INTRODUCTION

For it was unseemly, he said, that the land did not serve a king, as all other lands in the world.¹

Theme

The game of power politics in which Norwegian kings and claimants to the throne competed to unite Norway under the rule of one king was a process that began in earnest in the 1130s and did not end until 1241. The power struggles created a need for new administrative and fiscal instruments, and from the end of the twelfth century the king began to build up a nationwide, centralized apparatus to deal with the collection of taxes and fines and the administration of justice. The political consolidation and the incipient state-formation process also had consequences for areas bordering on Norway, and areas which had strong cultural and historical ties to Norway and the Norwegian crown. The Norwegian king sent tax collectors to the large areas shared by Norway, Sweden, and Russia in the far north in the fourteenth century. Jemtland, today a Swedish county bordering on central Norway, was integrated in the kingdom of Norway from the end of the thirteenth century. The consolidation also had consequences for the Norse² island communities in the North Atlantic, along the coast of Scotland, and in the Irish Sea. While Man and the Hebrides were ceded to the king of Scotland in 1266, the rest of the “tributary lands”—Greenland, Iceland,

¹ According to Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar these were Cardinal Vilhelm of Sabina’s words about Iceland when he was in Bergen to crown King Hákon Hákonsson in 1247. Old Norse orig.: “þuiat hann kallaði vsannlikt at land þat þionaði ecki vndir eínn-huern konung sem òll ònnur í verólldinni”. Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar etter Sth. 8 fol., AM 325 VIII, 4’ og AM 304, 4’ (HsH), ed. by M. Mundt, Norrøne tekster 2, Oslo 1977, p. 144.

² In this book Norse (ON norrænn) should be understood as Norwegian or West Nordic referring to Norway and areas and communities in the Viking Age and the Middle Ages where the inhabitants were descendants of Viking emigrants and shared a common Norse cultural heritage and language (Old Norse); the Norse world. See Steinar Imsen, “Introduction”, in S. Imsen (ed.) The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World c. 1100–1400, ’Norgesveldet’, Occasional Papers No. 1, Trondheim 2010, pp. 13–33, on the usage of ‘Norse’, ‘Norse world’, ‘Norwegian’, ‘Scandinavian’, ‘Nordic’ etc. in historical research.
the Faroes, Shetland, and Orkney—became integral areas, in political, judicial, and administrative terms, in the realm of the Norwegian king at the end of the thirteenth century.3

The integration of formerly autonomous or semi-autonomous areas into larger political units is a characteristic feature of political development in north-west Europe in the High Middle Ages.4 In national traditions of historical research this process tends to be depicted as self-explanatory, natural, and inevitable, but although it is often described, it is rarely analysed.5 Historians tend to see the integration of the border zones and the Norse island communities as being directly associated with the emergence of a Norwegian medieval state in the thirteenth century, without looking more closely at how the areas were integrated and the consequences this integration had for the formerly autonomous or semi-autonomous areas.6 In this book we shall see that the Norwegian crown used the same tools in the integration of Iceland, the Faroes, Shetland, and Orkney as were used for the consolidation of Norway. Although there was scope for continuity, centralization and outside rule led to major upheavals in the Norse island communities, not just in the thirteenth century, when the king's

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3 Medieval Norway consisted of present-day Norway as far north as Troms County and as far south as Bohuslän in present-day Sweden. The areas in the north, including Finnmark, the northernmost county in present-day Norway, were not integrated into any state organization in the Middle Ages. There were no fixed borders before the seventeenth or eighteenth century in this area. See Magne Njåstad, Grenser for makt: Konflikt og konfliktløsning mellom lokalsamfunn og ovrig. See. ca. 1300–1540, doctoral dissertation in history, Skrifterie fra Institutt for historie og klassiske fag 42, NTNU, Trondheim 2003, pp. 207–208; Lars Ivar Hansen “Fra Nöteborgsfreden til Lappecodicillen, ca. 1300–1751: Folkegrupper og statsdannelse på Nordkalotten med utgangspunkt i Finnmark”, in S. Imsen (ed.), Grenser og grannelag i Nordens historie, Oslo 2005, pp. 362–86.


5 Given 1990, pp. 8–9.