

# Social and Geographic Mobility in Medieval Norway

---

SVERRE HÅKON BAGGE

Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen, Postboks 7805, 5020 Bergen, Norway. Email: [Sverre.Bagge@uib.no](mailto:Sverre.Bagge@uib.no)

The kings' travel patterns in thirteenth-century Norway raise the question of the relationship between geographic and social mobility. A clearer social hierarchy would reduce the king's need for travelling and the introduction of permanent and professional administrators would mean that these people would visit the king rather than vice versa. Moreover, the king did not travel exclusively for political reasons, but also for hunting and other entertainments and on pilgrimages. The changes in this field form a significant part of the development of European monarchy.

The change from a highly mobile to a more sedentary kingship seems to have been a general pattern in medieval and early modern Europe, which in turn corresponds to a trend towards a more impersonal government. An early, non-bureaucratic government needed the frequent presence of the king to function. With impersonal, bureaucratic government, this was no longer necessary; the king travelled less, at least for administrative and bureaucratic reasons, as can be illustrated by Louis XIV who spent most of his time in Versailles, although he did travel to various other places as well.

In the following, we shall attempt to trace this development in one country, namely, Norway.<sup>1</sup> By the middle of the thirteenth century, Norway had been a kingdom ruled by one dynasty for around 250 years, although there had often been periods of internal struggles and rivalries between pretenders. These struggles came to an end in 1240, when the country entered a stable period under an established dynasty, until it entered first into a union with Sweden (from 1319) and then with Denmark (from 1387). Christianity had been introduced in the early eleventh century and an ecclesiastical organisation, similar to that in the rest of Europe, had been established. The royal as well as the ecclesiastical organisation had undergone considerable development during this period, to the extent that we may talk of a rudimentary

1. All the necessary factual information can be found in the following overviews: Bagge (2010), Bagge (2014), Helle (2003), and Kouri and Olesen (2016).

bureaucratic structure. At the same time, the king's personal presence was still essential, which in turn necessitated frequent movement.

In the twenty-first century, Norway is a large and thinly populated country, and this was of course even more the case in the middle ages, when the country's borders were almost the same – the territory was actually somewhat larger – but the population was of course only a fraction of the present one. The distance from north to south in Norway equals the distance from the south of the country to Rome. The population of the country today is around 5 million, while estimates for the middle ages vary from 400,000 to 600,000 before the first arrival of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century and 150–200,000 afterward. Of course, it was impossible for the king to intervene in person in large parts of the country, although not quite as difficult as it might immediately seem. He had the advantage of a long and protected coast that, at least to some extent, was navigable even in winter and along which the great majority of the population lived.

The king's travel pattern is best known from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, partly from the Saga of King Håkon Håkonsson (1217–1263), composed shortly after the king's death and probably to some extent based on official records, and partly from charters, which became more numerous from the second half of the thirteenth century. The king mostly spent the summer travelling by ship between Oslo and Bergen, while winter, centred on the Christmas celebrations, was spent in one place, usually Bergen. There was no capital in the middle ages but the king mostly confined his longer stays to a few towns: Bergen (most often), Oslo and Tønsberg, all situated along the normal itinerary. He rarely travelled north of Bergen to Trondheim and hardly ever to Northern Norway. The distance between Bergen and Trondheim is considerable, but was clearly possible to cover by sea, although a good alternative was to travel over land from Oslo in winter, when sledges and skis could be used. The main reason for the rarity of these visits, however, seems to have been the fact that Trondheim was the archbishop's main residence and was dominated by him.

From the late twelfth and early thirteenth century the country was divided into around 50 districts, called *sysla*, governed by a *syslumaðr*, an officer corresponding to the bailiff, sheriff or *bailli* in other countries, i.e. a man, normally of aristocratic, although not usually the very highest, rank, who acted on the king's behalf within a clearly defined district. In addition, the country was divided into ten legal districts, each headed by a judge (*logmaðr*). These men were probably in relatively close contact with the king. King Håkon V (1299–1319) ordered the *syslumenn* to send him frequent reports in writing and to visit him in person at regular intervals. He may also have visited some of these officials quite often on his travels and they may have been present during the Christmas celebrations.

