The Nordic 'civil wars' in the High Middle Ages from a cross-disciplinary and comparative perspective

The project is guided by the following two hypotheses:

- The Nordic 'civil wars' were less extensive, less chaotic and a more complex process than earlier research has claimed.
- These conflicts should be studied as regional conflicts, not as national ones.

In order to investigate these theories, we will adopt a cross-disciplinary and comparative perspective. By co-operating with medieval scholars working on English, French and German medieval history, we will gain a deeper understanding of how the Nordic 'civil wars' can be situated in a broader contemporary European context. This perspective has been almost completely lacking in earlier Nordic medieval scholarship. By involving political scientists and anthropologists working on 'civil wars' in a more contemporary setting, we will obtain insight into new approaches and theoretical perspectives on the nature of 'civil wars'.

This project will study the 'civil wars' in the Nordic realms between c. 1130 to 1260. The 'civil wars' of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden begun around 1130. In Denmark they ended c. 1160, whereas in Norway and Sweden they continued until the middle of the 13th century, when strife reappeared in Denmark. In Iceland, 'civil war' raged during the period 1220-1262/64. Similar conflicts occurred in other European kingdoms. England experienced 'civil war' between 1135 and 1154, but turmoil characterised much of the period up to c. 1265. In the Holy-Roman Empire, the political culture was characterised by substantial strife and rivalry, particularly in connection with dynastic changes such as 'The Great Interregnum' 1254-73.

A 'civil war' can be defined according the following criteria: a conflict occurring within a state; with organised parties; government involved; local recruitment; a certain amount of violence; sustained violence, and solution through treaty or victory (Sambanis 2004). 'Civil war' implies large-scale warfare, which differentiates it from feuds, and by using the term 'civil', internal factors are regarded as decisive in governing these conflicts.

A feud is similar to warfare, but is distinguished from it in important aspects. A feud can be defined as a hostile relationship between groups, in which there is collective liability; groups are variable and frequently change in size and composition, with norms of honour controlling and limiting violence, and the keeping of scores according to a rough principle of balance, including settlement (Miller 1990: 179-181; cf. Helgi Þorláksson 2007).

The focus on breakdown of order has been dominant in previous research, particularly in French history, where Marc Bloch launched the term 'feudal anarchy'. The next generation of French historians developed the term into a thesis of anarchy 1000CE. This paradigm was challenged by American historians who, instead of analysing the struggle as one between order (represented by 'peace of God' and 'the king's peace') and disorder (feudal lords), studied it as a rivalry between different perceptions of what constituted social order (Cheyette 1970, White 1978 1986, Geary 1994).

Whereas historians working in the French tradition viewed conflicts as destabilising and as symptoms of social crisis, the American historians analysed them as feuds, which were conducted according to norms limiting violence and 'giving each his due'. Their approach was inspired by legal anthropology (Roberts 1979; Comaroff and Roberts 1981). This perspective became important in Icelandic history through the investigations of Helgi Þorláksson (1989), Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1989, 1999) and William Ian Miller (1990), and has had some repercussions in Norwegian and Danish history (Bagge 1991; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 2008; Orning 2008; Hermanson 2000), but on the whole it has not revised the image of the 'civil wars' as a period characterised by chaotic conditions.

Furthermore, 'civil wars' in the Nordic area have been approached as internal processes, which were only marginally influenced by the political situation in the surrounding countries. This is particularly the case in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where the 'civil wars' are viewed as a necessary stage towards the formation of stronger states. The only exception here is Iceland, where external factors with reference to the intervention of the Norwegian king has been underlined (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940; Jón Jóhannesson 1956; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Gunnar Karlsson 2004), and which is interestingly also the only Nordic country where the 'civil wars' led to subjugation under 'foreign' (i.e. Norwegian) rule. Some attempts have been made to link the 'civil wars' with the socio-political ties that extended across the Nordic borders, but they are either very brief (Sawyer 1993; Gustafsson 1997), or they do not really leave the national tradition (Sawyer 2003; Bagge 2014). The lack of a Nordic perspective in medieval scholarship is clearly visible in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, in which presenting a common Nordic history simply means *adding together* the histories of the various countries in the region, without devoting much attention to interaction between the regions (Helle 2003).

