To Rede and to Ropn

Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources

Abstract

The subject of this thesis is early Scandinavian kingship, and the analysis is based on a number of written sources and runic inscriptions. A study of early Germanic kingship focuses primarily on the development of Gothic kingship from the fourth to the sixth century. The royal attributes expressed in kennings and *heiti* in *Ynglingatal* are analysed, showing that the poem presents the development of kingship as a process in four stages. The dating of this work and its style of composition is also discussed. A study of the chapters in *Ynglinga saga* which deal with King Ingiald *illráði* examines the role of counsel, the political structure of the Svear and high kingship as a structural problem. *Vita Anskarii* is analysed with particular emphasis on the interaction between kings, noblemen and the ‘people’ in political decision-making. Finally, the associations between kings and runes are discussed, and the inscription of the Sparlösa stone is reinterpreted as a monument over a royal succession.

*Keywords*: kingship, historical analogy, textual archaeology, written sources, counsel, rune
SVANTE NORR

To Rede and to Rown
Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources

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Due to great public demand... Well, not really, but over the years, on occasion, people have asked me for a copy of my book and I have had no extra copies left to give them. Therefore, I located the old PageMaker file in a remote corner of a dusty hard disc, imported it into InDesign, wiped the cobwebs away, and discovered that it did not look too bad. After some minor polishing and the elimination of a few errors, the text is now ready to enter our new, digital world. The page breaks are almost identical to the original (the difference is generally less than one line), so there should be no problems when it comes to references and comparing the two editions – it can still be referred to as Norr 1998. If you insist on distinguishing between the two editions, write the reference to this one like this:


Or something similar, depending on your choice of reference system.

So without further ado, here is the book again, should you be interested. To be quite frank, here it is, even if you are not.

Oh, yes, I changed the title of Chapter 4. It should not matter. I just like the new one better.

Uppsala 2008-01-17

Svante Norr
In a lecture at the Department of Archaeology in Uppsala some years ago the Russian archaeologist Leo Klejn talked about the necessity of co-operation between archaeologists and historians. He expressed his ideal of the relationship between the two in the picture of a rider on a horse: the historian was the rider and the archaeologist the horse. Although I presently wear my hair in a ponytail and am closely acquainted with people who think highly of the intelligence of horses, the vision of archaeology as a ‘data factory’ for the thinking and synthesising historians appeared bleak to me. However, Klejn was right in stressing the need for inter-disciplinary co-operation.

This need is widely recognised within archaeology today. Post-processual archaeology aspires to unite related disciplines in ‘material culture studies’, and in Scandinavia research projects often include historians, linguists, art historians and historians of religions alongside archaeologists; good examples are the Danish *From Tribe to State* (Mortensen & Rasmussen 1988 and 1992) and the Swedish *The Christianisation of Sweden* (Nilsson 1996).

Furthermore, in recent years archaeologists themselves have more frequently turned back to the written sources for historical analogy, as literary criticism, and from other angles in order to understand various archaeological sources or general topics; this goes hand in hand with a developing interest in past mentalities and ideologies. I say ‘turned back’ since archaeologists of the ‘narrative’ school in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries regularly combined archaeological and historical sources in their works.

*To Rede and to Rown* reflects these recent developments. Its subject is early Scandinavian kingship and the study is primarily based on written sources. Archaeological records play a minor role, apart from rune-stones, which, however, are analysed with regard to their inscriptions, as texts. This bias can, of course, be justified only if we believe that archaeology should not be given a more narrow definition than what is provided by the etymology of the word itself: ‘knowledge of the ancient’.

For the individual scholar, the obvious problems involved in this transgression of traditional academic boundaries is a lack of training in the methods of the related disciplines, a lack of knowledge of existing literature, and a lack of time to read all the relevant literature which is found. It is inevitable that a text on, for example, historical or textual archaeology today reflects not only a process of interpretation but also a process of learning. Inter-disciplinary interaction will be crucial for the development of this trend.

My aim has been to design the individual chapters so that they can be read separately and still make sense. In chapter 1 some reflections are given on current
theoretical issues. The discussion is taken further in chapter 2 against the background of, not least, modern research on orality versus literacy, and ultimately leads on to the subject of textual archaeology.

Chapter 3 deals with historical analogy and studies the nature and development of Gothic kingship. The subject is covered by several recent monographs, and the Goths have also been used by archaeologists as an analogue for the understanding of contemporary Scandinavian societies.

In chapters 4-6 I analyse three well-known written sources: Ynglingatal, Ynglinga saga (chapters 33-41) and Vita Anskarii. Since I have been involved in the SIV project (Svealand in the Vendel and Viking Periods) it was natural for me to choose sources which referred to the kingdom of the Svear. Ynglingatal claims to describe a long dynastic line of famous Norwegian and Swedish kings up to c. 900 AD, the selected part of Ynglinga saga describes events surrounding the last two kings of this Ynglinga dynasty to reign in the kingdom of the Svear; and Vita Anskarii describes the interactions between kings and their ‘people’.

Chapters 7 and 8 concern runic inscriptions and the multifaceted concept ‘rune’, especially in relation to kings and royal discourse of power; the inscription of the rune-stone in Sparlösa, Västergötland is reinterpreted as a monument over a royal succession.

An increasing number of historical texts are today being published on the Internet, both in original languages and translations. In terms of accessibility this is an obvious advantage since they can be easily downloaded, but there are also drawbacks. As a result of international copyright rules, electronically published translations commonly date from the late nineteenth and earliest twentieth centuries, and the publication of texts in original languages as plain text means that diacritics may not always be displayed (compare, for example, the lines from the Gothic Bible cited from Heather & Matthews 1991 with those from the electronic texts of Project Wulfla in chapter 3). However, the greatest advantage with these electronic texts may be that the time to make a word-search is radically reduced with the help of a computer. This has been of significant value for me in my analyses of the rulership vocabulary in the Gothic Bible and Heliand (chapter 3) and the Old English concept ræd (chapter 5).

In my translations of texts from the original languages I have consulted several existing translations for guidance, and these have all been listed in my literature references. In these cases the reference in the text only reads ‘my translation’. If a translation has been based on a particular work this has been indicated, and also, of course, if a single existing translation has been used. The only text which I have translated from the original with the help of dictionaries and glossaries is a passage from the Old English poem Maxims I in chapter 5.

The fonts used in this volume are Junius Standard and Junius Modern, publicly available on the Internet in The Old English Font Pack for Windows and
the Macintosh at Old English at the University of Virginia (URL: http://www.engl.virginia.edu/OE/). The rune font used in chapter 8 is Gullskoen, developed by Odd Einar Haugen, University of Bergen, and publicly available at Norwegian Computer Centre for the Humanities (URL: http://gonzo.hd.uib.no/NCCH-docs/runes.html).

Although the subject of this work is kings and kingship my aim has not been to define these concepts in a scientific sense. Instead, I have focused on the past horizon of understanding, on expressions of kingship and verbal images of kings which I have encountered in those sources which I have studied in detail.

The very use of the word ‘king’ instead of a more neutral term, like ‘ruler’, could be criticised as the former term is inevitably coloured by our understanding of historical kingship from Medieval times and onwards: the monarchy, the king enthroned, the king with crown, orb and sceptre, the king as head-of-state. However, the use of the word ‘king’ for Germanic-speaking rulers from the first century AD to the late Viking Age, a time of profound social changes, can be defended partly because Latin writers used the word rex for these men throughout this period, partly because more neutral terms merely circumvents the real problem: to illustrate how concepts are re-defined or replaced by others as social life changes.

My interpretation of the sources is by nature speculative. But it is not something which has caused hesitations on my part, and I borrow the words of William Merritt Sale (1995) from his review of John Miles Foley’s The Singer of Tales in Performance: ‘in the long run there is little danger from over-readings: they usually simply fail to persuade and are forgotten, while if a work is under-read, there is a terrible loss’.

To those who have read and commented on parts of the manuscript or have otherwise given me good counsel during various stages of the work I wish to express my sincere thanks: Birgit Arrhenius, Stefan Brink, Bo Gräslund, Frands Herschend (my superviser) and Ulf Näsman (names in alphabetic order). I am particularly indebted to Ingrid Lundegårdh, research student in Medieval history, University of Cambridge, who laboured for weeks revising and greatly improving the English of my manuscript, checked and revised all quotes and expressions in Latin and Greek, and, in the process, scrutinised every single statement in the book to content as well as to form.

Svante Norr
Uppsala, 16 March, 1998
In theory...

Hypothesis – a guess
Theory – a series of hypotheses
(Paul Bahn, Bluff Your Way in Archaeology)

To write a text within the discipline of archaeology in the late 1990s involves a taking of sides, a taking on of an identity. The first choice is between theory or no theory. Either we care about and are explicit about theory, or we dismiss it and write our texts as if it did not exist. For those who venture from the safe harbour of tradition and straightforward craftsmanship there is a further choice, between processual (New Archaeology) and post-processual (post-modern, post-structuralist) theory. However, as neither of these approaches offer a fixed set of tenets the choices for the theory-conscious writer are far more complex, but the dichotomy can serve as a crude, heuristic model, a pointer in two general directions.

The music of the future?

There are different ways of defining processualism and post-processualism, but this is not the place for a thorough examination or comparison of the two currents. Neither should be unfamiliar by now, sixteen years after the publication of Ian Hodder’s Symbols in Action (1982a) and Symbolic and Structural Archaeology (1982b), and eleven years after the publication of Michael Shanks’ and Christopher Tilley’s ‘black’ (1987a) and ‘red’ (1987b). Furthermore, in a recent thesis this topic has been covered comprehensively against a background of the history of archaeology and history of ideas (Hegardt 1997). The reader of Scandinavian languages is referred to this work for information and elucidation.

At times we encounter alternative ways of illustrating these theoretical differences. In a related discipline, the branch of historical linguistics and literature concerned with Old English, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe identifies what she regards as the major, theoretical trends with two ‘founding fathers’, the French historian Gabriel Monoud and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The former advocated ‘proper attention to the past, an attention to be paid in the form of positivist histories’, and the latter looked on critical objectivity as ‘a deadly illusion’ (O’Keeffe 1997, p. 2). Thus, Monoud and Nietzsche take on the character of antithetical archetypes.
Michael Shanks, in *Experiencing Archaeology* (1992), uses metaphorical, figurative language to define the differences between processualism and post-processualism. He compares scientific (processual) archaeology with a tree, and its philosophy as ‘tree thinking’:

> In sum, tree-thinking has these characteristics: it is unified and hierarchical, concerned with the meanings and identities of things (what they are), conceives that there are roots or bases to what we know, aims to reproduce its object in thought. The symbolism of trees implies that such reasoning is solid, upstanding, and stable. (Shanks 1992, p. 24)

As a contrast to the tree Shanks envisages post-processualism as the underground part of certain plants, the rhizome:

> You can’t get rid of the stuff. It sends out creeping white underground stems. Chop it up and each piece grows again... Thick underground sprouting more plants. Extensions then focus in tubers and bulbs. Rhizomes-thinking is conjunctive. Its principle is not, as in tree-thinking, an ontological one, of *being* something (*A* is *B*), but of connection and lines of sequence (*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*...). Its character is multiplicity, in contrast to the multiple of tree-thinking... Trees can have multiple branches and leaves on the basis of segmentation of a higher unity or pollarding, but rhizomes are always already more than one – multiplicity. There is no unity in a rhizome in the sense of a centre or focus which can support attributes... (Shanks 1992, p. 35)

It is hard to imagine Shanks winning new disciples through this piece of rhetoric. On the contrary, opponents of post-processualism might be attracted to the image of subterranean, ‘crawling crabwise stalks’. Characterisation of theoretical movements by use of metaphor is a questionable and narcissistic method, one which processual archaeologists would regard as pointless and unsound in their search for a ‘clean’, scientific language. It is unlikely to have any lasting value, but here it may serve to illustrate that psychological processes other than cool reflection guide our personal preferences and choice of theory. To imagine that adherence to a particular theoretical approach is guided solely by logical considerations is wishful thinking, a failure to appreciate the complexity of the human mind.

An alternative set of metaphors for processual and post-processual theory can be found with the assistance of Friedrich Nietzsche and his book *The Birth of Tragedy*:

> We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics [read: archaeology], once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the
Apollinian and Dionysian duality – just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations. The term Dionysian and Apollinian we borrow from the Greeks, who disclose to the discerning mind the profound mysteries of their view of art, not, to be sure, in concepts, but in the intensely clear figures of their gods. Through Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, we come to recognize that in the Greek world there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollinian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music. These two different tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance; and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term ‘art’; till eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic ‘will,’ they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art – Attic tragedy.

In order to grasp these two tendencies, let us first conceive of them as the separate art worlds of dreams and intoxication...

(Nietzsche 1968a, p. 33; the editor Walter Kaufmann prefers to translate Nietzsche’s term Apollinisch with ‘Apollinian’ and not ‘Apollonian’, which is more often favour ed and will be used below)

The use of texts which from a present-day, scholarly point of view seem irrelevant can be justified by their usefulness as rhetorical devices, simply because it is impossible to take them literally. Leaving aside Nietzsche’s unification of opposed principles in the Attic tragedy (the Grand Synthesis of archaeology has yet to appear) we can let his concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian generate the following list:

\[
\text{APOLLONIAN – DIONYSIAN} \\
\text{SCULPTURE – MUSIC} \\
\text{FIXED – FLUID} \\
\text{DREAM – INTOXICATION} \\
\text{CALCULATION – INSPIRATION} \\
\text{DISTANT OBSERVATION – EXTATIC PARTICIPATION} \\
\text{PROCESSUAL ARCHAEOLOGY – POST-PROCESSUAL ARCHAEOLOGY}
\]

Of course, this list does as much or as little justice to each of the two theoretical currents of archaeology as any other (and very little to the god Apollo!). However, the point is that each pair of concepts represents the end points on a continuum, not separated and irreconcilable entities, just as in each human mind thought and inspiration would be pointless without the other; and intoxication inevitably leads to sleep – perchance to dreams? It is not only a matter of per-
sonal choice but also of personal, psychological disposition—attitude—in what direction we are inclined.

To give processualism a metaphorical expression in the Apollonian manifestation sculpture (emphasising fixed form, solidity, clear boundaries, presence, etc.) and post-processualism in the Dionysian manifestation music (realised, re-interpreted and present only in performance, etc.) may not lead to intellectual advancement but perhaps to a recognition that two different phenomena within the same sphere may have an equal right to exist. Sculptural art may be executed well or poorly, and the same applies to music (although we may personally prefer one to the other); but to attend a bad performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony should not make us call for a world-wide destruction of musical scores or turn the world’s opera houses into museums for sculptural art. Music and sculpture are not complementary phenomena; each can be appreciated in its own right. Still, as different aspects of art they have something in common.

I enjoy classical music, and if faced with the hypothetical and ludicrous choice between life-long enjoyment of either music or sculptural art, I would choose music. I find post-processual theory more interesting and promising for the future of archaeology than processual. It is important as a critique against the processual ideal model of the natural sciences and aspirations to methodological hegemony; it extends the subject of archaeological enquiry to archaeology itself as social practice; it speaks for openness and diversity. Also, the role of language in understanding has been emphasised. Material culture is regarded as a ‘text’ that we read and translate into new texts in articles and books: the textual metaphor. Still, I would not condemn all aspects of processual archaeology – out of respect for its proponents.

A school of theory is defined through language; it constitutes a language-game. But no school or language-game is entirely different from the other; if it were, there could be no communication. Ludwig Wittgenstein emphasised that scientific language and ordinary language merge (Alford 1986), and Duncan Richter (1997) explains Wittgenstein’s perception of ordinary language as a link between language-games in the following way:

What one says, or what people in general say, can change. Ways of life and uses of language change, so meanings change, but not utterly and instantaneously. Things shift and evolve, but rarely if ever so drastically that we lose all grip on meaning. So there is no timeless essence of at least some and perhaps all concepts, but we still understand one another well enough most of the time.

If I understand Wittgenstein correctly, the mere fact that it is possible to make sense of the past without a prolific use of exclusive terminology—as was done to a large extent by ‘traditional’ archaeologists until New Archaeology entered
the scene—renders attempts to impose an exclusive terminology on the past, if not invalid, at least problematic and suspect. If so, the processualists were wrong and the post-processualists have to take care not to fall into the same trap from another direction.

The ‘genealogical’ method

The ideas and methods of the post-modern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84) have proved a great source of inspiration within the human and social sciences, archaeology included (for example, Tilley 1990; Brattli 1993; Svestad 1993). Foucault has treated such diverse subjects as sexuality, madness, criminality, medicine and the humanities. He analyses these concepts and institutions in the light of their own history, revealing how they have been continuously re-defined over time, and how intimate and complex the relations are between discourse, power, knowledge, and definitions of such abstract concepts as truth and ethics. Such seemingly fundamental issues as what can be considered as normal sexual behaviour or mental sanity are constantly subject to change, and the question is when and under what circumstances these changes occur.

Foucault was a strong opponent of essentialism and any attempt to narrowly define his method may be against his own intentions (Tilley 1990, pp. 281 f.). Others have called his mode of knowledge-production a ‘structuralist epistemology’. Foucault himself preferred to use ‘archaeology’ as a term relatively free from metaphysical connotations, at the same time expressing metaphorically how the foundations for our perception of the world and ourselves can be revealed only by delving beneath the surface (Kearney 1987, p. 284).

The term generally used to label Foucault’s method is ‘genealogy’. Obviously, this is because a fore-runner is seen in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) On the Genealogy of Morals. In this work Nietzsche unveils the bleak historical reality behind those moral ideals which the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie regarded as pure and eternal (Nietzsche 1968b).

The Swedish sociologist Mats Beronius has attempted to set out guide-lines for a genealogical method, based on the works of Nietzsche and Foucault. He regards their theories as a ‘tool-kit’, not as a delimited and ready-to-hand system, possible to reconstruct; no post-modern, general method springs forth like a fully armed Athena out of the head of Zeus, and to create it would violate the source(s) of inspiration.

Reality is, according to Beronius, ‘perspective dependent’ (this expression is not seldom found in archaeological works in Sweden today after its introduction by Mats Burström, 1989). Language contains fundamental ambiguities and uncertainties; words acquire their meaning only through their relation to other words and their meaning can vary with the context. Language does not relate
to objects and phenomena in predestined ways. Discourse generates rules which define the meaning of words and statements, giving language the superficial appearance of stability (Beronius 1991, p. 34). Language does not mirror the world, it creates representations of the world.

This opinion echoes the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), particularly the familiar dichotomy signifié (signifier) and signifiant (signified). This implies that a word has no imperative relation to that which it represents; one word can be exchanged for another or have several different meanings (Kearney 1986, pp. 243 f.). We are also reminded of Jaques Derrida's term ‘differance’: ‘Derrida often uses this neologism, differance, to denote the dual functioning of writing as both a differing (each sign differs from the other) and a deferring (the endless chain of signs postpones any termination of the chain in some original signified). The French term, différer, carries both these senses. The metaphysical prestige of the logos—as a centred and centring self-identity—is subverted by the operation of differance’ (Kearney 1987, p. 119).

When we define and describe reality in accordance with a certain discourse or perspective, we exclude, to a higher or lesser degree, other interpretations of reality, other perspectives or discourses. If we aspire to a discursive monopoly we restrict what is possible to describe, the remainder being designated as meaningless, unscientific, irrational, and so on (Beronius 1991, pp. 34 ff.). Beronius’ perspective is taken from Nietzsche, but the term was used already in the early eighteenth century by scholars working within the hermeneutic tradition (Mueller-Vollmer 1986, pp. 59 ff.).

Genealogy perceives society not as static but in a constant state of formation. Societies, like languages and discourses, are processes, dynamic and highly complex systems. The simplified and formalised (for example, scientific) statement does not represent absolute knowledge, but provides us with a medium through which we can comprehend the world and cope with our existence (Beronius 1991, pp. 36 ff.). There are no fundamental concepts or methods within any branch of science which can provide us with a truth, transcending time and space. Instead, science has created more or less accepted frames of expression and action, which facilitate communication between parties involved. We are then talking of intertextuality, that is, what is more or less commonly agreed upon.

It does not occur to the genealogist to search for fundamental phenomena, first causes, basic laws or primeval essences. To stress the discontinuous and non-linear instead of the continuous and linear does not, however, imply that an ‘absolutist’ fundamentalism should be replaced by a relativist free-for-all. Rather, it implies that discontinuity is an aspect of reality, parallel with continuity (Beronius 1991, pp. 39 ff.). Obviously, this brings us close to what is called deconstruction: to ‘turn concepts inside out’, to invert established value hierarchies within dichotomies, to demonstrate that seemingly absolute, firm
and natural concepts in reality are historically constructed and contradictory (Culler 1989, pp. 85 ff.).

Genealogy does not perceive society and history as an unbroken causal chain. While causal explanation is not eschewed, stress is put on changing, haphazard and vacillating power conditions (Beronius 1991, p. 47). The insight into the complex nature of social systems leads us to the conclusion that social events cannot be predicted out of any general principles.

There is a great fear, Beronius writes, both within and outside the academic world, of the chaotic, the fragmentary and the intensive. But this is a fear which has been socially acquired (Beronius 1991, p. 41). I would add that the Dionysian approach (my expression) does not satisfy the desire for security founded in a sense of power or control over what we study; it does not provide us with a solid and final world-view. Anyone who attempts to write genealogically must seek a sense of security in a view of the world as discourse dependent, in the knowledge that a text can be read and interpreted in many meaningful ways. These interpretations are neither irreconcilable nor complementary (like sculpture and music); instead, they can be regarded as equal, based on different ways of perceiving reality. They may even meet in harmony (like sculpture and music in the final act of *Don Giovanni*).

When you at last close Beronius’ book you have not really learnt how to write genealogically yourself. At the same time you realise that in principle you already knew how when you first read his preface. Much further than to general guidelines, theoretical standpoints and a critical attitude towards concepts and texts you do not get – but even that is quite far. The point is that there are no universal, genealogical principles. The same applies to deconstruction (Culler 1989, pp. 227 ff.). In his review of *Re-Constructing Archaeology* (Shanks & Tilley 1987a) Stig Welinder (1989, p. 87) questions whether it is possible to achieve more than a intuitive and wordless understanding of this work, and whether that, perhaps, is the very intention behind it. He may be right.

**Subjectivity**

Post-processual archaeology invites the question of subjectivity: how can we avoid conjuring up the relativist ghost, the impending threat of *Anything Goes* (see, for example, Renfrew 1989 and Malmer 1993)? My personal answer is: by taking an ethical stand before your own writing, and showing a self-critical attitude towards your aims and your context. Fundamental for how your text will be judged and valued—as objective or subjective, scientific or unscientific—is the language you use and how it is received, how ‘compatible’ it is with the language of your readers.

A factor which strongly works against (or even renders impossible) ‘the Past-as-wished-for’ is that the language/discourse of archaeology precedes the indi-
individual archaeologist. I have not created it myself. When I decide to take a stand in relation to the established discourse I am already part of it. Post-modern zeal might make me speak of ‘the free play of meaning’ or something similar, but, as James Clifford has pointed out, meaning is not free to play any game at any given moment. Meaning is subordinate to the discursive power-game of history (Clifford 1986, p. 110). The meaning of my text is not there in itself, passively, but is produced through the act of reading by different readers and, thereby, through its relation to other texts. A new language-game does not suddenly emerge out of nothing but out of, and in reaction to other language-games.

This makes it as unwise to campaign for an absolute relativism as to be afraid of it. Both reactions are founded in a defective analysis and understanding of our production of meaning and of the role of language in human existence. As far as I know, no archaeologist has advocated an unmitigated solipsism, that is, where my guess and interpretation always is as good as yours. Somehow, we seem to realise that such a standpoint would make communication utterly pointless.

Consciously or unconsciously, I take part in conserving or changing the language of archaeology through intra-disciplinary communication in speech and writing. Accepting and supporting prevailing discourse, I can choose a traditional and conformist way of expression. Wanting to change archaeology, I use a more unconventional language. The word ‘language’ here contains aspects of my attitude towards the world and my understanding of it. However, even in the latter case I consciously have to relate to the established discourse in order to be understood and maintain a dialogue between myself and my audience of colleagues and, hopefully, members of the public. Research is communication and relation. When my research has become a monologue it will no longer evoke interest and has lost its ethical value. We must not, as stressed by Michael Shanks, fail to take account of the past, empirical ‘reality’ or our contemporary audience. Experiment must walk hand in hand with responsibility (Shanks 1992, p. 180).

This responsibility each of us must shoulder ourselves. At the same time, language is a power-tool in archaeology as elsewhere, and sender and receiver can interpret the message of a text differently in accordance with authorised or traditional language-games (theoretical debates tend to show this all too well). The archaeology I applaud someone else would like to see abolished. The reaction of the receiver is, however, his or her own responsibility.
Our dialogue with the dead

One of the stated aims of post-processualists has been to make prehistoric people visible. It is therefore not surprising that we are now accustomed to talk about ‘the Other’. The Other is, simply expressed, every human being who is ‘not-I’, past or present.

Ethics and the Other

The Other has a central role in the philosophy of ethics of Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–1995). In his study of modernism versus post-modernism in archaeology Johan Hegardt suggests that ethics based on that of Lévinas should be introduced into archaeological theory as a way of retaining (or regaining) a ‘justified and serious pluralism in archaeology’ in a present situation where ‘post-processual archaeology has shifted from a pluralistic, critical discourse to discourses with power ambitions’ (Hegardt 1997, p. 266).

The Other is the human being who confronts us with his presence, either in person or through the records of his actions (such as ancient monuments). The presence of the Other creates an immediate relation between me and him (I use the masculine pronoun merely for convenience), or perhaps rather a ‘relational space’, challenging me to establish a conscious, active relation, to open a conversation. Alphonso Lingis, who has translated works by Lévinas, outlines the latter’s view on the encounter with the Other in the following way:

The other manifests his alterity by taking a stand before me; his alterity is not negative as a content of cognition that yet eludes me but as a destitution that appeals to me, is not remote as an externality out of reach but as a height or a perfection that contests me. The other faces me in the poverty and nakedness, and the majesty, of his face. To recognise the alterity of the other is not to grasp, to conceive it, but to answer to his solicitation and to answer for my being; it is to give – not a spontaneous giving of meaning (Sinngebung), but a giving of what is meaningful for him. The cognition of objects and the recognition of the alterity of the other, acts of different structures, are not separate performances; it is in signifying a world of objects that I recognise the alterity of the other. In signifying object-terms, that is, in putting the environment I have grasped in the perspective of another, in constituting an objective world, I also respond to his appeal and his contestation. (Lingis in Lévinas 1987, p. xiv)
I cannot claim to have more than a superficial understanding of Lévinas’ ethics but I will, nevertheless, make some reflections on the meeting between us as archaeologists and the past Other. Responding to the Other involves a meeting of two horizons of understanding or languages in a kind of dialogue between participants who from an ethical point of view should be considered equal. We can envisage the result as a double conceptual archaeology, where we not only try to understand the past in present-day concepts, but also scrutinise the concepts themselves, much in the spirit of Foucault. The challenge for the archaeologist would be not so much to seek straightforward answers to certain questions, but to find a way to express our acknowledgement of the fundamental alterity of the Other as well as our recognition of his equality to ourselves in and through his humanity. Or, more simply expressed, to try to express the fact that before the Other we simultaneously recognise ourselves and feel estranged.

In Hegardt’s opinion, processual archaeology has failed to take adequate responsibility for the Other by imposing its own language upon him, striving to make the Other the Same (Hegardt 1997, pp. 256 ff.; cf. Donoghue 1996, p. 148). Post-processualists, with their focus on archaeology as a contemporary practice and their extensive use of post-modern theory – most of it published in the last 50 years – should also consider the danger of leaving the past Other ‘in the lurch’, dejected and silent behind an elaborate and exclusive meta-language (see, for example, the criticism expressed by Gräslund, 1989). If we wish to let the Other ‘speak for himself’ out of respect for his alterity it may be wise to let terms like differance or, indeed, ‘alterity’, be balanced by others which could actually have been used by the Other. Or better: such as really were used. The language of Derrida is not relevant to human life as everyday experience, and neither is any meta-language, whether post-modern, realist, positivist or some other. They are inevitably detached and exclusive.

In an interview in March 1997 for the archaeological Internet journal The Assemblage (interview by Mel Giles, Judith Winters and Kathryn Denning; Giles et al. 1997) Michael Parker Pearson expressed himself in related terms regarding the application in archaeology of the social theories of Anthony Giddens, and I find it justified to provide space for an excerpt here:

Q: You were already interested in social theory then; who were your guiding influences?

M.P.P.: We were very influenced by the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Giddens as well. Giddens was in my college, in Kings, so I actually asked him if he knew much about archaeology and would he be interested in coming to talk to us and getting involved in our projects, and he was. He wanted initially to read some books on archaeology to get the hang of what was going on and I gave him a series of references as to where we were at theoretically, in other words,
straight processual stuff, and he came back after a couple of days after having read the lot – well he said he did, I don’t know if he really did! – and said, ‘Well it’s all terribly functionalist you know and that sort of thing has basically died a death in the kind of work that we’re all up to’... So I introduced him to archaeology and he came along to one or two sessions but then I think his interest waned. Partly because his own work is particularly directed to what he sees as the period after the fundamental break with traditional pasts, yeah, but I mean, that’s the revolution onwards and therefore he felt that there wasn’t much to be said about pre-industrial society.

Q: So do you think that might pose a problem in the way that Giddens’s work is extensively used?

M.P.P.: I think there are big questions about the nature of agency which we’ve taken on board without understanding the constraints that people in traditional societies work under. I found a lovely quote about this the other day in Frazer’s *Golden Bough* where he talks about the people of Java being slaves to their religion and tradition. Although it’s over-stated, I think it brings out the sense that agency is a very different matter in many traditional societies that don’t have notions of innovation, change, fashionability and so on that we’re so used to living with today.

Q: So in archaeological social theory we may be placing emphasis upon individual action and freedom of thought that might sometimes be inappropriate for past societies?

M.P.P.: Yes, I think we do. It’s all part of our working it through. I mean Giddens never meant his theory to be a universalised and general theory. It is a theory for its place in time which is contemporary twentieth century society. He’s not interested, and I don’t even think he’d see it as relevant, I think he’d see it as a misapplication, if we were to take it into the pre-industrial societies.

Archaeology and written sources

How are we, as archaeologists, to do justice to the past Other? How can we let the dead speak for themselves when they are gone and silent, and known to us only from material records (if archaeology is defined narrowly)? I would suggest that we can at least create an artificial dialogue by including in our archaeological analysis what the Other *has said* in different kinds of texts, such as poems, sagas, chronicles and inscriptions. And we should not be satisfied with later translations, but unfold the complexity and alterity of the original languages. We need to gain competence as historians as well as linguists.

Before the ‘loss of innocence’, as David Clarke (1973) once labelled the advent of the self-conscious New Archaeology, some Scandinavian archaeologists like Sune Lindqvist and Birger Nerman made prolific use of written records to put flesh on disparate archaeological bones. They had the linguistic competence
that made this possible. To these members of the so called ‘narrative’ school it was a matter of course to combine literary and material sources when writing their cultural histories. To them, the one source category seemed as good and trustworthy as the other. Seeing through the deficient knowledge and ‘unconstrained inclination to romance’ (to speak with Sune Lindqvist, 1945, pp. 58 and 69) of a saga writer, it was possible to unveil historical ‘facts’ by means of a ‘ruthless and thorough critique’ (my translation). When written and material records were combined it was, for instance, possible to place named, ancient kings in particular burial mounds (see chapter 4). Thereby a personal relation could be established between on one had, the scholar and his/her audience, and on the other a collection of burnt bones from the West Mound of Old Uppsala. Also, different source categories could be combined to create a coherent narrative history from the age of Tacitus’ *Germania* (first century AD) to the end of prehistoric times – as long as contradictions were ignored.

Cultural-historical archaeology went into international eclipse after its systematic abuse under the Third Reich. This no doubt contributed to marginalise Scandinavian, narrative archaeology with its sometimes too Germanic-romanticist and heroic-nationalist tendencies. It was also criticised on methodological grounds by historians of strict, source-critical conviction, notably the brothers Curt and Lauritz Weibull (for example, Weibull 1964). In the 1960s it was no longer possible to stay un-reflecting towards one’s own production of knowledge. With Paradise lost, works of earnest scholarship could no longer contain a statement like Nerman’s: ‘...I have contrived to establish with certainty that Aun, Egil and Adils were buried in the Uppsala mounds and Ottar in the Ottar’s mound in Vendel...’ (Nerman 1919, p. 146; my translation). This kind of question had disappeared from the research agenda and been banished to the realm of curiosities and dilettante speculations.

For some time the written sources were mostly left in the hands of Medieval historians. To Swedish archaeologists the works of Peter Sawyer (1982, 1983a and 1989) are probably the most familiar. In the last two decades, however, an increasing number of Scandinavian archaeologists have turned their attention to the old, neglected volumes. Examples of this are Ulf Näsman’s discussion on the value and practical application of historical analogy in Nordic (pre)historical ‘ethnography’ (Näsman 1988) and Per Ramqvist’s (1991) subsequent attempt to describe the society of Migration Period Middle Norrland in the light of Visigothic hierarchical concepts. Several studies by Frands Herschend (1992, 1994, 1996, 1997a and 1997b) represent a historical-sociological and/or textual approach, whereas the article by Bjorn Myhre in Christensen et al. 1992 contains a ‘neo-traditional’ combination of written and material sources. Lotte Hedeager has made a number of studies on Germanic myths with reference to material and written records (Hedeager 1993, 1996 and 1997). Recently, Åke Hyenstrand
has included some central, written sources in a work on the Swedish Late Iron Age (Hyenstrand 1996).

It is scarcely surprising that the increasing number of archaeologists returning to written records corresponds to the present expansion of the theoretical, archaeological, framework and the relaxation of the discursive rigour of New Archaeology. Post-processual archaeology would, at a superficial glance, seem to invite ‘re-constructed’ literary studies because of its application of the textual metaphor to material culture. But in fact, it has not approached the written record for new, systematic consideration. When Tilley ‘abolishes’ the term archaeology, stating that we are now engaged in *material-culture studies*, there is no reference to ‘real’ texts: ‘The field of material-culture studies is one concerned with the relationship between artefacts and social relations irrespective of time and place. It aims to explore systematically the linkage between the constitution of social reality and material-culture production and use’ (Tilley 1990, p. vii). In spite of Tilley’s proclamation further on, that one of the aims of material-culture studies is to abolish the traditional (and artificial) boundaries between different disciplines of human and social science, ironically, the fact remains that the will to break boundaries has not yet, at least to my knowledge, been extended to written sources. It is tempting to see the focus on material records as the unconscious and mechanical conformation to the same traditional, academic boundaries that are criticised, in this case separating archaeology from Early Medieval history, Old English studies, and other related disciplines.

But regardless of how Tilley or any other post-processualist conceives of written records in an archaeological context we can, with clear conscience, accept them as relevant sources of information, referring to the world of experience; the physical, social and ideological reality. There is an ‘immanent materiality’ in the text. Thereby, we arrive at the same principal position which, in silent understanding, was held by the narrative school of archaeologists. But that is far from maintaining that we should revive their theoretical position (if something scarcely existing can be revived). The point is, rather, to engage in new encounters with written records from our altered theoretical positions. Where narrative archaeology regarded different source categories as equally unproblematic we must regard them as equally problematic, meaning-laden sign systems. The texts may also strengthen our conceptual apparatus as we put them alongside material records and, in the process, expand our understanding of our process of inference. This is because at some stage our understanding inevitably breaks down before the language of the past texts and needs to be restructured. In this process, the words of the Other must be instrumental, although they reach us on our own initiative and in mediated form.
Orality and literacy

In search of information about past societies on the basis of written legacy, we have to ask ourselves to what extent our own reading differs from the reading of contemporaries. Even before delving into the original language we often find that our understanding falters before the words of the Other. Reading Snorri Sturlusson’s prologue to *Heimskringla*, as historians we feel acquainted with Snorri as he accounts for his source-criticism: ‘We know not if these stories are true, but we know that old and wise men have considered them to be true’. *Old and wise*; at their advanced age, their memories reached several generations back in time. Their wisdom allowed them to interpret their memories and evaluate the information they received from others. Snorri writes a genealogy of the knowledge upon which he bases his history. Ari Frodi gained his knowledge from Odd Kollsson who had his knowledge from Torgeir Avradskoll. The only thing we miss is the head-line ‘History of earlier research’.

But our recognition founders when Snorri says that the old lays, written by poets for kings and chieftains are the most trustworthy sources, ‘if they are rightly recounted and one has understood them correctly’. Here, we do not face the wise man’s answer to the question of the historian/ethnographer but transmitted products of courtly art.

Snorri justifies his attitude in these much quoted lines: ‘It is the way of poets that they praise the one most before whom they stand, but none would dare to tell someone about his deeds when all those who listened and he himself knew that it was flattery and lies. That would be mockery and not praise’ (my translation). Snorri fails, of course, to consider that words and messages may be transformed in their passage through time and space. But his confidence in the lays as true historical documents (if not in today’s sense) is natural from his position in a society which has not advanced too far into the world of writing. In oral society it is formalised speech, not least in the form of poems, which for generations can preserve an utterance in memory. A lay is a key to the past, a contact with the ancestors and a tool for self-definition in the present. Snorri’s words define the traditional foundation of knowledge in his culture. His reference to age and wisdom is another trait typical for oral society.

In recent years much research has been devoted to the investigation of the differences between orality and literacy, particularly after the introduction of the so-called oral-formulaic theory in the 1950s and 1960s by Milman Perry and his student Walter Lord. By analogy with the formulaic composition of twentieth-century, illiterate Serbian poets, Parry and Lord came to the conclusion that the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey had also been illiterate (formulae = ‘a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea’). This theory has also been applied, for example,
to Anglo-Saxon poetry, but it is now widely held that although this technique has its roots in a purely oral culture it can also be employed in a literate or semi-literate culture (Orchard 1997, pp. 101 ff. with refs.).

The professor and Jesuit pater Walter J. Ong claims that the differences between oral and literate cultures are considerable: ‘writing re-structures consciousness’ (Ong 1990; also Clanchy 1993, pp. 114 ff.). For people who do not practice writing, the only knowledge available is that which is contained within memory. This means that language must be structured in a way that facilitates memorising and recalling. Ong (1990, p. 50 ff.) identifies the following traits as characteristic of thought and expression in primarily oral societies:

Additive rather than subordinate. Reading the Old English poem Widsith we realise what additive means: Ætla weold Hunum, Eormanric Gotum, / Becca Baningum, Burgendum Gifica. / Casere weold Creacum & Caelic Finnum, / Hagen Holmryc[gl]um & Henden Glommmum... (ll. 18–21). Narratives are likely to be structured episodically. Michael Shanks might call this rhizome-thinking (above, p. 2).

Aggregative rather than analytic. Different formulae are employed to support memory; concepts are grouped in fixed constellations. Homeric epithets are good examples, ‘rosy-fingered Eos’ or ‘swift-footed Achilles’. According to Ong, oral societies are reluctant to analyse and question their epithets. If they ask why the Proud Oak is proud, the intention is not to deconstruct and abolish the established connection between pride and oaks but to confirm that oaks really are proud (cf. ‘agonistical toning’ below).

Redundant. Redundancy signifies that you, in one way or another, repeat what you have just said. The speeches of Beowulf on his way to and into Heorot can serve as examples (see chapter 7).

Conservative or traditionalist. Knowledge can only be preserved through repeated recitation. In this context, originality does not lie in the invention of new stories, but in the ability to adapt the existing story at each occasion, making it relevant to the present situation and meaningful to the audience. There is an element of interaction between narrator and audience in an oral performance.

Close to the human lifeworld. Whereas writing encourages the invention of analytical categories which structure knowledge and distance it from lived experience, oral cultures conceptualise and verbalise their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human life-world and thereby incorporates the strange, objective world in the everyday life of people.

Agonistically toned. Oral cultures ‘often evidence wars of words, such as riddle or song contests, name-calling, and bragging. On the positive side, eulogists can strive to out-do each other in heapung up words of praise on the living or dead.’ (Fowler 1994, p. 26)
We can recall how Beowulf and Hunferth sit in Hrothgar’s hall, bickering about each other’s prowess, both striving to excel. Naturally, Beowulf’s victory is unquestioned, rewarded by the praise of the audience and Hunferth’s silence (Beowulf, ll. 499 ff.; see below, pp. 182 ff.).

Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced. ‘For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known’ (Ong 1982, p. 59, quoting Havelock).

Homeostatic. The dynamics of oral societies depend on a dialectic between conservatism (above) and a strong focus on the present. Therefore, oral societies generally change slowly and step by step rather than in great leaps. ‘An oral culture is constantly adjusting, maintaining equilibrium or homeostasis. Outdated traditions are revised or sloughed off and unneeded memories are forgotten’ (Fowler 1994). In Ong’s words, ‘Oral traditions reflect a society’s present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past’. Tales and genealogies are revised when their messages are no longer in line with present opinions and relations of power. We could say that oral society has no respect for the text in itself simply because there is no text as such. Accordingly, authors in the modern sense cannot exist in oral societies where such concepts as authoritative versions and copyright rules would be incomprehensible (on Heimskringla and the question of authorship, see Bagge 1991, pp. 57 ff.). Whereas the author in Roland Barthes’ post-modern world is dead, in oral society the author has not yet been born.

Aggregative rather than abstract. Ong describes a number of interviews conducted 1931–32 by A. R. Luria in southern, former Soviet Union (Ong 1990, pp. 63 ff. with ref. to Luria 1976). The aim was to investigate how the ability to read and write affects our thinking, and the persons interviewed were either illiterate or had a varying competence in reading and writing. The questions were designed to make the subjects define concepts and make logical connections.

There were significant differences between illiterate and literate. Even those who had received only a few years of schooling used the ‘correct’ geometrical terms when describing circles and rectangles; an illiterate could use similes like plate or moon, door or house. The participants were shown pictures of a sledgehammer, a saw, a log and an axe, and were asked to decide which three objects ‘belonged together’. The literate chose the three tools, leaving the log out, thus using a categorising concept. The illiterate, on the other hand, who imagined themselves in a practical situation, could, for example, exclude the axe because it was less efficient than the saw for working on the log. The illiterate generally considered classification in categories to be of little interest and value. A farmer was asked to explain what a tree is: ‘Why should I do that? Everyone knows what a tree is, I don’t have to tell them that’ It is not improbable that Ludwig Wittgenstein would have appreciated this statement.
The thinking of the illiterate was governed rather by reference to the world of experience than by formal logic. It was operational rather than abstract. If all the bears are white in the north where there is always snow and Novaja Semlja lies in the north and there is always snow there, what colours have the bears there? In response to this syllogism Luria could be told: ‘I don’t know. I have seen a black bear. I have never seen any others... every place has its own animals’.

Neither did introspection and self-analysis come natural to the illiterate. When asked to describe themselves as persons, they might tell where they came from, how they lived and which crop they cultivated. When questioned further by the interviewer they referred to the judgement of others, to the collective. A man did not judge himself, others did. Man is what he does. This clearly shows that the discreet ‘self’, regarded as a matter of fact in our technological, Western society is, in fact, a cultural phenomenon.

Oral transmission of historical facts, an ethnological example

In modern times the Norwegian ethnologist Bjarne Hodne (1973) has studied oral transmission in Scandinavian rural society. His sources are tales of murders and assaults in the Norwegian countryside which can be dated to the period 1672–1850 and were written down at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Hodne compared these tales with official court records. Aware of the risk that oral transmission in some cases may have been influenced by written documents, he excluded those tales which were supported by farm archives or had been committed to writing after official documents had been issued (Hodne 1973, p. 28 ff.).

In his assessment of the accuracy of the tales Hodne (1973, p. 182, table 1) focused on seven variables (constants) which corresponded to certain aspects of the related events (all numbers in per cent):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting person</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place/occasion</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motive</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average/median</td>
<td>44/45</td>
<td>20/22</td>
<td>6/0</td>
<td>15/15</td>
<td>14/0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A = Correct information; B = Information partly correct; C = Vague, general information; D = Wrong information; E = No information
The differences between the constants are significant. Hodne concludes that the ‘action-supporting’ elements have been best preserved, that is, what happened, the final outcome, the motive behind the act, and the name of the acting person (Hodne 1973, p. 187).

Hodne’s discovery that tales originating in the nineteenth century are more detailed than older ones may not seem surprising, but Hodne argues that this cannot be explained by merely referring to the ravages of time. An older tale is not necessarily more distorted than a late one, he claims. Instead, changes in the story reflect changes in attitudes and opinions; they are dependent on social context and ideology. For instance, tales from 1686–1798 often feature repentant felons who voluntarily atone for their crimes. This was a period when the pietist movement exerted a strong influence on contemporary church life, with a stress on penance and atonement. Hodne concludes that the question of what is historically true in a story should be rephrased. Only by asking for whom the story is true and why can we begin to approach the social dynamics and strategies behind the story (Hodne 1973, pp. 177, 188 and 196 ff.).

The text as a process

Of course, Hodne’s results cannot be automatically applied to other historical contexts. His society of Norwegian farmers was in many ways different from that of Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavia. We have to consider the possibility that the pattern of oral transmission can be different in other narrative traditions or genres or within other social groups. It is unlikely that the kings’ sagas of Snorri Sturlusson would produce exactly the same result if a similar test could be performed – which it cannot. We may, however, be justified in making one general statement: in an oral environment or an environment where the oral element is still strong, the precise dating along a linear axis of time is of little or no importance (Shanks & Tilley 1987b, pp. 118 ff.; Welinder 1992). The efforts of narrative archaeologists to reconstruct a linear history from the written sagas and genealogies, trying to overcome the contradictions between the different traditions and texts, thus appear as fundamentally misguided. The message, not facts, is the most important aspect of these texts.

Texts play an active role in human interaction, individual as well as collective. Thus, the creation of a text, as well as its preservation or re-formulation, is intimately connected with such social phenomena as power and ideology. When a text cannot be adapted to reflect current conditions, it will simply pass into oblivion. A partly or entirely orally transmitted text can, as John Miles Foley remarks, not be properly understood if seen solely as a synchronous document; its diachronic aspect and context must be analysed (Foley 1990, p. 10). To put it differently: The text is a process, and the preserved, written text is a sudden section
in time within this process, perhaps, but not necessarily, an end point (cf. O’Keeffe 1990, p. 5). Thus, ‘Most preserved texts are regarded as only one of several possible versions of a broad oral tradition’ (Andrén 1993, p. 34).

The strongly dichotomised relation between oral and literate consciousness which Ong, Foley and others explicate deserves our careful consideration, although we must be equally careful not to over-emphasise the dichotomy. The assimilation of writing with its concomitant changes in consciousness and view of reality is a gradual and complex process, since it takes place within a dynamic, social context (for example, Goody 1986 and Clanchy 1993).

Between orality and literacy

In her book Visible Song, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe explores the border zone between orality and literacy against the background of early Anglo-Saxon literature. She argues that orality and literacy should be perceived as ‘the end points on a continuum’ and not as mutually exclusive entities, concluding that ‘residual orality might be encoded in early manuscripts’ (O’Keeffe 1990, pp. 5 f. and 13). Foley (1990) makes the same point and calls such texts ‘oral-derived’. Both authors maintain that the long debate on the written or oral foundations for Anglo-Saxon poetry has largely been built on false premises: it has been determined by the modern interpretation of these concepts as mutually exclusive. Andy Orchard has pointed out how literate, Anglo-Saxon poets (like Cynewulf, the author of Christ B, Juliana and Elene) regularly relied on traditional, formulaic composition, that formulaic methods were also used by Anglo-Saxon poets writing in Latin, and that even some prose compositions ‘demonstrably rely on the formulaic repetition of rhythmical phrasing’ (Orchard 1997, pp. 107 ff.).

O’Keeffe suggests that we should try to understand the preserved texts from the perspective of the reader. At an early stage, those who learned the art of writing understood a written text as a form of spoken words. Accordingly, not only were texts at this time habitually read aloud, but oral technique was used by early Anglo-Saxon readers when interpreting a written text (O’Keeffe 1990, p. 21). This reading technique O’Keeffe calls ‘formulaic reading’, and its traces are clearly discernible in lesser disparities between different manuscripts of the same texts. Caedmon’s hymn and Solomon and Saturn I are preserved in a large number of ‘readings’, all correct with regard to syntax, semantics and context, showing that ‘at least some scribes ‘participated’ in the heavily formulaic texts they received and transmitted. As they read familiar formulae, they naturally and quite unconsciously substituted other alliterating words which were also metrically correct. In this way, their written transmission of texts with traditional diction became the literate analogue of oral transmission by performers and poets’ (O’Keeffe 1990, p. 76). We recognise the empathetic (participating) trait of oral thinking.
Whereas a speaker could employ aids like stress, pause and gesture to make his audience understand him better, a writer had to find other means to clarify his message:

In the hypothetical case of an originally oral poem, for example, committing the work to writing involves loss and gain – loss of interpretative performance but gain in the conservation of the poem. That loss is gradually, though never completely, compensated for by the addition of graphic cues that add information which guides interpretation. The fewer the number of graphic cues in the written message, the greater the information a reader must bring to the text in order simply to read it. Non-lexical graphic cues – hierarchy of script, capitals, lineation, significant space (for division of morphemes or larger units of meaning) and punctuation – all develop as graphic analogues to oral interpretative cues. Both oral and graphic cues function to regulate the reception of the work by the audience. For early vernacular works (whether oral or written in origin), the transmitting manuscript does not merely ensure the survival of the work as a text through the operation of a technology of preservation; it actually determines conditions for the reception and transmission of the work.

The physical arrangement of a text on a page thus becomes a crucial constituent of its meaning... Given these features of early manuscript transmission, the usual distinction between the reality of the ‘poem’ (as an abstract conception to be approximated by careful editing) and its realisations in the manuscripts is illusory (O’Keeffe 1990, pp. 4 f.).

Structured space, as we know, structures thinking (and vice versa). This applies to all forms of material culture: a house, a settlement, a megalithic tomb, a rock carving or a page of written text (for example, Tilley 1991 and 1993). According to O’Keeffe’s line of reasoning the written text is a piece of material culture, equal in that sense to any traditional archaeological object.

**Runes and readability**

Certain features of Iron Age Scandinavia make an interesting contribution to the study of differences between oral and literate thinking. The runic script was introduced (or created) in Scandinavia in the late second century or thereabout (see chapter 7). The multitude of rune-stones from the Viking Age, particularly from its later part, testify to the spread of literacy. This trend continues into the Medieval Period as shown by the large number of finds of runic inscriptions in Medieval towns; by this time the Latin alphabet had become the official sign system in the Scandinavian countries. When we explore the development and social role of writing and literacy during the first millennium in Scandinavia, we must also question how it may have affected mentality and to what extent.
It is commonly held that the writing reform which led to a reduction of the number of runes and the 16-rune futhark made life easier for the rune-carver since it simplified the spelling, but more difficult for the reader, demanding a greater deal of knowledge from the latter to ‘decode’ the text (Jansson 1984, p. 28; Roesdahl 1991, p. 48). If so, we could perhaps regard the reform as the reaction of a privileged group whose control over the language was threatened by other members of society, at a time when social hierarchies were eroded and social mobility increased. This is, however, pure speculation, and an explanation which certainly fails to do justice to a complex development, in which social as well as linguistic changes must have interacted. However, I would claim that the relation between early and late runic inscriptions is the opposite of what Jansson assumed. Considering how texts from different periods are structured in the space provided by the stones, that is, how the messages are visually presented, it is clear that the late rune-stones (late Viking Age and Early Medieval) are structured in a way which facilitates reading rather than obstructing it.

This can be easily demonstrated by an analysis of ninety-four Swedish runic inscriptions. I have used the illustrations in a popular work by Åke Ohlmarks (1978) as an easily accessible sample of inscriptions with geographical spread (the book is otherwise of limited scholarly interest). One group contains fifteen early stones (earlier than the tenth century) and another seventy-nine late stones (mainly late eleventh- and early twelfth-century). About half of the late stones come from the Mälar valley. The sample of early stones is small but may suffice in this simple analysis. Because of the large number of late stones these are not listed individually. The numbering refers to Ohlmarks’ own.

**Early stones**

*Möjbro*, 32: Horizontal, right–left, down–up, inverted runes  
*Noleby*, 49: Horizontal, left–right, up–down, 4 runes upside-down; punctuation by sentence  
*Skärkind*, 57: Horizontal, left–right  
*Kylver*, 60: Horizontal, left–right  
*Björketorp*, 92: Horizontal, left–right, down–up  
*Krogsta*, 34: Vertical, up–down, inverted runes  
*Skääng*, 36: Vertical, up–down  
*Järnsberg*, 48: Vertical, up–down, partly down–up, partly inverted runes; punctuation by sentence  
*Roes*, 61: Vertical, up–down; punctuation by part of sentence  
*Istaby*, 90: Vertical, up–down, right–left  
*Sparlösè*, 52: Vertical, down–up, left–right, inverted runes on the top; punctuation by occasional sentence
Rävsal, 54: Vertical, down–up; punctuation by word
Tanum, 55: Vertical, down–up, inverted runes
Rök, 56: Mostly vertical, down–up, left–right; punctuation occasional
Stentoften, 91: Vertical, down–up, rows partly bent counter-clockwise, left–right

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Stones</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vertical rows</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertical + down–up</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertical + up–down</td>
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<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal rows</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–right</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right–left</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down–up</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up–down</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverted runes</td>
<td>3+2</td>
<td>20% (33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Punctuation by sentence, part of sentence or occasional: 5 (33%)
Punctuation by word on 1 stone (54), but the inscription consists of only 2 words.
(The name of the carver occurs on 5 stones, 33%)

There is great variation in the disposition of these inscriptions. That vertical rows are twice as common as horizontal has little bearing upon readability. The only significant tendency appears to be a preference for left–right movement on the surfaces against right–left, whether it concerns runes along a horizontal line or the ordering of vertical lines. This corresponds to the practice of writing in Latin and Greek. The only stone with horizontal lines of runes running right–left is the Möjbro stone from Uppland, but because its runes are inverted it is not a true exception from the rule in this sample. If read in a mirror, the runes would run left–right.

Late stones

On the seventy-nine late stones the texts are rarely ordered in rows; instead, they run in curves or serpentine, often in the form of the well-known rune-beast (fifty-three stones). This may at first appear to complicate reading, but in fact it does not. Where there is a rune-beast, the inscription generally (eighty-seven per cent) runs from the head of the beast towards its hind-quarters (the text simply begins where the animal begins). In some instances (for example, Hillersjö in Uppland) natural breaks in the texts are accentuated by a skilful leap from one rune-beast to another. On the Hillersjö stone, along with a few
others, the rune-master’s signature is placed outside the rune-beast or otherwise apart from the main text, detaching the craftsman/carver from the text as message. Almost two thirds of the inscriptions are, moreover, written clockwise. Of the remainder, half (12) are written in alternating directions owing to greater complexity of the rune-beast. Nine of these, however, begin at the head of a rune-animal or at one end of an outer rune-ribbon, and six run clockwise. The clockwise percentage can thus in reality be raised to seventy per cent. Thus, when reading an unfamiliar rune-stone, you would first look at the head of the rune-beast (if there was one), secondly at one end where the text ran clockwise, and only after that attempt other solutions.

*Text starting at the head of the rune-beast: 46 stones of 53 = 87 % (the opposite on 3, 8, 13, 14, 23, the 1st half of 28, 30).
Counter-clockwise: 5, 15, 20 (but inverted runes), 36, 38, 50, 64, 74, 77, 81, 87, 94. 12 stones of 79 = 15 %
Alternating: 6, 8, 10, 14, 24, 25, 26, 43, 46, 75, 76, 78. 12 stones of 79 = 15 %
Vertical rows: 69 (down–up + up–down; right–left + left–right), 79 (down–up + up–down; left–right + right–left) 80 (down–up + up–down; left–right), 83 (down–up), 88 (down–up, last word up–down; left–right, last word right–left). 5 stones of 79 = 6 %
Horizontal rows: 96. 1 stone of 79 = 1 %
Inverted runes: 20, 87 partly
Punctuation by sentence: 1/79 = 1 % (13)
Punct. by sentence or part of sentence: 5/79 = 6 % (18, 20, 95, 96?, 100)
Punct. by word or part of sentence: 9/79 = 11 % (23, 24, 36, 40, 65, 68, 70, 94, 97)
Punct. by word: 64/79 = 81 %
(Punct. mostly by word = 92 %)

Only six of these late stones have their inscriptions organised in rows. But at a closer look we find that three of these, in fact, run in serpentine, although the bends of the serpentine lie implicit outside the stone, and can only be imagined. Therefore, they properly belong to the alternating category, increasing this to fifteen stones (nineteen per cent). Thus, stones with proper rows are only three, making up four per cent of the total. This was obviously an outdated way of presenting a message. Inverted runes only appear on two stones (three per cent).

However, an equally or even more important aid for the reader than the directional pointers was the increasing use of punctuation, O’Keeffe’s ‘graphic cues’ (signs like • or :). Whereas only one third of the early inscriptions displayed punctuation in any form – often occasional – all the late ones do (the possibility that words were marked with different colours on early stones is unfortunately
impossible to control). In as much as ninety-two per cent of the cases punctuation followed almost every word in a text and in eighty-one per cent of the cases every word. This is a poignant increase in orderliness and in abstract and sequential thinking. The reader is led along beast or ribbon step by step, word by word, not overwhelmed by the continuous current of letters and sounds of the early inscriptions. The late inscriptions appear as texts, more or less in the modern sense, rather than ‘petrified speech’. It is likely that this development reflects a cognitive change, creating a distinction between sound and word. For a further discussion on runes, see chapters 7 and 8.

Secondary orality

Strange as it may seem, a generation which feels in tune with – or, at least, not totally estranged from – concepts and phenomena like cyberspace, hypertext, and interactive media, may be in a better position to understand oral culture than previous generations. Scholars like Walter Ong claim that we have now entered what they call a ‘secondary orality’. Robert Fowler explains:

Secondary oral cultures are literate cultures, such as our own, that have been rendered significantly oral/aural once again by the appearance of dominant new electronic communication media, such as television, telephone, video and audio recording, to say nothing of the ubiquitous computer. As different as ancient, primary oral cultures and postmodern, secondary oral cultures are, there are also some remarkable similarities that are only now emerging into view. (Fowler 1994)

Fowler takes the hypertext as ‘paradigmatic of digital, electronic communication’ and, building mainly on the works of David Jay Bolter and John Landow, investigates its properties as a phenomenon of secondary orality. The following text consists of excerpts from Fowler 1994, pp. 16 ff. with Fowler’s reference apparatus simplified. It is interesting to note not only the similarities with primary orality but also the links to post-modernism and, thereby, post-processual archaeology:

Hypertext demands an active reader; it blurs the distinction between author and reader... In a less restrictive hypertext... the reader is granted freedom to annotate existing texts, to add new texts to the network, and to create new links between texts, often with remarkable power to change the appearance of everything... The boundary between creator and critic (another current vexation) simply vanishes.

Hypertext is fluid, multiple, changing; not fixed or single... Bolter observes: ‘There is no single story of which each reading is a version, because each read-
ing determines the story as it goes. We could say that there is no story at all; there are only readings’...

Hypertext has no beginning or ending, no centre or margin, no inside or outside...

