelag.[54] The geographical dispersal of towns thus reflects the division into regions that we have treated previously. Yet despite their paucity and small size, towns had a central position as loci of power and communication in the political struggles. This can be seen from the numbers. *Sverris saga* refers to twice as many encounters at assemblies in towns (twenty) compared to in rural surroundings (ten).[55] In addition, townsmen are often referred to as a separate category of people in the political struggles, as distinct from retainers and peasants—a division that was also laid down in law with separate town laws.[56]

Towns can be classified along a spectrum from those situated in core areas to those in oppositional regions. In core areas, townsmen were naturally usually supportive. The townsmen in Magnus Erlingsson's core areas stated their unequivocal allegiance on several occasions, and notably when he thought he was in a good position to vanquish Sverre (Sv 39, 48, 84, 86; see also 39, 48). Likewise, Sverre could usually count on the support of the people from Nidaros—most directly stated in the statement that "he had the people from Trøndelag dearest of all [...] because they had

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[52] Many aspects of towns have been discussed in previous chapters, in particular in chapter 2 on fortifications, so the analysis here will not be exhaustive.

[53] On Denmark, see Krongaard Kristensen and Poulsen, *Danmarks byer i middelalderen.*

[54] In addition, Hamar, Borg, and Stavanger intermittently figure in the sagas, but they were not of huge strategic importance.

[55] Assemblies in towns: Sv 39, 48, 73, 76, 84, 86, 96, 99, 104, 109, 117, 121, 120, 125, 133, 137, 146, 152, 153, 154. Assemblies in the countryside: Sv 16, 26, 69, 117, 121, 138, 139, 153, 167, 178. Some of the references are overlapping because it is impossible to determine whether the assembly was held in town or countryside.

[56] Townsmen are mentioned frequently in *Sverris saga* as a separate category: Sv 15, 16, 27, 28, 29, 36, 39, 46, 48, 49, 60, 62, 64, 73, 76, 83, 86, 96, 97, 102, 103, 104, 108, 109, 110, 135, 136, 137, 146, 154, 156, 158, 162, 165, 175. Less often in Bögl: 15, 19, 29, 31, 38. The old town law was called *Bjarkøyrett*. A new town law was issued by Magnus lagabøte in 1276. See *Norges gamle love*, vol. 1–2.

for long served under the same shield" (Sv 43).[57] Yet the support that a king could expect from a town was not very stable. Sverre's statement about the unconditional support of people in Trøndelag is an "invented tradition" that is amply contradicted by his previous experiences (Sv 14–15, 27–28, 32–33).

Townsmen were no different from other people in that they generally supported the armed group that was present there, and tried to stay on the fence as long as possible. Their conditional attitude must be viewed in relation to the largely non-territorialized power that we discussed in chapter 2. This attitude was usually quite uncomplicated in situations where the group in power was strong and prosperous. Sverre's first step after having defeated Magnus Erlingsson in 1184 was to send an envoy to Bergen to prepare for his take-over, as Bergen had always supported Magnus prior to that (Sv 96). In Sverre's speech at the assembly in Bergen, he urged people to support him, but he made no effort at forcing them, and bade those who still were enemies to leave town (Sv 99). His argument was based on pragmatism, as he was now the strongest man in the country. (His power was nevertheless not that impressive, as he arranged the sailing of the fleet into Vågen in Bergen so as to look as impressive as possible, Sv 97).

This generous attitude to townsmen was also commonplace among other armed groups when they were doing well. Problems only emerged when they were running on empty. For a group facing trouble, it was unsatisfactory to know that a contextual dominance would wane as soon as they disappeared. The experience of the Kuvlungs is a good example. In 1185 they sailed to Nidaros after a series of remarkable successes, and here they accepted all the defeated Birchlegs as their men without requiring an oath of allegiance (Sv 105). Later they came back to Nidaros after several defeats. Now they were less willing to be complacent: "The Kuvlungs imposed a large tax on the town and said that they would burn it unless the tax was paid; in that way they would reward the townsmen for their resistance against them" (Sv 108).[58] Yet even

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[57] "gerði hann ser Þrændi kærsta allz lanz-folcs [...] hófdu jafnan þionad wnndir hinn sama skiolld."

[58] "Kuflungar lögðu gjald mikit á bæinn og sögðu at þeir myndu elligar brenna þar ok launa bæjarmönnum samnað ok mótstöðu."

if problems were most urgent in cases where a group on the wane tried to obtain resources from an unwilling town, challenges also remained in cases of prosperous groups and core towns. The reason is that the issue of support was also a question of resources. Kings needed funds, and they would try to have the townsmen contribute as much as possible. In Sverre's experience, support from Nidaros was critical in periods when the Birchlegs had nowhere else to go, and he therefore laid claim to vast resources (Sv 73, 154).

There was evidently a ceiling on how much an armed group could claim from an area without losing support, even in areas that usually were supportive.[59] This ceiling was much lower in towns where power relations were floating and variable, as in Bergen after 1184, where power relations shifted repeatedly. In this situation, the townsmen basically supported whatever group was present there in sufficient numbers. The armed groups were not happy with that, but there was little they could do if they wanted to maintain good relations with the townsmen. Sverre could ridicule the Kuvlungs for being politically naïve in accepting side-switches without the swearing of oaths (Sv 105), but the fact remains that options were few for converting contextual dominance into binding submission. The Birchlegs built castles intended as strongholds that could make towns capable of fending off enemy attacks, but as we saw in chapter 2, these efforts at laying the foundation of territorial dominance were by and large unsuccessful. Another option was to impose harsher conditions on townsmen in an effort to create more binding loyalty. Both Sverre and Nikolas Arnesson accused the townsmen in Bergen of being disloyal (Sv 146, 150), and the Kuvlungs did the same in Nidaros (Sv 109). Townsmen were definitely under a great strain in situations where power changed rapidly, as they had to handle threats and what often amounted to a double set of requirements from competing factions—most clearly seen in the double taxation of peasants around Bergen by Birchlegs and Croziers in 1198 (Sv 148, 151). Yet their situation was less grave than it seems, because threats usually remained just that—words—and townsmen normally

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[59] *Sverris saga* sugared the pill in the case of the Birchlegs by describing the peasants as eager to help them, but their "willingness" to build ships cannot have been very sincere (Sv 154). In the same vein, Sverre said he always let townsmen stay in peace, but other evidence is more ambiguous on this (Sv 15 vs. Sv 27).

deflected the threat by bowing and showing deference. Only Nikolas Arnesson fulfilled his threats when he burned down Bergen in 1198 (Sv 150). His behavior was considered inappropriate, and it did not help his future position in Bergen. Harsh measures in enemy areas could be effective in adding resources, but they were an utterly uncertain road to future support.

Thus, even if townsmen at times suffered a lot of pressure from armed groups that tried to squeeze them into a more binding relationship of subordination, towns on the whole were able to withstand attempts at forcing them into submission. On the one hand, armed groups had the power to reap the benefit of taking as much as they could from townsmen. On the other hand, such a tactic would usually misfire in terms of securing future support, unless the hardships were part of a deterrence strategy, in which case dominance had to be maintained over a longer time span. If an armed group opted for future support, a better strategy was to be compliant with the towns. This shows that towns were part of the fluid power struggle between armed groups, where there existed few territorial markers. As such, the relationship between kings and towns epitomizes the same issues as the relationship with peasants more generally.

Local leaders

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced David Kilcullen's analysis of modern Afghanistan as a potential model for investigating the implications of the civil wars in Norway on a local level. In the case of Afghanistan, there is a clear difference between full-time fighters and local cells, where the latter are not expected to participate in the struggles but to be sleeping partners ready to offer support when the armed group arrives. Did the professionalization in medieval Norway lead to a similar split between full-time warriors and village cells, or were war leaders also local leaders who—full-time or part-time—devoted their energies to the defense of their local communities? In order to find out whether local leaders were synonymous with armed group leaders, or whether they constituted two different groups, I will investigate the recruitment to the Croziers in the period 1203–6, as *Böglunga sögur* offers an opportunity to study the various roles within this group in unusual detail. A blind spot is that the saga is not particularly interested in what happened in localities when armed groups were absent, so the analysis of local leadership must necessarily remain incomplete.[60] I will first investigate the establishment of the Crozier group in 1203–4, before turning to its large-scale shipbuilding effort in 1205–6 as a case to study its local repercussions. *Sverris saga* is less detailed on these issues and will only be referred to in passing. A key office here is the one of *sýslumaðr*. *Sýslumenn* were appointed by kings to govern regions—*sýslur*. In the latter part of the thirteenth century, Norway was divided into around fifty *sýslur*, where the *sýslumenn* had legal, military and fiscal duties on behalf of the monarchy.[61] However, the degree of formalization of this administrative corpus has been disputed, not least for this early phase around 1200,[62] and in the following I will not presuppose that the office of *sýslumaðr* was firmly fixed or bureaucraticized.

The first Crozier group had been terminated with the killing of King Inge in 1202 (Bögl 3). The re-establishment of the group from 1203 onward went through several stages, which reveal the various (and varying) commitments to the group. In 1203, Erling steinvegg first appeared at Skanør in Scania, and claimed to be the same Erling son of Magnus Erlingsson who had fled from imprisonment at Visingsø (Bögl 5). Skanør was a market town and a hub where numerous Norwegians were staying at that time.[63] Some men who were former Croziers proposed to raise a flokkr with Erling as their king (Bögl 5). Erling refused, but upon Håkon Sverresson's death next winter the situation changed. Following the election of Guttorm as Birchleg king early in 1204, some men who had formerly been with the Croziers traveled to Erling, now in Copenhagen, and

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[60] Typically, the role of the local leader is only exposed when it had an impact on the armed struggles. An example is Einar kongsmåg, *sýslumaðr* of Stavanger in 1205. That year he was taken by surprise by the Croziers and killed, but we also learn that this happened when he was leading a local meeting in Stavanger intending to settle a dispute (Bögl 15). *Böglunga sögur* would never have mentioned this meeting had it not been for the dramatic context.

[61] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 206–11.

[62] Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*, 233–43.

[63] Krongaard Kristensen and Poulsen, *Danmarks byer i middelalderen*, 185–91.

formally established the flokkr. This included five to six men: Torleiv skålp and the sons of Asbjørn lunn, Odd tann and Arnbjørn troll (Bögl 8).[64] These men were probably not very powerful, as they are only mentioned infrequently thereafter.[65] *Sverris saga* gives us an additional clue to the identity of these men before the battle of Oslo in 1197. At that time Bishop Nikolas formulated the tactics whereby some men—including "the sons of Onund lunn"—were set to defend the piers, because "they were hardiest [hörðust]" in the fighting (Sv 135). The sons of Onund lunn are probably identical with the sons of Asbjørn. This implies that the initial founders of the Croziers were among the professional fighters who were most uncompromising in battle.

After the group had been formally established, it grew substantially as former Croziers flocked to it, probably from the "reservoir" of former Croziers mentioned the year before at Skanør (Bögl 5). These men "sent a message north to Viken to their friends and summoned them to Ålborg in Denmark in the fasting period" (Bögl 8).[66] Now the saga mentions four very powerful men: Reidar sendemann, Jon drotning, Solve Disarson and Filippus of Veien (Bögl 8). These are later portrayed as Crozier leaders, in particular Reidar and Filippus, who were among the most influential men who had also participated in the first Crozier group. Reidar was in fact one of its instigators. [67]

The group now sailed to Viken, "where all the people bowed to them" (Bögl 8),[68] before arriving in Oslo, where Bishop Nikolas Arnesson resided. Nikolas promoted his own nephew Filippus Simonsson as leader but this was firmly rejected by the military leaders (sveit-höfðingjar), who had Erling elected as king in Tunsberg (Bögl 8). After that, eleven named men sought Erling's service and did homage to him: Arnbjørn Jonsson, Helge Birgersson, Asbjørn kopp, Gyrd Benteinsson, Guttorm tvare, Orm lange, Tord dokka,

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[64] These names are mentioned in both L and S.

[65] Odd is mentioned once again (Bögl 16); Arnbjørn troll twice (Bögl 13, 16). Both fell in 1205.

