CHAPTER THREE
KINGS AND POWER STRUGGLES:
SWEDEN FROM 1130 TO 1290

3.1. The structure of political factions and the basis of their power in
twelfth- and thirteenth-century Sweden

Before the latter part of the twentieth century a general assumption
was made that the family (Sw. ätt) was the most important single
social unit in medieval society, as demonstrated by extant laws on
inheritance and the example of the Icelandic sagas. Although not
always borne out by events, the naming of various Scandinavian fac-
tions as, for example ‘Hvide klan’, ‘Sverkerska ätt’ and ‘Folkungaätt’
has reinforced the impression that this was the case. Even in a chief-
dom society, such as might be envisaged for the early Iron Age in
Sweden, the individual could be a member of a number of social
units, which might be based on family, occupation, religion or sta-
tus in the hierarchy. By the high medieval period, society was becom-
ing more complex. As noted below, views as to how far someone’s
‘family’ or blood-ties extended, or whether ancestors or living rela-
tives were more important, varied depending on social structure.1
Family links could be strained or broken by rivalry for control of
resources or political considerations. Moreover, the influence that
personal feelings of like or dislike can exert on a person’s political
alignment should never be underestimated.

Scandinavian society was stratified long before the twelfth century,
with social differences between the living being manifested by differences
in house sizes, quality of clothes or weapons and ownership of land,
animals or ships. Large burial markers signified the status both of
those who were buried and those who buried them, their families.
However, during the High Middle Ages in Scandinavia the upper
nobility became ever more separated from the rest of society. In a

1 Unless otherwise stated, I use ‘family’ in a wide sense to refer to a bilateral
kin-group (Sw. släkt), including cousins.
sense the period 1150–1300 was one of transition: whereas local leaders had lived among those who farmed the land in the Viking Period, by the end of the Folkung Period in 1365 a small upper elite lived in entirely separate locations from those who worked the land, and in fortified manors which bore no resemblance whatever to the houses of those in the villages. The elite was no longer part of the village unit. Land ownership, the basis of their wealth, had become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. Although it may be argued that the family unit concentrated in the household was the most important single social grouping for the majority of medieval people, its relative importance diminished the higher a person’s status in the social structure. The higher nobility, especially adult men, had to travel in order to manage their properties and to carry out the political, religious and military tasks expected of them.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in western Europe social and political structures became increasingly hierarchical and formal in nature. The family came to have an ‘authoritarian’ structure, in which there was inequality of inheritance between siblings. Rules of inheritance, frequently designed to prevent the fragmentation of land ownership through inheritance by too many sons, ultimately ensured that the number of inheritors who could claim to belong to the highest elite diminished. A noble saw his or her lineage as unilateral, tracing it back through one line of ancestors, and this ancestral lineage was of primary importance in determining a family’s status. The aristocracy strove to maintain its own position and preserve its family name. Their social rank was buttressed by ever more elaborate rituals which formalised their status, especially those associated with knighthood. The use of a family name, with its own heraldry and associated symbolism, further distinguished the aristocracy from the rest of society. Correspondingly, it became increasingly important for a noble family to demonstrate that it was of aristocratic origin and to number among its ancestors people of a rank that befit its station.

The influence of this system was beginning to make itself felt in Scandinavia, particularly in Denmark, in the early twelfth century. In both Denmark and Sweden families that claimed a special status, either as kings or jarls, claimed descent from the Carolingians,

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2 In relation to Norway, see especially Vestergaard 1988 pp. 192–93.