Hypertext is ‘multicentered’; ‘infinitely recenterable’. Hypertext mirrors the decentered, disseminated self of much poststructuralist critical theory. Landow... attributes such thinking to contemporary shifts in communication technologies: while print encourages the ideal of the single, integral self, electronic text encourages multiple, even conflicting voices. (Landow 1992, pp. 11 ff., 66 ff.).

Hypertext is networked text. Unlike the linear or hierarchical structure of print, hypertext is a multilinear network. A network has no obvious beginning or ending, no top or bottom. Therefore, a network can uphold no enduring hierarchy or central authority. Moreover, the shift to the network paradigm encompasses far more than hypertext; it is redefining our entire culture:... just as our culture is moving from the printed book to the computer, it is also in the final stages of the transition from a hierarchical social order to what we might call a ‘network culture.’ (Landow 1992, pp. 23 ff., 57 ff., 66 f.; Bolter 1991, pp. ix, 112 ff., 201, 231 f.)

Hypertext is collaborative...

Hypertext is ‘antihierarchical and democratic’... Hypertext foregrounds the responsibility of the reader for ethical and political decision-making in the midst of the hypertextual docuverse. As a diverse, multilinear network, hypertext can readily incorporate conflicting arguments and interpretations; it can ‘encompass conflicting possibilities’ (Bolter, 1991, p. 143). Thus, hypertext can provide the arena in which ethical and political arguments can take place (Landow 1992, pp. 169 ff.)... Make the argument the focus, not the decision at the end of the argument, Graff says, for canons come and go, but the need to argue over authority, values, norms, beliefs, and behaviors will remain with us forever.

Fowler’s idealised picture of secondary oral society is open to criticism, and to imagine that we are about to witness the end of ‘a hierarchical social order’ is outright naive. Still, it is ironic and may seem disconcerting to self-proclaimed post-processualists that from one perspective they can be understood as products of a technology. Any reader so inclined is certainly welcome to see this as the ultimate triumph of processual archaeology and environmental determinism. Personally I do not, believing that the relationship between ourselves and our thinking on the one hand and the world on the other is more complex. While it is worth remembering that our consciousness to a significant degree is structured by language, technology, and society in general, not to speak of our biological heritage, we still have the capacity to think and act as unique individuals.
Textual archaeology

In 1952 Sune Lindqvist made himself an early proponent of the textual metaphor by describing the boat-grave cemetery in Valsgärde as ‘a record which has not been written with letters but with objects’ (Lindqvist 1952, p. 353; my translation). Half a century earlier Oscar Montelius had suggested that the boat-graves in Vendel should be interpreted as those of a royal dynasty. He claimed that the magnificent helmets found in the Merovingian Period boat-graves could be seen as the material manifestations of one of the most common metaphors (heiti) for ‘king’ in Old Norse literature, hilmir (Montelius 1906, p. 245; the theory was later abandoned, see Norr & Sundkvist 1995, pp. 407 ff.).

The boat-grave cemeteries reappear in a study by Anders Andrén (1993) which investigates how images, words and objects interact. The rich imagery on the Gotlandic picture-stones from the Viking Age is interpreted as an expression of masculine virtues like heroism and wisdom in a mortuary context, metaphorical and formalised epitaphs for prominent dead. Thus, Late Iron Age boat burials and picture-stones are both ‘expressions of death rituals’, and share symbols like boats/ships, war equipment, horses and carriages. There are also parallels in gender attributes and compositional principles. Andrén then extends the comparisons to features of oral tradition: ‘A metaphorical interpretation of pictures and objects in death rituals does not imply a total rejection of any relation to social practice; it only denotes that this link is indirect... By regarding graves as metaphors they can be viewed as material parallels to skaldic poetry, which was characterised by complicated paraphrases (kennings), sometimes constructed on several levels. This perspective means that graves can be related to a panegyric poetic genre, in which mythological references were used to honour dead persons’ (Andrén 1993, p. 50). Andrén has expressed similar thoughts in regard to gold bracteates (Andrén 1991).

However, if we wish to identify the ‘syntax’ of material ‘texts’ like boat-graves, we must be careful not to impose modern principles of textual composition on the sources. Already Montelius realised this intuitively. If we like Andrén ‘recognise’ skaldic poetry in the image sequences of picture-stones we should learn the rules of skaldic poetry, its use of alliteration, variation, metaphor (kennings and heiti) and other principles of composition. Of course, I do not claim that modern concepts cannot be relevant for and enrich the study of these phenomena, but the past horizon of understanding should have our equal attention.

The perspective represented by Andrén has reached a level of acceptance where central concepts can be used without actually being defined or given a content. For example, Björn Varenius (1995) has discussed boat burials in a paper with the title Metaphorical Ships in Iron-Age Contexts, and although he once uses the expression ‘material language’ (and makes a reference in passing to Giddens) we are never told what the boats are metaphors of.
Frands Herschend has attempted to set out guidelines for textual archaeology, ‘a standard analysis of material as well as written sources’. The method he proposes is a ‘critical rereading’ (Herschend 1997a, p. 69). In a way, every new reading of a source is a rereading and whether it is critical or not could be said to depend on our scholarly virtues, but Herschend makes the expression theoretically significant, distinguishing three analytical levels which ‘cover a way of reading which proceeds from the limited and formal to the open and discursive’:

The conceptual level. This basic stage involves determining the meaning or meanings of the original word or concept we are interested in, the etymology. As there is more often than not a vagueness about concepts in Old Norse and related languages the meaning equals the way in which a concept was used in different sources and different contexts. This can be compared with what Wittgenstein says in Section 43 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

> For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (from Richter 1997)

The intentional level. What did the author intend with the use of a particular concept, what message was he transmitting to his readers? Herschend exemplifies this level with how the *Beowulf* poet connects grants of land (Old English *lond*, *land*) with ‘glorious deeds among the aristocracy’. Four passages in the poem deal with the topic, and there is a ‘rhetoric escalation’ towards the last one in which the message is most clearly presented (Herschend 1997a, p. 72).

The structural level. This level is fairly complex and hard to define. It reflects how a concept is commonly defined and understood and can be expressed, for example, by the use of compositional conventions, such as habitual combinations of certain alliterating words. Here we can expect to find structuring principles which may not always or not entirely be consciously embraced by an author.
Early Germanic kingship: the example of the Goths

Historical analogy

This study of early Germanic kingship partly involves ‘old fashioned and hopefully legitimate’ analogy (Carver 1989, p. 143) and is focused on the Gothic peoples between the fourth and sixth centuries AD. In archaeology the word analogy is most often used to describe the method of comparing archaeological sources with ethnographic or historical sources. Analogical inference is, simply phrased, to draw conclusions about what we do not know on the basis of what we believe we know. In fact, since even the basic classification of artefacts is based on analogy, it is a fundamental feature of any archaeological study (Gräslund 1974).

Whereas the use of ethnographic analogy has been common both within New Archaeology and among its theoretical successors, historical analogy has lagged somewhat behind. Also, the theoretical basis for analogical inference has long been neglected. During the last fifteen years or so, however, analogy has been moved into the theoretical foreground, notably by Alison Wylie in several papers (a central title is Wylie 1985). In Scandinavia, Ulf Näsman (1988) has discussed theoretical and methodological aspects of historical analogy, exemplified by the use of late fourth century Visigothic society as an (historical) analog for late Roman Iron Age Scandinavia. Noteworthy is also a recent debate on ethnographic analogy in Norwegian Archaeological Review, in which a number of scholars comment on a paper by Mads Ravn (1993); here useful references can be found.

From the theoretical point of view analogy is analogy is analogy. Thus, the principles for using ethnographic and historical analogies respectively in archaeological explanation are fundamentally the same. Unless we do ethnographic field-work, in both cases we deduce information from texts about certain peoples which we compare with material evidence from, for example, Scandinavian prehistoric societies in order to see whether congruent pictures can be formed out of both source categories or not.

As sources, both modern ethnographic texts and those of classical authors are problematic, because they are products of a process of translation, or, we may say, of a merging of hermeneutic horizons of understanding (the author’s
and the studied subject’s; see, for example, Mueller-Vollmer 1986). The information in a text is conditioned by the author’s more or less imperfect understanding, cultural and personal prejudices, or will to transmit some normative message to the intended readers. We could identify an additional hermeneutic dimension between ourselves and the ‘ethnographic information’ of a classical author, in awareness of the temporal and cultural distance between his horizon of understanding and ours (it would equal the fourth hermeneutic dimension of archaeology according to Shanks & Tilley 1989, p. 107). It becomes even more problematic if we use primary sources and are forced to rely on translations because of a lack of competence in, for instance, Latin, Greek or Gothic.

Whatever the obstacles, the end result is what Herwig Wolfram calls a historical ethnography (Wolfram 1988, p. 2; also Näsmann 1988, p. 136). From this ‘secondary’ ethnographic text, we take our analogies. Fortunately for us archaeologists, historians on the Early Middle Ages have already created several historical ethnographies for us, but unfortunately they tend to disagree with one another, sometimes on crucial points.

That scholars disagree is not surprising, but rather what makes scholarly life worth living. However, in this case, it creates a problem familiar to archaeologists, the ‘following-the-leader syndrome’. There is a danger that we take not only the general results of other research branches for granted and uncontrollable (the natural sciences spring readily to mind), but also that individual works within other disciplines are credited with too much authority. This is simply because it takes time and effort to gain a critical attitude towards their results. For example, Ulf Näsmann describes the confederate leadership of the Visigoths: ‘If a crisis demanded a more effective leadership, the confederate council was able to choose a temporary leader, who in Gothic was called kindins...’ (Näsmann 1988, p. 127, my translation). This and other information show that he collects his ethnographic ‘facts’ from the historical ethnography of Wolfram (1988). However, other scholars claim that the confederate leader was called thiudans, and I believe that they are right (see below). To be fair, this particular problem does not affect Näsmann’s use of the analogy or his conclusions, but in another context, such as the nature and early development of kingship in pre-Christian Germanic society, and its possible ‘sacral’ content, the accuracy of such information could become crucial. Wolfram’s kindins is still going strong in Ramqvist 1991 and Duczko 1996 and, in fact, Näsmann’s text is the sole source for Ramqvist’s historical ethnography of Visigothic society. Thus, Wolfram’s interpretations are transmitted without reference through Ramqvist’s text. The kindins becomes a ‘factoid’, something which regularly appears in the secondary literature as a fact over a long period of time but which – in reality – lacks primary confirmation.

Ramqvist, again following Näsmann, stresses the importance of the text known as Passio Sancti Sabae Gothi (The Martyrdom of Saint Sabas the Goth, see Flem-
berg 1992; Heather & Matthews 1991; Thompson 1966). This text is certainly, as Thompson proclaims, ‘of the highest value’, providing us with glimpses not only of Visigothic village life and organisation, but also of religious and social attitudes and conflicts, especially the local, ‘sedentary’, farmers’ community versus the ‘mobile’ magnates. However, it is not true, as Ramqvist states, that we on the basis of this single work can reconstruct the organisation and structure of Visigothic society in Muntenia (Ramqvist 1991, p. 307). On the contrary, Ramqvist’s short Visigothic ethnography in reality builds on the works of several other classical writers, the information of whom has been further processed by generations of historians. Accordingly, the source behind Ramqvist’s ethnography is less similar to a short but comprehensive television documentary than to an entire Visigothic soap opera series, where the script writers often changed and the proletarian, religious fanatic Sabas happened to show his face in an odd episode or two. The understanding it mediates is obviously shallow and needs cautious handling.

These may seem trivial examples, but they nevertheless illustrate that we must be wary of the apparent clarity and incontestability of historical ethnographies. To use them to induce from the known to understand the unknown may prove an unattainable ideal; the reality will often be more like inducing from the less obscure to the more obscure. The fragmentary records of the Germanic peoples and kingdoms effectively denounce any claims to certainty.

Mads Ravn and Allison Wylie, to whom the former is much in debt, are aware of the philosophical fact that analogical inference cannot be tested objectively, as was sometimes claimed by New Archaeologists (exemplified by Binford 1967). This is because ‘a human consideration is involved in the assessment of relevance between analogical source and subject’. From this follows that ‘analogical sources in general are creative for archaeology as an inspiration about processes, which may have happened in the past’ (Ravn 1993, p. 60, my italics). To explain the concepts source and subject, we can turn back to Näsman and Ramqvist: their analogical source is the late fourth century Visigothic society, their subjects the Scandinavian Iron Age society in Denmark and middle Norrland respectively. However, archaeological data can never confirm, but only support hypotheses formulated through analogy (Ravn 1993, p. 64; Wylie 1993, p. 83). Analogy will not provide answers to our questions, but it can help us to formulate or rephrase questions and suggest what kind of information our data may yield.

In order not to induce my readers with false hopes I should point out that my aim in this work has not been to follow a strict analogical methodology. In the following study of Gothic kingship I concentrate on the analogical source while the analogical subject, Scandinavian, Late Iron Age kings, stay mostly invisible. Accordingly, the analysis will hardly even reach the level of formal analogy (a point by point assessment of similarities and differences). An investigation of
Sources and early history of the Goths

The history of the Gothic peoples, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths of the late Roman period, remains littered with question marks until well into the fourth century, long after they first came into contact with the Roman Empire. The search for a Gothic *Urheimat*, pursued by earlier generations of scholars (we still find it in, for example, Wagner 1969, pp. 103 ff.) seems now to have been banished to the scientific backyard; but apparently it can at least be argued that they inhabited part of the south coast of the Baltic (around the mouth of the Vistula) around the beginning of our reckoning (for example, Wolfram 1988, p. 39). Archaeological finds in Pommerania, connected with the Wielbark (or East Pommeranian-Mazovian) culture, are held to substantiate that view (Bierbrauer 1992 with refs.).

The royal propaganda of Theodoric the Great (d. 526) claimed an ultimate Scandinavian origin for the Gothic people, the Gutthiuda; however, this may be no more than an ideological invention, perhaps made on the basis of Tacitus’ *Germania*, a work well known at the court of Theodoric (Wolfram 1988, p. 317). This question is fortunately of little consequence for the subject of this study, and it should be emphasised that even if the connection with the Wielbark culture were historically correct, the peoples who founded the Gothic kingdoms within the former Western Roman empire would have had little in common with their ancestors in any *Urheimat* as regards ethnicity.

The migration from the Baltic area probably lasted from the late second until well into the third century (Wolfram 1988, p. 42). From that later date and throughout the fourth century the Goths are considered to have been a dominant element within the wide-spread Sîntana de Mures-Cernjachov culture, which extended from the Danube to the Don, and somewhat beyond to Poltava and Kharkov, and from the Black sea as far north as Lvov, Rovno, Kiev and Sumy (Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 51 and 55 and map 2; some scholars trace the origins of the Cernjachov group as far back as c. 200 AD, see Näsman 1988, p. 127). At this stage the Cernjachov culture (in southern former USSR) was dominated by tribes known to Ammianus Marcellinus as the Greutungi, and the Sîntana de Mures culture (in eastern Romania) by other groups known as the Tervingi; the latter name is mentioned for the first time already in 291 (Wolfram 1988, pp. 57 ff. and 85 ff.; on the names Tervingi, Greutungi, Visigoths and Ostrogoths, see Wolfram 1988, pp. 24 f. and Heather 1991, pp. 331 ff.).

It is obvious both from the archaeological record and from the written sources that these cultures were strongly multi-ethnic and probably loosely organised, although the Gothic elements probably were, or came to be, military and thus
politically dominant. The archaeological evidence in Eastern Romania indicates a continuous presence of a subsistence-farming, indigenous population, both ante-dating and post-dating the Sîntana de Mures-Cernjachov culture. Occasional burials of markedly Germanic character on cemeteries associated with this culture show that the settlement was less an event than a process; newcomers arrived continuously, but in the second generation they had acquired a new ethnic identity, expressed in the archaeological material as an amalgamation of the earlier, local material culture and that of the newcomers (Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 94 ff.). Thomas Burns describes the archaeologically defined Cernjachov civilisation as ‘a peculiar collection of material items created under the sustained influence upon the indigenous populations of imported wares stemming from the general area of the Black Sea’ (Burns 1984, pp. 23 f).

In the general turmoil of the third century, Romans and Goths came into closer contact for the first time, often through Gothic incursions into Roman territory. These were encouraged by the weakening of the Danubian front-line, and ranged from small-scale looting expeditions to greater ventures in collaboration with other ‘Scythian’ peoples, as they were called by the Romans. In 269 Claudius II was the first emperor to assume the title Gothicus, indicating that he had won a major victory over the Goths. But we also hear of Gothic warriors enlisting in the Roman army together with other Germans, as well as captured Goths being sold as slaves to Roman landowners. However, conditions were not turbulent enough to inhibit trade (Burns 1980, p. 17, and 1984, pp. 25 ff.; Wolfram 1988, pp. 43 ff.). Our knowledge of these developments is, regretfully, very fragmentary, the most important sources being the Roman historical works Scriptores Histioriae Augustae and the Caesares by Aurelius Victor. The Historia Nova by Zosimus (c. 500), building on the now lost works of previous historians, is also considered to be a valuable source (Burns 1980, pp. 5 ff. with references).

However, when we reach the fourth century contemporary literary sources are more abundant, featuring works like the history of the Roman ex-soldier Ammianus Marcellinus, the preserved part of which covers the years 354–378 (A. Wallace-Hadrill 1986), fragments of a work by the Neoplatonist Eunapius, and the speeches of the Greek panegyrist Themistius (Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 13 ff. and 199), the two latter also from the later decades of the century. Of great importance is, furthermore, the translation of the Bible into Gothic, made by the Gothic bishop Wulfila (Ulfilas) during his forty years’ episcopate in the late fourth century, and the above-mentioned Passio Sancti Sabae Gotbi, apparently written not long after the martyrdom of Sabas in 372 (Thompson 1966, pp. xiv ff.; Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 109 f. and 133 ff.; Flemberg 1992).

The increase in the amount of sources is a natural consequence of the first large-scale settlement of Goths (the Tervingi) on Roman territory (Thrace) in 376 and the ensuing wars. From Thrace they filtered westward through the
empire, ending up in Aquitaine, where they founded the kingdom of Tolouse in 418. However, it was not until 456 that the major part of the Ostrogoths made the decisive and permanent move onto Roman soil, after having long enjoyed the mixed blessings of Hunnic overlordship. In the wake of the defeat of the Hunnic alliance and its ensuing dissolution after Attila’s death in 454, part of those Ostrogoths who had shared the military misfortune of Attila and his sons sought admission into the empire. The request was granted by the Emperor Marcian, and they settled in Pannonia under their kings Valamer, Thüdimer and Vindimer, three brothers, who ruled one district each, although Valamer seems to have held the highest authority. Finally, to cut short a complicated story of wars against Huns, other Germanic peoples and Romans as well as between rivaling groups among themselves, they entered the Roman empire in 473, where they twenty years later, 493, could hail their ruler Theodoric the Great as king of Italy (Burns 1984; Wolfram 1988; Heather 1991). King also over the Roman population, this member of the illustrious Amal dynasty earned the Latin title Flavius Theodoricus rex (first documented in 501, Claude 1980, p. 156).

The kings of the Tervingi

The Tervingi and Greutungi were divided into tribes, kunja, and each kuni was ruled by a king or chief, reiks. Greek writers called a tribal leader archon or hegemon while Latin sources refer to him as regulus, ducator or dux. These men formed the backbone of the oligarchic, confederate council which assembled when the situation demanded. It would appear that other prominent members of society had seats in this council as well, because our classical sources mention sinistans (elders) and maistans (magnates) in connection with its sessions. Wolf-ram interprets these men as representatives of the different kunja and their local councils. The kunja may have varied considerably in size and power, larger units forming through the coalescence of smaller ones (Burns 1980, p. 5 and 1984, p. 165; Wolfram 1988, pp. 94 f.).

Another element of Gothic leadership is known, at least among the Tervingi. It is a confederate leadership, firmly documented for the first time in the later fourth century. In 364 the emperor Valens received reports from his generals that ‘the Goths... were combining [conspirantes in unum] to violate the borders of Thrace’ (Ammianus 26.6; Latin from Wolfram 1988, p. 94). A confederacy of Tervingian tribes, living north of the Danube, seems to have been formed, at the head of which we find a certain Athanaric (he is generally identified as the instigator of the second Gothic persecution of Christians in 369–72). This Gothic leader invoked the anger of Valens by supporting the short-lived imperial usurper Procopius later the same year. The retaliating war (367–69) ended with Tervingian defeat and a peace treaty (Ammianus 27.5).
This treaty was concluded on board a ship in the middle of the Danube, since Athanaric ‘was bound by a tremendous oath taken at the behest of his father never to set foot on Roman soil’ (Ammianus 27.5). There is no reason to follow Wolfram’s argument that Athanaric’s office demanded this arrangement because the overlordship was regarded as exclusively defensive (Wolfram 1988, p. 65; also Näsmann 1989, p. 127). After all, Athanaric did not claim that he was not allowed to leave Gothic soil. The mention of the father—who had been a hostage in Constantinople in 332 under Constantine the great—ties the oath more convincingly to Athanaric the man than to Athanaric the ruler. We should not even rule out the possibility that the Gothic leader made the whole thing up, merely to vex the emperor (cf. Ammianus 31.4).

Athanaric corrected the Romans when they addressed him as rex, instead calling himself judge of kings, in Latin iudex regum. This latter title, he said, denoted not only power, but wisdom as well.

Thomas Burns has argued in defence of the ‘defensive iudex’ theory that the formation of the confederacy did not take place until 367, in reaction to the Roman incursion into Gothic territory (Burns 1980, p. 36). But in that case it appears odd that Valens should have shown such concern and determination in 364. Receiving the reports from his commanders he immediately deployed ‘a sufficient force on horse and foot’, the exact size of which is unknown, to meet the threat to Thrace. Among these troops were the two elite legions Divitenses and Junior Tungricani (Ammianus 26.6); these preparations were surely more than would have been necessary to meet bands of tribal foragers. A passage from the history of Isidore of Seville, written around 620, may with due reservation be taken as supportive of an earlier dating of the formation of the confederacy and Athanaric’s overlordship: he states that Athanaric had been king of all Goths for thirteen years up to the Hunnic invasion in 376 (Historia Gothorum 6–9; Thompson 1966, n. 4, p. 43).

The later events of the war clearly show that the strategy of the Tervingian confederacy was offensive. The political situation was complicated by the appearance of the afore-mentioned Procopius, a former tribune and a kinsman of the previous Emperor Julian, who in Valens’ absence (in Bethynia on his way to Syria) managed to take control of the legions deployed for the defence of Thrace and had himself proclaimed emperor by a crowd in Constantinople (Ammianus 26.6). He approached some Gothic ‘units of cavalry and infantry [that] were passing by on their way to the campaign in Thrace’, befriended them and enlisted them – or part of the force – in his host. Ammianus says that ‘Collected into a single body they [the Goths] already looked like an army’, implying that it was a combined force under multiple leadership (Ammianus 26.7). That is not to say, however, that Athanaric as iudex regum was not the co-ordinator of these moves, nor is Ammianus’ subsequent statement that the three thousand Goths had been sent by ‘their kings’ to help Procopius (Ammianus 26.10) necessarily an
indication that these kings acted entirely independently. But it does show that the authority of the *reiks* was not curtailed in the presence of a *iudex* and that the forces of the former were not at the latter’s free disposal (Ulrich 1995, pp. 125 f.). With the *iudex* an additional hierarchical level was added to the socio-political system, it did not replace existing ones.

Unfortunately we do not know what Gothic word lies behind the Latin *iudex*. Wolfram (1970; 1988, pp. 94 ff.) argues that it must be *kindins*, and Scandinavian archaeologists tend to follow his advice (above, p. 30). However, a majority of historians suggest *thiudans* as the corresponding term (Burns 1980, p. 38 and 1984, p. 166; James 1989, p. 43; Heather 1991, note 47, p. 98 leaves the question open). The most important point is, perhaps, less the actual word than what we read into it, and how it can be related to Gothic terminology of rulership in general.

Both *kindins* and *thiudans* are known from the Gothic bible, translated from the Greek by Bishop Wulfila, the so called Apostle of the Goths, into his native tongue. Although known to posterity – and himself – as a Goth and having a Gothic name, Wulfila (possibly born 311 AD) descended from Christian Cappadocians captured during Gothic campaigns into the Empire in the 260s (Wolfram 1988, pp. 58 and 75 f.). When Tervingian Christians were accused of pro-Roman sympathies and persecuted in the 340s, he and others sought and gained the friendship of Emperor Constantius II and were settled in Nicopolis in present Bulgaria, then the province Moesia. In fact, his enemies may not have been totally in the wrong, for Wulfila had been consecrated bishop in 341 and his missionary work among the Tervingi was undertaken with—at least—the silent approval of the emperor (Wolfram 1988, p. 63; Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 133 f. and 142). His work on the translation was carried out at some time between his consecration and his death in Constantinople (380–383). In the words of the church historian Philostorgius, Wulfila and his associates translated ‘all the Scriptures into their language – with the exception, that is, of [the Books of] Kings. This was because these books contain the history of wars, while the Gothic people, being lovers of war, were in need of something to restrain their passion for fighting rather than to incite them to it...’ (Heather & Matthews 1991, p. 144).

Although only Wulfila’s version of the New Testament has been preserved, and even that incompletely, the work is of great value. It should be kept in mind, though, that the work was not completed in Wulfila’s lifetime, and that the preserved manuscripts date from the Gothic settlement in Italy (Heather 1991, p. 82). Several sources also relate ‘that the actual text of the Gothic Bible in use among Gothic communities in the fifth and sixth centuries was subject to change and adaptation’ (Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 155 f.). Thus, the terminology does not directly reflect late fourth century usage (as Ulrich 1995, pp. 53 ff. would seem to assume).
In Wulfila, Matt. 27.2 and 27.11–15, the Roman Procurator Pilate is referred to as kindins, whereas thiudans is used to signify Jesus as potential king of the Jews:

\[\overline{\text{Þþ Þesus stóþ faura kindina; yah frab ïna sa kindins qiþands, Þu ìs ðiudans ïudaie? Þþ Þesus qaf ðu imma, Þu qiþis.}\]

Jesus stode before the debite; and the debite axed him, saynge, Arte thou the kynge of the Iewes? Jesus sayd vnto hym, Thou sayest. (Matt. 27.11; Heather & Matthews 1991, p. 192; similarly Wulfila, John 19.33–37).

Similarly, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the people call: osanna, þiuþida sa qi-manda in namin fraujins, þiudans Israelis (‘Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, he who is the King of Israel!’) (Wulfila, John 12.13).

Jesus is also thiudans as King of Heaven, and Wulfila further states that ‘anyone who makes himself thiudans opposes the authority of the emperor’ (Wolfram 1988, pp. 145 f. with quote from Wulfila, John 19, 12; note, however, that in Mark 12.14–17 the emperor is called kaisar). Pilate as kindins, Wolfram argues, is subordinate to the Roman emperor, he receives his power from this worldly thiudans. Pilate’s relationship with the emperor parallels the position of the Tervingi in the fourth century: ‘Like the Jews, they have no thiudans of their own; instead, for them, Christians or pagans, the emperor is the “king of the Roman people”, the rex Romanorum or thiudans’. That this theory makes the word kindins deviate from its etymology as the leader of a kind (= ‘kin’; it is related to kuni, ‘tribe’) does not worry Wolfram (1988, p. 94), but it makes the word suspiciously like a synonym for reiks. Wolfram, in my opinion, fails to convince when he on this basis interprets the institution of the thiudans as an original and permanent, ‘ethnic’ monarchic kingship with strong sacral content, a leader who ‘ruled in heaven’ and enjoyed a ‘sacred prestige’ (Wolfram 1988, pp. 64.; similarly Andersson & Herschend 1997, p. 131).

A passage in Orationes 10 by Themistius, in which it is stated that the wise man ‘rejects the title of king [basileus] and embraces that of judge, since one denotes power but the other wisdom’, has been taken to refer to Athanaric, and since basileus is translated with thiudans in the Gothic Bible this would mean that the Tervingian leader eschewed the latter title (Thompson 1966, note 1, p. 45; Wolfram 1975, pp. 266 ff.). However, it is now widely held that Themistius is referring to Emperor Valens in the verbal contest with Athanaric in the negotiations on the Danube: ‘It may be that Themistius is punning, developing the metaphor of the oratorical competition with Valens as the judge, precisely because he knew that to be Athanaric’s title. Portraying Valens as a superior “judge” emphasises the Gothic leader’s inferiority’ (Heather & Matthews 1991, note 91, pp. 42 f.).

Wolfram’s argument rests on the assumption that the institution of the thiudans was unknown to the Tervingi of the late fourth century, that it had become
obsolete with the onset of Gothic migration (Wolfram 1988, pp. 64, 94 and 146). He thereby agrees with Thompson in regarding the confederate leadership of Athanaric as predominantly military (Thompson 1966, p. 46). An underlying pre-understanding of ‘original’ Germanic kingship seems to guide his interpretations, but on this subject we are conspicuously lacking in knowledge. Edward James has suggested reversed roles for thiudans and reiks, with the former as ‘the traditional king, with his concerns in religious and political as well as military matters’ and the latter as ‘the military leader’, an equally questionable theory (James 1989, p. 43).

Regarding Wolfram’s argument: would it not have been strange if the Gothic bishop, wishing to open the ears of his flock to the Divine, Vernacular Word, had used an obsolete and thus abstract word as thiudans, as Wolfram understands it, for something as central as the characterisation of Christ; a word evoking tribal memories rather than present reality? As we can see even in the short quotation above, thiudans is certainly used in a purely worldly sense: King of the Jews, that is, ruler of all the Jewish people, of all Israel. A king who could call himself king over an entire people (including eventual tribal kings), could call himself thiudans. What other word could Wulfila have used to describe Christ as King of Heaven? Even from his Arian hierarchical understanding of the Trinity, the Son was definitely not king over a mere tribe of souls! Furthermore, Wolfram does not take into account the fact that also King Herod is referred to as thiudans (Wulfila, Mark 6.14 and 6.22–27; Luke 1.5), a man who was king over the entire people of Israel, even though he was subordinate to Roman authority; and his kingship certainly cannot be mistaken for heavenly in the eyes of the authors of the Gospels. All aspects considered, I find myself in agreement with Burns (1984, p. 166) when he states that ‘Athanaric was doubtless thiudans’, and it is indeed possible that Ammianus chose the word iudex for its phonetic similarity as Burns (1980, pp. 37 f.) has also suggested. We may strongly doubt that the distinction between spiritual and worldly rule, which is so natural within our own discourse, would have made any sense at all to Wulfila’s contemporaries, or indeed to himself.

I consequently believe that the confederate leadership we encounter among the Visigoths in the fourth century was not necessarily ‘constitutionally’ defensive or temporary in nature, a mechanical response triggered by the stimulus of sufficient external pressure (thus contrary to Burns 1980, p. 36 ff.; Wolfram 1988, p. 94; Näsman 1989, p. 127; Wood 1989, p. 7). I do not claim that such cases may not have been the most obvious or usual (as in 346–47 when we for the first time hear about it and the Romans provided the stimulus) or even original, but political theory is one thing and political practice another. The evidence for the practice, ambiguous as it is, rather suggests a contextual basis, and that the necessary pressure could also come from within, from the dynamics inherent in
the power structure of the tribal system. The particularistic nature of the tribal organisation would however by necessity make this form of leadership highly volatile and thus appear to the outside observer as a temporary institution. Although the majority of Tervingian tribes acknowledged Athanaric’s superiority, a few did not, and there was nothing he could do about it. Later, when hard pressed by the sudden and fierce attack of the Huns in 376, a majority of the people deserted him, and forced their way onto Roman territory under the leadership of Alavivus and Fritigern (Wolfram 1988, pp. 117 ff.). Athanaric withdrew into the Transylvanian mountains with what seems to have been solely his own tribe, by circumstances reduced to a reiks (Burns 1980, pp. 43 f.).

Contrary to other scholars Heather has suggested that the office of iudex was hereditary:

Ammianus records that Athanaric swore a great oath, which was in accord with his father’s orders, not to tread on Roman soil (27.5.9). This makes most sense as the admonition of one ruler to his successor. More important, we know that Constantine had erected a statue to Athanaric’s father behind the Senate at Constantinople... Athanaric’s father can be plausibly equated with ‘the son of King Ariaricus’ who came as a hostage to Constantinople in 332 (Anon. Val. 6.31)... We seem, then, to have three generations of a ruling family: Ariaricus (king in 332), his anonymous son, and Athanaric (Ariaricus’ grandson). (Heather 1991, p. 99)

In my opinion, the fact that Athanaric was the son of a member of a ruling family suffices as explanation. Athanaric was not only a confederate leader, he was also the leader of his own kuni, a reiks, a position which qualifies him for the epithet ‘ruler’. The father probably held the same tribal office as did Ariaricus. There is no evidence for any confedercy among the Tervingi between 332 and 364. We should also remember that Ammianus describes Athanaric as being ‘at that time their most powerful ruler’ (Ammianus 27.5). If we understand this as referring not to his confederate leadership but to his position as king of the most powerful Tervingian tribe we arrive at a plausible explanation of how a confederate leadership could be attained: it would be natural to confer the supreme leadership on the reiks who commanded the greatest armed following and had the greatest economic strength. If a kuni happened to retain a dominant position for several generations it is more likely than not that consecutive rulers would attain the confederate leadership, provided it became actualised.

Heather (1991, p. 103) boldly proclaims it ‘perverse to conclude that the judge and confederation of the Tervingi were anything other than permanent’. Well, call me perverse if you like, but I cannot agree (also Thompson 1966, p. 54).

As an addendum to this discussion it is worth mentioning that the word reiks is used to translate ‘archon, governor or military commander’ in the Gothic bible
In the later half of the fourth century, the legendary Ermanaric (*Aírmnareiks*), king of the Greutungi, clearly represents a Gothic high kingship that was strongly extroverted, to use a euphemism. Ammianus Marcellinus portrays him as a ‘warlike king whose many heroic exploits had made him a terror to his neighbours’ and with a ‘rich and extensive realm’ (*Ammianus* 31.3). The events of Ermanaric’s life and career are shrouded by legend, but even if we allow for substantial exaggerations of his feats by later authors like Cassiodorus and Jordanes they remain impressive. In some way or other he must have united several if not all of the Greutungian tribes living on the steppes beyond the Dniester. From this power basis he appears to have held authority over several neighbouring peoples or tribes, in the opinion of some scholars creating a multi-ethnic confederacy, containing Sarmatian, Celtic and Germanic elements (*Burns* 1980, p. 36; *Wolfram* 1988, pp. 86 ff.). Although Ammianus does not name him *iudex* and we cannot know if he had the title *thiudans*, it seems reasonable at least to see him as the equivalent of one (see, however, below). The military aspect of his rule appears to have been predominant (*Wolfram* 1988, p. 115); no stay-at-home, royal officiant of communal sacrifices could have earned his reputation (although this does not eliminate the possibility that his eventual suicide [c. 375] had a religious significance, see chapter 5). It is also clear that his high command was not limited to a short campaign or two.

The only reliable evidence on Ermanaric’s career that we possess is the cursory note of Ammianus, quoted above. Later Ostrogothic legend made Ermanaric one of Theodoric the Great’s most formidable forbears, and Jordanes claims that he ruled ‘all the Scythian and German nations’ (*Getica* 23.116–20). This could not have been the case. He obviously did not rule the Tervingi, and if he had really been the most powerful Germanic ruler of his time he and his followers would surely have made a greater impact on contemporary authors. Furthermore, although Ammianus reports that all Ermanaric’s Goths crossed the Danube in 369 the Romans apparently considered the Tervingi the greater threat (*Heather* 1991, pp. 88 ff.). As Jordanes also describes Attila as ‘sole possessor of the Scythian and German realms’ (*Getica* 54.257), I consider it likely that
the Ermanaric of Ostrogothic legend was modelled on the image of Attila. With Ermanaric grafted onto the Amal family tree and made the equal in achievement and fame of the great Attila, Theodoric and his Ostrogoths could look back on a history equal in status to the greatest non-Roman rulers and conquerors. In reality, and despite Jordanes’ claim of the opposite, it is unlikely that Ermanaric was an Amal; it was his reputation that qualified him as a suitable ancestor of Theodoric’s (Heather 1991, pp. 24 f.).

We next catch a glimpse of Greutungian kingship in the mid-450s when the Gothic peoples were reorganised after the breakdown of the Hunnic empire. The aforementioned Valamer managed to gain control over those Greutungi who had settled in Pannonia with the permission of the Emperor Marcian. He achieved this by killing or subjugating rival claimants to power. However, Valamer only assumed direct control over one of three divisions of his Goths, while the other two were ruled by his brothers Thiudimer and Vidimer who were, according to Jordanes, content with Valamer’s sovereignty. In the following years the three divisions often acted independently, both in offensive and defensive wars (Heather 1991, pp. 240 f., drawing from Getica 48 and 52 ff.).

In confirmation of a renewed treaty with Marcian’s successor Leo in c. 461 (459 according to Wolfram 1988, p. 262), Gothic hostages were sent to the imperial court, among them Thiudimer’s son Theodoric, later to become ‘the Great’ and king of Italy. When young Theodoric was a hostage in Constantinople, Valamer was killed while successfully repelling an attack by the Sciri (a tribe of obscure ethnicity; Burns, 1984, p. 54, claims it to have been Alanic) and Thiudimer inherited Valamer’s division of the Pannonian Goths. When Theodoric returned in c. 470 his father made him king (Getica 56. 282). The circumstances and the extent of Theodoric’s authority are somewhat unclear, but Wolfram’s assumption, supported by Heather, that Thiudimer transferred Valamer’s inheritance to Theodoric is probably correct, because in the following years Theodoric acted as independently as his father or uncle and is reported by Jordanes to have had a personal following of six thousand men (Wolfram 1988, p. 264 ff.; Heather 1991, p. 250).

Joint rulership between brothers or between fathers and sons was a fairly common feature of, for instance, Anglo-Saxon and Frankish kingship; Frankish chronicles also tell us that joint kingship occurred in ninth-century Denmark (Sawyer 1992). Wolfram may lead us astray when stating that Valamer’s brothers ‘participated in his dominion but did not share in his kingship’ (Wolfram 1988, p. 151), and Theodoric’s elevation speaks against this. As Wolfram acknowledges, Theodoric later looked upon this as the beginning of his kingship (Wolfram 1988, p. 267). The impression given is that at least in practice Valamer and his two brothers each functioned and behaved like a reiks. Theodoric’s elevation, therefore, hardly represents a break in Greutungian practice. It may have been a tactical move made to weaken Vidimer’s position, and when Thiudimer and his
son led their forces into the eastern Empire, Vidimer and his party chose the route to Italy and later joined the Visigoths (Heather 1991, p. 250).

From another point of view, Valamer’s acknowledged pre-eminence reminds us more of the political structure of rulership among the Anglo-Saxons, where powerful kings frequently subordinated less powerful ones (see chapter 5), than the *thiudans* – *reiks* system of the Tervingi in the fourth century, if the latter is to be understood as a base of (at least nominally) equal kings with a temporary, monarchical extension in times of crisis. Valamer’s superior position was considered permanent, not a temporary mandate.

This may be explained in different ways. It is possible that this kind of overlordship was a traditional part of the tribal system of both the Tervingi and the Greutungi although it has left no further trace in the sources, but also that the instance we see was exceptional and a consequence of the very particular circumstances that surrounded it, an anomaly grown out of a disrupted political organisation. It is also possible that the institution of *thiudans* was unknown to the Greutungi, at least at this stage in history; we should not automatically expect identical systems of rulership among the two Gothic peoples. If so, Ermanaric may not have started his successful career as an elected *thiudans* but from a position similar to that of Valamer. Like the latter, Ermanaric appears to have shared his command with—among others—junior members of his family (Burns 1984, p. 38). Another plausible alternative is, of course, that Valamer could not claim the title of *thiudans* as he did not control all Greutungian tribes. A competing, powerful group stood under the leadership of Theodoric Strabo (‘the squinter’). Like the Amal family he and his father Triarius had held a favoured position under Attila and later cultivated a friendship with the Roman emperor who let them settle as *foederati* in Thrace. Some Ostrogothic groups even remained outside these two major divisions (Heather 1991, pp. 251 ff.). Finally, the omission of the title may be an effect of Valamer’s dependence on Rome, but that is unlikely since at this stage the relationship between the Pannonian Goths and the empire was not of an intimate nature.

However, the disappearance of the word *thiudans* from the Gothic scene in the fifth century is no doubt in part a consequence of the settlement of the Goths on Roman territory (from 473 in the case of the Ostrogoths) and their integration into the Roman social, political, military and symbolic system. The process involved a Romanisation of Gothic vocabulary and institutions, and not least a recognition of the supreme status of the Roman emperor. When Tervingian dissidents in Moesia (among them Wulfila) in the mid-fourth century accepted Constantius II as their ruler, they addressed him as *thiudans* (Wolfram 1988, pp. 63 f.; Moorhead 1992, pp. 100 ff.). Thus Wulfila had no doubts as to who his only worldly *thiudans* was even though he sometimes used the Greek word *kaisar* for the emperor in his version of the Bible (for example, *Wulfila*, Luke 20.22–25).
Later, if a king of the Visigothic kingdom of Tolouse (418–507) or Ostrogothic Italy (493–552) had called himself *thiudans*, he would indeed have violated the symbolic power language and challenged the ‘authority of the emperor’.

The Huns had actively encouraged a certain degree of political fragmentation among their subject peoples to keep dependent groups strong enough to be of value, but too weak to pose any threat to themselves (Heather 1991, pp. 241 ff.). It would be logical if they had also favoured certain lineages within the groups to assure themselves of stable sub-leadership, and this may be the background to the position of, for example, the Amal and the Triarius – Strabo families after the breakdown of the Hunnic empire. The Romans, on the other hand, strongly favoured a centralised Gothic government with which diplomatic relations could easily be maintained. From the late fifth century both Gothic peoples were headed by a supreme (monarchic) *reiks*, in Latin *rex*, while the authority of the ‘de-royalised’, tribal leaders, and thus the confederate council, was diminished (Wolfram 1988, pp. 94 ff., 144; James 1989, p. 44).

The Roman influence on the development of Gothic kingship should not be underestimated, and Burns argues that there was a strong and significant difference between the Goths and the Heruli (or Eruli); the contacts between the Heruli and the Romans were much more sparse, and as late as in the sixth century their king was, in the words of Burns (1980, pp. 47 ff.), ‘little more than a ritual leader’. This invites us to be cautious when using late Gothic kingship as an analogy for Scandinavian conditions. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that we know very little of substance about Herulic kingship, and as our primary source, Procopius, disliked the Heruli intensely, his description may well be more prejudiced than Burns acknowledges. In reality, their kingship may have differed little from that of the late fourth century Goths.

Theodoric the Great was given a name that was singularly appropriate for his future role as a ruler. In Gothic his name should be written *Thiud-reiks*, and this is precisely what he was as a leader of his people, a *reiks* over the entire Ostrogothic *thiud*. The word *thiud-reiks* was never used as a title (we really do not know if it was used at all, apart from as a name), but we find the same ‘idea’ expressed in the Old Nordic *þiðkonungr*, used by Snorri as an honorary epithet of a supreme king. In Harald Fairhair’s saga in *Heimskringla* the girl Gyda did not want to become Harald’s wife or mistress until he had won all of Norway for himself and could be called *þiðkonungr*. In the thirteenth as well as in the fourth century it was highly desirable to be able to call oneself king of an entire ‘people’. Somewhere within these temporal bounds, the first two lines of the *Beowulf* poem fill in part of the space: *Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum / þeod-cyninga þrym gefrunom...*

Theodoric must be regarded as a Roman ruler no less—perhaps even more—than as a Gothic. Until 474 the Goths in Pannonia under Amal leadership had
been less favoured by Emperor Leo I than the Thracian Goths under Theodoric Strabo, but Leo’s successor Zeno shifted his support. Between 474 and 476 Theodoric the Amal led his part of the people to Lower Moesia by the Danube where they resided more or less continuously to 488. Zeno adopted him ‘as a “son in arms”, called him his “friend” and appointed him patricius and commander-in-chief’, magister militum praesentalis (Wolfram 1988, p. 270). In spite of imperial disfavour Strabo had gained the upper hand in the internal power-struggle when he died by accident 481; Theodoric the Amal could take over most of Strabo’s inheritance. Theodoric was now strong enough to bully Zeno into making him consul for 484 and, again, magister militum praesentalis. The following years saw repeated Ostrogothic demonstrations of power to the emperor’s face, and at one time the relations between Ostrogoths and Romans even deteriorated to open war, so it is hardly surprising that when Theodoric and the Ostrogoths in 489 answered a call for help from the Rugians who had been defeated by the ruler of Italy, Odovacar (Odoacer), Zeno gave the enterprise his blessing. A formal treaty with Zeno, quoted by Wolfram (1988, p. 279), states that ‘after the defeat of Odovacar Theodoric, in return for his efforts, was to rule [Italy] for the emperor until he arrived in person’. Luckily for Theodoric, no emperor arrived in person in Italy while he was king. He was a Roman citizen and a Roman rex, and in the official art and propaganda, on the coinage he issued, he is not appearing as king of the Ostrogoths but as a Roman ruler whose rule was imperial in almost everything but name.

It is clear that the power of the thiudans was more dependent on the good-will of the confederate council (that is, the tribal kings and other nobles) than the later monarchic (thiud)reiks; the former appears as primus inter pares, and his power was strongly restricted, particularly in regard to truces, alliances, declarations of war and similar matters (Burns 1980, pp. 32 and 49 f.).

In the Visigothic kingdom of Tolouse (418–507), featuring prominent kings (reges) like Theoderid (418–451; he is sometimes also called Theodoric I), the legislator Euric (466–484) and Alaric II (484–507), government was quickly centralised, and the kingship monopolised by Theoderid’s clan, the Balthi. The authority of these kings was uncontested. The assembly, made up by the most prominent nobles, could do little but acclaim a new ruler, although it still was involved in decisions concerning declarations of war, conclusions of treaties or the promulgation of a new code of law. But while it is evident that the power balance had shifted, it is also clear that in most respects the nobility remained influential within the same spheres of action as in earlier times (Wolfram 1988, pp. 212 f.).
Comparisons: ‘Tacitus’ Cherusci and Bede’s Old Saxons

The temporary character of the institution of thiudans seems to correspond to the Germanic kingship depicted by classical historians, notably Tacitus; it can also be compared with Bede’s description of the continental Saxons around 700 AD (for example, Wood 1979, p. 7).

The leadership of Arminius

In his Annales Tacitus describes the spectacular career of the Germanic leader Arminius. Serving in the Roman army as leader of a contingent of his fellow tribesmen, the Cherusci, he learns the Latin language and Roman tactics. In 9 AD he leads the united forces of his people to a triumphant victory over his former employers: Varus and his legions are annihilated in the Teutoburger forest.

Tacitus contrasts the anti-Roman Arminius with the pro-Roman Segestes, another Cheruscian leader. The latter, he says, was ‘dragged into war by the unanimous voice of the nation’, and we are probably justified in assuming that the same ‘unanimous voice’ had appointed Arminius leader of the expedition. Obviously, Segestes reluctantly went to war against his Roman friends, but we sense between the lines that he could have refused but dared not in the face of a compact majority for the venture.

The war continued under Arminius’ leadership and in spite of Segestes’ opposition. Although he was the undisputed leader, Arminius could not and did not expect blind obedience from his generals. Several passages in the text make it clear that each leader commanded his own troops in battle, and the question of tactics was a matter of debate among the participating chieftains:

There was as much restlessness in the German host with its hopes, its eager longings, and the conflicting opinions of its chiefs. Arminius advised that they should allow the Romans to quit their position, and, when they had quitted it, again surprise them in swampy and intricate ground. Inguiomerus, with fiercer counsels, heartily welcome to barbarians, was for beleaguering the entrenchment in armed array, as to storm them would, he said, be easy, and there would be more prisoners and the booty unspoilt. (Annales, Book I)

Other passages describe Arminius standing before a battle ‘with the other chiefs...’, how ‘Arminius and the other German chiefs... call their respective clansmen...’, etc.

Had Arminius been a Tervingian leader in the fourth century we would hardly have hesitated to call him thiudans, while Segestes would have made a suitable reiks. In the ‘unanimous voice of the nation’ we would have recognised the
confederate council, made up of tribal kings and elders. Tacitus, however, gives us no clues as to what the Germanic leaders called themselves, and his Latin terminology is confusing, simple though it is.

Tacitus never uses the words *rex* or *iudex* in the Cheruscian context. Arminius is a *dux*, a term that in later Roman usage stands for a military leader who is not a king. To be a *dux* is to be assigned a command, not having a position for life. But in that respect it is similar to a *iudex/thiudans*, so our problem is not solved.

It is important here to remember that Tacitus was a dedicated republican and thus strongly biased against kingship. Similar sentiments had guided the senatorial daggers into the body of Julius Ceasar when his aspirations came too close to those of a monarch (although he did refuse the title *rex* in 44 BC); for the republicans the historical Roman monarchy was looked back upon as the bad old days, although it may be doubted if their picture of it was quite historical (OCD, ‘Rex’). Interestingly enough, it is when Arminius attempts to perpetuate his leadership, to become a *rex*, that he is overthrown and killed by his own people, and the parallel with Ceasar is striking:

Arminius... found himself opposed in *aiming at the throne* by his countrymen’s independent spirit. He was assailed by armed force, and while fighting with various success, fell by the treachery of his kinsmen. Assuredly he was the deliverer of Germany, one too who had defied Rome, not in her early rise, as other kings and generals, but in the height of her empire’s glory, had fought, indeed, indecisive battles, yet in war remained unconquered. He completed thirty-seven years of life, twelve years of power... (*Annales*, Book II; my italics)

This, I would say, is more a message to the Roman people that certain events sadly repeat themselves and less a description of Germanic ‘institutions’. It is symptomatic that the only *rex* we encounter in the text is described as hated by his own people in contrast to Arminius, that is, before Arminius started aiming at the throne himself:

...the Suevi... were imploring help against the Cherusci. For when the Romans had departed and they were free from the fear of an invader, these tribes, according to the custom of the race, and then specially as rivals in fame, had turned their arms against each other. The strength of the two nations, the valour of their chiefs were equal. But the title of king rendered Maroboduus hated among his countrymen, while Arminius was regarded with favour as the champion of freedom.

I believe we should use Tacitus’ terminology with the utmost care, and I do not consider it unlikely that behind his *dux* there may hide both the non-royal war-leader whom we are familiar with in later sources, but also the confederate leader, the *iudex* or *thiudans*, whatever names they had at this early time.
The Old Saxons

In the early eighth century Bede says about the continental Saxons:

For these Old Saxons have no king, but several lords [satrapes] who are set over the nation. Whenever war is imminent, these cast lots impartially, and the one on whom the lot falls is followed [as dux] and obeyed for the duration of the war; but as soon as the war ends, the lords revert to equality of status. (Historia ecclesiastica V.10)

The straightforward conclusion is that we are dealing with an archaic system, reminiscent of early Cheruscian or Gothic organisation with several tribal rulers and a temporary, confederate leadership. As regards the absence of true kings in Bede’s eyes Alex Woolf has remarked: ‘We tend to think of this word [satrapes] as the word for provincial governors in the Achaemend Persian Empire but to Bede it would have indicated the rulers of the Philistines in the Vulgate. Like the Saxons the Philistines were gentiles with no clear political unity who struggled against the people of God (Israel/Franks). In fact Saxony was as big as the territory inhabited by the Angles in Bede’s time and the satrapies were as large as kingdoms like East Anglia. Bede’s description of the Saxon “polity” (which must have existed for its people to be recognised as Saxons) is actually not so different from Gens Anglorum and kings holding imperium. Frankish propaganda and Christian prejudice may well have un-kinged the Saxons.’ (Woolf 1996, Ansaxnet; formatting added). As in the case of Tacitus and the Cherusci we have to reckon with the possibility that the information given in the text has been distorted by the author’s prejudices. The Saxon leaders may—possibly—have regarded themselves as no less royal than their Anglo-Saxon or Frankish counterparts.

The Saxons were at more or less constant war with Charlemagne and his Franks from 772 to 804, and therefore they constantly feature in the Frankish annals of the period. Until 785 the main director of the efforts of the Saxons was a certain Widukind from Westfalia. In Annales Regni Francorum the Saxons appear as an anonymous, hostile body (stubbornly and stupidly resisting civilisation in the form of Christianity and Frankish overlordship), and Widukind is most often referred to only by name (like in the entries for 778 and 782 AD, see Murphy 1989, pp. 22 ff.). That he was of noble descent is, however, obvious. Professor Richard Landes has informed me that Annales Einhardi (entry for 777 AD) describes the Saxon rebel leader as widokindus, unus ex primoribus westfalaorum, that is, ‘one of the foremost men of Westfalia’ (Landes 1997, Mediev-L, formatting added). The Frankish annals support Bede’s statement that the Saxons had no kings, but the cultural superiority of the Franks is such a prominent feature in these texts that a distortion of actual conditions on ideological grounds can be at play even here.
Another text indeed appears to present a different picture, the strange work called the Old Saxon Gospel or, from the 1830s, Heliand (‘Healer, Saviour’). It is based on the Gospels, written in alliterative verse in the vernacular, and 5983 lines long (Beowulf has 3182 lines). Heliand was created within the circle of the great monasteries of Fulda, Corbie, Corvey and Werden in the ninth century, probably in the 830s. According to the Latin preface it was commissioned by Ludovicus piissimus Augustus, whom we most likely can identify with Louis the Pious, the son and successor of Charlemagne, and written for the spiritual benefit of the newly converted Saxons (Murphy 1989, pp. 12 f.; on the dating see, for example, Baesecke 1973 and Haubrichs 1973).

While certainly conveying the Christian message, this epic poem borrows not only its form from traditional, heroic poetry but also, to a major degree, its expressions and ‘spirit’. For example, Christ is depicted very much in the image of a worldly lord and warrior, and the disciples as his retainers; at his birth he is not surrounded by common, bleating sheep but by noble, neighing horses, watched by the grooms of the proud father, Joseph (indicating Joseph’s high social rank). The poem is considered to have been influenced by Anglo-Saxon, Biblical works like Christ III, Phoenix and Guthlac, and may in turn have influenced the Anglo-Saxon Genesis (Baesecke 1973). The image of Christ as secular hero is also a common feature in Anglo-Saxon poetry (Orchard 1997, pp. 107 ff.).

With the help of an Internet document on the word frequency in Heliand, compiled by the linguist Brett Kessler (the document was no longer available by the time this thesis was finished), I have calculated the frequency of the four most common words for ‘king’ or ‘ruler’ in their various grammatical forms and compounds, and cuning/kuning here appears in second place:

- drohtin – 237 (4 in compounds)
- cuning, kuning – 130 (70 in compounds)
- bêrro, Hêrro – 97 (no compounds)
- frôbo, frâbo, frôio – 47 (3 in compounds)

Using the same logic with which I earlier argued that Wulfila’s use of the word thiudans in the Gothic Bible spoke against Wolfram’s theory that this word referred to a type of kingship no longer existing among the Goths, I find it highly unlikely that the author of Heliand would have introduced a concept of kingship which the Saxons themselves had no firsthand experience of. It should also be of particular importance that the word cuning/kuning occurs in compound form in more than fifty per cent of the cases (compared to 1.8 per cent for the other words together). This is most often when Christ is characterised as heavenly king (bebankuning, fifty-three times) as opposed to worldly kings (like Herod), but also in constructions like adalkuning (‘noble king’, twice), folkkuning/thiod-
kuning (‘folk-king’, three times), kuningdôm/kuningrîki (‘kingdom’, four times) and kuningstôl (‘royal seat, chair or throne’, once). If the poem was made to assist the spread of the Christian message among the Saxons (who for decades had resisted conversion and Frankish overlordship), and the author/authors took meticulous care to ‘translate’ it into the Saxon, traditional mode of expression to make their audience feel at home with it (Murphy 1989), why would he/they choose the word kuning for such a variety of related concepts if it had not been familiar to the Saxons.

Against my argument it could be maintained that the concept of kuning in Heliand could have been used to educate the Saxons in Frankish (Carolingian) kingship, to make them see this office not as an oppressive force but a divinely sanctioned office in the service of all mankind at the head of the new people of Israel, the Franks (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, pp. 99 f.). The evidence is certainly not conclusive, and Heliand was composed a century later than Bede’s report. Still, it gives at least some weight to the disinformation theory. To be a king is to be recognised as king, and the Frankish measure of a king was their own anointed monarch who was likened to (or even proclaimed to be an incarnation of) the great kings of the Old Testament, primarily David and Solomon; he ruled the New Israel, the Franks, who in a number of papal letters are assigned pre-eminence among Germanic peoples because of their calling and role (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, pp. 99 f.). In contrast, the Saxons were a ‘fierce people, given to the worship of devils, and hostile to our religion... [which] did not consider it dishonourable to transgress and violate all law, human and divine’, as Einhard describes them in his Life of Charlemagne (Einhard 7). Why would the Franks honour a leader of godless traitors with the same title which their own ruler, the minister of God himself, enjoyed?

How Gothic kings were made

How was a Germanic king recognised by his own people, what procedures and rules regulated succession? In his account of Anglo-Saxon and Norman kingship, Christopher Brooke gives a good introduction on the subject:

There were, indeed, no precise rules; but the succession to the thrones of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the English kingdom was hedged round with a series of conventions, customs and assumptions; and out of the dialectic between these conventions each succession was settled – sometimes peacefully, sometimes by violence. Frequently a ‘strong man armed’ seized the throne; and in later centuries at least he often felt bound to justify his action, and from the way in which he justified it we can tell what rules he was pretending to have followed. If at all possible, he showed that he was related to his predecessor – that he had a hereditary claim; he argued that the people had accepted his rule in
due form – that he had been ‘elected’, whatever that meant; and he asserted that
his predecessor had declared that he was to succeed – he had been designated by
a reigning king. (Brooke 1967, p. 24)

These elements, blood-right, election and designation obviously have a long his-
tory among Germanic peoples. So also, it seems, has the sense that although
it was highly desirable to be able to fulfil all conditions, one or two could be
dispensed with if practical circumstances so dictated.

While kinship and designation are fairly straightforward terms the projection
of the word ‘election’ back to the early centuries AD is more problematic. The
analogical sources make it obvious that when we speak of ‘elections’ among the
Germanic peoples, we have to free the concept from our present-day democratic
connotations. If they carry any resemblance to anything present, it would be to
the yes/no elections of totalitarian states where the candidate is given and the
affirmative result silently inscribed in the process. The view of early scholars that
Gothic kings were popularly elected (cf. Wolfram 1988, p. 2), or that the Anglo-
Saxon Witan had more power than the nineteenth-century English Parliament
(cf. Brooke 1989, pp. 22 f.), should thus not be revived. There is no evidence
whatsoever in Gothic history of what Wolfram calls the ‘Germanistic fiction’ of
an assembly of the people in the literal sense (Wolfram 1988, p. 212). Wallace-
Hadrill expresses this well, stating that the Lombard king Rothari (mid-seventh
century) ‘owed his crown not to blood but to election, that is to his strong right
arm and to his suitability in the eyes of his brother chieftains’ (Wallace-Hadrill

After Theodoric the Great

When the merely ten year old Athalaric succeeds his grandfather Theodoric
the Great as king over Goths and Romans in Italy in 526, the references to the
acclamation of an assembly in Ravenna (of both Goths and Romans), where
the participants also took oaths of obedience to the new king, are manifold.
This would appear to testify to the importance of this ceremony. However, the
assembly was called so quickly that almost only people resident in or close to
Ravenna would have had time to attend. Commentators give no information
about the distribution of social rank among the participants, but, according to
Cassiodorus, Athalaric noted that none of the leaders, proceres, made any protest
against his succession. Obviously, the voice of the common people counted for
little if they were, at all, present at the event. The important thing was to gain
the support of the leading Gothic families, not least since Athalaric was a minor,
and the assembly was, probably, less a constitutional necessity than a convenient
safe-guard against actual or possible dissidents.
Athalaric also did not fail to point out that he had been designated by Theodor-oric. This was most likely the deciding factor in the succession; the designation of Theodoric by his father Thiudimir was very formal, being conducted at the latter’s death-bed before invited Gothic notables. On such an occasion the sup-
port of the present proceres would have prefigured the acclamation of a possible later assembly. Needless to say, Athalaric was an Amal, a member of the true stirps regia (Claude 1980, pp. 153 and 160 ff.).