[66] This is only described this way in S. In 81a: "þeir sendu boð norðr í Víkina til vina sinna ok stefndu þeim til Álaborgar um föstu."

[67] Jon was among the *sýslumenn* mentioned in 1205 (Bögl 17), and Solve was clearly a friend of his, as he avenged Jon's death (Bögl 17).

[68] Both S and L have this. In 81a and E: "þá gekk allt fólk undir þá."

Simon kyr, Benedikt of Gomnes, Kolbein raude, and Gyrd skjalge. These were powerful men who are mentioned several other times in the saga, and they were to provide the backbone of the Crozier group. This in particular goes for Tord, who is the only one also mentioned in Sverris saga, and Arnbjørn and Simon, who would become central leaders for several decades to come.[69]

In campaigns in the western part of Norway, five new men joined the Croziers from Nikolas Arnesson's home region of Nordfjord: Lodin of Løykin, Nikolas and Korlung Bottolvsson, Eindride hegre and Kalv of Horne (Bögl 13). Out of these, Lodin possibly became stallari,[70] and Nikolas and Eindride are mentioned again later.[71] In Opplanda, the Croziers had the following military leaders during the winter of 1204–5: Toralde Ogursson, Gudleik skreidung, Benedikt of Gomnes and Jon gridman (Bögl 14), of whom Benedikt and Toralde are mentioned several times.[72] During a campaign in Stavanger in the spring of 1205 and in Ålborg in the summer, a number of Crozier leaders are mentioned (Bögl 15–16). Most of these were already part of the group, and no new recruitment of leaders seems to have taken place, so I will not give all the names here.

The recruitment to the Crozier group initially seems to have come from fairly modest men, probably full-time fighters who were awaiting an occasion to join a group—here we should keep in mind that the Croziers had existed since 1196, and that they again built on previous oppositional groups against the Birchlegs. Thus, there existed a substantial "pool" of potential supporters ready to support any man who would assume leadership against the Birchlegs. Only

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[69] Arnbjørn Jonsson is referred to eighteen times in Bögl, Simon five times. Tord dokka is the only one mentioned in *Sverris saga*, where he figures at the siege of Berget in 1201–02 (Sv 172, 175). The other leaders mentioned, with the number of mentions in parentheses, are Helge Birgersson (three), Asbjørn kopp (four), Gyrd Benteinsson (four), Guttorm tvare (two), Orm lange (five), Tord dokka (four), Benedikt of Gomnes (five), Kolbein raude (one), and Gyrd skjalge (five).

[70] *Stallari* is the Old Norse equivalent of Latin *stabularius*, which signifies master of the stables. In this period, it had developed into one of the leading royal offices.

[71] On Lodin, see Bögl 15, 16, 19, 26; on Nikolas, Bögl 15, 16, 26; on Eindride, Bögl 26. The reason for identifying this Lodin with Lodin stallare is that he is twice mentioned together with Nikolas. The two evidently often operated in tandem.

[72] Toralde is also mentioned in Bögl 17; Benedikt in Bögl 9, 14, 18, 22, 23. The last reference documents his death.

after Erling had succeeded in attracting a number of warriors did more leading men join the group, some sailing to Skanør once they got the message that a new flokkr had been formed, others joining when the group arrived in Viken. This indicates that those who became military leaders of the group probably were local magnates in Viken, who were able to ride two horses: to be in command in their localities while at the same time being military leaders. Once these leading men had joined the group, it was fully established, and whereas later recruitment in more peripheral areas added quantitatively to the group, it did not affect the leadership, as none of the latecomers are described in key positions.

The establishment of the second Crozier movement in 1203–5 resembles the formation of the first Crozier group in 1196, which is described more cursorily in Sverris saga. The movement started abroad in Denmark and then swiftly spread to Viken, where it attracted numerous magnates, and then further on to Opplanda and some other areas. In contrast to the second group, however, the first group's formation was entirely an elite undertaking initiated by enemies of King Sverre, partly clerical ones (Bishop Nikolas and Archbishop Eirik, with support from the Danish episcopate), and partly secular ones (Reidar sendemann in Denmark and Sigurd jarlsson as soon as the Croziers arrived in Viken).[73] Hence, the second Crozier rising had a professional element absent from the first one. Yet we should not overestimate the importance of this element, as most of the military leaders seem to have been established local leaders, not full-time warriors, who had more modest social positions.

Böglunga sögur gives a unique glimpse into the Crozier leadership at one particular point in time—after their return to Viken in the fall of 1205, when they launched a huge program of shipbuilding during the winter. Here the saga refers to eleven *sýslur* and seventeen *sýslumenn* building twenty-two ships. As this probably was a complete survey of *sýslur* and Crozier leaders in Viken, it gives us an opportunity to discuss Crozier leadership in full. The passage goes like this:

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[73] Sv 129–132 depicts the initial formation. Further recruitment did not impact the leadership of the group, similar to the second rising.

> Soon after Christmas the *sýslumenn* traveled to their *sýslur*. Filippus of Veien had Borgarsysla. He made two ships, Asbjørn kopp one, Toralde Ogursson one ship [in Oslo], Orm Lange one ship in Onsøy, Torstein tjov one ship [in Sotenes], Jon drotning two ships in Elv, Gudolv of Blakstad and Gunnar Åsason [in Lier] two ships, Reidar sendemann two ships [in Dramn], Filippus earl two ships, Tord dokka one ship, Hundolv hetta and Gunne Lange two ships in Skien, Gyrd Benteinsson one [in Visedal], [Simon kyr and Ragnar Gamalsson two in Bevja, and Arntor foka one in Bærum]. In total twenty-two ships were made, but the king summoned almost all of the crew to them. (Bögl 17)[74]

The list of *sýslur* in Viken seems to be fairly complete in that it covers the coastal area in eastern Norway from the border with Sweden / Denmark at Göta river to Visedal toward the southern tip of Norway, although it differs quite substantially from the *sýslur* that are usually reckoned for this region.[75]

Almost all of the men mentioned here as shipbuilders and *sýslumenn* were prominent men who are recorded numerous times elsewhere in *Böglunga sögur*, and some also in other sagas. A majority of them—ten out of seventeen—are mentioned previously as members of the Crozier group from early on. Three of these—Filippus earl, Reidar sendemann and Filippus of Veien—stand out as major leaders who were in the Crozier high command. The others (Asbjørn, Toralde, Tord, Gyrd, Jon, Orm, Simon) were not

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[74] This appears in both S and L, but only L is complete, with *sýslumenn* and *sýslar*. In 81a: "þegar á bak jólum fóru sýslumenn í sýslur. Philippús af Veiginni hafði Borgarsýslu. Hann lét gera tvær skútur, Ásbjörn koppr eina skútu, þóraldi Auguson eina skútu, Ormr langi eina skútu, þorsteinn þjófr eina skútu, Jón dróttning tvær skútur við Elfi, Guðúlfr á Blakkastöðum ok Gunnarr Ásuson tvær skútur, Hreiðarr sendimaðr tvær skútur, Philippús jarl tvær skútur, þórðr dokka eina skútu, Hundólfr heita ok Gunni langi tvær skútur í Skíðunni, Gyrðr Benteinsson eina. Alls váru gervar tvær ok xx. En konungr fekk til flest allt liðit." 81a lacks some names of *sýslur* (given in brackets in the translation), and it as well as E lacks the last two *sýslur*. Only 81a has the last passage, on the king's contribution to manning the ships.

[75] Helle lists eight / ten sýslur in Viken: Elv, Ranrike, Borgarsysle (two), Oslo (two), Tønsberg, Skien, Agder east and mid-Agder. See Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 207. *Böglunga sögur* refers to eleven: Elv, two in Ranrike (Bevja and Sotenes), Borgarsysle and Onsøy (reckoned as part of Borgarsysle), Oslo and Bærum (Oslo west), Lier and Dramn (Tunsberg in Helle), Skien, and Visedal (east Agder). According to *Gulathingslaw*, the peasants in Viken should equip 60 ships as part of the leidang contribution (*Gulathingslaw*, 315).

as prominent, but they are referred to numerous other times in the saga and can surely be reckoned among the leading stratum of the Croziers (see references in previous footnote).

Seven of the *sýslumenn* are not mentioned previously in the saga. Five of them appear in tandem with another leader as *sýslumaðr* / shipbuilder, hinting that they were not as powerful as the others (Gudolv, Gunnar, Hundolv, Gunne, Ragnar), while two stand alone (Arntor, Torstein). This interpretation is, however, not wholly convincing, as out of the five in tandem, three of them (Gudolv, Gunnar, Gunne's son Lodin) were prosperous Crozier leaders for a long period to come.

If we compare this list to the fifteen men who did homage to Erling in 1204 (four at Skanør, eleven in Viken), we see that almost half of the original members (seven) are not among the *sýslumenn* referred to one year later: Solve Disarson, Arnbjørn Jonsson, Helge Birgersson, Guttorm tvare, Benedikt of Gomnes, Kolbein raude, and Gyrd skjalge. Does this attest to a major shift among the Crozier leaders during this interval? Probably not, as there are other reasons why these seven men are not among the *sýslumenn* that the saga mentions in 1205–6. Two of them (Guttorm tvare and Benedikt of Gomnes) had *sýslur* elsewhere in the country.[76] Solve Disarson is probably not mentioned because he operated in tandem with Jon drotning (Bögl 17). Helge Birgersson and Gyrd skjalge are later mentioned as Crozier leaders, so even without a *sýsla* they were probably prominent men (Bögl 16, 33). The most remarkable absence here is Arnbjørn Jonsson, who is later mentioned numerous times as a major leader in Viken, often with Tunsberg as a home ground. I find no plausible reason why he has been omitted other than that he might have cooperated with either Filippus or Reidar, who both built two ships near Arnbjørn's home base. This means that Kolbein raude is the only person from the early phase who does not appear as leader later on.[77]

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[76] Guttorm had a *sýsla* in Tingvold in the western part of Norway (Bögl 16). Benedikt probably had a *sýsla* in Ringerike in Opplanda (Bögl 14).

[77] Apart from these men and Arnbjørn Jonsson, we do not hear about other local magnates in the Viken region from the Croziers. The Birchlegs as far as I can see only had *sýslumenn* and military leaders appointed in Opplanda in 1204–5: Ulv hane, Harald kesja, Gudleik flotbytta "and even more sveit-höfðingjar" (Bögl 14).

The overall impression is that there was a marked continuity among the Crozier leaders during these years. Most of the *sýslumenn* in 1205–6 ranked among the prominent men who sought out Erling steinvegg at an early stage and participated in numerous military campaigns in Norway and Denmark. Their combination of a close association with the group and a leading local role indicates that there was little or no division between the professional military leaders and local leaders in the Crozier case. It was possible to combine being military and local leaders.

If the professional military leaders were simultaneously local leaders, does this mean that society had been militarized as a consequence of the prolonged struggles between the Birchlegs and Croziers? This is how Norwegian historians have usually viewed it. However, it is my contention that the concurrence of military and local leadership is better interpreted in the opposite direction: not as a sign of increased militarization, but as an indication of the *limited* militarization of society. If men could combine the roles of military and local leaders, it primarily testifies to a condition in which warfare was not a full-time occupation, but an activity that could be combined with a "normal" life in a local community.