In order to gain new perspectives on the 'civil wars' in the Nordic Middle Ages, we want to use some of the ideas and theories that have been created and used for some of the 'civil wars' fought in different places across the world in the last 50 years. We believe that this will shed a new light on the 'civil wars' in the Middle Ages. Even though the sources regarding the 'civil wars' in the Nordic realm are good, they do have their limits and restrictedly show how conflicts worked in practice. In this instance a comparative perspective may prove productive.

At the same time we hope that the mutual dialogue with researchers interested in today's 'civil wars' may increase interest in our theories and ideas concerning the Nordic 'civil wars' in the Middle Ages. The hope is that this mutual research interest increases partly because of the different research traditions but also because of the periodical distance between the Middle Ages in Europe and today's 'civil wars'. The similarities distance provides the possibility of discussing their results from within the perspective of a longer time scale. The similarities between the Nordic 'civil wars' and today's 'civil wars' are many. Firstly, they are often studied as wars, where their feud-like characteristics are rarely addressed. Secondly, they are often depicted as internal conflicts; the outer influences are often undervalued, not only in a purely military context, but also regarding ideological impulses. It is the national state that is the basis in most of the discussions concerning 'civil wars', despite the fact that the nation is a modern phenomenon only accepted in certain parts of the world. A large part of the world's population has, similar to the population in the Middle Ages, their identity attached to regions and local leaders, as opposed to a government. It is therefore necessary to look at the local power structures, the social networks between the local leaders and how these are used to start, to continue and dissolve conflicts.

Hypotheses

This project, as stated above, is guided by two main hypotheses. The first one maintains conflicts during the 'civil wars' in the Nordic area were not so chaotic or dramatic as earlier research has claimed. These conflicts can be understood in two widely divergent ways: as abruptions causing social disorder, or as feuds. A clerical-monarchical ideology fed by the Peace of God movement and the Gregorian struggle viewed conflict as sin and as a break with the divinely / royally installed and guaranteed peace. Our hypothesis, which is influenced by conflict studies in anthropology, is that this conception of conflict is largely an ideological construct, which tends to overshadow a widespread view of conflicts as legitimate expressions and outlets of rivalry within the confines of society – as feuds. We believe that a thorough and critical scrutiny of the sources can reveal more about these two opposing views on conflict, and that if we pay due attention to the ideological bias of sources, the search for counter-voices will yield interesting results.

The second hypothesis is that the parallel pattern of 'civil wars' in the Nordic area indicates a tightly integrated development. For that reason, the Nordic countries will be treated as *one* region, at the same time as impulses and influences from the Holy Roman Empire, the Baltic, and the areas bordering on the North Sea will be included in the analysis. However, regions should not be analysed as closed entities, but as open and highly variable territories depending on what united them. Political unities must be envisaged on multiple levels, depending on the scope and range of elite networks: from localities and small regions (local magnates), via national unities (officials in royal government) to international networks based on alliances of kingship or friendship, common culture and the church organisation.

The more specific themes and questions we would like to address can be divided into three components, revolving around the comparative aspects of today's 'civil wars', comparison and interaction with 'civil wars' outside the Nordic Middle Age realm, and the 'civil wars' in different parts of the Nordic realm.