Although Athalaric was king in name it was his mother, Amalasuntha, who in practice ruled the kingdom. The royal youth instead spent his time and him-
self in debauchery. And when Athalaric died in October 534, his end perhaps hastened by ‘a drunken revel that passed all bounds’ (Procopius V.iii.10), the succession was settled without any of the aforesaid procedures. Amalasuntha apparently assumed the title of regina directly after his death, and already on the following day she elevated her cousin Theodahad (Theodatus) to co-regent. This she did solely through a proclamation to the (Roman) senate, and there is no mention of any acclaiming assembly. This co-regentship was unique at this time, but it clearly shows that a regent who was both daring enough (Procopius claims that she to a great extent displayed ‘the masculine temper’!, Procopius V.ii.3) and under sufficient political pressure could dispense with procedures which would normally have been deemed proper.

The pressure in Amalasuntha’s case came mostly from a hostile party among her relatives of which Theodahad was a member. No doubt the queen sought to appease this group by her choice of co-regent. Also, it may have been politically impossible for a woman to act as head of the army (contrary to Wolfram 1988, p. 337). No doubt Amalasuntha was aided by the strong ‘Amalocentric’ ideology nursed by Theodoric and herself (with the aid, not least, of Cassiodorus), and could thus lean on the principle of clan heredity. It would also have involved a risk to call an assembly, since Theodahad was detested by many people; apart from being cruel and greedy he was Romanised to the point of eschewing the martial arts, instead occupying himself with reading Plato and writing Latin poetry (Procopius V.iii.1–2 and iv.1–8; Moorhead 1992, p. 88). Amalasuntha’s efforts to reconcile the opposing parties were, however, thwarted: Theodahad, easily forgetting his oaths of loyalty, had her imprisoned and killed within the year (Claude 1980, pp. 164 f.; Wolfram 1988, p. 338).

Then again, when Theodahad proved an utter failure as military leader in the war against the Byzantines (secretly even conspiring to give his kingdom up to Justinian, Procopius V.vi.10–21), part of the Gothic army rebelled. The leader of the revolt, Vitigis, was an experienced military leader (probably a dux), known for distinguished service under Theodoric in the wars against the Gepids. He assumed the kingship in 536 through an ‘election’ among his soldiers at Regata, and promptly had Theodahad assassinated (Procopius V.xi.5–9). In a propaganda
letter (penned by Cassiodorus) to ‘all the Goths’ he presents this as an election by the Gothic people with, as a precaution, the consent of God. As a manifestation of his elevation Vitigis was, he claims, raised ‘on a shield among the swords of battle in the ancestral way’ (Varie X.31). Although certainly a noble, Vitigis was ‘not of a conspicuous house’ (Procopius V.xi.5) like the Amal, and to overcome this obstacle he was careful to stress that he should be considered the kinsman of Theodoric by merit of his deeds, not his blood (Varie X.31). To strengthen his position he married the reluctant Matasuntha, daughter of Amalasuntha (Procopius V.xi.27; Claude 1980, pp. 166 f.).

The shield-raising of Vitigis is the first documented instance of this ceremony among the Goths, but it is a well-known feature of Merovingian king-making (Weidemann 1982). We should not, however, regard the Gothic appropriation of the ceremony as an imitation of Merovingian custom. Its origins are rather to be found in Roman imperial inaugurations, practised at least as late as in the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, Ammianus reports that when Cæsar Julian was proclaimed Augustus in Gaul in 360 ‘he was placed on an infantry shield, raised aloft, and proclaimed Augustus without a dissident voice’ (Ammianus 20.4). It is quite possible that it had been part of the Gothic ceremonial before Vitigis, for instance in the case of Theodoric the Great, as assumed by Claude. Thus, both Goths and Merovingians probably appropriated the shield-raising ceremony from the Romans. Perhaps it could originally have been a Celtic custom as the ceremony involving Julian took place in Gaul. Vitigis used the ceremony as an instrument in his efforts to give a formal appearance of his coup, at the same time stressing the martial aspects of kingship (Claude 1980, p. 175; Nicol 1991, p. 63).

A few years later the Goths resorted to quite extraordinary measures, at the end of an unsuccessful war. After the surrender of Vitigis and Matasuntha in 540 they offered the kingship to a non-Goth, the victorious Byzantine general, Belisarius (who declined the offer). To take—or try to take—an ‘alien’ enemy leader as king was a desperate measure in the face of extreme crisis, but it is known to have occurred in some instances among Germanic peoples, for example the Spanish Suebi in 456/457 (Claude 1980, p. 170). Perhaps such events lie behind the well-known passage in the Gutasaga, which claims that the people of Gotland by their own free will entered under the overlordship of the king of the Svear. The propaganda of a victor would certainly present such a decision as a voluntary one.

The successors of Theodoric the Great provide us with a valuable insight into late Ostrogothic king-making, and especially how procedures could be disregarded in the face of political pressure. Indeed, Brooke’s statement above that there were no precise rules among the Anglo-Saxons and Normans seems to hold true for the Ostrogoths as well. Certainly, there were principles, although not in the rigid constitutional sense of later centuries, but with an ‘infinite malleability in action’, to speak with Karl Leyser (1989, p. 82).
Tracing the king-making principles of the Ostrogoths back in time takes us into less well charted territory, but the evidence, such as it is, does at least not conflict with the picture we have. After the suicide of Ermanaric in c. 375 (Ammianus, 31.3), he was succeeded by a certain Vidimir, ‘who was certainly related to Ermanaric but was certainly not his son’ (Wolfram 1988, p. 115). According to Claude (1980, p. 151), an elective act may have confirmed Vidimir’s accession, since Marcellinus names him rex creatus, but the word creare is vague and probably only means that the man was made king in a general sense.

Contrary to what we might expect, even at this critical hour the concept of hereditary kingship exerted a strong influence, for when Vidimir had lost his life on the battlefield, he was succeeded by his son Videric, a minor like later on Athalaric. Videric was placed under the guardianship of ‘Alatheus and Saphrax, two experienced commanders [duces] of proved courage’ (Ammianus 31.3). These two ‘Goths’ are both likely to have been of non-Gothic origin, Sarmatian and Alanic/Hunnic respectively; the Greutungian confederacy was highly polyethnic, and Ermanaric had no ethnocentric prejudices when it came to admitting capable people to positions of power or, indeed, into the Gothic gens (Burns 1984, p. 38; Wolfram 1988). In this way the army could be expertly led, with the royal minor as a lucky charm in the background. For once, the famous, generalising statement of Tacitus that the Germans ‘choose their kings [reges] for their noble birth [nobilitas], their commanders [duces] for their valour [virtus]’ (Germania 7) holds perfectly true; however, reality, as we have seen, was normally more complex. We are here provided with an early example of the Gothic readiness to attach their loyalty to a certain stirps regia (cf. Claude 1980, pp. 174 f.). Ermanaric’s feats and fame generated a dynastic charisma which prepared the way for the accession of little Videric. However, neither the boy’s noble blood nor the ability of his commanders could turn the fortunes of war, and the Ostrogoths were forced to accept Hunnic overlordship (Wolfram 1988, pp. 252 ff.).

The succession of royal minors among the Ostrogoths as a consequence of the idea of an exclusive stirps regia can shed light on some exclusive, sixth-century burials in Sweden. It has been established that the East Mound of Old Uppsala (sixth century) and the Högom grave (c. 500 AD) have been raised over very young men or even boys; the age of the deceased in the East Mound has been estimated to 10–14 years (Arrhenius & Sjøvold 1995, pp. 30 ff.; Arrhenius 1995, pp. 317 ff.). As Peter Sawyer (1983, pp. 119 ff.) has argued, these burials imply that power could be inherited within the uppermost social strata in Scandinavia, and that the notion of stirps regia was relevant for these northerly peoples as well. It seems probable that we are dealing with parallels to the Ostrogothic cases above, first or second generation successors to very successful kings who effectively (if temporarily) had outmanoeuvred competing dynasties and managed to establish a more or less lasting dynastic monopoly, possibly also an imperium over other
kings and dominions (cf. Arrhenius 1995, p. 329). Although the boat-graves in the Mälar valley are generally considered not to be of royal status, the grave Vendel XII contained a helmet that may have been altered to fit a small skull. The grave is dated to the early seventh century (Arbman 1938) or the late sixth century (Arrhenius 1983). As further comparison we can refer to the young man (‘prince’) in Mound 17 on the, most likely, dynastic and royal cemetery at Sutton Hoo, a burial that has been dated to the late sixth century (Carver 1992b, pp. 362 and 365).
An archaeology of Ynglingatal

Together in our saddles sit we shall and of kings’ lineages speak; those men who descend from gods.

(Hyndluljóð 8)

Ynglingatal is one of the central texts of Swedish prehistory, at least if we are to judge from the amount of attention paid to it by generations of scholars from the disciplines of archaeology, linguistics, history and history of religion. It is a poem listing twenty-seven generations of kings of the Ynglinga dynasty, twenty-one (twenty-three kings) of them Svear, the last six Norwegian. Two co-regencies make the total number of kings twenty-nine. The main subject of the poem is the death of each king. The names of the kings are (original, normalised spelling): Fiðlnir, Sveigðir, Vanlandi, Vísburr, Dómaldi, Dómarr, Dyggvi, Dagr, Ágni, Alrekr & Eiríkr, Yngvi & Álfr, Iorundr, Aun, Egill, Óttarr, Ádils, Eysteinn, Yngvarr, Ónundr, Ingialdr, Ólafr (trételgia); Hálfdan (hvítbeinn; the first of the Norwegian kings), Eysteinn, Hálfdan, Guðrøðr, Ólafr, Røgnvaldr (the cognomens are not known from the poem).

The text is known only from Snorri Sturlusson’s Ynglinga saga, the first saga in Heimskringla (written around 1230 AD), where it appears as quotations at the end of the narrative on the individual kings, announced by the words: Svá segir Þióðólfr ‘thus speaks Thiodolf’.

Snorri ascribes the composition of the poem to a certain Thiodolf of Hvini, an obscure character of whom little is known. In the prologus of Heimskringla Snorri states:

Þióðólfr inn fröði ór Hvini var skáld Haraldz ins hárfragra; hann orði ok um Røgnvald konung heidaumbera kvedi þat, er kallet er Ynglingatal. Røgnvaldr var son Óláfss Geirstadaálfs, bróður Hálfdanar svarta...

Thiodolf the wise or of Hvini was Harald Fairhair’s poet; he also composed the lay called Ynglingatal about King Ragnvald the Honour-High. Ragnvald was the son of Olaf Geirstadalf, the brother of Halvdan svarti. (my translation, based on Heimskringla 3)
Thiodolf is mentioned briefly in Harald Finehair’s saga in Heimskringla and Saga Óláfs konungs bins helga; in the Skáldatal of Snorri’s Edda and the later Skáldasaga in Hauksbók he also appears as one of King Harald’s poets (Krag 1991, pp. 34 f.). It is believed that Harald became king over all Norway after the battle at Hrafnsfjord c. 890 AD and that he lived until c. 940 AD; Sverre Bagge (1991, p. 8) gives the dates 890/900–945. This would place Ynglingatal in the decades around 900 AD, at least three centuries (ten to twelve generations) before Snorri wrote his saga.

The dating of the poem is, however, still debated. The language, use of synonyms, and mythological references have been interpreted as early (Viking Age) by some scholars and as late (Medieval) by others (Åkerlund 1939, pp. 12 ff. with refs.). Comparisons with skaldic poems like Völuspá and Grímnismál, attempted not least by Sophus Bugge, yield no conclusive results since skaldic verse is in itself difficult to date. Furthermore, as Åkerlund (1939, p. 18) and others have pointed out, the composition of poems like Völuspá can scarcely be pinned to a single point in time; they are rather composite works, compiled from a hoard of skaldic tradition and fragments. Åkerlund contrasts this kind of poem with compositions like Ynglingatal, but as we shall see this may be to misconstrue the data. Recently, Claus Krag (1991) has suggested that Ynglingatal may have been composed as late as around 1200 AD.

The poem is written in kviðubáttr, a metre considered to have developed from the fornyrdislag. Not many poems in kviðubáttr are preserved, but they include such famous works as Sonatorrek and Arenbiarnarkviða, both ascribed to Egil Skallagrímsson and the 960s, and Háleygjatal, written by Eyvind Finnsson, called skáldaspiller, at the end of the tenth century; there is also Glelognskviða, said to have been composed by Thorarin Lovtungi in the early 1030s, Ævekviða of Grettir Ásmundarson from about the same time, Nóregs konungatal from the end of the twelfth century and Hákonarkviða from the 1260s (Åkerlund 1939, p. 1).

Ynglinga saga and Ynglingatal are known from three Medieval manuscripts, Kringla, Jófraskinna and Codex Frisianus. Only Codex Frisianus is preserved in the original today (Cod. AM 45 fol.), written down by an Icelander c. 1325; the others were almost entirely incinerated when the city-fire in Copenhagen 1728 destroyed the University Library where they were kept. Kringla, originally written in Iceland c. 1250–80, is preserved in three transcripts, the most important of which is K (Cod. AM. 35 fol.), made by the Icelander Ásgeirr Jónsson c. 1700 and emended shortly afterwards by Arne Magnusson; there is also a transcript in Stockholm, made by Arne Magnusson c. 1680 (Cod. Isl. 18 fol.), and one in Oslo from c. 1700 (Cod. 521 fol.). Jófraskinna was written in Norway c. 1325 and is also known from three transcripts, the incompletely preserved J1 (Cod. AM. 37 fol.), made by the Norwegian bishop Jens Nielsson in 1567–68 and supplemented after K by the end of the seventeenth century, J2 (Cod. AM. 38 fol.), made by Ásgeirr Jónsson in

A handful of other sources also mention the Ynglingar, presenting the line of kings in part or in its entirety but with some variations. The Icelandic priest Ari Frodi, whom Snorri mentions in his prologue to Heimskringla, wrote a langfeðatal over his family, the Breiðafirðingar, in the mid-twelfth century. He connected the founder of his own line, Olaf hvít, through four ancestors to the son of Halfdan hvítbeinn, the twenty-second king in Ynglingatal. This series is ‘particular to Ari, two versions of Landnámabók and the tract called Pátr af Upplendinga-konungum. Ari also had a branch-line joining Haraldr hárfagri to Hálfdan hvítbeinn (this was inserted between the prologue to Íslendingabók and the opening rubric)’ (Turville-Petre 1980, p. 49). Ari is, by the way, the first to apply the name Ynglingar to this royal dynasty. Pátr af Upplendinga-konungum is considered also to derive from the twelfth century, although it is only preserved in the much later Hauksbók. Another work is Historia Norvegiæ, written in Latin in the late twelfth century; it adds to the names of each king a brief description of his death, sometimes corresponding to that in Ynglingatal, sometimes not.

The following original text of Ynglingatal is from K, the one presented by Wessén (1952). I have followed Wessén’s or Åkerlund’s (1939) suggestions for substitutions of occasional words from J1, J2 or F where these three manuscripts are in agreement against K. In the prose translation I have aimed to convey the literal meaning of the text as faithfully as possible (not that it is always obvious) at the cost of elegance of expression.

A poetic translation was avoided for several reasons, not only my personal lack of poetic talent. Earlier translations to modern languages show the difficulties of faithfully retaining the meaning of the text helming by helming, not to mention half-line by half-line. Two examples of earlier translations to English of strophe 20 on King Ingiald can serve as illustration. The first was made by Samuel La- ing and was originally published 1844, the first translation of Heimskringla ever made into English. Paradoxically, it is the most accessible translation existing today since it is published on the Internet (Laing 1844):

With fiery feet devouring flame
Has hunted down a royal game
At Raening, where King Ingiald gave
To all his men one glowing grave.
On his own hearth the fire he raised,
A deed his foemen even praised;
By his own hand he perished so,
And life for freedom did forego.
Not only does Laing change the rhythm and substitute alliteration for end-rhyme, he also freely introduces elements from *Ynglinga saga* where he sees fit, like all Ingiald’s men and the ‘foemen’, and invents expressions like the hunting down of a ‘royal game’, the ‘hearth’ and ‘freedom’. On the other hand, the people of the Svear and Ingiald’s outstanding bravery and divine descent is left out.

Laing cannot be blamed for being a child of his times, but the contrast with the more recent translation by Lee Hollander (1964) is striking:

Raging fire   at Rœning farm
  trod Ingiald   while in this life,
  when by stealth   in stocking feet
it fell on   the friend-of-gods;
  and this fate   most fitting seemed
to all Swedes   for scion of kings:
to die first   in fiery death,
  and end first   his own brave life.

Hollander masterfully manages to retain meter and alliteration; he also comes very close to the original meaning of the text although he is forced to change the position of some half-lines. Still, the reason given in the last four half-lines why the Swedes thought Ingiald’s end so fitting is not entirely clear: die *first*, end *first*?

The reader should not be deceived into believing that my prose translation expresses the exact meaning of the original text. First, I am not a linguist and have had to rely upon the works of other translators to a large degree, and their opinions often deviate significantly. Second, and more important, there is seldom a direct correspondence between Old Norse words and expressions and modern ones. To capture the nuances is difficult and the choice of a single modern word for an Old Norse one inevitably involves a partial loss of meaning (on the problems of translating Old Norse poetry, see Bernáth 1990 and Macek 1990). What I present is a ‘working-translation’, valid for the purposes of this study.

The syntax of *Ynglingatal* is sometimes complex. For example, lines 3 and 4 (helming 2) of strophe 8 read:

`þá’s valteins   til Vôrua kom
spakfrômoðr   spôrs at hefna.`

It means ‘when the promoter of war-shaft wisdom came to Vorvi to avenge a sparrow’ but it is actually written:

when the war-shaft’s   to Vorvi came
  wisdom-promoter   a sparrow to avenge.

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For the modern reader this sentence begins with the first half-line in line one (the first on-verse), leaps to the first half-line in line two (the second on-verse), then leaps back to the second half-line in line one (the first off-verse) and ends with the second half-line in line two (the second off-verse). The original audience will have found this less confusing than we since the meaning is contained within a single helming, that is, within a connected set of two lines (four half-lines) (Åkerlund 1939). To assist the reader I have given occasional ‘cues’ in the translation in the form of index numbers before each half-line (or even within half-lines), to show in what order they should be read. In this way the reader will hopefully be able to find the way between translation and original text with reasonable ease. The helmings are marked with alternately bold and normal typeface. For each strophe I present alternative readings of certain ambiguous passages, explanations of kennings and other obscure expressions as well as other information I have deemed helpful.

Text and translation

1. Varð framgenget, þar es Fróði bið, feigðarð, er at Fjolni kom; ok Sikling svigðis geira vágr vindlauss um viða skyldi

Was fulfilled where Frodi lived, the word of death that to Fjolni came; and the Sikling the neck-bender’s spear’s windless wave should slay.

‘The neck-bender’s spear’ (svigðis geira) = ‘the bull’s horn’.
‘The neck-bender’s spear’s windless wave’ (svigðis geira vágr vindlauss) = ‘mead’.

2. En dagskiarr Durnis níðia salvprðuðr Sveigði vélti, þá er í stein inn stórgeði Dusla konr eptir dvergi blióp, ok sal bifatr þeira Sokkmínis iðtunbyggðr við iðfri gæin.

But day-fearing, of Durni’s kin, the hall-warden wiled Sveigdi, as into the rock the great-minded descendant of Dusli leapt after the dwarf. And the bright hall of Sokkmimi and his people, built [or: inhabited] by giants, gaped over the ‘boar’.

Dusli = unknown proper name, see Marold 1983, note 157.
3. "Enn á vit Vilia bróður
vitta vétr Vanlanda kom,
há trollkund um tóða skyldi
liðs Grímibldr líona bóga,
ok sá brann á beði Skútu,
mengloatuðr, er mara kvalði.

But to meet Vili’s brother
the ‘being of enchantment’ sent Vanlandi;
there the troll-born should tread –
the entourage’s [or: the mead’s] Grimhild –
on the enemy of peoples.
And there burnt, on the bank of Skuta,
the waster of neck-rings whom the nightmare choked.

‘Vili’s brother’ (Vilia bróður) = Odin.

4. Ok Vísburs vilia byrgi
siávar niðr svelgia knátti
há er meinhið markar òtto
setrs veriendr á sinn fiður,
ok allvald í arinkióli
glóða garmr glymiandi beet

And Visbur’s will’s stronghold
the sea’s brother could swallow
when the mean thief of the woods was urged
by the seat-defenders upon their father;
and the ruler of all in the hearth-ship
the glow-dog barking bit.

‘Visbur’s will’s stronghold’ (Vísburs vilia byrgi) = ‘Visbur’s body’.
‘The sea’s brother’ (siávar niðr); ‘the mean thief of the woods’ (meinhið markar);
‘The glow-dog’ (glóða garmr) = ‘fire’.
‘Hearth-ship’ (arinkióli) = probably: house; possibly: funeral-pyre (Lindqvist 1921a, pp. 151 f.). If it is a reference to a funeral-pyre it could be to a cremation in boat or ship, in which case the expression is not a kenning (cf. strophe 17).

5. Hitt vas fyrr, at fold ruðu
suerðberendr sínum drótni,
ok landberr af lífs vomen
dreyrog vápn Dómaldar bar,
há er árgjörn Íta dólgi
Svíia kind um sóa skyldi.

It was of old that the ground was reddened
by the sword-bearers with [the blood of]
their lord
and the land-host from the life-bereft
bloody weapons from Domaldi bore,
1 as eager for prosperity 4 the enemy of Jutes
2 the kin of the Svear 3 should slay.

The thundering bane of Half’ (dynianda bana Hálfs) = ‘fire, funeral pyre’.

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7. Kveðkak dul, nema Dyggua brør
Glitnis gná at gammi befr,
því at íóðís Úlf ok Narfa
konungmann kíosa skyldi,
or allvalð Ýngva þiðdar
Loka mær at leikinn befr.

I do not hide that Dyggvi’s corpse
Glitni’s woman has for her pleasure,
for by the sister of Ulf and Narvi
the royal man should be chosen.
And the ruler of all the peoples of Yngvi
Loki’s maiden has for play.

‘Glitni’s woman’ (Glitnis Gná); ‘the sister of Ulf and Narvi’ (íóðís Úlf ok Narfa);

8. Frá ek at Dagr dauða orði
fregaðar füss of fara skyldre
þá’s valteins til Vörns kom
spakfræðið spprs at befrna.
Ok þat orð d austrvega
visa ferð frá vigi bar,
at þann gram um geita skyldi
slønguþref Sleipnis verðar.

I learnt that Dag by word of death,
eager for glory, should go,
1 when the war-shaft’s 3 to Vorvi came
2 wisdom-promoter to avenge a sparrow.
And that word on eastward roads
by the wise man’s companions was borne
from the fight,
that the grim one should be struck
by the sling-thrower of Sleipnir’s food.

‘Loki’s maiden’ (Loka mær) = Hel.
Helming 2, clarification: ‘when the promoter of war-shaft wisdom came to
Vorvi to avenge a sparrow’.

9. Þat tel ek undr, ef Agna her
Skialf råð at skópum þóttu,
þá er göðing með gullmeni
loga dís at lopti höf,
binn er við Taur temia skyldi
svalan best Signýiar vers.

That I would call a wonder if Agni’s host
the counsel of Skialf found in order with fate,
as the rich one with the golden neck-ring
the marriage-vow’s woman raised aloft;
he who at Taur would tame
the cool horse of Signy’s husband.

‘The sling-thrower of Sleipnir’s food’ (slønguþref Sleipnis verðar) = ‘hay-fork’.
Alt, helming 2: as the rich one with the golden neck-ring was raised into the air
by the smoke/wind (see next remark).
‘The marriage-vow’s woman’ (Loga dís) = ‘wife’ (Lindquist 1929, p. 63); alternatively,
the expression could mean ‘the fire’s consort/sister’ and be a kenning for
the wind or, more fitting figuratively, the rising smoke (from the funeral pyre).
This interpretation might seem hard to reconcile with Agni hanging from
the gallows in helming 3, but the two helming could possibly reflect two separate
death-rituals (Lindqvist 1921b), here mentioned in reverse chronological order.
Taur = place-name or taur = ‘neck-ring’ (Noreen 1925, p. 227).
‘The cool horse of Signý’s husband’ (svalan best Signýiar vers) = ‘gallows’.
10. Fell Alrek, þar er Eiríki
broður vápn at bana urðu,
ok hnakkmars með hófuðfetlum
Dags frendr um drepsk kváðu.
Fráat maðr áðr eykja greiði
Freys afspring i fólk hafa.

Alrek fell as for Eirik
brother-weapons became his bane,
1and of the saddle-horse 2with the head-fetters
4Dag’s kinsmen 5were said to have slain each
other.
Never before had a man learnt that horse-gear
Frey’s offspring in battle used.

The head-fetters of the saddle-horse’ (hnakkmars hófuðfetlum) = ‘reins’.

11. Ok varð binn er Álfr um vá,
vorðr véstalls, um veginn liggia,
er doglingr dreygían meki
prüfðgiarn á Yngva rauð.
Vara þat bært, at Bera skyldi
valsæfender vígs um hvetia,
þá er braðr tevir at bónum urðusk
ðjurfendi um afbrýði.

Also had he, whom Alf slew,
the guardian of the sanctuary, to lie fallen,
as the Dagling the bloody sword
envious on Yngvi reddened.
It was not to stand that Bera should
the battle-slaughterers urge to a fight,
where two brothers became each other’s bane
to no avail out of jealousy.

K begins Varð Ingialdr... in accordance with the Historia Norvegia which states:
Cujus filius Ingialdr in Swecia a fratre suo... occisus est... (‘His son Ingiald was killed in Sweden by his brother...’, Noreen 1925, pp. 231 f.; translation based on

12. Varð Iórundr, binn er endr um dó,
lifs um lattr í Limafirði,
þá er hábrióstr hörva Sleipnir
bana Guðlaugs um bera skyldi,
ok Hagbarðs bersa valdi
þöðnu leif at bálsi gekk.

Was Iorund, who died of yore,
by life bereft in the Limfjord,
when the high-breasted, flax-bridled
Sleipnir
the bane of Gudlaug should carry.
1And Hagbard’s 4of the leader of chieftains
2goat’s inheritance 3went around the neck.

‘The high-breasted, flax-bridled Sleipnir’ (hábrióstr hörva Sleipnir) = ‘gallows’.
‘The bane of Gudlaug’ (bana Guðlaugs) = Iorund.
‘Hagbard’s goat’s inheritance’ (Hagbarðs... þöðnu leif) = ‘rope’.
Could once in Uppsala
old-age disease catch Aun,
and the stubbornly living should take
the food of infants, for the second time.
1And 5of the bull 2to himself he turned
4part of the sword 3the narrow
1as from the yoke-reindeer’s 3the reddener
[slayer] of kinsmen
2blade’s tip 4lying drank.

Managed not the herd-sword
the East-king to uphold.

The meaning of helming 2 has been much debated, the question being whether Egil was killed by a stray, wild bull (as Snorri states in Ínglinga saga) or a boar. A minority has favoured the last alternative, for example Noreen (1925, p. 236), which makes it consonant with the Beowulf poem, where Ongentheow (identified as Egil) is killed by a certain Eofor (= ‘boar’). The word trionu would seem to correspond to the modern Swedish word for a pig’s snout, tryne, but is elsewhere in Old Norse literature used only in connection with a snake, a dog or a bear, never with a pig. However, the word is used figuratively for ‘weapon’ in general and can be likewise understood here (Marold 1983, p. 124). Most commentators see farri = ‘bull’ but de Vries (1977) accepts farri = ‘boar’ with some reservation. Accordingly, farra trionu can be understood as ‘the bull’s weapon’ = ‘horn’ or ‘the boar’s weapon’ = ‘fang’ (Åkerlund 1939, pp. 95 ff.).

The expression iptuns eykr can be translated ‘the giant’s horse’ and is unlikely to refer to anything other than a bull (see Marold 1983, pp. 123 ff. for the most recent and extensive discussion); eykr means ‘Zugtier, Pferd’ (de Vries 1977).
A possible way to solve the problem would be to see the ‘verbal equation’ not as
\[ \text{farra trionu} + \text{iötuns eykr} \] but as \[ \text{farra} + \text{trionu iötuns eykr} \]. If the last three words mean ‘the weapon of the horse of giants’ = ‘the horn’ the entire construction would make a perfect kenning if \text{farr} means ‘boar’, simply because boars do not have horns: ‘the boar’s horn’ would mean ‘fang’.

There remains the first word in the helming, \text{flæming}. ‘Aisl. \text{flæmingr} bedeutet ‘Flucht’ und \text{flæma} ‘vertrieben, verjagen’. \text{Flæmingr} als adjektiv kann dann ‘der flüchtige’ bedeuten’ (Marold 1983, p. 125). As we learn that Egil has been driven from his kingdom in helming 1 it would be more natural that the word referred to him as I suggest in my translation, instead of \text{farr} / \text{iötuns eykr} as has otherwise been assumed. A traditional interpretation of helming 2 is: ‘but the fugitive horse of giants \[ \text{flæming... iötuns eykr} \] coloured the bull’s weapon red on Egil’), but I suggest that it should be understood: ‘but on the fugitive Egil the boar’s fang was coloured red’.

The Medieval Ynglinga tradition unanimously adheres to the ‘bull theory’. The \text{Historia Norvegiæ} states: \text{Auchun vero genuit Eigil cognomento Vendilcraco, quem proprius servus nomine Tonne regno privavit, et cum domino pedissequus VIII civilia bella commisit, in omnibus victoria potitus, in nono tandem devictus occubuit; sed paulo post ipsam regem truculentus taurus confodiens trucidavit} (‘Aun had the son Egil, nick-named Vendel Crow, whose servant [thrall?] Tunni deprived him of his kingdom, and this attendant fought eight battles with his lord and was victorious in all, but was defeated and killed in the ninth; but shortly thereafter a fierce bull pierced the king and killed him’; translation based on Krag 1991, p. 119).

‘Eyebrows’ rock’ \[ \text{brûna hôrg} \] = ‘head’ (or: ‘helmet’?, Lindqvist 1921a, p. 150, note). The expression is normally considered to refer to Egil, but Åkerlund (1939, p. 95) believes it refers to the beast.

‘The sheath-less sword of the beast’ \[ \text{skîðlauss... hœfis hiðr} \] = ‘fang’ (or: ‘horn’) helming 3, clarification: ‘and sheath-less the sword of the beast stood the Skilfing’s descendant in the heart’.

\[ \text{15. Fell Öttarr undir ara greipar, dugandligr, fyr Dana vápnun.} \]
\[ \text{Þann hergamr hærgum fæti, vits borinn, á Vendli sparn.} \]
\[ \text{Þau frá ek verk Váttis ok Fasta senskri þiod at sogum verða, at eylands iarlar Fróða vigtvæmuð um veginn hofðu.} \]

Fell Ottar under the eagle’s claws, the doughty, for Danish weapons.

Him the host-vulture, with bloody foot, the unconscious, in Vendel trampled.

I learnt that these deeds of Vott and Fasti among the Swedish people became legends, that the island kingdom’s jarls of Frodi the promoter of battle had slain.

‘Host-vulture’ \[ \text{hergamr} \] = ‘eagle’.
16. That I further asked, that Adils’ life a ‘being of enchantment’ would waste, and deed-eager, from the shoulders of the horse the descendant of Frey should fall. And with gravel the terrifyer’s brain, the bragning’s son’s, was mingled, and deed-rich should die the foe of Ali at Uppsala.


17. I know that Eystein’s terminated end of life was stuck at Lovund, and the Sikling, among the Svear it was said, Jutish men burnt to death in a house.

‘Biting pain of the land-tang’ (bitsótt... blíðar þangs) = ‘fire’ (‘land-tang’ = ‘wood’).

‘The fire-ship’ (brandnóí); ‘the timber-fast ship of the homestead’ (timbrfástr toptar nökkví) = ‘house’.

18. It was heard that Yngvar by the kin of Sysla had been slain; and fair, at the heart of the lake, by the Estonian host the helm-bearer was attacked.

Sysla = tributary realm (cf. the Danish ‘syssel’ as administrative district; Skovgaard-Peteren 1991, p. 327). ‘The heart of the lake’ (lagar biarta) = ‘island’.
19. Varð Önundr Iónakrs bura
   harmi hepr und biminsfiólum,
ok afvég Eistra dólgí
   beipt brísungs at bendi kom,
ok sá frømuðr foldar beinum
Hognã breyrs [or: brørs] um borfinn
   var.

Was Önund by Ionakir’s son’s
grief halted under the heaven-mountains,
and the over-strong the enemy of the
Estonians
wrath of the bastard came to reach;
and the promoter with the bones of the
earth
of Hogni’s corpse [or: cairn] was wrapped.

‘The grief of Ionakir’s sons’ (Iónakrs bura harmi); ‘the bones of the earth’ (foldar beinum) = ‘stones’.
‘The heaven-mountains’ (biminsfiólum) = ‘clouds’.
‘The promoter... of Hogni’s cairn/corps’ (frømuðr... Hognã brørs/breyrs) = ‘the slayer of Hogni’.

20. Ok Ingiald ifîprvan trað
   reyks rausuðr á Ræningi,
   þá er búsiþófr byriar leistum
godkynning í gøgnum steig.
Ok sá urðr allri þíðu
   sanngorvastær med Svíum þótti,
er hann siálfr sínu fiôrí
fræknu fyrstr um fára skyldi.

And Ingiald alive was trodden
by smoke’s welterer at Ræningi,
as the house-thief, with glowing feet,
the kinsman of gods fell upon.
And that fate all the people
most consummate of the Svear found,
that he himself his own life,
in bravery the foremost would end.

‘Smoke’s welterer’ (reyks rausuðr); ‘house-thief’ (búsiþófr) = ‘fire’.

21. Ok við vág -- --
   bræ Ólafs bøfgyldör svalg,
ok gløðfíalgr gorvar leysti
sonr Fornióts af Svía íófrí.
Sá áttkonr frá Úppsólum
loðða kyns fyr lõngu bvarf.

And by the wave -- --
Olaf’s body the hall-wolf swallowed,
and the bright-glowing, loosened the garments
son of Fornjot of the Svea ‘boar’.
This offspring from Uppsala
of renowned men’s lineage departed long ago.

The first off-verse is so corrupted in the manuscripts that an interpretation must be based on pure guesswork; following Åkerlund (1939, p. 110) I leave it blank. ‘The hall-wolf’ (bøfgyldör); ‘the bright-glowing son of Fornjot’ (gløðfíalgr... sonr Fornióts) = ‘fire’.
22. Þat frá hverr, at Halfdanar sökkmiðlendr sakna skyldu, ok ballvars blíﬁ-Nauma þiððkonung á Þótni tók. Ok Skereið í Skiringssal um bryniálfs beinum drúpir. All learnt that Halfdan by the distributors of gold would be missed, and the stone-cairn’s protective goddess the folk-king at Toten took. And Skereid in Skiringssal over the mail-elf’s bones leans.

‘The protective goddess of the stone-cairn’ (ballvars blíﬁ-Nauma) = Hel?

23. En Eysteinn fyr ási fór til Býleists bróður meyiar, ok nú ligger undir lagar beinum rekks lóður á rásar broddi, þar er élkaldr hiá iôfur gauzkum. And Eystein, struck by a boom, went to Byleist’s brother’s maid; and now lies, under the bones of the sea, the fighters’ benefactor on the tip of the ridge, where ice-cold, by the Gautic ‘boar’, Vodla’s stream comes to the lake.

‘Byleist’s brother’s maid’ (Býleists bróður meyiar) = Hel (‘Byleist’s brother’ = Loki). ‘The bones of the sea’ (lagar beinum) = ‘stones’.

24. Ok til þings þriðia iôfri Hveðrungs mær ór heimi bauð, þá er Halfdan, sá er á Holti bió, norna dóms um notit hafði. Ok buðlung á Borrói sigrbafendr síðan fáltu. And to council the third ‘boar’ Hvedrung’s maid called from the world, when Halfdan, who lived at Holt, the sentence of the norns had enjoyed. And the commander at Borre the victorious ones then buried.

‘Hvedrung’s maid’ (Hveðrungs mær) = Hel (Hvedrung = Loki). buðlung[r] = ‘commander’ (Noreen 1925, p. 250); others have favoured a translation as ‘descendant of Budli’ (see Martin 1990, p. 371).

25. Varð Guðróðr, binn gofugláti, lómi beittir, sá er fyr lôngu var, ok umrúð at plum stilli höfðu heiptrakt at bilmí dró. Ok launsigr binn lóngedi Ásu árri af iðri bar, ok buðlungr á biði fornun Stiflusunds um stunginn var. Was Gudrød, the stately, through deceit snared, he who lived long ago; and evil counsel against the beer’s leader a vengeful head against the helm-bearer took. And a treacherous victory the deceit-minded retainer of Ása won over the ‘boar’; and the commander on the ancient bed of Stiflusund was stung.
‘The beer’s leader’ (olum stilli[\textit{r}]) is often translated ‘the drunken leader’, following Snorri’s narrative (for example, Noreen 1925, p. 209; Wessén 1952, p. 76; \textit{Ynglinga saga} 48), but as Åkerlund (1939, pp. 115 f.) has pointed out the half-line should be seen as a variation of \textit{hilmi}[\textit{r}] at the end of the helming. I tentatively take the kenning to refer to the king’s function as mead-provider in the hall. Compare the frequent occurrence of the word \textit{alu} = ‘ale’ on gold bracteates (for example, Andrén 1991).

26. \textit{Ok niðkvísl i Nóregi}\n\textit{þrottar Próð of þróask bafði.}\n\textit{Red Ólafr ofsa fórðum}\nvíði grund of Vestmari,\nunz fótverkr við Foldar þróm\nvígmiðlung of viða skyði.\nNú liggir gunndiðr á Geirstôðum\nberkonungr haugi ausinn.\n
\textit{1And the lineage \textit{in} Norway\n2of the strong god \textit{had} increased \textit{grown}.\n3Olaf ruled \textit{of old with great might} \textit{?}\n4over wide lands \textit{over} Vestmar,\n5until by foot-pain, \textit{by the brink of Foldar,}\n6he who stood in the midst of fights \textit{should be}\n7killed.\n8\textit{Now lies the battle-bold \textit{at} Geirstad,}\n9\textit{host-king, \textit{in} his mound.}}\n
‘Of the strong god’ (\textit{þrottar Próð}) = Odin?, see below, p. 86.\n\textit{Vestmar} = unclear geographical reference

27. \textit{Þat veit ek bazt und blám himni}\n\textit{kenninafn, svá at konungr eigi,}\ner Rôgnvaldr reiðar stióri\nbeiðumbár of beitin er.\n
\textit{That I know to be the best \textit{under the blue sky} of cognomens \textit{that a king can own,}\n\textit{as Ragnvald, the leader of riders,}\n\textit{the ‘honour-high’ is called.}}

\textbf{Ynglingatal in archaeological research}

\textit{Ynglingatal} has been the focus of many works by historians, philologists and archaeologists. Within Swedish archaeology the foremost representatives are Sune Lindqvist and Birger Nerman, their mentor Knut Stjerna (1874–1909) hovering in the background. Particularly in the years following Stjerna’s death, the Uppsala archaeologists vigorously pursued the study of written sources, not least \textit{Ynglingatal} (Nerman 1913\textit{b}, 1913\textit{c} and 1914; Lindqvist 1921\textit{a} and 1921\textit{b}).

When we read between the lines it is clear that Nerman considered the written sources to be more or less truthful reflections of reality at the time of composition, while Lindqvist regarded them more as reflections of an author’s \textit{perception} of reality. As regards \textit{Ynglingatal} they did not question the time and circumstances of \textit{Ynglingatal’s} composition, ascribed to it by Snorri. Written sources were problematic mostly because they were fragmentary and contained poetic expressions which were difficult to interpret, not because their presenta-
tion of reality was coloured and distorted by ideological and political influences. A shortcoming of the narrative school is that in their interpretations the past texts are assigned a passive, reflective role, and are not seen as channels for the social power game (except for references to vague, ‘national’ biases).

From text to artefacts and back again

The most familiar of Lindqvist’s and Nerman’s theses is probably their identification of the burials in the Royal Mounds of Old Uppsala as those of the Ynglinga kings Aun, Egil and Adils, known from Ynglingatal, Ynglinga saga and Historia Norvegie. It was first suggested by Nerman (1913a), who placed King Aun in the East Mound, Adils in the West mound and Egil in the central, unexcavated mound. Lindqvist had Aun and Egil shift mounds as a close analysis showed the central mound to be the oldest (Lindqvist 1917 and 1936). The generation between Egil and Adils is represented by Ottar, in Ynglinga saga called Vendel Crow. He could be connected with Ottar’s Mound in Vendel parish, Uppland, excavated by Bernhard Salin and Sune Lindqvist 1916 and 1918 (Nerman 1913 and 1917; Lindqvist 1936). The mound had been identified as the resting place of King Ottar already around 1700 AD by Johan Peringsköld in two works, Swea och Götha konungars och regenters lefwerne och regering (The Life and Rule of the Kings and Regents of the Svear and Götar) and Ättartal för Swea och Götha Konunga Hus (The Lineage of the Royal House of the Svear and Götar) (Nerman 1943, p. 48). Archaeologists like Knut Stjerna (1904) and linguists like Otto von Friesen (1910) had followed suit.

The finds from the East and West mounds at Old Uppsala and from Ottar’s Mound date from the sixth century, the late Migration and early Merovingian Period. The East Mound is dated to 525–550 by Arrhenius (1995, p. 329), and by Duczko (1996b, p. 81) to the middle of the century. The West Mound can probably be dated as precisely as to the last two decades of the sixth century (Duczko 1996b, p. 91). Lindqvist and Nerman had dated the East Mound to around 500 AD and the West Mound to the mid-sixth century (Lindqvist 1945, pp. 107 ff.; Nerman 1943, p. 39). The above-mentioned names of kings could be tied to the same period with the help of the Beowulf poem, known from a manuscript from the decades around 1000 AD, and the Historie Francorum, written by the Frankish chronicler Gregory of Tours around 575 AD.

In Beowulf the Svea king Ongentheow is the father of Ohtere and Onela, and Eadgils is the son of Ohtere (l. 2379 ff., 2612 ff. etc.). Ohtere and Eadgils could be identified with Ottar and Adils in Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga. In Beowulf Eadgils defeats and kills his uncle Onela in battle, and in Ynglingatal Adils is called Ála dolgr, Ali’s (Onela’s) enemy. Although the Old English name Ongentheow is believed to correspond to the Old Norse Angantyr, this king is
nevertheless identified as Egil (Agilar), an identification already made by Svend Grundtvig in 1856 (see Malone 1960, p. 179). The order of generations and relations appeared clear enough. The fact that contemporary scholars unanimously dated the *Beowulf* poem to the early eighth century gave additional weight to the comparison, since this made the poem almost two centuries older than *Ynglingatal* according to Snorri’s dating (for example, Lindqvist 1945, p. 61). The less time between source and event, the more accurate the source.

Nowadays there is less agreement on the dating of *Beowulf*, and opinions range from the traditional standpoint (eighth century) to one which regards composition and manuscript as more or less contemporary, from the decades around 1000 AD (see, for example, the different contributors to Chase 1981, where Kevin Kiernan argues for a late date, and Stanley 1994, pp. 69 ff., for a recent overview). Although Hyenstrand (1996, p. 50) accepts a late Viking Age date without reservations the question is far from settled.

Gregorius of Tours describes how the Geatric *rex* Chlochilaicus is killed on a raid on the Lower Rhine, in what was later known as Frisian territory, c. 520 AD (*Historiae* III, 3; Wood 1983, pp. 6 ff.). A Frankish history from the eighth century and the (probably) English *Liber monstriorum* from the same century calls him Chochilaicus and Huiglacus respectively (Collinder 1988, p. viii). This information was compared with a passage in *Beowulf* in which the Geatic king Hygelac is killed on an expedition against the same Frisians (ll. 1200 ff.), and the same Hygelac is said to have killed King Ongentheow in battle (ll. 2480 ff.). Identifying Hygelac with the Chlochilaicus of Gregory, Egil’s death could be pin-pointed to the early years of the sixth century, since he was killed while Hygelac was alive (Nerman 1917, p. 13; Lindqvist 1945, p. 62).

**Birger Nerman: a history of events and individuals**

So far Nerman and Lindqvist have been seen to be in general agreement regarding *Ynglingatal*, accepting the authorship suggested by Snorri and relating four consecutive kings to history and absolute chronology. However, in their further treatment of *Ynglingatal* the two scholars part company.

Knut Stjerna had considered it impossible that *Ynglingatal* built on a genuine Swedish tradition. In his opinion the poem presented the Swedish kings in a very unfavourable light. They are continuously defeated, even by inferior armies, and mocked by their adversaries; their schemes are thwarted by their own greed; when a victory is won it is through deceit, not prowess, or they are immediately struck by revenge (see Lindqvist 1945, p. 62). More recently, Lars Lönnroth (1986, p. 91; 1996, p. 148) has expressed similar opinions, claiming that the deaths of the kings in *Ynglingatal* often are ignoble and that the poem could be considered a *nið*, a mocking-poem.
As pointed out by Lindqvist (1945, p. 63), Stjerna fails to separate Ynglingatal from Ynglinga saga and understands the poem entirely in the light of Snorri's prose. By focusing on similarities he regards poem and saga as complementary and the Ynglinga tradition as uniform, thereby committing a fundamental methodological error (my words, not Lindqvist's). The same objection invalidates Lönnroth's suggestion.

Nerman was to take a rather extreme standpoint, trusting both Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga as sources for historical events and characters. Like Stjerna, he regarded the sources as complementary. When the section of the Ynglinga line from Aun to Adils had been so successfully assigned a place in time and material reality, he asks 'whether the greater part of this Swedish list of kings could not be chronologically correct' (Nerman 1917, p. 10, my translation). In later works he confirmed his assumption and demonstrates how Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga willingly lend themselves to the project. The principle is, that if one piece of information can be shown to be historical (like Hygelac's war-expedition) most likely others are too.

Alrek and Alf (strophe 10 and 11), both sharing rulership with a brother, are dated to the fifth century, partly because of their position in the poem in relation to the 'conclusively' dated Egil and his successors, partly because their names (in Old Norse Alarikr and Athawolfar) correspond to those of the Visigothic kings Alaric (d. 410) and his successor Ataulf. Nerman argues that Alrek and Alf were named after their continental namesakes and that ‘...the Swedish royal dynasty considered itself to be related to the Gothic kings’ (Nerman 1919, pp. 148 f., my translation). No further motivation is provided.

King Agni (strophe 9), Alrek's father, should accordingly have lived in the early fifth century. He suffered the fate of being hung by the neck in his golden neck-ring by his malicious wife. And neck-rings, solid enough to hang people by, only existed from around 400 AD and about a century forward (Nerman 1919, pp. 152 ff.). As icing on the cake the death-place of Agni (Agnefit), placed by Historia Norvegiæ in Stokholmr, is identified as the Old Town in the Swedish capital (Nerman 1919, p. 168).

Yngvar (strophe 18) and his son Braut-Onund (strophe 19) made war against the Estonians according to Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga. Their location in the seventh century could be associated with the archaeological remains of central Swedish and Gotlandic activities in Estonia, corroborated by finds in Grobin (Seeburg) and Apuole (Apulia) (Nerman 1942, pp. 26 ff.).

The last king of the Ynglingar to reside in Uppsala was Ingiald, nick-named illrāði because of his lack of royal virtues (chapter 5). Ynglinga saga describes how Ingiald's enemies rally behind the leadership of the great Ivar Widefathom, and how Ingiald burns himself to death in a hall rather than accepting defeat. According to Nerman this event takes place c. 650, and subsequently Ivar es-
establishes a Danish-Swedish ‘union’ with its centre in Suithiod (Nerman 1925, pp. 30 ff. and 137 ff.). The Ynglinga family escapes westwards, establishing itself in Southern Norway after a intermediary touchdown in the province Värmland. Nerman connects this political turnover with the emergence of the rich boat-graves in the Mälar Valley, which he dated to the mid-seventh century. The boat-graves were the material ‘signatures’ of the new ruling dynasty. A few boat-graves in southern Sweden, among them the female grave in Augerum, Blekinge, proved to Nerman that the custom of boat burial originated in this region (with Ivar’s dynasty), even though only the Augerum grave was older than the graves in the Mälar valley. Perhaps King Ivar himself lived in and was buried at Valsgärde (Nerman 1941, pp. 170 ff.). Today we know that Nerman’s dating of the boat-graves in the Mälar valley could be as much as a century too late (Arrhenius 1983), and already Lindqvist (1921a, pp. 177 ff.) pointed out the inconsistencies and chronological contradictions in Nerman’s theory.

Nerman finally concludes that not only must the six Norwegian kings at the end of the poem be regarded as historical, but also the entire line of Swedish kings whose names alliterate on vowels (strophe 9–21); the first eight are dismissed as mythical. Using Ynglinga saga and occasional information in Ynglingatal for details on the length of each king’s reign, he calculates the following absolute chronology for the Swedish rulers (Nerman 1943, p. 45; 1960, p. 145; all dates AD):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agni</td>
<td>dead at the beginning of the fifth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alrek &amp; Eirik</td>
<td>dead in the early fifth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alf &amp; Yngwi</td>
<td>dead about 450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorund</td>
<td>dead before 475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aun</td>
<td>dead at the end of the fifth century or, at the latest, c. 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egil</td>
<td>dead 514 or 515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottar</td>
<td>dead c. 525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adils</td>
<td>dead c. 575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eystein</td>
<td>dead at the end of the sixth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yngvar</td>
<td>dead c. 600 or in the beginning of the seventh century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onund</td>
<td>dead c. 640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingiald</td>
<td>dead shortly after 650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olaf tretelgia</td>
<td>dead at the end of the seventh century</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite his own reservations, Nerman does not rule out the possibility that some of the earlier kings (from Vanlandi to Dag) may be historical. After all, Snorri associates them with Uppsala, and the grave-field at this site had been shown to contain graves from the third and fourth centuries AD (Nerman 1943, pp. 46 f.).

With the help of Beowulf Nerman also manages to write political history, and to move the date of the foundation of the kingdom of Sweden back to the sixth
century. The poem describes how the sons of the Svea king Ohtere, Eadgils and Eanmund, rebel against their uncle Onela, seeking and gaining the support of the Geats. King Onela defeats their combined forces and installs Beowulf as new king over the Geats (ll. 2378 ff.); this makes Onela the overlord of Beowulf and his people. Towards the end of the poem it is hinted that the kingdom of the Geats is doomed after the death of Beowulf, and that the Sweones will somehow be involved in its downfall (ll. 2999 ff. and 3018 ff.). This was taken as a piece of historical information by Nerman, who identified the Geats with the Swedish Götar and dated the event to the late sixth century (for example, Nerman 1941, pp. 103 ff.). From this time onwards the Swedish kingdom grew continuously, and by the late eighth century it had reached the extent known from historical times (Nerman 1943, pp. 64 f.).

Lately, Gad Rausing has expressed even greater faith than Nerman in Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga as genuine sources of historical information. For Rausing, these texts are the products of an oral tradition of a very particular kind, and they evolved alongside the events they described:

Even today, family sagas are being continually created, in Africa, in New Zealand and in Iceland, sagas composed with one stanza per generation. Apparently, family chronicles of Ynglingatal’s, and probably also of the Ynglinga saga’s, type grew in the same manner. There was no single ‘author’. The poem grew gradually, the verses being composed and added, generation after generation, even if the man who finally edited the saga and put it to parchment, in this case Tjodolf of Hvin, has been taken to be its ‘author’.

In spite of being orally transmitted, these sagas did not constitute an ‘oral tradition’ such as we now understand the term. Rather, they constitute a metric, living, quite unchangeable literature, even if unwritten. In the same manner, the Songs of the Old Testament survived for many centuries before being put in writing during the Babylonian Captivity. (Rausing 1985, p. 166)

Rausing’s argument, the central parts of which are remarkably free from references, is no more convincing than Nerman’s. Based on a selective use and very personal interpretation of theories on oral and literary transmission rather than a careful presentation of analogies, his synthesis lacks in credibility.

**The time problem: royal ‘generations’**

According to Nerman’s absolute chronology of the kings from Agni (fifth century) to Ólaf trételgia (the end of the seventh century) there were four or five royal generations per century, making the average reign 20–25 years. Rausing has attempted a similar calculation, arriving at an average reign of 20–22 years for the Ynglinga kings from Egil to Ragnvald. He finds this figure convincing since
'The medieval Danish kings ruled from 2 (Harald, Abel) to 42 years (Erik of Pommerania) for an average of 16.4 years, and Swedish kings from 4 (Hans) to 46 years (Magnus Eriksson), for an average of 17 years' (Raising 1985, p. 168). The figures of Nerman and Raising appear high, considering that several of the kings are said to have died violent deaths. Furthermore, Raising’s arithmetic is incorrect. If we reckon that king Egil was succeeded by Ottar around 510 and that Halvdan svarti (son of Gudrød according to Historia Norvegiae) died around 860, we get 350 regnal years to distribute on twelve generations, giving a mean-value of 29 years. For comparison, the sixteen post-Medieval kings and queens of Sweden from Gustaf Vasa to Karl XIII (1521–1818) reigned for an average of 18.6 years, four of them dying violent deaths, while the six kings of the Bernadotte family (from Karl XIV Johan to Gustav VI Adolf, 1818–1973) reach an average of 25.8 years, all having died peacefully.

Obviously, it is far more relevant to make a comparison with kings from the times when the Ynglingar are supposed to have existed. A list of Anglo-Saxon kings in Oman 1938 gives the following mean values:

All Northumbria (655–867) – 10 years
Northumbria (Bernicia, 547–655) – 12 years
Northumbria (Deira, 560–655) – 12 years
Mercia (593–874) – 13 years
All England (the house of Ecgbert, 802–1016) – 14 years
Kent (560–860) – 15 years
East Anglia (593–870) – 15 years
Wessex (560–839 ) – 15 years.
Total mean value – 13.25 years.

Even if we presumed that Anglo-Saxon society was more turbulent than Scandinavian, and the threat on a king’s life correspondingly greater (which is doubtful), this can hardly explain the difference of almost a decade between the Anglo-Saxon averages and the average of Raising. That is hardly reasonable. Contrary to what Raising claims, his calculations for Danish and Swedish kings help to falsify the hypothesis that the line of kings in Ynglingatal is historical. If the royal line of Ynglingatal shall be ‘salvaged’ we are forced to assume that the kings led peaceful lives and with no or few exceptions expired quietly in their beds at an advanced age. That is an utterly implausible picture, both from a cultural-historical point of view and in the face of the poem’s stress on the warlike qualities of kings.

Following the Anglo-Saxon averages we should calculate with seven to eight royal generations per century. The six Norwegian kings would thus make up an almost century-long, dynastic line. It is not entirely beyond possibility that
this part of *Ynglingatal* could be historical, that is, if *Ynglingatal* is a Viking Age poem. That memory could be ‘living’ for a century is not implausible, and in all sources Halvdan hvítheinn appears as the founding-father of the Norwegian line. The origin of the Norwegian kings and the possible downfall of the Swedish Ynglingar could thus with some degree of plausibility be sought around 800 AD, give or take a couple of decades depending on when Thiodolf composed *Ynglingatal*. As the poet is supposed to have been a contemporary of Harald Fairhair, who is believed to have had an unusually long reign, the composition cannot be dated more precisely than to the last decades of the ninth century or the first decades of the tenth.

Further back in the Ynglinga line the twelve Swedish kings with names beginning on vowels would hypothetically cover about 120–180 years (with an average reign of 10 or 15 years). This would bring us back to somewhere between 600 and 700 AD, depending on when the move to Norway took place. Just for the sake of calculation: if we count with an average reign of 15 years and let Ragnvald’s father Olaf die 875 AD, we find that Ingiald kills himself 785 AD and Agni dies 620 AD after becoming king 605 AD (only a few decades after the king in the West Mound at Old Uppsala was buried). The kings from Fiolni to Dag would have taken us yet another century back in time had they not been so obviously mythical. Egil, Ottar and Adils, who were supposed to have lived in the early and mid-sixth century because of the connection with Hygelac in *Beowulf*, are transferred to the decades around 700 AD. However, this is not a cause for worry. Either *Beowulf* is right and the author of *Ynglingatal* merely placed these famous names where he saw fit (without being overly concerned with plausible lengths of reigns or the linear aspects of time) or *Beowulf* is wrong and picked the same famous names for his Svea kings to embellish the story without concern for when they had lived.

The dating of *Ynglingatal* is a complex and controversial issue, and the above argument rests on only one of the alternatives, that it belongs to the Viking Age. It merely serves to point out the problems involved in analysing the poem as a historical document. The author may not have been concerned with historical truth in the modern sense. His genealogy probably did not refer backwards in time in a straight line but rather ‘outwards’ in different directions, associating to names and events which the audience recognised from oral tradition.

*Sune Lindqvist: a history of royal culture*

Lindqvist makes an important departure from the position of Stjerna and Nerman when he focuses on the discordances between poem and saga. He found the approach of his colleagues unsatisfactory, and engaged in an ‘archaeology’ of *Ynglingatal* to recover its ‘historical core’ (Lindqvist 1932; later he was to do
the same with *Beowulf*, Lindqvist 1958). He states: ‘If we free ourselves from the straight-jacket which Medieval prose expositions have created, we can reach a deeper and more genuine understanding of the original meaning of the poem’ (Lindqvist 1945, p. 66, my translation). Although Lindqvist’s conclusions are often over-confident, speculative and unconvincing in the light of modern research they deserve our attention; he shows an attitude towards the sources that I find in many ways basically sound.

Lindqvist (1945, pp. 63 ff.) has a different explanation for the pro-Danish bias of *Ynglinga saga* than the one Stjerna suggested: at least the part of the saga which concerns the Swedish kings (*Ynglinga saga* 11–43) is not the work of Snorri but a fairly faithful rendering of part of the now lost *Skjoldungasaga*, written shortly before *Heimskringla* by an anonymous Icelander. Lindqvist supports his theory with a statement made by the Icelander Arngrim Jónsson who possessed a copy of *Skjoldungasaga* in the late sixteenth century. Arngrim claimed that this saga also contained a story about Fiolni and his descendants, almost identical with that which appeared in the expurgated version of *Heimskringla*, issued shortly before. *Skjoldungasaga* was written in honour of a Danish royal dynasty; for Lindqvist this explained why the Danes are favourably depicted in *Ynglinga saga* and not the Svear. The author had known *Historia Norvegiae* and *Ynglingatal* and some other legends but adapted his story to fit his political and ideological agenda.

