CONCLUSIONS

THE LONG ADAPTATION OF PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN IDEOLOGIES OF RULERSHIP

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1. Essentials

Field of research, source problems and possibilities

Through our discussions of different subjects and sources, and with our different methodologies, we strove to gain a better understanding of the ideological aspects of rulership in the Nordic countries during the five centuries from c. 800 to c. 1300. With this, we aim to contribute something new to the wide field of Nordic viking and medieval studies: a consideration of Nordic viking and medieval history of ideas. Contrary to works from the field of history of events, our book does not focus on the social, cultural or material exercise of power as such, but on the ideological foundation and legitimisation of power.¹ And contrary to existing works on royal ideology, we do not work within medieval national—especially Norwegian or Danish—confines.² Rather, we discuss the ideology of rulership during both the viking and the medieval period, and in an appropriately wide geographical "international" Nordic setting.

The dangers of such an approach are obvious, and each author had to battle with them. Major problems are posed by the available written and non-written sources. In order to identify viking and medieval


ideology of rulership we could not limit ourselves to normative texts. On the contrary, narratives about rituals, legends and myths, as well as mythography, took pride of place, followed by discussions of the archaeological material. Taken together, the chance survival of these sources, their uneven contribution and differing interpretations make comparisons of ideological elements exceedingly difficult. A methodological stumbling-block is not only the question of discerning history of ideas (“ideology”) from history of events (“facts”), but also the question of whether we can discern ideology as it existed from ideology as it is represented in our sources—and manipulation occurs in written and material sources. A particular problem here, and one which partly explains the prior reluctance to discuss Viking Age ideology of rulership beyond the question of sacral kingship, is the late, i.e., medieval, date of all manuscripts and many texts. To mention but one example, how genuinely Viking-Age is the link to Freyr or the identification of the ruler’s territory with the dead king’s body in Snorri Sturluson’s Hálfdanar saga svarta? Did this particular ideology exist in Viking-Age southern Norway, or is it merely represented as such by Snorri in the thirteenth century? Thus Viking Age ideology cannot be examined on its own; in our texts we always see it through a medieval looking glass. An interpretation of material remains with the aim to discern ideological systems which, as carefully as this might be done, refers to textual evidence, faces the same problem.

Rather than baulking at these challenges, authors tried new approaches and discovered new possibilities. In response to the source situation, the focus of many contributions constantly shifts between the viking and the medieval periods. This, we hope, allowed us to identify medieval ideology, discern medieval representations of Viking Age ideology, and finally distil Viking Age ideology. It also meant that we did not, in fact could not, merely discuss which ideological elements existed at which period. Rather, this examination is closely intertwined with a debate of the reasons for their existence, survival, or resurgence.

We tried to take care not to equate Nordic with Scandinavian. However, an element which we should have wished to discuss more within the ideology of rulership is the Sami perspective. The present volume makes a beginning by considering their ideological incorporation

3 Cf. discussion Walker 2006: 36.