One issue that can shed light on this question of the relationship between military and local functions is the duration of campaigns, as drawn-out expeditions would imply that the warriors were absent from their homes for long intervals, putting a strain on seasonal labor and efficient local leadership. *Böglunga sögur* is a war narrative, giving the impression that warfare was almost endemic. Usually it is not possible to find out in detail how long-lasting the military campaigns were, as the saga seldom gives information on the duration of campaigns, but one partial exception is the Crozier expedition to Nidaros in 1206. The fleet met on the 25 March in Tunsberg and set out westwards. On 17 April they passed Bergen, proceeding north to Nidaros, where they arrived on the 22 April. After the successful attack, they stayed in town until 1 May, subsequently setting sail to Bergen. In Bergen we lose track of the time schedule, but the Croziers besieged the Birchlegs for some time. After that, part of the fleet returned to Østlandet, while some remained in Bergen under the leadership of Earl Filippus. Probably the ones returning to Østlandet were magnates and peasants from that region. If we reckon two weeks' stay in Bergen and the same time for sailing from Nidaros to Oslo (with a stop in Bergen), their campaign had lasted for roughly two months or a bit more. This is probably the longest interval that the Croziers spent on military campaigns. The only comparable military effort occurred the year before, when the Croziers were chased from Viken to Denmark, and the Croziers who stayed in Denmark were eager to get home as summer wore on (Bögl 16). Two months was a long absence from farm work, but it was in accordance with the leidang stipulations, which allowed the king to keep forces gathered at a maximum of two months per year.[78] There is no doubt that the sustained presence of the armed groups in the field put a strain on the leaders' double role as *flokkr* fighters and local magnates. Still, their absence probably did not exceed the limits laid down in the laws, which indicates that it was feasible for military followers to keep up their local engagement and that their role as military leaders was closely intertwined with, and probably subordinated to, their position as local leaders.

An objection to the juxtaposing of military and local leaders is that the list of the appointed Crozier *sýslumenn* in 1205–6 might reflect the Crozier ambitions to control the region by appointing "their" men in key positions rather than these men's actual local standing at that time. This argument is strengthened by the discrepancies between *sýslur* in *Böglunga sögur* and those usually referred to in Viken, which could be interpreted as a sign that there were other local leaders in this region who were outmaneuvered by the Crozier war leaders. Another argument in this direction comes from a statement from one of the shorter versions of *Böglunga sögur* (81a) quoted above, after it has recounted the shipbuilding: "but the king summoned almost all of the crew to them" (Bögl 17).[79] The royal responsibility for mustering crew in this instance might imply that the Crozier leaders had a weak local power base that made it difficult for them to command the peasants.

However, there are strong arguments in favor of the list of Crozier *sýslur* as providing a fairly complete picture of power relations in

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[78] *Gulathingslaw*, 300. The obligation was extended to three months in the National Law from 1274. See *National Law*, part 3, 9. Cf. discussion in chapter 2.

[79] Only in 81a: "En konungr fekk til flest allt liðit."

Viken in this period. First, the Croziers had been in control of Viken most of the time since they were established in 1196, and the region had also normally been an area of opposition to the Birchlegs before that.[80] Thus, the burden of proof lies not on demonstrating that the Croziers controlled Viken, but on showing the opposite. Second, even if the sagas seldom had statistical completeness as their primary aim, the detailed description of the shipbuilding project in *Böglunga sögur* argues against a view that there were plenty of unnamed magnates in this area.[81] Finally, the fact that the leidang crew was summoned by the king is not a strong argument against *sýslumenn*'s authority. For one thing, the shipbuilding in itself indicates that the magnates were indeed able to extract substantial resources from the local communities. For another, judging from how the leidang was summoned elsewhere in the saga, this seems to have been a royal prerogative that was routinely activated and that does not imply some lack of magnate authority.

Still, even if leaders in this period were capable of combining their military and local roles, one might suspect that their presence on prolonged military campaigns put a strain on their position as local leaders. The term *sveithöfðing*—leader of a military unit—is used regularly in the sagas, and has been viewed as a sign of increased professionalization.[82] *Sveit* is used twenty-six times in *Sverris saga* and seventeen times in *Böglunga sögur*.[83] Many of these instances simply refer to military units or to unnamed military leaders, but a total of nineteen leaders are named in *Sverris saga* and twelve in

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[80] Magnus Erlingsson and the Heklungs had their main base there, as had the Kuvlungs (established in Oslo) and some minor rebel groups. One example of the continuity of opposition is Torstein tjov in Sotanes, who was the grandson of Simon in Skredsvik. Simon had been a lendman in Ranrike during Magnus Erlingsson's day.

[81] Bjørgo argued that Sturla Þórðarson, the author of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, must have had a royal archive at his disposal, because such detailed information appears in the saga. See Bjørgo, "Om skriftlege kjelder for Hakonar saga." The same argument can be put forward here. Detailing the distribution of so many ships, *sýslur*, and *sýslumenn* at least makes it conceivable that the saga author worked from written documents in this case.

[82] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 75; Moseng et al., *Norsk historie,* vol. *1: 750–1537*, 120–21.

[83] The total number is higher but that is because the terms are often used several times on one occasion. Sv: 31, 33, 36, 46, 48, 61, 62, 63, 72, 102, 102, 117, 119, 120, 130, 135, 159, 162, 163, 163, 165, 168, 171, 173, 177, 179; Bögl: 2, 3, 8, 15, 16, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 21, 22, 28, 33, 33, 40.

Böglunga sögur. The emergence of *sveithöfðingjar* has often been connected to a view of King Sverre as the great transformer of the aristocracy, implementing a "systemic change" by killing most of the old aristocrats and installing new ones dependent on him. This view has been criticized as exaggerating the role of King Sverre, however, on the grounds that the shift was one of persons, not systems.[84] To this one should add that aristocratic families were never stable. The average duration of an agnatic noble lineage in the Middle Ages was three generations.[85] This means that when analyzing *sveithöfðingjar* we should not ask whether they were "new men" or not, as all leaders were more or less "new." What we should ask instead is whether they held responsibilities that signal that they were local leaders in addition to being military leaders, or whether they were more full-time military leaders within the royal retinue without a more independent, local position in addition to their military one. A detailed analysis of all references to *sveithöfðingjar* would exceed the limits of this chapter, which deals with main currents.[86]

Many of the mentions of *sveithöfðingjar* refer to established leaders such as Nikolas Arnesson, Sigurd jarlsson, Reidar sendemann, King Sverre's sons Sigurd and Håkon, and his half-brother Eirik. The kings themselves are also referred as *sveithöfðingjar* (see for instance Sv 33, 36, 72, 168, 179, ; Bögl 3, 19, 28). Of particular interest are references to less established men who could be examples of "pure" military leaders with any local affiliation. Most such men are referred to only once or twice, which makes it difficult to assess their position.[87] However, two men figure more

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[84] For a brief review of these positions, see Sverre Bagge's historiographical article in Hubbard, *Making a Historical Culture*. The literature in Norwegian is vast on this, but for a start one can consult Holmsen and Simensen, *Norske historikere i utvalg, vol.* 2–3.

[85] Esmark, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, and Vogt, "Kith and Kin: Ties of Blood and Marriage." Lunden also argues for more continuity on a personal level in Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 32–38. However, here we need to take into account that this continuity was not in families, but in political agents seeking to oppose Sverre.

[86] Moreover, such analyses have been done in M.A. theses by Eimhjellen, "*Kongshirda i Norge 1177–1263*" and Arstad, "Kongsemner og maktkonstellasjoner."

[87] Often several are mentioned together, which makes it easier to trace their position. For instance, *Böglunga sögur* refers to a number of *sveithöfðingjar* in Opplanda, from both the Croziers and the Birchlegs (Bögl 14). Out of these, we know that one man, Benedikt from Gomnes, was a Crozier leader, which makes it probable that the others had a roughly similar status. Actually, this passage in the saga gives more than half the names of *sveithöfðingjar* that we know from this period. The remaining ones are mentioned in Bögl 16.

often and can help us evaluate the position of professionalized *sveithöfðingja*r: Torolv rympel and Åsolv Avlesson. Both started out as brave warriors given difficult tasks of spying (Sv 44) who rose to become ship governors (Sv 51, 80, 142), and they were even given responsibility for regional protection (Sv 102, 63, 68). However, here their career similarities end. Torolv became leader of the "guests," the lowest segment of the retinue who had dirty jobs as their special duty.[88] Torolv lived up to this reputation, as he is described as burning down peasants' farms and leading large-scale fighting in the retinue (Sv 82, 103). Øyolv followed a different track, ending up as a leader of the peasants in Trøndelag, probably with a base in Orkdal (Sv 63, 157, 161). It is difficult to judge which of these trajectories was the more common but considering the many "new" men under Sverre who rose to prominence,[89] a fact also noted by their opponents (Sv 40), Øyolv's career seems to be the more usual one. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that most Heklung and Crozier *sveithöfðingjar* were established men who were local leaders as well.[90] Thus, the overall tendency evidently was that it was possible and indeed normal to combine the role of *sveithöfðing* with that of local leader, despite exceptions from this pattern in more professionalized military leaders such as Torolv rympel. However, these exceptions cannot have been very numerous, as Torolv stands quite isolated in the sagas as a whole.

Another potential indication of increased "professionalization" is the presence of local leaders who seem to be acting more as military leaders than as local chieftains. Gunnar Åsason and Gudolf blakk were among the "new" Crozier *sýslumenn* in 1206. As part of the settlement in 1208 they probably kept their *sýslur*, but in the final settlement between Croziers and Birchlegs in 1217, neither of them received any *sýsla* after having done homage to King Håkon Håkonsson (Hák 57, 74). Both protested by joining a new rebellious group, the Ribbungs, of which Gudolv was the founder (Hák 57). They had substantial military capital, as Gunnar is described as

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[88] Their duties are specified in *The Law of the Retinue* [Imsen, *Hirdloven*], 38–44. See Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten,* 416–20, who emphasizes their dirty work.

[89] See for instance Håvard jarlsson, Ulv from Lauvnes, and Ulf fly, who all had become lendmen even before Fimreite (Sv 54).

[90] See Sigurd Nikolasson, Jon from Raudaberg, Ivar horte, and Hallvard from Såstad among the Heklungs; the latter man as well as Hallvard bratte and Arne biskopsfrende among the Croziers.

having a following of ninety men (Hák 74), and Gudolv with seventy (Hák 149). Both of them made a great deal of trouble for the Birchlegs, especially Gudolv.

However, their destinies illustrate the shortcomings of acting solely as military leaders. Gunnar was ambushed and killed along with all his men by the Birchlegs not long after he had rebelled (Hák 74). What killed Gudolv was his hostile relationship with the local peasants. The reason why he did not receive a *sýsla* in 1218 was that "he was very disliked by the peasants there" (Hák 57).[91] When he retired from the Ribbungs in 1227 to settle at his homestead Blakstad, where he had probably served as *sýslumaðr* twenty-two years earlier, the peasants mobilized and killed him in church (Hák 149). *Hákonar saga* laconically ends his epitaph this way: "Few mourned Gudolv's death, on account of his unfairness."[92] Men like Gunnar and Gudolv probably obtained their positions because of their high standing within the Crozier camp, stemming from their courage in armed struggles. Their armed power was substantial, as demonstrated by the fact that both had armed followings numbering up to ninety men. Becoming *sýslumenn* implies supplementing their "military capital" with "local capital," but this did not occur at an even rate, as both of them probably ruled based more on military coercion than on local authority. The fact that this imbalance caused their deaths is a strong argument for the limits of military professionalization in this period.[93]

So far, Gudolv blakk has been presented as a war leader and peasant scourge. Yet this background of unwavering opposition to the Birchlegs did not stop the Birchleg *sýslumadr* in Oslo, Ivar Utvik, from entering into foster-brotherhood with him before he had joined the Ribbungs (Hák 58). The saga author chose to mention the foster-brotherhood because Ivar's trust in Gudolv proved to be a fatal mistake: Gudolv ambushed and killed him in the winter of 1219–20 (Hák 58). To us this shows that men like Gudolv could operate within the interstices between various groups. It is probably

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[91] "hann var mjök illa þokkaðr af bóndum þar sem hann hafði haldit sýslu."

[92] "var Guðólfr lítt harmaðr af mönnum fyrir sinn ójöfnuð."

[93] Gudolv was not the only magnate who died at the hands of peasants in this period, as the same thing happened shortly thereafter to Ragnvald Hallkjelsson (Hák 32). With Ragnvald there is nothing to suggest that his unpopularity with the peasants had anything to do with the struggle between Birchlegs and Croziers. Thus, to the degree that there was a military professionalization in this period, it need not be related to the political struggles referred to as the "civil wars."

no co-incidence that Gudolv's concubine was an acquaintance of Nikolas Arnesson and functioned as a messenger between him and the Ribbung leaders in 1223 (Hák 84). Gudolv's crisscrossing bonds to the Birchlegs and his prosperity in spite of royal enmity suggests that he might have enjoyed a mediating position similar to that of Bishop Nikolas Arnesson.