Since we cannot possibly judge to what extent the two texts were similar, Lindqvist’s theory does not reach beyond speculation, but it reminds us of how fragmentary our sources are and should at least make us pause. Had another text been preserved—like *Skjoldungasaga*—the overall picture might very well be different. The Ynglinga tradition is not necessarily uniform.

Lindqvist’s dissection of the poem and his efforts to interpret it in the light of archaeology led him to another interesting conclusion: several of the violent (and ignoble) royal deaths stem from misinterpretations of poetic renderings of pagan, royal burial rituals in an earlier version of the poem. For example, Visbur and the Swedish Eystein are said to have been burnt to death, the first by his sons, the latter by his enemies. If we regard ‘the hearth-ship’ (*arinkióli*) of Visbur and ‘the fire-ship’ (*brandnói*) of Eystein as kennings for the cremation pyre (of a type identical with or similar to the ones shown by Lindqvist to have been used for the royal cremations at Old Uppsala), the words make perfect and peaceful sense. Similar errors can be argued for in the cases of Vanlandi, Dyggvi, Agni, Egil and Olaf *tretelgia*. Lindqvist also finds continental sources referring to the burial practices of the Visigoths to support his theory (Lindqvist 1921a, pp. 111 ff. and 136 ff.; 1936, pp. 301 ff.).

Lindqvist never questioned the dating of the preserved text of *Ynglingatal* to shortly before or around 900 AD. It fitted well with his assumption that Norwegians and Svear did not share the same beliefs about death and the after-world.
Among the Svear an essential element was the cremation, among the Norwegians (and Icelanders) the mound. The soul of the Svea king was freed and sent to Valhalla by the fire, while the Norwegians assumed ‘that their interred chieftains lived in the mounds, awaiting an ultimate resurrection, a Ragnarök’ (Lindqvist 1932 p. 98, my translation). Thus, for Lindqvist the reason for the anomalies was that the Norwegians around 900 AD were ignorant of Swedish burial customs (Lindqvist 1936, pp. 303 ff.).

Lindqvist concluded that there most likely had existed an original and lost Swedish ‘Lay of the Ynglingar’ (ynglingakväde), on which Thiodolf had built his Ynglingatal, a poem with the same structure and theme as the one we know: the death and burial of the kings (Lindqvist 1921a, pp. 147 ff.; this theory appealed to Nerman, 1943, pp. 42 f.). Whereas the cultural differences between Svear and Norwegians were obvious to Lindqvist as a cultural-historical detective, they had not been understood by Thiodolf. The Norwegian court poet had misinterpreted several strophes, much in the same way as Snorri later did. He not only composed the strophes on the Norwegian kings, but also added helmings of his own to some original strophes, in order to make their message clearer to his audience. One example is the last helming of strophe 3 on Vanlandi, introducing the mara as the killer of a king who is ‘really’ only taken from the land of the living by Odin. Similarly, when Eystein (strophe 17) is said to have been burnt in the ‘fire-ship’ (brandnói), and the ‘ship of the homestead’ (toptar nôkkvi), this was only a poetic representation of the funeral-pyre, misinterpreted by the poet who inserted the helming ok Sikling með Svíum kváðu / iózka menn inni brenna as ‘clarification’ (Lindqvist 1932, pp. 94 f.; 1945, p. 84; translation p. 65). Accepting this, we could easily explain why Snorri and other unknown Medieval authors, working and elaborating on the Ynglinga tradition, were deceived by certain other kennings for ‘fire’ which associated to houses. They perpetuated the mistake of the careless Thiodolf and took expressions like húsþiófr (‘house-thief’, strophe 20) and borgylðir (‘house-wolf’, strophe 21) as referring not only to the burning itself but to what was burnt (Lindqvist 1921a, pp. 161 f.). In this way Lindqvist could not only claim to understand the text better than the author himself but also, with the help of archaeological knowledge, bring the ‘core’ of Ynglingatal home to Sweden – probably to his own professional and patriotic satisfaction.

There are obvious weaknesses in Lindqvist’s argument. That Viking Age, upper-class globe-trotters should show such embarrassing lack of knowledge about the customs of their neighbours is scarcely credible. Perhaps Lindqvist was too influenced by Snorri’s words in the prologue of Heimskringla on a development from a cremation age to a mound age, and assumed that the stress on ritual versus monument really reflected genuine differences in belief on the cultural level (see especially Lindqvist 1921a).
An alternative interpretation of the burning of kings in houses would be to regard them as symbolic images. In Gothic, the word *gards* (the house, the homestead) ‘...is both the *frauja’s* (the lord’s) dwelling and family: it includes his wife, children, relatives, and all his dependants... to the house belonged also the servants... and the armed retainers as well as the dependent freedmen living in their own huts... *Gards* is also the basic word in... the terms for kingdom and royal castle, and finally in the word for world...’ (Wolfram 1988, p. 101). It may not be too far-fetched—if still hypothetical—to interpret these poetic depictions of deaths as metaphorical expressions for kings killed by enemies within their own territories, their ‘homestead’ or ‘house’. Eystein was killed at *Lofundi*, possibly an older name for Lyhundra in eastern Uppland (Wessén 1952, p. 69).

Lindqvist’s argument can also be appreciated from a modern perspective. What he says is that Thiodolf interprets the past (the hypothetical ‘Lay of the Ynglingar’) on the basis of his present. This is a valid point in principle, although not convincing in this particular case. It is also clear that a poem based on a strict helming structure like *Ynglingatal* would be fairly easy to rewrite. If we, for instance, take away the last helming of strophe 21, Olaf *tretelgia* does not leave Uppsala or any other place but merely dies and is cremated, marking neither an end nor a beginning. If the helming is replaced with one like the last one on King Domar, *Nú ek þat veit, at verkbitenn / Fiœlnis niðr við Fýri brann* (translation above), the strophe suddenly becomes consonant with the information in *Historia Norvegiæ*, that Olaf lived peacefully and died an old man in Sweden (... *diu et pacifice functus regno plenus dierum obiit in Swethia*; Krag 1991, p. 131). Skilfully made revisions of this kind could be hard to notice for a modern reader, especially when focusing on corresponding information in different sources.

Lindqvist makes an important point when he instead focuses on discordances, and stresses the possibility of interpreting the individual text as a *process* of writing more than a single event of writing. However, following Lindqvist’s theory, we are not only forced to assume that the preserved text of *Ynglingatal* is identical with Thiodolf’s original, unaltered by three centuries of (oral) transmission, but also that parts of the poem can derive word by word from a Swedish original of unknown age. These are assumptions that certainly cannot be taken for granted.

Needless to say, the poem must have been based on some kind of tradition, but there is little point speculating on the nature of this tradition. Considering that the subject is a royal dynasty material cannot have been lacking. The tradition behind *Ynglingatal* is likely to have been rich but varied, probably even conflicting. Ironically, Lindqvist’s ingenious but scarcely credible suggestions on how a hypothetical, original Swedish ‘Lay of the Ynglingar’ may have become transformed into the *Ynglingatal* we know, catches the spirit of oral and early literary transmission quite well (Lindqvist 1936, pp. 308 ff.).
Royal attributes in Ynglingatal: kennings and heiti

When we look only at the narrative of Ynglingatal, particularly in the light of Ynglinga saga, we can hardly fail to ask: why would a king feel the need to trace his ancestors twenty-seven generations back in Ynglingatal? ‘Regional’ Ragnvald of Vestfold, keen on stressing the legitimacy of his position against the great war-lord Harald Fairhair? Would Harald have ordered his men to make a detour around the Oslo Fjord and respect Ragnvald’s sovereignty, had he been told that Ragnvald twenty generations back had an ancestor who was killed with a hay-fork, while on the war-path to avenge his tame sparrow?

This is, of course, only a parody of an argument. We have no immediate access to the poem’s code of understanding and symbology. And even a superficial knowledge of the complexity of expression found in old Scandinavian poetry tells us that caution is appropriate.

I have decided to analyse the poem’s picture of its kings on a conceptual level, disregarding the ambiguous narrative. In the study below I list, categorise and analyse the characterising epithets of the kings, single words or phrases, most often but not exclusively confined within the same half-line. They are all expressions which could be substituted with the king’s name.

These attributes belong to the linguistic group metonymy-synecdoche-metaphor (Boyer 1990, p. 85) and are known as heiti and kennings. They can be understood as the contents of a large wardrobe, out of which the poet could pick a garment of his choice whenever his composition demanded one for a character. It could be argued that expressions of this kind served a purely decorative function, that the poet’s choice was governed only by the demands of metre, alliteration and variation, otherwise being completely random. However, this would be the same as to say that any garment in a wardrobe can suite any social occasion as long as it fits the body. Edith Marold (1983) has argued convincingly against that assumption in her analysis of kennings in Ragnarsdrápa, Ynglingatal and Haustlông. Following Marold, I wish to test the hypothesis that the expressions were an important part of the message delivered and, therefore, subject to conscious choice. They would still have been decorative and subject to the structural demands of the poem. Concentrating on these expressions enables us to free ourselves – at least momentarily – from the interpretative constraints which Ynglinga saga imposes on our reading of Ynglingatal, just like Sune Lindqvist wished.

The kings will be divided into three primary groups according to the generally recognised, systematic differences in name-giving (for example, Lindquist 1929, pp. 59 ff.; Wessén 1952, p. XVII):

**Group A** (strophe 1–8, from Fiolni to Dag), with eight kings’ names beginning on consonants; these kings are generally labelled ‘mythical’. Two consecutive
kings have names alliterating on V. They are succeeded by two pairs of kings with names on D. This alliterative pairing fits these kings into a wider Germanic context as recognised by, for example, Newton: ‘Pairs of founding-fathers with alliterating names, depicted as either brothers or as fathers and sons, appear to have been a distinctive convention in early Germanic royal tradition, the most well-known pair in Anglo-Saxon England being Hengest and Horsa. Other Germanic legendary founder-pairs include Ibor and Agio, a pair of brothers who are said to have led the Langobard migration from Scandinavia; and two Vandal royal pairs, Ambri and Assi, and Raos and Raptos... Another Anglo-Saxon royal example is provided by the West Saxon founding-father and son pair, Cerdic and Cynric’. Newton also mentions Hrothmund and Hryp as possible East Anglian founding-fathers (Newton 1993, pp. 79 f).

**Group B** (strophe 9–20, from Agni to Ingiald), with twelve kings’ names alliterating on a vowel. In the entry for the year 494 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle we find a lengthy and informative account on the naming practice of the house of Wessex. To separate legendary names from historical is of no importance in this context, but we find what appears to be two branches of the same family with different but almost entirely consistent alliterative practices (names beginning on C or a vowel):

Six years after they landed they conquered the kingdom of Wessex... He [Cerdic] held the kingdom sixteen years, and when he died his son Cynric succeeded to the kingdom and held it (twenty-six years. When he passed away, his son Ceawlin succeeded and held it) seventeen years. When he died Ceol succeeded to the kingdom and held it six years. When he died his brother Ceolwulf succeeded and ruled seventeen years.... Then Cyneigils, Ceolwulf’s brother’s son, succeeded to the kingdom... Then Cenwalh succeeded and held it thirty-one years; and that Cenwalh was the son of Cyneigils. Then his queen, Seaxburh, held the kingdom one year after him. Then Aescwine, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded to the kingdom and held it two years. Then Centwine, the son of Cyneigils, succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex and ruled seven years. Then Ceadwalla, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded to the kingdom and held it three years. Then Ine, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex and held it thirty-seven years. Then Æthalheard, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded and held it fourteen years. Then Cuthred, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded and held it seventeen years. Then Sigeberht, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded and held it one year. Then Cynewulf, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded and held it thirty-one years. Then Beorhtric, whose ancestry goes back to Cerdic, succeeded and held it sixteen years. Then Egbert succeed-
ed to the kingdom and held it thirty-seven years and seven months. Then his son Æthelwulf succeeded and held it eighteen and a half years. That Æthelwulf was the son of Egbert, the son of Ealhmund, the son of Eafa, the son of Eoppa, the son of Ingeld, the son of Cenred; and Ine, Cuthburh and Cwenburh were also children of Cenred. Cenred was the son of Ceolwald, the son of Cuthwulf, the son of Cuthwine, the son of Celin [ɪ Ceawlin], the son of Cynric, the son of Cerdic...

Group C (strophe 21–27, from Olaf to Ragnvald) consists of the six Norwegian kings, with non-alliterating names. I have added Olaf tretelgia (strophe 21) to the group, which might cause an occasional eyebrow to be raised among my readers. As the link between eastern Sweden and Vestfold Olaf has an ambiguous position, but the strophe on Ingiald, Olaf’s father, is better understood as the end point of a story than the one on Olaf (compare the analysis of Ingiald in chapter 5). Furthermore, Olaf’s strophe shares the compositional trait with all the Norwegian strophes (except Ragnvald’s) that the last helming includes a geographical reference. Olaf is also a traveller, a trait he shares with many other founding-fathers, like Scyld Scefing in Beowulf, Hengest and Horsa, and others (not least Odin).

Symmetry and a subdivision of group B

This grouping of the kings, adhering to the traditional model except for strophe 21, makes the composition of the poem almost symmetrical: group A comprises twenty-four helmings (fourtie-eight lines), group B fourty-four helmings (eighty-eight lines) and group C again twenty-two helmings (fourty-four lines). At a closer look group B can be subdivided into two parts:


Egil is said to fall from power and be driven into exile by a certain Tunni; Ingiald takes his own life at the unidentified place Ræningi. As I argue in chapter 5, the suicide theme is, most likely, also connected with defeat and loss of power; the original audience would have made the right associations and seen Olaf’s departure from Uppsala in the following strophe as natural. Thus, both sub-groups of B end with the downfall of a king. The first time the setback is temporary, the second time it is final but results in something new and good: the dynasty of Vestfold.
Categories and attributes

The numbers after each headline show how many times the particular kind of attribute occurs in each group (A, B₁, B₂, and C). The number after each word/expression refers to the strophe or strophes in which the attribute occurs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genealogical: patronyms</th>
<th>Heiti, neutral/power</th>
<th>Warlike qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(3–3–1–0 = 7)</td>
<td>(4–0–0–2 = 6)</td>
<td>(3–1–5–8 = 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikling (1, 17)</td>
<td>allvald (4, 7)</td>
<td>igoður (2, 18, 21, 23–25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durnis niðia (2)</td>
<td>yngua (6)</td>
<td>grám (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiplnis niðr (6)</td>
<td>konungmann (7)</td>
<td>valteins spakfrómuðr (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dags frændr (10)</td>
<td>thíððkonung (22)</td>
<td>valsefendr (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doglingr (11)</td>
<td>konungr (27)</td>
<td>vigfrómuð (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilfinga nið (14)</td>
<td></td>
<td>ægir (16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genealogical: divine descent</th>
<th>Geographical specification of rule</th>
<th>Personal attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(0–2–2–0 = 4)</td>
<td>(0–1–0–2 = 3)</td>
<td>(2–1–5–1 = 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freys afspring (10)</td>
<td>austrkonungr (13)</td>
<td>enn storðgeði (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Týs áttungr (14)</td>
<td>Súla [igoðr] (21)</td>
<td>vísa (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freys áttungr (16)</td>
<td>[igoðr] gaðzkum (23)</td>
<td>losfell (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>godkynning (20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>dugandligr (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genealogical: general</th>
<th></th>
<th>dágðiarn (16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(0–0–1–1 = 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>dágðiarn (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bragnings burs (16)</td>
<td></td>
<td>liósþomum (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>áttkonr (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td>fræknufyrstr (20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Liberality, richness

(1–1–0–2 = 4)
 mengloðuðr (3)
gæðing (9)
gofuglát (25)
plum stilli (25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious function</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>War, specified opponent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(0–1–0–0 = 1)</td>
<td>(0–2–0–0 = 2)</td>
<td>(2–1–3–0 = 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vóðr véstalls (11)</td>
<td>þrálífr (13)</td>
<td>liðna baga (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>áttunga riðr (13)</td>
<td>Íosta dóli (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of attributes per group: 16–14–18–21

Kenning/heiti per helming and group: 0.7–0.6–0.9–1.0
To clarify the variations in distribution between the three groups, the attributes are listed below for each group in the order of frequency. For each group also four wider categories are formed out of those concerned with war, genealogy, the king’s person (personal attributes + liberality and richness), and the remaining ‘other’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A (strophe 1–8)</th>
<th>Group B (strophe 9–20), B1 and B2 separated within parenthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heiti, neutral/power 4</td>
<td>Personal attributes 6 (1–5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genealogical: patronyms 3</td>
<td>War: qualities 6 (1–5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War: qualities 3</td>
<td>Genealogical: patronyms 4 (3–1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War: specified opponent 2</td>
<td>Genealogical: divine descent 4 (2–2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attributes 2</td>
<td>Geographical specification of rule 1 (1–0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War: leader of warriors 1</td>
<td>War: specified opponent 4 (1–3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberality, richness 1</td>
<td>War: leader of warriors 2 (1–1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative 2 (2–0)</td>
<td>Genealogical: general 1 (0–1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genealogical: general 1</td>
<td>Liberality, richness 1 (1–0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heiti, neutral/power 2</td>
<td>Religious sphere 1 (1–0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attributes 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summarised distribution, absolute numbers:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genealogy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summarised distribution, percentages:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B1</th>
<th>B2</th>
<th>B1+2</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genealogy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Genealogical reference

Genealogical references occur frequently within group A–B2 (19–33 per cent) but is almost entirely absent from group C (5 per cent). Patronyms are mainly found in A and B1, while the four proclamations of divine descent, which are exclusive for B, are evenly distributed between B1 and B2.

The only three genealogical references to persons within the poem are to Fiolni (strophe 6) and Dag (strophe 10 and 11) from the A group, presumably a sign that the original environment, poet and audience, considered these seven kings to belong to a different category than their descendants, a stratum of mythical, archetypal forbears of a past so distant that it is closer to the Otherworld of myth than to the quasi-history of heroic legend. As Steinsland (1989, p. 362) argues, this does not imply that they should not be regarded as mortal kings.

The king is called konungr in five cases, but, strophe 27 excepted, always in a compound, like þióðkonungr (strophe 22). This is rather unusual, since otherwise in skaldic poetry the word konungr is frequent. In Ynglingatâl the king is most often characterised by a single metaphor, a heiti, like bilmir (helmet, helm-bearer) and iôfur (boar). Contrary to the genealogical references (particularly those of divine descent) these single ‘king’-words occur frequently in groups A and C while in group B more complex expressions (of two words or more) are preferred, such as genealogical references.

Thus, like Odin the king can be known by many names, and while Odin is the progenitor of many gods and heroes the king descends from many gods and heroes. Kings are not only the material of which myths are made, they are also made by the myths and re-live the myths (cf. Herschend 1996).

In my opinion, the eponymic genealogical references (like Sikling and Skilfing) tell us that the kings were considered to be related to other legendary lineages, at least in the context of the poem; it is not just the case of ‘empty’ labels. The greater the number of active genealogical links a king could establish, the more powerful he became. Bonds made through marriages, adoptions etc. with other dynasties meant that the support of the members of these could be mustered in times of need. A king, rich in relations of this kind, was a strong king who knew how to rule.

Divine ancestry: the connection with Frey

In the Anglo-Saxon, royal genealogies from the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Collection, the pedigrees of the royal houses of Bernicia and Deira, Lindsey, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent and Wessex begin with Woden, Odin (Dumville 1976). Nicholas Brooks regards this as part of the propaganda of leading dynasties, a means of enhancing their status beyond that of others of – intrinsically – equal
rank, relegating the latter to subordinate roles like ‘principes, reguli, subreguli, praefecti, duces, ealdormen and the like’ (Brooks 1989, p. 163). It would be just as easy to regard it as a (poetic?) convention, expressing an established power structure and possibly, as suggested by Dumville (1977, p. 79), a common (Anglian) group identity.

The genealogy of the East Anglian royal Wuffingas trace the ancestry back to Frealaf (Frey?), making Woden his offspring, the latter in turn begetting Caser, whose name is an obvious rendering of the Latin caesar (Evans 1986, p. 122). From the gods, via the divine Emperor, to the royal mortals: the divine blood remained undiluted and the ideological heritage became impressive.

In Háleygjatal Odin is the divine founding-father, but he is not explicitly mentioned in Ynglingatal. Here, the proclamations of divine ancestry refer to Frey in two cases, Tyr in one case and unspecified divinity (gōðkynning = descendant of gods) in one. There is also the expression bragnings burs that may be counted to the same category and to which I shall return below.

Frey is in the lead with 2–1 against Tyr in Ynglingatal, but as his position as divine ancestor is contested it is possible that these references to divine descent should be understood in a less specific sense, so that, for example, Freys attungr (‘Frey’s offspring’) is synonymous with gōðkynning). This assumption gains support by the occurrence of the expressions Týs attungr and Freys attungr in Háleygjatal (Turville-Petre 1980, note 28, p. 53). The connection between the Ynglingar and the fertility cult is only obvious if we assume a priori that it exists.

Frey = Yngvi?

The name Yngvi divides scholars into two camps. One takes Snorri’s words in the prologue to Heimskringla that Freyr hét Yngvi ðöru nafni (Frey was called Yngvi by another name) for a fact. Fuel is added to this fire by the use of the name Ingunar-Freyr in Lokasenna (43), and the expression Ingifreys or Yngvifreyr in Haustlông and Háleygjatal (for a recent discussion, see North 1997, pp. 39 ff.).

Yngvi is also a heiti for ‘king’ (Turville-Petre 1979, pp. 53 f.) and is used in this sense in strophe 6 (Domar): Ok ek þess ópt of yngua breyr / fróða menn um fregit hafða (And often I about the lord’s cairn / wise men had asked). Here the reference is obviously to the king, not a god. However, in the last helming of strophe 7 (Dyggvi) we find the expression allvald Yngva þiðdar (the ruler of all the peoples of Yngvi). It cannot refer to Dyggvi himself, nor to King Yngvi who does not appear until strophe 11. Had the expression appeared in the first helming it could possibly – although with great reservation – have referred to the previous king, Domar, like in the Háleygjatal (strophe 6) where Gudlaug is called synir yngva (Steinsland 1989, p. 340). The possibility remains that Yngvi really refers to Frey in strophe 7. Still, the divine descent of the Ynglingar could have been
considered multilinear, that is, that a king was the kinsman and earthly parallel of several gods.

**Odin between the lines**

Already in the late nineteenth century scholars observed that some passages in Ynglingatal may contain references to Odin, but the theory has attracted few modern adherents apart from Krag (1991). In strophe 26 on the Norwegian King Olaf we meet with the expression niðkvísl... þrottar Prós, translated by Wessén (1952, p. 77) as ‘the lineage of the strong [þrott = f. strong, powerful] Þrór’. As recognised by Wessén, Þrór is a name for Odin in Grímnismál (49): Þrór þingom at (Thror [is my name] at the assembly). However, it has generally been assumed that the name had wider connotations and that in Ynglingatal it has to stand for Frey as the ancestral god of the Ynglingar (Åkerlund 1939, p. 117 with refs.; also Wessén 1952, p. 77). This argument is obviously ‘tailor-made’ to suite the traditional (pre-)understanding of the ancestry of the Ynglingar. As such it must be questioned, and because there is another source in which Þrór stands for Odin the argumental path to the one-eyed god is the shorter one.

Steinsland observes that þing may metaphorically stand for a meeting between lovers (as in Ynglingatal 24): ‘... in this context the name is used for the potent god of good crops. Þrór is related to þróast, þroskr, which in Skirnismal is used for Frey, cf. strophe 38 where the context is the approaching love-meeting with Gerd á þingi? (Steinsland 1989, p. 345, my translation). But as Steinsland herself remarks, the words þróastr and Þrór are used of both Odin and Frey in Eddic poetry, and always when they take on the role as progenitor. It is not the particular god who is denoted by the words but the particular act of begetting, of being fruitful.

Noreen agrees with the translation of þrott but follows Jungner in associating Þrór with Latin truncus. In his opinion the phrase means ‘pillar of strength’ (Noreen 1925, p. 251, with reference to Jungner). But the word þrottr has also been interpreted as a name for Odin in the Glymdrápa: Gørðisk glamma ferðar gný-Þróatr ípú dróttar, where gný-Þróatr is translated as '(battle-)din-Odin' by Lindquist (1929, p. 43). It thus appears that even if Jungner and Noreen are right in their interpretation of þrór we can still be dealing with a reference to Odin. It was pointed out above that this helming might not be original, and if that assumption is correct the sole reference to the pagan gods apart from the ubiquitous Hel disappears from group C.

There are further possible references to Odin in the first strophes of Ynglingatal. In Ynglinga saga Snorri describes how the first king, Fiolni, falls deadly drunk into a large mead vessel and drowns while being a guest of the Danish King Frodi. Fiolni is also presented as the son of Frey (YS 11). Ynglingatal is
silent about both ancestry and circumstances and merely states that mead killed Fiolni where Frodi lived. *Historia Norvegiæ* tells us that Fiolni was the son of Frey and drowned in a mead vessel: *Froyr vero genuit Fiolni, qui in dolio medonis dimersus est* (Krag 1991, p. 101). Ari Frodi states that Fiolni died where King Peace–Frodi lived: *Fjôlnir, sá es dó at Friðfróða* (Krag 1991, p. 100).

So far there seems to be no reason to regard Fiolni as anything else than a mythical king who had the god Frey as father, at least as long as we regard the different sources as different trickles from the same fountain of tradition and knowledge. But it gets more complicated. Following the example of several scholars before him, Noreen identifies Frodi with Frey. The argument is based partly on the fact that a place-name Frövi in Balingsta parish, Uppland, in 1377 was written *Frodhevi*, while in eight instances during the thirteenth century it was spelled *Frod(h)awi* or *Frødauij*, and partly on two passages in the *Skírnismál* where Frey is called *enn fróði*. Noreen further argues that the word *fróðr* must have had a meaning parallel to the known ‘wise’, namely ‘potent’. (Noreen 1925, pp. 212 ff.).

Wessén (1952, p. 58) accepts these conclusions in principle but regards the myth as having been transformed to a mortal setting, and that the poet of *Yn­glingatal* considered Fiolni to be a human king.

In *Grímnismál* (47) and *Reinskýl* (18) Odin mentions Fiolni as one of his names. Elsewhere in the sources the name is used in contexts, referring to war or weapons and, indirectly (in Krag’s opinion), to Odin (Krag 1991, p. 62). Hjalmar Falk (1924) explained this as a (late) transference of epithets from Frey to Odin, through the association of mead as a product of the fertile earth with the skaldic mead. Steinsland (1989, p. 360) adds that both these Eddic poems describe Odin *in disguise* and that, therefore, the names cannot be understood as genuine names for Odin. Falk’s argument rests on the question of the dating of the different sources, an exceedingly problematic issue that hardly warrants definite conclusions. That the prologue and epilogue to *Grímnismál* were composed at a later date than the poem itself is implied from references in the past tense in the poem to characters and events in these prose passages. In strophe 47 Odin mentions the name Grimnir and in strophe 49 clarifies: *Grimnir hétumk at Geirrôðar* (‘Grimnir I was called at Geirrôð’s’), that is, exactly where he was at the moment, strung up by the fire. While Steinsland’s observation is correct, her conclusion is difficult to follow, since any *heiti* or *kenning* can be said to refer to its object ‘in disguise’.

That the strophe on Fiolni is intended to direct the audience’s imagination towards the skaldic mead (and, indirectly, Odin) becomes more likely when we consider that allusions to the drink of poetic inspiration are present in the first strophes of several other poems. In Lindquist’s (1929) collection I have found such in *Hofðulausn*, *Velleklá*, and *Háleygjatal*. A poet drains a goblet of mead and, inspired, pours out a poem for his (or, on rare occasions, her) audience. The
fertility is not of the field but of the mind: creative inspiration. The possible allusion to Odin and the skaldic mead is further enhanced by the presence of wisdom in the character of Frodi, a name meaning ‘the wise’ (cf. strophe 6, fróðamenn, where, by the way, Domar is called Fjólnis níðr); mead kills Fiolni where wisdom lives.

Fiolni’s successor in the poem, Sveigdi, has the remarkable misfortune of being tricked by a dwarf to enter a rock where he finds himself in the hall of a giant, Sokkmimi. In Grímnismál (80) where Odin recounts his many names we find that Sveigdi too has followed in the steps of War-father:

\[ \text{Sviðurr ok Sviðirr es ek bét at Sókkvmímis ok dulþak enn aldna jótun,} \]
\[ \text{þas ek Miðvitnís vask ens mæra burar orþinn einbani.} \]

Svidur and Svidir I was called when with Sokkmimi
and I tricked the old giant
as Midvitnir, his glorious son,
I slew single-handed (my translation)

The likeness of the name Sveígði with Sviðurr ok Sviðirr may, perhaps, be coincidental (although it stimulates the interest of the reader), but it has been suggested that Sokkmimi is another name for Suttung (see Krag 1991, pp. 63 f.).

There are interesting similarities between the strophe on Sveigði and the story in the prose Edda on how Odin took possession of the skaldic mead. When the Æsir and the Vanir made peace they all spat in a vessel, and from this communal salivation they created the wise Kvasir who knew the answers to all questions. Kvasir was killed by the dwarfs Fialar and Galar who used his blood to brew a mead that gave poetic inspiration and wisdom to all who drank it. This mead, which was kept in three enormous vessels, was taken from the dwarfs by a giant named Suttung. Odin set his mind on retrieving the mead and—after some preliminary trickery—persuaded Suttung’s brother Bangi to burrow a hole through the mountain in which Suttung slept. In the shape of a snake Odin crept through the hole, lay three nights by Suttung’s daughter and made her give him three sips of the mead. In three great gulps he emptied the three vessels, transformed himself into an eagle and flew home to Asgard where he relieved himself of the mead in vessels prepared for the occasion (Page 1990).

The first strophe of Háleygíatal by Eyvind skaldaspiller supports the theory, although it gives the giant’s name as Surt:

\[ \text{Vilja’k hliód at Hóars lóði,} \]
\[ \text{meðan Gillings gióldum yppí’k,} \]
\[ \text{hinu’s Surts ör Sókkvplum} \]
\[ \text{farnognóðr fliúgandi bar} \]

I crave sound as for the drink of Odin the Gilling-fines [= a poem] I carry forth, [the drink] that from Surt’s Sókk-valley he, the mighty traveller, flying brought (my translation, based on Lindquist 1929)
There is also a kenning for ‘poem’ in *Vellekla* (2) by Einar skálaglamm, *bergs grymmiló dværga*, ‘the frothing liquid of the dwarfs of the rock’.

If the identification of Sokkmimi with Suttung/Surt is correct, the parallel with Sveigdi is obvious; if not, it is still worthy of consideration. In both stories we have the elements dwarf, trickery, the entering into a rock or mountain and the abode of giants inside the rock or mountain. It could be that the poet is presenting Fiolni and Sveigdi as aspects of Odin himself, or he is merely stressing the parallelity, moulding the two kings in the image of the foremost of the gods. It may matter less that Sveigdi is unsuccessful and dies where Odin succeeds (winning the skaldic mead) since in both instances we are dealing with processes of transformation through a journey to the Otherworld. The transformation in Sveigdi’s case does not concern the king himself but his lineage; the defeat in death of one king becomes the triumph of the next in becoming king.

Finally, the death of the third king, Vanlandi, is described as his dispatch to *Vilia broður*, Vili’s brother, that is, Odin. If the enigmatic *vitta vettr*, who is also called *líðs Grimbild*, can be identified with a valkyrie is uncertain, but obviously she is some kind of being from the Otherworld; that is the meaning of *vettr* (cf. Morald 1983, p. 115: ‘das [jenseitige] Wesen der Zaubermittel’). The word *vitta* literally means ‘of spells’ or ‘of enchantments’. A being that was somehow conjured? We cannot know, but the use of the word *líðs*, bringing the concept into the context of armed retainers, at least makes a sweeping gesture in the direction of valkyries and, therefore, Odin. If the translation *líð* = ‘mead’ is preferred (Lindquist 1929, p. 59) we may recall the numerous depictions of female beings greeting the fallen with a drinking-horn upon their arrival in Valhalla on, for example, Gotlandic picture-stones. According to Morald (1983, p. 117) this would make ‘eine ganz normale Frauenkenning’ and therefore need not mean anything more specific than ‘woman’. Sune Lindqvist thought otherwise and identified *vitta vettr* with Odin himself, referring to a line from the poem *Oddrúnargrátr* where *bollar vettr* can be seen as synonymous with the expression in *Ynglingatal* (and the god Odin): *Svá hjalpe þer bollar vettr, Frigg ok Freyja ok fleire goþ* (Lindqvist 1921a, p. 145 including note 2). A bold shot from Lindqvist, but it seems clear that the poet could as well – or even more likely – be aiming at the two goddesses Frigg and Freya. Is Vanlandi’s bane simply a feminine deity, perhaps another synonym for the ever-present Hel?

To summarise, when we look only at *Ynglingatal*, the traditional view of Frey as ancestor god is far from obvious. If one god should be singled out as ancestor the argument for Odin is stronger. However, it is difficult to know if the allusions to Odin should be taken literally and if they have genealogical implications. It is possible that the ancestry in *Ynglingatal* was collective, that the kings were the descendants of the gods, not of one god.
Kings and war

Almost half of the attributes of kings in Ynglingatal concern their belligerence and fierceness. They are seen fighting named leaders or peoples (six cases), as leaders of warriors (eight cases) or being battle-keen or fierce in general (seventeen cases). Thirty-eight per cent of the attributes in group A and thirty-four per cent in group B are war-epithets. The association with war is, thereby, of greater importance than the genealogical reference for both these groups.

However, there is a significant imbalance within group B with twenty per cent for B1 versus fifty per cent for B2. The explanation may be found when we compare these numbers with the narrative of the poem. Group B1 is much concerned with fights within the dynasty, between co-rulers (strophes 10 and 11) or between the king and other, unspecified, family members (strophe 13). It seems that the poet considers dynastic strife as a stage which the B2 kings have past, and it may be significant that Ali, the enemy of Adils in the last helming of strophe 16, is not identified as a family member, contrary to the tradition expressed in Beowulf.

In group C we enter an extreme phase where the association with war has become predominant (sixty-two per cent). We can also note that of the eight cases in which a king is characterised as a leader of men, five are found in group C; in groups A and B the warlike qualities are general or refer to enmity towards a particular individual or people. The word buðlungr, occurring in strophes 24 and 25, means ‘the one who commands’, ‘the one who gives orders’ and corresponds with gebieter in modern German. Although I have favoured this interpretation it has been suggested that this word should be understood in a more general sense and that it more properly belongs to the ‘neutral’ category or that it is a patronym, referring to descendants of Budli (see Martin 1990, p. 371). However, as it is set in relation with sigrhafendr (the victors), in strophe 24, it seems likely that the military association is intentional (Noreen 1925, p. 250, with reference to Wadstein). Thus, the Norwegian king is pictured in an active relationship with the people he rules or, rather, with his warriors; his identity appears to be very much defined by the bond between ruler and ruled. It is not surprising to find the term þioðkonungr in strophe 22. For the kings of the Svear, on the other hand, no tension is built up between the individual leader and the serving collective. The latter is frequently invisible.

When these observations are put together with the fact that the most frequent heiti for king in group C is iôfur, here used four times out of six, it is hard not to see this combined usage as intentional, and that the picture of the Norwegian kings was deliberately made more clear-cut and uniform than that of earlier kings. Olaf tretelgia, the link between the ‘old’ kings and the Norwegians, is one of these kings. The word iôfur literally means ‘boar’ (Martin 1990, p. 371), an
animal characterised by immense strength and fierceness; however, their aggressiveness and lethal capacity is primarily defensive and directed against intruders/predators who come upon them. That these obvious connotations should have been lost in the context of skaldic poetry is highly unlikely, particularly in a society with a shamanic heritage (see, for example, Hedeager 1997, pp. 105 ff.).

The Norwegian kings lack any visible outer opponent; instead, they die in their own territory from accident, sickness or treason. The contrast with earlier kings, striking westwards or eastwards or at individual leaders, forces us to see this omission as deliberate. At the same time the poet spares no effort in pointing out the war-like qualities of the group C kings to his audience, and the words vígmidung (‘the battle-central’, that is, the one who is found in the midst of a battle) and gunndiårfr (the battle-bold), both from strophe 26, certainly suggest that they fought battles. Also, in strophe 24 King Halvdan’s men are called sigrbafradhr, victorious.

 Whereas the kings of group A and B, who are called the enemies of certain peoples in three cases and of individuals in three, are shown with their lethal capacity realised and externalised, the Norwegian kings maintain their own, protecting their territory and their people, discouraging aggressors with the fear their strength inspires, terror, to use a Latin term. The image of these rulers becomes prosaic and down-to-earth, one of primitive ‘statesmen’ rather than predators; it gives an air of ‘institutionalisation’. The enemy or enemies are invisible, and a reason for this could be ‘diplomatic courtesy’. The strophes on the Norwegian kings appear to be written in a strained political situation where the enemy was well known and posed an acute threat against the kingdom of Ragnvald or whomever the poem—or this part of it—was written for; the image of the political scene in the earlier parts of the poem is more chaotic and fluid. Instead of engaging in straightforward polemic in the final part of Ynglingatal, the poet chooses to stress that this strain of kings can be formidable adversaries if threatened, but otherwise craving no territory beyond their own.

**Negative characterisation**

Only in the strophe on old King Aun do we find epithets that can be interpreted as negative, þrálfir (die hard) and áttunga rióðr (reddener of kin, of descendants; it could be argued that this expression is a neutral if somewhat lugubrious reference to the king’s warlikeness). This Old Nordic titan not only consumes his close relatives (instead of extending his violence outside his dominion) but also has the bad taste not to end his life in time to do it heroically.
Peaceful and religious duties

Turning to the peaceful qualities of kings, these are little emphasised in *Ynglingatal*. There are only five characterisations in all, four of which describe the king as rich or liberal with gifts. The last case is the enigmatic expression *vørðr véstalls* (the warden of the sanctuary), strophe 11, which also is the only certain reference to religious duties of the king. I will not linger on the debate on Scandinavian, sacral kingship since the historian of religions Olof Sundqvist treats this subject in his forthcoming dissertation (see Sundqvist 1996 and 1997 for preliminary papers).

Geographical reference

The particular and rather stereotype character of the strophes on the Norwegian kings is accentuated by their well-known emphasis on the burial sites of their kings, all of which are safely located within the borders of Vestfold. Only Ragnvald, who is alive in the poem, is left without a geographical identification. Admittedly, the site of death and/or burial is given for about every second king in the earlier part of the poem, but they are often less specific and sometimes located outside the kingdom of the Svear (again emphasising the extroverted aggression).

The name Uppsala occurs in connection with two of the Svear and Olaf tretelgia. Aun and Adils are said to have died at *Uppsolum*, and Olaf to have departed thence. If Åkerlund (1939, pp. 70 ff.) is right in his assumption that Olaf’s departure cannot merely be a poetic rendering of his departure from the land of the living as some have believed (for example, Lindqvist 1936, p. 306), this would be our strongest indication that the Swedish Ynglingar had their political centre at Old Uppsala according to tradition; leaving this site would be synonymous with giving up their kingship over the Svear. Also Aun, dying bedridden of extreme old age, *ánasótt*, would presumably have used his home bed for the purpose. Whether the tradition was correct or not is another matter.

Valteins spakfrómuðr

Two different translations have been suggested for the words *valteins... spakfrómuðr*, an epithet for King Dag (strophe 8). I have translated it as ‘promoter of war-shaft wisdom’, thereby adhering to the most common and, I believe, originally favoured interpretation where *val-* is seen as derived from *valr* (= ‘corpse, slaying, battle’). The reading of *valtein* = ‘battle/corpse’ + ‘shaft/stick’ (signifying a sword or, possibly, a lance or a spear) makes the phrase no more than yet another expression of the king’s warlike qualities, in this case coupled with wisdom: the king as an adept battle tactician.
An alternative interpretation of the expression which transfers it to the ‘peace’ category is offered by Noreen (1925, p. 224). He argues that ‘sword’ does not fit the description of King Dag, who is described as spakfrómuðr, spakr meaning ‘perceptive, wise, thoughtful, quiet’ and ‘complacent’. Instead, Noreen prefers to see valtein as a synonym for blótspôn and hlutviðr, the sticks or twigs used for sprinkling the sacrificial blood or, alternatively, for divining the will of the gods (casting of lots; we can compare with the word teinblautr, stick-lot, from the Vellekla, see Lindquist 1929, pp. 54 f.). The entire expression is thus supposed to mean ‘the wise sacrificer’. This theory is supported by Olof Sundqvist (1996, p. 74).

The choice between the two interpretations will be guided by the picture we have of the old Scandinavian kings in general and the Ynglingar in particular, how great an emphasis we want to put on religious versus martial duties. We must further judge if the traditional link between the Ynglingar and Frey should be maintained and, if so, whether that would produce a king with different outlook from one who counted his descent back to Odin. But in Ynglingatal the stress on kings as warlords is overwhelming. The only other use of the word val- in the poem is also ambiguous (below, p. 95) and can give us no guidance. Furthermore, a dismissal of an association between King Dag and pointed weapons is unconvincing since he is said to have lost his life on a war-expedition for which he himself took the initiative. In my opinion, therefore, Noreen’s interpretation is less supported by the tone of the poem than the one I have chosen.

**Vôrðr véstalls**

In strophe 11 the king is called warden of the sanctuary or, more correctly, the sanctuary-place (vé = ‘sanctuary, assembly’, stallr = ‘place’). This is a fairly straightforward reference to the king’s role as responsible for the communication between the people and the gods and can be compared with several similar expressions from rune-stones and other written sources (see chapter 8 for further discussion).

**Domaldi’s death – true or metaphorical sacrifice?**

In the Domaldi strophe the verb sóa (in the last off-verse) is commonly translated ‘sacrifice’ (Noreen 1925, p. 199; Wessén 1952, p. 60; Krag 1991, p. 105). It has generally been interpreted in a strictly religious sense in the light of the corresponding passage in Ynglinga saga, where the king is said to have been killed by a people outraged by his failure as a (sacral) ruler to bring forth good crops (for a recent discussion, see Sundqvist 1997, pp. 154 ff.). In the strophe on Alf and Yngvi we find the royal brothers characterised by the words valsaefender, by Noreen (1925, p. 230) read val sæfender and translated ‘väl förstående sig på att offra’ (well understanding how to sacrifice).
So far ‘sacrifice’ has been understood literally, but in another passage in *Ynglingatal* the word sóa—in my opinion—is clearly used as a metaphor. In the strophe on Yngvar it is said that the tributary people of sóet bæffe the king. Noreen (1925, p. 205) translates the words ‘hade offrat’ (had sacrificed) in line with the Domaldi strophe, but the later part of the Yngvar strophe shows that it was a question of an ordinary battle—the Estonian host attacked Yngvar at the heart of the lake. To follow Noreen we have to assume that the Estonians either captured Yngvar and had him ritually sacrificed, or that they performed some kind of ritual on his corpse. These assumptions may have a foundation in reality but are not supported by any sources. The text of *Historia Norvegiæ*, for example, is equally neutral: *Hujus filius Ynguar, qui cognominatus est canutus, in expeditione occisus est in quadam insula Baltici maris, quae ab indigenis Eysysla vocatur* (‘His [King Eystein’s] son, whose cognomen was “the fair”, was killed on a war-expedition, on an island in the Baltic Sea called Ósel by the inhabitants’) (translation based on Krag 1991, p. 127).

While Wessén, as we have seen, accepts the translation ‘sacrificed’ in the Domaldi strophe he uses the more general ‘avliva’ (kill, put down) concerning Yngvar (Wessén 1952, p. 70; also Krag 1991, p. 126), referring to an analogous use of the word in *Hávamál* (109; my translation):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ens hindra dags gengu hrímþursar</th>
<th>The following day went the frost-giants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Háva ráðs at fregna</td>
<td>to ask for the High One’s counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Háva bóllu i;</td>
<td>in the High One’s hall;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at Bôlverki spurðu, ef veri meþ bôndum</td>
<td>of Baleworker [Odin] they asked: had</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kominn</td>
<td>he come back among men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eþa bæfði Suttungr of soit?</td>
<td>or had Suttung slain him?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not inconceivable that a concept can have literal as well as metaphoric meanings in different parts of a poem like *Ynglingatal*, but the Yngvar strophe, supported by *Hávamál*, must still make us cautious. If Domaldi was ‘killed’ and not ‘sacrificed’ the ritual aspect of his death is transferred to a symbolic sphere; maybe any prominent death or, indeed, any violent death involving the spilling of blood, could be metaphorically labelled ‘sacrifice’. We are left with a king who somehow failed to bring prosperity to his people and, as a result, was killed. He need not have neglected any particular (sacrificial) duties as Baetke (1964) proposed, but merely have been a big failure, a bad king.

*Historia Norvegiæ* retains the distinction between Domaldi’s death as a sacrifice and Yngvar’s as a death in battle: *Cujus filium Domald sweones suspendentes pro fertilitate frugum deœ Cereri hostiam obtulerunt* (‘His [Visbur’s] son Domaldi was hung by the Swedes as a sacrifice to the goddess Ceres to give good crops’; translation from Sundqvist 1997, p. 158), but that does not necessarily restrict us.
Ynglinga saga is almost as vague as Historia Norvegiae: the Svíar are dissatisfied with their king, and the chieftains (hófðingiar) decide to have him sacrificed. Ynglingatal, on the other hand, identifies the suerðberendr (sword-bearers), the landberr, as Domaldi’s killers, a rather obvious, double reference to high-ranking warriors; to avoid confusion they are further described as Svía kind (of the kin of the Svear). A host or warriors kill Domaldi, and a host or warriors kill Yngvar. In both cases the word sóa is used which makes its connection with warriors and death-by-arms very clear in this poem.

If we assume that Ynglingatal is the oldest of the three mentioned texts it is not difficult to see the passages in Historia Norvegiae and Ynglinga saga as variations on a theme that belongs in the category of interpretatio Christiana, not unlikely to have evolved because of the use in Ynglingatal of the ambiguous concept sóa. So while Olof Sundqvist is right in saying that ‘no doubt... the word sóa gives religious-cultic associations’, his conclusion that ‘the words in Ynglingatal st. 5 bear a vestige of cultic and religious actions in which a mythical king was involved as victim in a bloody sacrifice and whose purpose was to give a good year’ both fails to do justice to the ambiguity and polysemic expressions of Viking Age poetic language and shows a too strong dependence on the later sources on the Ynglingar (Sundqvist 1997, pp. 159 f.).

In line with my reasoning Wessén (1952, p. 54) translates valsœfender with ‘kämparna’ (the fighters, the warriors): val- = ‘de fallna’ (the fallen) and -sœfendr = ‘m. pl.: sœfa (þ), “dräpa, offra, slakta” (slay, sacrifice, butcher). Noreen (1925, p. 230, with refs.) had dismissed this interpretation, earlier made by Gislason and Jónsson, as he considered the meaning of valr, ‘the slain’, as already contained in sœfa, preferring to see val as a form of Old Norse væl (= well, good); therefore he chose to separate the words, not seeing them as a compound. However, it should be obvious that valr has a wider meaning than ‘the fallen, the slain’, extending to the process by which men fell or were slain, the battle, and to the site where this took place, the battlefield (de Vries 1977). We can also compare with the expression wæl-sliht, ‘battle-slaughter’, in Old English works like The Fight at Finnsburg (l. 28; Klaeber 1950) and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC 3, entry for 871). Thus valsœfender should be understood as something like ‘the battle-slaughterers’. I chose this expression in the above translation of the poem rather than something more elegant as ‘the battle-slayers’, since ‘to slaughter’ and ‘to sacrifice’ in the old Nordic context generally would have had a common denominator, namely the killing of animals. Noreen’s interpretation has lost the obvious irony in the alliteration valsœfender – víg in the second line of the strophe: the ‘battle-slaughterers’ were urged to do battle, víg, against each other, a battle ending in mutual slaughter.
The royal attributes in Ynglingatal: a summary

The most important attributes of the kings of the different groups in Ynglingatal can be broadly summarised as follows:

Group A: These kings are warlike, often extending their violence outside their territory. They are of noble/heroic descent (patronym). Their lack of individualisation is shown by the rare references to the king’s person and by the use of varied and, often, general synonyms.

Group B: The B1 kings are similar to the A kings, the greatest differences lying in a less pronounced emphasis on war and an increase in genealogical reference, the latter caused by the introduction of divine descent. In B2 greater changes occur and the picture becomes more standardised. The warlike duties and abilities of the kings are again the most important; in this and in genealogical reference the B2 group is similar to A. As in A violence is often extended outside their own territory; in respect to genealogy this group retains the references to divine descent which featured in B1. In B2 we also find the most ‘individualised’ kings (personal attributes).

Group C: The Norwegian kings are almost exclusively warlike. In this aspect their role as leaders of men is important, much more so than in earlier groups; the heiti ‘boar’ (iôfur) is also used more frequently. They are defenders of their own territory, Vestfold, not conquerors or raiders. Limited attention is directed to the king’s person; genealogical references are very rare. As in group A and B1 there is little stress on individuality. They are, somewhat pointedly, the institutionalised defenders of an ordered society.

The evolution of kingship according to Ynglingatal

John M. Hill has observed that an ‘evolutionary’ model going from predator kings to protective kings is an underlying theme of Beowulf. There are fierce, marauding or ‘Woden-inspired’ kings like Scyld, Healfdene and Hygelac who are succeeded by ‘legislator-warrior’ kings like Beow, Hrothgar and Beowulf. Hill (1991, p. 170) connects the second category with the god *Tiwaz/Tiu (corresponding to Scandinavian Tyr), associated with the sky and war but without the fury of Woden (Odin). The connection between the models and different gods is Hill’s own and not implied by the Beowulf poet; it may be questioned, but the definition of two types of kings in the poem is convincing.

The same pattern is found in groups B2 and C in Ynglingatal: the B2 kings engage in offensive war while the C kings defend their own territory and are
defined through their relation to their subjects. The B1 kings take us one step further back to what seems to be a stage of disputed succession and, sometimes, joint kingship. The A kings start on the long road towards perfection by engaging in activities which imitate those of the gods, at least some of them and as far as we can understand it. This kind of evolutionary thinking also permeates Rígsþula, where Rig (Heimdal in disguise) sires thralls, freemen and noblemen in consecutive order, going from the imperfect towards perfection over time.

The composition of Ynglingatal: event or process?

There are two main ways of interpreting the observed differences between the groups of kings. Either Ynglingatal is the original composition (perhaps by Thiodolf of Hvini), preserved more or less intact, and the variations represent the poet’s intentions, or the different parts of the poem may have been composed at different times, in which case current perceptions of kingship have guided the characterisation of the kings. In the first case the idea would have been to place the Norwegian kings in a historical perspective, differentiating between the consecutive groups, and it is interesting to note that divine descent is referred to the poem’s past. In the second case it is possible to see the strophes on the Norwegian kings as later additions (or revisions), although group A could be later than group B and written with the latter as a stylistic model (in which case it could be argued that references to divine descent was deliberately omitted as an obsolete trait). A skilled ‘editor’ could have been well aware of original compositional, stylistic and grammatical traits and adapted new lines or strophes to the set pattern.

An ‘editor’s’ work in strophe 26?

A possible sign of ‘editing’ in the poem is the anomalous first helming of strophe 26 in group C, Ok niðkvísl í Nóregi / þrottar Þrós of þróask hafði. Wessén (1952, p. 77) suggested that it may constitute a separate helming and should be read detached from the main strophe. No other strophe begins in this relaxed and impersonal manner, and in its appearance it is more reminiscent of the last helmings in group C. Line 3 (Réð Ólafr ofsa fóðum), on the other hand, follows the pattern of introductory lines perfectly. Noreen’s assumption that þrottar þrós (‘the pillar of strength’s’) refers to the king of strophe 25, Gudrød, makes it possible for him to accept the helming as natural and genuine but, as was shown above, it is far more likely that Odin lurks behind the words. What this potentially later insertion of a unique helming means is not immediately clear. It could serve to introduce the name of Norway (as a—potentially—unified realm) into the narrative, widening the horizon from the geographical and political constraints of Vestfold which are otherwise obvious.
For Åkerlund the peculiar structure of the helming posed no problem. Emphasising as he was the helming-bound structure of the poem one helming was for him as good as the other, and one that stood alone between two strophes no less so. In my opinion he is basically right but in this particular case goes too far and ignores the symmetry of the larger units of composition. Åkerlund believes that the helming indicates that the line of the Norwegian Ynglingar here divides into different branches (thereby ‘increasing’ or ‘growing’), one leading to Olaf (Geirastadalf) and Ragnvald, the other (and in the end more successful) to Halvdan svarti and Harald Fairhair (Åkerlund 1939, pp. 116 ff.). It is obvious that this argument is guided by the Medieval tradition which ties Halvdan and Harald to the Ynglingar. As I have stated earlier it is not necessarily valid to interpret Ynglingatal in the light of this tradition unless we are sure that the poem was written after the Viking Age. In fact, if the tradition is wrong but Åkerlund is right about the interpretation of this helming, we get a good explanation for why it was inserted, possibly in the place of another (that might simply have developed the story of Olaf’s death): to remind the listener that there were other – and historically more important – kings who also belonged to the Yngling line. As such we would have reason to believe that it belongs to an advanced stage of the development of the Ynglinga tradition.

The name Ynglingar

As stated before, the first source to describe ‘our’ kings as Ynglingar is Ari Frodi in the early twelfth century; he also ‘knew’ that Harald Finehair descended from Harald hvitbeinn, just like Ragnvald Heidumhere. In the B-text of Haraldskvæði, composed for Harald Finehair, King Harald is called ungum ynglingi (strophe 4; Lindquist 1929, p. 2). The expression could mean either ‘the young king’ or ‘the young Yngling’, in the second case referring to a dynastic name. Steinsland considers the second alternative the likelier and concludes that the epithet was used at the time of Ynglingatal and that ‘Thiodolf has been familiar with a tradition on Yngvi as the ancestor of the Ynglingar’, that is, the kings of Ynglingatal (Steinsland 1989, p. 341, my translation).

Contrary to Steinsland, Krag (1991, pp. 209 f.) and Bjarne Fidjestøl (1997, pp. 16 f.) believe ynglingi to be a Medieval interpolation, an ideologically conditioned substitution of the word eðlingi in the older A-text. This enables them to date the formation of the Ynglinga tradition to Medieval times but forces them to support the argument on the later text of the two and to recognise that their interpretation is somewhat at odds with the careful way in which Harald is otherwise characterised in the poem.

In my opinion, both arguments are unconvincing. If yngling in the Haraldskvæði really is a dynastic designation and not merely a king-heiti this only connects Harald with the Ynglinga dynasty, not a single king known from Ynglin-
Now, if Harald Finehair was known as an Yngling while he was still alive, and if the learned, Icelandic tradition in the twelfth century believed that he and Ragnvald had a common ancestor, then the tradition would naturally have labelled Ragnvald’s ancestors—the kings of Ynglingatal—as Ynglingar.

The possibility emerges that Ynglingatal was given an entirely misleading name by the Icelandic tradition as a consequence of genealogical manipulation. If the poem was originally written for Ragnvald, neither he nor his Swedish ancestors need have been known by that name. On the contrary—and ironically—a dynastic name that *may* have been attached to the man who ended the independence of the local, Norwegian kings and became their overlord could later have come to be applied to Ragnvald’s ancestral line through a misunderstanding.

_Agni as founding-father?_

An interesting aspect of the first strophe (9) in group B1 is that it in all likelihood refers to a marriage between the king, Agni, and Skialf. As has been generally observed, Skialf can be seen as an eponym, and there is a connection with the Scyldings/Scylfings of the _Beowulf_ poem. These are Ongentheow, his sons Oht(h)ere and Onela, and Ohtere's sons Eadgils and Eanmund, of which at least three appear in Ynglingatal. The Skilfingar are also mentioned in _Hyndluljóð_ (11 and 16; in the last strophe the Ynglingar are also mentioned).

Skialf could thus serve a dual purpose in strophe 9. Becoming the founding-mother of the dynasty, she not only gives her offspring to posterity but also her name to her offspring. Fittingly, the last king in group B1, Egil (strophe 14), is called Skilfinga nið, reminding the listener of the dynastic name.

In Gro Steinsland's world of Old Scandinavian, royal ideology the _hieros gamos_ (holy wedding) between a god and a jotun-woman is what generates a dynastic line of mortal kings. The pair Agni – Skialf makes a perfect, holy couple for Steinsland (1989, pp. 385 ff.), and she readily identifies Skialf as a jotun-woman. The jotun-status of Skialf may be doubted but she and Agni fit better with Steinsland’s _hieros gamos_ theme than does Fiolni, whom Steinsland is forced to understand in the light of _Ynglinga saga_ (10 f.) as the offspring of Frey and Gerd. I find her arguments on Fiolni as archetypal king and the product of a _hieros gamos_ less convincing than her analyses of _Skírnismál_ and _Hyndluljóð_ since _Ynglingatal_ does not give the slightest hint in that direction. Whether the marriage between Angi and Skialf is ‘holy’ in Steinsland’s sense or not is not even of importance; it still forces us to raise the question whether group A of _Ynglingatal_ could not be of a later date than the rest of the poem (or, at least, group B) and Agni the original, first king. It may also be significant that Agni is followed by two pairs of kings in accordance with the early Germanic custom of beginning a genealogy with pairs of progenitors with alliterating names, brothers or fathers and sons.
Ynglingatal as genealogy: historical document or ideological instrument?

Claus Krag claims that Ynglingatal is not a genealogical poem, not even a poem which incorporates a genealogy; it is simply a poem presupposing an existing genealogy. In this way it differs from Háleygjatal in which the genealogical purpose is explicit; we are told that B was the son of A. Krag (1991, p. 97) concludes that Ynglingatal must be regarded as one part of a set of texts, including a genealogy and a saga.

To distinguish between a poem which incorporates a genealogy and one which presupposes the existence of one may seem close to hair-splitting, but Krag’s hypothesis helps him to support his own late dating of Ynglingatal as a product of the learned tradition of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when the ‘supporting’ texts were composed. This is obviously not the only possible explanation. The poet and the dynasty which he honours may not have been concerned with the exact dynastic relation between one generation and the next. Being a member of the dynasty may well have been the only necessary prerequisite for becoming king; brothers and sons may theoretically have had equal prospects of succeeding to the kingship, and among sons the principle of primogeniture need not have been practised. In my opinion, the genealogical intention of Ynglingatal is beyond doubt and it may therefore be called genealogical. This also means that our understanding of the poem from this aspect appears to converge with that of Snorri and his contemporaries.

If Ynglingatal can be regarded as a genealogy in poetical form, can the genealogical aspect be separated from the poetical? I would suggest it cannot. It could be argued that poetic form may have helped to preserve the genealogy intact, but not only would the helming-based structure of the poem have made revisions easy for a skilled ‘editor’, but strophes could also have been rearranged and original ones replaced with new.

