CHAPTER THREE

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KING
AND THE PEASANTS

Introduction

The king’s relationship to the peasants is characterized by the fact that he was not usually close to them. The peasants shared this normally large physical distance to the king with the magnates. They differ from the magnates, however, by virtue of their lower social status. One reflection of this is that they are almost always referred to as a collective.¹ That does not imply that the peasants necessarily acted as a collective, but this is usually the only way the kings’ sagas allow us to study them.

The relationship between the king and the peasants was examined in the part about ideal subordination, where I proceeded from the use of the term lýðni (obedience), supplemented with trúnaðareiðr (oath of loyalty). The peasants’ relationship to the king was presented as one of obedience in the normative sources from the period. The king’s demand for obedience was limited by the law, but within the framework of the law everyone who lived in his kingdom was obliged to show him unilateral obedience through the oath of loyalty sworn by the people’s representatives at the konungstekja (election of the king at the þing). There was nevertheless a possibility to avoid this by refusing to accept the king’s laws and amendments, but this meant declaring oneself “out of the law”, thus becoming an “outlaw”. A study of the contemporary kings’ sagas suggests that the peasants’ obedience to the king was a relationship with stronger reciprocal and personal elements than prescribed by the normative sources. The king’s aim was not so much to obtain compulsory and unilateral obedience as to win the support of “the most” and “the best”, with no clear distinction being made between these. This was regarded against the background that

¹ This also applies to the townsfolk, who are classified here together with the peasants.
formal institutions such as the assembly and the royal election had limited formal autonomy and therefore could not be studied independently of power relations.

The investigation of the terms lýðni and trúnaðareiðr has little to say when it comes to understanding the practical relationship between king and peasants. The terms are not used very often in the sagas, and to the extent that they do occur, they are primarily used about the formal aspect of the relationship. In this part I shall instead analyse the relationship based on the terms for loyalty examined above in connection with magnates and retainers. These terms are used somewhat less frequently about peasants than about retainers, and just under half as often as about magnates. The exception is landráð, with the majority of the uses referring to peasants. In addition, peasants often occur in connection with terms referring to taxation (skattr, leidangr, gjald). This indicates that the peasants’ relationship to the king was less a question of loyalty than of a subject’s duties (obedience) compared with the magnates’ relationship to the king. It is misleading, however, to make a sharp distinction between the two types of connection. The term gjald, for example, can mean both fines (institutional payment) and retribution (personal recompense). In the following analysis I shall therefore treat the terms together.

Before I embark on the situational analysis, two tendencies should be mentioned. Firstly, the terms are used about peasants more often in Sverris saga than in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar. This was also the case concerning magnates, and it undoubtedly has to do with the more frequent internal conflict during Sverre’s reign. Not so much significance will be ascribed to this change in the present chapter, where the structure of the conflicts will be analysed in qualitative and not quantitative terms. The question of change and continuity, however, will be considered at the end of the chapter and in the general conclusion.

Secondly, it is possible to detect regional patterns in where and when the terms are used. Trøndelag dominates in the earlier phase of Sverris saga (before 1184), but is mentioned less often as the saga proceeds,

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2 Cf. the quantitative discussion on pp. 120–21, and the appendix.
3 Five of seven references are to peasants (eight cases where the word means governing a country are not counted).
4 See more on this later in the chapter, pp. 273–74.
5 Here we can distinguish three types of situations where the terms are used. First of all, they occur during Sverre’s initial expedition to the area in 1177 (Sv² 14–15). Then several of the terms are used in connection with the battle of Kalvskinnet, which