CHAPTER ONE

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KING AND RETAINERS

Introduction

The king’s retainers consisted of the hirdmen who shared his table. They were attached to the king through personal bonds of service which ideally gave high status and were highly asymmetrical. Yet the retainers also include the men conscripted when the king was campaigning with the leidangr. The essential thing here is that the retainers usually accompanied the king, and that their physical distance to the king was therefore minimal. The social distance to the king could vary, however, since the differences between the upper and the lower strata in this group were considerable. Although the hirdmen and the leidangsmenn are treated together here, I shall make a distinction between them when it is possible and significant for the investigation.

Conflicts between the king and his retainers tended to arise in critical situations in connection with battles and expeditions. These were fairly common activities in the time of King Sverre, whereas they occurred less frequently during the reign of Håkon, especially in the period after 1240. The crucial thing in this analysis, however, is not the real historical frequency of battles and expeditions, but the way in which these are portrayed in the sagas. This also means that it is not important whether battles or expeditions took place at home or abroad, even if this may have been significant in other ways for the accounts.

Conflicts between the king and his retainers mostly took the form of a tug-of-war rather than open confrontations. The theme of the struggle varied depending on which phase of the conflict it occurred

---

1 Cf. the reasons given for this method of categorization in the introduction to this part. I do not wish to take a stance on the question of whether the leidangsmenn should primarily be perceived as directly subordinate to the king or as the magnates’ private retainers, a topic of much debate in recent Danish research (Lund 1996, pp. 64–68, 245–46, review in Albrechtsen 1998, and subsequent debate in Gelting 1999 and Lund 1999; see also Hermanson 2000). Geir Atle Ersland has touched on this in a Norwegian context without considering it in the same detail (Geir Atle Ersland and Terje H. Holm, Norsk forsvarshistorie vol. 1, Bergen 2000, pp. 51, 63).
in. In preparations for battles and expeditions the crucial factor was the retainers’ support, whereas during and after these enterprises the focus was on plundering and giving quarter. Because these conflict themes are so interwoven, I want to extend the terminology to include terms for plunder (herja and ræna) and truce or quarter (gríð). Their use will be specified later in this chapter. The main question is to what extent retainers displayed absolute loyalty to the king in these areas of potential conflict. A distinction will be made between an ideological and a practical perspective, as explained in the introduction. First I shall consider support before battles and expeditions, and then go on to examine plundering on expeditions and truce after battles.

1. Support before battles and expeditions

The king often appealed to loyalty to mobilize the army to take part in expeditions and battles. Rousing soldiers for battle was a set topos with the rendering of speeches by generals, which goes back to classical models. The focus on speeches before battles means that Sverris saga is distinctly over-represented in relation to Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. It is nevertheless not the frequency of speeches, but the way of appealing for support that is essential in this context. Sverre’s speeches before the battles of Kalvskinnet in 1179, Ilevollene in 1180, Nordnes in 1181, Fimreite in 1184, and Strindfjorden in 1199 are reported at great length, while Hákon is represented only by a long speech before the battle of Oslo in 1240. Several other speeches are cited, by Sverre and by Magnus Erlingsson, Arnbjørn Jonsson, and Nikolas Arnesson, but these are more peripheral here because they are not so much about appeals for loyalty.

When the king referred to the retainers’ duty of allegiance to him, we can assume that loyalty to the king was mainly of an absolute character. Loyalty was not something the king was forced to appeal to; he could take it for granted. Conversely, a royal appeal to the retainers’...