There is general agreement among modern historians and anthropologists that genealogies are not the equivalents of the lists of regents in elementary textbooks of history; instead, they are inscribed into a context of ideology, politics and social relations. Already in 1952 Laura Bohannan observed that genealogies among African societies had a dynamic and dialectical relationship with social conditions (Bohannan 1952, pp. 311 f.). Walter Ong refers to an example from the Tiv people of Nigeria, where genealogies are preserved orally and are used to decide legal issues. When twentieth century ethnographers recorded ‘the same’ genealogies with an interval of four decades, they discovered considerable discrepancies between the temporally separated versions. The Tiv insisted that their genealogies had not changed and that the ethnographers of forty years ago must have recorded them incorrectly. What had in fact happened was that the genealogies had been adapted to altering social circumstances (Ong 1990, p. 62).
Several historical examples of how genealogies were manipulated with political aims can be found in Ireland, Wales, and Anglo-Saxon England. Bede describes how at the death of the ‘glorious’ king Edwin of Northumbria (632 AD) Osric assumed power in Deira and Eanfrid in Bernicia (the two sub-units of the kingdom). These kings made the unforgivable mistake—in Bede’s eyes—to apostate to paganism in spite of having received the blessing of Christian baptism. Divine retribution, however, fell upon them within a year, and they ended their lives miserably in battle against the godless and heinous Cadwalla, king of the Britons. This human monster then ravaged Northumbria with fire and sword before he against all odds—Deo gratia!—was killed by Eanfrid’s god-fearing brother Oswald. Bede concludes: ‘This year remains accursed and hateful to all good men, not only on account of the apostasy of the English kings..., but also because of the savage tyranny of the British king. Hence all those calculating the reigns of kings have agreed to expunge the memory of these apostate kings and to assign this year to the reign of their successor King Oswald, a man beloved of God’ (Historia ecclesiastica III.2, pp. 141 ff.). From Bede’s words we may infer that there existed some Anglo-Saxon ‘genealogical committee’, and David Dumville (1977, pp. 102 ff.) identifies it with a class of learned, primarily ecclesiastical, court functionaries.

Anglo-Saxon genealogies were on the whole malleable, ideological instruments, reflecting political intentions and changing as the political situation and considerations changed. They could be lengthened or shortened; different genealogies could be linked together, reflecting new conditions resulting from alliance and domination, to provide a dominant lineage with an aura of greater legitimacy; they could be completely amalgamated as two separate kingdoms coalesced into a new political unit, to mask the previous fragmentation (Dumville 1976 and 1977; Bassett 1989, p. 4). In the light of these examples it is clear that the old Germanic genealogies must be seen as active political statements rather than passive reflections. Claus Krag, too, stresses the intentionality behind genealogies (Krag 1991, p. 205 ff.) even though he does not, in my opinion, manage to disengage sufficiently from an implicit notion of the preserved, written text as a chronological and contextual unity.

Not only genealogies suffered changes as social conditions changed. Peter Sawyer gives examples of variations between different versions of Landnámabók, between Grenlendinga saga and Eiriks saga raudar, and from Norwegian and Danish historiography (Sawyer 1989, pp. 12ff.). A text acquires yet another ‘distortion filter’ if it has didactic aspirations. Olaus Petri writes in his Svenska chrónika (Swedish Chronicle) from 1534, concerning the names and order of the oldest kings of the Svear and Götar: Dock ligger icke thes heller så stoor macht uppå hvadh som hvar hafver betat, uthan huru väl och ährliga hvar hafver sig bevijsat och sitt rike regerat..., what is important is not their actual names, but how good and honourable they were and how well they ruled (Chrónica, p. 229).
Dating

When we realise that the text we are trying to analyse must be seen as a process, where the preserved text appears as one single act out of several, the question of dating gets complex. Or, rather, we must ask ourselves what we want to date. The preserved text of Ynglingatal derives from the 1220s and Snorri Sturluson. We seem to witness the formation of an Ynglinga tradition in the twelfth century, from Ari Frodi and onwards. According to the traditional dating, Thiodolf of Hvini composed Ynglingatal around 900 AD.

In his study on Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga Claus Krag (1991) argues that the poem was written in the late twelfth century, as one of several parts of a developing Ynglinga tradition. One of his arguments is that it corresponds so well with the prose texts (Ynglinga saga and Historia Norwegiae). Had it been decidedly older than these the discrepancies between poem and prose would have been greater. To this we can retort that it cannot have been very difficult to adapt a prose text to an already existing and familiar poem (especially a poem made up by a series of short and ambiguous statements), nor to partly revise or add to such a poem for someone well-versed in the skaldic art. Furthermore, how we perceive the differences between poem and prose sources is very much a question of subjective considerations.

This is clearly shown when Krag compares the strophe (13) on King Aun with the narrative in Ynglinga saga (25) and finds that the epithets þrálfir and áttunga ríðrar in the poem suffice to prove a common source for both texts (Krag 1991, p. 69). Because these rather weak and ambiguous hints at Aun’s fate have developed in Ynglinga saga into a pact between the king and Odin, by which Aun receives an extra ten years of life for each son he sacrifices to the god (he got to the ninth), Krag’s conclusion is founded on faith, not compelling logic.

My own comparison of the texts on Ingiald illráði in the Ynglinga tradition (chapter 5) suggests that the image of Ingiald in the different sources are ideologically ‘incompatible’ and that the image presented in Ynglingatal appears more archaic than those in Historia Norwegiae and Ynglinga saga which can be safely dated to after the Viking Age. This invites caution not to over-stress superficial similarities between the sources. Furthermore, strophe 14 on King Egil, with the problematic farri passage, the expressions frðmuðr Hógna breyrs in strophe 20 (Onund; see chapter 5) and ðlum stilli in strophe 25 (Gudrød), should probably be understood differently than by Snorri. Not only do these examples suggest the existence of older layers in the poem than in the saga, but it is also not difficult to understand how they could be misinterpreted.

Krag has further suggested that there is a four-element symbolism in Ynglingatal, manifested in the deaths of the four earliest kings: Fiolni drowns in mead (water), Sveigdi disappears into a rock (earth), Vanlandi is suffocated (air), and
Visbur is burnt (fire). There is also the expression *sónr Forñióts* as a metaphor for ‘fire’ in strophe 21, where he sees *Forñiótr* as the earth element personified. He finds the symbolism expressed in such a way that it must have been transmitted by the Church, from Augustine (christianising Plato) via Bede and onwards, and that it reached the Norsemen no earlier than in the late eleventh century (Krag 1991, pp. 55 ff.). This assumption is not unreasonable, but it must be considered debatable. It is not impossible that narrow, learned groups knew parts of the Christian philosophy and its symbolic language before the Church had established its total religious hegemony and—officially—rooted out pagan cult practice. Perhaps the contacts with the Anglo-Saxons during the ninth century gave the Scandinavians an impetus to make royal genealogies?

Krag further regards the first four kings of group A (Fiolni, Sveigdi, Vanlandi, Visbur) in the light of euhemerism. Their names are divine appellatives, the first two associated with Odin, the third with Frey, the fourth with Bur and Odin. Of the following ‘D-kings’ only Dag is a genuine name while the others are reminiscent of those in the strings of names occurring in *Ríspula* and some *pulur*. In combination with the element symbolism this gives Krag a strong argument for a Medieval origin of *Ynglingatal* (Krag 1991, pp. 60 ff.).

I suggested above that the dynastic name Ynglingar may not have been originally associated with the poem. It may be significant that the name Yngvi, related to the name Ynglingar, only occurs in strophes 6 and 7 in *Ynglingatal*, that is, in the A group. Add to this Krag’s classification of these mythical kings as euhemerised gods or personifications of royal virtues, and the possibility emerges that group A was added to an existing poem by a Medieval ‘editor’ (or extensively rewritten). With the greatest reservation this theory could be supported by the anomalous number of helnings of group A, twenty-four.

Krag draws a picture of how the Norwegian part of the Ynglinga tradition evolves and undergoes changes during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. In *Historia Norvegiae*, dating from around 1190 but based on older material (presumably mainly the Ynglinga genealogy in Ari Frodi’s *Íslendingabók* from c. 1125), it is said that the Ynglingar were kings of Oppland. Some decades later, Snorri narrates how Halvdan *hvitbeinn* and his son Eystein take control over Vestfold through conquest and marriages, and how this province later becomes the base for the unification process under Harald Fairhair. Krag suggests that a separate line of Vestfold kings (Gudrød – Olaf Geirstadalf – Ragnvald Heidumhere) has been added to the genealogy in *Af Upplendingakonungum*, in which Halvdan Svarti precedes Harald Fairhair. In the Ynglinga tradition Olaf Geirstadalf is turned into Halvdan’s half-brother, the two reigning jointly over Vestfold (Krag 1991, pp. 154 ff.). Krag summarises the development from *Historia Norvegiae* via *Af Upplendingakonungum* to *Heimskringla* in the following way (Krag 1991, p. 159, my translation):
According to Krag, the shift in emphasis from Oppland to Vestfold is supported on one hand by works like Fragrskinna and Nóregs konungatal, which build on earlier sources, and by Af Upplendingakonungum, Flateyjarbók and Egil's saga on the other (Krag 1991, pp. 156 f.). As a possible reason for the revision Krag suggests that ‘the central position of Vestfold, the brooding grave mounds, and what could otherwise have been sensed of old riches and strength in Viking Age Vestfold, might have contributed to the development of these opinions. Conditions such as these can have combined with a general need to emphasise Vestfold as the original province of the royal dynasty - namely in the second part of the twelfth century, when king Valdemar of Denmark had aspirations in Southern Norway’ (Krag 1991, pp. 160 f., my translation).

Krag’s sketch of the developments is neat, tidy, and linear, but offers at least one logical problem. If Ynglingatal originated in the late twelfth century as a deliberate archaism within an Ynglinga tradition under revision or even construction, why does not the poem incorporate Halvdan svarti, and why does it not end with Harald Fairhair, son of Olav, son of Gudrød? According to the sequence of generations this would have posed no problem, and precedence could have been found in Ari’s genealogy. Instead the list is crowned by the historical ‘blind alley’ Ragnvald Heidumhere, son of Olav, son of Gudrød. It seems illogical. To graft branches from other genealogies onto ones own was, to be sure, genealogical commonplace, but in this case the resulting picture becomes confused rather than clear. Why not carry through the geographical relocation without involving new names?
To answer that question Krag suggests an explanation which separates Thiodolf of Hvini from \textit{Ynglingatal} while retaining the connection between the poet and King Ragnvald. The poet Thiodolf probably existed and probably had connections with a king of Vestfold, called Ragnvald. And as there is a strophe in \textit{Ynglingatal} that differs from the rest, the last one, on King Ragnvald, it is possible that \textit{this} is an authentic strophe by Thiodolf, and that the rest of the poem is a later creation, falsely (by mistake or deliberately) attributed to the poet (Krag 1991, p. 166).

Could in fact a lineage of Vestfold-kings have been the first to trace its ancestry back to the Swedish Ynglingar? It is conceivable that a petty king like Ragnvald, facing the threat of political unification or Danish pressure and the establishment of an overlordship, would have a genealogy composed in order to enhance his particularist ambitions and stress the legitimacy of his own dynasty (cf. Christensen et al. 1993, p. 266). A genealogical connection with a famous Svea dynasty could have provided a convenient link to a remote and heroic past. Then appeared the dynasty of Harald Fairhair which achieved the unification and possibly was known as Ynglingar. Wishing to manifest its seniority and greatness in genealogical form they found a suitable material in the genealogy of the kings of Vestfold; Halvdan \textit{hvítbeinn} is made into the link. The victors engage in ‘genealogical cannibalism’, absorbing the prestige of the losers. A marital bond between members of the two lineages would, of course, have provided a link, facilitating or even demanding a revision of the genealogy. As Harald started as king of Oppland his ‘new’ ancestors are made kings of Oppland. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Christian tradition takes up the material for treatment and performs a major revision and systemisation of the tradition, with particular focus on the Norwegian part of the dynastic line. The geographical references are gradually shifted from Oppland (the home of Harald Fairhair’s lineage) to Vestfold (the kingdom of Ragnvald). By coincidence (?) this corresponds to original circumstances as regards Ragnvald and his ancestors. Some cosmetic changes are probably also made: a helming with reference to Norway as a potentially unified kingdom is inserted in strophe 26, possibly replacing an earlier one. Maybe the entire A group (strophe 1–8) is added at this point, reflecting Christian appropriation of the pagan, mythological heritage.

In all texts Halvdan \textit{hvítbeinn} appears as the true founding-father of the Norwegian Ynglingar. When Ari wrote his genealogy with a specific purpose, he tied the names Gudrød, Olav, Helge, Ingjald, Olav Vite, Torstein the Red, Olav Feilan, Tord, Øyolv, Torkel, Gelle, Torgils and his own, Ari, to a line of kings almost identical with the one we know from \textit{Ynglingatal}. \textit{Historia Norvegiæ} adds Eystein, Halvdan, Gudrød and Halvdan \textit{svarti}.

In this way we can hypothetically sketch how \textit{Ynglingatal} is created and reshaped in the course of history, how new readings lead to partial re-writings which, in turn, provide starting-points for the composition of new texts with
new political messages within a web of tradition. The monolithic Ynglingatal we first thought we knew becomes dissolved into ‘a collage of incompatible structures, or perhaps a patchwork of intertextual layers, not always easy to disentangle’ (Lönnroth 1986, p. 93). The text is in reality a plurality of texts, eventually gathered under one canopy. They derive from changing contextual situations and can be analysed out of a diachronic as well as synchronic perspective. They invite a multitude of equal readings, not necessarily being either complementary or mutually exclusive. From a historical point of view both the ‘traditionalists’ and Krag may be right regarding the dating.

With my suggested interpretation we avoid the problem of Snorri’s unhesitating categorisation of Ynglingatal as an old poem. According to Krag’s scenario the poem may have been merely half a century old when Snorri wrote Heimskringla. As Snorri appears to have been highly aware of the ‘genealogy’ of his information in other respects it is certainly odd if he should have let himself be fooled in this particular case (unless he lied about it all). Krag believes that half a century could suffice for the poem to have been classified as ‘old’. But it seems remarkable that an important text within a topical discourse could suddenly have been surreptitiously produced without anyone noticing where this happened and who did it. The Nordic literature presents many examples of ‘quotations’ from earlier poems, and it is the rule that an authorial ‘reference’ is made, whether correct or not; it is like a stamp of authenticity.

At the same time Snorri had not read Walter Ong, Elisabeth O’Brien O’Keeffe or Jaques Derrida. He was not in our way conscious of the fact that reading a text was equivalent to interpret and, in a sense, ‘re-write’ it, that, for instance, oral technique was used in reading and copying texts. Either he regarded the text of Ynglingatal that he read (or heard) as authentic according to our notion of the concept, or the sense of authenticity was solely tied to the name of the poem and that of the supposed author. Under all circumstances he did not analyse the text as a process in time, perhaps because linear time did not have a prominent position in his mind.

Ynglingatal from pagan origin to Christian composition

When I had analysed the terminology used in Ynglingatal I discovered another symmetry in the poem which does not entirely correspond to my four analysis groups. It becomes apparent if we set the two helmings on King Ragnvald aside from the rest as an epilogue and concentrate on the ‘ancestor-helmings’. Let us first look on the helming distribution according to my analysis groups, but also count the number of generations and kings within each group:
There are twenty-six generations (strophes) with twenty-eight kings before Ragnvald, and they are presented in eighty-eight helmings. Generations and number of kings in each group seem to be built on the numbers six and eight, the sum of which is fourteen, half of twenty-eight. Furthermore, the poem is symmetrically constructed in two parts, the second of which is almost the inverted image of the first; the ‘split’ or centre is in strophe 14 (Egil). The number of helmings, added for each strophe, gives the following cumulative sequence (strophe 14 marked with double bars):

\[
\begin{align*}
2 & 5 & 8 & 11 & 14 & 17 & 20 & 24 & 27 & 30 & 34 & 37 & 42 & || & 46 & || & 50 & 54 & 58 & 61 & 64 & 68 & 71 & 74 & 77 & 80 & 84 & 88
\end{align*}
\]

If the second part of the sequence (strophe 15–26) is counted from right to left instead of the opposite the symmetry becomes obvious. The only differences occur in strophes 1–2 compared with strophe 26, and strophe 12 compared with strophe 16 (bold numbers below). The figure of Egil’s strophe is here changed to four, the number of its helmings:

\[
\begin{align*}
\end{align*}
\]

There are twenty-eight ancestors, fourteen in group B, and fourteen in groups A and C together; strophe 14 is the compositional ‘pivot point’ with its four helmings, and it is flanked on either side by three times fourteen (forty-two) helmings. If we count the number of kings there are fourteen from Fiolni to Iorund and fourteen from Aun to Olaf, the father of Ragnvald. In groups of seven kings there are Fiolni – Dyggvi (20 helmings), Dag – Iorund (17 helmings), Aun – Onund (27 helmings), and Ingiald – Olaf (24 helmings):

\[
\begin{align*}
\end{align*}
\]

Parallels are found in Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies. Kenneth Sisam observed that the trunk-lines of the genealogies in the so called Anglian collection (Dumville 1976) were of very similar length. ‘He concluded that there was a recognised
length for a pedigree of some fourteen names, including the ultimate ancestor’
(Dumville 1977, p. 89 with ref. to Sisam 1953, pp. 326 ff.). Sisam did not draw any conclusion from this observation, and neither does Dumville. North of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms the Picts produced genealogies which often featured twenty-eight generations (Johnson 1993, pp. 93 ff.). In the Ostrogothic Amal genealogy presented by Jordanes there are twenty-eight males listed (Getica 14).

The centrality of the number fourteen in the Anglo-Saxon genealogies is a sign of Christian influence, an imitation of biblical models (Howlett 1997, Ansaxnet). There are two genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels, one in Matthew 1, 2–17, the other in Luke 3, 23–38. The genealogy in Matthew goes back to Abraham and has fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the captivity in Babylon, and fourteen from there to Jesus; this makes forty-two generations. Three female ancestors are also named. In Luke there are seventy-seven ancestors (7+7=14) with God himself heading the list. Counting backwards from Jesus, fourteen generations at the time, we find the names Mattathias (14), Jesus (28), David (42), Abraham (56) and Enoch (70). According to Jewish number symbolism the number fourteen corresponded to the name of David. Krag has observed that some genealogies of the Skioldunga dynasty are also based on the number fourteen in imitation of this Biblical model (Krag 1991, pp. 181 ff.).

David Howlett further points out that the West Saxon Regnal Table has forty-two male names plus three women. This pattern is repeated even in prose and poetic works: ‘The first annal A.D. of the [Anglo-Saxon] Chronicle says that in the 42nd year of Augustus’s reign Christ was born and in the next that 3 star-wise men came to honour him. In the last annal of the first Alfredian recension Alfred was 42 and 3 Irishmen came to him... If we observe the number of headnings in Alfred’s Law Code and the number of chapters in Alfred’s translation of Boethius and the number of fitts in Beowulf, all 42, the two latter in three chiastic groups of 14 each, we may suspect a consistent tradition of ordering thought and word’ (Howlett 1997, Ansaxnet; formatting added; Howlett’s investigations into composition principles are set forth in Howlett 1996, a work to which I have unfortunately not had access).

These observations strongly suggest that as far as the preserved text of the poem is concerned, Claus Krag is most likely correct in identifying it as a Christian composition. Thereby, his late twelfth century dating gains in credibility. But this does not necessarily invalidate my interpretation of Ynglingatal as a text of possible pagan origin which has been changed and added to over time. There are still the principles of oral transmission and the role of genealogies as dynamic, political instruments to consider. A Christian poet could have taken an old, sad song and made it ‘better’.
We can only make guesses about the specific circumstances behind such a revision. If the Christian poet was concerned with creating a structure which alluded to Biblical models he could have found a structure within the existing poem which expressed a ‘bad’ symbolism. Since Krag’s dating of the poem primarily rests on arguments concerning the A group, and because King Agni and the following two generations of kings make up a suitable set of founding-fathers for a Germanic, royal genealogy, we can imagine a purely hypothetical scenario in which an original *Ynglingatal* is identified as groups B₁–C, not necessarily word-by-word but in respect to the number and order of the strophes as well as the number of helmings of each strophe. The cumulative helming sequence for this hypothetical, original structure is:

```
3 6 10 13 18 22 | 26 30 34 37 40 44 | 47 50 53 56 60 64 66
```

The numbers of *generations*, *kings* and *helmings* of groups B₁–C (with Ragnvald listed separately, R) then becomes:

- **B₁**: 6 – 8 – 22
- **B₂**: 6 – 6 – 22
- **C**: 6 – 6 – 20
- **R**: 1 – 1 – 2
- **Total**: 19 (18 ancestors) – 22 – 66

There are six generations of ancestors in each group, 6+6+6. Remove the plus signs between these three numbers and you have the number of the Beast from the Book of Revelation. The total of sixty-six helmings including R will hardly have made the poem more palatable for a learned Christian as it will have emphasised the number six, the ‘unattained’ number seven, and symbol of evil and imperfection. I repeat that this is pure speculation, but the discovery of a structure such as this is not unlikely to have encouraged a revision of the poem.

There are other possible alternatives which complicate the dating issue. For what we know (or, rather, do not know) Ragnvald could have been one of the earliest, Christian kings in Norway. He and his court poet could have learnt about the compositional principles of Anglo-Saxon, royal genealogies in England (this has been tentatively suggested by Turville-Petre 1979, pp. 49 f. and North 1997, p. 39). After all, he was a contemporary of Alfred the Great, king of Wessex 871–899. Alfred did not interact with the Scandinavian invaders only on the battlefield. Asser (bishop of Sherbourne and Alfred’s counsellor) describes in his *Life of Alfred* that the king ‘bestowed alms and largesses on both natives and foreigners of all countries; he was affable and pleasant to all, and curiously eager to investigate things unknown. Many Franks, Frisons, Gauls, pagans, Britons, Scots, and Armoricans, noble and ignoble, submitted voluntarily to his dominion; and all of them, according to their nation and deserving, were ruled, loved, honoured, and enriched with money and power. Moreover, the king was
in the habit of hearing the divine scriptures read by his own countrymen, or, if
by any chance it so happened, in company with foreigners, and he attended to it
with sedulity and solicitude’. Therefore, in my opinion, the dating issue is not
as straightforward as it first appears, in spite of the recognition of Christian ele-
ments in *Ynglingatal*. It is unlikely that any reliable conclusions will be reached
unless a new, meticulous analysis is made of the poem. This analysis should
ideally start out from the different original manuscripts, and must totally dis-
regard the interpretations of the poem in *Ynglinga saga* and the other Medieval
sources.
The deeds and death of Ingiald illráði

According to Ynglinga saga, Ingiald illráði was the last Ynglinga king to reign in Suithiod. He is also the most sinister of all its characters. In a lengthy account of Ingiald’s childhood, Snorri narrates how at the age of six Ingiald plays with Alf, the son of King Yngvar of Fjädrundaland. Ingiald proves the weaker of the two and this makes him weep bitterly. His uncle, Svipdag the Blind, finds the situation shameful, fries a wolf’s heart and gives it to Ingiald to eat. Svipdag’s true blindness was to the consequences of his act, for after that meal, says Snorri, the boy became the hardest of men and the worst in disposition (ok þaðan af varð hann allra manna grimmastr ok verst skaplundaðr; Ynglinga saga 34). Alas, for the bad reputation of the wolf!

After his father Braut-Onund died, either by accident (Ynglinga saga 35) or by the hands of a bastard brother or son (Ynglingatal 19, see below), Ingiald became king in Uppsala:

King Ingiald arranged a great feast and prepared an arval in honour of his father, King Onund. He had a hall built, in no way lesser or of less honour that the Uppsal, and he called it the Seven Kings’ Hall. There were raised seven high-seats. King Ingiald sent men out over all Suithiod, and invited kings, jarls and other notables [to Uppsala]. To this arval [erfis] came King Algaut [of Göta-land], Ingiald’s father-in-law, and Yngvar, king of Fjädrundaland, with his two sons, Agnar and Álf, Sporsniall, king of Närke, and Sigverk, king of Attundaland. Granmar, king of Södermanland, did not come. The six kings were shown to their seats in the new hall. It was the custom in those days that when someone was to claim the inheritance after a king or jarl, then he who held the arval and would be led into inheritance should sit on the step before the high-seat until that chalice which was called the Bragi bowl had been carried forth.
He should receive the Bragi bowl and take an oath, then drink from it. Then he should be placed on the high-seat, that which had been his father’s. Then he had come into inheritance after him. (Ynglinga saga 36; my translation, based on Heimskringla 3)

Here, we are faced with the information that a number of the invited kings ruled over provinces in Suithiod; Ingiald’s claim to royal status was not unique. But Snorri has already given an explanation:

Viða um Svíþióð váru í þann tíma heraðskonungar. Braut-Ônundr réð fyrir Tiundalandi. Þar eru Uppsalir; þar er allra Svía þing. Váru þar þá blót mikil; sóttu þannug margir konungar, var þat at miðium vetri. [...] Uppsala konungar váru aezir konunga í Svíþióð, þá er þar váru margir heraðskonungar, frá þeit er Óðinn var bôðingi í Svíþióð. Váru einvaldz-bôðingar þeir, er at Uppsolum sátu, um alt Sváveldi, til þess at Agni dó, en þá kom ríkit fyrst í brœðraskipti... En síðan dreipðisk ríki ok konungðómr í ættir, svá sem þar greindusk.

All around Suithiod there were in those days provincial kings. Braut-Onund ruled over Tiundaland. There is Uppsala; there is the assembly of all the Svear. Many a sacrifice was held there; many kings attended these; it was in mid-winter. [...] The Uppsala kings were the highest kings in Suithiod when there were many provincial kings, as it was from the time when Odin was chief in Suithiod. Those who sat in Uppsala were all-mighty chiefs of all the dominion of the Svear until the time Agni died, and then the power was for the first time divided between brothers... And after that the power and the kingdom went along lineages, as these branched. (Ynglinga saga 34 and 36)

The odd circumstance that the sons of King Yngvar of Fjädrundaland, Agnar and Alf, are counted among the kings is left without comment by Snorri. The sinister outcome of the festivities was that when the guests had become thoroughly inebriated, Ingiald, the sons of his uncle Svipdag and their men set fire to the new hall and burned them all to death. Then Ingiald took possession of the four kingdoms, suddenly devoid of rulers, and exacted ‘taxes’ (skatta) from them: Eptir þetta lagði Ingialdr konungr undir sik òll þessi ríki, er konungar bôðu átt, ok tók skatta af (Ynglinga saga 36).

After this, Ingiald waged war upon King Granmar of Södermanland, but with a profound lack of success. His host now counted troops from the usurped provinces under the sub-command of their own leaders, now called chieftains, bôðingiar. These, however, saw fit to repay Ingiald for his deeds and withdrew with all their men from the battle-field, leaving Ingiald at the head of an outnumbered force to fight his way back to his ships wounded and humiliated (Ynglinga saga 38).

For once, Ingiald appears to have listened to good advice, as he let himself be persuaded to conclude a peace treaty with Granmar. But true to his nature he
used the peace to come upon Granmar unawares with his host and burn him to death in one of his halls. Naturally, Ingiald usurped Granmar’s kingdom, and is said to have appointed chieftains to rule the territory: ...ok setti yfir hovdinga (Ynglinga saga 39). Snorri claims that Ingiald killed in all twelve kings and broke his promises of peace to them all (Ynglinga saga 39), thus, so to say, becoming the Judas Iscariot of a royal congregation of thirteen.

Ingiald now involved himself in sustained but indecisive feuding with King Hogni of Östergötland and his son Hilder. Hogni’s daughter Hildur had been Granmar’s wife, and her father was not greatly pleased with the course of events. At the same time, Ingiald seems to have extended his ambitions even further south and married his daughter Åsa to King Gudröd of Scania. A true daughter of her father, the Lady Macbethian Åsa made Gudröd kill his brother Halvdan and also caused her husband’s death in some unspecified manner (Ynglinga saga 39).

At this point, however, fate finally turns, when Ivar Wide-fathom (víðfaðmi), the son of Halvdan, invades Scania with a great host. Åsa flees to her father with Ivar’s host in hot pursuit. Ingiald realises that he cannot withstand the power of Ivar and, crowning his pyromaniac career, burns himself to death, together with Åsa, in a hall. Ivar conquered Suithiod and Ingiald’s son Olaf fled west to save his skin. All the Svear, Snorri says, stood up as one man to drive Ingiald’s dynasty and his friends out of the kingdom (Ynglinga saga 39–42).

Bad counsel makes a bad king

Ingiald’s cognomen in Ynglinga saga, illráði, means ‘the ill-advised’, ‘of bad counsel’. This label would have made it clear what kind of man he was and what he – in general terms – did and how he ended. The central role of counsel in government is frequently emphasised in, for example, Frankish and Anglo-Saxon sources.

A realm was ruled by counsel, but not only that of the ruler himself. Ráð did not so much spring from the individual at the top of the social ladder as from the interaction between that individual and the collective or, rather, certain prominent representatives of the collective. The body of the king as a good ruler had many heads. Royalty taking good advise from the nobility was the key to unity, which in turn engendered stability and peace (at home); from there the path led on towards prosperity. A Merovingian Mahntraktat, written by an unknown cleric and possibly directed to Clothar II in 613, stresses how important it is that the king surrounds himself with good advisers (Anton 1968, pp. 51 f.). The ill-advised king or prince either—by active choice or personal incapability—surrounded himself with bad advisers, or refused to listen to the good advice of wise people (particularly bishops) around him. Gregory of Tours is in no doubt about the inevitable consequences of such conduct:
At this time Chramn [son of Lothar I] was living in Clermont-Ferrand. He was extremely ill-advised in nearly everything he did, and his premature death was a direct result of this. He was hated by the townsfolk of Clermont. Among all his associates there was not one capable of giving him good and useful advice. (*Historiae* IV.13)

Ascovindus did all in his power to prevent Chramn from behaving so badly, but he failed in his attempt... Chramn... was led astray by the advice of evil men around him... (*Historiae* IV.16)

[Chramn had rebelled against his father, but] was overrun by his father’s army, made prisoner and bound. When this was announced to King Lothar, he ordered Chramn to be burnt alive with his wife and daughters. They were imprisoned in a poor man’s hut. Chramn was held down at full length on a bench and strangled with a piece of cloth. Then the hut was burnt down over their heads. So perished Chramn with his wife and daughters. (*Historiae* IV.20)

Chramn was, by the way, called *rex*, having been ‘set over the Auvergne by his father’ (Wood 1979, p. 11). Bede gives us a similar lesson in his *Historia* concerning a late-seventh-century Northumbrian king:

King Egfrid, ignoring the advice of his friends and in particular of Cuthbert, of blessed memory, who had recently been made bishop, rashly led an army to ravage the province of the Picts... where he was killed with the greater part of his forces [in 684]... but in the previous year he had refused to listen to the reverend Father Egbert, who begged him not to attack the Scots who had done him no harm; and this was his punishment, that he now refused to listen to those who tried to save him from destruction. (*Historia ecclesiastica* IV.26)

Later in Anglo-Saxon history, King Æthelred II of Wessex struggled against misfortune. Unsuccessful in the wars against the Danes and unable to secure the loyalty of his followers, his reign ended with the subjection of the English to the Danish King Cnut in 1016. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (entry for 1011 AD) attributes the Danish success to the bad counsels (*unredas*) of the king. Later, Medieval tradition coined his famous epithet *unred*, ‘no-counsel’ (nowadays rendered ‘the Unready’), first known from the early thirteenth-century *Leges Anglorum*, as ‘Ethelredus Unrad’ (Barnes 1993, p. 6); Æthelred was later described by Sir Frank Stenton (1975, p. 395) as ‘a king of singular incompetence’. In spite of his later nick-name he managed to remain king for 37 years, from 978-1016, attaining kingship at the unready age of 10. Ironically, his real name means ‘noble counsel’. Threads of tradition reach into the Late Middle Ages when William Langland wrote the chronicle *Richard the Redeless* on the downfall and death in 1399 of Richard II (Skeat 1886).
Kings who heeded the advice of counsellors and friends fared better. King Edwin of Northumbria realised this when he wished to accept the True Faith in 627 AD (he was king 616-632):

[Edwin] answered that it was his will as well as his duty to accept the Faith that Paulinus taught, but said that he must still discuss the matter with his principal advisers and friends, so that, if they were in agreement with him, they might all be cleansed together in Christ the Fount of Life. (Historia ecclesiastica II.13; see also II.9)

What a golden age did not the Northumbrians experience under the well-advised King Edwin! ‘So peaceful it was...’; ‘Such was the king’s concern for the welfare of his people...’; ‘And so great was the people’s affection for him, and so great the awe in which he was held...’; and ‘So royally was the king’s dignity maintained throughout his realm...’ (Historia ecclesiastica II.16). Further homage to good advice is plentiful both in Gregory (for example, Historie II.32, IV.51, VI.19 and IX.40) and Bede (for example, Historia ecclesiastica II.9, III.22, III.25 and III.29).

It was customary for Anglo-Saxon kings to stress that new law-codes were made and issued with the advise of their counsellors (Chaney 1970, pp. 181 ff.; Historia ecclesiastica II.5), and the same applied to other judicial matters. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle the royal grant of lands and tax-redemption to an abbey is accompanied by an excess of expressed unanimity:

In this time the abbey of Medeshamstede, which his brother Peada had begun, grew very wealthy. The king [Wulfhere] loved it much for love of his brother Peada, and for love of his sworn brother, Oswy, and for love of Seaxwulf, its abbott. He said that he wished to honour and reverence it according to the advice of his brothers Æthelred and Merewala, and according to the advice of his sisters, Cyneburh and Cyneswith, and according to the advice of the archbishop who was called Deusdedit, and according to the advice of all his councillors, both spiritual and temporal, who were in his realm: and so he did. (ASC 1, E manuscript, entry for 656)

‘Red’ in Old English poetry

In Beowulf Christian attitudes meet with the ideals of Germanic heroic poetry. An analysis by Robert Payson Creed of what he calls ‘Ideal Structures’ in Beowulf is made with a method which broadens the study of concepts. Creed considers the poem ‘not as the work of a writer, but as the work, composed in performance, of a continuator of traditions many generations old’. In a work of this character these Ideal Structures make up the lowest stratum ‘preserved in the [oral] performance’. They ‘consist of pairs (or sets of interlocking pairs) of
words containing sound-linked [alliterative] stems of words that encapsulate the ideas and ideals of prehistoric speakers of Germanic’. In other words, they form a logical link to ideas and practices beyond the narrative itself, making the Ideal Structure greater than the sum of its parts. The uppermost stratum ‘is that of the particular performance’, while an intermediary stratum is formed by ‘the formulas and other traditional compositional devices’ (Creed 1992, p. 65; see also 1985, pp. 147 ff.), like those defined by Walter Ong (chapter 2). That the composition technique behind Beowulf is a matter of vigorous debate, and that Creed positions himself at one end of the spectrum when stressing the spontaneous element (composition ‘in performance’) is, I believe, not of crucial importance for my analysis below.

Creed shows that in Beowulf the word rice (‘kingdom, realm, rule’; ‘powerful, mighty, of high rank’; Klaeber 1950) most frequently occurs in combination with the words rond/rand (denoting ‘edge’ but signifying ‘shield’) or red (‘advise, counsel, what is advisable, good counsel, help’). On the other hand the latter words are never combined in the same line. According to Creed (1992, pp. 68 f.) the poet(s) of Beowulf primarily associated authority and power (rice) with defence and protection (rond) on one hand, and with good advice or counsel (red) on the other.

I have made a similar analysis, focusing on the word red but based on a wider range of sources, using 118 Old English, alliterative poems in the original language, accessible on the Internet in The Labyrinth Library: Old English Literature:

The Meters of Boethius (British Library, Cotton Otho A.6): Proam and Meter 1–31
With the help of the search function I located and copied lines where the word *ræd* occurs in alliterating position, in single or compound form. The process of finding these lines in this vast material took less than three hours with the help of computer technology. If two alliterating words occur in the same line (apart from *ræd*, of course) I have included both, regardless of whether they are stressed or not. Below are the poems and individual (numbered) lines in which the *ræd*-combinations occurs with *ræd* in **bold** letters and alliterating words **underlined**:

**BEOWULF (COTTON VITELLIUS)**

172 *rice* to *rune*, **red** eabtedon
278 *purh* *rumne* sefan **red** geleran,
1201 *Eormenrices*, *geceas ecne *red*.
1325 *min* *runwita* ond *min *redbora,
1376 *roderas* *reotað*. *Nu is se *red* gelang
1555 *rodera* *redend*, *hit on *ryht* gesced
2027 *rices* *byrde*, *ond *het* **red** *talad*,
2056 *þone *þe ðu mid *ribte* **redan** scolest.
3080 *rices* *byrde*, **red** *enigne*,

**JUDITH (COTTON VITELLIUS)**

68 *se *rice* on his *reste* middan, *swa be nyste *reda* nanne
97 *mid *ræde* ond *mid *ribte* geleafan. *þa wearð *byre *rume* on mode,

**GENESIS A, B (JUNIUS)**

286 *rofe* *rincas*; *mid swilcum meg man *red* gehcpencan,
289 *redan* on *his* *rice*. *Swa me *het* *riht* ne *þinceð*,
424 *rice* *mid *ribte*; *is se *red* gescyred
561 *þu meaht* *his *þonne *rume* **red** gehcpencan.
1913 *rumor* secan. *Ic *red* sprece,
2031 *þa *rincas *þes* **red** *abolican,*
2182 **red** *abolican*. *Geð gerefa* *min*
2462 *þa *aras *braðe*, *se ðe *æft* **red** ongeat,

**EXODUS A, B (JUNIUS)**

526 *Run* *bið* gercenod, **red** forð *geð*,
549 *Swa *reordode* **reda** gemyn dig
Daniel (Junius)

8 ðenden hie þy rice redan moston,
177 rede and redleas, ribt ......
456 Weron byra redas rice, siddan bie rodera waldend,
651 redfæst sefa, da be to roderum beseab.
685 da be ðy rice redan sceoldon.
733 Ne mibton aredan runcrefiege men
740 aredde and arehte, buet seo run bude.

Christ and Satan (Junius)

498 rices redboran, brefian mihten.

Christ A, B, C (Exeter)

1525 redum birofene. Sceolon rape feallan

Guthlac A, B (Exeter)

132 butan by þy reafe redan motan.

Azarias (Exeter)

11 ryhte mid rede. Rodera waldend,

The Gifts of Men (Exeter)

73 read eabtiad. Sum bið bredtæfe.

Precepts (Exeter)

26 redbygende. Sy ymb rice swa bit mæge.'

Widsith (Exeter)

123 Redbere sobte ic ond Rondhere, Rumstan ond Gislhere,

Maxims I (Exeter)

22 Red sceal mid snyttro, ryht mid wisum,
91 ricene gerecan, ond him red witan
118 ryht rogian. Red bip nyttost,
138 Red sceal mon seegan, rune witan,
177 A scyle þa rincas geraðan ledan

The Order of the World (Exeter)

13 rincas redfæste; cuþon ryht sprekan,

The Rimming Poem (Exeter)

10 under roderum areabt, redmægne oferpeabt.

Resignation (Exeter)

15 red arere. Regneof ne let
18 ricum dryhtne, honne min red were.

The Lord's Prayer I (Exeter)

4 Cyme þin rice wide, ond þin redfæst willa

Andreas (Vercelli)

469 Ongan da reordigan redum snottor,
473 rowend rofran, redsnotterrain,
627 rodera redend, rune beseton?"
There are 102 relevant combinations, made up of 23 different words. The analysis shows that there are great variations in the frequency of alliterating words. It is hard to say where we should draw the line between true Ideal Structures and combinations governed by the demands of the narrative (including a possible ‘surprise effect’ attained by departing from the Ideal Structures), but in the following list I have tentatively separated words occurring eleven times or more from words occurring six times or less. These words make up exactly two thirds of the total:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rice</td>
<td>kingdom, realm, rule; powerful, of high rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>riht/ryht</td>
<td>right, what is right; law, justice; rightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rodor/rod</td>
<td>rodor = heaven; rod = cross (rood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>run</td>
<td>(secret) consultation, council, mystery; rune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rinc</td>
<td>man, warrior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rum</td>
<td>room, opportunity; spacious, large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breo, brað, raþe</td>
<td>quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gerefa, reaefian</td>
<td>rob, plunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rot</td>
<td>renowned, brave, strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brefn</td>
<td>raven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rad</td>
<td>raid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reþian</td>
<td>perform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reccan</td>
<td>narrate, tell, unfold; care (for)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recen</td>
<td>ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td>right, just; fierce, cruel, savage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regnþeof</td>
<td>very, great [regnþeof = great thief]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reordan</td>
<td>speek; reord = speech, voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reotan</td>
<td>weep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rest</td>
<td>rest; resting-place, bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rogian</td>
<td>[unique word of unknown etymology]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rom</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rond</td>
<td>protection, shield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>row</td>
<td>row, swim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Commentary**

In line with Creed’s observations on *Beowulf*, *red* is most frequently combined with *rice*, one time out of four. We find *riht/ryht* on an uncontested second place, being used somewhat less than one time out of five. This can be perceived as a ‘triangle’ of interlinked and mutually dependent concepts: *red* is a condition for *rice*, upheld with *riht*, and so on. When there is *unred*, *rice* is threatened or lost as King Æthelred II discovered to his cost, and so is *riht*. Without *riht* there would be chaos and lawlessness, a state in which no ‘woman could carry her new-born babe across the island from sea to sea without any fear of harm’, as a proverb stated had been possible during King Edwin’s of Northumbria reign (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.16). *Rice* would more or less correspond to the Latin term *regnum*, and *riht* to *iustitia*.

I have not attempted to separate the meanings of *rodor/rod* in the texts since I consider them to have approximately the same connotations in combination with *red*, denoting Christian piety as the ultimate virtue of king and commoner alike. Naturally, in Christian times, the guidance of God—or His clergy—were
of imperative importance for the good king, not least in the eyes of the clergy. We can, if we choose, express this in more general terms, saying that the good king needed to ensure and maintain a good relationship with the supernatural powers through constant and correct interaction. This is what a Latin author would call pietas.

It is, in my opinion, probable that run should, together with rodor/rod, be seen as part of ‘the second level of importance’ of ræd. Run is impossible to translate with a single word. It can mean ‘secret’, but also a rune as a writing sign; there is an element of what we today would call ‘private’ conversation, private deliberation, in the word; it can be used to describe the conversation between a lord and other members of his family or household. ‘Confidence’, ‘confidant’ and ‘confidential’ are other concepts which encapsulate further nuances of the word (see chapter 7 for details).

A few words should also be said about the ‘runners-up’, rinc and rum. Rinc explicitly points to the necessity of interacting with other men to attain ræd, men, that is, of the warrior class. In Beowulf and Judith rum refers to heart and mind respectively, in both cases signifying magnanimity. The line from Widsith is memorable for its ingenious inclusion of ræd, rond (= rice, cf. above) and rum in compound names.

A comparison: râd in the Old Saxon Heliand

For comparison I have made a similar analysis of the early ninth century, Old Saxon epic poem Heliand (see chapter 3). The aim was to find out to what degree this continental, heroic Gospel corresponded to the Anglo-Saxon texts. With its kinship with Anglo-Saxon biblical works like Christ III, Phoenix, Guthlac, and Genesis, Heliand is not linguistically, culturally or temporally further away from the Anglo-Saxon texts than geographically (Baesecke 1973). Naturally, there can be no question of equal representativity in a comparison of the major part of a corpus of poetry with a single text, even though the latter is long.

The word râd (corresponding to Old English ræd) occurs 14 times in Heliand:

71 Erodes thes rîkeas endi râdburdeon held
226 ‘ni gibu ic that te râde’, quað be, ‘rinco negênun,
627 riki râdgeo, the ribtien scal
1273 rincos te theru rûnu, thar the râdand sat,
1961 rîkean râdgeo, thene the al reht bican.
2668 rîncos râdan, buô sie thene rîkeon Krist
2721 râden an rûnon, endi ine rinkos bêt,
3226 thene rink an rûna endi imu is râd saga,
3813 is it reht the nis? Râd for thînun
There are five alliterating words, occurring 24 times in the poem. The correspondence with the combinations found in the Anglo-Saxon poetry is considerable; it is much less a question of different images than of a shift in emphasis (translations from Berr 1971 and Holthausen 1954):

- **riki** (7): domain, master, power
  
  Recht, Herrschaft, Gewalt, Volk; Herrscherstuhl

- **rinc/rink** (6): warrior, man (retainer)
  
  Mann, Jünger, Krieger

- **riht/reht** (5): just
  
  Recht, Gesetz, Gerechtigkeit; Pflicht, Nutzen

- **rûna; gi-runi** (5): secret (private) talk, ‘tête à tête’; secret
  
  geheime Beratung, Beschprechung; Geheimnis

- **riedun [reðion]** (1): speak
  
  reden, sprechen

The four Old Saxon words that occur more than once in *Heliand* are among the five most frequent corresponding Old English words. Only Old English **rodor** is absent from the alliterative pattern in *Heliand* but that can be easily explained since the word for ‘cross’ in *Heliand* is **galgo** , ‘gallows’. A further point of interest is that in ten cases **râd** alliterates with two words in the same line:

- **rinc/rink + rûn** (4)
- **riki + riht/reht** (4)
- **riki + rinc/rink** (1)
- **reðion + rûn** (1)

The distribution of these word-combinations is obviously not random. **Rinc/rink + rûn** and **riki + riht/reht** both occur four times. Allowing for speculative freedom in translation we could read the ‘equations’:

- warriors + personal/private consultation = counsel (to be acted-out)
- (acted-out) counsel + justice = rule

It should be pointed out once more that we are most likely not dealing as much
with differences in mentality between Anglo-Saxons and Saxons as with the variations on a set theme which would naturally occur in different works. *Heli-and* was created within a Frankish, monastic context, and the majority of the Anglo-Saxon texts in the study are Biblical or has a general Christian didactic tone. In view of the interaction and exchange of people and ideas between continental and insular monasteries it is not surprising to find similarities.

It is obvious from the analysis as well as the preceding discussion that *ræd* cannot be seen as a royal ‘power that comes from within’ as Chaney assumed (Chaney 1970, p. 177; quote and interpretation originally from Grönbech 1931). It was definitely not restricted to royalty, although that is the context in which it usually appears in Old English poetry. It was also an ideal, something *attained* through personal ability in the interaction with others. A king had to be discriminating in the choice of advisers, and wise, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff among the arguments in a council; so far his personal abilities were crucial for his success. Inability to give *ræd* went hand in hand with the inability to take it, from the right sources at least. *Hávamál* (9) gives us good advise on the subject:

| Sá er sél   | er sjálfur um á |
| łofog vit měðan lífír |   |
| því að íll ráð   | hefír maður ofí þegið |
| annars brjóstum úr. | |

Happy he who owns for himself praise and wit while in life; for ill advice has a man often taken out of another’s breast. (my translation)

A strong emphasis on the complementary relationship of power and advice was not restricted to Early Medieval Germanic society. Rather, it appears to be a common feature of oligarchic society in general. In the Roman Republic the ‘most important feature’ of government was, according to Michael Crawford, ‘the structure created by the traditional obligation on anyone responsible for taking action to consult a group of advisers. It is apparent everywhere in Roman society; the decision in the last resort might be that of one man alone, but the obligation to take advice was absolute. A *paterfamilias* might summon his family and his friends... a magistrate in the provinces had to consider the opinions of his entourage; the senate was the *concilium* of the two highest magistrates, the consuls...’ (Crawford 1978, pp. 33 f).

**Women and counsel**

We should note that women also act as advisers in the sources, if less frequently and often in less official contexts than men. The account of King Edwin’s benefaction in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, quoted above, mentioned the king’s sisters after his brothers, but before the archbishop.
That the words of women mattered in prehistoric and early historical Scandinavian society is old hat, and many examples can be found in the Icelandic sagas. The power and influence of royal women, not least widowed queens, in the continental Germanic kingdoms are also generally acknowledged. The names of the Frankish queen Brunhild (d. 613) and her Visigothic counterpart Goiswinth readily spring to mind, but there are other examples. The Lombard queens Theudelinda and Gundeperga (mother and daughter, living in the late sixth and early seventh centuries) both outlived their first royal consorts and married their respective successors, retaining the rank and role of queen in return for their support for the succession. Gundeperga even compelled her new husband to set aside his former wife (Wood 1994, pp. 166 ff.).

It is obvious that any analysis portraying noble and royal women as passive pawns in a system of exchange between rulers and families, alongside precious gifts like swords and good horses, fails to do justice to the Germanic-speaking peoples and, particularly, its women. This is clearly illustrated in a passage from one of Theodoric the Great’s letters, drafted by Cassiodorus, concerning the marriage of his niece Amalaberga to his anti-Frankish ally Herminafred, king of the Thuringians, c. 510:

1. In the desire to add you to my kinship, I unite you, by God’s favour, to the beloved pledge of my niece. Thus may you, who are descendent from a royal stock, shine forth still more widely in the splendour of Amal blood. I send you the glory of a court and home, the increase of a kindred, a loyal and comforting counsellor, a most sweet and charming wife. With you, she will lawfully play a ruler’s part, and she will discipline your nation with a better way of life. 2. Fortunate Thoringia will possess what Italy has reared, a woman learned in letters, schooled in moral character, glorious not only for her lineage, but equally for her feminine dignity. So, your country will be famous for her character, no less than for its victories. (Variae IV.1; my italics)

Not only does Theodoric/Cassiodorus explicitly call the girl a counsellor, but Amalaberga is also assigned an active role in her new position as a cultural ‘missionary’, to discipline the nation with a better—read: Italic/Ostrogothic—way of life. Little reading between the lines is required to recognise this girl as an Ostrogothic ambassador, assigned her office through her marriage, and that the ‘better way of life’ included keeping and reinforcing the bond of friendship with Ravenna. No doubt the princess’ education extended far beyond cultivated table-manners into state politics.

The primary expectation of royal women was obviously that they should actively labour to maintain peace and friendship between the families to which they were tied by kinship on one hand and matrimony on the other. Peace between ruling families in turn meant peace between peoples or nations. We recall one of the
epithets of Queen Wealtheow in *Beowulf,* the ‘peace-pledge of peoples’, *frídusibb folca* (l. 172). She is also characterised as mindful of etiquette, *cynna gemyndig* (l. 613), and ‘word-wise’, *wisfæst wordum* (l. 626) when we first meet her, passing around the mead-goblet in Heorot. She puts these qualities to use in short speeches to Hrothgar and Hrothulf (ll. 1168 ff.) and Beowulf (ll. 1215 ff.). We sense the presence of an ideal image behind the real Amalaberga and the fictitious Wealtheow, embracing education, wisdom, manners, eloquence and diplomacy.

From the Anglo-Saxon literary sources we can add a passage from *Maxims I* (ll. 83b ff.) on the desirable qualities of royal consorts, and note the presence of the words *run* and *ræd*:

... *Guð sceal in eorle,*  
*wig geweaxan, ond wif geþeon*  
*leof mid byre leodum, leobmod wesan,*  
*rune healdan, rumbeort beon*  
*mearum ond mædmum, meadorædenne*  
*for gestōmegten symle eghwærs*  
*eorðor æþelinga ærest gesgretan,*  
*formæne fulle to fœran hond*  
*rícæne geræcan, ond him ræd witan*  
*boldagendum bœm ætsonne.*

... *Battle shall in the lord*  
*his valour increase; and the wife prosper,*  
*dear to her people, bright-minded be,*  
*confidence keep, wide-hearted be*  
*with horses and treasure, a mead-provider*  
*for the retainers around the banquet;*  
*the protector of noblemen first greeting,*  
*first the cup to the lord’s hand,*  
*the rich one, reach; and know to give him*  
*counsel,*  
*the hall-owner, when the two are*  
*together* (my translation from the original)

The same social and ideological expectations must have molded women like Æthelberga, queen of the aforementioned King Edwin of Northumbria. In a letter from Pope Boniface V (619–25 AD) she was encouraged to ‘persevere in using every effort to soften his [the king’s] heart by teaching him the commandments of God’ and to help the king ‘to understand the excellence of the mystery that you have accepted by believing and the marvellous worth of the reward that you have been accounted worthy to receive in this new birth’ (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.11). Likewise, Queen Theudelinda of the Lombards ‘held a key position in pope Gregory the Great’s policies towards the Lombards’ (Wood 1994, p. 166). These were issues of scarcely less political importance and implications than that of joining or staying outside the European Union today, in the 1990s.

Frankish queens and princesses give us further examples. Ingund, daughter of the Frankish king Sigibert (d. 575), is claimed by Gregory of Tours to have persuaded her Visigothic husband Hermanagild to abandon his Arian faith for Orthodoxy, despite the hostility of the court (*Historiae* V.38; other accounts deprive her of this honour, see Wood 1994, p. 171). The princess Bertha, who became the consort of King Æthelberth of Kent, was another queen whose political potential was recognised by Gregory the Great, who in a letter encour-
aged her to support Augustine’s mission and to work for the conversion of her husband (Blair 1990, p. 80; Wood 1994, p. 121). The attitude of the bishops of Rome towards these queens give clear testimony that the queen’s role in society was far more than ceremonial and reproductive.

Finally, we return to the ideal behind the prose of King Theodoric’s letter above, this time expressed in the form of exuberant panegyric by Venantius Fortunatus in a poem written for King Chilperic I (d. 584) of the Franks in 580, containing a eulogy to his queen, Fredegund:

...sed tamen haec maneant et crescent prospera vobis
et lineat solio multiplicante frui
coniuge cum proprià, quae regnum moribus ornat
principis et culmen participata regit
provida conciliis, soliers, cauta, utilis aulae,
ingenio pollens, munere larga placens,
onnibus excellens meritis Fredegundis opima,
atque serena suo fulget ab ore dies,
regia magna nimis curarum pondera portans,
te bonitate colens, utilitate iuwans.
qua pariter tecum moderante palatia crescunt,
cuius et auxilio floret honore domus...
quae meritis proprii effulget gloria regis
et regina suo facta corona viro.
tempore sub longo haec te fructu prolis honoret,
surgat et inde nepos, ut renoveris avus...

...Yet may your good fortune remain and increase, and may it be granted that you enjoy your spreading dominion with your lawful consort. She adorns the king’s domains with her virtues, and shares in the rule on high; wise in counsel, sagacious, shrewd, a good mistress of your palace, intelligent, of pleasing generosity. The noble Fredegund excels in all virtues, the glorious light of day shines forth from her countenance; she carries the heavy weight of the cares of state, she cherishes you with her goodness, she helps you by her service. With her guidance at your side, your palace grows, by her help your house gains greater honour... She shines resplendent through her own merits, a glory to a king, and when she is queen, a crowning glory for her own husband. In the fullness of time may she honour you with offspring, so that a grandson will be born to make you grandfather, giving you fresh life... (Poem 9.1: Ad Chilpericum regem quando synodus Brinnaco habita est, ll. 115 ff. in George 1992, pp. 204 f.)
In the turbulent sphere of high-level social interaction all these women had an important and highly demanding role to play as active participants. The above examples not only show that women could have this role but that they were expected to be active performers on the political stage. It was a game in which the stakes were high, as shown by the tragic fate of some ‘peace-pledges of nations’. Having defeated the Vandals in Sicily in 491 and made them tributary, Theodoric the Great later (in 500 AD) married his sister Amalafrida to the new Vandal king, Thrasamund. This queen did not, however, find her spouse overly receptive to advise, and the relations between Ravenna and Carthage remained strained throughout Thrasamund’s reign. His successor Hilderic switched his allegiance entirely to the Roman emperor, and when Amalafrida dutifully tried to counteract, she was ‘outmanoeuvred and eventually killed’ (Wolfram 1988, p. 308).

**Ingiald before illráði**

The Ingiald we encounter in *Ynglinga saga* is a king who violates almost every principle upon which his power rests and therefore suffers the condemnation of posterity. Turning to older sources we find, however, that the tone is softer. *Historia Norwegia*, written in Latin around 1190 but based on some even older sources, probably mainly the Ynglinga genealogy in the *langfeðgatal* of Ari Frodi’s *Íslandingabók* of around 1125 (Krag 1991, pp. 143 ff.), states:

> Post istum [Braut-Onund] filius suus Ingialdr in regem sublimatur, qui ultra modum timens Ivarum cognomine withfadm regem tunc temporis multis formidabilem se ipsum cum omni comitatu suo cenaculo inclusos igne cremavit.

After him his son Ingiald was exalted to king; driven by an overwhelming fear of King Ivar, called Wide-fathom, who at this time inspired fear in many, he burnt himself to death with all his retainers, shut up in a guild-hall. (my translation, based on Krag 1991, pp. 129 f.)

This text says nothing of Ingiald’s character and does not pass judgement on his self-burning. The ‘overwhelming fear’ does appear derogatory, but extenuating circumstances are provided by the remark that Ingiald shared that fear with many others. In *Ynglingatal*, at last, the image is entirely different:

> Ok Ingiald ífjórvan trað reyks rosuðr á Ræningi, þás húshjófr hýjar leystum godkynning ígognum sté. Ok sá yrðr allri þíða sanngrøvastr með Sfilum þótt

And Ingiald alive was trodden by smoke’s welterer at Ræningi, as the house-thief with glowing feet the kinsman of gods fell upon. And that event [or: fate] all the people most consummate of the Svar found,
The word *sanngorvast* is central for our understanding of the strophe since it gives the people’s judgement on Ingiald’s death. It occurs in the manuscripts J1, J2 and F and should therefore be preferred to the *siallgætastr* of K although the latter word has been the choice of several scholars. It is difficult to translate *sanngorvast*, but it means something like ‘consummate, perfected, most appropriate, most fitting’. For readers of Swedish I quote Åkerlund on the subject, a text I find it impossible to translate:

Calling someone outstanding in bravery and a kinsman of the gods can hardly be seen as abuse. Ingiald’s death seems to have struck the Svear with awe and amazement and earned their admiration, not the contempt a cowardly act would have generated. The strophe does not state that a house was used as a funeral-pyre. The use of *húsþiófr* (house-thief) as a *kenning* for fire could, possibly, hint in that direction, but it could be equally possible that the expression led later interpreters to a false conclusion (above, pp. 76 f.). Thus neither *Historia Norvegiæ* nor *Ynglingatal* speaks as negatively about Ingiald as *Ynglinga saga* does. It is true that both texts focus on the deaths of the kings, not on their lives and careers, but I still find it remarkable that they should reject the opportunity to mark him as a tyrant if they considered him to be one. Any ‘reality’ could, perhaps, be hidden behind the fairly neutral words of *Historia Norvegiæ*, but the epitaph in *Ynglingatal* is as glorifying as that of any other king, if not more. It seems unlikely that the poet knew Ingiald as *illráði*; Ari Frodi did, however, in the twelfth century, as he includes *Ingialdr enn illráði* in his line

*es bann sjalfr sínu fjórví frøkno fjóstr of fara vilde.*

that he himself his own life in bravery the foremost would end.

*(Ynglingatal 20, my translation)*
of ancestors (Wessén 1952, p. 72). A century before Snorri wrote Ynglinga saga Ingiald had obviously been typecast as a bad king, at least in some circles.

In my opinion these observed disparities strongly indicate that this part of the poem and the saga did not evolve alongside on a single path of tradition as Krag (1991) and others before him would have us believe. The portrait of Ingiald the godkynning in Ynglingatal could well be a genuine example of a pre-Medieval horizon within the poem. At least the B group of kings (above, p. 80) would appear to be older than Ari’s genealogy.