I. Comparison with today's 'civil wars'
Based on our assumption that the 'civil wars' of the modern world and the 'civil wars' of the European Middle Ages address some of the tensions between wars and feuds, state and region, internal and external forces, while playing out within those tensions, we want to discuss the following questions:
- How did factions / elite groups in different political situations and constellations behave? Similarities in the behaviour of the society in today's Afghanistan and medieval Iceland and Norway have been presented (Barth 1965; Bagge 1986; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Fotini 2012). Was power balance the primary goa, so that if one fraction and one chief became too powerful, the other chiefs started making alliances against him? Within such an understanding 'civil wars' can be perceived as a game with the intention of maintaining the status quo, as set against the understanding that characterises a stately / western outlook.
- Factions can't be discussed without focusing on how networks are created, maintained and reshaped. Here we will focus on the patron-client relationship, family relations and in-laws, and also on how different types of public offices are used. How are fractions put together, how stable are they over time, and in what degree do they form the basis for a territorial dominion? A gender perspective is highlighted through the focus on non-formal networks, on individuals and their scope of action, and on an extended notion of politics and political culture.
- Which type of character and influence do outside impulses have on how 'civil wars' are understood and fought? Modern civil wars research can shed a new light on the medieval civil

wars, because the tension between so-called 'traditional' and 'modern' ways of understanding civil wars is a lot bigger in a modern context. Outside influence has been a one-sided attempt to implement a modern understanding of state and civil wars based on a technological and ideological superiority within areas where such political structures are poorly developed.

II. Comparison with 'civil wars' in medieval Europe

In medieval Europe the rivalry between different factions or elite groupings is a characteristic element of all politics. However, such conflicts have occasionally assumed a violent character, which has made researchers use terms such as 'civil wars' and 'anarchy' in order to describe these fights. A lot of this research has taken place within a national paradigm, where the conflicts have been sharply confined in time and space, making the connection to more 'normal' warfare, and conflicts in other areas, less distinct. In this part of the project our goal is to explore these interactions between different factions and to draw comparisons with research from other European areas.

- Comparing the Nordic 'civil wars' with similar conflict in French and English dominions: How did the regional, national and supranational impact the conflicts? The interesting common denominator here is that 'civil wars' had a positive outcome. They resulted in centralization on a state level in the second half of the 11th century. At the same time the boundaries between different 'states' were fluid. The Angevin Empire was for a long time the authoritative factor in the continental France, where a lot of the regions experienced 'civil wars', which may correspond to the 'feudal anarchy' around the year 1000. In addition to comparing it will also be interesting to compare the Nordic 'civil wars' to English 'civil wars' (1135-54) and to the English political dynamics until Simon de Montfort's rebellion in 1263-65.
- A comparison with the German realm, where there was periods with profound conflicts (early and the middle of the 11th century) and conflicts about succession, may also be fruitful, but a crucial difference is that centralization on a state level did not occur. What is similar and what is different in these areas, and which role did the relationship between the elites and the central government play in the results?

III. 'Civil wars' in different parts of the Nordic area

The elite will be the focus of our enquiry, because its members possessed the important positions in society, and their decisions and relations affected the political development decisively:

- To what extent were conflicts a part of stabilizing the society? An example of this might be the internal rivalry within the *elites*. Did this help to lessen actual conflicts because it was more important to *appear* inclined towards aggressive ideals than to actually execute such ideals?
- How much was the rivalry within the elites affected by the introduction of new career opportunities within the royal and ecclesiastical administration?
- In what way did the conflicts under the 'civil wars' differ from conflict in more peaceful times? Was the perception of 'anarchy' vs 'peace' primarily a construction to legitimize God and king as a peacekeeper, or was this a dichotomy, which gradually appeared when conflicts reached a certain level (a development from feuds to wars)?
- To what extent could the Nordic realm be perceived as a 'system' where impulses traveled from one area to another? And the opposite: How much autonomy did the different realm in the Nordic area have, and how tight or transparent were the boundaries between the Nordic realm and other areas? A Nordic perspective on the 'civil wars' will clarify whether it was one process throughout the entire area or if the 'civil wars' were parallel processes in the different kingdoms.

- Did the 'civil wars' fundamentally change society, and, if this is the case, to what extent? This will be examined with regard to ideology, (one or several?), military development (peasant army vs professional elements and castles) types of conflict (feuds vs wars) and loyalty personal control through friendship vs regional rule with stable fractions).

