RITUALS OF REBELLION:
CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND METADISCOURSE
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT IN IRON AGE AND
MEDIEVAL DENMARK

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Abstract

Despite modern notions of cultural homogeneity in southern Scandinavia, substantial ethnic differences characterized its Iron Age and early Medieval populations. Creation of a unified state from earlier social formations ignited rifts leading to social disorder, rebellion, and uprising during a transitional era when upper and lower classes felt these changes most sharply. Ethnohistoric evidence preserves a record of ritualized public performances by state and local leaders, revealing relationships that shifted between fear, negotiation, challenge, and defiance. This is compared against archaeological evidence of widespread, rapid changes in settlement organization in some regions, and relative stability in others, interpreted as outcomes of unsuccessful and successful challenges to state authority. Groups electing to use violent conflict in challenging the state, who also had histories of inter-group interaction, were better able to preserve autonomy than those attempting legalistic arguments and ‘rational’ negotiations. Data are interpreted in light of ethnographic case studies and contemporary social theory.

Introduction

In the following study, I examine two cases of conflict between ethnic minorities and the same central government during the course of their forcible integration into an emergent, centralizing state. The state in question came to be called Denmark, the two provinces Scania and North Jutland (Figure 1). It may seem faintly absurd that people in what are modern south Sweden and northern Denmark represented substantial ethnic diversity during the Iron Age, but they did—not only between each other, but between themselves and the Danes. Ethnicity, a self-defined social category, is based on beliefs about common descent and culture, defined by kinship, eating habits, or historical experience as much as by appearance or language. Often difficult to nail down archaeologically, it cannot always be tied to a style, artifact cluster, or house-type. Because of this, it sometimes seems preferable to abandon the concept rather than to use it incorrectly. However, the substantial ethnohistoric record relating to Denmark, both external and indigenous, permits us to bring textual and archaeological evidence together to understand ethnic identities and how they interacted, sometimes violently, through time.
Fig. 1.

‘Official’ histories, as well as transcribed oral traditions, are important in understanding Scandinavian ethnic identities and the courses of conflict. Part of the following analysis rests on evidence for the public performance of ritualized orations and the later oral and written dissemination of such performances. The cultural narratives, or ‘public transcripts’ as Scott calls them (1990: 2), apparent in these rituals, describe the rationales of various parties to ethnic conflict. Additionally, there is a ‘hidden transcript’—discursive practices expressing a dissident political culture, detected within the public transcript in disguised or coded forms (Scott 1990: 4–5).

The most important support for various theories of conflict and resolution lies in evidence of state actions to incorporate or conquer formerly allied peoples, exact tribute and taxes, and punish insurrection, and the counter-actions of regional ethnic leaders, to avoid incorporation, to reject state demands, evade taxes, and eventually to take up arms. Then, there were consequences, suffered locally, for actions against the state. Here, archaeological data takes precedence, not to understand who ‘won’ or ‘lost’—we know that—but the impact on everyday lives. What did resistance and rebellion achieve: a desired outcome or further repression?