TRADING PLACES: ROYALTY AND URBANISM IN NORSE LITERATURE

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The establishment of urban centres and of stable monarchical governments were central features of the evolution of the Middle Ages in Scandinavia, as in the rest of Germanic Europe. It is a basic premiss of this paper that much medieval Scandinavian literature reflects a struggle on the part of the literary community to come to terms with its own relatively recent and abrupt incorporation into the cultural mainstream of western Europe. The tension involved in that development is revealed by the variety of results: from resistance to the recognition of cultural change in some cases to acceptance and approbation in others, with many different imaginative representations of contemporary phenomena to suit the preconceptions and traditions of different literary contexts in between. Literary art was not, however, in a completely subservient position to the social and economic context, at best following and responding to uncontrollable changes in that milieu. Rather it can give us valuable insights into the perception and manipulation of such contexts by a medieval community. In the present case it shows how royalty and urbanism did not just exist as political and material/economic constructs, but have to be understood as cognitive entities as well.

There are few sources which provide us with direct and reliable information about political organization in early Germanic Europe — particularly in Scandinavia — before the establishment of national kingdoms. This is because administrative literacy and, consequently, literate historiography are the natural associates of the level of political centralization represented by kingdoms of this kind, and not of the less focussed, usually more flexible, social systems that preceded them. We can claim to know something about those preceding stages, partly on the strength of a few early ethnographical sources such as Strabo and Tacitus, and partly on the basis of analogy, both in the societies of comparable Iron-age European cultures (e.g. Caesar on the Celts) and in the societies of apparently comparable cultures of more recent times (see, e.g., Service 1975). Archaeology is our constant source of information on the late prehistory of Scandinavia, and the archaeological record concurs with the view of 'chiefdom' societies evolving into kingdoms as the first millennium AD progressed, although there is still disagreement over the pace and timing of the change in different parts of Scandinavia (Myhre 1987; Hedeager 1992; Mikkelsen and Henning Larsen ed. 1992; Axboe 1995).

Although archaeologists have also found it difficult to agree on how a 'town' should be defined, no characterization of a town has been made which does not assume that it will be physically substantial. The archaeological record of the presence of towns is thus relatively good, and on the whole allows for less conjecture in historical reconstruction than does the field of political systems (Hodges 1989; Bencard *et al.* 1990; Clarke and Ambrosiani 1991). This point is reinforced by the diversity of remains and records which the complex economic and social life of towns generates, so that it is even possible for the existence of early-medieval urban

sites such as Quentovic (France) and Truso (Poland) to have been known of long before their precise locations were known and the actual sites discovered (Hill *et al.* 1990; Jagodziński 1988).

Less simple a matter, however, is that of understanding the development of towns in terms of their general historical context. We can accept without debate that towns are sites of specialized exchange, both material and social (i.e. functions such as administration and jurisdiction are forms of non-material, interpersonal exchange), accommodated within permanently occupied, built structures, which also presuppose economic specialization, on the basis of which towns can grow in size far beyond the practical limits of rural agricultural units (villages). Before the towns, however, trade and exchange were conducted, even over long distances and in both bulk commodities and luxury goods, through non-urban systems (see Hårdh *et al.* ed. 1988), and royal administration could be exercised by peripatetic kings and courts from a series of halls and *villae regales*. The Church, which was established in southern and western Germany and England from the end of the sixth century onwards, later in Frisia, northern Germany and Scandinavia, required permanent sites; and as episcopal sees attracted royal palaces or other administrative offices and grew into cathedral cities these gave some impetus to urbanization; but in the known historical sequence this cannot be identified as *the* vital catalyst to the emergence of towns in northern Europe. The foundation of such towns is rather believed to have been chiefly the product of royal policies which were aimed at both encouraging and controlling economic exchange — providing secure centres for production and trade, and taxing these. There is thus a close link between the political phenomenon of royal monarchy and the process of urbanization in northern Europe. No clearer example could be found than Óláfr Tryggvason's reported founding of the city which hosts this year's saga conference, Niðaróss/Trondheim, just as Óláfr kyrri later founded Bergen (*ÓsT* LXX; *Ósk* II).

It was only at the end of the Middle Ages that European literature began to contain, on a regular basis, the celebration of the urban context as a scene in which urbane drama could occur; consequently it is no surprise that Norse literature consistently prioritizes persons over places in its dramatic narratives, and as a result appears to offer a great deal on the theme of kingship and little on that of urbanization. Even in Norse literature, however, the situation varies from literary context to literary context; in particular in relation to the literary genre — which implies a literary tradition — and the date of the text. Thus there is, to start with the simplest case, no place at all for urbanism in the poetry of the Edda; a body of literature which does, however, reflect the unreal ideal of a hall- and country-based aristocracy, feasting, gaming, loving and hunting, and which stigmatizes artificers and producers as cripples or dwarfs.

