

## From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. State Formation in Norway, c. 900-1350

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Haki Antonsson

This book examines the emergence and nature of the medieval kingdom of Norway. Professor Sverre Bagge's study commences in the late 9th century when the earliest poetic sources first tell of one ruler, King Harald Fairhair, who extended his authority over coastal Norway at the expense of other regional rulers. By the early 14th century Norway was a unified, relatively well-ruled, kingdom and an integral part of European Christendom. The *terminus ante quem* of the book around the year 1350 or in the middle of the reign of King Magnus Eriksson, who had inherited the crowns of both Norway and Sweden, and at the eve of the Black Death which devastated the Norwegian governing class. At the end of the 14th century Norway became a part of the Kalmar Union and thereafter through various historical permutations, the kingdom remained under Danish, and subsequently Swedish, authority until 1905. Between the early phase of Norwegian state-formation and the kingdom's decline (and foreign domination) in the later Middle Ages there is the period c.1240–1319, which in the historiographical tradition has been represented as the high watermark, or even the golden age, of pre-modern Norwegian history. In this 'Age of Greatness' the Norwegian kings ruled over an empire of a kind which included the Norse colonies of the North Atlantic. The fascinating story of state-formation which led up to this period as well as the perceived dramatic decline of Norway thereafter explains why Norwegian historians have traditionally focused more on the Middle Ages than their counterparts in Sweden and Denmark. The question which inevitable lurks in the background is why, considering the successful establishment of a relatively strong kingdom in the period c.1000–1300, did Norway not enter the Early Modern period as a separate and independent political identity?

The first part of the title, '*From Viking Stronghold*', refers to the fact that the kingdom of Norway, unlike

that of neighbouring Sweden and Denmark, was essentially the creation of Viking leaders. In the period 995–1066 the returning Vikings, Olaf Trygvason (995–1000), Olaf Haraldsson (1015–28) and his half-brother, Harald Hardrada (1047–66), laid the foundations for the Christian realm of medieval Norway. It appears fairly obvious that it was chiefly wealth accrued from Viking activity – raiding in conjunction with a most lucrative form of extortion racket – which funded this early phase in the expansion of Norwegian royal power. But old habits die hard and in 1103 King Magnus Barelegs was ambushed and killed by irate natives following a botched Viking-style campaign in Ireland, and as late as the early 1150s, another Norwegian King, Eysteinn Haraldsson (d.1157), raided England and Scotland. The title of Bagge's book is arguably a slight misnomer for it principally deals with the Norwegian kingdoms in the 13th and the first half of the 14th centuries or when Norway had, by any measure, become a Christian kingdom. The real focus of the work is on the development and nature of royal and ecclesiastical administration in this later period. This emphasis on the later phase reflects to a considerable degree the dearth of native written sources prior to the second half of the 12th century.

The principal theme of *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom* is the Europeanization of the Norwegian realm. In a sense the work can be read as a regional, in depth case-study of a peripheral land of the kind that Robert Bartlett has treated more generally in his well-known monograph *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950-1350*. (1) Norway emerged as a Christian kingdom during the second major phase of conversion to Christianity which occurred around the turn of the First Millennium. In this period eastern and northern Europe adopted what Sverre Bagge refers to as a 'European packet' which included a new religion, a different form of literacy, the codification of laws, and the establishment of a royal and ecclesiastical bureaucracy. The source of political power shifted away from charismatic rulership with pagan roots to a kingship which, with time, became underpinned by divine legitimacy. Apart from the relevant section in the recent *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200* (2), this is the first book published in English which introduces and engages with this topic from a Scandinavian perspective.

Bagge's usual method is to present the historical problem along with the relevant sources that are invariably in short supply. This then leads to Bagge's own interpretations which in a number of instances disagree with the findings of earlier scholars in the field. For example, Bagge has little time for the Marxist-inspired view of Norwegian medieval history which views the royal office (in cahoots with the Church) as essentially an instrument of the magnates that was wielded against the interests of an oppressed and largely passive peasantry. In general Bagge adopts a middle ground, or perhaps more specifically his own ground, between the strict empiricism of Professor Knut Helle, the other doyen of Norwegian medieval studies, and the model-building of the aforementioned 'Marxist school'. A particularly noteworthy feature is how Bagge's discussion is frequently enriched by his awareness of developments in other fields of European medieval studies, such as recent trends in saga studies, while his engagement with ideas of other scholars allows the reader to place the author's own interpretation within the context of previous literature. Although the detail with which Bagge discusses some of the issues may appear slightly less than inviting to the uninitiated reader, he does provide clear and concise summary chapters at the end of each thematic section along with an extensive concluding chapter.

