The Politics of Violence and the Transition from Viking Age to Medieval Scandinavia

THOMAS LINDKVIST

The Age of the Vikings (ca 750–1100) is one of the most spectacular periods in the history of the Scandinavian peoples. The Viking Age corresponds in Northern Europe to what in general is termed the High Middle Ages. This age is often considered as a violent and cruel one. The word 'Viking' contains both an ethnic classification, a Northener, and a functional one, a man of violence.

During this period profound social changes took place. The gradual conversion to Christianity was one of the more important changes and it implied a changed world-picture and attitudes. An ecclesiastical organisation was built up. The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish kingdoms, including more solid and permanent political structures, emerged. In all it meant that societies with more or less tribal patterns were transformed to complex societies with an emerging or primitive state. Medieval ideologies, mentalities, institutions and organisations of the Western feudal culture were rather momentarily adopted. This fundamental social change included as well a functional change of violence.

The Viking Age was violent. It was also an era of expansion. Scandinavians pillaged and plundered in the West as well in the East. They frequently raided the British Isles, Northern France and along the shores of the Baltic Sea. They colonized virgin lands as the Faroe Isles, Iceland and Greenland, or they settled in ancient territories, e. g., in England, Normandy or Russia, where they quickly merged with the native population.

Traditionally the assault in 793 against the rich Northumbrian monastery Lindisfarne is considered as the starting point of the Viking Age; although the raids probably commenced some years earlier. The violent Viking raids petered, however, out during the course of the eleventh century. The colonization was in general peaceful. They became ordinary peasants and holders of land. The Northeners eventually somewhere established themselves as a political and social elite; but that position ceased

when the ethnic distinctions faded. Occasionally the Scandinavians established bases aimed primarily for pillage and plunder raids; the Norwegian earldom of the Orkneys is a good example, recorded in the *Orkneyinga saga*.[1] There seems in general to have been more of violent activities in the West than in the East. In chronicles and annals from the monasteries on the British Isles and in France, the Scandinavian Vikings were described as violent and cruel men. They were God's punishment. "A furore Normannorum, libera nos Domine!" was a prayer regularly performed in the Frankish kingdom during the High Middle Ages.[2]

The Viking achievements and their successes is explained by their strategic and military superiority. The long shallow ships were at first an excellent factor of surprise. From the more or less comtemporary chronicles and annales we are informed that the Scandinavians not only were settlers, but that they plundered, burnt and killed. This fame is partly a bias explained by the character and nature of those sources. The aims of the chroniclers were to record spectacular and memorable events, evil as well as good ones. The first raids were more deliberate violent and cruel than the later ones. The Scandinavians' expeditions became more organized towards the end of the Viking Age. The resistance became more effective and the Vikings became more inclined to demand tribute under the menace of violence. But the elapsing Viking Age also included temporary political conquests. The most spectacular example is the kingdom of the Dane Canute in England.

The cruelty of the Vikings was a common theme and topic in the contemporary writings. The German bishop Thietmar of Merseburg, i. a., recorded in his chronicle an assault against Stade close to Bremen in the year 994. Prisoners were taken, i. a., close relatives to Thietmar, and the "pirates" maimed and mutilated them in a most brutal and pitiless way.[3] Frankish, Irish and Anglo-Saxon chronicles have similar, sad stories to tell us.

It has, however, been pointed out that this extremely unfavourable and bad reputation of the Vikings partly depends on the origins of the

---

[1] Barbara E. Crawford, Scandinavian Scotland (Leicester 1987), pp. 39 ff.

[2] See e. g. Erling Albrectsen, Vikingerne i Franken (Odense 1976).

[3] Thietmar von Merseburg, Chronik, ch. IV, 23–25.

sources. The British historian Peter Sawyer once remarked that the Scandinavians in practice did not differ from other peoples of that period.[4]

During the late first millennium Europe experienced a lot of violence and atrocities. The political and jurisdictional structures were weak and inconsistent. Warfare between different pettier and mightier lords was the routine of the day. But the Scandinavians were pagans and thus they could plunder monasteries and other ecclesiastical establishments without any ideological and emotional restraints. The written culture and the dwellings of the recorders of the collective memories belonged to the religious communities. To them the Vikings were more cruel and more violent than others.

Eventually the Vikings were not more violent and more cruel than others. But they were, together with the Saracens and the Magyarian horsemen, considered as a deadly threat to the entire Christian community.