The posthumous panegyric of Ynglingatal accordingly contradicts the fully-fledged fulminations of Ynglinga saga, whereas Historia Norvegiæ stands somewhere in between, perhaps somewhat inclined towards Ynglinga saga. Maybe Ingiald was not such a bad king after all?

Bad son - good father

The Ingiald of Ynglinga saga indeed possesses most of the traits which a king or chieftain should not possess, both regarded from a heroic-Germanic perspective and according to the elaborate, Christian, early and high Medieval standards. He lacks virtus; he is a traitor, an oath-breaker and a callous murderer. To make matters worse, he is weak (remember his childhood!) and cannot win his victories by any manly prowess (potentia) of his own. Snorri certainly passes no judgement on war-like exploits in general; kings successful in war are mentioned in positive terms. It is Ingiald’s methods that make him not a rex, but a tyrannus, one who loses the fidelitas of his soldiers and people. And, as the ninth-century Frank Ermoldus Nigellus puts it, a Rex sine potestate is a Contradictio in adiecto and no more deserves the name (Anton 1968, pp. 387, 390 ff and 401 ff.). Ingiald is a character whom King Hrothgar and Beowulf would have spoken of with the utmost contempt. The man with a wolf’s heart is a civilised creature turned into a beast. It is almost surprising that nothing negative is said about his relationship with the gods and the cult, his pietas, to use the Christian word.

Ingiald’s father, Braut-Onund is a striking contrast to his fiendish son. In Onund’s days, Suithiod had peace and good crops, the king was rich, successful in war (in Estonia, where he avenged the death of his father) and much liked by the people. Snorri also, as we have seen, mentions the much-visited (even by other kings) assembly (þing) and sacrifices (blót) at Uppsala in passing (‘The following spring King Granmar went to Uppsala to sacrifice as was the custom in times of peace...’; Ynglinga saga 38, see also 34). Onund thus kept his people well fed and managed law and cult well; he kept peace in his own country and was successful in war abroad, inspiring awe in his enemies; he was rich and could thus provide his followers with good gifts. In return, he earned the love and loyalty of his subjects. Although nothing is said on the subject we can rest assured that he
had a good ear for good advice. Also, he cleared new land, built many roads and journeyed throughout his country:

King Onund put much effort and cost into clearing land and settle it after it had been cleared. He also had roads built across the wastelands, and wide around the country they discovered woodless land, and there they established great provinces [stór heruð]. He had a mansion [bú] built for him in each province [stórherað] in Suithiod and went around the land on circuit [at veizulum]. (*Ynglinga saga* 33)

Onund is what, for instance, Alcuin and his contemporaries on the Continent in the time of Charlemagne would have called a ‘good king’, albeit pagan. Wallace-Hadrill summarises Alcuin’s standpoint thus: ‘... the king’s authority is characterised by potestas, sapientia, and praedatio; his aim should be the subjugation of inimicos gentes everywhere through the terror he inspires by his military power; to his own people he is protector, judge, guide and preacher; and the outcome of good rule will be earthly fidelitas, the peace and prosperity of his Christian subjects’ (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, p. 102). In an identical spirit, Einhard, writing in the 820s with reference to Charlemagne, makes a list of royal virtues: prudentia, magnanimitas, amicitia, constantia, patientia, liberalitas, moderatio, potentia (on the battlefield); all this will bring him and his people fortuna (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, p. 109).

As early as in the late 530s, the Frankish Bishop Aurelian (not the famous Aurelian of Arles) wrote a letter to King Theodebert I which takes the shape of an early ‘proto-mirror of princes’, naming ‘pity, justice, concord, piety, clemency and humility’ as desirable royal qualities (Collins 1983, pp. 19 ff.). Aurelian stresses that it was Theodebert’s virtues that made him a good king, not his birth. The king is ‘being led to expect triumph and dominion as the fruits of his piety’, and, if this incentive should prove insufficient, is reminded of Judgment Day ‘when power, birth, wealth and status would be held as being of no account’. Some of the listed virtues, like concordia and pietas, were a legacy of the Roman imperial tradition while humilitas was a ‘novelty’, probably inspired by the teachings of Ambrose of Milan (Collins 1983, pp. 21 ff).

The image of Onund could hardly be more complete. My conclusion is that it was consciously modelled on the royal ideal that developed on the Continent, most notably around Charlemagne, and which remained influential long afterwards (for example, Ullman 1969; Bagge 1987). Since Onund was a pagan, the Christian element is lacking, at least in explicit terms. There may, however, be reason to believe that Onund’s career as a road-builder is a reference to the fact that in his actions, if not in faith, he was a Christian. It is a small step from his roads to the bridges which people built for the benefit of the souls of the departed or themselves according to numerous inscriptions on Christian, eleventh-century rune-stones in the Mälar Valley, particularly Uppland (Gräslund 1989,
pp. 227 ff.). In Anglo-Saxon England the maintenance of bridges as a condition for land tenure is attested by charters (Loyn 1991, p. 101). The mention of the *blót* and *þing* at Uppsala that enjoyed popularity even among kings also clearly shows us that Onund dutifully observed *pietas*.

Thus Onund makes the ideal, contrasting background for the villainy and disaster of Ingiald’s reign. Devoid of royal virtues, Ingiald cannot have *fortuna*, nor can his people. The inevitable consequence of his atrocities is the downfall of the Ynglinga dynasty and the humiliating subjection of the Svear to foreign rule, a situation that they would have considered ‘to be nothing short of servitude’ (Higham 1995, p. 230, with reference to Anglo-Saxon conditions).

The parallels that I have pointed out between the story of Onund and Ingiald in *Ynglinga saga* and the Continental ideology of kingship unfortunately yield no conclusive evidence as to when the former was originally composed. That the story cannot be older than the ninth century in its present form is of little interest, since it cannot possibly have retained a fixed form for 400 years. I find it most likely, though, that in its present form it belongs to the Christian milieu of the 11th and 12th centuries, when the ideology of kingship, carried and nursed by the newly established Church, took root on Scandinavian ground. The rune-stone analogy gives some support to this view. Charlemagne (that is, Charlemagne as an ideological construction, as the ideal king) was here the ultimate model, often being presented as a Christian hero, a new David or Solomon.

Indeed, it would not surprise me if the story or stories which were ultimately incorporated into *Ynglinga saga* were originally intended as (or in time transformed into) a mirror for (Christian) princes: ‘Look at Ingiald *illráði* and see what happens to bad kings; just you beware, my boy...’ The possible Judas analogy, indicated above, also points in that direction. As a Judas, Ingiald is a traitor not only to men but also to the Lord, whose minister on earth he is supposed to be (although he knows neither Him nor the concept of *ministerium Dei*). This, however, does not preclude the possibility that the story has pre-Christian roots; archaic traits like the great number of kings are possible traces of older, narrative layers. An older set of morals in those layers need not have been alien in all its aspects to a Christian environment, and thus easily transformed.

We can conclude that the type-casting of Ingiald and his father Onund is a strong indication that their images have been significantly distorted. If we, for a moment, accept the narrative and assume that it contains an authentic core not only when it comes to historical process but also to historical events, we would suspect that this distortion originated in the political propaganda of the new rulers of Suithiod, Ivar and his successors (or whoever they were). To create an image of Ingiald as an abhorrence would serve to strengthen their own claims to legitimacy. And there are several oddities in the narrative hinting in that direction, as we shall see below.
The narrative of *Ynglinga saga* seems to imply that the late Ynglinga kings had direct rule only over the central province (*stórberáð*) of Tiundaland, although they were the highest kings (*œztir konunga*) in Suithiod. The other provinces were governed by rulers who were also of royal standing, kings in name and inferior only in degree of status; of possible economical differences we learn nothing. Suithiod appears here as a confederacy. This royal plurality is conspicuously present also in other parts of *Heimskringla*, for instance, in the saga of Harald Fairhair (7). On the bloodstained road to unification King Harald has to overcome veritable hoards of kings, provincial rulers. To conquer ‘Trondheim’ only, that is, the Trøndelag, he is said to have had to pass over the bodies of eight kings. The dominions of these kings did not correspond to anything which we today would recognise as kingdoms. We learn about four of the kings that ‘one ruled over Verdal, the other over Skogn, the third over Sparbyggefylke and the fourth over Innerøy, he had Eynafylke’.

This fragmented system where a major social unit (a ‘people’) is subdivided into groups of—at least theoretically—equal status, each with its own ruler, reminds us of the Gothic polities of the fourth century and the Tervingian *reiks–thiudans* organisation (above, pp. 35 ff.). Useful analogies which contain more of a geographical aspect are provided by the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The course of the invasions of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes and the formation of kingdoms on English soil by these Germanic-speaking peoples is, at best, obscure. The so called ‘invasion’ appears to have been a drawn-out process of several ‘waves’, starting in the late fourth century and continuing into the early sixth. Towards the end of the sixth century the process of Christianisation begins in earnest and written sources become more abundant, enabling us to build up a picture of the development of the kingdoms until they ultimately coalesce into a single unit (England) under a single king in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Even so, we often have to rely on later sources for our understanding of the earlier centuries (for example, Bassett 1989; Yorke 1990). There is a vast secondary literature on Anglo-Saxon history, written sources and archaeology, but I will here only concentrate on a few points of particular relevance for the picture of early Scandinavian kingship and kingdoms presented by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*, 33 ff., and elsewhere.

In the sixth-, seventh- and early eighth-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms we sometimes find kings acting together in surprising numbers. For example, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that when King Edwin of Northumbria invaded Wessex in 626 AD his forces killed five enemy kings in a single battle (in spite of this two kings of Wessex were alive and well two years later; Wood 1979, p. 19). Bede reports that at the battle of Winwæd in 655 AD ‘Penda of Mercia, overlord of all the southern kingdoms, was able to call upon thirty contingents, each led
by *duces regii* (‘royal commanders’), to fight with him against the Northumbrians’ (Yorke 1990, p. 11).

A document called *Tribal Hidage* (probably of late seventh-century, Mercian origin) lists thirty-five peoples of widely differing sizes, from the *West Sexena* (West Saxons = Wessex) with one hundred thousand hides of land to obscure units like the *Swordora* and *Gifla* with three hundred hides, and it is believed that a hide at this time was the definition of ‘land sufficient to maintain one family’ (Yorke 1990, pp. 10 f.; see also Dumville 1989). Some (or most) of the smaller units were probably already at this stage dependent on more powerful ones but retained a degree of nominal independence and their own royal houses. These semi-autonomous units within major kingdoms were called *regiones* by Bede and others, while the word *provinciae* is generally reserved for kingdoms. The hierarchical relationship where kings are able to claim superiority over other kings is expressed in the Latin terms *reges* and *subreguli* (kings and sub–kings). A *subregulus* was standing in a tributary position to the *rex* but still maintained formal rule over his own subjects (Campbell 1979 and 1986; Bassett 1989, p. 17).

In Stephen Bassett’s words, Bede ‘was... watching the earlier rounds of a fiercely contested knock-out competition... The document called the Tribal Hidage... is like the *Sports Pink* newspaper which reports the winners of, say, the fifth round of the F.A. Cup. Most of the little teams have long gone; there are a few potential giant-killers left – the Spalda, the Arosætna, the East and West Willa – survivors only because they have so far avoided being drawn against the major teams. But the next round will see them off; they have had their brief moment of glory and no more will be heard of them’ (Bassett 1989, p. 25).

In the following centuries we find the title *rex* being increasingly monopolised by more powerful rulers as the polities developed from a loose network structure into more integrated, organisational units, the ‘heptarchy’ of kingdoms which we know from before the Danish invasions: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex, Sussex, Essex and Kent. At first, the changes are often revealed in the rhetoric of the powerful, when a superior king refers to a subject king as his *subregulus, princeps, praefectus, comes* or *minister*, although the latter would still have been recognised as *rex* among his own people and enjoyed royal attributes. These hierarchical relationships in time become permanent and subordinate leaders loose their royal status: ‘In ninth century charters *principes* appear as having rights over extensive lands coordinate with, but inferior to, those of the king’ (Campbell 1986, p. 89). When particularly powerful kings gain overlordship (*imperium*) over other kingdoms they confirm their position by, for example, confirming charters of their subject kings. For example, in 742 the privileges of the Kentish churches are confirmed by King Æthelbald of Mercia. In the later part of the same century, ‘Offa is clear that he alone can authorise the granting of land in perpetuity to churches’, not only in Mercia but in all the kingdoms over which he ruled (Wal-
lace-Hadrill 1971, pp. 110 f.). Such overlords are also known to have ‘experimented’ with their titles to convey their superior prestige; for example, Æthelbald is titled rex Britanniae and monarchus Britanniae in charters while Offa favoured rex Anglorum (Yorke 1981, pp. 181 f.; see also Higham 1995 on overlordship in general).

Joint kingship is a feature well-known from Germanic societies, both from origin-myths and history, with or without a territorial division. We found it among the Ostrogoths in the generation before Theodoric the Great (above, pp. 40 ff.); it occurred among the Visigoths, the Merovingians, the Lombards, the Alamans, and – with particular frequency – the Anglo-Saxons (Wood 1979, pp. 17 ff.).

Among the last-mentioned, joint kingship appears to be primarily an early phenomenon, but there are some instances recorded as late as in the seventh and eighth centuries, for example, Sieghere and Sebbe of East Anglia, who appear to have had equal authority. There could also be more than one ruling king in a realm, though they might not have been of equal power. In this case maybe all male members of age of a ruling family shared the title, although one may have been senior, ‘executive’ king (Brooke 1989, p. 81), or it is a system with subreguli. Sometimes a son was made subregulus to his father; this was a way of ensuring intra-dynastic succession but could also have increased a son’s authority as a military commander.

Using the Anglo-Saxon system as analogue and model, we can sketch the Swedish scene in the following way. In Suithiod Onund had established himself as a superior rex, probably simply by being a good – and, therefore, successful – king. His supreme status may have been expressed in his management of the common cult and/or his position as military leader on joint expeditions (where participation may or may not have been voluntary). The others, like Yngvar, Sporsnjall and Sigverk, were reges to the people of their own regiones, but subreguli to Onund and Ingiald, bound to them by oaths and paying regular tribute.

In the light of this it does not appear anomalous that Ynglinga saga counts Agnar and Alf, the sons of King Yngvar of Fjädrundaland, among the kings present at Ingiald’s accession. Either they came to partake formally in their father’s regnum (on an equal status or as sub-kings) or any son and/or brother of a ruling king shared the title, that is, any rightful, potential heir. The first alternative seems most in line with the analogical evidence.

The Ynglinga kings’ status is confirmed by the saga’s information that Onund had – or built – a manor, bú, in each stórherað in Suithiod (Ynglinga saga 33), that is, outside the area of his immediate control. This reminds us of the villae of Bede’s Anglo-Saxon kings in tributary regiones (Campbell 1986, pp. 99 ff.; Charles-Edwards 1989, pp. 28 f.). On his constant tours, Onund maintained his authority and carried out whatever judicial functions (if any) he might have had from these administrative centres, and to these his tribute (in kind) was delivered.

Like the Anglo-Saxon kings he and his no doubt substantial retinue would partly live off this tribute and partly exploit the hospitality of local nobles. By
being more or less constantly on the move, they were able to distribute the financial burden of their presence more or less equally among his subjects, thus in the ideal case minimising the risk of complaints. In his own dominion, King Granmar did the same: ‘In the autumn, King Granmar and his son-in-law King Hiorvarð went on circuit [veizlu] to their mansions [búum] on the island called Sela’ (Ynglinga saga 38–39). Onund’s subreguli would also have provided him with troops for his campaigns (Sawyer 1989, p. 5). The theory that there were several kings in Suithiod but that the king of Uppsala held the foremost rank perhaps gains support from the passage in Beowulf, where it is stated that Onela was ‘the best of the sea-kings, of those who distributed treasure in the Swedish kingdom’ (þone selestan sæcyninga / þara ðe in Swiorice sinc brytnade; Beowulf, ll. 2382 f.); however, it may only be a reference to Swedish kings in general.

Onund’s concern for roads suggests that his object was integration of the kingdom. The symbolic significance is obvious, but from a practical point of view improved communications would also have been beneficial for the administrative, fiscal and military organisation in a social system of intrinsic instability and particularism. Onund’s clearing of new land may be regarded equally symbolically as extending the boundaries of the civilised world, but it may also be a hint at a latent crisis; perhaps the dynasty by this time had depleted its land resources by permanent grants, much like the late Merovingian and late Carolingian kings (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, pp. 126 f. and 1982, p. 247). Land ownership was essential for a king since it not only yielded him new revenues but could also be given to loyal subjects for services rendered or expected. We get the impression that ownership of land was exclusively private. When Onund cleared new land, he had to do it in marginal areas, where no one had claims on it. Any free man could probably have done the same, but on such an insignificant scale that no compiler of stories would have taken notice.

The saga’s glorified image of Onund’s reign thus seems to veil structural problems intrinsic to early Germanic kingdoms. While his people prospered in tranquil contentment, the king laboured like an ant to maintain or increase his economic—and thus his social and military—potential. Ingiald inherits his father’s kingdom, and also his father’s ambitions. If we accept the basic facts of the saga, he decides to employ more drastic means to achieve his ends. He simply tries to kill off as many subreguli as possible, taking direct control over their regiones and a firmer grip on the purses of their subjects. It is obvious that he also aims to monopolise the title of king as the new leaders of the regions are referred to as chieftains.

Ingiald may not have resorted to base murder at all but may have defeated his subreguli in regular campaigns. Even so, his actions were still drastic and risky. He might have become an oath-breaker in the process, but perhaps such things caused him no sleepless nights. More seriously, his popularity would be certain to plummet in large parts of the provincial, upper social strata, and the risk of
rebellion would be imminent for a long period of time. Indeed, when at last he has brought about the final exit of the subregulus(?) Granmar of Södermanland, he does not place a member of his own family on the empty high seat but appoints a number of ‘chieftains’ to manage the regio (Ynglinga saga 39). These were probably positioned at several strategic points. Apparently Södermanland had its own regional sub-divisions. It was a common safeguard to send administrators to conquered territories, to try to build up a loyal nobility. For example, when the Carolingians conquered the Lombard kingdom in the late eighth century no less than ‘360 Franks, 160 Alamanni, 15 Bavarians and 2 Burgundians’ were assigned important posts on Lombard territory, each bringing ‘a big vassal company’ (Steuer 1989, p. 101).

Unfortunately, the saga is silent as to what administrative measures Ingiald took in the other regiones. As we saw above, it merely states that he subjugated their kingdoms and took skatta from them (Ynglinga saga 36). Ynglinga saga 33–41 gives us a condensed picture of a historical process which among the Anglo-Saxons took several centuries, going from networks of nominally (if not actually) equal polities to the idea of monarchy and the attempts to realise it. As a history of events it is certainly not to be trusted, but in the light of analogy it would be overly critical to say that the narrative builds entirely on learned speculation.

Leadership and loyalty

One particular part of the story of Ingiald’s military endeavours deserves additional attention since it accords with what is known of conditions in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and (as far as can be known) among the Goths: the unsuccessful war against the kings of Södermanland and Östergötland.

Polities like the Šuithiod of Ynglinga saga were formed by personal ties of loyalty and dependence, which permeated society from the top down. Essentially, success and power could be measured by the number of bonds of loyalty a leader could tie to his—or her—person. This was not least important in royal and aristocratic, that is, military circles. A king or nobleman attached to himself young, landless men of—primarily—good family in a private bodyguard, the retinue, comitatus, hird. These young men were entertained with food and mead, weapons and gifts, and repaid their leader with armed service and – ideally – loyalty unto death. The difference between kings, chieftains, ealdormen or comites was in this respect a difference in degree, not in kind. The Beowulf poem expresses this clearly when the eponymous hero has returned home after his great deeds among the Danes and delivers all his won treasure to his king, Hygelac. The king gives him gifts in return, an exquisite sword, seven thousand hides of land, a hall and a high-seat, whereby the poet remarks:
As Beowulf had been given land by Hygelac he became comparable with the latter; both owned a hall and a high-seat. Now Beowulf could move from Hygelac’s hall to his own and surround himself with his own retinue of landless young men, whom in turn he, in time, could provide with land. Still, the bonds between him and Hygelac were unbroken. At the same time as Beowulf now was a lord he looked up to Hygelac as his lord.

Beowulf’s loyalty was not directed at an abstract Geatic nation or ‘the Crown’ but to the individual Hygelac. In the Anglo-Saxon sources the loyalty to a king is not differentiated from that to any other lord. ‘This tendency to associate kingship with personal lordship culminated in the tenth-century Colyton oath, in which King Edmund, desirous of strengthening the monarchy, commanded his subject to swear fealty to him, not as it behooves a man to be loyal to his king, but “just as a man ought to be faithful to his lord”’ (Abels 1988, p. 18). If a nobleman came into conflict with his king and was forced into exile it was a matter of course that his companions should follow him. It made no difference if their lord had rebelled against the king or was otherwise to blame. He who chose to stay and shift his loyalty and service to the king was dishonoured. A letter from the late seventh century, written by Bishop Aldhelm in Wessex to the monks who served under Bishop Wilfrid of Northumbria, at a time when the latter had fallen out of favour with King Ealdfrith and been driven into exile, shows that even monks were measured with the same ideological yard-stick as noble members of an armed retinue:

...even if necessity require you to be driven from your native land with the prelate who is deprived of his episcopal dignity, and you have to go to any parts of the broad realms across the sea... Behold, if laymen, ignorant of the divine knowledge, abandon their faithful lord whom they have loved during his prosperity, when his good fortune has come to an end and diversity befallen him, and prefer the ease of their native land to the afflictions of their exiled lord, are they not regarded as deserving of ridicule and hateful jeering, and of the clamor of execration? What then will be said of you if you should let the pontiff who has fostered you and raised you go into exile alone? (Abels 1988, p. 17)

When after Beowulf’s homecoming Hygelac decided to go to war he would have brought his own retinue under his own direct command. He would also have summoned Beowulf and his other chieftains, who would have participated under Hyge-
lac’s supreme command but commanded their respective retinues themselves.

In the same manner, when Ingiald fought together with the chieftains from the subjugated kingdoms the forces of each leader would have formed a separate contingent. It was this arrangement which made it easy for the regional leaders to suddenly cease fighting, turn to their respective men and tell them to call it a day. Their loyalty they kept for their dead lords.

An alternative scenario

The feats attributed to Ingiald are reminiscent, for instance, of those of the Merovingian King Clovis. During the course of his reign, he succeeded in defeating and killing all other Frankish kings, several of whom were his relatives, taking ‘...their kingdom and their treasure. In the same way he encompassed the death of many other kings and blood-relations of his whom he suspected of conspiring against his kingdom. By doing this he spread his dominion over the whole of Gaul’ (Historiae II.42). Clovis, however, was successful to the end and did not earn the reputation of Ingiald. In Sverre Bagge’s words: ‘A good king is a successful king’ (Bagge 1991, p. 156).

But it is also possible that this violent process had already been started, contrary to the saga’s version, by Onund. Ynglingatal (19) mentions that he was the enemy of the Estonians, as does Ynglinga saga, but also that he had killed a certain Hogni, of whom the saga seems silent:

\[
\text{ok sá fromvôr foldar beinum} \quad \text{Hôgna brôrs um horfinn var} \quad \text{and the promoter with the bones of the earth of Hogni’s cairn was wrapped.}
\]

As Walter Åkerlund (1939, p. 107) pointed out, this interpretation of the text is far more convincing than Adolf Noreen’s: ‘Och denne, som bragde branta fjâll att ramla (då han anlade fjällvägar)...’ (And this man, who made steep mountains fall [when he built mountain roads]...) (Noreen 1925, p. 207; my translation). Noreen (1925, p. 242) associates hreyr/hrôr with the small cairns that serve as route-markers in the mountains, although, when it occurs elsewhere in Ynglingatal, it doubtless stands for gravrôr, burial cairns. To ‘promote the cairn’ of someone, of course, means to successfully encourage his premature departure from this world.

This Hogni must have been important to be mentioned in the poem. And as we have seen, Ynglinga saga does mention a very important Hogni, namely the king of Östergötland, who for a long time was involved in fighting against Ingiald but managed to hold his kingdom against the latter until his death (Ynglinga saga 39). Now what if those Hognis were one and the same? In that case, time and tradition have distorted the events during the reigns of the last Ynglinga kings considerably. Then it must have been Onund who at least initiated the aggression
on Södermanland, and who sent Granmar to Valhalla and appointed chieftains over the regio. These chieftains probably resided in the royal manors mentioned earlier. Perhaps Ingiald shared the command of the host with his father, as did many Anglo-Saxon and Frankish princes. Hogni may, as the saga says, have been Granmar’s ally in the fighting (Ynglinga saga 38) or the clash between him and Onund may have developed later. Whichever was the case, Hogni at last shared Granmar’s personal fate, but his kingdom may have retained its full, administrative independence. Onund can have had no possible means of enforcing an effective, administrative control over Östergötland and probably contented himself with entering into a treaty with Hogni’s successor and taking tribute.

From historical event to didactic narrative

If this sketched scenario is closer to the truth than the narrative of the saga – which, of course, we cannot prove – then why did the story change? According to Sawyer, when Snorri ‘and any predecessors whose work he developed’, elaborated the Ynglinga tradition, they drew heavily on their knowledge of ‘events in the tenth, eleventh and even twelfth centuries’. Among the parallels between Ynglinga saga and such events, Sawyer notes ‘the general theme of Danish domination’ but also detailed similarities: ‘... the meeting of three kings (c. 38) appears to echo that reported in 1101, Aun was driven from his kingship of Uppsala twice, and found exile in Västergötland (c. 25), as did both Olof Skötkonung and Inge I, and, most remarkable of all, Hogni, king of Östergötland, was the one Swedish king who preserved his independence from the Svear (c. 39)’ (Sawyer 1989, p. 11). The Swedish twelfth-century kings Inge I, Sverker and Karl were all closely associated with Östergötland, and seem to have had their economic bases there. At times, all three also held the kingship over the Svear (Sawyer 1989, pp. 24 ff.). A political situation in which the Götar dominated the Svear would indeed provide a suitable context in which the tradition about Hogni would undergo changes.

Whether Onund was also responsible for other aggressions, later ascribed to Ingiald, is impossible to say. As we cannot be certain that the two kings are genuine, historical characters the question is also of limited interest. If there is a historical core in the narrative the likely scenario is, in my belief, that the son continued in very much the same tracks as the father. In reality, their aims and methods were most likely the same: to strengthen the economic, political and ideological basis of the kingship to the disadvantage of the other rulers within the people, by force if need be (cf. Nerman 1925, p. 230). Perhaps they even consciously tried to abolish the institution we call subregulus altogether, making royal status within Suithiod exclusive to the dynasty of the rex. This is obviously what Snorri believes or intends his readers to believe, since we find the kings of the provinces replaced with chieftains after Ingiald’s mass-murder. If so, the
efforts of Onund and Ingiald to transform kingship from a position where they functioned as *primus inter pares* in the direction of what we call monarchy (literally meaning the rule of one man) was indeed an ambitious venture.

When this process of integration may have taken place among the Svear is a matter of speculation. In Denmark we can recognise the signs of the formation of larger organisational units during the seventh and eighth centuries in the erection of Danevirke, the foundation of Ribe and the building of the Kanhave canal across Samsø (Sawyer 1983, pp. 73 ff.). Although we have to wait until the tenth century to find Harald Gormsen explicitly boasting of having won all Denmark for himself, Rimbert claims that he had predecessors, at least in the middle of the ninth century (*Vita Anskarii* 24, see chapter 6). Events in the Mälar valley which may be significant is the foundation of Birka and the royal manors at Adelsö and Old Sigtuna in the late 8th century. These are only a few links in a complex chain of Scandinavian development (Hyenstrand 1996, pp. 74 ff.), but they are more or less contemporary with the first viking expeditions eastwards and westwards. These are signs of large-scale organisation as well as competition. What if Birka was founded after the overthrow of the old royal house of the Svear by some conquering, southern-Scandinavian war-lord in co-operation with allied local nobles with the aim to wrest economic power from Old Uppsala? Or perhaps by Onund or Ingiald before the downfall as a new and modern, economic nave in an enlarged kingdom, more central than Old Uppsala?

As has been demonstrated, we can conceive of possible strategies behind the texts which make it highly likely that Ingiald was no worse than any other Iron Age king, although that, to be sure, may be bad enough from a modern standpoint. The villain we encounter in *Ynglinga saga* is a product of a process of type-casting, a transformation from man to stereotype.

First, he was unlucky enough to be defeated and lose his life and kingdom. His death may also have marked the end of the power of the Ynglinga dynasty in Suithiod, as the saga says, but, on the other hand, the story of Olaf trételgia’s flight to Värmland is highly dubious. In fact, *Historia Norvegiae* claims that Olaf reigned long and peacefully, dying in old age in Sweden: *Ejus [Ingiald’s] filius Olavus cognomento trételgia diu et pacifice functus regno plenus dierum obiit in Swethia.* The passage on Olaf’s son, Halvdan hvítbeinn, is equally interesting as it states that Halvdan came from Sweden to Norway where the people in the mountains made him their king: *Olavus genuit Halvdanum cognomine hvítbein, quem de Swethia venientem Norwegenses in montanis sibi regem constituerunt...*

Perhaps Olaf did move his main high seat (cf. Åkerlund 1939, pp. 70 ff.), not to Värmland but to Adelsö, adjacent to the new economic centre of Birka? Instead of the ultimate end of Ynglinga power, we may surmise a break in the dynasty’s monopoly of the ‘throne’, a break which in reality may have been as undramatic as the opposite. Also, the Svear were now subjected to the overlordship of someone who
might have been known as Ivar Wide-fathom (whether Ingiald did indeed succumb to the power of a great, southern-Scandinavian war-lord or to a hostile alliance within his own dominion is not of primary importance, but Ivar Wide-fathom in my view has something of the air of a deus ex machina in the narrative).

In this situation, it would have been natural if Ingiald’s bad reputation started to develop in the propaganda of Ivar’s (or an anonymous adversary’s) party and/or of local nobles who wished to see the end of Ynglinga power. Had Ingiald been successful, posterity might have known him as a hall-builder and conqueror. Now, by depicting him as tyrannus, his enemies could claim that Ingiald had forfeited his right to rule. And apparently propaganda was needed. That the Svear were not at all as united against their old lords as Snorri claims, is indicated by the fact that many are said to have fled Suithiod, outlawed by Ivar: \textit{þat var mikill mannfiði, er útlagi fór af Svíþióð fyrir Ívari konungi} (Ynglinga saga 43). The conflict we detect in Rimbert’s \textit{Vita Anskarii}, between a pro-Christian ‘reformist’ and a heathen ‘conservative’ party among the upper class Svear of the mid-ninth century, might perhaps have its roots in the events of Onund’s and Ingiald’s reigns (\textit{Vita Anskarii} 17-20).

Secondly, the political situation in Sweden in the twelfth century may, as suggested above, have encouraged a twist of events in favour of the Östgötar through the revision of Hogni’s role.

Thirdly, the wish of Snorri and/or some predecessor of his to paint moralistic portraits of Onund and Ingiald as opposites would have further distorted the tradition, adding black marks to Ingiald’s already badly stained reputation.

All this is very speculative, but it is not of primary importance to seek the truth about the original events. Suffice it to say that the story of Onund and Ingiald reflects structural problems of early Germanic kingship and different practical solutions to these that both we and Snorri would expect kings of the past to have sought.

In this connection it would not even be surprising to learn that the name Ingiald is secondary, that it was given by tradition to an unsuccessful king of the past because of its long-lived associations with failure. In \textit{Widsith} (ll. 45 ff.) someone called Ingeld is defeated by Hrothwulf and Hrothgar and several centuries later Saxo gives us a lengthy account of King Ingeld, a weak ruler until roused by the hero Starkad to an appropriate act of violence (\textit{Gesta Danorum} I, pp. 307 f. and 330 ff.). We will never learn the truth of the matter but it is not out of the question that the mingling of legend and history around Ingiald reached this far.

As a matter of curiosity, I can add that the ‘royal’ mound \textit{Ingialdshögén} (Ingiald’s Mound) in Vansö parish, Södermanland, becomes a theoretically possible resting-place for the remains of Ingiald through my suggested late date of the end of Ynglinga rule. The mound was excavated in 1919 by Sune Lindqvist, and from the finds it can be dated to around 800 (Lindqvist 1936, p. 234; earlier he had suggested a date in the seventh or eighth century, 1921a, pp. 90 f.). Unfortunately for all romantics, however, the tradition connecting the mound
with King Ingiald seems to be of no older date than 1794, when a local curate named Hacksell read Ynglinga saga and identified the Ræningi of Ynglingatal with Rällinge in the neighbouring parish (Lindqvist 1936, pp. 23 f.). Although accepted by Noreen (1925, pp. 243 f.), this identification is pure conjecture.

Exit Ingiald: high-kings and suicide

Returning to our hypothetical reevaluation of King Ingiald, a final incident in his life remains to be highlighted – the final incident, his suicide. As pointed out above, the epitaph in Ynglingatal has a distinctly heroic tone, whereas in the Christian, moral universe of Ynglinga saga Ingiald’s act merely adds a humiliating taint of cowardice to the fitting and inescapable end of a tyrant. In my mind, this further strengthens the argument that at least this part of Ynglingatal predated the saga by more than a generation or two (see also above, pp. 102 ff.).

Unfortunately Ynglingatal is silent up to the point when Ingiald is already burning; nothing is said of why he put the torch to the wood. But assuming that the later sources give the right principal cause, Ingiald appears to have had a fellow-sufferer in the Greutungian King Ermanaric. He too died by his own hand (c. 375) before the onslaught of an overwhelming enemy, in this case the Huns, as related by Ammianus Marcellinus less than 20 years after the event (around 390):

The Huns, overrunning the territory of those Alans who border on the Greuthungi and are commonly called the Don Alans, killed and stripped many of them, and made a pact of friendship with the survivors. This success emboldened them to make a sudden inroad on the rich and extensive realm of Ermenrich, a warlike king whose many heroic exploits had made him a terror to his neighbours. Ermenrich was hard hit by the violence of their unexpected storm. For some time he endeavoured to stand his ground, but exaggerated reports circulated of the dreadful fate which awaited him, and he found release from his fears by taking his own life. (Ammianus 31.3.2)

These few sentences give us the only reasonably reliable information on Ermanaric, whose life and exploits are clouded by the myth-making of later centuries. For instance, Jordanes’ statement (from c. 550) that he ruled ‘all the Scythian and German nations’ (Getica 23.116-20) is, no doubt, much exaggerated (for example, Heather 1991, p. 88). Late versions of the legend of Ermanaric have unanimously substituted his suicide for death at the hands of two brothers whose sister he is said to have killed. This topos is first encountered in Jordanes’ Getica from c. 550 AD, but interwoven with the earlier:
Now although Hermanaric, king of the Goths, was the conqueror of many tribes... yet while he was deliberating on this invasion of the Huns, the treacherous tribe of the Rosomoni [gens Rosomonorum], who at that time were among those who owed him their homage, took this chance to catch him unawares. For when the king had given orders that a certain woman of the tribe I have mentioned, Sunilda by name, should be bound to wild horses and torn apart by driving them at full speed in opposite directions (for he was roused to fury by her husband’s treachery to him [pro mariti fraudulento discessu]), her brothers Sarus and Ammius came to avenge their sister’s death and plunged a sword into Hermanaric’s side [Hermanarici latus ferro petierunt]. Enfeebled by this blow, he dragged out a miserable existence in bodily weakness. (130) Balamber, king of the Huns, took advantage of his ill health to move an army into the country of the Ostrogoths... Meanwhile Hermanaric, who was unable to endure either the pain of his wound or the inroads of the Huns, died full of days at the great age of one hundred and ten years. (Getica 129-130).

The image of the old and hapless king, watching his realm fall apart while crying with the words of Richard Wagner’s Parsifal: ‘Die Wunde! Die Wunde! Sie brennt mir hier zur Zeite!’, moving as it may be, takes us no further than to Grand Opera. The reference to the Huns was likely taken directly from Ammianus, since several passages concerning Ermanaric in the Getica acknowledge Jordanes’ knowledge of and indebtedness to the Roman historian, for example, ‘the conqueror of many tribes’ (Gschwantler 1980, p. 202; Heather 1991, pp. 24 f.).

Ermanaric and Ingiald seem to have had much in common ‘professionally’, caring much for war and little for neighbourliness. And like Ingiald, Ermanaric in time acquired the reputation of a traitor, murderer and tyrannus. Beowulf speaks of Ermanaric’s ‘treacherous hatred’ (searoniðas; l. 1200), and in Deor (ll. 41-51) we learn that he (like Ingiald) had the mind of a wolf, ruled over an extensive realm, was cruel and brought sadness to his subjects. However, in the older poem Widsith (ll. 88 ff.) Ermanaric is presented in a more favourable light by the eponymous speaker, a wandering scop, recounting all kings and peoples he has visited:

& ic wes mid Eormanrice ealle þraga. Per me Gotena cyning gode dohte: se me beag forgeaf, burgwarena fruma, on ham siex hund wes smetes goldes gescyred sceatta, scillingrime.

And I was with Ermanaric the whole time [of his reign]. There the king of the Goths treated me generously: he gave me a torque, the prince of borough-dwellers, in which by shilling count was reckoned 600 coins of pure gold. (translation by Malone, 1961, p. 48)

Ermanaric even appears in the prologue, before Widsith himself starts to speak: Hreðcyninges ham gesohhte / eastan, of Ongle, Eormanrices, / wræpes wærlogan... (‘The
glorious [or, possibly: Gothic] king he sought out, east of the Angles, Ermanaric, foe to traitors’; ll. 7–9, translation based on Malone 1961, pp. 28 ff. and 174 f.)

Other scholars have been inclined to translate wraþes wærlogan as ‘the fierce faith-breaker’ or ‘des grausammen Tyrannen’, but Malone’s arguments for a ‘positive’ interpretation of the phrase appear convincing (Malone 1961, pp. 29 ff. with refs.). However, the etymology of the words in my opinion suggests that the line is not an indirect reference to the treacherous Rosomoni of Jordanes but should be read: ‘terrible repayer of the foe’, ‘with wrath rewarding the foe’ or ‘wrathful foe-blamer’ (wraþ = wrath, anger, terrible; wær = foe; logan from lean = reward, requital, blame), that is, as a general homage to Ermanaric’s warlike qualities and kingly potestas. In particular, the ‘positive’ reading of the line is consistent with the poem’s favourable view not only of Ermanaric but of lords in general; and why should Widsith have endured Ermanaric’s company during his entire reign had he been a gruesome tyrant? It would, accordingly, be tempting to see Ermanaric as one of many models for the type-casting of Ingiald (notably concerning his death).

Thomas Burns believes that the original and accurate story of Ermanaric’s suicide, told in its outlines by Ammianus, had become controversial in the light of Christian morals, and that Jordanes (or, perhaps, rather his predecessor Cassiodorus) introduced the feud motif and Ermanaric’s high age and life-weariness as a counter-weight (Burns 1984, p. 37). Earlier scholars have been more prone to argue that the change was demanded by the heroic code; suicide in the face of an enemy, however strong, must have been perceived as cowardly (Gschwantler 1980, pp. 193 f. with refs.). For late developments of the legend these theories may, perhaps, be worth considering (see, however, Gschwantler 1980, p. 194), but they do not accord with another passage by Jordanes, concerning another king who won for himself a prominent place in Germanic legend, Attila, king of the Huns (Lukman 1943, Cordt 1984; Howarth 1994, pp. 159 ff.). Jordanes describes how Attila had his own funeral pyre prepared during the battle on the Catalaunian fields in 451, where his advance into Gaul was stayed by the forces of the Roman general Aetius and the Visigothic King Theodoric (who was killed in the battle). Here, the cornered animal is not a rat but a royal lion, motivated by strength, not by weakness:

But it was said that the king remained supremely brave even in this extremity and had heaped up a funeral pyre of horse trappings, so that if the enemy should attack him, he was determined to cast himself into the flames, that none might have the joy of wounding him and that the lord of so many races might not fall into the hands of his foes. (Getica 213)

Was this ‘perverted’ heroism allowed Attila because he was not a Christian? In my opinion, the almost century-long subjection to Hunnic overlordship that
the Greutungi experienced could explain the emergence of a more modest, indigenous tradition on Ermanaric’s death. Succumbing to the power of the Huns in the late fourth century (after a prolonged resistance) they became the allies of their conquerors, thereby entering a period of historical obscurity. From this they emerged when the Hunnic hegemony was decisively broken in the late 460s, now as an independent people, known as the Ostrogoths (Burns 1984, pp. 38 and 53 f.). From what sparse evidence there is we can infer that the Huns exploited Gothic tribal particularism (chapter 3). These circumstances may have encouraged the genesis of alternative local versions of Ermanaric’s death.

In should also be emphasised that the background of the revenge story fits well into the picture presented by Ammianus. That a subjugated ‘people’ or clan would use a hostile attack as an opportunity to side with the aggressors and rebel against their overlord is not unlikely. From the point of view of the overlord they would thereby become a gens infida, violating their oaths to him and laying themselves open to retribution. It is equally plausible that prominent hostages from that people or clan were staying at his court as a security (Theodoric the Great spent his youth as a hostage in Constantinople, as related above, chapter 3). The lives of these would be regarded as forfeit the moment news arrived about the rebellion. That was simply ‘sound business’, nothing personal; in those days scruples were not among the building-stones of great empires. This scenario may well, in my opinion, have had some foundation in reality, unknown to Ammianus but preserved in Gothic tradition (and even in Widsith, cf. above).

It is of minor importance whether there actually was a partly successful attempt on Ermanaric’s life or not. The tendency within Germanic story tradition to personalise political events is well documented and we may here be dealing with a secondary tradition (Gschwantler 1980, pp. 198 ff.).

Tres faciunt collegium

We now face the images of three kings, Attila, Ermanaric and Ingiald, all war-like, subjugating and ruling over many peoples (that is, having an imperium), and being prepared to take or in fact taking their own lives in the face of a powerful enemy rather than accepting the humiliation of defeat and capture. It is certainly difficult to dismiss these structural similarities as being coincidental. But we might still be inclined to do that. In Ingiald’s case because Ynglingatal (not to speak of the other sources) derives from a time too distant from the continental events, when tradition had already transformed Ermanaric from a hero to a gruesome tyrant. In Attila’s case because of the cultural gap between Huns and Germans.

Dealing with the last objection first, we must remember that although Attila was born a Hun the ‘people’ he ruled was, as that of Ermanaric, a strongly multi-ethnic confederacy, and had been so under his predecessors for more than
half a century. The Greek writer Priscos, who is one of our chief sources on Attila and who had even visited his court, bears abundant witness to this fact (Priscos; also Howarth 1994). A prominent element within this confederacy was the Greutungi. This circumstance taken into consideration, the argument of cultural dissimilarity loses much ground and the ethnic origins of a person becomes less important than his or her social context. It is obvious that the proven, intimate interaction between these warrior ‘peoples’ of Germanic and non-Germanic stock speaks of a very high degree of what we could call ‘social compatibility’. I would not even regard as impossible that Ermanaric’s conduct served as the explicit, heroic model for Attila, as it would certainly have become known to him in one form or another (alternatively we are dealing with an element of Gothic ruler ideology for some reason projected upon Attila).

But what about Ingiald? Is the correspondence in his case a fabrication or is it possible to conceive of the existence of parallel threads of tradition, stretching back to the two continental, legendary kings, one thread (the black one!) finally gaining supremacy over the other? The absence of information in the sources calls for caution, but, on the other hand, we should not get too deeply entrenched in the notion that ‘what we see is all they had’ when we look at our written sources. A ‘true’ surviving tradition may not have been connected with the names Attila and Ermanaric, but with notions about the social and metaphysical status and expected conduct of high-kings, kings attaining an *imperium*, in general. Then we have to infer that these notions were transmitted to the Nordic peoples through actual contact with the continental peoples.

**Why suicide?**

We must now consider the motive behind the high-kings’ suicide. Was it fear, pride, a combination of both or something more? A simple answer would be that they feared to be cruelly maltreated if falling into the hands of the enemy. This was often, to be sure, a valid motive, as we learn from a quick glance in the *Historiae* of Gregory of Tours. Some captured would-be assassins of King Chilperic ‘killed themselves with their own daggers while they were still in prison; for they could not face all these different tortures’. Gregory adds laconically that others ‘died while they were actually being questioned’ (*Historiae* X.18; similarly III.33). One scene features royalty on both sides, with an unhappy servant suffering the consequences of living to face the fury of a king:

Merovech, who knew what they [his father, King Chilperic – against whom he had rebelled – and his men] were up to and who was afraid that in their desire for vengeance his enemies would maltreat him in the most cruel way, called his servant Galien to him... ‘Take my sword and kill me.’ Galien did not hesitate for a moment. He killed Merovech with his own sword... Galien was sized: they cut off
his hands, and his feet, and his ears, and his nose, tortured him cruelly and then despatched him in the most revolting fashion. (Historie V.18)

These deaths, however, lack any conspicuous element or sense of grandeur, and thus conform to the common notion of suicide as an act of desperation. We should note that the suicides belong to the party of inferior rank in these conflicts. As kings over kings, Attila and Ermanaric would have considered themselves superior to their adversaries; our image of Ingiald fits into the same frame. In spite of Ammianus’ talk about the ‘exaggerated reports... of the dreadful fate which awaited him’ that circulated and, supposedly, influenced Ermanaric, and of the ‘overwhelming fear’ that possessed Ingiald according to the Historia Norvegiiæ, we should, I believe, rather regard them as having been guided by pride. With Attila this seems entirely clear, at least if we read Jordanes by the letter. The ‘lord of so many races’ had come so high that stepping down was unthinkable; to have his person violated by enemy hands would have been a profanation (even extending to his dead body, since he prepared his cremation, contrary to the burial practice of his people, cf. Bona 1991, pp. 191 f.). And Ermanaric did not take his life until he saw that the battle (war) was, in fact, lost beyond hope.

The high-king as ‘numinosum’ and structural problem

Did the achievements of these men perhaps make them closer to the gods than to mortal men – in their own eyes at least? From dominus it was not a great step to deus, and one which Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors had taken without hesitation. Were the gods the only ones into whose hands Attila and his likes could surrender their bodies and lives unsullied? Stretching the evidence, may the word göðkynning, stressing the divine descent and, thereby, godliness of Ingiald in Ynglingatal, have had more particular connotations than we would at first be led to believe? It is, after all, the only impersonal proclamation of divine ancestry in the poem, lacking a reference to a particular god.

Here, we should also take into account the possible ritual aspect of Ermanaric’s death, pointed out by Gschwantler. The wound in the side, afflicted by the vengeful brothers, can be associated with Odin’s self-sacrifice as depicted in Hávamál (138) when, hanging himself from a tree, he pierces his own side with his spear.

A more radical attitude towards this whole question would be to regard the high-king’s suicide as a primarily literary motif with no necessary foundation in reality, deriving from the Getica or, possibly, from the lost history of Cassiodorus. Jordanes depicts Ermanaric and Attila as equal in fame, standing and bravery, two incarnations of an archetypal great king. Like the Greutungian king, Attila is reported to have ruled over all Scythian and Germanic peoples (Getica 49.257; cf. Heather 1991, p. 24). That the suicide motif enters into both accounts would,
therefore, be natural, regardless of the actual circumstances. Attila’s funeral pyre may be just a romantic creation inspired by the brief note on Ermanaric’s death retrieved from Ammianus. Equal in life – equal in (or before) death.

This, however, leaves us with the problem of the parallels with Ingiald. Whether rooted in social practice or literary imagination, how did the ideal come to be projected onto him (regardless of whether he was a real or literary person – or both)? To consider the suicide motif as a literary theme would, at first sight, not shorten the temporal distance one step. However, a tentative solution presents itself in the activities of German missionaries, sent out from Hamburg-Bremen, in the lands of the Svear in the ninth century.

Classical learning reached a high peak in Carolingian Germany. Italian fifteenth-century sources speak of a manuscript of *Germania* (probably also containing *Agricola*), preserved in the monastery of Hersfeld. Presumably it had at some time been transferred there from the famous monastery of Fulda (Beumann 1953). In the eighth century the biographer of Charlemagne, Einhard, and one Rudolf, both at times stationed at Fulda, drew from that work, and so also did Adam of Bremen about three centuries later (*Gesta IV*, Schol. 128). Furthermore, and of greater importance to our investigation, both Fulda and Hersfeld had copies of the history of Ammianus Marcellinus (Woolf 1976, p. 77 with refs.). Anskar, future archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, started his tonsured career as a teenager in the Benedictine monastery of Corbie, just east of Amiens, and lived and worked at the newly founded (in 822) Nova Corveia (Korvey) in Westfalia for a few years in the 820s. In the latter monastery copies of Tacitus’ works are also known to have been kept (Ahnlund, p. 18; see also chapter 6).

It is, of course, impossible to determine what learning Anskar and his fellow missionaries transmitted to the Svear, apart from the most urgent, that of the True Faith. But if they were familiar with some of the aforementioned—and, perhaps, even other—works of Germanic history they might have calculated that this kind of knowledge could enhance their prestige in the eyes of their new proselytes and create an interest in their teachings.

But whatever alternative we regard as more likely, there remains the attitude conveyed by the sources towards high kingship as a structural problem. And we must furthermore ask ourselves if it is justified to speak of purely ‘literary’ motifs in our context. Such could hardly exist, if we understand them as entirely disengaged from contemporary social reality. In my opinion we should regard the three cases of Ermanaric, Attila and Ingiald as reflecting the recognition in different times and contexts of the same problem, one which most warrior societies in the limbo between tribe and state at varying dates in history may have had to face: the sudden extension of personal power beyond ‘social expectation’, where social norms and institutions (the last word taken in the most general sense) failed both to curb that power and to assimilate it without friction. I
would suggest that this is the very situation in which we would find sacredness most strongly associated with kingship, where a king would have been regarded as most numinous (see below) by his subjects – and by himself. From the aspect of social intercourse his relationship to his subjects may have become more like that of a god to his cult community.

This said, we should not, however, expect this kind of situation to have generated identical ideological expressions everywhere it occurred. Quite the contrary. The suicide theme under discussion appears to be a very particular tradition, possibly evolving in a Hunnic-Greutungian environment and transmitted to Scandinavia (or parts of Scandinavia) at some time between the late fourth and the sixth centuries. I have not encountered any similar traditions among the western Germanic peoples.

This hypothetical sacredness would have forced itself upon the social actors, not grown out of social practice; it would be a sign of a social ‘neurosis’. Therefore, it would have had little to do with the traits that we normally consider as characteristic of pagan, sacral kingship: divine descent, cult leadership, an innate ‘luck’ and the correspondence between successful rule and the prosperity of the people, including, perhaps, an influence over climate and crops – except insofar as all kings were sacral kings in that respect. These traits may also have been acquired – or transferred from the sphere of the divine – as a kind of rationalisation and legitimisation of the abnormal new conditions. Herwig Wolfram (1970, p. 476) has argued along similar lines on the (in his opinion: sacral) aspect of the king’s ‘luck’: ‘Besonders die Einrichtungen, die man heute als “Heerkönigtum” begreift, verkörperten das dynamische Element im Sozialfüge eines Stammes. Ein erfolgreicher, zum “Heerkönig” aufgestiegener Geolgsherr bedurfte des Glücks in doppelter Hinsicht. Zunächst zum Sieg, dann aber mußte er sich zur Legitimierung und Konsolidierung seines Erfolges auch derjenigen politischen Mächte und Gegebenheiten bedienen, die eine statische Gesellschaft entwickelt hatte.’ I would add, though, that a Heerkönig would probably not disturb the social equilibrium in the way an Ingiald would. The process by which, for example, a Gothic dux became a reiks could well have been turbulent, but it would still have occurred within an existing system, and left the hierarchies and social bonds more or less intact.

A definition of sacral kingship, able to accommodate the kind of sacredness I propose, has to be rather general, like those proposed by František Graus (1965, Anm. 73, p. 316) or Rory McTurk. Graus defines as sacral ‘alle irrationalen Elemente, die mit den Herrscher verbunden wurden, sich jedoch nicht zu einer Theorie entwickelten (selbst zu keiner irrationalen)’. For McTurk (1977, p. 156) ‘a sacral king is one who is marked off from his fellow man by an aura of specialness which may or may not have its origin in more or less direct associations with the supernatural’. However, it might be prudent to eschew the use of the word ‘sacral’ in the present context, thus avoiding the inevitable risk
of ‘conceptual contamination’. John Stanley Martin suggests that the term be reserved for ‘Christian kings for which a clear definition is available... In many societies, both past and present, the office of king or of chief implies a sacred function so that the addition of the adjective “sacral” to this type of kingship is redundant. We do not talk of a “political” kingship, an “economic” kingship or a “social” kingship, let alone a “juridical” kingship. Whereas we in the liberal Western tradition separate the secular from the sacred, the phenomenon is not universal, neither geographically nor historically. In many societies the office of king or chief is or was apprehended in relation to the religious behaviour of that community. This would obviously differ from society to society and from age to age. The only common factor is that there is generally a sacred aspect of a ruler’s function. Thus it appears that the office of chief or king which included the function of overseeing sacrifices through which the gods bestowed fertility and good seasons would lie not in the “sacral” character of the person who held the office but in his functional presidency of the cult’ (Martin 1990, p. 380).

Martin’s critical attitude can be contrasted with Jens P. Schjødt’s (1991) and Olof Sundqvist’s (1996) unhesitating application of the term ‘sacral’ on pre-Christian Scandinavian kingship. Karl Leyser (1989, p. 75) finds the term problematic even in the description of post-Carolingian Christian kingship. Since the two former are historians of religion the difference in attitude may largely be a question of disciplinary tradition.

Avoiding the addition of yet another (and rather particular) aspect to the concept of ‘sacral kingship’, but still wishing to apply some kind of term to the phenomenon, we could use the more neutral term ‘numinous’, speaking of a king like Ingiald, Attila or Ermanaric as a numinosum. The term ‘numinous’ is taken from Rudolf Otto (1923) and has been used by Jungian psychology, signifying ‘...the action of beings and forces that the consciousness of primitive man experienced as fascinating, terrible, overpowering, and that it therefore attributed to an indefinite transpersonal and divine source’ (Neumann 1974, p. 5).

If we erase the chauvinist adjective ‘primitive’ from the quotation, the definition will be more attractive and still useful; the point is that the numinous refers to something that transgresses the boundaries of the familiar and established order of things. Ynglinga saga, and not least the stories of Onund and Ingiald, gives us a glimpse of the problems associated with the transgression of established political boundaries. In a narrow perspective Ingiald fails because he is unable to legitimise his transgressions by force with a new and convincing set of morals. In the perspective of the wider narrative of Heimskringla we are led to understand what set of morals was needed for a successful transgression – those provided by the Christian faith. In our next text, Vita Anskarii, we shall see how this faith takes its first safely documented steps on Swedish soil.
A final note

That earlier archaeologists were heading towards a dead end in their attempts to recreate a coherent prehistory from the testimony of the early literary sources need hardly be emphasised again. However, there can be no fundamental, theoretical fault with their efforts to combine literary and material sources, nor in their view of the literary sources as being as valuable sources of information as artefacts and ancient monuments. For instance, *Ynglinga saga* is interesting not because it describes events of ancient times, but because it claims to do just that. What the text does is to present what we might in computer language call a ‘virtual reality’ to its readers. It is worth reading and re-reading, not because hidden somewhere between its lines there is an ultimate explanation to the enigma it presents, but because it contains no ultimate explanation at all, only a play of strategies.

We can take *Ynglinga saga* at its face value, as Nerman tried to do (for example, Nerman 1925). This will take us somewhere, as it did Nerman, but ultimately we arrive at the end of this methodological road. Or we can start with the assumption that the text is a complete fabrication, as I have done here, and by a close reading try to contextualise the intentions behind the words. As a framework for this project, we have our pre-understanding of the society of those times; as our aids, we have historical analogies, material culture, and other elements of ordinary archaeological methodology. There is nothing wrong in sketching historical sequences which cannot be firmly supported, as long as we remember that this is not an end in itself. The individuals and events in the narrative, all certainly more or less coloured by fiction, can be seen as imprints of a historically plausible process – in this case a brief episode in the struggle for power, between centralisation and particularisation. Or as M.I. Finley said in an analysis of the early Greek society depicted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: ‘It is convenience, finally, rather than licence, that suggests retention of the ten-year war, and of Achilles and Hector and Odysseus and all the other famous names, as useful labels for unknown King X and Chieftain Y’ (Finley 1979, p. 50). This is how the names of Ingiald and Onund should be understood here. They may never have been historical persons but they nevertheless serve us well as the embodiments of historical processes.
The Life of Anskar, the first archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen (d. 865), was written by his successor on the episcopal chair, Rimbert (d. 888), and completed c. 876 (Ahnlund 1926, p. 5). This makes it more or less contemporary with the original composition of Ynglingatal, if we choose to believe that Snorri dated that poem correctly (chapter 4). From the accounts of Anskar’s two missionary expeditions to the Svear (829 and in the early 850s) and the description of the political conditions in Denmark and Sweden we can extract valuable information about the political role and structure of kingship at the time. In particular, it is important to look closely at some of the concepts used by Rimbert to describe the social actors in Scandinavia and the context of their actions.

**Rimbert’s story**

The German Emperor Louis the Pious (d. 840) had been approached by messengers from the Svear (legates Sueonum). They had several missions, but unfortunately Rimbert leaves unspecified all but one, the only one he found important: the messengers informed the emperor that many of their people desired to espouse Christianity and that their king was favorably disposed to the presence of Christian missionaries in his realm, would the emperor deign to send some. The emperor would, and appointed Anskar to lead the enterprise (Vita Anskarii 9). The meeting between the emperor and the northmen probably took place in August 829 AD, at an assembly in Worms, and Anskar and his fellows would have set out on their journey the following year, 830 (Ahnlund 1926, p. 23).

Arriving at the vicus/portus Birka after having been robbed of most of their valuables on the way, Anskar’s party was presented to the king, whose name was Björn (Bern). Having learned their purpose, the king conferred with his ‘faithfuls’ and, with their unanimous ‘consent’, he gave permission to the missionaries to stay and preach the Gospel of Christ (Cognita itaque legatione eorum, et cum suis de huiusmodi negotio pertractans fidelibus, omnium pari voto atque consensu dedit eis licentiam ibi manendi et euangelium Christi praedicandi...). One of the men at the king’s side was Hergeir (Herigarius), praefectus of Birka and adviser of the king (consiliarius regis) (Vita Anskarii 11).

Apart from Hergeir, however, the men around the king are anonymous. We know not whether they were the members of a regular council or just the foremost
men of his entourage, perhaps reinforced with one or two present notables who, like Hergeir, may have been regular advisers. The procedure seems to have been rather informal and straightforward, so the second alternative appears more likely.

In contrast, the formalities surrounding the reception of the missionaries at Anskar’s second journey some twenty years later are strikingly different. At this time the Christian religion had become a highly controversial subject among the Svear, causing a political split between pro-Christian and oppositional groups. Persecution and even murder had haunted the mission in spite of nominal royal protection (*Vita Anskarii* 17).

When Anskar now sees the king, Olof (*Olef*), he is informed that in view of the strong anti-Christian currents the king dares not give him immediate permission to re-establish Christian worship. The king must first divine the will of the gods through the casting of lots and let the people (*populus*) express their will at an assembly (*placitum*), that is, a *þing* (*Vita Anskarii* 27).

