The period from c. 1030 to c. 1160 has normally been viewed as a transitional period in Norwegian history, following the formation of a national kingdom and Christianization (c. 890–1030), and leading up to the so-called civil wars (c. 1160–1240).¹ As such, it has usually been analysed as a prelude to later developments, paving the way for a stronger state in the later twelfth century, and not on its own terms. Moreover, the prevalent practice of joint rule in the period has traditionally been regarded as a sign that society was unstable. The main cause for this instability has been sought in the weakness of central power, which carried the germs of the “civil wars.”²

This article has a twofold purpose. In the first part, I want to demonstrate that Norwegian society in this period was not particularly unstable. My hypothesis is that conflicts in this society should not primarily be viewed as disruptive, but rather as integrative, partly because they very seldom developed into large-scale war, and more fundamentally because a function of conflict in this type of decentralized society is to regulate

¹ This development is not unique to Norway. Its Scandinavian neighbours Denmark and Sweden, as well as realms in the eastern part of Europe—Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary—followed a similar pattern, with a first wave of national unification and Christianization, succeeded by a period of internal strife leading to a stronger state in the High Middle Ages. See Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London: Penguin, 1994), 7–11, 15–23. The martyr death of St Olav and the ousting of the Danish kings in 1035 initiated the period. The terminal date in 1160 has been suggested by Sverre Bagge, contrary to traditional opinion that 1134 marks the start of the civil wars. See Sverre Bagge, “Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen,” *(Norsk Historisk tidsskrift)*, 65 (1986): 145–97; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 34–65.

power relations. It is furthermore my contention that the dominance of one strong chieftain is more detrimental to this social order than a situation of rivalry between chieftains of roughly equal status, if we judge by level of violence, exploitation, and unpredictable behaviour. The second section will deal with possible causes for the changes that took place after c. 1160 in Norway. I shall argue that the traditional explanations for these changes operate from a teleological premise that state formation was unavoidable due to the alleged instability of society around 1160, and that this is manifested in a belief that the change must be attributed to internal, long-term, structural causes. Instead I shall argue that the causes for the change c. 1160 must be related to external factors over the course of a much shorter time span.

The first part will consist of an analysis of conflict and leadership in the kings’ saga Morkinskinna, which tells about events in the period c. 1030–1160. This saga is particularly well suited to investigate social order in a kingdom where the king has not (yet) attained substantial institutional power, because it gives a detailed and very vivid image of the society in exactly this period (1030–1157). Moreover, Morkinskinna has seldom been used by historians as an historical source. It is generally agreed

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3 This comes close to a functionalist argument. While admitting this, I nevertheless would stress the need for posing the question in these terms. The issue of social functions cannot be dismissed out of hand because of functionalist connotations, because the character of social order is a central theme bringing attention to how a society can be analysed as a system with internal coherence. The contrasting approach mentioned above—which views this period as merely a prelude to a later development—has until now been the prevalent mode of analysis.

4 Morkinskinna, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2 vols., Íslenzk forrit 23–24 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011); translated into English by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade as Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). The Icelandic text is hereafter cited by chapter number; the English translation as Andersson and Gade. Morkinskinna is only one of several kings’ sagas telling of the period c. 1030–1160. Apart from reasons of convenience and manageability, I have chosen this saga because the three early “Norwegian synoptics” (Ágrip, Theodoricus Monachus, Historia Norvegiae) are very brief and yield little concrete information on the workings of society. Heimskringla from c. 1230 has been analysed in detail by Sverre Bagge, Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Fagrskinna is less detailed than the two above-mentioned sagas and will therefore be skipped in this analysis. A main difference between Morkinskinna and Heimskringla is that the former saga contains a large number of short stories in addition to the main narrative. There has been a prolonged discussion on whether these short stories are later interpolations. The most widespread view today is that they were part of the original narrative. See Ármann Jakobsson, Staður i nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgafan, 2002); Ármann Jakobsson and þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, “Formáli,” in Morkinskinna I; Andersson and Gade, “Introduction,” 25–57.