Gudolv blakk is a spectacular example of the floating and variable divisions between armed groups, as well as between groups and local populations. However, he is no isolated case, as the significance of group affiliation could vary substantially. After Håkon Sverresson became king in 1202, *Böglunga sögur* says that "the whole armed group then dissolved, and there was good peace" (Bögl 3).[94] The saga specifies three potential strategies for the ex-Croziers: Some joined the Birchlegs, others went home to their farms, and still others fled abroad because they feared that they would not be spared by the Birchlegs (Bögl 3). Thus, the armed groups comprised men with various affiliations, and only the hardliners had to flee the country. It was probably the latter men who were intent on continuing the fight and who took the initiative to re-establish the Croziers after Håkon Sverresson's death. As we saw earlier, these hardliners were neither very prominent nor numerous. This means that the majority of Croziers were softliners who could easily switch sides or transform into local peasants. Two decades later, the Ribbungs opposed the Birchlegs, carrying out what looks like guerrilla warfare in Opplanda.[95] Yet once more, the elasticity of the groups is striking. The Birchlegs several times made grand show-off expeditions to various parts of Opplanda, each time unsuccessful because the "Ribbungs had relatives in every house" (Hák 104).[96] Not only could the Ribbungs hide among the locals; the very boundary between rebels and locals was also a blurred one.

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[94] S: "Raufsk þá sá flokkr allr, ok var friðr góðr." L has a similar phrasing.

[95] Opplanda was inland, and therefore much more inaccessible than the "central" regions of Norway accessible by sea. Holmsen held it to be integrated into the realm only in the late thirteenth century, Arstad in the aftermath of the Ribbung rising. See Holmsen, *Norges historie: Fra de eldste tider til 1660*; Arstad, "Ribbungopprør, riksenhet og enekongedømme."

[96] "Ribbungar áttu frændr í hverju húsi á Raumaríki." *Böglunga sögur* relates that during the winter of 1204–5 there were both Birchlegs and Croziers residing in Opplanda, and that there were numerous skirmishes and ambushes. However, it tells nothing of the scope of the calamities, which can make us suspect that they were prompted by fairly low-key enmities and were not necessarily very serious (Bögl 14).

David Kilcullen states that a complicating factor in the conflicts in contemporary Afghanistan is that "village cells" can be sleeping until the rebel group of hardliners arrives.[97] Medieval Norway also had sleeping cells and a blurred and variable transition between group members and locals. However, its hardliners were fewer and more modest, making what we call the Norwegian "civil wars" even more of a phenomenon whose significance and influence lie largely in the eyes of the beholder, and whose ramifications for society at large were fairly limited.

Conclusion: The limited repercussions of civil war

While chapters 2–4 analyzed the conflicts during the civil war period as seen through the lenses of the armed groups that fought the wars, this chapter has viewed the conflicts from outside—from the standpoint of their social impact. What repercussions did the struggles have for society at large, and what was the connection between the armed groups and local populations? The first question concerns the role of the peasants, the second the relationship between military and local leaders. Peasants became more embroiled in the armed groups' struggles now than they had been before. The leidang duty probably weighed heavily on them, in some years being fulfilled to its legal maximum of two months a year. Peasants were also subject to leidang tax and other contributions, and exchanges between local communities and armed groups on these matters were sometimes very tense, in particular because the lack of firm territorial borders could entice armed groups to venture into peripheries that were in reality support areas of the opposing group. The period even saw three rebellions with large-scale resistance from peasant communities. Finally, the political influence of peasants diminished, as their voice in assemblies was weak, and in the relatively few instances when it was heard, they voted for "peace candidates."[98]

Yet the involvement of the peasants and their sufferings during the civil wars should not be overestimated. As military participants, they were clearly distinct from professional warriors, and it evidently was

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[97] Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar," 238–43. Cf. the surprise at how few IS-soldiers were tracked down after their main strongholds in Syria had been conquered in 2016–17.

[98] The term is from Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten,* 158.

surprising to see peasants killed in battle. Peasant rebellions were primarily reactions against armed groups trying to conquer hostile regions. As such, they bear witness not so much to peasant involvement in the civil wars as to failed attempts at securing control over large areas. Tellingly, such attempts became less common in the era of *Böglunga sögur*, which generally saw more prudent and low-scale styles of fighting. This transition not only entailed an increased attentiveness in the armed struggles, as seen in the previous chapter, but also a more reconciliatory stance toward the peasants. This attitude is nowhere more visible than in the armed groups' relation to townsmen. On the one hand, townsmen were constantly squeezed and threatened, as no armed group was really content with receiving only a pragmatic support that would disappear as soon as they themselves disappeared. On the other hand, threats remained just words and were seldom effectuated. There was no quick fix to achieve the lasting loyalty of either townsmen or peasants, as long as territories could change hands through the arrival of new groups. This does not mean that everything was in flux. The armed groups had their core areas where they could normally count on support. However, this support was not absolute, as in the last instance it was an expression of who had been present there in the past. And this could change—yet not rapidly, as too-ambitious turnovers elicited rebellions.

Peasant communities were not sharply separated from the armed groups, as local leaders also participated in the groups. The role of the aristocracy in this period has been among the most hotly debated issues in Norwegian history—an older generation seeing King Sverre as the great transformer who implemented systemic change by killing most of the old aristocrats and installing new ones who were dependent on him, whereas more recent historians have criticized this view for exaggerating Sverre's role and argued that the shift was one of persons, not systems. These discussions notwithstanding, most historians have been in agreement that during this period there was a transition of the aristocracy from local leaders to royal servants, where their participation in the armed groups was viewed as a vehicle for transferring allegiances from the local community to the kingdom.[99] There is no doubt that the increased

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[99] Helle, *Norge blir en stat*, 204–5; Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten,* 170; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Riisøy, *Norsk historie*, 109, 112–13.

hostilities in this period resulted in a military specialization or professionalization, of which the armed groups themselves are the prime expressions. However, in my opinion it is more uncertain whether this professionalization should be regarded as a sign that the magnates' local affiliation disappeared or diminished. The truly professional segments of these armed groups comprised not army leaders but warriors of a more modest social position who had tied their destinies to the prospects of the armed group. To these men, there were no alternatives to fighting, and peace was surely a threat. Therefore, they were also the propelling force behind the second Crozier rising. Yet this group was also modest in numbers, and the decisive element in the armed groups on both sides was elite members who combined substantial local power with a high standing in the armed group. Through a detailed analysis of Crozier recruitment in *Böglunga sögur*, I argued that the military leaders were also local leaders in Viken. The armed struggles put a strain on their double roles, but they did not sever them. Actually, the examples in the saga of more coercive leadership furnish the best arguments for why such a leadership style did not develop or prevail, as they demonstrate that leaders without social backing were bound to run into trouble.

In a way, there is nothing very surprising in this conclusion that power had to be built from the bottom up. Modern doctrines of warfare have undergone a crisis since Western military forces have proved unable to conquer resistance in Iraq and particularly Afghanistan through the use of conventional warfare. It simply turned out that conquest was worth little without the support of local populations, and that this support could not be gained through coercion, threats, or military presence, despite the immense military superiority of the American / Western forces, but had to be earned through winning the "hearts and minds" of local populations.[100] Sagas like *Sverris saga* and *Böglunga sögur* can be seen as part of the process of forming the modern doctrine of war that has been hegemonic until now by placing the military activities of armed groups at the center of society. A close reading of the sagas has

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[100] The literature on this topic abounds. For a discussion of the "hearts and minds"-doctrine in a comparative modern-medieval context, see Orning and Østerud, *Krig uten stat*, 188–93.

revealed that this is largely an illusion. The societal ramifications of the armed struggles were quite modest. Peasants could not be squeezed hard militarily or economically as their contributions were valuable and dependent upon obtaining their basically voluntary support. Elites combined participation in armed groups with acting as local leaders, and the latter confined their military activities. A largely unaffected hinterland forms the tacit background of the saga description of the movements of armed groups.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

Civil war has historically been viewed as the worst possible condition to live under, a time when "murderous destiny" makes "brother rush on brother and son on his father," as described by Lucan.[1] Civil wars have been associated with breakdown and chaos, and with the Hobbesian state of nature. In our contemporary world, more than ninety percent of armed conflicts are classified as civil wars, fought under severe conditions and with disastrous consequences, not least since such wars seem to be never–ending. Why embark upon an attempt to mitigate a concept and phenomenon that everyone agrees is concomitant with crisis, chaos and suffering? The short answer to this is that the concept of civil war has tended to become a focal point for all our fears and turned them into an issue of unrestrained conflict in areas where the state has broken down or does not exist. This view of civil war is heavily tinged by a modern view that the state is the optimal solution to problems of violence containment. Whereas this is perhaps valid in a long–term, Western historical perspective, it nevertheless serves as a poor guide if we want to get a firmer grasp on how conflict has worked in past societies—and in many contemporary societies as well. As I have argued in the introduction, we are fed a view of conflict that is highly historically contingent and atypical, and at the same time so pervasive that it is difficult to adopt the role of the analyst of our own conceptions.

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[1] Lucan, *The Civil War*, 217. The motif of brothers fighting one another is frequently invoked as an image of civil war, see 9, 68, 141, 159.

In order to gain a better understanding of how conflicts functioned in a medieval setting, I have proposed the concept of “constant crisis” as an alternative to “civil war.” The term is intended to signify a society characterized by violent conflict to the degree that we can view it as intrinsic to the system—albeit varying in scope, form, and content. Moreover, the conflicts do not flow from a central core nor are they programmed to uphold a centralized political system (even if that is the goal of some of the participants). In investigating a society in constant crisis in medieval Norway, I have operated with a two–fold categorization of conflicts. The most visible classification concerns the *range* of conflict, as it underlies the division into chapters: conflicts between armed groups (chapter 2), within groups (chapter 3), across groups (chapter 4), and between armed groups and local populations (chapter 5). As this book demonstrates, conflicts do play out at different levels of society. The counterpart of this traveling of conflict is that no group can in general terms be viewed as primordial or more basic than other groups. Groups only constitute groups in relation to other groups—this is the fundamental insight of Evans–Pritchard’s system of segmentary oppositions. Conflict and community are therefore relative properties that depend on the level upon which conflict and cohesion play out. By classifying groups and conflicts according to a system of segmentary oppositions rather than ossifying them at one level—usually the regnal or dynastic one—conflict can be perceived as constant, and so can communities—albeit on ever–fluctuating levels.

A second categorization of conflicts concerns their form, as conflicts can play out as anything from verbal exchanges to large–scale, violent clashes. Today, we consider violence to be of another category than conflicts that are non–violent, as violent conflict signals a break with the state monopoly on exercising legitimate violence. This distinction was different in medieval Norway. First, it should be emphasized that being subject to violence is unpleasant, and this is no doubt a human universal. Having said that, however, we must acknowledge that the interpretative framework of violence varies. To medieval people, violence was enmeshed in social relations and part of a repertoire that they could legitimately apply in defending themselves or in challenging others. This reality does not imply that any form of violence was acceptable, as is often assumed in scrutinizing stateless societies. Violence was always assessed according to its form and its success, as well as to how it was framed. However, this legitimizing process was not a peculiarity of violence, but part of an ongoing evaluation of all kinds of actions—violence and non–violent alike. This points strongly to the political character of violence, and thereby its embeddedness in the political culture, and warrants against distinguishing too strictly between violent and non–violent conflict. Rather than placing them in a dichotomous scheme, they should be set along a continuum of political tools, where their significance and success must be interpreted according to context, not to some preset moral dividing line. This ambiguous significance of violence is epitomized in the Old Norse term *vald*, simply meaning power or authority, regardless of normative considerations.

The view that conflicts should be interpreted as signs of social disorder is logical in an intuitive way. Conflicts are in essence triggered by wishes to change the present power structure, and as such they can be viewed as tokens of discontent with a given status quo. However, this kind of tension is not equivalent to the malfunctioning of society. On the contrary, most conflicts are internal to society, in the sense that they do not aim to transform society, but only to modify the distribution of power within it. Moreover, when we proceed from the agency perspective on conflicts to their structural aspect, we see more clearly that most conflicts in effect served to confirm and strengthen the basic structures of society. This position has often been associated with functionalism and denounced for operating with an equilibrium model of society unable to account for tensions or change.[2] In my view, an important insight to be gained from functionalism is that conflicts may have integrative societal effects in spite of their superficial aspect of challenge and posturing.