Methodology

'Civil wars' have usually been analysed as part of a state formation process in which kings gained the upper hand over recalcitrant aristocracies. We consider such a dichotomy to be flawed and will therefore instead take the *elites* as point of departure. Our goal in using the term 'elites' is not to delimit a precise, legal category of people, but to identify the leading strata of society, often termed as aristocracy, magnates or nobility. The elites do not constitute a homogenous group, but encompass powerful men and women who occupied a variety of positions and roles, which could be at odds with one another and overlap with the undertakings of other groups (Bougard et al. 2006). Their relationship to the monarchy and the Church was ambiguous. On the one hand, the new royal and ecclesiastical ideology in the twelfth century challenged the traditional protector role of the elites by according crucial roles in maintaining social peace to the monarchy and the Church. On the other, these two institutions were staffed by the elites, and as such can be viewed as types of elite networks. By studying how members of the elite manoeuvred through their varied and complex positions in local communities, and royal and ecclesiastical organisations, it is possible to throw new light on a well-known topic.

A focus on elites removes politics from the institutional realm and makes it a result of how elites manoeuvred within the political field. This directs attention towards two concepts: factions and networks. *Factions* can be defined 'political action groups characterised as non-corporate and leadership-oriented' (Barfield 1997, 110). *Networks* are personal bonds which in this context are formed between elite members on a fairly horizontal basis (as opposed to patron-client relationships). These bonds can be based on economic, socio-political and religious interests (Althoff 1994; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999, 2008; Hermanson 2000). An approach focused on elite networks avoids the shortcomings of viewing state formation as a set of formal institutions supplanting informal norms, but regards the emergence of new institutional norms as an addition to existing norms, thereby enlarging the scope of choices offered to elite members. Hence, even if the political culture is encircled by what Gerd Althoff calls 'Spielregeln' ('rules of the game'), these 'rules' are not absolute or compelling, leaving substantial room for agency and strategy (Althoff 1997; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999).

The concepts of elites, factions and networks are closely related to *regions*, since networks could be variable in scope and intensity. The Nordic 'civil wars' will be studied on three different regional levels. At all levels the establishment and maintenance of various types of networks – social, political, religious, learned and economic alike – should stay at the centre of the stage.

- The 'micro'-level of approaching these conflicts consists in viewing them as 'seigneurial wars', or as part of rivalry among magnates. Most medieval conflicts were elite conflicts, since elites were leaders of localities or regions, to whom the king or prince would have to pay heed in order to get support beyond his own small demesne of direct control.
- At the 'middle' level these conflicts can be regarded as internal, often dynastic, wars within kingdoms. This is the traditional way of analysing the 'civil wars', and whereas it should not be omitted, on the other hand it should not be taken to provide the only way of studying them.

- At a 'macro' level, one can analyse 'civil wars' as a joint European process, where elites constitute a group not limited by national boundaries or institutional concerns. The contributions of the Church and the transnational Christian culture will loom large on this level, as this outlook promoted new ways of understanding conflict, on the one hand advocating a peace ideology, on the other hand encouraging rulers to relentless persecution of enemies from biblical precedents. In this broad regional perspective, it is particularly relevant to study systematically elite relations across national boundaries in the Nordic area, since here conflicts seem to 'travel' between different regions in the period c. 1130-1260. Were these patterns a result of direct influence and interaction between the elites, or rather expressions of a similar phase in the state formation process?

The main Nordic sources in this project will be chronicles or sagas. In Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, written c. 1200, is the most important source, in Norway the contemporary king's sagas written between c. 1180 and 1280 are the main sources, and in Iceland *Sturlunga saga*. The character of these sources is very different, and they have their own national historiographical traditions. A major issue in this project is reading these sources in a common Nordic context. Other important sources include Nordic laws, didactic and ideological literature, and charters. As for the modern comparison, a variety of sources are available, which, in addition to broadening the medieval panoply, will shed light on the blind spots of the medieval source situation.

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