Skaldic poetry similarly continues to represent its heroes in a largely traditional mode right down to the second half of the thirteenth century and the poetry concerning King Hákon Hákonarson. The emphasis on persons is consistently strong; the attention to place consistently sparse. Towns are mentioned primarily as points of reference for an area on the map rather than as entities of any interest in themselves. Thus Hedeby serves largely to denote the southern limit of Scandinavia

(Þórleikr fagri; *Skj.* B I 365-8):

Fúrsendir vann fjǫndum	The dispenser of the fire
fjǫrspell í gný hjǫrva	of the hawk's land took life from
(brǫð fekk hrafn) fyr Heiða	enemies in the clash of swords (the
haukstaðr bœ norðan;	raven was fed) to the north of Hedeby;
rǫ́kusk Vinðr...	few Wends escaped.
...fáir undan.	

Bergen, likewise, may be cited as the natural goal of those approaching the south-western coast of Norway by sea. An exception piece of apparent urban realism occurs in a verse of Earl Rǫgnvaldr (*Skj.* B I: 479):

Vér hǫfum vaðnar leirur	We have waded in mud
vikur fimm megingrimmar;	five awful weeks;
saurs era vant, er vǫ́rum	there is no lack of mud where
viðr, í Grímsbœ miðjum;	we were in the middle of Grimsby.
nú'r þats mǫ́s of mýrar	But now with equal cheer we make
meginkátliga lǫ́tum	the elk of the prows
branda elg á bylgjur	speed over the waves
Bjǫrgynjar til dynja.	of the sea-gull's mere to Bergen.

The representation of Grimsby here is, of course, the hyper-realism of a Dickensian caricature. Functionally, it serves to contrast with the apparently clean and open surroundings of Bergen, where ships and gulls swoop. Bergen, however, appears only as a point on the horizon, beyond the sea and the waves, not as the cramped, damp and smelly settlement we know it actually was then. Even in the thirteenth century, the contrast between the heroic outdoors and the anti-heroic townscape remains perfectly clear in a verse of Játgeirr Torfason (*Skj.* B II: 93):

Rjóðr sák hlœkinn heðna	Reddener of the battle-drift of
hjaldrdrifs á Kyrfjalli	the ground of the hard serpent, I saw
stirðaurriða storðar	unmanly Þóri wrapped up
stórfjarri mér Þóri;	far away from me on Kyrfjall;
þat frák líkn, es lékum,	I heard it was his heart's comfort,
lungtors, við Ribbunga,	while we sported with the Ribbungar,
dásinn lá at við dísi	that the wretch lay with a dwarf-house
dvergranns í Túnsbergi.	lady in Tønsberg.

In the mid-thirteenth century, the panegyrics for Hákon Hákonarson show an interestingly more realistic appreciation of the infrastructural importance of the towns to the king (e.g. *Skj.* B II: 107 v.10; 124 v.29; and Sturlu Þorðarson's *Hákonarflokkr*, *Skj.* B II: 132-4). Yet the town and its activities still seem to be an awkward motif for skaldic verse to handle.

This point is corroborated for us by the differences found in the more adaptable medium of prose, as it flourished as a narrative medium in the thirteenth century. In, for instance, the sections of *Íslendingasögur* set in Norway, or in

England, or in the *konungasögur*, references to towns are both natural and frequent; and the association between royalty and town is unmistakable. Towns are usually referred to in saga prose simply because that is precisely where the kings are to be found. Phrases such as *'Bjǫrn...sat optast í Túnsbergi'* (*HsH* XXXV), *'Magnús konungr...fór norðr til Bjǫrgynjar ok settisk þar um vetrinn'* (*MsB* III), or *'þeir koma til Þrándheims ok finna Óláf konung í Niðarósi'* (*ÓsT* LXXVI) are practically formulaic.

Yet it is not merely the irresistable pressure of realism that is reflected in this development. The town is adopted as a motif by Icelandic historiography and woven into the and dramatic artistic texture of this literature. When Icelanders meet Norwegian kings they often — inevitably — did so in towns; but such meetings are just as inevitably recorded in saga literature as events of significance and consequence, not mundane social calls. Even if he does not realize it, for instance, Kjartan Óláfsson (*Laxd.* XL) goes to Niðaróss to meet Óláfr Tryggvason and to become a model of the willing Icelandic convert. The details of the process as narrative are vital and revealing. Kjartan first meets and competes in strength with an Óláfr literally stripped of his royal guise, and impresses him to the same extent as he is pleased with Óláfr to accept a cloak as (nominally) a gift from him. The king subsequently deals generously with Kjartan, excusing him the hot-headed threat against his life, and so further preparing the way for his eventual conversion, which he declares to Kjartan he was willing to fulfil *"...þóttú værir nǫkkuru kaupdýrri"*.

Óláfr's figure of speech here is profoundly appropriate. The towns were set up as *kaupstaðir* — as trading places, or bargaining sites; sites where explicit negotiation was the rule. The royal government, according to our usual understanding, established towns so as to control and profit from such business; but royalty did not remain aloof and separate from this commerce. Kings did not live at traditional estate centres but relocated within their towns. And within the saga literature we see them exercising and developing their power, not by *diktat* and brute force, but by making deals. Kings usually negotiated from positions of strength, like some powerful cartel, it is true; yet within the town they could be flexible in their actions, to their own and others' advantage, in a way that seems to be deined them outside of that context.

