Gifts and society in fourteenth century Sweden

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Gifts to churches and religious houses were one of the clearest manifestations of the relationship between the individual and God in the Middle Ages. All over Europe, gifts and donations were a natural part of how faith was expressed. By conferring real and personal property upon religious houses and churches—whose clerics, monks, and nuns were mediators between the people and the saints—the donor created strong and indissoluble bonds with the recipient: ultimately, God. Therefore the purpose of the gift was of course religious, and in return the donor and his or her family received prayers, masses, or perhaps a burial place inside the church. However, as has been exhaustively discussed and shown over the last decades, the social and political significance of donations and gifts could be as crucial as their religious importance. Inspired not least by social anthropology, various studies have shown how religion was an integrated and unquestionable part of everyday life, and how religious gifts can be interpreted as an important element of the efforts and strategies people used to strengthen their social positions. For the donor, gifts and donations to religious houses and churches not only involved important bonds with these institutions; they also created significant relations with secular people. Religious gifts were part of how medieval society organized such relations—kinship, relations with ancestors, and so on—as well as playing a part in solving conflicts.¹

The aim of this article is to analyze some aspects of the Scandinavian culture of gift-giving. In Scandinavia, as in other parts of medieval Europe, religious gifts were part of a wider social system. Using the example of Sweden, my intention is to show how religious gifts can be interpreted as an important way of creating personal networks with other secular aristocrats, as well as being understandable in terms of strengthening a person’s symbolic capital. Gifts could also be part of the reconciliation process in

conflicts between different kin-groups, disputes about inheritance, and other, less severe conflicts. A further aim is to address a perspective which hitherto has attracted relatively little attention from scholars who study gift-giving, namely the practice of giving children to monasteries or convents.

Gift-Exchange in a Scandinavian Context

Analyses of the social and political implications connected with medieval donations have been particularly inspired by Marcel Mauss’s classic work, *The Gift*. In this well-known study, Mauss describes the phenomenon of gift-exchange as a part of a total social phenomenon, a theoretical view that has been used and developed by many subsequent scholars in various fields of research. Following Mauss, one can say that gifts and counter-gifts play a crucial part in how relationships and hierarchies are organized in societies not yet centralized in terms of, for instance, political rule or formal laws. Three fundamental duties characterize the gift-exchange system: the obligation to give a gift, the obligation to accept a gift, and the obligation to give a gift in return. The gift does not necessarily have to be a material object or an object of special value, but might also be some type of personal contribution such as military assistance, feasts, rituals, or offering diversions.²

As Aron Gurevich demonstrated, the conditions described by Mauss are directly applicable to early Scandinavia. By using sagas, law texts, and linguistic observations, Gurevich showed the way in which gifts and counter-gifts such as material objects, services, or feasts were an important part of how social relations and hierarchies were manifested during the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages. The treasures and riches the Vikings brought home with them were used to arrange feasts and carouses, occasions on which generous gifts were given to the guests. These feasts and gifts were of major importance in maintaining and increasing the donor’s social authority and prestige. What is more, Gurevich described the feast, together with the *thing* (the local assembly), as the focal points

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