Before the actual assembly, the king summoned the foremost men of his realm (*congregatis primo principibus suis*) to give their advise. This council debated the matter and found that their gods, suicidally, supported Anskar’s request. King and advisers agreed in favour of the mission, and one of those present (*unus ex primoribus*), who was also a friend of Anskar’s, brought the good news to the archbishop (*Vita Anskarii* 27).

Later, at the formal assembly in Birka, the issue was presented to the ‘people’ (*populus*) by a speaker or herald (*praeco*), and those present were allowed to voice their opinions. A heated discussion ensued, but in the end the ‘people’ was persuaded to consent, and they gave their ‘unanimous’ (*unanimis*) support for the king’s decision. In Rimbert’s words, they ‘elected’ (*elegit*) to have the Christian cult re-established. The king, however, still withheld his final permission to Anskar, since he had to ‘communicate’ (*nuntiaret*) the decision to the ‘people’ at another assembly in another part of his realm (*in altera parte regni sui*). At this second assembly the issue (and, as Rimbert explicitly states, the decision of the issue at the first assembly) was presented, and the congregation reached total and utter *consensum* (*Vita Anskarii* 27).

We get an impression of considerable flexibility within the political system. When it came to decision making, the king’s power was in no way absolute, but he could also act quite independently under certain circumstances. Christopher Brooke’s statement about royal succession, that there were no precise rules (with the stress on ‘precise’, not on ‘rules’, see chapter 3), seems to be equally relevant for this context. At Anskar’s first visit King Björn only consulted with some trusted men who happened to be at hand before giving his permission. The term *fideles [-ibus]* would appear to identify them as his private retainers, and, as we saw, only Hergeir is singled out as *consiliarius regis*. We understand from the Svea emissaries at the Imperial court that there was a strong interest in the Christian
religion at least in royal and noble circles. No doubt this group was aware that Christianity was an important key to the good-will of one the most powerful rulers in their world, the German emperor. Many Svear, visiting trade centres on the continent, must also have been influenced by converts, advertising their new and superior faith. Why not gain the support of this new god too, if he really was as powerful as they said? We know nothing of the formalities which might have preceded the request at Louis’ court, but an important political move like this must have been discussed at least in the king’s council. Nevertheless, when Anskar arrives, the king can make the decision almost by himself. The matter has been settled beforehand. But it is quite possible that this informal introduction of the missionaries, to let them slip into society through the back door was a strategy to avoid alarming already existing and influential anti-Christian factions among the Svear.

Two decades later, when political quiet has changed into turbulence, King Olaf proves himself an adept politician, making full use of the formal institutions of the oligarchic council and the þing, letting divination reinforce his argument. In the end he and his ‘party’ manage to enforce their will upon all the ‘people’. Customary law may or may not have explicitly dictated that issues of concern for all the Svear should go ‘the long way’. In either case, the evidence indicates that the council decided which issues were of such concern. If the procedure in the case of Christian worship was standard practice for issues which were considered to concern the entire people (and we cannot know if it was), these had to be presented at at least two ‘general assemblies’, one in Birka, one somewhere else. We may be tempted to identify the location of the second þing as Old Uppsala, but that would be to give in to the legend connecting that site with the royal power of the Svear. The political geography of the time is even at its best obscure.

This flexible system must have been a powerful political tool in the hands of the nobility. While its most prominent members in practice made important decisions between themselves in the king’s council, the act of presenting them to the ‘people’ at an assembly provided them with a kind of safety net. If the assembled ‘people’ should happen to howl unanimous dissent the council could at the last minute withdraw or modify a decision that would otherwise have put its members under severe political and social strain. Whatever the local political theory may have stated, in practice the role of the ‘people’ at the assembly was to comment and affirm, not really decide.

Rimbert’s famous proclamation that among the Svear ‘every public affair’ depended more on the unanimous will of the ‘people’ than on the power of the king (Sid quippe apud eos moris est, ut quodcumque negotium publicum magis in populi unanimi voluntate quam in regia constet potestate; Vita Anskarii.26) used to support the view that in traditional Germanic society the assembly was the political power-centre while the king’s political power was much circumscribed
(for example, Baetke 1964, p. 166). But while it is clear that the kings were no absolute autocrats, their power held in check by nothing more than the limits of their imagination and resources, it should be obvious from the narrative that Rimbert’s statement was only partly true. In reality, we find a narrow circle of lords (including the king) making decisions in the king’s council, well above the head of any commoner. However, decisions could be formalised if they were communicated to the ‘people’ at one or two assemblies.

When Adam of Bremen later (c. 1075) describes the relationship between the kings of the Svear and the ‘people’ (the assembly?), he may have drawn the information from Rimbert’s *Vita*, one of the more important sources for his own work (Hallencreutz 1984, pp. 6 ff.); however, his phrasing carry somewhat different nuances:

Reges habent ex genere antiquo, quorum tamen vis pendet in populi sentencia; quod in commune omnes laudaverint, illum confirmare oportet, nisi eius decretum potius videatur, quod aliquando secuntur inviti

‘They have kings of ancient lineage, the power of whom, however, depends upon the judgement of the people; what is generally approved of he should confirm, when not his decision appears to be better, which they then sometimes follow reluctantly. (Gesta IV.22; translation based on Buchner 1961)

Adam provides the additional information that the genealogy of kings was important among the Svear, something on which Rimbert is silent. Apart from this Adam’s statement is less straightforward than may be granted at a first glance. In the German translation Buchner has: ‘Sie haben Könige aus altem Hause, doch deren Gewalt ist vom Willen des Volkes abhängig. Was alle gemeinsam beschließen, muss er gutheißen,...’. It is also clear from Buchner’s note ‘O’ that he understands the passage in the light of the similar passage in *Vita Anskarii*. Ingrid Lundegårdh pointed out to me that the two clauses of the Latin sentence may refer to different aspects of the king’s relationship with his people (Svennung 1962 makes two sentences out of Buchner’s one in the Latin text). The first clause (Reges habent...) may explain how royal power was attained whereas the latter clause (quod in commune...) could describe the exercise of the king’s power. It is possible that the words quorum tamen vis pendet in populi sentencia refer to the formal element of ‘election’ at a royal succession. In the second clause, laudaverint is derived from laudare, literally ‘to praise’.

Therefore, and contrary to Buchner, I do not believe that Adam is describing the course of formal ‘parliamentary’ procedure, but that he makes a general statement about the relations between king and subjects, that is, the ideology of kingship among the Svear. The king was simply not to act against general opinion unless he had very good reasons to do so; he stands out as the representative
of the collective. Concomitantly, we can also see this passage as a reminder that a king was supposed to take counsel. If he did not, he could well end up like Ingiald illráði (see chapter 5). Perhaps that is why Adam chooses the word vis instead of the potestas we would expect (and which is Rimbert’s choice). Buchner’s Gewalt carries the meaning(s) of vis well; what it stands for is not so much ‘power’ as we understand it rather neutrally or even with a slightly positive tint, but rather naked and impersonal ‘force’ with a negative tint. The word is applied to, for example, natural forces like storms as well as to enemy forces, so there is an element of ‘rage’ in it. The power of a Scandinavian king was a natural force which needed tempering; unchecked, it could be destructive. The best ‘remedy’ was, of course, the Christian Faith.

As to the ‘quality’ of the king’s decision we may well ask who decided whether it was better than that of the people or not. It was obviously not the ‘people’. What Adam in fact says is that a king could disregard the will of the ‘people’ if he and (implicitly) his advisers saw fit to do so and thought they could get away with it without provoking straightforward rebellion. If the nobility could bend the most influential and wealthy among the ‘people’ to their will the ordinary freemen could do little more than go home and sulk.

We must remember that we are dealing with a hierarchical society in which people of lesser social standing were bound with ties of dependence to people higher up on the scale. That the obligations of support were mutual should not lead us to conclude that the relationship was symmetrical with regard to social and political power. The assembly certainly had the power to agree or disagree, but it was faced from the onset by the pressure of a decision already made by the most powerful people of the realm (including the king), people on whom many would have been directly or indirectly dependent. There would have been a strong tendency to ‘follow the whip’. The free peasantry who may have formed the majority at assemblies were certainly free according to the law, but not in respect of social ties or economic status, and they can hardly be seen as a homogenous body unless, perhaps, seen in a Marxist class perspective. Rimbert’s words about the ‘people’s will’ might well be a relic of original propaganda, disseminated from the king’s court.

The arena for communal decision-making and social domination is called placitum. In the kingdom of the Franks the word had judicial connotations, designating a court where lawsuits were tried and settled (Wood 1994, pp. 262 f.). Whether the application of this term should be interpreted as significant or not may be a matter of debate, but considering the parallel with the Icelandic Allthing it seems probable. Rimbert uses a different expression, conventus publicus, for the Emperor’s assembly as well as for one of the assemblies at which Hergeir but not the king appears to be present (Vita Anskarii 22 and 19).
In the *Annales Regni Francorum* (entry for 776 AD) the annual general assembly of Charlemagne is described as a *placitum publicum* (Murphy 1989, p. 21). The addition of the word *publicus* may emphasise the ‘generalness’ of this assembly, concerning as it did all Franks. In *Vita Anskarii* the kings of the Svear only meet with parts of their subjects at the described assemblies. The *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* uses *conventus publicus* to describe the assemblies of the Saxons:

*Interdiximus, ut omnes Saxones generaliter conventus publicos nec faciant, nisi forte missus noster de verbo nostro eos congregare fecerit.*

It is prohibited for the Saxons in general to hold any public assemblies, unless by chance our delegate should, on our word, have them come together. (Murphy 1989, p. 57)

It could appear at first sight that the two concepts are used synonymously, but as the relationship between Franks and Saxons was hierarchical with the former as overlords, it is not unlikely that this is reflected in the terminology. The term *placitum* would then indicate a higher status, possibly with royal/imperial presence, whereas *conventus* would stand for an assembly of lesser authority. However, Rimbert’s use of *conventus publicus* for an imperial assembly indicates that the terminology was less precise than this.

The man in the *populus* who stands up at the *placitum* at Birka and turns the tide of debate with an eloquent speech is described as *senior natu*. Although it can be translated as ‘old man’, as do Rudberg and Buchner, that is, senior in age (cf. Nelson 1994, p. 56), it can also be understood as senior in birth. Janet Nelson observes that faithfulness ‘for the Franks immediately evoked the service of the youth (*puer, vassus*) to the older man (*senior*), a service first and foremost military’ (Nelson 1991, p. 216). In the late ninth century vernacular translation of Bede’s *Historia* the term *maior natu* is translated with *ealdorman*, a title signifying rank, not age (Loyn 1991, p. 210). This dramatic scene from the *Vita* may well be yet another illustration of whose voices were raised and whose words counted at Viking Age assemblies in Scandinavia. The *senior natu* is likely to have been one of the more prominent freemen present at the assembly, certainly a man of mature age who had retainers of his own.

In an analysis of the political structure at this time the great political divider should be placed between the council and the assembly rather than between the king and the ‘people’ (even though it is quite possible that the king’s advisers were counted among the ‘people’ at the assembly!). It was the loyalty of the powerful that was most eagerly sought and most dearly bought by a king, and this loyalty was (hopefully) obtained in the council. By estranging himself from a powerful nobleman he would also become more or less estranged from that man’s dependants. Rimbert tells us indirectly that the persecutions of the missionaries were instigated
by men of high social rank, naming the son of a ‘powerful man’, *potens*, among them (*Quidam namque in terra illa potens extitit, cuius filius in eadem conspiratione com alis fuerat, et quae sibi de spoliis inibi captis proveniunt in domum patris sui contulit*; ‘In this land there was a powerful man whose son was, together with others, involved in this conspiracy, and brought his share in the spoils to his father’s house’; *Vita Anskarii* i8). As the spoils are said to have been taken to the father’s house, the latter was certainly as involved as his offspring. In Frankia the epithet *potens* could be applied even to such important personages as the mayors of the palace, at least in the eighth century (Wallace-Hadrill 1982, p. 243).

The king’s council

When we speak of the king’s council at this time in history we must realise that it should not be understood as some kind of primitive parliament with a fixed membership. Anglo-Saxon charters contain lists of witnesses which tell us whose support a king wanted to enlist for his decisions. The entry for 656 AD in the E manuscript of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* contains what could be called an imitation of such a witness-list. The witnesses confirm a benefaction to the abbey of Medeshamstede (Peterborough) made by king Wulfhere of Mercia, the son of Penda:

These are the witnesses who were there present, and who attested it with their finger on Christ’s cross and agreed to it verbally. That was first the king Wulfhere who first confirmed it by his word and afterwards attested it with his finger on Christ’s cross and thus spake: I, king Wulfhere, in conjunction with these kings and earls, leader of the army and thanes, the witnesses of my benefaction, do confirm it before archbishop Deusdedit with a cross +. And I, Oswy, king of Northumbria, friend of this monastery and of abbot Seaxwulf, approve of it with a cross +. And I, king Sigehere [of the East Saxons], grant it with a cross +. And I, king Sebbi [of the East Saxons, brother of Sigehere] sign it with a cross +. And I, Æthelred, the king’s brother, grant the same with a cross +. And we, the king’s sisters, Cyneburh and Cyneswith, we approve it. And I, Deusdedit, archbishop of Canterbury, grant it. After that all the others who were present agreed to it with a cross. They were, by name, Ithamar, bishop of Rochester, and Wine, bishop of London, and Jaruman, who was bishop of Mercia, and bishop Tuda, and Wilfrid the priest who was afterwards bishop, and Eoppa the priest whom king Wulfhere sent to preach Christianity in the Isle of Wight, and abbot Seaxwulf, and ealdorman Immine, and ealdorman Eadberht, and ealdorman Herefrith, and ealdorman Wilberht, and ealdorman Abo, Æthelbald, Brorda, Wilbert, Eahlmund, Frithugis; these and many others who were present of the king’s retainers all agreed to it... (ASC i)
This witness list is long and elaborate, but it shows us the wide range of people who could be called upon as advisers, including kings of other realms. Family members have a particularly prominent position which is natural, since dissent within a ruling family was a prime cause of instability, something which the history of the Merovingian kingdom shows with great clarity. A family member left out of political decision-making was prone to subordinate the king’s interests to those of his or her own.

The king’s advisers: praefecti, comites and principes

As we learned above, the only member of the council that we get to know personally is the Christian benefactor Hergeir, praefectus over Birka. This man was, however, no mere garrison commander. He owned heritable land (hereditas) where he is said to have built a church (Vita Anskarii 11). He must, therefore, have been of considerable social standing and in possession of corresponding wealth. In contemporary Frankish practice hereditas was one of several concepts (alod, proprium, proprietas) which designated land to which the holder had full rights. It was not, however, necessarily inherited family land but could also denote acquired land granted by a king as a permanent gift, not only to the recipient as a royal office-holder but to be retained by his descendants with free rights of disposal (Reynolds 1994, pp. 59, 97 and 105). It was common that charters made the gift conditional on the recipient’s faithfulness and loyalty to his benefactor (Lloyn & Percival 1975, pp. 148 and 150).

The word praefectus is used by Rimbert only for men with authority over towns (vici, porti), functioning as royal representatives or officials in charge of the defence and probably also fiscal and judicial matters. In Hamburg we find the praefectus Bernharius, described as an illustrious comes (Vita Anskarii 16). Hovi, the praefectus of Danish Sliaswich (Haithabu) is also labelled comes (Vita Anskarii 31-32). Based on this indirect evidence it is not too far-fetched also to regard Hergeir as the equivalent of a comes (the missionaries and Rimbert probably did).

Praefectus

The title praefectus goes back to the Roman Republic before the Social War, where it designated commanders of the military contingents, alae, of the non-Italian allies, the socii; three of the six commanders were Roman. The well-known commanders of the Praetorian Guard, called praefecti praetorio, were first appointed by Augustus in 2 BC. Their sphere of responsibility grew during the first and second centuries AD when they were assigned extensive judicial and financial responsibilities. The provincial governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate of the New Testament, is mostly known as procurator, but was sometimes referred
to as *praefectus*. The two titles were sometimes used alternately, even though a prefect was more of a military governor and a procurator more of a financial administrator. When Constantine the Great disbanded the Praetorian Guard in 312 AD the office of prefect lost its military aspect and turned into a territorial governorship over the prefectures of Gaul, Italy, Illyricum and the East (OCD, ‘Praefectus’, ‘Praefectus Praetorio’).

While the *praefecti praetorio* retained their high status and importance after the reforms of Constantine it was different with the *praefectus urbi*. Once the deputy of absent kings or consuls in the city of Rome, under Augustus the title became attached to a magistrate responsible for the security of the city and who presided in his own court of justice (OCD, ‘Praefectus Urbi’). During the fourth century, however, the office had become more ‘ornamental’ than functional. Even so, it was retained, together with the Italian prefecture, by the Ostrogoths after the conquest. Theodoric even re-established the praetorian praefecture of Gaul early in the sixth century. After this the title was frequently assumed by the rulers of Provence as well as by the mayors of the palace before their overthrow of the Merovingians, and we also hear about a sixth century *praefectus urbis Parisiensis*. ‘In the eighth century these urban associations were extended, so that *praefectus* acquired the fresh meaning of count [*comes*]...’ (Thacker 1981, p. 210; cf. below).

**Comes**

In the reformed organisation of Constantine the Great the Roman *comites* were civil and military officials both in the central and the provincial administration. The title, as well as its general meaning of ‘follower’ or ‘companion’ (cf. *comitatus*), was taken over by the Goths. Visigothic officials in the fifth-century *regnum Tolosanum* (kingdom of Tolouse), entrusted with the task of supervising the remaining Roman administration, bore the title. The most important officials in the kingdom were the *comites civitatis*, who commanded the nineteen city-districts of the kingdom. They shared the political and military responsibility with *duces*, and the distinction between the two titles sometimes appears blurred; in the sixth- and seventh-century kingdom of Toledo we find military commanders described as *comites et duces*, and the Visigothic royal entourage and administration is virtually littered with various *comites*, including the old *comites civitatis* (King 1972, pp. 53 ff.; Wolfram 1988, pp. 213 ff.).

In the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy the situation was similar. *Comites civitatis* appear, and they seem to have had an administrative and military role more or less identical with that of their Visigothic counterparts. The comital command could be extended to include a whole province, particularly if regular Gothic settlers were few. The *comites rei militaris* were the king’s military deputies, and after Theodoric the Great had gained control over Dalmatia and Pannonia-Savia
in the war against Odovacar in the late fifth century, a commander with this title was appointed to govern these provinces (Wolfram 1988, pp. 213, 291 and 320; Moorhead 1992, p. 77).

Comites are found also among the Vandals in North Africa and the Lombards in Italy, but in both these cases we can say little more than that they were high-ranking officials; their exact areas of responsibility and relationship with other officials, like the Lombard gestaldi and the Vandal praepositi regni and millenarii are obscure (Harrison 1993, p. 194; Clover 1993, ch. VI, p. 11).

The Franks, like the Goths and Vandals, took over the Roman administrative system in their dominion, or what remained of it. The towns, civitates, retained much of their importance as basic units and centres of administration under the Merovingian regime, and very often, if not invariably, the senior official of a civitas bore the title of comes. Wood believes that these officials should be ‘seen as similar to the late Roman comites civitatis’, and that their duties, just like those of their predecessors, involved the hearing of law-suits and the enforcement of justice as well as military leadership. And as the levying of taxes obviously was based on the civitas the responsibility of the comites in this area was crucial for the treasury. Royal estates could also be managed by comites (Wood 1994, pp. 60 ff.). By the mid-eighth century it had become common to inherit the title and office of comes within the family (Wallace-Hadrill 1982, p. 20). Compared with the Gothic comites, however, the Frankish ones largely appear to be of lesser status, whereas superior officials were generally titled duces (Wolfram 1988, pp. 213 f.). A Merovingian list of office-holders and their functions, preserved in a tenth-century copy (possibly of British origin), claims that a dux had authority over as much as twelve civitates, and duces could also lead royal armies (Wallace-Hadrill 1982, p. 218; Wood 1994, p. 61). After the overthrow of the Merovingian dynasty in 751 it was to the duces of the Frankish gens that Pope Stephen II wrote to enlist their support for King Pippin I (Nelson 1994, p. 56). Still, in the times of Charlemagne, the comites remained a very important part of the administration, and their administrative areas varied ‘from the size of a parish to that of a province’ (Loyn & Percival 1975, p. 8).

The Anglo-Saxon comites fit into the general picture, although the nomenclature varies regionally. Many of the comites mentioned by Bede (early eighth century) paid some kind of service to the court and some were even of royal descent. The late ninth century vernacular translation of Bede’s Historia uses the word gesith for these companions of kings. Such a man was ‘settled on an estate, in command of a powerful section of the royal army’, possessed a hall and was ‘surrounded by retainers’ (Loyn 1991, pp. 209 f.). The late seventh century Law of Ine (of Wessex) distinguishes between two kinds of gesith, one land-owning and one without land, the former with an estate (or estates) granted to him by the king for his services. This land reverted back to the king at death or if the
**gesithcond mon landagende** (land-owning gesith) ignored the king’s summons (*Ine 51*). Those without land formed the king’s noble bodyguard, his housecarls, and would in Latin often be distinguished by the title *ministri* (Thacker 1981, p. 207; Abels 1988, pp. 24 f.; Hooper 1994, pp. 94 ff.). In time, their title came to be replaced by that of *thegn* (Loyn 1992, p. 78), also known from late Viking Period Denmark and Sweden where, however, it appears to have corresponded to the landed *gesith*; here, *drengr* appears to have designated a landless retainer (Christophersen 1982; B. Sawyer 1994).

**Princeps**

We now turn from the concepts around Hergeir to the other men around the king who formed the circle of his advisers. When they are summoned by King Olaf before the assembly they enter the narrative as *principes* (*Vita Anskarii* 27). This word is translated *bövingar* (chieftains) by Rudberg (Ahnlund 1926) and Odelman (1986) and *seinen Grossen* by Buchner (1961); the Latin word literally means the *first, foremost or principal* men of the king. It was used (mainly in the plural) as a general term both for rulers and for their foremost subjects in Anglo-Saxon England and among the Franks throughout the early Middle Ages.

Rimbert also uses the term for the men closest to King Olaf on the great war-expedition (c. 855) to Seeburg and Apulia which post-dates the events discussed above. Here too, *principes* and king form a distinct body which stands out from the host as a whole, and the former also evidently act as the king’s advisers. When the population of Apulia offered a treaty according to which they were to pay an immediate as well as an annual tribute and to confirm the treaty with hostages, all to avoid a devastating sack of their urbs, the king and his *principes* proved wiser, says Rimbert, than the young men of the host who wanted the matter settled with fire and sword; *rex* and *principes* accepted the offer, settled the treaty and went home with great riches and the honour of a considerable political victory, having established an overlordship, an *imperium* (*Vita Anskarii* 30). The two sites can with reasonable confidence be identified with Grobin–Seeburg and Apuole in the eastern Baltic, and Nerman suggested that the information in the *Vita* can be corroborated by the evidence from archaeological excavations at these sites (Nerman 1942, pp. 116 ff.); although Nerman frequently over-interprets the sources the main outlines of his argument in this case for once—pardon the expression—appears worthy of serious consideration.

The fact that the *principes* act together with the king in a decision to conclude a treaty is a strong indication that the former were more important people than prominent members of the king’s private entourage. Some may have been members of the entourage and/or royal officials as well, but if so it was not primarily in that capacity but as men of great individual power and social importance that
they partook in the decision. Some may have belonged to the king’s own family. These were important foreign affairs and a sphere where the king could not act independently. We can, for instance, recall that in the Visigothic kingdom of Tolouse, the highest nobility still participated in major political decisions such as royal successions, declarations of war, the conclusion of treaties or the promulgations of new law codes, even though its independence and power had been strongly circumscribed by the monarchy (chapter 3). We should not assume that the treaty with the people of Seeburg was a matter of less importance, particularly since Rimbert emphasises the large scale of the expedition. Accordingly we should identify our *principes* as members of families of the highest nobility, the people closest to the king on the social ladder. Also in Denmark we find *principes* acting as the king’s advisers, one of them identified as the *comes* Hovi, the above-mentioned *praefectus* of Sliaswich (*Vita Anskarii* 31). Hergeir, also a *praefectus* and (probably) *comes* is, interestingly enough, never called *princeps*. Perhaps he was something of a social upstart, a man who had climbed the social ladder in the king’s service from a somewhat humbler background.

Turning to comparative evidence our impression is largely confirmed, even though we are reminded that the word *princeps* like other words did not have a single and settled meaning regardless of time and social context.

*Princeps* was the word selected by Augustus as the one most properly defining his constitutional position; he was the *first* man of the state, because, according to his own explanation in *Res Gestae*, it was in authority and not in executive power that he excelled over his fellow Romans. It was, thus, not an official title. Used also by his successors, the word came to signify an epoch, the Principate (OCD, ‘Princeps’; Thylander 1973, p. 126).

Among the Ostrogoths in Italy *princeps* was the title of local, apparently mainly municipal governors who were subordinate to the *comites*. The office could be shared between several men (Burns 1984, p. 174).

In Frankia the title retained (or in time regained) much of its former Roman brilliance. It was monopolised by the mayors of the palace in the seventh and eighth centuries, who could be described as *principes Francorum* or *principes palatii*. Even the sons of the mayors enjoyed the title *princeps* or *dux et princeps*. When the Carolingian dynasty had gained the crown the title was extended to certain leading members of the nobility, ‘such as Waiofar, *princeps* of Aquitaine, and Arichis, the *dux* of Benevento who assumed the title *princeps gentis Langobardorum*’ (Thacker 1981, p. 203).

In seventh- and early eighth-century Mercia *princeps* appears to be particularly connected with subordinate rulers, those whom we might otherwise expect to be called *subreguli* (see chapter 5). The complex political situation in Mercia, where its powerful kings were the overlords of several other dynasties of royal standing, produced a complex terminology of rank. As James Campbell remarks, a ‘ruler of
the Hwicce might be *rex* or *subregulus* of his own people; to his Mercian overlord he was *meus subregulus*, or *comes* or *minister* or *princeps*. The Mercian charters can be expected to ‘de-royalise’ subject rulers, but these are sometimes referred to collectively as *reges et principes*. Once Bede even refers to Peada, the son of the powerful King Penda, as *princeps* of the Middle Angles under Peada’s overlordship (Campbell 1986, p. 92 f.). Adding to the confusion the title was occasionally applied to the Mercian king himself (Thacker 1981, pp. 203 f.). Alcuin (Albinus) of York repeats the phrase *reges et principes* in a letter to King Offa of Mercia in 796 (Lloyn & Percival 1975, p. 115).

In Mercian charter witness lists from the late eighth century and the time around 800 AD the term is commonly found, often in association with *duces*. Apparently the *principes* had some pre-eminence over the latter since they head the lists. The standard Old English for *princeps* was *ealdorman*, but the latter term obviously concealed the nuances conveyed by different Latin terms; in the vernacular translation of Bede’s History no less than eleven (!) Latin terms for rank and social status are translated as *ealdorman* (Campbell 1986, p. 91; Lloyn 1992, p. 75). Thus, for instance, in some charter lists from around 800 AD, some ealdormen are distinguished from their colleagues by the word *princeps*. Thacker may well be right when claiming that ‘in the ninth century ealdormen had rights which were in some sense regalian and may have had their origin in the royal status of the *princeps*’, supporting her argument on a charter from 836 AD in which ‘a monastery was exempted from the *pastus regis et principum*, for which encroachment on their rights two ealdormen received compensation’ (Thacker 1981, pp. 204 and 218).

Charters from ninth century Wessex echoes the Mercian precedence of *principes* over *duces* and the former is usually applied to senior ealdormen. In Kent *principes* appear as ruling over *provinciae*, implying that they enjoyed a status comparable with if not equal to that of lesser kings. In Northumbria in the late eighth century, however, the term is almost exclusively employed in a general sense, the words *patricii* and *duces* being preferred as personal titles (Thacker 1981, pp. 204 f.). To conclude, the word *princeps* appears to be primarily connected with royal or semi-royal status (and blood) among at least the southern Anglo-Saxons in the eighth and ninth centuries. In many respects it seems to be synonymous with *subregulus* in that it implies the rulership of an area under an overlord.

It would seem that Sw. *bövding* (above) is a valid translation of *princeps*. In the Christian, twelfth-century *Niðstigningarsaga* the Latin original *Satan... dux et princeps mortis* is translated with *helvítis höfðingi* (Hultgård 1992, p. 59). It appears that in Scandinavia, just like in Anglo-Saxon England, indigenous titles would correspond to more than one Latin title. According to the vocabulary of the Icelandic sagas the terms *bersir* and *lendir maðr* correspond to *principes* as the men closest in rank to a king (Bagge 1991, p. 124).
Interlude: the hermeneutics of Vita Anskarii

The critically minded reader may object that looking at the Scandinavian past through the spectacles of Christian clerics and monks must needs produce a distorted picture of reality. And from a hermeneutic point of view our stance indeed appears insecure: we are trying to bridge the gap between our own horizon of understanding and that of the Scandinavian past by inserting an intermediary horizon of understanding, making necessary a two-step process of historical ‘translation’. But from another and less superficial hermeneutic angle we must recognise that the process is not sequential and that the interpretation of Scandinavian society made by, for instance, Rimbert and his colleagues is of equal authority as that of the Scandinavians themselves. They stand side by side, not in line in the analysis. It could be argued that the richer Christian nomenclature is a more accurate mirror of social consciousness and conditions than the generalising pagan one, at least from our point of view. We saw above that the *gesith* of late sixth century Wessex could be landed or landless, playing different social roles albeit in the same stage set. Peter Sawyer has compared the penalties for breach of the *mund* (peace) in the earliest Anglo-Saxon law-code (early seventh century), that of Æthelberth of Kent, for different classes of men and widows, noting that there is an additional class of widows between those corresponding to the male classes of king and *eorl*. This suggests that the law-code ‘hides’ a factual subdivision among male nobles (Sawyer 1984, p. 173):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breach of <em>mund</em></th>
<th>Breach of widow’s <em>mund</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>the highest class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>50 shillings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>eorl</em></td>
<td>second class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 shillings</td>
<td>20 shillings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ceorl</em></td>
<td>third class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 shillings</td>
<td>12 shillings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>fourth class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>6 shillings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We recognise the Kentish classes of free males in the *Karl*, *Jarl* and *Konr ungr* of the Scandinavian *Rigsþula*: a simple, tripartite division that on the basis of our evidence must be considered as a simplification. The traditional Germanic terminology thus gives the false impression of equality within each class and appears to disregard the real power relations, whereas the Christian nomenclature highlights such aspects wherever it can, perhaps even excessively. Of course, this impression may be somewhat over-emphasised, because of lack of evidence on the Germanic side. The more detailed Christian nomenclature focuses on social role whereas the Germanic seems content to give information on social standing. The former provides us with nuances on which the Germanic is silent. This is where it becomes a useful tool for us, despite local and temporal variations in usage, the possible influence of an *interpretatio Christiana*, misinterpretations, and outright errors.
Absence of information: the king and the cult, and plural kingship

Returning to the text of *Vita Anskarii* we find that apart from what the text says there are some interesting omissions to be noted. A first point, and one of interest for the connection between the kings of the Svear and Old Uppsala, is that the name Uppsala does not occur in the text at all. But neither does any other place-name, except for Birka. Either the king is there, or he is just elsewhere. From Rimbert’s Christian as well as continental point of view, Birka is the centre, the only one really worth mentioning.

Secondly, there is no mention of particularly royal, religious duties, nor is any aura of sacredness around the king discernible. When Anskar at his second visit asks for the king’s permission to re-establish Christian worship, the king’s sole concern seems to be not to stir up discord among his people; if he felt any threat against his own position he was silent about it (or so the text makes him).

When the council divined the will of the gods before the great assembly, they did this themselves, casting lots in an open field. This might well be called a priestly duty, but pagan religious specialists are totally absent from this scene. In fact, no pagan sacerdotes, such as we find among the Svear of Adam of Bremen (*Gesta* IV.27), ever set foot on Rimbert’s pages; where Hyenstrand (1996, p. 65) finds them is unclear. Nor has the king any special role in the lot-casting ritual; in Rimbert’s eyes it is a collective performance, involving the whole council in the act. The assembly apparently did not consider this to be irregular, or they would surely not have accepted it. However, as the missionaries may not have personally witnessed the ceremony we cannot be sure that details have not been left out. Ian Wood has pointed out that ‘the casting of lots in campum... seems to be paralleled by a reference to the seeking of omens in a field, a velli, in Vellekla (strophe 30), a skaldic poem attributed to Einar skáløglamm (Wood 1987, p. 56).

It is, of course, possible that Rimbert excluded existing pagan priests from his narrative out of contempt, but it would have been excellent propaganda to point it out if they had participated in the process of reinstating the Christian cult. Bede carefully reports how ‘Coifi, the Chief Priest’ of King Edwin of Northumbria became one of the most eager proponents of the new Faith; this man obviously was one of the king’s advisers (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.13). It is equally possible that Rimbert deliberately or out of ignorance misinterpreted the king’s role in the divination, but as the text stands no individual with a specialised religious competence is singled out.

Rimbert does mention one man with a ‘professional’ relationship with the supernatural. When divine retribution began to pour calamities on the household of the man whose son had stolen church property, the man consulted a diviner (divinum) to find out what god the family had offended (*Vita Anskarii* 18).
Would Bede have labelled this diviner *sacerdos*? We cannot know, but possibly Coifi held some kind of ‘office’ at King Edwin’s court, whereas the diviner was a ‘supernatural’ talent and part-time specialist who in clerical eyes could stand no comparison with a Christian priest.

Rimbert gives no explicit information with reference to the plural and hierarchical kingship that we encountered in *Ynglinga saga* and in our analogical sources. He shows us *reges et principes* but not *reges et subreguli*. Were they absent at this time or were they merely passed over in the text?

It is impossible to give a definite answer to the question. On the surface it appears that we have arrived at a stage in social development where the idea of the monarch has begun to make its presence felt, but to what degree it had influenced the minds of the Scandinavians is a matter of speculation. This is an area where we can suspect clerical ‘editing’ on ideological grounds. In contemporary Christian royal ideology of this time kings held their office by the grace of God and the earthly kingdom was conceived of as (ideally) a material offprint of the Divine Kingdom (Leyser 1989, pp. 77 ff.). This ideal could well have been projected upon the lands and rulers of the Danes and the Svear (cf. Sawyer 1991, p. 283).

What is evident, though, is that even if the monarch had become the ideal and the descendants of old *subreguli* were now called jarls or suchlike by their countrymen and *principes* by the missionaries, the political reality was one where the practical enforcement of monarchy, of land-wide political unification, was very hard to attain, an exception rather than a rule. The competition for royal power was fierce, both in Denmark and Sweden.

Rimbert tells the story about King Harald who is said to have ruled over part of Denmark. Because of the hatred and enmity of other kings in the country he was driven into exile, probably in 826 AD (...*Herioldus quidam rex, qui partem tenebat Danorum, ab aliis ipsius provintiae regibus odio et inimicitia conventus, regno suo expulsus sit*). He sought the protection of Emperor Louis the Pious and, after some hesitation, converted to Christianity in return for political assistance. The emperor himself led the new convert to the baptismal font in Mainz and adopted him as his son (*suscepit sibique in filium adoptavit*), thus making him an informal personal dependant (*Vita Anskarii* 7). Harald’s subsequent efforts to maintain his position in Denmark were not immediately successful, so the emperor formalised the vassalage by granting him a *beneficium* of lands beyond the Elbe on which he could fall back if necessary (*Vita Anskarii* 8). We are told that about two decades later a king called Horic managed to extend his rule over all Denmark (*qui tunc solus monarchiam regni tenebat Danorum; Vita Anskarii* 24). According to the Frankish annals Horic managed to stay on the political top until 854, when the realm—or at least the ruling power—once again was split between rulers (Sawyer 1991, p. 287).
From this we gather that there must have been at least three and possibly more kings ruling *provinciae* of Denmark at the end of the first quarter of the ninth century, but of their status and relationship we learn nothing. A hint that this small-scale kingship was still the rule is provided by the plural description of the Danes: they are not the *Gens Danorum* but the *Gentes Danorum*, the peoples of the Danes (Vita Anskarii 7). There is nothing which corresponds to the late Anglo-Saxon concept of the *Gens Anglorum* (cf. Wormald 1983). This fragmented state of rulership would have resulted in unstable relationships and hierarchies among kings, just as it did among the early Anglo-Saxons. Presumably Horic held authority over some Danish kings before he reached ultimate supremacy, and it was his superior power that drove Harald into the arms of the emperor. But this, of course, need not necessarily imply that an established *reges-subreguli* system was still existing among the Danes at this time.

Sawyer’s analysis of Danish ninth-century kingship, based on Frankish annals, adds valuable information to the picture. It appears that between 804 and 864 ‘all known kings and claimants belonged to two families’. Whether they were, as Sawyer suggests, ‘branches of one dynasty’ or not, it is still clear that the notion of the *stirps regia* was ideologically influential at this time and place. Kingship was not seldom shared, notably but not exclusively between brothers (Sawyer 1991, pp. 283 ff.).

For the Svear the evidence is more obscure and we are not assisted by continental sources. As with the Danes they form, in Rimbert’s eyes, not one but several peoples, *gentes Sueonum* (Vita Anskarii 14). Nevertheless, these peoples have only one king at a time, at least whom we hear about, with the possible exception of King Onund (Anoundus).

King Onund ruled the Svear, but was forced into exile and stayed among the Danes (Per idem fere temporis accidit, ut etiam quidam rex Sueonum nomine Anoundus, eictus regno suo, apud Danos exul fuerit). Enlisting Danish military aid he sailed to Birka with a substantial fleet. The force fell upon the town unawares. The king was said to be elsewhere, which means that so also were his personal retainers; there was no time to summon neither the *principes* nor the ‘people’. Hergeir had only the present tradesmen and other ‘people’ at his disposal (Et forte tunc rex ipsorum longius inde aberat, / et principes ac populi multitudo congregari non poterant. Tantum supradictus Herigarius... cum eis qui ibi maneabant negotiatoribus et populis praesens aderat; Vita Anskarii 19). Onund demanded 100 pounds of silver in ransom, which was promptly paid by the townsfolk. The Danes, however, were dissatisfied with the deal and planned to assault the town; Onund advised the Danes to first divine the will of the gods. They did that and found that the gods strongly recommended them to devastate a certain Slavic town instead (in fact, it was the Christian God working to protect his faithful Hergeir, obviously finding innocent Slavs expendable).
God's will was done or, if you wish, Onund's scheme worked. The Danes went away while Onund paid back the silver and made peace with the citizens of Birka. 'He stayed for a while there, as he wanted to be reconciled with his people' (*volens genti suae reconciliari*).

A strange story, and one which leaves us with most questions unanswered. Had Onund been sole king of the Svear or one of – at least – two, indicating a division between, say, brothers? Was Onund really reconciled with his 'people' (*gens*) and, if so, did he again become king? And, in that case, of all or part of the Svear? What does Rimbert mean with *gens*, all the Svear or a subdivision? There are no definite answers. If this is a hint of multiple kingship among the Svear, we cannot regard it as more permanent than among the Danes at the same time. It seems probable that the Svear in the ninth century had come further towards monarchy than those ruled by Ingiald *illrådi* in Snorri's fictional past.

Sune Lindqvist dismissed earlier suggestions (without giving any references to these) based on a passage in a Medieval Icelandic chronicle that Onund could have been co-ruler with Björn, the king who received Anskar at Birka on the first missionary journey. This text mentions in passing two co-reigning brothers, Björn at Håga (?) and Onund—as indicated by the epithet *upsale*—at Uppsala. Lindqvist states that all other evidence speaks against such a theory and that we have to visualise a unified and powerful 'Swedish' kingdom at the time, one that was ruled by a monarch (Lindqvist 1930, pp. 14 f.). Lindqvist's romantic-nationalist argument is obviously untenable considering the cases of contemporary co-regency in Denmark, but the note in the late source cannot, on the other hand, prove that co-regency did occur. Birger Nerman disagrees with Lindqvist and follows the Icelandic text, considering the co-regency as an established fact. His conclusion is that there were two branches of the 'Swedish' royal family, one residing at Uppsala, the other at Birka/Adelsö (Nerman 1943, pp. 66 f.).
Runes and royalty I: ‘Rune’ as exclusive discourse

A standard list of the elements which formed the power base of a Scandinavian late Iron Age king would probably contain land, retainers, alliances, cult leadership and plunder along with a number of other factors of social, symbolic and economic nature. Perhaps ‘special knowledge’ should be added on an equal basis with these. A passage in Rígsþula (33 f.) makes literacy the prerogative of the king and the jarl:

Fregna og segja skal fróðra hver
sá er vill heitinn borskur.
Einn vita né annar skal,
þjóð veit ef þrír eru.
(Ígumál 63, my translation)

Ask and answer ought the wise
if they’d be called clever.
One should know, another not:
a ‘people’ are three who know.

(Upp óxu þar Jarli bornir
besta þómþu hlifar bendu,
skeyti skófu, skelfþu aska.
En Konr ungr kunni rúnar,
efinrúnar ok aldrrína.

Meirr kunni hann mónnum bjarga,
eggar deyfá, egi lægja.
Klpk nam fogn, kyrra elda,
sefá of vefja, sorgir lægja;
afl ok eljun átta manna.

Hann vi Ríg Jarl rúnar deildi,
brýgum beiti ok betr kunni;
þá oðlaþisk ok eiga gat
Rigr at beita, rúnar kunna.

There grew up the sons of Jarl:
horses they broke, shields bent,
arrow-shafts smoothed, spears shook.

But Kon the young alone knew runes,
eternal runes, and ancient runes.

More he knew: how to keep men,
blunt edges, calm the sea;
he learnt bird language, to quench flames,
soothe hearts and lessen sorrows;
had the strength and power of eight men.

With Rig Jarl he in runes competed,
wiles he used and better knew;
there he earned and won for himself
the name of Rig and knowledge of runes.
(my translation)
Of all the sons of Jarl, only the youngest, Konr ungr (‘Kon the young’, cf. konr (kinsman) + ungr (young) = konungr, ‘king’), was literate. It is through his command of language (literally: rune-magic) and not through his great prowess he prevails and earns the name of Rig. Whether his command over the sharpness of weapons’ edges and his fluency in bird language are supposed to derive from his literacy is unclear, but this is not of immediate importance. It would be overly rash to take the poem at face value, not least since opinions diverge on its dating. It could be as old as from c. 900 AD, but a date in the twelfth century was suggested by Andreas Häusler and in the thirteenth by Jan de Vries and Klaus von See (see Kristjánsson 1990, pp. 205 and 212). In the former case we would expect it to reflect pagan ideology, whereas in the latter case we are forced to take syncretism and interpretatio Christiana into account.

Nevertheless, the Rígsþula passage certainly tells us something of the aristocratic aura around the runic script. It seems clear that older runic inscriptions can be primarily or even exclusively associated with the optimates of northern Germanic society, considering their not infrequent appearance on objects like gold bracteates (Axboe 1991; Andrén 1991). The question is whether the runic finds are representative or not; the possibility of lower-class inscriptions on perishable material leaves room for speculation. My personal guess is, however, that the present impression is more or less correct. The runic finds from the late Viking Age and the Middle Ages originated in a society much different from that of the early Roman Iron Age. The connection between ruling power and exclusive, possibly ‘esoteric’, knowledge also deserves consideration, regardless of what date we ultimately ascribe to Rígsþula.

From Rimbert’s Vita Anskarii (12) we know that the king who ruled the Svear at Ansgar’s first visit to Birka in c. 830 wrote a letter in runes to the German emperor in his own hand. There is hardly any reason for disbelieving this information, but it tells us nothing of how far down the social ladder literacy extended at the time.

A theory on the origin of the runes

The earliest known runes occur on objects found in Denmark and Northern Germany and date from the late second century or the time around 200 AD. Many suggestions have been made about the purpose for which the Germanic peoples invented the runic script, ranging from purely practical intent to magical and divinatory. In his recent contribution to the debate on the origins of the runic script, Bengt Odenstedt (1990) summarises the discussion (see also Magnus 1992). I will here concentrate on one single theory, the one supported by Odenstedt. It was originally presented by A. Bæksted in 1952 and suggests that the script was not primarily invented for a practical purpose, such as record-mak-
ing and the writing of letters and military despatches, but that it ‘was created as an artificial, playful, not really needed imitation of the Roman script’ (Odenstedt 1990, p. 171, quoting Bæksted). I find this theory attractive, but if it was play it was certainly in a serious game: a social game. The technology of reading and writing (see chapter 2) can be compared with, for instance, the technology of building a road or a portcullis, also acquired from the Roman Empire (Jørgensen 1998, pp. 101 f.; Herschend 1985; Näsman 1989). Was the portcullis in the fortified village of Eketorp, Öland, really necessary? The use of these technologies must surely also be perceived in an ideological perspective, as displaying an exclusive and exotic knowledge within local society. It goes without saying that this would have enhanced the status of those who knew, presenting them in the light of that otherness that was Romanitas.

In the competitive world of predator economy where power was wielded by kings and magnates who, like the Medieval barons of 1066 and all that believed in ‘the Combat, the whole Combat and nothing but the Combat’ (Sellar & Yeatman 1954, p. 21)—if we understand ‘combat’ in a very broad sense—, the use of runes became a statement of exclusiveness, or, to borrow the words of Shakespeare’s Henry V (act III, scene III), an expression of ‘we few, we happy few, we band of brothers’. The maintenance and extension of personal and group power was not attained by brute force alone, but also by factors such as public display of material splendour, lavish destruction of valuables and the manifestation of exclusive knowledge (for example, Hedeager 1993 and 1997).

In my opinion, we should not be at all surprised that the Germans invented the runic script, nor necessarily seek a functional cause in the mundane sense: the fact that these ‘happy few’ had learnt the technology of literacy made the invention inevitable. Once acquired, this exotic knowledge, one among several, set them apart from their stay-at-home fellows, and could simply not be dispensed with. Albeit originally of little or no practical value in their oral culture, from the ideological view-point of the upper social strata it was highly functional. Therefore, the early runic inscriptions on, for example, the gold bracteates of the Migration Period—often short, often obscure, sometimes impossible to interpret—were probably less important as texts than as social markings, that is, the meaning of the inscriptions was subordinate to the mere presence of signs, mysteriously capturing speech like a fly trapped in a piece of amber (cf. Odenstedt 1990, pp. 172 f.). Of course, this argument rests on the assumption that the early runic finds are representative, and we cannot be sure that they are. But whatever the reason was behind the invention of the runes, when runic inscriptions become more common towards the end of the Roman Iron Age and in the Migration Period they appear as elements of an exclusive discourse. Whether this was the outcome of a social process or not is a question which need not be answered in this study.
A rune-expert at Hrothgar’s court?

A passage from Sune Lindqvist’s (1958) little known translation of parts of the Beowulf poem deserves a place in this discussion. After Beowulf’s heroic battle with Grendel, the ogre’s mother seeks the hall of Hrothgar to avenge her maimed and dying brood. Having forced her way into the hall she soon takes to her heels before the onrush of the awakened warriors, but one man still finds his bane in the female clutches:

Se wæs Hroðgare / hæleþa leofost
on gesiðes hád... (ll. 1296 f.)

[and Hrothgar says:]  
Dead is Æschere

Yrmenlafes  yldra broþor
min runwita  ond min rædbora
eaxigestealla  bonne we on orlege
bafelan weredon  bonne kniton féhan
eoferes cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesan
æþeling ærgod  swylc Æschere wæs! (ll. 1323 ff.)

Lines 1296–97 tell us that the man, later identified as Æschere, the older brother of Yrmenlaf, was Hrothgar’s dearest retainer (gesið). In lines 1326–29 the king recalls how, years before, he and his ‘closest comrade... defended our heads in the fray, when troops clashed, struck against boar-crests’ (Swanton 1978). The crucial line is, however, 1325, min runwita ond min rædbora. It is usually translated quite neutrally as by Laing (1844): ‘my sage adviser and stay in council’; Swanton (1978): ‘my confidant and my councillor’; Collinder (1988): ‘som var min för-trogne i tankar och rådslag’ (who was my confidant in thoughts and council) and Hoops (1965; runwita = ‘geheimer Ratgeber, Vertrauter’). Here we have a great warrior and long-time, close friend of the king, perhaps a brother-in-arms from his youth, who is a wise and reliable household councillor. The death of this man strikes us as a calamity, but on the mere personal level (after all his sorrows, and when everything seemed so nicely settled, why should Hrothgar be bereft of his old, dear friend?), whereas Grendel’s solitary and nocturnal war was directed against the official centre of Hrothgar’s kingship, the hall.

But Sune Lindqvist tells a different story. He reads line 1325 ‘min runläsare och min rådgivare’ (my rune-reader and my councillor; 1958, p. 38). This reading gives Æschere a particular, important and highly official function at the court: he is the ‘court secretary’, the one who knows (or knows best) how to read and write. The only other scholar to follow Lindqvist’s interpretation is, as far as
I know, Karl Schneider, who gives us a more modern Lindqvistian translation of *runwita* as ‘runic expert’ (Schneider 1986, p. 169). Lindqvist’s translation of *run* is etymologically correct, but so are also the alternatives. Klaeber translates *run* with ‘(secret) consultation, council’; *-wita* in this compound literally means ‘knower’, not ‘reader’.

The seemingly haphazard blow dealt by Grendel’s mother becomes, in Lindqvist’s and Schneider’s readings, highly intentional and significant, being directed at another vital aspect of rulership beside the hall, that of the control of specialised and exclusive knowledge. Æschere’s death is a collective loss, not only a personal. It is a loss for the ruling class in relation to those it dominates. This adds to the drama of the passage and makes it attractive in the light of current research on orality versus literacy and social domination.

However, a closer analysis reveals a complex reality behind the word *runwita* as well as a need to go beyond a word-for-word translation if a more qualified understanding is sought. I initiated a discussion on the translation issue on the electronic mailing list *Ansaxnet* and received responses from a number of linguists, one ethnographer and one initiated amateur. In the following some vital parts of the exchange are presented (formatting added):

**From: Paul Acker, 21 March 1997. Subject: Runwita**

In etymological time, *run* meant ‘secret’ first, ‘secret writing’, i.e. ‘rune’, second. A *wita* is usually a counselor, a *run-wita* then most likely a compounded form of the same (used for purposes of r-alliteration?). One wouldn’t expect it to mean a specialist in runes without other added indications, e.g. in other contexts outside *Beowulf*. [...]

**From: Martin Foys, 21 March 1997. Subject: Runwita**

Æschere is one of my favorite figures in *Beowulf* – and the fact that his death focuses on the head, not the limbs (as in the death of Hondscioh (lit. ‘Mr. Hand’) always suggested to me a connection with learning and knowledge. [...]

**From: Duncan Macrae-Gibson, 22 March 1997. Subject: Runwita**

[...] Apart from the *Beowulf* occurrence Bosworth-Toller [= *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*] records only one appearance [of *runwita*], in praise of Saint Guthlac on his holy death-bed. The close context isn’t very definitive but from the wider context the sense would seem to be ‘wise in the heavenly mysteries’. So there is really no support for ‘expert in runes’.

**From: George Clark, 24 March 1997. Subject: Runwita**

I like the suggestion [of Sune Lindqvist], but then what does ‘rune-expert’ mean? The wise men of the Geats consulted the omens and encouraged Be-
owulf – who seems to already be heading for his ship and Denmark as they speak. Æschere may have had the same job at Hrothgar’s court. He read the runes (a passage in Tacitus evidently describes a way of doing it) and gave advice based on what he thought he saw in them. This suggestion is out of sync with the dominant paradigm for the interpretation of Beowulf since Tolkien and indeed wouldn’t have been agreeable to Klaeber either. This narrative detail, like the omens read by wise Geats, doesn’t count as a Christian element in the poem. In this case, mother monster is striking (not necessarily by design?) at traditional wisdom, augury.

From: Susan Granquist, 26 March 1997. Subject: Runwita
I’ve been following this out of a matter of interest rather than expertise, but one of the questions that occurred to me is whether runwita could have anything to do with singing or chanting. According to a number of sources I have ‘rune’ had a connotation also of song or sound, whisper/mystery, somewhat the same way that galdar (magic) is related to bird song. [...] Has the possibility of runwita as a court poet been examined?

From: Wade Tarzia, 26 March 1997[a]. Subject: Runwita
[...] Consider that the runes (Germanic alphabetic characters) were something for which the god Óðinn/Odin had to go through a shamanic ritual to ‘win’ from an otherworld. Once won, they represented a magical knowledge that could be used in the real world to gain pragmatic ends. I am not certain if they were always meant to be carved on an object to invoke their individual magic properties [...] or whether one might do something else with them, such as meditate on them or perform an incantation with the rune mentioned, etc. [...] So, this is a long way toward suggesting that ‘runwita’ may be hinting at some shamanic or sacred function to Chief Hrothgar’s counselors. But since religion and rank in a chiefly society can intermix in various ways (chiefs are sometimes the head priests in a chiefly tribe, and sometimes this function is separated) it would be no surprise to me if it were pagan-religious counselors who were close associates of the chief in some expressions of the Germanic chieftdom. [...]  

From: Wade Tarzia, 26 March 1997[b]. Subject: Runwita
With traditional performance in many societies being melded into many kinds of pragmatic social argumentation and dispute, ethnographic analogy, at least, is tentatively supportive of your idea [cf. Granquist’s posting]. [...] Also, folklore studies of the role of performance and audience emulation would help out here. [...] What is needed is specific evidence from the Anglo-Saxon world. Hrothgar plays the hearp and performs, narrating his life – performance here is shown as melded with narrative not purely for entertainment. Beowulf’s speech to his retainers before he fights the dragon might be seen as a kind of performance of socio-political legitimisation of kingship – sort of pragmatic among the
hall retainers. If not couched as poetic performance (though the poet doesn’t say either way) it is at least speech act (see Creed’s article, Beowulf’s Fourth Act, *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. John Miles Foley, New York, Garland Publishing, Inc. 85–109, 1992). So *runwita* as court poet, in the sense of a performer of traditional modes and genres thought appropriate in legal discourse and persuasion, is not a bad idea. More evidence? [...] If we retreat to *runwita* as being more of a ‘secret councilor’ or whatever, instead of my speculative shamanic-survival suggestion (which perhaps the poet would have rather avoided but for the need for alliteration?), I am uncomfortable only because traditional societies of this kind like to keep councils in the open. Preliterate people lay great importance on the public word. (Note that wergeld fines for open murder are sometimes lower in these societies than for murder by magic spell, which is secretive; and thieves are the lowest of possible folk [...]). If *runwita* implies secret councils and insider politics, etc., my wholly intuitive impression is that the term of this meaning does not well fit the oral, public, traditional community. [...]

**From:** Duncan Macrae-Gibson, 27 March 1997. **Subject:** Runwita

‘secret councils and insider politics’? A ruler will necessarily have confidential business, and need a confidential counsellor to discuss it with. So will any man with any considerable position; his wife is urged in the Exeter *Maxims* to take this position of confidant, and *rune healdan* [above, p. 125]. Why look further?

**From:** Wade Tarzia, 27 March 1997. **Subject:** Runwita

I don’t disagree, but in such societies this ['confidential' discussion] would provide tension, since there is no record of what has been decided except that which is made into public ritual. What is decided in a chief’s council will have great ramifications among the kin-groups who share corporate responsibility and action. I doubt that secret deliberations in this scenario are evaluated positively, nor social roles specialized in deliberating secretly.

**From:** Wade Tarzia, 27 March 1997. **Subject:** runwita, take 2

One more thing on this, the *Maxims*. Folk culture is filled with contradictions. Proverbial wisdom often conflicts with other proverbial wisdom, one proverb conflicts with a demonstrated social role, another supports it (This is where communicative competence in folk disputations comes in – mastery of all the wisdoms, selection and refutation via the very conflicts that confuse the outside observer, anthropologist or medievalist). [...] The *Maxims* are part of the argument, yes, but are also part of the problem. We have two meanings of ‘rune’, (more?) with either secretive of magical implications. [...] I would make a guess and say the same might be true of the social function of councilors and the relation of rune and *wita*, secretive vs. magico-religious functions. Were the ‘councilors’ being secretive in their councils? Were they being shamanic-magical (or had they that role in other matters)? *Beowulf* does not show shamanic
functions in councilors, nor a secretive function (the chief’s hall would not be a very secretive place, and we have been shown that all important matters spoken in public in this poem, but perhaps that tells us too little). At this point I would have to defer to a study of all the occurrences of run, and wita, and run-wita in the Old English corpus, with an analysis of their context in the narrative.

The suggestions by Clark that runwita might be associated with ‘traditional wisdom, augury’, and by Granquist that Æschere could have been a ‘court poet’ share a common denominator in their focus on ‘specialist discourse’, particularly if we understand ‘court poet’ according to Tarzia, ‘in the sense of a performer of traditional modes and genres thought appropriate in legal discourse and persuasion’. Tarzia hesitates before the ‘confidential counsellor’ of Macrae-Gibson and rightly stresses the inherent risk of tension within an oral society, should power-discourse be partly conducted in ‘private’. However, as shown in the previous chapter on Vita Anskarii, this kind of tension appears to have been part of the political landscape of early Viking Age Sweden: some issues needed to be presented before the ‘people’, others would be settled within a small circle of magnates. This is a society where bonds of kinship make up only part of the social web. It is very much a question of size and structure (of the socio-political units involved) and logistics (overcoming geographical distance and other obstacles to participation in a collective discourse); we could also speak of ‘social logistics’ (overcoming social distance and obstacles). The king’s or chieftain’s hall was indeed a ‘secretive place’ insofar as access to it was exclusive.

In our present-day, Western society the distance between ‘the man (or woman) on the street’ and the political and economic establishment is a matter of everyday experience. However, in search for an early case of perceived tension between kings and warriors on one hand (within the sphere of ‘rune’) and the rest of society on the other hand we can turn to Bede’s praise of King Oswald of Northumbria (d. c. 642), after which he generalises: ‘Kings should take a paternal interest in all their subjects, rich and poor, and not confine their affection to their warriors’ (Wallace-Hadrill 1971, p. 83). The statement implies that the latter was precisely what many kings did. The same tension is also apparent in the late fourth-century Passio Sancti Sabae Gothi (see chapter 3).

