

Steinar Imsen (ed.), *The Norwegian Dominion and the Norse World c. 1100-c1400 & Taxes, Tributes and Tributary Lands in the Making of the Scandinavian Kingdoms in the Middle Ages* (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2010 & 2011) | 1

These two edited books constitute a set; they complement one another. Together they provide an excellent scholarly overview of much of the literature on the Vikings and Scandinavia. These will no doubt be standard sources for anyone interested in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic history. Fins will also benefit from this book, as will those in the United Kingdom interested in the early history of “the Danes” in Northumbria, Wessex, Essex and other Anglo-Saxon and Celtic lands. Irish, Welsh and Scottish historians will certainly want to be aware of this excellent body of work by pre-eminent scholars. A great body of literature is summarized and it would require someone extremely well versed in Scandinavian history to be able to discern if the proper emphasis is placed on contributions by leading academics of the past. I would definitely recommend that academic librarians order these books as key historical reference texts. Some of the twenty-six chapters involve some degree of cross-referencing, but by and large each chapter is relatively independent. Yet the books do “hang together.”

At the same time, the two books to some extent lack a coherent theoretical outlook. There is not much Comparative Historical Sociology (CHS) as opposed to idiographic history and “thick description.” Like many highly specialized works the editor and the authors assume quite a bit of previous knowledge so this is not likely to be a good set of books for an introductory course, except of course in Scandinavia itself (where students are more likely to have the background knowledge). The use of older letters for older words is appropriate but also presents a small obstacle to those who may not immediately want to have a detailed understanding. Nevertheless, separate chapters could be assigned in undergraduate and graduate history courses. For example, in a course in United Kingdom history the sections on Wales, Scotland and Ireland could benefit from several of the chapters in Steinar (2011).

If a CHS framework had been applied more rigorously then the distinction between “tribute” in ‘tributary lands” and “taxes” in taxation lands would have to be discussed in more detail. The definitions assumed by various authors are neither consistent nor entirely rigorous. For example Barbara Crawford writes about the skatts in the Orkneys and Caithness. In some parts of Norse Britain like the Hebrides and the Orkneys (bordlands) a tribute was paid by the “earls” to the “kings” of Norway. But it is not entirely clear that the skatt system can be considered a “tax system” per se. Fifteenth century tribute systems were not necessarily tax systems in the narrow sense What Crawford discusses as “rentals” could equally be considered a kind of appanage system. In terms of sociological theory it might have been better to stick with the notion of a “tribute system” (Latin *tributa*). Of course there was a kind of evolution from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, but the subtle shifts are not investigated as systematically as some might wish. Nevertheless, Crawford does deal with some of the changes that took place over several hundred years. It may be

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that the geographically compact nature of the Orkneys and Caithness made it possible to introduce a tribute system which was somewhat more “advanced” toward a taxation system. There were 3,670 “pennylands” in Orkney and 18 pennylands were one “ounceland” (urislands). The idea of a monetary assessment based on ploughlands comes closer to a true taxation system, but it is not clear that was something which took place on a regular basis, or only for the construction of a cathedral (Saint Magnus).

The lack of Indices makes it somewhat difficult to cross-reference ideas. One would not necessarily expect one index for the two books, of course, but each book individually could benefit from a detailed Index. So many technical terms are used that a word list would have been helpful for those readers who do not fluently read Norwegian, Danish, Swedish or Icelandic!

The editor, Steinar Imsen, has certainly done an excellent job in compiling first class, relevant essays by top ranking scholars. It is not easy to get this degree of focus on detailed subject matter. Overall there is much agreement, although there are not any papers devoted to a discussion of theoretical or methodological problems per se. (Methodological comments are incidental and mostly contained in footnotes.) The 2010 volume is the result of a workshop on the Norse world held in Røros, Norway, in 2008. The 2011 volume is the product of a workshop held in Visby, Sweden. Colleagues were enthusiastic in discussing a common Scandinavian-Norse-Swedish-Danish-Scottish-Irish-Welsh-British world that spanned several hundreds of years (approximately 8<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> centuries). Anyone who is not already deeply immersed in pre-Medieval and Medieval Northern European history is bound to learn a great deal. For example, while I had some general knowledge of Sweden as a nation the short chapter by Thomas Lindkvist (Imsen 2010, pp. 251-262) made me much more aware of the differences between Svealand and Götaland. The Svear and the Göta of Västergötland and Östergötland were not always united. Indeed, the Götland provinces were “Christianized” earlier and were seemingly more connected to events in continental Europe, including the emergence of full blown “patrimonial” feudalism (Weber 1968). The link between the Roman Catholic Church and the Europeanized kingdoms of Sweden and Norway is not fully understood. But the existence of a traditional bureaucracy (Bakker 2010) in the form of bishoprics and nunneries, etc., seems to have been a key to the emergence of the type of “feudalism” usually discussed in textbooks. It is interesting to note that the Geatas discussed in *Beowulf* may or may not have been the Götar and *Beowulf* may not be a reliable historical source for the sixth century.