Bagge leads the reader step by step through the complex problems associated with the sources and their interpretation on military organisation, the importance of literacy and law and the development of Crown and Church as bureaucratic organisations. This is where Sverre's main qualities as an historian come to the fore: he combines a clear logical and forensic examination of complicated issues with a talent for placing the Norwegian scenario within a wider Scandinavian and indeed European context. It hardly needs emphasising that these qualities are extremely useful for readers seeking an introduction into Norwegian medieval history. Indeed Bagge seeks at every turn to compare the development of the Norwegian monarchy with the rest of Europe. In this respect the kingdom of Denmark provides the obvious comparative point of view in light of the similar (at least superficially) historical trajectory of the two countries from the Viking Age onwards. For the later period, the 13th and the first half of the 14th century, parallels and differences are also made with the more developed kingdoms of Europe such as England, especially in relation to literacy and

law.

Although Bagge draws out the similarities between Norway and the other relatively newly converted kingdoms of Europe, he also emphasises the *sonderweg* of the Norwegian monarchy. Most notably, in the 12th century the kingdom emerged as a hereditary monarchy although one that still included the residual element of royal elections. In contrast, Denmark and Sweden were, at least in theory, elective monarchies throughout the Middle Ages. Moreover, the Norwegian kings ruled a comparatively poor kingdom in comparison to their Danish counterparts which still retained some features of its Viking-age origin. Most notably, in the 13th and the first half of the 14th century the Norwegian rulers relied on a military system that had not changed fundamentally since the Viking Age: the king's levies were geared towards defence rather than offence warfare. As Bagge demonstrates, the kings were quite adept at playing the weak hand they had inherited. Thus they were through necessity forced to tread a narrow path between diplomacy and the application of force; whereas the Valdemars of Denmark embarked on an expansionist adventure in the Baltic, the Norwegian kings carefully consolidated their authority at home and in Norse North Atlantic colonies. By the end of the 13th century they were at least nominally in control of the Northern Isles, the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland. But it was perhaps in the codification of laws that the Norwegian kings were in advance of their Scandinavian and, as Bagge shows, arguably most of their European counterparts. Thus in the 1270s the Norwegian king issued a single law-code that extended over the whole kingdom and which represents one of the earliest of its kind in medieval Europe. In the closing pages Sverre Bagge attempt to answer the question referred to earlier: why did Norway not emerge from the Middle Ages as a strong, independent kingdom Bagge argues that, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the successful unification of Norway from the Viking Age onwards actually made it easier for foreign authorities to rule the kingdom from the end of the 14th century onwards. Yet Bagge makes it clear that this development was far from inevitable, as some economically-inspired historians have suggested.

In one sense this book sums up and presents an overview of Sverre Bagge's immense and varied work on Norwegian medieval history in the last few decades; the bibliography contains no less than 50 of his published items between 1975 and 2007. It is difficult to find a fault with this volume which distils Sverre Bagge's mastery of Norwegian medieval history into a coherent whole. The book is written in a clear and functional rather than elegant style. Only occasionally does the narrative stray near an 'auto-pilot mode' where the author appears more concerned to tell us what he knows (which is a lot) rather than what we strictly need to know. There is, for instance, nothing wrong with the survey of the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia (pp. 137–48) but one might question if it is really necessary to treat this well-known subject at such a length for the purposes intended. And, in general, the quality of the work would hardly have been affected if an editorial trimming had been made here and there. The one topic which does, however, arguably deserve more detailed discussion is the involvement of the Norwegian kings in the establishment and promotions of towns. This topic is, admittedly, touched on in a number of chapters but its importance would seem to justify a separate treatment. As alluded to earlier, there is also the inevitable problem of the disparity of sources between the early period for which we have no Norwegian written sources, and the later period for where we have a relative abundance of written records. This, perhaps inevitably, results in a slightly unbalanced book which in reality is primarily focused on the period c.1240–1350 and in which the question of Norwegian weakness in the later Middle Age looms ever larger as the work progresses.

Sverre's principal conclusion is that foreign innovations were adapted according to the specific, local, needs of the Norwegian monarchy. This by itself is hardly a startling or novel conclusion. The principal value of the work lies elsewhere, namely in the extremely learned and thorough way in which Bagge demonstrates how this adaptation occurred in each of the spheres of royal (and indeed ecclesiastical) activity. This he successfully achieves while never losing sight of the larger historical context. A particularly successful example of this approach can be seen in Bagge's discussion of laws where the native and the traditional were blended with the foreign and the international to create something wholly unique. Although *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom* may not present a radical new departure for Norwegian and Scandinavian medieval history, the book will deservedly take its place as one of the most significant works published in the field; and it is certainly the most important book on the subject to date published in English.

## Notes

1. Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (London, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. Nora Berend (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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