If we look at the chapters of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* around the episode of the conversion of Iceland, for instance, we not only see Óláfr negotiating that business (Chs. LXXXII and LXXXIV) but also striking a bargain with Hallfrøðr Vandræðaskáld (LXXXIII), formerly Earl Hákon's man. There is a very marked contrast between Óláfr's treatment of Hárekr Eyvindarson, who has Christianity pressed upon him in Niðaróss, but is sent away laden with both gifts and a threat after persisting in his refusal to be baptised (LXXV), and the immediate execution of Rauðr inn rammi (LXXVIII-LXXX) for his intrangisence:

> Lét þá konungr leiða Rauð fyrir sik, bauð honum at láta skírask. "Mun ek þá," segir konungr, "ekki taka of þér eigu þína, vera heldr vinr þinn, ef þú kannt til gæta." Rauðr œpði á móti því, segir at aldri skyldi hann á Krist trúa, ok guðlastaði mjǫk. Konungr varð þá reiðr og sagði, at Rauðr skyldi hafa inn

versta dauða. Þá lét konungr taka hann ok binda opinn á slá eina, lét setja kefli á millum tanna honum ok lúka svá upp munninn. Þá lét konungr taka lyngorm einn ok bera at munni honum, en ormrinn vildi eigi í munninn ok hrøkkðisk frá í brot, því at Rauðr blés í móti honum. Þá lét konungr taka hvannnjólatrumbu ok setja í munn Rauð — en sumir menn segja, at konungr léti lúðr sinn setja í munn honum — ok lét þar í ormrinn, lét bera útan at slájárn glóanda. Hrøkkðisk þá ormrinn í munn Rauð ok síðan í hálsinn ok skar út um síðuna. Lét Rauðr þar líf sitt.

This takes place at Rauðr's farmstead. There are complicating factors of course. Rauðr is introduced as *blótmaðr mikill ok mjǫk fjǫlkunnigr*, so that there is no real hope of his conversion; shortly before this, the same excuse is given retrospectively for Óláfr's equally brutal killing of Eyvindr kinnrifa (LXXVI), a prisoner brought back to Niðaróss and refusing conversion. In amongst these events Óláfr visits Hárekr at Þjótta, where the latter accepts baptism without debate. There was no negotiation out in Hålogaland: *bar þá engi maðr traust til at mæla í móti*.

The same situation can be found yet again in the *hǫfuðlausn* episode in *Egils saga*, where it is in the town of York that Eiríkr is for once able to take charge of a situation and to come — nominally temporarily, but actually finally — to terms with Egill. In a recent discussion of this episode (Hines 1995) I argued that it was significant that it was in England that this erstwhile Norwegian king and born enemy of Egill could thus retrieve some dignity. This view does not have to change — in attributing structural significance to the urban situation, we could claim to be looking at the immediate context which supplies the practical mechanisms whereby Egill and Eiríkr can be reconciled rather than the bigger context which allows their reconciliation to fit in the whole saga structure. Thus the urban context juxtaposes the negotiating parties' houses, Arinbjǫrn's and Eiríkr's, and the *fora* and private spaces where the deals can be made and Egill can produce his poem. In this context, Gunnhildr's magic is powerless. We can also note an essential difference between the poetic version of the fiction, in which Egill has produced the poem in his own time and space,

Vestr fórk of ver,	I travelled west over the sea
en ek Viðris ber	and I carry the sea
munstrandar mar,	of Viðrir's mind-shore,
svá's mitt of far.	such is my course.
Drók eik á flot	I hauled an oak afloat
við ísabrot;	at the breaking of the ice;
hlóðk mærðar hlut	I loaded a portion of praise
munknarrar skut.	in the stern of the mind-ship,

and the prose fiction, where the 'goods' are produced to order within a sequence of rapid exchange.

The value of Norse literature as a historical source can be more fully appreciated when it is recognized that history is not only the narrative of date-to-date events and the identification and explanation of major changes in time. There is also

a history of long-term process, within which consistency and stability may far outweigh change. The latter is much more easily recognized from an archaeological perspective, using both the evidence of material remains, in their entirety, not selectively, and the anthropological theory which is essential to modern archaeology. It enhances both literary studies and historical studies to add the literary artefact to all the other evidence of cultural history; for this is not to reduce the literary text to something which tells you exactly the same as any other type of artefact but rather something which yields the most precise characterization of both what is special, and what is culturally general, in the literary composition.

Royalty and urbanization were closely linked innovations of the early Middle Ages. For simple but important literary reasons, kingship was adopted as a major and substantial theme in contemporary literature while social and economic topics, such as urbanism, were largely excluded, marginalized or stigmatized. When medieval Norse literature does finally accommodate the urban phenomenon it does so on its own controlled terms. This fact is not so immediately obvious because the distinct dramatic role assigned to the town as a trading place in the prose literature is also a realistic one. But this also allows us to realize that the actual operation of a town depended upon a particular understanding of what a town was there for — the town was, in this sense, not only a type of place but also a state of mind. And it is precisely this that is only revealed by the literature.

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