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[2] Criticism of functionalism is so widespread that it is difficult to point to specific literature. In this context, the issue has been raised by Philippe Buc, much of whose criticism is waged against the notion of *Spielregeln* as applied by Gerd Althoff—for instance in Althoff, *Spielregeln*. The debates on these issues have been extensive. See Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*; Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter*. Here I agree with Kiril Petkov that whereas functionalistic mechanisms must surely be treated in a critical way, to jump to the opposite stance and do away with functionalism altogether would be a much bigger mistake. Petkov, *The Kiss of Peace*.

Using the term "crisis" is intended to play down the thought of an equilibrium—partly by underlining the undesirability of conflict, partly by emphasizing the uncertain outcomes of conflicts. A situation of constant crisis requires maximum attentiveness because there is no agreed–upon hierarchy, nor are there formal institutions, to bolster social order. But the political dynamics are not arbitrary, as they spring from social encounters based on social networks. Conflicts had the potential to incur dramatic changes in terms of one party's gaining more lasting dominance, something that happened in the period following the one discussed in this book. However, a main point in this book is that conflicts often led to less change than it appears. Victories were usually less pervasive than they seemed, since attempts at ousting opponents often had an adverse effect in the longer run. In this respect, I align with the functionalist view that conflict and equilibrium are closely related.

In the remainder of the conclusion, I will present the results from this book chapter by chapter, before discussing their implications for the subsequent period of state formation in the Nordic countries. Finally, I will broaden the perspective and relate the results to the state formation process more generally in the Middle Ages and beyond.

Constant crisis in Norway ca. 1200

The theme of this book is conflicts in Norway from 1196 to 1208, with glimpses backward and forward in time. In this period, Norway was in the midst of what historians have termed the civil war period from 1130 to 1240. Historians have acknowledged that the term "civil war" might be problematic, as Norway was not yet a state at this time, but they have nevertheless considered it a fruitful one in that it helps contrast this period to the adjacent, more peaceful ones, and in that it elucidates the state formation in this interval. I oppose this view, arguing that civil war is a misleading concept to the degree that it threatens to distort our understanding of what actually went on in this period, and to frame it within a teleological narrative in which states and wars are analyzed more in accordance with their future importance than with respect to their contemporaneous significance.

Chapter one starts by introducing what I term the civil–war paradigm, which distinguishes sharply between war and peace and holds kings and prelates responsible for maintaining peace and banishing war and violence from society. However, this noble vision of peacemaking is less disinterested than it might seem, because in conferring the power to implement and enforce this condition on kings and prelates, it presupposes that they will employ these powers for the common good. But were kings and prelates so disinterested after all? Would a king be willing to end struggles if the solution favored an opposing group rather than himself? Were not kings and prelates also magnates with vested interests that could complicate their role as intermediaries, or even more, as impartial peacemakers? In the civil–war paradigm, groups whose interests diverged from those of kings and prelates in the struggles are classified as troublemakers, but did they not have a legitimate right to pursue their own interests? In order to address these blind spots, we need to disentangle the analysis from the civil–war paradigm. The account in this book of the struggle between the Birchlegs and the Croziers shares with previous ones in that it depicts the struggle as an intense one with no winner. However, my approach departs from older views in interpreting this situation of unresolved power relations as a condition that was quite stable. This period was certainly a violent one, but it was not a time of untrammeled or arbitrary violence, and the societal reach of the struggles is also questionable. I introduce the concept of “constant crisis” explained above in order to approach violent conflicts as an intrinsic part of society and violence as a legitimate political response.

Chapter two discusses the struggle between the Birchlegs and the Croziers, and as such it takes the existence of parties and their quest for dynastic dominance as a given, in line with previous research. A main point in this chapter is to demonstrate how difficult it was for one party to gain lasting supremacy over the other. Since this was not a result of the agents’ intentions—they all aimed for dominance—the tendency to end up in a power balance has to be explained with recourse to structural factors. The most obvious one is the military technology that the parties had at their disposal. Ships were crucial for dominating the coastline and have usually been considered a decisive resource in determining which was the superior party. However, a close analysis demonstrates that whereas ships were indeed important for controlling regions, they were less efficient in dominating the whole of Norway, which in practice meant the three central areas of Østlandet, Vestlandet and Trøndelag. Moreover, as the armed groups became more experienced in war, they developed strategies and tactics to avoid being decisively defeated even with naval inferiority. Battles were more common in Norway than in contemporary Europe, but battle frequency declined markedly in the period, probably as the parties became used to war, being more attentive and making fewer mistakes. Moreover, battles were often less decisive than it appears. There were normally ample opportunities to flee in the face of an impending defeat, and for captured enemies, the absence of ransoming and execution implied that the only real option was to pardon them. Considering the widespread incidence of side–switching, the long–term advantages even of unilateral victories were limited, as without further victories, side–switching could equally well be reversed. Plunder is a complicated issue to discuss because of the blurred distinction between economically and politically motivated plunder, as well as between the goals of deterrence versus reduction of opponents' resources. Nevertheless, a major conclusion is that plunder was fairly rare in Norway, and this rarity can be linked to the non–territorial dimension of the political struggles. The armed groups usually had core areas of support, but regional allegiances were not absolute or immutable, as they were established through prolonged presence combined with provision of efficient protection and could be easily destabilized by the arrival of a superior group. The limited territoriality of power can be interpreted as a sign that to a large degree, power was built bottom–up. The erection of castles can be regarded as an attempt to create more territorially based dominance through establishing safe points that could serve as centers for controlling the surrounding region. However, while castles were partially effective as safe places, they largely failed as centers for controlling larger areas.

What these military resources—ships, battles, plunder, and castles—have in common is that they were largely inefficient as means to dominate the realm of Norway, and were instead more conducive to upholding a balance between the armed groups. This outcome does not imply that the armed groups were happy with a power balance. On the contrary, they repeatedly tried to eliminate rival groups. Particularly in the aftermath of naval battles, the victors typically followed up by trying to oust defeated groups. However, such attempts largely failed to accomplish their goals, and they could even weaken the group that employed this strategy. The reason for this failure is threefold. First, ousted groups often traveled abroad, both to seek refuge and to recruit more military resources. A second countermove was to turn to guerrilla warfare, which was effective in undermining the opposing group's attempts at creating dominance in new areas. Third, expelled groups could organize ambushes in areas that were poorly protected by the attacking group, most typically in their centers.

The following chapters broaden the analysis by viewing the conflicts in this period not (only) as bipolar conflicts between two armed groups for dynastic preeminence, but also as multifaceted power struggles determined by a number of considerations, of which the royal concern was but one. Chapter three investigates the inherent tensions within the armed groups. After the Birchlegs were established under the leadership of King Sverre, the group seems to have experienced extremely little discord at the top level, in contrast with the Croziers, who were troubled almost permanently with internal strife and quarreling. Historians have almost universally praised Sverre for his strong leadership, but whereas undoubtedly Sverre was an unusually able leader, few have addressed the down sides of this strong leadership. First, Sverre sometimes made mistakes, even if they were probably not numerous and the saga does its best to camouflage such incidences. A graver disadvantage was that the Birchlegs usually turned out to be very inefficient without their great leader present. There is little doubt that dependence on a strong leader was detrimental for the group as a whole. This deficiency emerges clearly from a comparison with the Crozier group, which has often been described as weakened by internal strife. To be sure, the prospect of Crozier demise due to inner discord was sometimes impending, but we should still note that the Croziers always managed to terminate internal conflicts before the group dissolved. Analysis of Crozier leadership discloses two advantages resulting from its diffuse structure. First, the unsettled Crozier hierarchy was conducive to basing solutions upon debate rather than on rank. Repeatedly we can observe discussions among Crozier leaders where the chosen strategy was a result of the best argument winning out, even if leaders higher in rank disagreed. Second, multiple leadership made it easier to split the group into several fighting units that could work efficiently by themselves in a form of guerrilla warfare. The division of authority fostered a culture of accountability, so that the Croziers always had two or three leaders who were capable of leading armies. After King Sverre's death in 1202, the circumstance of diffuse leadership also applied to the Birchlegs. In *Böglunga sögur*, there are no substantial differences between Birchlegs and Croziers with respect to leadership. Once again, it should be noted that on an individual level, ambitions of strong leadership prevailed, so that a situation with several leaders was almost destined to be accompanied by internal conflicts and tensions. Yet the crucial issue is that this condition, in spite of the turmoil it aroused, provided the most conducive political climate. These enigmas are still relevant today. We are attracted by strong leaders, and no one wants to have a weak leader. But what is a strong leader, and why do we want him (often him, yes) in societies like our own, where we have cultivated a culture of negotiation, participation, competition, and power from below because we hold these aspects to be crucial for arriving at good solutions?

Chapter four transcends the group boundaries that are taken for granted in the previous two chapters. Armed groups were undoubtedly important, but they did not exist in a vacuum. Medieval people belonged to numerous groups and had several identities, obligations, and allegiances, just as we have. The most fundamental group was that of friends and relatives, where bonds were cultivated and maintained with great care—the more so since protection in this society ultimately was a private concern. The king might style himself as protector of the realm and of the poor and helpless in particular, but everyone knew that these were largely empty words. With their tiny administrative staffs, kings were in no position to act as monopolists of power and justice unless they were grounded in norms shared by wider strata of society. Kings were of course aware of the precedence of personal bonds, and if they forgot, they were vehemently corrected. Still, we should not posit an inherent conflict between personal bonds and fealty to the king. For one thing, the king was as "private" as any of his supporters—King Sverre even took great care to present himself as a man seeking vengeance, the same as his men. For another, personal and royal concerns could usually be harmonized and accommodated. The king knew perfectly well that he could not coerce his men into fighting unless they themselves wanted to do so, and that appeals for loyalty to king or fatherland were void without further backing. The gist of the matter lay in mutual interests and in not pushing limits. Moreover, in some instances families and friends were situated on opposite sides of the struggles between the armed groups, indicating that the dynastic conflicts were seldom so intense as to streamline the family loyalties and polarize divisions between localities.

Kings also had to take into consideration that their own retinues did not constitute one indivisible body. A king typically encouraged and bred a community among his followers in the first place, as his retinue thrived on being an attractive place for young, ambitious, and aggressive men to seek their fortune. Yet the men's motivations for joining the king were not identical with the king's interests in every matter. For a group that lived off war and its spoils, war had a different function than it had for the king, who conducted war primarily for political reasons. Tensions could explode on occasions when the king wanted to pardon his opponents for political reasons, contrary to the warriors' wish to reap the benefits of victory. More generally, the warriors as a group had an interest in a persistent state of war, which meant that they would typically oppose royal efforts at peacemaking.

Another informal community existed at the top level of the retinue, comprising magnates who played leading roles close to the king. These men certainly had an interest in supporting royal efforts, so that they could appropriate the largest possible share of resources. We should always keep in mind the classic Marxist perspective of kings and elites as sharing a fundamental interest in maintaining a status quo of social inequalities for economic reasons. However, this view does not give the full picture. Intra–elite conflicts were more than "surface waves," as elites had an ambivalent view of the monarchy. They would usually support the king's war, but not if it threatened to undermine their elite colleagues in the opposing camp with whom they shared interests and usually also kin. Likewise, they would normally support the king's peace, but not if it implied the setting aside of rivalries with competing elite factions. In short, elites could be opposed to both uncompromising hostilities because of their communality, and general peacemaking because of their internal rivalry. The elite members were both fellows and rivals. Their relationship is best described as a constant crisis—they were neither at peace nor at war with one another, but somewhere in between.