The Vikings and their activities in Northern Europe were unique manifestations of a general European economy of plunder. Pillage and predatory expeditions were at the end of the first millennium essential means whereby wealth could be acquired by kings, princes, lords, chieftains and other men, aiming to obtain and uphold a position of power. There were but minor possibilities to levy regular taxes, rents or tributes within their own realms.[5]

Wealth, the material base for a leading social and political position, was to a minor degree founded upon control of land and production. On the contrary, a dominant position was upheld through distribution of wealth in diverse forms. Hereby allies, followers, retinues were recruited and rewarded. Wealth was possibly acquired through an exchange of prestigious products, an exchange often described as trade. But wealth was as well amassed by violent means. This appropriation through violence comprised pillage and plunder as well as, on a more organized level, the taking of tributes under the threat of violence. The French historian Georges Duby has,

---

[4] Peter H. Sawyer, The Age of the Vikings, second ed. (London 1971), pp. 12 ff. and 202 ff. Cf., however, Peter H. Sawyer, Kings and Vikings. Scandinavia and Europe AD 700–1100 (London 1982), where the character of the Vikings as primary assaulters is stressed.

[5] Thomas Lindkvist, 'Social and Political Power in Sweden 1000–1300: Predatory Incursions, Royal Taxation, and the Formation of a Feudal State', in Ross Samson (ed.), Social Approaches to Viking Studies (Glasgow 1991), pp. 137 ff.

e. g., pointed out how a feudal society emerged around the year 1000, preceded by a stage of plunder.[6] The social, political and economic importance of plunder for the coherence of the political power within the Carolingian empire are furthermore underlined by Timothy Reuter.[7]

The particular economy of plunder of the Vikings emerged momentarily during a period when the more peaceful exchange of products became insufficient to supply and sustain the more hierarchical and stratified society that orginiated in Scandinavia. A changing political and social structure demanded more wealth that could be acquired peacefully. An important form of wealth was silver. The import of silver from the caliphate of the Abbasides, in exchange of other precious products: i. a. furs, slaves and amber, was disturbed due to the invasions of steppe peoples into the South of Russia and political upheavals within the caliphate.[8]

The outburst of violence during the Viking Age can thus be explained by a combination of internal and external factors: the lack of prestigious products and wealth that could be acquired by a potential social elite. The age of intensified external and violent appropriation meant a transformation of this social elite from warlords and pillagers to feudal lords of land, from lords of armed men to lords of a dependent peasantry. A society dominated politically by pagan petty kings was followed by the Christian kingdoms. This transformation of the society meant that the necessary or accepted violence was turned from being directed against other societies to be directed internally, to uphold a new social order. In other words: violence during the Viking Age was mainly used for appropriation externally. In the medieval society the violence was monopolized by the representatives of a state. A ruling caste or class upheld a new order, where the taxes and rents were demanded from the peasants. The violence became more organized, sophisticated and professionalized in the medieval society. The

---

[6] Georges Duby, The Early Growth of the European Economy. Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century (London 1974), pp. 112–154; Georges Duby, The Three Orders. Feudal Society Imagined (Chicago 1980), pp. 150–153.

[7] Timothy Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th ser. 35 (1985).

[8] Sture Bolin, 'Mohammed, Charlemagne and Ruric', Scandinavian Economic History Review, vol. 1 (1952); Richard Hodges, Dark Age Economics. The Origins of Towns and Trade AD 600–1000 (London 1982); Richard Hodges & David Whitehouse, Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe (London 1983).

precarious economy of plunder and external appropriation was superseded by a more stable and regular internal exploitation.

How common was violence during Viking Age? In order to illustrate everyday life and social attitudes in pre-medieval and pre-state Scandinavia the Icelandic sagas (and the Norse literature in general) are often used. The sagas were all written down during the Middle Ages, but the action is often of the Viking Age.[9] It is frequently told in these sagas that younger men went "in Viking" regularily during the summer season. To go "in Viking" could imply peaceful trade or violent pillage, or, rather common, a combination of both. These Vikings were often younger sons, lacking farm or family. They often joined the retinue of a chief or another leader. But Viking expeditions were also organized by martial confraternities. The Vikings of Jomsburg were such a confraternity, partly surrounded by fictitious legends. Eventually the stories about the Vikings of Jomsburg more reflect a martial and male ideal than an actual institution. But evidently some Viking confraternities were well organized and got a more or less permanent or at least long-lasting structure. Jomsburg was probably a base at the mouth of the river Oder for institutionalised piracy.