What did the king do during these travels? King Håkon's saga gives a detailed account of his itinerary but has little information about what he did, unless some extraordinary event took place. Did he control accounts and legal practice? Were his visits opportunities for ordinary people to approach him and ask for help, possibly against his own officials? There are stories about this in the sagas but not much

detail. There is also evidence in the charters but usually no particular connection between the charter and the place where it was issued. The limited amount of preserved charters suggests that quite a number of cases were brought before the king, mainly by members of the elite, but also by ordinary people. Most of the administrative documents from this period have been lost, but there is evidence that the king dealt with a number of cases involving individuals, including people of lower rank. Thus, people who had committed homicide – which happened relatively often at the time – had to approach the king in person to have the normal punishment, outlawry, changed into a heavy fine.

In addition to his regular travelling pattern in Norway, the king was also sometimes abroad, in connection with foreign policy, war and diplomacy. King Håkon Håkonsson (1217–1263) led an expedition to Scotland in 1263 and King Eirik (1280–1299) and his brother and successor Håkon V (1299–1319) fought in Denmark in the 1290s. In most cases, however, the king acted through his representatives.

The typical royal sport in medieval and early modern Europe was hunting. It has even been suggested that the main pattern determining the itinerary of King Philip IV of France was the opportunity for hunting. However, Norwegian sources have little to tell about this. The saga of Håkon Håkonsson mentions that Håkon's eldest son, also named Håkon, died from a disease he had caught on a hunting expedition. In addition, there is an explicit discussion of hunting in the mid-thirteenth-century *Konungs skuggsjá* (*The King's Mirror*). Here, the author strikes a middle way between the enthusiasm for the sport in secular circles and the clerical condemnation of it: it is a good exercise, but should be practised with moderation, so that it does not interfere with more serious work.

In the early middle ages, the king often seems to have visited and been entertained by wealthy people on his travels. This probably still happened in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but apparently more rarely, as he now had elaborate palaces in the main towns, in addition to various farms in the countryside.

In his history of the kings of Norway, the Icelandic saga writer Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) includes an anecdote about the national saint, King Olav Haraldsson or St Olav (king 1015–1030). One morning, the king is lying awake in his bed, while his men are asleep around him. The sun has just risen and the room is in full daylight. The king notices that one of the men, called Thorarin, has stuck one of his feet outside the bed. Then, the other men in the room wake up:

The king said to Thorarin, 'I have been awake for a while, and I have seen a sight which seems to me worth seeing, and that is, a man's foot so ugly that I don't think there is an uglier one here in this town.' And he called on the others to look at it and see whether they thought so too. And all who looked at it agreed that this was the case. Thorarin understood what it was they talked about and said, 'There are few things so unusual that their likes cannot be found, and that is most likely to be true here too.'

This discussion then leads to a bet between the king and Thorarin as to whether or not there can be found an equally ugly foot, the winner having the right to demand a favour from the loser. Thorarin then produces his other foot, saying:

‘Look here, Sire, at my other foot. That is so much uglier for lacking a toe. I have won.’ The king replied, ‘The first foot is the uglier because there are five hideous toes on it, whilst this one has only four. So it is I who has the right to ask a favour of you.’

Here we find a very small distance between the king and his men. They are sleeping in the same room and there is a playful tone between them. The sagas dealing with the periods before the thirteenth century are full of similar stories, whereas there is less of this in the saga of Håkon Håkonsson. In addition, *The King’s Mirror*, probably composed in the 1250s, depicts the king as mirroring God on earth and emphasises the deference and respect his men should show him.

Still, however, the king’s personal relationship to his men was of great importance. In November 1239, Duke Skule Bårdsson proclaimed himself king in Trondheim, thus challenging the current ruler, Håkon IV Håkonsson, who had ascended the throne in 1217, in competition with Skule himself. In the intermediate period, Skule had ruled one third of the country as earl and later duke. The rebellion took place when Håkon was celebrating Christmas with his men in Bergen. At the news of the rebellion, Håkon took various precautions, but he did not interrupt the celebrations. Some people blamed him for this and gave him the nick-name Håkon Sleep, but there is much to indicate that Håkon did the right thing. The decisive factor in the struggle was to retain his men’s loyalty; which seems to have been achieved by eating and drinking with them rather than dragging them out in mid-winter to fight the rebel. The outcome suggests that Håkon was right. Half a year later Skule was defeated and killed and Håkon remained the sole ruler of the country.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are the ‘classical period’ regarding travelling. Whereas now the king’s itinerary was confined to a limited part of the country and he mostly resided in his own palaces, the early-medieval pattern was almost constant movement all over the country, during which the king was often the guest of some local chieftain. An important reason for this was that there were as yet no taxes; the king received his revenue in the form of hospitality: local people and communities entertained him for a limited period. In addition, writing was rarely used or not at all, and the king’s authority was weaker than in the following period.