Whereas chapter four investigates the intersecting bonds permeating the armed groups, chapter five takes an even broader sweep, turning to the implications of the armed struggles for the society at large. This endeavor is of course a complicated one, given that the sources we have at our disposal focus on the dynastic struggles between the armed groups. Yet it is possible to assess the wider repercussions of the conflicts by studying the role played by peasants and townsmen in the struggles and by analyzing the relationship between military leaders and local leaders. Peasants were involved in the armed struggles in three ways: as participants at assemblies, in the leidang as military staff, and sometimes as rebels. Assemblies were arenas for negotiation between kings and local communities, and they continued to be so, even if it is easy to see signs of growing coercion of the peasants in situations where armed groups vastly superior in military power met with them and dictated conditions. However, it is equally easy to forget that such instances were atypical, and that although it was possible to subdue peasant populations at assemblies, it was inconceivably harder to do so permanently, the more so if the goal was to attain a stable hegemony in a region.

The limited repercussions of armed struggles in local communities are revealed with unusual clarity in the case of towns. This fact might seem counterintuitive, considering that townsmen were repeatedly squeezed for loyalties and contributions following the arrival of armed groups, and that they undoubtedly experienced hardships as a result of frequent turnovers in power. Yet the fact that threats toward townsmen usually remained just words serves as a powerful reminder that the armed groups were seldom successful in attaining more binding submission from town dwellers. The floating allegiance of towns shows that dominance was territorialized to only a limited degree, and that efforts to increase it were bound to run into serious trouble. The few instances of open peasant resistance confirm this conclusion, as they were either directed against hostile troops who were aiming at a regional takeover or against military leaders with insufficient local grounding. As such, incidences of resistance primarily attest to the failure of establishing coercive dominance, and thus to peasants unaccustomed to serving as pawns in armed struggles. A final argument in favor of a relatively modest impact of armed struggles on local communities comes in terms of peasants' leidang participation, where they were clearly distinguished from more professional warriors in being less committed and in taking fewer risks in battle. Peasants were not untouched by the consequences of violent conflict, but they were not among the main players. Moreover, military leaders could not simply overrule these peasants, as they had to take their concerns into consideration if they wanted to gain a foothold in an area.

So, did the conflicts called the civil wars create a new class of professional war leaders who became more closely attached to the king and less so to their local communities? An assumed transition "from local chieftains to royal servants" has been a major argument in favor of the civil wars' transforming Norwegian society. There is ample support in the sources for armed groups led by commanders whose military skills improved as a result of years of conflicts and campaigning. Yet apart from the development of a group of professional rank–and–file warriors, it is my contention that military professionalization did not come at the expense of local leadership. There are some examples of war leaders who became local leaders without sufficient local grounding or who excelled in their military roles, but they were invariably put down. Military leaders were also, and never stopped being, local leaders. We can see this identification from the time spent in the field. It was not only peasants who urged returning from prolonged campaigns; leaders too were eager to go home, because of their local commitments. The combination of military participation and local engagement serves first and foremost as an indication that military professionalization was limited. Life at the local level could be interrupted by clashes between armed groups or strained by prolonged absence of leaders and peasants, but on the whole, it persisted more or less as before. If strife or oppression threatened to destroy their functioning, local communities had means of resistance, and this resistance was less a matter of rebellion or violent actions than of a tacit resilience stemming from the armed groups' fundamental dependence on local support.

Constant crisis and state formation in Scandinavia

This book consists of a close analysis of the political structure in Norway around 1200 using two contemporary kings' sagas as sources. There are two potential objections to the emphasis put on the stability of this system, subsumed under the heading "constant crisis." The first one is that the chosen method might underestimate the role of the Church, and maybe also of formal institutions more generally, since sagas are characterized by a secular outlook and a focus on political actions, not on their institutional framing. A focus on ecclesiastical and legal sources would probably have produced a different image of the period than the one present in this book. Just a few decades before the period under study—in 1152/53, a Norwegian archdiocese was established in Nidaros, and a number of documents from the foundation and in its aftermath testify to the Church's emerging as an independent institution with its own organization and personnel from this time onward.[3] The ramifications of this development were considerable in that the division into parishes with priests appointed and supervised by bishops laid the foundation of a centralized religious governance. Moreover, the ideology of the Church and many of its institutional innovations were adopted by the monarchy. In this book, I have emphasized the ideological convergence and community of interest between Church and monarchy. Moreover, in the period of this study, we see the first indications of a division into *sýslur* led by *sýslumenn* and of regular taxation. These developments have been duly mentioned and discussed in previous chapters, but they have not formed the core of the argument. The reason is not that I consider the institutional

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[3] The documents can be found in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, the most important ones also in *Norske middelalderdokumenter* and *Latinske dokument til norsk historie*. For the most central literature, see Imsen, *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537*; Imsen, *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis and Noregs veldi*; Imsen, *Den kirkehistoriske utfordring*; Iversen, *Archbishop Eystein as Legislator*.

development to be insignificant, but rather that I have preferred to use the descriptions of political actions and struggles as the starting point for elucidating the political culture of the period. Implicit in this view is a critical stance toward approaching state formation through an analysis of formal political institutions such as the legal apparatus, the military levy, and the administrative staff. In my view, such institutions must be studied in terms of how they work in practice, not of how they were ideally intended to function. I accordingly regard sagas as better suited for such a survey than normative documents such as laws and diplomas. Finally, I think that working from a view that struggles and violent conflicts are inherent to the sociopolitical order comes closer to medieval politics than equating order with the establishment of centralized authority and formal institutions to back up its power. It also implies not dividing sharply between secular and ecclesiastical leaders. Typically, bishops played important roles in the political struggles in this period, but in roles where their clerical and secular powers were often inseparable.

A second objection to the endeavor in this book to envision and describe a sociopolitical system based on constant crisis that had a certain stability and permanence to it is that shortly after 1220, when this book ends, civil war ended, and Norway entered a period of stronger kingship and fewer internal conflicts. The so–called period of greatness after 1240 was characterized by territorial expansion and institutional consolidation in terms of national legislation, expansion of the royal administration and military organization.[4] Why argue for the stability of a system that in a short while was gone, giving way to a different system that was going to persist for centuries to come? There are several ways of answering and discussing this question.

A first observation is that conflicts did not disappear from the surface after the formal settlements between Birchlegs and Croziers in 1208. The settlement of 1208 in many ways can be viewed as a fixation of the constant crisis between Birchlegs and Croziers that I have analyzed prior to 1208. The two groups divided the

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[4] The most central works are Helle, *Norge blir en stat;* Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten;* Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom.*

territory, but the persistence of conflict can be seen in the tugs–of–war between the groups over the next decade, as well as in the power struggles between factions within the groups themselves. These struggles were to persist after the Birchlegs and Croziers made a more binding settlement in 1217, as the first thing to happen then was that a new armed group—the Ribbungs—was established as a rallying point for resistance to the new union, mainly in the eastern part of the country. After the Ribbungs merged into the dominant group in 1227, the rivalry between King Håkon and his earl Skule Bårdsson, which had been present since Håkon was elected king in 1217 to the frustration of Skule, resurfaced with increased intensity. This power struggle resembles the one we have seen between Håkon galen and King Inge Bårdsson from 1204 onward, not only in that Skule was a half–brother of Håkon galen, but also in that the more experienced military leader was relegated to playing second fiddle. The difference is that the rivalry between Håkon and Skule exploded into Skule's open rebellion in 1239, culminating in Skule's total defeat during the Battle of Oslo on 21 April 1240. The battle marks the end of the civil war period in Norway. Yet the overwhelming victory of Håkon in Oslo was highly atypical of warfare in this period, and it probably owes much to a severe miscalculation on the part of Skule prior to the battle, which led to the total disintegration of his faction.[5] In the period of this study, only the battle at Fimreite in 1184 had equally drastic ramifications, and there the outcome was less a result of tactical blunders than of military coincidence.

Thus, 1240 marks the end of a condition of constant crisis at a dynastic level in Norway. King Håkon Håkonsson promulgated a new succession law in 1260 implementing hereditary, individual monarchy based on primogeniture, and the country experienced smooth successions for more than a century after 1240. [6] Yet the stability of these successions can be attributed in large part to coincidence. In 1255, there were discussions on how to solve the coming

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[5] Arstad, "Rex bellicosus," 431–518; Orning, "Håkon, Skule og de norske borgerkrigene."

[6] The principle was followed thenceforth until 1387, with only one exception: The younger son of King Magnus Eriksson, Håkon, was designated by his father to be King of Norway in 1343. However, here specific reasons apply, as the older sibling Erik was going to succeed his father as Swedish king. Following King Olav Håkonsson's death in 1387, there were no king's sons available, and it was decided that succession from then on was to be reckoned from Olav's mother Margrete. See Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 273–74.

succession between King Håkon Håkonsson's two sons while the king was still alive:

> Some said that Magnus should have one third of the country and the title of duke. Others advised that the country be divided into two, but that Håkon alone should be king after his father. Still others said that they would not participate in meetings discussing differences between the brothers and held that it would be most fitting that everything be made equal between them (Hák 284).[7]

The prospect of dynastic strife abated when the death of the king's eldest son Håkon the Young in 1257 resolved the issue in favor of Magnus. In the next generation, Magnus's eldest son Eirik was made king and the younger Håkon duke. There is no doubt that Håkon was the abler of the two brothers, and again a convenient death—here Eirik's in 1299—probably prevented open strife.[8] Of course we cannot know what would have happened had Håkon the Young or Eirik Magnusson lived longer. It might well be that the succession issue would have been solved in peaceful terms, and that the younger brother would have been content to rule a lesser fraction of the realm. However, if we are to judge from comparative evidence from the neighboring Scandinavian kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden, we should not be too confident that the conflicts would have been resolved so smoothly. Both the Danish king Valdemar the Victorious (r. 1202–41) and the Swedish king Birger Magnusson (r. 1290–1318) had three adult sons who survived them. The usual way of handling such tensions was by appointing younger king's sons or close relatives as dukes with duchies to govern.[9] This form

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[7] "Mæltu sumir at Magnús skyldi hafa þriðjung af landi ok hertuganafn. Sumir mæltu at skipta skyldi landi í helminga, þó at Hákon konungr bæri einn konungsnafn eftir föður sinn. Þeir váru sumir er eigi kváðusk vera vilja á þeim stefnum er nökkurr hlutr væri misjafnaðr með þeim bræðrum. Létu þeir bezt gegna mundu at öllu væri í helminga skipt þeira millum."

[8] Sources are sparser for this period, but we have indirect evidence of the tensions in the prosecution of leading royal advisors that Håkon undertook shortly after his ascension.

[9] In Denmark, Abel's line usually served as dukes of the southern region of Schleswig, whereas in Sweden and Norway, younger king's sons were appointed dukes. Erik, brother of the Swedish king Birger, was designated duke of Södermanland; in Norway King Eirik's younger brother Håkon was made duke of the eastern part of Norway and some other areas.

of power-sharing was not a peaceful arrangement, as the second-in-rank often had no intention to stay in that position. However, the alternative to such an uneasy sharing of power could be grimmer. In Denmark, Abel killed his brother Erik in 1250 but himself died shortly thereafter. In Sweden, King Birger decided to put an end to the incessant rivalries with his two younger brothers by having them arrested in 1317, whereupon he probably had them executed. The result was a revolt that swept him off the throne, which was passed on to his hated brother Erik's son.

The tension between elderly brothers striving for sole monarchy and younger brothers and relatives opting for a system for sharing power is no Scandinavian peculiarity. The Polish historian Zbigniew Dalewski has drawn attention to how there existed more informal norms about sharing power within the Polish Piast dynasty:

> Power was regarded as a common good, belonging to the entire ruling family, and all members of the dynasty had the right to participate in it. As a result, the circle of people entitled to rule was not restricted to a ruler's narrow family, his one son, but also included his other relatives.[10]

The same statement can be made for medieval Norway. The royal dynasty functioned more as a broad, horizontal network than as vertical lineage where sons followed father in an enclosed circuit.[11] In both places, kings strove to limit political competition by promoting sole succession and curtailing opponents, but such attempts had mixed results, as overly ambitious policy in these matters tended to foster more relentless opposition.[12] In reality, kings had to acknowledge that a multitude of interests were at stake, and that their power resided more in balancing various concerns than in dominating them. Thus, constant crisis is an apt concept

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[10] Dalewski, "Creating Dynastic Identity," 7–8. See also Dalewski, "Family Business," in Berend et al., *Central Europe in the High Middle Ages*.