To participate in Viking expeditions is described as something adventurous and hazardous, but it often rendered honour, fame and respect. The Viking was a hero of the Norse literature. But it was the open or plain violence that made a hero. The clandestine violence was considered contemptible. In the saga of Egil Skallagrimsson, one of the masterpieces of the Icelandic saga literature, there is an illuminating episode. Egil participated in Viking expeditions along the shores of the Eastern Baltic. During a raid in present Estonia Egil and his followers were captured and gaoled. They managed, however, to escape after dark. They stole precious objects and ran away. When leaving the farm Egil, however, hesitated. It was not in accordance with the concept of honour to run away like a thief in the night. He therefore returned, woke the lord of the house and his household up, and then slayed all the men. Thus Egil payed respect to the general concept of honour.

This dichotomy between the open and the clandestine violence is reflected in, i. a., the medieval Swedish law codes of the thirteenth century.

---

[9] See e. g. Carol J. Clover, The Medieval Saga (Ithaca 1982), and Jesse L. Byock, Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas and Power (Berkeley 1988).

A manslaughter committed cladestinely was punished more severely than a frank and open murder.

A particular form of violence of the Viking Age was practiced by the berserks. They were professional men of violence. A berserk could at certain convenient occasions fly into a towering and uncontrollable rage. In skirmishes or in combat a berserk could at the right moment run amok. He then "went berserk"; *furor berserkicus* is the Latin term. But the berserk was not the average and regular Viking. He was instead considered as someone exceptional, dreadful and frightening. He did not in general execute the heroic Viking violence.

Sometimes berserks were members of the retinues of the kings or the earls. A berserk could be sent as a gift to another prince as a confirmation of friendship. According to *Eyrbyggja saga* the Swedish king Eric *segersäll*, the victorious, sent two berserks to earl (*jarl*) Haakon of Lade in Norway as an act of benevolence and alliance.

The berserks are only known from the Viking age and they were often associated with the pagan or pre-Christian religion. A berserk was often described as gentile in the post-conversion literature. Their extraordinary qualities derived from Woden (Oden); it was imagined that they changed guise and became wolves when they "went berserk".[10]

The Viking Age society is often considered as violent, not only externally, but also internally. Brutal actions, murder, homicide are common in the Icelandic sagas and the Norse literature. Violence was, however, punished; wergeld had to be paid; violence menacing the social order could be sentenced by outlawry, i.e. the exclusion from society. Violence was necessary to sustain the honour of an individual or the kin.[11]

The Icelandic society in the age of the sagas was characterized by a comprehensive and elaborated legal system; probably this was common in entire Scandinavia, but we have but scant information. Society was defined through the law. To be a member of society was identical to be within or to belong to the common law.[12] But an executive power was lacking before the development of a state. The more stratified and hierarchically

---

[10] Nils Lid, 'Berserk', Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid, vol. 1 (1956); Folke Ström, Nordisk hedendom. Tro och sed i förkristen tid (Stockholm 1985), p. 110.

[11] Agneta Breisch, 'Fredlöshetsbegreppet i saga och samhälle', Scripta Islandica. Isländska samhällets årsbok, vol. 39 (1988).

[12] Aaron Ya. Gurevich, Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen (Dresden 1978),

ordered society, that followed the classical Viking Age, meant that an older, community-based social balance was disturbed. More powerful men, with new means of power, undermined an established, more egalitarian community. As a consequence there were periods with outrageous social violence within the elite during the formation of an early state.

The first half of the thirteenth century is commonly termed the age of the Sturlungs in Icelandic history. The history of that period is recorded in the *Sturlunga saga*, which in fact is a collection of separate sagas.[13] That was a period with intensified violence, combined with malevolent cruelty. Maiming and mutilations were frequent. It has been demonstrated that about 350 murders or homicides are recorded in the *Sturlunga saga*.[14] But the violence was confined to a limited social elite. But this intensified violence reflects new social conflicts. Similar violent and cruel conflicts within a social elite occurred also in mainland Scandinavia after the Viking Age, although they are not documented in such detail as the Icelandic ones.

The end of the Viking Age, the end of the age of plunder meant intensified internal violence. But that violence was probably confined to this social elite, seeking to establish new forms of domination and hegemony. The gradual outcome of these brutal struggles for power was the rise of the kingdoms in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In Iceland the result was the end of the independent community and the incorporation of the island within the realm of the Norwegian kingdom.

The genesis of the medieval society was violent, but it meant the birth of a feudal society with a new social order. The social function of violence and the attitudes towards it changed in Scandinavia as elsewhere. The origins of a kingdom and an incipient state meant a more ordered society.

The power of the arising kingdoms was indicated through the attempts to prevent internal social violence. In ideology and in legislation the kings became the warrants of the peace. That was one of their primary functions. From all the Scandinavian countries it is known that the kingdom

---

pp. 188–246; Kirsten Hastrup, Culture and History in Medieval Iceland. An Antrhropological Analysis of Structure and Change (Oxford 1985), pp. 205–222.