A change in the opposite direction took place in the later middle ages. In 1319, the dynasty became extinct in the male line and the king’s maternal grandson, Magnus, son of the Swedish Duke Erik, succeeded to the throne in both countries at the age of three. During his minority, both countries were governed by regencies consisting of leading noblemen. When Magnus came of age, he continued to rule in the same way as his predecessors, with the exception that he had two countries to govern rather than one and consequently could spend less time in each of them than did his predecessors.

The great change took place around 1400, when the union consisted of three countries – a combination of deaths in the royal families and the ambitions and

political skill of the Dowager Queen Margrete of Denmark had united all three kingdoms under one ruler. Then a central administration was established in Copenhagen, and the king relatively rarely visited the other countries, or at least he confined himself to the border regions to the south. Whereas Sweden remained in the union only for shorter periods after 1450, Norway was joined to Denmark until 1814, first as an in principle equal partner (until 1537) and then as subordinate to Danish rule.

During the union with Denmark, most kings visited Norway only once during their reigns, usually in order to receive the crown. However, the political result of this differed significantly over the period. Partly because of the union and partly because of the reduced population after the Black Death, after the mid-fourteenth century the administration was simplified. The number of local administrators was drastically reduced and the castles, of which there were few in Norway, became the main administrative centres. Thus, the three main residences of the king in the previous period, Oslo, Tønsberg and Bergen, all with castles, became centres of larger districts, although a number of other, smaller units still remained, but these were often merged or divided to reward particular royal favourites. The general trend was considerable independence for the commanders of these castles, as long as they sent the agreed revenues to the king and supported him in war. On the other hand, their opportunity to administer their large districts was limited; often, it seems that their control was confined to the areas close to the castle. The system thus resulted in a revival of local independence or, in other words, an exception to the general theory.

In the next phase, however, we are back to normal. Partly as the result of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, but above all of the great wars in the seventeenth century, an increasing bureaucratisation took place. Taxes increased, as did the number of crimes and the severity of their punishment, and local administrations were extended and streamlined and more closely subordinated to the king and his government. Although the king was rarely seen in the country, it was possible to visit him in Copenhagen, which a number of people actually did. Moreover, his picture and symbols were everywhere and his local representatives insisted on his quasi-divine status and the obedience due to him. Distance could clearly work, the more so as, particularly in the eighteenth century, the kings were not personally very impressive. Thus, Frederik V (1746–1766) was an alcoholic and his son, Christian VII (1766–1808), was mad.

The distant king in Norway has of course much to do with the fact that Norway was in a union with Denmark and that the travel distance between the two countries was considerable. However, it is a general trend that the early-modern king was more distant from his subjects than his medieval predecessors. Bureaucratisation, centralisation and the increasing use of letters and documents made the king's personal presence less necessary, and images and symbols could not only replace this presence but might even be more effective; distance created more respect than did presence.

This may also solve the apparent paradox that in the contemporary State, which is stronger and intervenes more in people's lives than any other in history, kings, presidents and politicians travel more and are seen more often by their subjects than at any other time in history. The contemporary state is strong but it also has to appeal

more to its subjects than any previous time in history. When, in addition, modern technology also makes it easier to travel than at any other time in history, it becomes obvious why the previous trend is now reversed.

### References

- Bagge S** (2010) *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. State Formation in Norway c. 900–1350*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press
- Bagge S** (2014) *Cross and Scepter. The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Helle K** (ed.) (2003) *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kouri EI and Olesen J** (eds) (2016) *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia II 1520–1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### About the Author

**Sverre Håkon Bagge** is Emeritus Professor of Medieval history at Bergen University. His recent publications include: ‘Warrior, king and saint: the medieval histories about St. Olaf Haraldsson’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* **109**(3), (2010), 281–321; *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. State Formation in Norway, c.900–1350* (København: Museum Tusculanum Forlag, 2010); ‘Ethics, politics, and providence in William of Malmesbury’s *Historia Novella*’, *Viator* **41**, (2010), 113–132; ‘The model emperor – Eginhard’s *Charlemagne* in Widukind and Rahewin’, *Viator* **43**, (2012); *Cross and Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); and *State Formation in Europe, 843–1789. A Divided World* (London: Routledge, 2019).