[11] See Sawyer, "The 'Civil Wars' Revisited" on the fluidity and extension of royal networks, with Sweden as the prime but not atypical case.

[12] A more systematic comparison of Norway and Poland in the high Middle Ages is the topic of the research project "Symbolic Resources and Political Structures on the Periphery: Legitimization of the elites in Poland and Norway, ca. 1000—1300" funded by Norway Grants in Poland and led by Grzegorz Pac. Forthcoming articles co-written by Dalewski and Orning elaborate on these issues in a comparative perspective.

to describe the dynastic dynamic not only in periods of civil wars, but also in times of more normal struggles within the dynasty. The intensity and level of violence in constant crisis varied, but the inner tensions were ever present.

A situation of constant crisis also persisted below the dynastic level in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Elites, now called "nobles" because of their legal privileges, became more closely integrated into the monarchy than previously. Whereas prior to c 1200 elites had rebelled against kings, from now on they primarily fought to control them.[13] The community of interest between kings and nobles was clearly demonstrated in the aftermath of the Black Death. In a situation where land was plentiful and labor scarce, major landowners rallied together to uphold the level of land rent—by the use of force, if necessary. Yet the nobility's ambivalent attitude toward kings continued. In the Scandinavian countries, councils of the realm started out as institutions intended to support royal decisions by channeling advice and consent from the elites, but in the early fourteenth century they increasingly became arenas for noble opposition to the king.[14] Moreover, ambiguity resided in the heart of the nobility itself. On the one hand, they entered into alliances through intermarriages, resulting in a number of inter-Scandinavian noble family lineages. On the other hand, noble families competed fiercely for resources, estates, and royal and ecclesiastical offices. Thus, a condition of constant crisis still prevailed within the nobility.

Constant crisis, feud, and revolt

State formation in the Middle Ages and beyond has typically been framed as a choice between viewing it as a top-down process ("war made the state," Tilly and Reinhard) or a bottom-up process ("peasant communalism," Blickle and Blockmans).[15] However, what these alternatives largely neglect is how governance was practiced as a collective enterprise that could work only through intermediaries—i.e., elites, nobles, lords—and how widespread norms concerning violence were not suppressed but rather ingrained in

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[13] Watts, *The Making of Polities*, 273–80.

[14] Bagge, *Cross and Scepter*, 235–89.

[15] These perspectives are presented in Blockmans, Holenstein, and Mathieu, *Empowering Interactions*.

the state.[16] In this book, I have used the concept of constant crisis to demonstrate how conflict permeated society as power struggles at multiple levels, and to show that it usually served as a vehicle for defining and regulating relationships between various parties. The modes of conflict ranged from inherent tensions through overt disagreements to outright violence. In my opinion, it would be a serious flaw to distinguish sharply among these various levels and forms of conflict, because violence was a part of the system—not, as in our modern world, a negation of it, unless performed by the state (as external war or internal law enforcement). This view of conflict as an integral part of society goes against the grain of studying state formation as a pacification process whereby violent conflict was gradually curtailed.[17] In the following, I will briefly discuss constant crisis in relation to two concepts that have often been posited in contrast to state formation: feud and revolt.

In Otto Brunner's groundbreaking but long-ignored analysis of a German state, or lack of it, he rehabilitated the feud as an indispensable part of medieval politics.[18] Yet he drew a contrast between the feud and the state, implying that the nobility were inimical to the state. Contrary to Brunner, Hillay Zmora has argued that feuds were closely interwoven into the medieval state because they were about lordship. German lords were both feuding parties *and* participants in the state.[19] Nobles acted as indispensable intermediaries between princes and local communities, and princes' attempts at territorialization of power often fell short when confronted by the personal power of lords, because princes depended on lords for wielding power farther down the social ladder.[20] The presence of noble

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[16] See Buylaert, "Lordship, Urbanaization and Social Change in Late Medieval Flanders." Rees Davies has noted that the absence of lordship in English historiography is a result not of lords' actual absence in the Middle Ages, but of historians' reluctance to acknowledge their presence. Davies and Smith, *Lords and Lordship in the British Isles*.

[17] On state formation as a gradual pacification, see the classic Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, and more recently, Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

[18] Brunner, *Land and Lordship*. Brunner's work was translated into English by Howard Kaminsky, who also emphasized the "alternative legality of the feud" in medieval France, where he termed The Hundred Years War an anachronism because it was rather a series of feuds. See Kaminsky, "The Noble Feud in the Later Middle Ages."

[19] Zmora, *State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany*. Viewing lords as opponents of the state, not as part of it, has been typical in the discussions of feudalism or seigneurial lordship. See West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution* for a synopsis of the debate.

[20] Zmora, *State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany*.

feuds in the late Middle Ages is a telling expression of a culture of constant crisis that would persist for centuries as part of the state formation process.[21] This perception aligns well with John Watts' view that the late medieval state was polycentric, with a "variety of routes through which power was transmitted and contested."[22]

If noble feuds were more ingrained in the state than has been assumed, what about the frequent revolts occurring after 1200? As mentioned in chapter five, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are the great period of revolts in European history. Chris Wickham sees the rarity of revolts before 1200 as a sign of the weak medieval state.[23] If this is so, the huge increase in revolts after 1200 must signal a concurrent growth of the state. This assertion does not fit with other scholarly opinion, however, according to which state growth slowed down considerably in the late Middle Ages. Moreover, it accords poorly with the fact that several of the revolts occurred in Scandinavia, an area where state formation was rudimentary when compared to the core regions of Europe.[24] One reason why this interpretation runs into problems may be due to its underlying assumptions. Justine Firnhaber-Baker argues that we need to move away from the Weberian view of the state as the monopolist of power—or the monopolist-to-be—and instead regard it "not as a monolithic entity in contrast to or opposition with 'society,' but rather as a collection of institutions, practices and ideas indistinct from the people and structures it purported to govern."[25] In line with this definition, recent historiography has objected to the conceptual framing of revolts as an antithesis to political order. Patrick Lantschner views revolts not as deviations from a normal political pattern, but as ingrained in politics.[26] Medieval sources often depict rebels as criminals, but this conceals their political dimension. As formulated by Vincent Challet, "violence

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[21] See Kaminsky, "The Noble Feud in the Later Middle Ages."

[22] Watts, "Conclusion," 377, 371. See also his *The Making of Polities*. Watts compares late medieval government to bricolage.

[23] Samuel Cohn has identified 1112 revolts in the period 1200–1425, contrasting with the fifteen revolts that Chris Wickham finds in the previous six hundred years: Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*; Wickham, "Looking Forward."

[24] See Wickham, "Looking Forward," 159–61 and Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 89–93 on state formation in Scandinavia.

[25] Firnhaber-Baker, "Introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Meieval Revolt*," 4.

[26] Lantschner, "Revolts and the Political Order."

should not be considered antagonistic to the social order but, on the contrary, as an integrative force for communities, states, and power more generally."[27] This formulation implies that the relationship between the state and violence is turned on its head, or to be more precise, it moves violence from the periphery of the state into its center. The traditional view, for instance as stated by Michael Hicks for late medieval England, is that the king's prime duty was to ensure that law and order prevailed for the common good and to prevent violence and disorder from erupting.[28] Contrarily, Philippa Maddern opposes the image of a breakdown and unleashing of violence during the fifteenth century, which she sees more as a perception among historians based on assumptions "that violence is clearly definable; that it is unquestionably disruptive and destabilizing," than as a fact of real life.[29] Violence was part of society, and inseparable from law and notions of honor because it could be used to bolster or undermine authority, depending on how it was framed. "Violence in short was a language of social order."[30]

A society where violent conflict is linked to social order, not opposed to it, is one that accords well with the concept of constant crisis. The unusual aspect of the so-called revolts is not the use of violence per se, but the coordinated efforts of peasants. If we agree with Lantschner that "political units could themselves be sites of political conflict, and negotiations could take place within, around and across them,"[31] then the peasants' actions can be tied to the political culture, not as its antithesis but rather as one aspect of it.

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27. Challet, "Violence as a Political Language," 280. Firnhaber-Baker asserts that the Jacquerie from 1358 "simply meant different things to different people at different times." Firnhaber-Baker, "The Eponymous Jacquerie," 68. See also Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, and Skoda, *Medieval Violence*, for related perspectives.

28. Hicks, *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century*, 24–25.

29. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, 7.

30. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, 234. This is not a novel insight in itself, as Weber connected the state to violence. However, he emphasized that this concerned legitimate violence, enforced through law, which has long been represented as the pinnacle of the state (see for instance Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*). However, by using the term "negotiation" instead of "adjudication," and "conflict" instead of "crime," the image changes, as it puts the state on a par with other conflict-solving institutions, not above them.

31. Lantschner, "Revolts and the Political Order," 11. Susan Reynolds writes about small groups that were loose and overlapping: Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300*.

This view of politics fits with Michael Mann's concept of "coordinating states" in Europe before ca. 1477.[32] Medieval kings could at times muster considerable resources and succeed in conducting large battles, but such instances were rare. Usually, kings had to be content with the more modest ambitions of meddling and negotiating between various groups and concerns. Europe in the high and late Middle Ages constitutes a different context from high medieval Scandinavia in economic and urban development, among other things, but the presence of violent conflicts, rivalry, and power balance within society resonates well with the concept of constant crisis used in this investigation.

Constant crisis and state bias

Historians have tended to view conflicts, in particular violent ones, as detrimental to the social order. To the degree that conflicts have been assigned a more positive role, they have been seen as a necessary step toward the formation of stronger states—typically as a phase of "civil war" in which the agents "learned" more rational political behavior. For instance, the Norwegian historian Kåre Lunden asserted that both elites and peasants learned political lessons in the course of the civil wars:

> Wise magnates learned that it caused strife and destruction, not peace, if one single faction too immodestly tried to monopolize the monarchy's resources for itself, excluding the legitimate interests of other factions [. . .] Peasants and townsmen learned that maybe it was the lesser evil to accept regular contributions to a state power that was strong enough to secure order and peace.[33]

It has been a main point in this book that learning curves were not so unequivocal and that conflicts did not disappear from society, but continued to be part of it without necessarily implying that it was at war. It has not, of course, been my intention to glorify conflict. Conflicts have the potential to develop into large-scale wars

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[32] Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, vol. 1*.

[33] Lunden, *Norge under Sverreætten*, 138.

that can polarize political landscapes into irreconcilable factions. However, they can equally well die down, and in medieval societies conflicts were usually part of the fabric of life and enmeshed in a web of nonviolent means of solving conflicts. Medieval society was structured not as a hierarchy where the use of violence was restricted to the state, but rather as a loose aggregation encompassing various contending groups, in which violence was part of the political repertoire. This structure does not imply that a balance of power was acknowledged by the historical agents themselves. On the contrary, as has been highlighted on numerous occasions, agents pursued goals of dominance and tried their best to oust their opponents. Therefore, the combination of a fierce, uncompromising power struggle and a more "harmonic" balance of power is not a contradiction, but simply expresses the same fact at different levels. Nor is it to say that violence was always allowed or cherished. Violence constituted a challenge because it involved the physical use of power against others and therefore tended to fuel conflict. In order to gain acceptance, violence needed to be framed so as to appear legitimate, basically by being presented as a fair and measured response to previous harassment. Yet in this respect violence does not differ from any other political strategy, as politics by definition is a competition for scarce resources. The difference from violence within a state is that violence in the Middle Ages was also part of the political repertoire when performed by private individuals and groups.

The state or dynastic dimension of conflicts looms large in the sources, and not least in historians' definitions of what constitutes politics. However, with their orientation toward states and wars, historians have been poorly equipped to identify other axes of conflicts, such as conflicts evolving within groups, across groups, in the interstices between armed groups and local communities, or across kingdoms. If we acknowledge that the state is but one of numerous forms of political entities, and that in addition to wars there were multiple other ways of conducting legitimate violent conflicts, the scope and role of conflict in society widen exponentially. All of a sudden, the allegedly "stable parties" of the civil wars reveal their transient nature as imagined and created communities held together by particular people for particular purposes. As their solidity evaporates, they transform into heterogeneous bodies with blurred boundaries, and other groups and communities arise, not to suppress the dynastic dimension, but to complicate and supplement it. Moreover, from this viewpoint, conflicts cease being a shorthand for societal trouble and malfunction, and instead become the guiding principle of politics, albeit a principle that takes on various forms, from armed struggles to verbal quarrels and tensions. This perspective renders our division into violent and non-violent conflict, which in reality means illegitimate and legitimate violence, not only misplaced but also misleading.