[13] Jakob Benediktsson, 'Sturlunga saga', Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid, vol. 17 (1972).

[14] Jesse L. Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', in Elisabeth Vestergaard (ed.), Continuity and Change. Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages (Odense 1986), p. 31.

sanctioned a new legislation, partly in conflict with an older, customary law. The intention of this royal and medieval legislation was mainly to prevent and obstruct internal violence. In Sweden, e. g., the earliest royal legislation, the *edsöre*, was directed against the breaking of the peace of the realm. This legislation meant that the king together with some of the most prominent aristocrats had sworn to punish some certain severe acts of violence, i. a., violence committed against women, in the church or at the court community meeting (the *thing*).

This the earliest medieval royal (or state) legislation was mainly directed against a social elite. The former local big men or chiefs were the primary target for this legislation. It was directed against an older pre-medieval aristocracy. The kingdom with its increasing legal instruments suppressed, i. a., the blood feuds that were common and a menace to social peace.

The Viking society with its important element of external appropriation, based upon violence, was replaced by a feudal society, based upon internal control. In the new social order internal violence became less acceptable. There was a tendencey in Scandinavia towards a political power that disciplined the violence. This Scandinavian evolution was obviously a counterpart to the general European development and the peace movement and the new ethical values concerning war and violence.[15]

The violence became monopolized by the kingdom and the state. The kings got control over the organizations that were used for external pillage. The Vikings plunderers had at their disposal men who joined them more or less voluntary. The capacity to execute violence depended on the social and economic position of a war leader, on the possibilities to attach followers. A final step towards the medieval society was taken when the king gained control over these private retinues and assembled them to a fleet that could be used for offensive (and to some extent, defensive) purposes.[16]

The professional man of violence of the Middle Ages was primarily the armoured knight. The knights constituted the aristocracy, a secluded privileged estate in entire Europe during the High Middle Ages. The chivalry and cavalry were more appropriate for control over the domestic

---

[15] Philippe Contamine, War in the Middle Ages (Oxford 1984), pp. 270 ff.

[16] See e. g. Niels Lund, 'The armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut: leding or lid?', Anglo-Saxon England, vol. 15 (1986).

territories and realms. And this new, medieval politics of violence fostered a new life-style, a new ethics and new culture of the warrior.[17]

The heroic violence that prevailed in the old Norse literature disappeared. In the Scandinavian kingdoms a new chivalrous ideal, imported, but adopted, was gradually introduced. The medieval knight was as well as the Viking a warrior, but new ethics surrounded him. There were new ideals for the professional warrior to fulfil. Violence became controlled and curbed. The privilege to practice violence was associated with Christian ideals. The good violence should be used to protect society from its enemies.

Probably the Middle Ages were not more peaceful than preceding periods. But the politics of violence changed during the transition from Viking Age to the Middle Ages. This was a general European trend. The external violence, the violence directed against other peoples and societies, became more centralized. The predatory expeditions were followed by the war that could be used for internal control and for territorial conquests.

[17] See e.g. Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven 1984) and Erik Lönnroth, Från svensk medeltid (Stockholm 1959), pp. 68–87.

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GERHARD JARITZ

SONDERBAND II

CRUDELITAS

The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World

Proceedings of the International Conference
Turku (Finland), May 1991

Edited by

Toivo Viljamaa, Asko Timonen
and Christian Krötzl

Krems 1992

Front page illustration: Martyrdom of Saint Barbara (detail),
Friedrich Pacher, Tyrolian, 1480–1490,
Neustift (Novacella), South Tyrol (Italy), Stiftsgalerie

Alle Rechte vorbehalten
– ISBN 3-90 1094 05 9

Herausgeber: Medium Aevum Quotidianum. Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters, Körnermarkt 13, A–3500 Krems, Österreich – Druck: KOPITU Ges. m. b. H., Wiedner Hauptstraße 8–10, A–1050 Wien.