Some parts of these books are also directly relevant to German, Estonian and Russian historians. For example, the 12-13<sup>th</sup> century Danish “empire” in the Baltic is discussed in Chapter 12 by Jens Olesen. Apparently the Battle of Bjornhöved in Holstein in 1227 was a

crucial watershed. The Danish expanded into Mecklenberg and Pomerania in what we now think of as Deutschland. (The Roman term *Germania* would have also included what we now consider the nation-state of Denmark.) Danish expansion also included a set of conquests to the East. The city of Reval was important to the sea route to Novgorod and was sold by King Valdemar IV Atterdag to the Teutonic order in 1346.

In a longer review I would want to go into detail concerning each chapter. Chapter 2 by Randi B. Woerdahl (in Imsen 2010: pp. 35-57) provides an excellent, detailed discussion of the historiography of the Norse world and the discussion about “Medieval history and the legitimization of nations and nation states” goes some distance toward starting to address sociological questions. He also briefly discusses alternative perspectives. There is a certain degree of conflict involved in studying nations retrospectively and once can easily fall victim to a kind of Whig History Fallacy, where what exists today is presumed to have been what would most likely evolve. Norman Davies (2014) has done a good job studying those “invisible” political realms in mainland Europe and Britain that we have now forgotten (e.g. the seventeen varieties of Burgundy/Burgundia). To some extent the Davies’ thesis about invisible kingdoms holds for many of the state systems discussed in these two volumes. They are “invisible” to the ordinary educated person, who is usually better acquainted with the histories of “countries” that exist today as nation-states (e.g. Deutschland, Italia) but may not know much about pre-Medieval sub-regions (e.g. Angle-land, Saxonia, Batavia). The national history approach has little to offer for those interested in an objective reading of the evolution of societies from pre-modern capitalist to modern capitalist relations, much less from truly traditional to postmodern conditions.

Overall, I recommend these two volumes as solid intellectual contributions, with the minor caveats that: (1.) some more overview material would have been beneficial for class room use (including more and better quality maps) and (2.) a Comparative Historical Sociological (CHS) based on Weberian and Neo-Weberian sociological theories would have been useful. (Imsen 2010: Chapter 4 by Ian Beuermann has excellent maps, but in some chapters the quality is not 100% clear.) Perhaps there will be additional volumes and perhaps such new work might integrate the historical material a bit more directly with social science theories of the state, including political sociology, political studies, political science, comparative international relations studies, agrarian history, rural sociology and political economy (including Marxian political economy). These are not books that will be read by very many non-academic readers and yet some of the chapters would usefully be summarized in popular publications in various languages, not just English.

Perhaps Steinar Imsen and some colleagues will write an introductory book which utilizes the abundant historical resources on which the twenty four other authors base their

arguments. The volumes taught me a great deal but it took a certain amount of effort to get past the sometimes overly technical discussions of Scandinavian terms. (There is no glossary in either book.) The whole idea of Skattlands is not well known to those who are not specialized in “North Sea” and “Baltic” history, yet the concept of military tribute and *corvee* labour is directly relevant to many theories of pre-modern state systems. The main focus historically is the 12-15<sup>th</sup> centuries and it would most certainly be valuable to have another volume in the series that covers the earliest archaeological discovered (before the 9<sup>th</sup> century) and a fourth volume on the period that starts with the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I remember as a young boy wondering how it was possible for three tiny countries (the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark) to continue to exist. In the Cold War Era it seemed that only superpowers mattered. But now I more fully grasp the fact that the current nation-states which are small relative to other significant players on the world stage were at one time themselves small scale world super powers. The Netherlands had its Golden Age in the early seventeenth century. To some extent these volumes celebrate a kind of Scandinavian Golden Age in the 12-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of this history, unfortunately, is not widely taught. Perhaps the television series on the Vikings will help to promote more interest. We are inundated with books on the histories of England, Scotland, Ireland, and English-speaking parts of the world. But the importance of Norway, Denmark and Sweden is under-appreciated outside of Scandinavia.

## References

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