CHAPTER 1

A Genesis under Church Control

1 Introduction

The second half of the 12th century was foundational in the making of royal communication in high medieval Norway. It was a formative period in the definition of the premises for the future development of the Norwegian kingship’s communication. First, it sanctioned the role of two major actors of communication: the kingship itself and the Church. It also saw the development of new concepts and ideas from which Norwegian kings drew their political legitimacy: a monarchy of divine origin. The period was also decisive in the development of the means through which these ideologies were transmitted. A set of religious rituals and ceremonies took form and imposed itself as central medium of communication. The most remarkable development however was the rise of literate culture and the use of the written word. At the core of these processes was a double context: the combined development of the royal and ecclesiastic institutions, and the civil war (1130–1240).

Under the reign of King Magnus Erlingsson (1163–1184), the crown increasingly affirmed itself as the greatest lay authority in Norwegian society. The rise of the royalty was obvious on an institutional level with the (albeit limited) development of a central administration centred on the hird and a network of local royal agents known as sýsselman (Steward). The enforcement of royal power was intermittent and varied from region to region. It also concerned the domains of finance, with the creation of new taxes, and justice, through the making of laws.1 Norwegian royal power also extended beyond the Norwegian realm. From the end of the 11th century, a number of territories in the North Atlantic (the Hebrides, the Orkneys, the Isle of Man, the Shetland and the Faroes) came under the sway of Norwegian royal power, although they were subject to the crown’s direct control to different degrees.2

The second major development concerns the foundation of the archbishopric of Nidaros in 1152/53. The new church province, Provincia Nidrosiensis, had

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Nidaros as its metropolis and included the 5 sees of Nidaros, Bergen, Stavanger, Oslo and Hamar and those of the Western Isles of Skálholt and Holar in Iceland, Gardar in Greenland, the Faroes, the Orkneys, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man and Shetland. Although the kingdom of Norway officially adopted the Christian religion in the early 11th century, the foundation of the archbishopric greatly consolidated ecclesiastic territorial organization, wealth and spiritual hold on northern men and women, and elevated the Norwegian Church to a new and powerful actor in the political landscape of Norway. Moreover, the foundation of 1152/53 introduced a new major power in culture and communication in Norway. The structural improvements enabled the Norwegian church for the first time to fully exploit its expertise and technology in ritualistic and written communication in the Norwegian context. It also made it possible for the Norwegian clergy to affirm itself as a mediator of knowledge and culture between Christian Europe and Norway.

The rise of kingship and the Church in the mid-12th century unfolded in the unstable political context of the civil war (1130–1240) which saw different pretenders competing for royal power. Under King Magnus Erlingsson (1163–1184), the two powers made an alliance aiming to consolidate their respective positions. This political association boosted the elaboration of a communication system meant to sustain the legitimacy of the Norwegian kingship. In the following we will identify the components of the communication system as well as their respective development and contribution to the consolidation of the Norwegian monarchy. The Church’s extensive control over the means of ritualistic and written communication made the alliance culturally asymmetrical and resulted in an ascendancy of the Norwegian clergy over kings. Through a detailed examination of ritual staging and of charter and literature production, we will shed light on how the Church transformed its cultural hegemony into political domination.

The period examined is the second half of the 12th century, in particular the reign of King Magnus Erlingsson (1163–1184). However, there will be two digressions from the chapter’s chronological scope. First, the reign of King Sverre (1177–1202) will be the object of specific treatment in consideration of its decisive importance in the making of a royal communication system (Chapter II). Furthermore, the examination of two rituals of kingship (konungstekja and

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3 Imsen 2012a; Imsen 2003.
5 Helle 1964, 20–47; Bagge 2010, 40ff.
6 Helle 1964, 37.