Contents

Preface 7

Andrew LINTOTT (Oxford): Cruelty in the Political Life of the Ancient World 9

Maarit KAIMIO (Helsinki): Violence in Greek Tragedy 28

Toivo VILJAMAA (Turku): "Crudelitatis odio in crudelitatem ruitis". Livy's Concept of Life and History 41

Katariina MUSTAKALLIO (Helsinki): The "crimen incesti" of the Vestal Virgins and the Prodigious Pestilence 56

Asko TIMONEN (Turku): Criticism of Defense. The Blaming of "Crudelitas" in the "Historia Augusta" 63

Christer BRUUN (Helsinki): Water as a Cruel Element in the Roman World 74

Luigi de ANNA (Turku): Elogio della crudeltà. Aspetti della violenza nel mondo antico e medievale 81

Greti DINKOVA-BRUUN (Helsinki): Cruelty and the Medieval Intellectual: The Case of Peter Abelard 114

Christian KRÖTZL (Tampere): "Crudeliter afflicta". Zur Darstellung von Gewalt und Grausamkeit in mittelalterlichen Mirakelberichten 121

Thomas LINDKVIST (Uppsala): The Politics of Violence and the Transition from Viking Age to Medieval Scandinavia 139

Alain DUCELLIER (Toulouse): Byzance, Juge Cruel dans un Environnement Cruel? Notes sur le "Musulman cruel" dans l'Empire byzantin entre VIIème et XIIIème siècles 148

Asko TIMONEN (Turku): Select Bibliography 181

Preface

The present volume is a collection of the papers read at the conference which was held in May 1991 at the University of Turku on the theme *The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World.* The general aim of the conference was to advance interdisciplinary and international collaboration in the fields of humanistic studies and particularly to bring together scholars who have common interests in the study of our past. The choice of the subject of cruelty naturally resulted from different study projects concerning the political and social history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages – the Roman imperial propaganda, the conflict between paganism and christianity, the history of the Vandals, the Byzantine empires, the Medieval miracle stories, to name some of them. Perhaps also contemporary events had an influence on the idea that cruelty could be the theme which conveniently would unite those various interests. And the idea emerged irrespective of considerations whether or not we should search for models in the Ancient World or join those who, as it seems to have been a fashion, insist on investigating what we have common with the Middle Ages.

One might argue – and for a good reason indeed – that cruelty is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, not for philologists and historians. Where does the student of history find reliable criteria for defining the notion of cruelty in order to judge the men of the past and their actions, to charge with cruelty not only individuals but also nations and even ages ("the *crudelitas imperatorum*", "the Dark Ages", "the violence of the Vikings", "the cruel Muslims")? Is it not so that the only possibility is to adapt our modern sensibilities to the past and to use our own prejudices in making judgements about others? The prejudices – yes, but this is just what makes the theme interesting for the historian because our prejudices – our conception of cruelty, for instance – are part of the heritage of past centuries. The events of our own day – maybe more clearly than ever – have demonstrated that we live in a historical world. When we investigate the history of the concept of cruelty we, as it were, look ourselves at a mirror and learn to understand ourselves better. The concept of cruelty has two sides. It is a subjective concept used to define and describe those persons

and those acts that according to the user of the term are negative, harmful, humiliating, harsh, inhumane, primitive and unnatural; in everyday life it is associated with religious habits – with crude remnants of primitive religion, it is associated with passion, an uncontrolled mental state, or with violence and with the exercise of power without justice. On the other hand the term is used to classify people by their ethical and social habits, to accuse, to invalidate and injure others; therefore the accusation of cruelty refers to basic features of ancient and also Medieval thought, to the fear of anything foreign, to the aggressive curiosity to define and subsume others simply by their otherness.

Such were the considerations wich gave inspiration for arranging the "cruelty"-seminar. The conference was accommodated by the Archipelago Institute of the University of Turku, in the island Seili ("Soul island"), in an environment of quiet beauty of the remote island and sad memories of the centuries when people attacked by a cruel fate, lepers or mentally ill, were banished there from the civilized community.

The conference was organized by the Department of Classics of the University of Turku in collaboration with the Departments of Cultural History and Italian language and culture of the same university. It is a pleasure to us to be able to thank here all those who helped to make the congress possible. We would like especially to express our gratitude to Luigi de Anna and Hannu Laaksonen for their assistance in preparing and carrying out the practical arrangements. The financial assistance given by the Finnish Academy and by the Turku University Foundation was also indispensable. Finally, we close by expressing our gratitude to Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* for the *Gesellschaft für Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters*, for his kind co-operation and for accepting this collection of papers to be published as a supplement to the series of the studies on the Medieval everyday life. One of the starting-points for organizing the "cruelty"-conference was the firm conviction that the Graeco-Roman Antiquity did not end with the beginning of the Middle Ages, but these two eras form a continuum in many respects, and the continuity was felt not only in the literary culture, in the Greek and Latin languages which were still used, but also in the political, social and religious structures of the Middle Ages. We think that this continuity is amply demonstrated by the studies of the present volume.

Department of Classics, University of Turku, Finland