An investigation of conflict in this alien context serves to shed light on our own perception of violence and conflict, and to show how it has directed and narrowed down our historical understanding of these phenomena when situated in contexts other than our own. On the one hand, we tend to cherish competition in the field of economics as an expression of capitalist principles, and even if few today would adhere to the "invisible hand" of the market, it still forms an ideal (to many), with the state relegated to the position of watchman. Moreover, competition among states has been regarded as driving state formation and growth in European history for the last five hundred years. On the other hand, we are allergic to intrastate violent competition, which by definition constitutes a break with the state's monopoly of power. This historically contingent view of conflict has proved its worth in furnishing the West with a political system that has helped it develop into the most affluent region ever seen in world history. Yet our success story does not turn us into good analysts of other societies. Some want to use it as a blueprint for historical evolution, as in the cry for a phase of Enlightenment as a precondition for modernization. In international relations, it forms the backdrop of Western intervention in wars all around the world, with the overarching goal of spreading western political systems and ideas. However, given the failures of Western interventionism during the last decades, at least a doubt about the propensity to learn from Western experience would not be totally misplaced, perhaps along with a reflection on why resistance to such external impositions is so resilient and runs so deep. Here medieval history has a mission in showing that a thousand years ago, people had widely different views on conflict and violence from today, and that the state started out not as a common benefactor but more as a "great band of robbers," in the words of Augustine.[34] The point is not that contemporary non-Western societies are "medieval," but that our conception of violence and order is historically atypical and should make us wary about extending our preconceptions to other times and places. In this book, I have tried to dismantle the towering image of the state by using the concept of constant crisis, with its notions of ingrained violent struggle and power balance as vehicles for analyzing society.

It is a commonplace to state that democracy is the prime Western contribution to world history and what the rest of the world now increasingly emulates or should emulate. However, we tend to pass over the fact that in Europe, democracy grew out of a millennium of struggle within society, where its main components were in the making long before they were launched as political principles during more or less glorious revolutions. During most of the medieval and early modern periods, "democracy" primarily consisted of demands, protests, and petitions that troubled and irritated kings, the more so as they had to take them into account somehow. They did so grudgingly, according not to principles but to exigencies, so that finally a political system grew out of this endless tug-of-war that could be termed "democracy." It was the result of a constant crisis where all aimed for dominance and used all available means—including violent ones—to attain it. That this constant crisis ended in a peaceful order governed by a central body is one of the great ironies of history.

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[34] For such a juxtaposition of medieval and modern evidence, see Orning and Østerud, *Krig uten stat*.

Appendix: Constant Crisis: Timeline, 1196–1208

1196

- Winter: The Birchlegs were in control of most of Norway after having put down the rebellion of Island Beards in 1194. They stayed the winter in Viken, the area where they usually had least control.
- Spring: The Crozier group was established by Reidar sendemann, Bishop Nikolas, the archbishop and other Norwegian magnates with the child Inge, alleged son of the deceased King Magnus Erlingsson, as king. The Croziers sailed to Viken, where the Birchlegs withdrew after an inconclusive battle in Seimsfjorden.
- Summer/fall: The Birchlegs sailed from Viken to Vestlandet and Trøndelag. The Croziers established themselves in Viken.

1197

- Winter: The Croziers stayed in Viken; the main bulk of Birchlegs spent the winter in Nidaros. Inge Magnusson was acclaimed king at Borgarthing.
- Spring: Sverre mustered a fleet from Trøndelag and Vestlandet and sailed to Viken. In a battle in Oslo the Birchlegs won, and thereafter sailed around in Viken demanding taxes and fines from the peasants.
- Summer/fall: The Croziers traveled over land to Nidaros, where they ambushed the Birchlegs there. The latter tried to take the

town back, but the Croziers managed to ambush them a second time. The Birchlegs tried to oust the Croziers from Viken, but failed, as the Croziers avoided open battle and had support in the area. Most of the Birchlegs sailed to Bergen.

1198

- Winter: Sverre had control only over Vestlandet, whereas the Croziers were in control in Østlandet and had taken Nidaros for the time being.
- Spring: The Birchlegs sailed from Bergen to Nidaros, only to find that the Croziers now had more and larger ships. The naval battle at Torsberg in May ended inconclusively, but the Croziers still had the upper hand at sea. Sverre took back Nidaros, where the inhabitants were favorable to the Birchlegs. The Croziers now controlled Vestlandet in addition to Østlandet.
- Summer/fall: Both groups had their main forces in Bergen. Many skirmishes were fought, but in the end the Birchlegs withdrew over land without having gained control over Bergen or Vestlandet. However, nor did the Croziers control Bergen, and 10 August Bishop Nikolas initiated the burning of the town. The Croziers controlled most of the coast up to Trøndelag, and they attacked Nidaros successfully during Sverre's absence.

1199

- Winter: The Birchlegs controlled only Nidaros and Trøndelag, where the Croziers continually attacked them from the sea. The peasants in Trøndelag agreed to build a large number of tall ships for the Birchlegs.
- Summer/fall: In the battle of Strindfjorden on 17 June, the Birchlegs won. After the battle, the Birchlegs pursued the Croziers all the way to Denmark.

1200

- Winter: The Birchlegs spent the winter in Viken with a large army. Some Croziers stayed on in Viken, others sailed from

Denmark to Bergen and Nidaros, making speedy and successful attacks on the latter town.

- SPRING: On 6 March, allegedly more than 50,000 peasants arose against the Birchlegs, who won a tight victory but left for Bergen immediately afterward.
- SUMMER/FALL: The Birchlegs returned to Viken with a large fleet, burning and forcing the peasants along the coast to submit, but returned to Bergen in late fall.

1201

- WINTER: The main bulk of the Birchlegs stayed in Bergen, most of the Croziers in Viken.
- SPRING: The Birchlegs returned to Viken with a large fleet.
- SUMMER/FALL: The Birchlegs sailed around in the eastern part of Viken, forcing all peasants along the coast into submission. 8 September they started a siege of the Croziers at Berget, a semi-natural fortification in the town of Tunsberg.

1202

- WINTER: The Birchlegs continued the siege of Berget, which ended on 25 January after twenty weeks with the Croziers succumbing. The remaining Croziers stayed in the inland of Østlandet—Opplanda.
- SPRING: Sverre died on 9 March in Tunsberg. (Here *Sverris saga* ends and *Böglunga sögur* commences.) A swift Birchleg expedition to Nidaros secured the election of Sverre's son Håkon as king at Eyrathing.
- SUMMER/FALL: The Croziers lost gradual support, and their king Inge Magnusson was killed on Helgøya in Mjøsa. Håkon Sverresson controlled the whole of Norway.

1203

- WINTER: Håkon Sverresson spent the winter in Viken without meeting resistance. Many of the Croziers sailed to Denmark, where they tried to raise a new group against the Birchlegs.

1204

- Winter: Håkon Sverresson spent the winter in Bergen. On New Year's Day he died under mysterious circumstances, Sverre's widow queen Margrethe being suspected of poisoning him. On 3 January the Birchlegs elected the four-year-old Guttorm, grandson of King Sverre, as the new king. Håkon galen was made earl, and Inge Bårdsson should be their leader in Trøndelag.
- Spring: When hearing about Håkon Sverresson's death, many Croziers sailed to Denmark to elect their own king. A dispute arose as to whether they should elect Erling steinvegg, who claimed to be a son of Magnus Erlingsson, or Filippus Simonsson, a nephew of Bishop Nikolas Arnesson. Erling was elected king and Filippus Simonsson earl, with the Danish King Valdemar the Victorious as arbitrator. The Croziers sailed to Borgarthing, where Erling was acclaimed king. This act initiated the second Crozier insurrection.
- Summer/fall: The Croziers gained control over Viken. On 11 August the Birchleg King Guttorm died suddenly. A succession dispute arose, the result being that Inge Bårdsson, Sverre's sister's son, was elected king, with his half-brother Håkon galen continuing as earl. The Croziers sailed to Vestlandet, where they ousted the Birchlegs in Bergen.

1205

- Winter: The Birchlegs stayed in Nidaros and the Croziers in Viken, while Opplanda was populated by both groups, and Vestlandet was an intermediate zone—probably closer to the Croziers.
- Spring: The Croziers made a speedy attack on Stavanger, killing the Birchleg leader there, but they returned when the major Birchleg fleet came from the north. The Birchlegs continued to Viken, and the Croziers withdrew to Denmark—some going to Halland and others to Jutland.
- Summer/fall: The Croziers traveled incognito in small groups to Norway. Some of them launched guerrilla attacks at various places, while the majority conquered Nidaros, where no Birchleg

leaders were present. The Birchlegs in Viken now sailed to Nidaros as fast as possible, while some remained in Bergen on the route northward. Noting these movements, the Croziers headed back to their core areas in Viken and Opplanda and resumed control there.

1206

- Winter: The Croziers were staying in Østlandet and the Birchlegs in Nidaros, with some in Bergen. During winter, the Croziers and the peasants in Viken built twenty-two large ships.
- Spring: In April the Croziers sailed with their newly built fleet along the coast from Viken to Nidaros. The result was the Norwegian "blood feast" of 22 April 1206, where Birchlegs celebrating a royal wedding were taken by surprise and almost ninety men were killed. King Inge managed to escape. The Croziers sailed southward, crossing paths with the fleet of the Birchleg earl Håkon galen. The latter avoided battle and swiftly returned to Bergen, while sending the bulk of the fleet to defend Nidaros.
- Summer/fall: Both Birchlegs and Croziers stayed in Bergen. The numerically superior Croziers stayed in town, Birchlegs in a fortified castle that they had recently erected. In the end the Birchlegs withdrew from Bergen. The Crozier fleet sailed northward, and they caught the remainder of Håkon galen's fleet by surprise in Moldefjord, resulting in the largest slaughter of the period, with two hundred Birchlegs killed.

1207

- Winter: The Croziers were firmly installed in Viken and considered spending the winter in Bergen, an indication that they had a grip on Vestlandet. In Nidaros, Håkon galen started a program of shipbuilding, emulating the successful Crozier strategy of the previous year. In January, the Crozier King Erling steinvegg died unexpectedly. His death was kept secret for a period.
- Spring: After a disputed dynastic succession, the experienced Crozier earl Filippus Simonsson was elected as their new king in

April at Borgarthing. The Birchlegs acted on the news of Erling's demise by attacking Østlandet, forcing the Croziers to leave. The Croziers sailed to Bergen, where they won the castle from the Birchlegs and burnt it down. Håkon galen sailed to Bergen, but the Croziers returned to Østlandet, where they had some indecisive encounters with King Inge.

- SUMMER/FALL: Håkon galen sailed to Østlandet to assist his brother Inge, whereas the Croziers sailed in the opposite direction, avoided Håkon galen, and came to Bergen, where they had no trouble conquering the castle that Håkon had rebuilt for a third time. The Croziers sailed on to Nidaros, which they won, and Filippus was acclaimed king at Eyrathing. Afterward they sailed southward, avoiding the northbound Birchleg fleet and continuing all the way to Viken.

1208

- WINTER: Archbishop Tore and Bishop Nikolas took the initiative to discuss a truce between the Croziers and the Birchlegs.
- SUMMER/FALL: The Birchlegs and the Croziers agreed to a settlement at Kvitingsøy, dividing the country between the two groups. The Birchlegs were granted Trøndelag and Vestlandet, and the royal title remained with Inge Bårdsson, whereas the Croziers retained Østlandet and the title of earl for their former king Filippus Simonsson.

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Roman letters with Scandinavian diacritics are interfiled in the standard English alphabet. The letter Þ appears after the letter Z in the index.