

THE BACKGROUND OF YNGLINGASAGA

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This paper develops the suggestion, made in The Making of Sweden, that Ynglingasa, although of no value as a source for the period it purports to describe, gives a realistic impression of the mechanisms of power in late Viking-Age Scandinavia, which were much the same as in other parts of early medieval Europe. In elaborating Ynglingatal Snorri adapted traditions about relatively recent Danish and Swedish history that were current in his time, and were related by Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic historians, including Snorri himself. There are many remarkable parallels. Apart from the general theme of Danish domination, there are detailed similarities. The meeting of three kings (c. 38) appears to echo that reported in 1101. Aun was driven from his kingship of Uppsala twice, and found exile in Västergötland (c. 25), as did both Olof Skötkonung and Inge I. Snorri notes, without comment, that Ingjald was the last of the dynasty to rule the Svear, implying that later rulers belonged to a different dynasty; such a change occurred when Sverker became king of the Svear in or before 1135. The only Swedish king who did not submit to Ingjald was Hogni, king of Östergötland (c. 39). That may reflect the leading role of Östergötland under Inge I and Sverker (and perhaps earlier) but Snorri may also have been influenced by his contact with Eskil, lawman of Västergötland, a member of a family based in Östergötland that was already powerful in the early thirteenth century, and in 1250 obtained the Swedish kingship. The description of Sigtuna as a base for the conquest of the Svear by a Danish ruler (c. 31) is particularly intriguing in the light of recent studies that have suggested that in the eleventh century the town was indeed a base for a new, and alien, type of royal authority in the region.

If, as argued in this paper, Ynglingasaga reflected relatively recent political developments in Scandinavia it is worth considering whether it can provide clues to the political structure of Sweden before its unification in the twelfth century. In this saga Snorri depicts Sweden as a collection of kingdoms corresponding to provinces that existed when he wrote. One of

them, Södermanland, appears to have been newly formed in the eleventh century and there are grounds for suspecting that several others were not much older. Small kingdoms of the kind Snorri described are also likely to have been late developments. The earlier pattern seems to have been much like that in Iceland, with competing chieftains whose power was over men rather than territory. Many Scandinavian chieftains acknowledged the distant overlordship of Danish kings, who for much of the time dominated the region. It was the collapse of Danish power in the late ninth century and again in the eleventh that made possible many of the independent kingdoms in Norway and Sweden that are mentioned or implied in eleventh- and early twelfth-century sources. The collapse of the Merovingian empire in the seventh century had a similar result.