The secret of ‘rune’

An analysis of ‘all the occurrences of run, and wita, and run-wita in the Old English corpus’ would surely be the best way to reach an informed understanding of the problem as Tarzia says, but the task would be well beyond the limits of this work as well as my personal competence. Nevertheless, I would like to cite examples from a few texts—not only Anglo-Saxon—that I believe are informa-
tive and, at least tentatively, takes the argument further. The first two examples are from *Daniel*, one of the biblical texts of the Junius manuscript:

\[ \text{þæt gyddedon gumena mænigeo,} \\
\text{heleð in healle, hwæt seo hand write} \\
\text{to þam beacne burbsittendum.} \\
\text{Werede comon on þet wundor seon.} \\
\text{Sobton þa wiðe in sefan gebydam,} \\
\text{hwæt seo hand write haliges gastes.} \\
\text{Ne mihton arædan runcreftige men} \\
\text{engles ærendbec, ædelinga cyn,} \\
\text{oðþæt Daniel com, dritrne geccoren,} \\
\text{snotor and söfist, in þet seld gangan.} \\
\text{Dam wes on gaste godes crafte micel,} \\
\text{to þam ic georne gefrægn gyfum ceapian} \\
\text{burbge weardas þet be him boostafas} \\
\text{arædde and arehte, hwæt seo run bude.} \]

Then the proud, heathen leader of the host [Nebuchadnezzar] began to tell his fearful dream, and all the horror of the vision that had vexed him, and bade him tell the import of this secret thing, bidding him speak in holy words and search his heart to tell with truth the meaning of the tree which he saw gleaming, and declare to him the decrees of fate. Then he fell silent. Yet Daniel clearly saw in the assembly that his prince, the lord of men, was guilty before God. The prophet paused; then God's herald, skilled in the law, made answer to the king:... (ll. 538 ff.; Kennedy 1916, my emphasis)
Him æcreftig andswarode,  
godes spelboda, gleaw gebances:

But the multitude, the host within the hall, debated what the hand had written for a sign to the city-dwellers. And many came to see the wonder. They searched the thoughts of their hearts to know what the hand of the angel had written. Nor could the nobles and magicians read the angel’s message till Daniel, wise and righteous, loved of God, came to the hall. And his heart was filled with wisdom sent from God. Then, as I have heard, the city-dwellers sought to tempt Daniel with gifts to read the writing and tell the import of the mystery. But the prophet of God, skilled in the law and wise of heart, made answer to them:... (ll. 727 ff.; Kennedy 1916, my emphases)

The two passages reflect identical situations, among other things indicated by the repetition of the half-line hwæt seo run bude, ‘what the run meant’ (ll. 540 and 740). A dream and the writings of an angel within a hall require interpretation. Both are ‘coded’ messages sent by God. Daniel is the one who can ‘read’ these messages and see the heavenly causes (intentions) behind the worldly effects or experiences; he succeeds where the pagan, runcraeftige men (l. 733) fail. His ability comes from God himself, he is God’s messenger or herald, ar (l. 550), loved (chosen) by God, drihtne gecoren (l. 735), etc. Here, the most suitable translation of run is ‘mystery’ (in the Christian sense), and the parallel with the passage from Guthlac (l. 1095) mentioned by Duncan Macrae-Gibson above is obvious.

But it is also clear that we can understand Daniel’s feat in general and present-day terms as derived from his access to a privileged discourse. And it cannot be ruled out that the ability of Daniel to understand God’s intentions, the Divine order as reflected in the world of human experience, could be translated back to a pagan context which might have contained traditional wisdom and augury, just as Clark suggested.

We can compare the Anglo-Saxon usage with a passage from the Gothic Bible (Wulfila, Mark IV.11, my emphasis and translation) where Jesus addresses his disciples:

jab qap im: izwis atgiban ist kunnan runa þiudangardjos gudis, iþ jainaim þaim uta in gaþukom allata wairþþiþ...

And he said: to you is given knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God, but to those outside all is given in similes...

The original Greek word translated with Gothic runa was mystérion. The word is associated with knowledge for the initiated and privileged (for instance in mystic cults) as well as with the divine secrets which defy explanation.
In *Daniel* (l. 149a) we also find the expression *wyrdageryn* (‘fate’s mysteries’) used to describe the ‘riddles’ which Daniel will solve. The compound *gastgerynum* (spiritual mysteries) occurs in the Old English poems *Christ* (A, B, C), ll. 440 and 713, *Elene*, ll. 189 and 1147, and *Guthlac* (A, B), ll. 248, 1084, and 1113.

In the Old Saxon *Heliand* from the 830s the words *rûna* and *giruni* are used in a way identical to *runa* and *geryn* in the Gothic Bible, and *run* and *gery* in Anglo-Saxon, spiritual poetry. Christ summons the disciples (*rincos = retainers*) *an rûnon*, to counsel (ll. 1273, 2721, 3095, 3226 and 5062). One such occasion is the scene of the Sermon of the Mount where Christ reveals his ‘lore’ to his disciples: the eight Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, and so forth. He does this at the request of the disciples to teach them ‘how to pray as John does... and how they should greet the ruling God’. The disciples end their request with the words: ‘gerihti us that geruni... “Teach us the secret runes”’ (Murphy 1989, p. 90). The reader is welcome to substitute Murphy’s ‘secret runes’ with ‘mysteries’, ‘secret lore’ or just ‘secrets’.

From the Biblical scene we now turn to *Beowulf* with its enigmatic mixture of traditional, heroic and Christian values. The first passage describes the sad plight of King Hrothgar and his household. For twelve years the monster Grendel has haunted Heorot, Hrothgar’s hall, coming from the wilderness after sunset, killing retainers and occupying the hall during the dark hours, thus barring the royal household from night-time access to this most central symbol of rulership:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sore was the sorrow to Scyldings’-friend} \\
\text{Hrothgar,} \\
\text{heart-rending misery. Many nobles} \\
\text{sat assembled, and searched out counsel} \\
\text{how it were best for bold-hearted men} \\
\text{against harassing terror to try their hand} \\
\text{(ll. 170 ff., Gummere 1910, my emphasis)}
\end{align*}
\]

In line 172 we find the word *rune* flanked by the words *rice* and *red* that were earlier found to be intimately connected within the ideology of kingship (see chapter 5); nothing suggests that their occurrence here is due to chance or random selection by the poet. The scholarly opinion is that *rice* in this sentence refers to Hrothgar and his men as being rich and powerful but also, I would suggest, as the collective body responsible for *rice* in the sense of ‘rule’ (in fact, the first part of the sentence could be read ‘Men often sat down, to *rune* how to rule, counsel seeking...’). They try to ‘search out counsel’ on how to act so as to re-establish
a proper *rice* or, in the simplest of terms: figure out what to do. Their method? Nothing mysterious, or so it seems: they go brain-storming, they have a ‘board-meeting’, they sit down and talk, and being the men they are, they most likely do it within the secluded and exclusive space of the hall. Here we can also compare with some passages from the Gothic Bible (my emphases):

*At maurgin ðan waurþana, runa nemun allai gudjans jab ðai sinistans manageins bi ïesus, ei afduþidedeina ina.*

When it then had become morning, all the priests and the elders of the people took *counsel* about Jesus, that they would kill him. (*Wulfila*, Matt. 27.1)

*jab gaggandans ðan Fareisaiës sunsaiw miþ þaim Herodianum *garuni* gatawidedun bi ina, ei imma usqemeina*

And shortly thereafter the Pharises went with the Herodians and took *counsel* of how they would dispose of him. (*Wulfila*, Mark 3.6; a further example is in Mark 15.1)

In the next passage from *Beowulf* the road to ‘rune’ is longer and less straight but still, I believe, worth toiling along. Beowulf and his warriors have arrived among the Danes. Coming ashore they are met and questioned by one of Hrothgar’s retainers who is set to guard the beach. Beowulf ‘unlocks his hoard of words’ (*wordbord onleac*, l. 259), presents himself, and declares his friendly and heroic intentions: to seek out and defeat Grendel. The Geats are escorted by the guard to Hrothgar’s dwelling, where they are approached by another royal companion, Wulfgar. Again, they are questioned about their identity and honesty and, again, Beowulf answers, confidently and correctly (ll. 331 ff.). Wulfgar then enters into Heorot and announces to Hrothgar that Beowulf and his men are standing outside his door. Hrothgar replies that he has heard much about Beowulf and his prowess. Even more, he has actually known Beowulf’s father and met Beowulf when the latter was a child. In other words, Beowulf is well known among the Danes, and the modern reader may at this stage be excused for wondering what all the fuss is about. Anyway, the Geats are now admitted into Heorot where they are cordially greeted by Hrothgar. Once again, Beowulf presents himself, declares his friendship and states his intention to solve the Grendel problem. He and his men are seated at an appropriate bench and—at last—drink is served to everyone by one of Hrothgar’s companions. But Beowulf’s ‘rite of passage’ is not yet over. Hunferth (written Hunferth in the manuscript but usually emended to Unferth by editors of the poem), Hrothgar’s ‘speaker’, *þyle* (ll. 1165 and 1456), who is obviously one of the most important and trusted of the retainers, raises his voice (ll. 499 ff.):
Hunferth and Beowulf now engage in verbal contest where the Dane attempts to belittle the heroic stature and feats of the Geat. To no avail, of course, Beowulf being the hero he is and having the ‘word-hoard’ he has. The young Geatic gang-leader answers eloquently, with unwavering confidence (not forgetting to repeat his plans for Grendel once more), and is rewarded with the acclamation of the bench-mates. As by coincidence, this is where Queen Wealtheow makes her first appearance:

Wealtheow passes around a goblet of mead to each and everyone, starting with Hrothgar, and when she comes to Beowulf he takes it in his hand and makes his last public speech for the evening, making a solemn oath that he shall kill Grendel or himself be killed. A point of culmination and no return has been reached. Is it a coincidence that the first thing we are told about Wealtheow, apart from being Hrothgar’s queen, is that she is *cynna gemyndig*, where *gemyndig* means ‘mindful (of)’, ‘intent (on)’, and *cyn(n)* ‘proper proceeding’, ‘etiquette’, ‘courtesy’ (Klaeber 1950)? It would come as no surprise to me if the expression was carefully chosen with regard to the context, that the queen appears at the proper time as Beowulf has passed the final test and given a proper answer to Hunferth’s challenge. Beowulf has ‘talked himself’ step by step from the Danish coast-line into Heorot, gained gradual access to Hrothgar’s person, and in the process been gradually transformed from a potentially threatening stranger to a trusted guest. Now, by his unflinching attitude and his verbal mastership he has proved himself completely worthy of the friendship of the Danes. In fact, like Hrothgar’s companions, he is now bound to the exclusive group by an oath, not as they to the king in person but to the context. The temporal extension of group identity is confirmed by Wealtheow’s communal toast. No more need for the Danes to *rune*: here is their *red*, answering to the name of Beowulf!
Superficially, the poem has Hunferth speaking on his own initiative out of an equal amount of envy and intoxication, but the impression between the lines is that the *þyle* is merely doing his job, saying the *proper* thing at the *proper* time (cf. Hill 1991, pp. 171 f. who endows Hunferth with both personal initiative and a contextual/discursive function as the king’s mouthpiece). The use of the word *beadurune*, battle-runes (l. 501), in my opinion also hints at the ritualised character of this verbal exchange: the participants play their set roles within an established, privileged, oral discourse, a code that can be said to answer to the name of *run*. It is a fixed, verbal pattern which can be ‘unbound’ or ‘let loose’ in certain contexts. The word *beadurune* also reflects the ‘agonistical tone’ of oral discourse (above, pp. 15 f.).

Beowulf’s knowledge of the oral ‘code’, the right way to approach and address the king, gives him access to the king, and earns him the king’s friendship and goodwill and makes him a temporal member of the exclusive circle around the king. Although, superficially, Beowulf is the one to offer help and Hrothgar the one to receive it, the king becomes the hero’s patron by providing him with the necessary stage for his heroic performance. We are not far from the disciples in *Heliand*, imploring their lord, Christ: *geribi ðus that geruni*. But Beowulf already knows.

The ‘office’ of the *þyle* reminds us of Rimbert’s description in *Vita Anskarii* (27) of the *placitum* (assembly) in Birka where the issue at stake (whether Ansgar and the missionaries were to be allowed to re-introduce Christian worship or not) was presented to the ‘people’ (*populus*) by a *praeco*, a speaker or herald. Like Hunferth, this *praeco* makes a challenge on behalf of the king, but to a collective, not an individual. By demanding a response the challenge upsets the stability or equilibrium (*homeostasis*) of the present state of social relationships between groups (built on loyalties, trust, the fulfilment of mutual obligations, etc.), requiring a renegotiation of the same relationships. The king avoids the direct, discursive responsibility for this by using his *þyle* or *praeco*. We also understand that when King Björn confers with his *fideles* at Ansgar’s first visit and King Olaf with his *principes* at the missionary’s second coming we witness two examples of ‘runing’. Rimbert’s use of the word *fideles* is singularly appropriate since it derives from *fides* = trust, and can be translated ‘confidants’.

Rounding up this discussion with a final example from *Beowulf*, I return to poor, old, decapitated Æschere, where he is briefly mentioned again in the poem (II. 2122–23):

... *þær wæs Æschere, 
  frōdan fyrmwitan  þeorb uðgenge.*

Using Klaeber’s (1950) glossary I arrive at the translation: ‘there Æschere, the wise, old counsellor, from life departed’. Swanton (1978) has a similar transla-
tion: ‘there it was that life departed from Æschere, sage old councillor’, and Gummere (1910) echoes: ‘From Aeschere old, loyal councillor, life was gone’. Fyrnwitan is an obvious variation of runwita, and to find out whether the parallel might extend beyond the formal poetic to the meaning of the compounds I searched a major part of the Old English, online poems in the Labyrinth Library. Only in Elene and Andreas (both from the Vercelli Book) I found occurrences of fyrnwita (fyrnweota, fyrnwiota), in the former work three (ll. 343, 438 and 1153), in the latter one (l. 784). In Elene the word is used to characterise first King David, prophesying about the coming of Christ, then the father of one of the characters in the poem (called Judas), and finally an anonymous collective of wise men of old (prophets), also having foretold the coming of Christ. In Adrian the subject is the Patriarch Abraham, preparing to reveal to his people what God has communicated to him in private.

Three of these four instances refer to what we could call divine revelation, prophesy or access to the exclusive discourse of God. The similarity to Guthlac as a Christian runwita is striking, and ‘wise in the heavenly mysteries’ is an appropriate description also of a Christian fyrnwita although it is not a literal translation of the word. In addition, both David and Abraham are said to be frōd as fyrnwitan, just like Æschere. While we can only speculate on the intentions of the Beowulf poet(s) it seems to me that a devout and learned Christian of those times would have understood Æschere as an extraordinary, old, wise man, a worthy representative of the good, almost-Christians in the poem, perhaps even a man with prophetic gifts. He was, like Njal in Njal’s saga, a man ‘who remembered the past and discerned the future, and solved the problems of any man who came to him for help’ (Njal’s saga, 20).

Words related to ‘rune’ have also been used in historical times: ‘The German word raunen preserves this aura of secrecy and mystery to the present day, while to roun or round ‘in the ear’, that is to whisper, was common English usage until the seventeenth century, kept alive in more recent times in the work of Scott, Carlyle, Kingsley, and other writers’ (Elliot 1989, pp. 1 f.).

From oral discourse to written sign

‘Rune’ can obviously stand for a class of different but related phenomena, many of which should be considered when we attempt to understand why the signs of the futhark got their name. The association with rulership, life in the hall and wisdom is clear enough, if not sufficient, to form an exclusive link between runes and rulers. It appears more likely that it was among the nobility that the runes were invented and first used, rather than, for example, by tradesmen to keep records or mark their goods.
The earliest runic inscriptions are of a very simple character, most often giving only the name of a person or an object, or stating that someone made an object. At the end of the late Roman Iron Age and in the Migration Period the inscriptions grew more complex. As an illustration I have selected some examples from Antonsen 1975. Transcription, transliteration, interpretation and suggested dating are all by Antonsen and should not be regarded as final. The first set of inscriptions show how a relationship between two people have been confirmed in writing (the numbering is Antonsen’s):

15. Kragehul spearshaft. Fyn, Denmark. 300 AD.

\textit{ek erilaz asugisalas em uba baite ag ag ag ginu ag he ... lija ... hagalawijubig ...}
I am the \textit{erilaz} of Ansugisalaz. I am called Uha. I give protection, I give protection, I give mighty protection ... hail ...

29. Valsfjord cliff inscription. Sønder Trøndelag, Norway. 400 AD.

\textit{ekhagustaldaz} \textit{þewazgodagas}
\textit{ek bagustaldaz þewar godagas}
I, Hagustaldaz [i.e. young warrior], servant of Godagaz [i.e. goody, the good one]


\textit{ekgudijaungandiz...}
\textit{ek gudija ungandiz...}
I, the priest of Ungandiz [i.e. the unbeatable]...


\textit{ekwagigazerilazagilamudon}
\textit{ek wagigaz erilaz agilamudon}
I, Wagigaz [i.e. the active one], the \textit{erilaz} of Agilamundo [i.e. protectress of the blade?]

52. Veblungsnes cliff inscription. Romsdal, Norway. 450 AD.

\textit{ek erilaz wiwilan}
\textit{ek erilaz wiwilan}
I, the \textit{erilaz} of Wiwila

We can only guess at the exact nature of the social relationships referred to in these inscriptions, but no. 29 and 31 clearly seem to confirm hierarchical...
relationships. The meaning of the title erilaz (erilar) has not been conclusively proven. It is commonly translated as ‘rune-master’ but the word is related both to the ethnic name Heruli/Eruli and the later title of jarl. Hermann Reichert (1996) states on the mailing-list Oldnorsenet (formatting added): ‘There seems to be some confusion about eril- and erul- and *erla-. The change between i/u/a signalizes Suffixablaut, that means that the resp. words are derivated from the same root, but need not have the same meaning. So the name of the people, the rune-master and the jarl have some essential part of the meaning in common (nobleness), but the three words must not be mixed up.’ The word often occurs in the affirmative formula ek eril, ‘I, the eril’, so whatever the title stands for it shares with the other examples above the character of an affirmation of a certain social identity.

Other inscriptions describe deaths and inheritance, topics which are familiar to us from Viking Age stones:

11. Möjbro stone. Uppland, Sweden. 300 AD.

anahahaislaginaz frawaradaz
ana babai slaginaz frawaradaz
Slain on (his) steed, Frawaradaz [i.e. advisor of lords].

27. Tune stone. Østfold, Norway. 400 AD.

ekwiwazafter · woduri dewitadahalaiban : worahto · [me]zwoduride : staina · țriozdothrizdalidun arbijarjostezarbijano

ek wiwaz after woduride witadahalaiban worahto. [me]z woduride staina țrioz dobriz dalidun arbijarostez arbijano

I, Wiwaz [i.e. the darting-one], wrought (the inscription) after [in commemo-
ration of] Woduridaz [i.e. furious rider], the lord [i.e. bread-ward]. For me, Woduridaz, three daughters, the most legitimate-to-inherit of heirs, prepared
the stone.

117. Istaby stone. Blekinge, Sweden. 600–650 AD.

afatzhariwulafa haþuwulafz haeruwulafiz waraitrunazþaiaz
afatz hariwulafa haþuwulafz haeruwulafiz warait runaz þaiaz.

Hôþuwulafz [i.e. battle-wolf], son of Hjôruwulafz [i.e. sword-wolf], wrote these
runes in memory of Hæriwulafz [i.e. army-wolf].

As a third category, inscriptions on gold bracteates should be mentioned, in particular the formulae lafu, alu and laukaz/laukar (occurring singly or in com-
binations) which have attracted the attention of Anders Andrén. He writes:
The origin of the three words could be the common formula found on coins and medallions *Dominus noster, pius NN* (name of emperor), *felix augustus*, which means *our lord, the pious NN*, *a fortunate emperor*. The formula contains the three central terms, *dominus, pius*, and *felix*, which interestingly enough may be paralleled with the significance of *laþu, laukar, and alu* in later Old Nordic texts.

This transformation from Latin to Old Nordic is connected with an interesting change in the levels of meaning. *Dominus* is a general word for a person with power, while *laþu* refers to the act – the invitation – which manifests the power. *Felix* signifies abstractly a desirable quality or condition, while *laukar* refers to the object – the leek – which promotes felicity. Finally *pius* indicates correct behaviour towards gods and men, and this concept has been translated with *ale*, the medium that is used to express *pietas*. (Andrén 1991, p. 256)

The thought that the Germanic concepts can be transformations of Latin ones (like many picture motives on the bracteates) is interesting and not unreasonable, but I am less convinced of the exact parallels Andrén suggest. Be that as it may, from another angle we could point at the hall-context of the three concepts (invitation, leek and ale) and recall Beowulf’s discursive passage into Heorot: being invited, sitting down at the bench, and finally drinking mead out of Wealtheow’s cup and taking the oath that binds him temporarily to Hrothgar’s household (there is no mention of food). Add to this the probable use of bracteates in the alliance and gift-giving system among the powerful in the Migration Period (Axboe 1991; Andrén 1991), that is, in the forming and maintenance of social bonds.

Although the above inscriptions may in some respects appear different, they have in common that they deal with the renegotiation of social bonds and roles. ‘Among other things, burial rites serve to reestablish the social order in the wake of the chaotic intrusion of death’, says Driscoll (1988, p. 180), and the statement could be rephrased, with ‘ritualised language’ substituted for ‘burial rites’. Runic inscriptions show us a form of ritualised language. The early (although perhaps not the earliest) ones appear in situations within primarily oral societies where the social equilibrium (*homeostasis*) has been temporarily upset or changed, and mark the point where a new equilibrium has been attained – or is claimed to have been attained. Whether some inscriptions on stones represent successions of rulers is possible but not obvious; however, in the following chapter we shall take a close look at a later runic inscription which I believe should be interpreted as a monument over a royal succession.
This chapter is devoted to the analysis of a single rune-stone, namely the one now standing at the Sparlösa (Salem) church, Sparlösa parish, in the Levene region, Västergötland (Vg 119). The stone qualifies as a source for the nature of kingship because it was most likely raised by a king and possibly even a king from a royal family of the Svear. This may seem to stir a reactionary echo (that Västergötland was an integrated part of the ‘Swedish’ kingdom in the late eighth century); however, it is not my intention to conjure up old ghosts, but to reread the inscription in the light of the discussions in previous chapters.

Built into the church wall with only its front surface with its large runes visible, the stone was first documented in 1669 by a certain Elias Brenner. Its fortunes did not change when the church was rebuilt in the mid-nineteenth century, except that its two parts were separated. Its academic history did not begin properly until 1937. Then Hugo Jungner and Sigurd Curman instigated its removal from the church wall, and the stone was restored and raised in the churchyard. Now it was sensationally discovered that all surfaces, the top included, were inscribed, not only with runes, but also with iconography (according to local tradition only the front was inscribed; von Friesen 1940, p. 7). With its around 280 runes the inscription suddenly ranked among the four longest runic texts written before 1000 AD, together with the Norwegian Eggjum stone (c. 175 runes, seventh century), the Danish Glavendrup stone (c. 205 runes, eighth or ninth century) and the Swedish Rök stone (c. 725 runes, ninth century, Ög 136) (Lindquist 1940, p. 202). In the following years excited runologists celebrated the discovery by producing an impressive amount of varying interpretations of the text (see Svärdström 1958, pp. 196 ff. with figs. 192–197 for background details). The stone has been described as ‘the most remarkable of Swedish runic monuments’ beside the Rök stone (Nielsen 1970, p. 102). Following conservation in 1982 it is now situated in a small house, adjacent to the Sparlösa church.

The stone is made from a rectangular gneiss block, 1.77 metres high and 60–70 centimetres wide on all sides. On linguistic and stylistic grounds it has been dated to c. 750–850 (Svärdström 1958, pp. 228 f. with refs.; see also below) with a preference for the late eighth century (for example, Lindquist 1940, p. 16); this is a period from which runic inscriptions are rare. The runes belong to a very early
form of the late, 16-letter rune alphabet which still retains some older rune-types and displays runes of both the so called Danish and the Swedish–Norwegian (short-twig runes) types. The latter, more narrow type, is primarily used at the end of lines, when the carver found himself short of space (von Friesen 1940, pp. 95 f.; Lindquist 1940, p. 28 f.). According to von Friesen (1940, p. 99) the Sparlösa inscription is the earliest known datable inscription with Swedish–Norwegian runes, but I do not know if that conclusion is still valid.

One of the intriguing aspects of the inscription is the presence of names which are known from the Ynglinga tradition. The inscription speaks of three men, Aiuls, Eiríkr and Alrikr, and the last two names are known from Ynglingatal and Ynglinga saga as the co-reigning brothers who died as mysteriously as violently during a private horse-race. For some scholars this has been enough to warrant an identification of the Sparlösa names with members of the Ynglinga dynasty, thus placing the monument in a royal context (Nerman 1960; Jungner 1938, pp. 213 and 217 ff.). The surface of the stone is, however, partly damaged; this, together with the habitual obscurity of older runic inscriptions, partly explains why the text has been interpreted in so many, different ways.

That the inscription is damaged at points forces us to make emendations more or less by informed guesswork. As von Friesen (1940, p. 9) recognised, most interpretations of the text have developed from an understanding of certain words and expressions. In combination with a subjective assessment of what is cultural–historically reasonable this has generated a general idea or understanding of the meaning of the text. This general idea has subsequently guided the interpretation of remaining details, until an appearance of completeness has been reached. In a benevolent mood we might call such lines of inference hermeneutical, and if not, circular!

Hugo Jungner (1938) interpreted the text as a primarily religious epitaph over a man called Øyuls and other members of a mighty dynasty, which he identifies with a branch of the Ynglingar (after their forced exile from Uppsala as told by Snorri); this identification connects the text with the Frey cult. Ivar Lindquist (1940) retained the royal context and the link with Uppsala but inserted a political element: dynastic strife. Otto von Friesen (1940), bringing the text down to earth, regarded it as a judicial documentation of a transfer of land (a farmstead, bú) from Øyuls to Alrik. C. J. S. Marstrander (1954), in a highly recreative mood, saw the message as a poetic reflection of the Frey cult: the god receives a sword as sacrifice in return for the prosperity to some rulers and their people. Niels Åge Nielsen follows Marstrander’s general path but constructs a syncretic deity, ‘Freyr–Ullr’, as the recipient of the sword (Nielsen 1970, pp. 120 ff.). Nielsen’s reading is ambitious but attributes Alrik with a piety that to me appears anachronistic, having Alrik sitting by himself, thinking about Ull, pondering what gift he is going to offer the god; nor is it convincing as an example
of sacrificial practice around the beginning of the Viking Age.

Elisabeth Svärdström’s interpretation in the fifth volume of Sveriges Runinskrifter seems to aim towards objectivity, but the fragmentary text she presents tells us little more of substance than that the stone was raised to the memory of Øyuls (Svärdström 1958, p. 227). Her ‘minimalist’ version will show the extent to which I and others have been forced to fill in the text to make it reasonably coherent and complete (not that Svärdström has refrained entirely from speculation, as indicated by a number of question marks). The English translation of the normalised text is Nielsen’s (1970, p. 104) with some modifications where I have deemed it appropriate:

Øyuls gaf, Æiriks sunr, gaf Alrik[r]. ... gaf raul (or: raut) at gialdi ... [P]a(?) sa[?] fædir Upsal(?), fædir svæð ... natr ok dagar. Alrik[r] lu[bi]R ugð[i]t(?ergyuls. ... þat Sigmarr (or: sigmærr) [b]æiti magur Æiriks. Mæginjaru(?). ... Aft Œyuls. Ok ræð runar ðat reginkundu þar, svæð Alrik[r] lubu fæði. ...

Øjuls, Erik’s son, gave, (also) gave Alrik ... gave ... in return ... Then(?) sat the father in Uppsala(?), the father who ... Nights and days ... Alrik lu[bi]R feared(? not(?) Øjuls ... that Sigmar (or ‘victory-renowned’) is the name of (or: ‘is called, may be called’) Erik’s son ... mighty battle(?) ... After Øjuls (this memorial is erected). And read the runes there, those that came from the gods, that Alrik lubu inscribed ...

Walter Baetke (1964, pp. 33 ff.) once criticised earlier interpretations of the Sparlösa inscription from his strict, source-critical standpoint, complaining that there was ‘viele willkürlich’ in them. He was right in a sense, and my own interpretation will not be immune to similar objections. However, if we ‘bei nüchterner Prüfung’ only arrive at Svärdström’s severely mutilated text (above), there is little point in making the journey into the world of the text at all.

My interpretation partly combines a few of the earlier theories: A, it is a judicial document concerning a transfer of something from one man to another (where I agree with von Friesen), and B, the persons mentioned are of royal birth (where I agree with Jungner, Lindquist, Nielsen and, apparently, Hyenstrand 1989). However, I do not agree with the proposed theories on the object of transfer. I believe that the inscription proclaims the transfer of kingship from one person (Øyuls) to another (Alrik), naming all three conditions which should ideally be fulfilled by a pretender in Anglo-Saxon and early Norman England or among the Ostrogoths in the early sixth century: the designation (line I, see below), the ‘election’ or acclamation of the designation by a certain body of subjects (line II:1), and the affirmation of blood relationship (lines I and II:3). As regards the connection with Frey and the Ynglinga dynasty, it will be demonstrated that this identification sometimes demands wild speculation.
Being no trained philologist, my reading is based mostly on earlier ones, and I borrow from one or the other, with caution but without scruples. De Vries 1977 has been used for reference. An account of each detail in the translation and basic interpretation would make tedious reading, so for the points I do not make myself and for detailed comparisons the individual scholars should be consulted; much can, however, be drawn from the discussion in Svärdström 1958.

As a source-critical note it should be said that I have not studied the stone itself, contrary to most of the earlier scholars. Repeated inspections of the stone’s surface have not helped earlier scholars to reach a consensus. Where one sees ‘faint imprints’ or ‘scarcely visible marks’ which makes him or her define a rune differently than someone else, another sees just ‘wear’ or ‘a slight, natural depression’. Furthermore, the reason for its conservation in 1982 was that it had been affected by pollution. I very much doubt the possibility of new, positive and definite conclusions resulting from a visual inspection.

Transliteration, transcription and translation

My interpretation of the Sparlösa text is presented line by line. Roman numerals indicate the different surfaces of the stone, I: front, II: back, III: left, IV: right, B: top, and the arabic numbering the vertical lines on each surface from left to right. For each line is given a transliteration of the runic text (bold letters), a transcription in normalised script (italics) and a translation; notes on the iconography are added. The numbering is originally by Jungner (1938), and has been followed by most scholars, including Svärdström (1958, pp. 199 f.; note the different sequence in von Friesen 1940, p. 13). However, I believe that the stone may have been intended to be read counter-clockwise; thus, the iconography on IV would have been admired before the text on II was read. If so, an additional emphasis is added to the concise message, bassooned by the huge (up to c. 50 cm high) runes on I, like a general pause after a great fortissimo (the first bars of the overture of Mozart’s Don Giovanni come to mind). Two things should be kept in mind when analysing the Sparlösa text: first, a single rune can signify both the last sound of one word and the first sound of the next (in the transliteration below this has been indicated by underlining the two letters); second, the u-rune (ᚼ) is in some cases used for R at the end of words (Svärdström 1958, p. 215).
I  (Plate 1, p. 195)

Aiuls kaf Airikis sunr kaf Alriki

Øyuls gave. Eirik’s son gave [the kingship] to Alrik.

*Iconography*: on the base a male figure upholding a ribbon with cross decoration over which the text is written.

II:1  (Plate 2, p. 196)

In ættr hála gaf fræy ull at gialdi.

And a great people gave their lord honour in return [acclaimed the designation].

II:2  (Plate 2, p. 196)

Þa sat faðir Upsal, faðir sváð æi/at átu (b)leifa.

Then/there the father sat in the Uppsal, a father so that [always?] food remained [Eirik was king of the Svear, and a good provider, a good king].

II:3  (Plate 2, p. 196)

Night competed with day as Alrik was born to the vi’s guardian [the king, Eirik], and so also [or: that after] Øyuls [Øyuls and Alrik were brothers].

*Iconography*: on top of the text a male head wearing helmet.

III:1  (Plate 3, p. 197)

Sigis nu a æra vé þat Sigmærr (b)eiti magur Æiriks,

Now it is said on the vi of honour that Victorious was the name of Eirik’s son [Øyuls had won his position through conquest],

III:2  (Plate 3, p. 197)

makiniaru

fierce-battle’s

III:3  (Plate 3, p. 197)

þuna

Odin [= leader].
After Øyuls and interpret

runar þar ræginukundu uiu þar suþr Ali-riku[=i] ulubu faþi
these runes which are god-given, here on the vi, that ‘Ali-rich’, as behoves glory, made.

Iconography: large, central picture of two intertwined birds, descending owl and rising, long-necked sea-bird (swan?).

IV (Plate 4, p. 198)

Iconography: from bottom to top, man on horseback with crested helmet and unsheathed sword, surrounded by three mammals; sailing vessel; two long-necked birds; building with a central circle.

The vi’s guardian am I [Alrik calls himself king].

The text is here very fragmentary but seems to contain an affirmative formula, partly abbreviated; all runes on B are inverted. See Svärdström 1958, pp. 224 f., and Nielsen 1970, pp. 108 ff., for suggested interpretations.

Swedish translation

Öjuls gav. Eriks son gav åt Alrik. Och ett mäktigt folk gav sin herre ära i gengäld.

Då/där satt fadern i Uppsalen, en fader så att mat alltid fanns i överflöd. Natt kämpade med dag då Alrik föddes åt (eller: avlades av) viets värnare, och så också (eller: och detta efter) Öjuls. Nu sägs det på ärans vi att ‘den segerrike’ var namnet på Eriks son, stor-stridens Oden (= ledare). Efter Öjuls och tyd runorna här, de gudagivna, på detta vi, som Alle den Rike (Alrik) gjorde enligt ärans bud. Viets värnare är jag...
Plate 1. The Sparlösa stone, surface I. From Jungner 1940, Pl. 90. Original photo by Harald Faith-Ell.
Plate 2. The Sparlösa stone, surface II. From Jungner 1940, Pl. 91. Original photo by Harald Faith-Ell.
Plate 3. The Sparlösa stone, surface III. From Jungner 1940, Pl. 92. Original photo by Harald Faith-Ell.
Plate 4. The Sparlösa stone, surface IV. From Jungner 1940, Pl. 93. Original photo by Harald Faith-Ell.
Comments on the text

**Line I. Giving without an object**

The lack of object to *kaf* has caused some scholars to interpret the ‘line-bow’ figure at the end of the line as a binding-rune, *bu*, *ibu* or even *ibuum*, in an attempt to overcome the *horror vacui* (for example, Lindquist 1940, pp. 48 f.; von Friesen 1940, pp. 35 f.). Following Jungner (1938), Nordén (1943) and Svärdström (1958, p. 215) I prefer to see it as an ornament. The ornaments on this surface were apparently inscribed before the runes (von Friesen 1940, p. 12; also p. 18 on III:5 [von F. IV] which is more debatable), and this would explain the compressed ending of line I. My reading of the inscription as a whole began with the hypothesis that the absence of object may simply mean that there was no convenient object to use: what Øyuls in fact gives to Alrik could be said to be his ‘giving’ *in itself*, that is, his kingship. The king’s whole object was to give, to bless his subjects and retainers with justice, treasure, victory, protection, and so forth, and maybe even good weather and crops.

The abstract word ‘kingship’ and kingship as an institution, separate from the king’s person and acts, were probably not yet invented in the Sparlösa context. A lack of abstract conceptualisation of rule and what we today would call the constitutional side of social organisation seems to have been a common feature among Germanic-speaking peoples. Even in the Romanised Gothic kingdom of Italy, ‘most Goths dealt with their leaders on a personal or familial level rather than in accordance with titles or prescribed procedures’ (Burns 1984, p. 163), that is, in a way which reminds us of the Godfather films. The Anglo-Saxons seem to display a similar lack of abstract vocabulary. For example, in Old English the words for ‘jurisdiction’ was *sacu ond socn*, the first word denoting ‘a ‘cause’, or matter in dispute, and the second, the act of ‘seeking’ a lord, or a formal assembly’ (Stenton 1971, p. 494); in other words, they described the actual *activity*. The vocabulary seems to have been similar in Sweden; we learn from a runestone in Oklunda, Östergötland, that a certain Gunnar fled from *sakr* and sought (*sotti*) the local *vi*, where the matter was settled peacefully (Jansson 1984, p. 41). Contrary to Sven B. F. Jansson I do not believe that Gunnar took refuge at the *vi*, expecting the kind of immunity offered in the sanctuary of a Christian church (we can imagine him in head-long flight before a hoard of irate and sword-rustling enemies), but that he simply brought his ‘case’ before a legal assembly at the *vi*, where it could be tried.

There is a multitude of kennings and *heiti* for ‘king’ in Germanic literature, many of which are variations on the themes ‘one who makes war upon others’ and ‘one who protects his own people’ (the analysis of *Ynglingatal* in chapter 4 gave some examples). Kings were described in terms of what they did or were ide-
ally supposed to do; the king manifested and confirmed his kingship in his acts. There was no abstract definition, no a priori king outside the king’s physical, acting body. In *Beowulf*, the word *eorlscipe* (ll. 1727, 2133, 2622, 3007 and 3173), ‘lordship’, is followed by the verb *æfnan*/*efnan* (to do, to perform) in three cases out of five. We recall how illiterate peasants in the former Soviet Union responded when asked to describe themselves as individuals (see chapter 2). Instead of any personal information about their mental attitude or inner qualities, they simply told where they came from, how they lived and which crop they cultivated. They were what they were seen to do. When asked to explain what a tree was, one of them exclaimed: ‘Why should I do that? Everyone knows what a tree is, I don’t have to tell them that!’. If we could make a journey back in time to when the Sparlösa stone was erected and ask a farmer to explain what a king was—or what it was that Øyuls gave to Alrik—we might get answers along the same lines.

Perhaps Alrik could have agreed with us that it was *ríki* he received from Øyuls. The standard phrase denoting accession to kingship in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is *þa feng* [insert the name of your favourite king here] *to rice*. The word *feng* is pret. 3 sg. of *fön*, meaning ‘grasp, grapple, seize’ but also ‘receive’ (Klaeber 1950). The etymology can be said to reflect both the process by which power was often assumed in Anglo-Saxon and comparable societies, and how those who gained access to power wanted others to regard that process.

We are also well acquainted with how Scandinavian rune-carvers in their inscriptions sometimes claim to have ‘made’ something without stating what it was. It is as obvious to us as it was to them that they referred to the runes or the object on which the runes were inscribed. One example is the inscription on a wooden box from Garbølle (Stenmagle), Denmark, from c. 400 AD, which can be read *bagiradar i tawide* or *bagiradaz tawide*, translated as ‘H. machte (in das Kästchen) hinein (die Runen)’ (Krause 1971, p. 148) or ‘Hagirädaz [i.e. giver of suitable advice] made (it)’ (Antonsen 1975, p. 42). There are also the first words of line III:4 of the Sparlösa stone itself, which have posed no problems for scholars: *Aft Aiuis uk rap* = ‘After Øyuls (this monument was made) and interpret...’.

Thus, it can be argued that when Øyuls gave there was no uncertainty about what he gave; the object was implied by the other statements on the stone. But it was important to state that he gave to Alrik, in fact, this was the most important message on the entire stone.

*Line II:1. The men and their frau*

‘A great people’, *ætt hāla* (where *hāla* is a poetic word for ‘great’, ‘high’; de Vries 1977), may signify the Ynglinga clan (or any other royal family), but should more likely be understood as a large number of men, present at the *þing*, held at the *vi*. The expression probably corresponds to Latin *populus* and is, equally prob-
ably, just as truthful. It could be a reference to an acclaimed assembly like the one we encountered in *Vita Anskarii* (chapter 6); it would be natural—and must certainly have been indispensable in theory—to make a succession as formal as possible. But as we have seen, an assembly of people of mixed social rank could only ‘decide’ upon issues which had already been informally determined by the king and his advisers. In the case of a succession, the ‘decision’ was basically made when the new king managed to gain for himself the friendship of those noblemen who had supported his predecessor. An alternative explanation would be that the above words refer to the decision of the *principes*.

With the word *frau* (*fræy*) we are brought into the sphere of Germanic royalty. The word means ‘lord’ (or ‘master’) and is not only the name of the great fertility god but also used for rulers in general. It relates to Old English *frea* and Gothic *frauya/frauja*, the latter word being known from the Gothic Bible of Wulfila as an equivalent to Latin *dominus*, for example, used about Christ (Green 1965; Heather & Matthews 1991, pp. 187 and 193). These words have probably derived from a Proto-Indoeuropean root *pre-*, meaning ‘the foremost’, ‘the one standing above the others’ (Wöbking 1997, *Oldnorsenet*). In the Old Saxon *Heliand*, frô (or: frôho, frâho, frôio) is the fourth favoured word (after droh-tin, kuning and bêrro) for ‘king’ or ‘lord’, heavenly or earthly. Another Scandinavian example is the name Frawaradar (sometimes normalised as Frawaradaz, for example, Antonsen 1975) in the enigmatic inscription on the picture stone from Môjbro, Uppland (U 877). It is commonly dated to the sixth century, although Antonsen suggests a date around 300 AD on linguistic grounds (see text, chapter 7). The name is composed of *frawa-* and *radaz* (*radar*), meaning ‘adviser of [a] lord’ (Antonsen 1975, pp. 33 f.; credits to Konstantin Wöbking for pointing this out). Svärdström (1958, p. 216) claims that the word *fræyr* is only known in Scandinavia as a proper name, but in the name Frawaradar, *frawa-* is the appellative which Lindquist (1940, p. 55) assumed existed. A second Scandinavian example is a bracteate from Darum, Jutland, Denmark, with the inscription *Frohila laþu* (‘Frohila invited’). The form of this name ‘beruht vielleicht auf altsächsischem Einfluß; echt urn. wäre *Fraujila*’ (Krause 1971, p. 142).

The phrase *gefa ull* corresponds, according to Lindquist (1940, p. 52), to Old English *wuldor* and Latin *glorificare*; we can compare *ull* with Gothic *wulþus*, ‘glory, honour’ (Heather & Matthews 1991, p. 187; Nielsen 1970, p. 115). The men hailed their (new) lord, confirming their mutual ties of loyalty, thereby bestowing honour upon him.

My reading of the line is based on Lindquist (1940, pp. 6 f.). Von Friesen’s (1940, p. 51) alternative reading ...*kaf fraut at kialti*, ‘...gave quickly in return’, would also be consonant with the interpretation of an acclaiming assembly, although more prosaic. The crucial point, again, is that something was given by many to one man because he had already been given something by another, as line I relates.
Line II:2. A good king sitting in the Uppsala

Eirik appears to have been alive and sitting when Alrik was designated heir by his brother, at least if we want to understand þa as ‘at that time’ instead of ‘earlier’. Øyuls thus seems to have been quite independent of his father. If we believe that he had made himself a kingdom in Västergötland (or part thereof), this indicates more than a governorship under Eirik. The latter may from then on have had no greater authority over his son than that bestowed upon him by his fatherhood. This suggests that Eirik would have had no – or very limited – practical means of enforcing effective political and administrative control over the Västgötar from his own seat in Uppsala, and that he was fully aware of that fact. A far better strategy would have been to place his able and victorious son on the conquered high-seat, with the hope that Øyuls might make the clan’s political dominion over the region permanent (and, perhaps, in time also inherit his father). This scenario suggests that at this time high politics were still conducted on a personal level. The Västgötar were not subjected to an abstract Svea kingdom, but to Øyuls in person, who happened to be of the royal stock of the Svear. Whether Øyuls’ dominion affected all or only part of the Västgötar is impossible to say.

I have substituted the customary translation ‘at Uppsala’ with ‘in the Uppsal’, following Bo Gräslund’s suggestion that the -sala (plural) element in Uppsala refers to the great halls, known to have existed on the large, man-made plateaus at the northern end of the central monument complex (Gräslund 1993, pp. 180 ff. with particular reference to the Sparlösa stone, p. 183; on the excavations of the hall on the southern plateau, obviously dating from the Merovingian Period, see Hedlund 1992 and Nordahl 1992; see Svärdström 1958, pp. 218 f. for alternative readings of the line). In Ynglingasaga, as on the Sparlösa stone, the word is in the singular, thus referring to only one hall: King Ingiald had a hall built at Uppsala, as great and glorious as the Uppsal (Ingialdr konungr lét búa vizlu mikla at Uppsôlum... Hann lét búa sal einn, engum mun minna eða óverligra en Uppsalr var...; Ynglinga saga 36). Contrary to Svärdström’s (1958, p. 219) opinion, Snorri need not have invented the singular form; it is as plausible as not that it was the original form of the name, referring to the main hall of the king and, thereby, the symbolic centre of his power.

To ‘sit’ in this context means to reside as a ruler, to be king. As Lindquist points out, the passage can be compared to one in a late Viking Age, runic inscription, this time from Järvsta in Gästrikland (Gs 11): þa sat aimunt (‘there/then [at the time the stone was raised] Emund was king’) (Lindquist 1940, p. 60). The same expression is used in Heliand (l. 716): Erodes the cuning, / thar be an is rikea sat (‘Herod the king, where he in his dominion sat’; my translation after Berr 1971). Again, we are encouraged to recognise a king through his acts. A king gave, a king sat, was seated in the high-seat in his hall.
The latter part of line II:2 is open to a variety of interpretations (see Svärdström 1958, pp. 217 ff.). I have settled for the translation ‘a father so that always food remained’. I take atu to derive from the noun át = ‘Speise, Essen’ (de Vries 1977) and liba from the verb leifa. The last word de Vries (1977) translates with ‘hinterlassen’ and can be compared with the nouns leif, ‘Erbschaft, pl. Folgen’, and leifð, ‘Rest, Erbschaft’. Further comparisons can be made with Old Saxon leba, (noun, ‘Nachlass, left over’) and lebðn (verb, ‘bleiben, dauern’, ‘remain, endure’) (Berr 1971, p. 236), as with Old English lef, láf (noun, ‘what is left as an inheritance, heirloom’; ‘remnant, remainder; survivors’) and lefan (‘leave’) (Klaeber 1950, p. 365). I believe the text implies that Eirik was always generous with food and/or that he was so generous that there were always left-overs on the table after a meal (as an ‘inheritance’ from the meal).

The words prefigure the well-known phrase on late Viking Age rune-stones that is also found in Hávamal (39), matar góðan, generous with food (Sö 130, Sm 39, U 703, U 805; variations are yndr matar, Sm 37, and mildr matar, U 739, DR 291; examples from Samnordisk runtextdatabas, Joint Nordic Runic Inscriptions). Once again, and this time very concretely, we encounter the giving and generosity that makes the good ruler (and any honourable man). We can also compare with the expression witadabalaiban (bread-ward) as a heiti for king/chieftain on the rune-stone from Tune in Østfold, Norway, dated to c. 400 AD (see text, chapter 7).

Line II:3. Night and day and the uuir

The reading aMAs nAtu [nATR] Auk tAKAr (Ammats natu ok dagar) is taken from Lindquist (1940, pp. 68 ff.) and means ‘night competed with day’, ‘night measured itself with day’, by Lindquist taken to mean ‘it was between night and day’ (= at dawn). What this actually refers to is unclear. If we believe that this royal dynasty regarded Frey as its ancestor we could see an association between dawn and the rising sun, and understand that as a metaphor for the god of fertility, but we cannot be certain that the same symbolism could not refer to another god. On the other hand, we cannot rule out that particular circumstances of birth, such as the time of day, was not part of royal ideology in general.

However, the expression could refer to a time of year rather than of day, an interpretation which can be supported by Svärdström’s plural ‘nights and days’. Significant times of the year could be the winter solstice with the return of light or the spring solstice with day and night of equal length. Regarding the winter solstice we can point at the Late Roman cult of Sol Invictus and Mithraism for possible foreign influence; the dedication day (natalis) of the Sun god was 25 December. Of course, it could also be the question of one of the great Scandinavian, pagan celebrations mentioned by Snorri in Ynglinga saga, the midwinter night 20 January or the summer night 21 April (the actual dates for each year
probably varied according to the moon cycle). At midwinter people supposedly sacrificed to ensure themselves of fertility in the coming year, at the summer night for success in war (OCD, ‘Mithras’, ‘Sol’; Henriksson 1995, p. 344; credits to Ingrid Lundegårdh for the original idea).

The word *uiir*, *véor*, is difficult to translate, since it literally means nothing more specific than ‘the *vi*-er’, ‘he who *vies*’. For ‘guardian’ in the above translation we may, for instance, substitute ‘keeper’, ‘head’, ‘warden’ or ‘administrator’, but any precise interpretation would be speculative and contextual. Whereas I see a king in the ‘*vi*-er’, Jungner sees a priest; with the Sparlösa stone, he writes, the *Veur* office appears on the Swedish scene of history of religion (Jungner 1938, p. 227). His argument can be countered by pointing at the lack of evidence for any priestly institution prior to the conversion to Christianity (see, for example, Hultgård 1997, pp. 19 f.). As we saw above (chapter 6), there is no mention of pagan *sacerdotes* in *Vita Anskarii*, only a *divinum* is mentioned, whom I described as a ‘supernatural’ talent and part-time specialist. However, a lack of evidence is not necessarily negative evidence, and there is a rune-stone from Nordhuglo, Hordaland, in Norway, with the inscription *ekgudijaungandiz...* (*ek gudija un-gandiz...*) that can be translated ‘I, the priest of Ungandiz [i.e. the unbeatable]...’ (Antonsen 1975, p. 47). *Gudijaz* is the same word as the later, Old Icelandic *göði* and Gothic *gudja*, ‘priest’. Antonsen dates the stone to c. 425 AD and Krause (1971, p. 157) to the fifth century; if nothing else the inscription warns us of making too categorical conclusions.

But even if priests did exist among the *Svear*, the word *véor* may still have signified the king in this case. We can easily conceive of a situation in which the *vi* could be the stage for different social actors (and directors) at different occasions. Although opinions diverge and the evidence is fragmentary, I am inclined to agree with those scholars who stress the close ideological and spatial relationship between law and cult in pre-Christian society, primarily on the basis of place-name studies (for example, Brink 1990, p. 358). Several examples of ritual activities on *þing*-sites can be found in Icelandic literature (L. Wilson 1994, pp. 57 ff. with refs.). It appears that judicial and religious activities often could take place at the same sites. The *vi* could thus be seen as a physical and ideological focal point in society, devoted (in most cases) to both horizontal and vertical communication, that is, communication between individuals and groups and between men and the gods.

In line with the argument on rune sequence I made above, we should probably not see the word *véor* as signifying kingship (or priesthood) as an abstract office, but as referring to the act of presiding over this particular assembly and whatever ceremonies of communal nature may have occurred in connection with it. As stated by Herschend, the *vi* is not primarily a physical locality but ‘a collective institution that should be administered, i.e. “take place”’ (Herschend 1997b, p.
20, my translation). We are, I suggest, not dealing with a true synonym of king, but with a word signifying one aspect of rulership, that is, of what rulers actually did. Thus, the word may be compared with similar expressions, like uiiauari on the Rök stone, vprdr véstalls from Ynglingatal (strophe 11) and vés valdi from the saga of Hakon the Good (Herschend 1997b, p. 82). A stress on the performative aspect of the ruler-vi relation in the Sparlösa context is natural since the physical act of leading the assembly manifests Alrik’s right to lead it, that he is rightful king or rightful heir and king-to-be.

In my interpretation the eighth century king in this respect resembles an Icelandic, pagan goði (The absence of a pagan priesthood in Iceland supports my view in the last paragraph). According to Úlfljót’s law from c. 930, fragments of which survive in Landnámabók, a goði was invested with both worldly, mainly judicial, and religious power. The people over which he had authority (mannaforræð) were his thingmen, expected to give him support in return for protection. He presided over the þing of his region and administered communal sacrifices at the main hof (Sigurðsson 1993).

I believe that Alrik and Øyuls should be seen as brothers, not son and father as is usual (Svärdström 1958 with refs.). The words Alrik ól véor can be compared with the half-lines Jóþ ól Edda, Jóþ ól Amma (‘a child bore...’) and, particularly, Svein ól Móðir (‘Svein was born of Mother’), in Rígsþula. In consideration of this Lindquist interprets uír (Uéir) as a proper name, Alrik’s mother, but his attempts to support this linguistically are awkward (Lindquist 1940, pp. 79 ff.). My reading may seem problematic in the light of Rígsþula since the véor cannot have given birth himself. However, with the words sibi uiiauari ul nirufir (Sibbi viaværi ól nirøðr, ‘Sibbi the vi’s warden begot at the age of ninety’), the temporally not too distant Rök stone shows us that the Sparlösa expression can be translated ‘Eirik begot Alrik’.

The two consecutive pairs of co-reigning, royal brothers of the Ynglinga tradition (Ynglingatal 10 f. and Ynglingasaga 20 f., see chapter 4) may be a reminiscence of successions from brother to brother as well as of actual co-regency. In Beowulf Onela succeeds his brother Ohtere (or his father Ongentheow) without any indication of irregular circumstances, before he is overthrown by the latter’s son Athils (Beowulf, ll. 2379 ff.). Beowulf and the Sparlösa stone both suggest situations where royal succession was not formalised to any greater extent than it had been, for instance, among the Ostrogoths, and that succession within or across generations occurred as circumstances dictated. The most influential and powerful man in the family, the one richest in land, goods, prestige and clients, was the most likely candidate for kingship. The author of Ynglingatal obviously saw joint kingship as a passed stage, if not in practice at least ideally (see chapter 4). Alrik and Øyuls could possibly have been co-regents from the start, Alrik later becoming sole ruler and claiming the possessions and personal loyalties of his dead brother as inheritance.
Line III:1. The victor

On the vi, before men and gods, Eirik’s son, Øyuls, was called Victorious. The martial aspects of kingship, so strongly emphasised in Ynglingatal, were not forgotten by Alrik. To give this epithet to Øyuls was hardly just posthumous flattery, but would rather imply that the subject status of the Västgötar under Øyuls was confirmed. This meant that Alrik, as designated and acclaimed successor of Øyuls, made clear that he had inherited the latter’s claim on ‘crown’ or tribute – or both. That the stone was at all erected points toward an awareness on Alrik’s part that the Västgötar could not be relied upon to be of an identical opinion. The alternative reading, þat síkmar Aiti makur airikis, ‘that the victorious horses were owned by Eirik’s son’, would also be consonant with my interpretation. It need not, as Jungner suggested in his revised interpretation (1939), be a short bulletin after a day at the races, but simply a statement that Øyuls’ horses carried their riders to victory in battle. Had the object only been to include warlike qualities in the description of Øyuls there would have been little need to stress that the quality or achievement was publicly acknowledged.

The stone would naturally have been erected at the vi where and when Alrik’s accession was proclaimed, and the identification of that site with the later churchyard hardly seems controversial (see L. Wilson 1994, p. 135).

Line III:2–3. A man of great battles

These short lines are highly problematic. Jungner, believing in a connection with Frey and the Ynglinga dynasty, read them Mægi Niaru þy ná, ‘The son of Night (= Day = Frey) forthwith reach’ (Jungner 1938, p. 221). Lindquist suggested magini iaru þun(n)a, meaning ‘the increaser of battle-din’, referring to magur Æiríkis in line III:1 (Lindquist 1940, pp. 91 ff.; similarly Nordén 1943, p. 207). Von Friesen settled for meginiôrð ná, meaning ‘(to) attain the great land(holding)’ (von Friesen 1940, pp. 70 f.). Svärdström regards all these suggestions as more or less problematic but favours a reading of makiniaru as makin + iaru, corresponding to a supposed Old Icelandic word *meginjaru, meaning ‘great battle’, ‘fierce battle’. When it comes to þuna she finds Jungner’s and Lindquist’s suggestions equally plausible (Svärdström 1958, p. 222; cf. Old Icelandic megin-rúnar = powerful runes).

The expression meginjaru þy na might convey that Øyuls was to join the forces of the Æsir, awaiting the ultimate battle of Ragnarök. He would thus look forward to a post-mortem career as a henchman of Odin’s. However, the explanation seems far-fetched. Combining Svärdström and Lindquist we get meginjaru þuna, ‘big-battle thunderer’, a possible epithet for a warlord, if somewhat awkward.
In the interpretation I have favoured above, þunna is regarded to stand for the Odin-heiti Þundr (de Vries 1977). The etymology of the word – and of the related Þund – is unclear but ‘Odin of fierce battles’ would simply and elegantly mean ‘commander of fierce battles’ in line with similar uses of the name Odin or Odin-heiti in compounds and kennings. For example, we can compare it with fens fír-Rognir, a kenning from a poetic strophe ascribed to Kormak Ögmundarsson, from Snorri Sturlusson’s saga of Hakon the Good in Heimskringla. The kenning means something like ‘the water’s fire-commander’, that is, ‘the person who is responsible for the fire, making the water boil in the cauldron, in which the meat which is eaten on communal, ritual meals is cooked’ and refers to Hakon Jarl as vés valdr, ‘leader of the vi’ (Herschend 1997b). Compared with this complex construction meginjaru þunna makes a fairly straightforward, standard metaphor for ‘king’ and a natural variation on sigmærr, ‘victorious’, in the previous text line.

**Line III:4–5. The god-given runes**

The runes are called rakinukutu, reckinkundu, ‘stemming from the gods’. We meet the same expression on the rune-stone Vg 63 (runo fahi raginakudo) and in strophe 80 of Hávamál (my translation):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Páð er þá reynt,} & \quad \text{That will be answered,} \\
\text{er þú að rúnum spyr} & \quad \text{what you ask for in the runes,} \\
\text{inum reginkunnun} & \quad \text{stemming from the gods}
\end{align*}
\]

To emphasise that the runes were of divine origin would be to say that the statements on the stone were made according to the will of the gods and the true order of things. That some rituals (like augury) accompanied the procedures and made them ‘sanctioned’ by the higher powers (at least in the eyes of those who performed them) is not unreasonable.

**Line III:5. Ali the rich, Ali the ruler**

The reading aliriku or aliriki interpreted as ‘Ali-rich’ is based on Lindquist (1940, pp. 106 f.). The form of the name is construed as a poetic play on the short form Ale, Al(l)i = Alrik, and the adjective ríkr = ‘rich, powerful’. That the noun ríki meant ‘rule’, ‘dominion’, would have added symbolic weight and an appropriate line of association. This kind of word-play features elsewhere in Old Norse literature, for instance in Rígsþula (44), where, as we have seen, the noun Konr, ‘kinsman’ in the form of a proper name and the adjective ungr, ‘young’, makes the reader associate with the word konungr, something little Konr was to become: en Konr ungr / kunni rúnar. That Alrik was rich and powerful was, of
course, an important component of his ‘image’ as well as a practical asset in a society where support and loyalty was primarily bought. A further reason behind the expression could be a wish to stress that Øyuls’ ríki had been transferred to Alrik, that we also should read the name ‘Ali-with-ríki’.

B.1. The top inscription

The top inscription is made by another, less expert hand than the rest (Jungner 1938, p. 225; von Friesen disagrees, 1940, pp. 23 and 84). Letting our imagination roam freely, we might want to identify him with king Alrik himself, not only speaking in first person, but actually chopping away at the stone to the best of his ability. Lindquist, on the contrary, attributes the main Sparlösa inscription, not the top inscription, to king Alrik in person, and this is certainly what lines III:4–5 imply. He has similarly attributed the inscription on the now lost, early sixth century rune-stone in Gummarp, Blekinge, to a royal hand (Lindquist 1940, pp. 105). The inscription is known from three seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drawings and reads ᵢᵗʰᵃᵖᵘʷᵒˡᵃᶠᵃ ˢᵃᵗᵉ ˢᵗᵃᵇᵃᵖʳⁱᵃ ᶠᶠ (ʰᵃᵖᵘʷᵒˡᵃᶠᵃ ˢᵃᵗᵉ ˢᵗᵃᵇᵃ ʰʳⁱᵃ ʰᶠᶠ), that is, ‘Ḥôþuwulafz [i.e. battle-wolf] set three staves, fff [i.e. much wealth(?)]’ (Antonsen 1975, pp. 83 f.). We will, of course, never know if Lindquist was right in this particular assumption (Hathuwulf may have let someone else do the actual work but saved the honour for himself), but it does not seem unreasonable to elevate this stone and the associated stones in Istaby and Stentoften, and perhaps also the one in Björketorp (Jansson 1984, pp. 20 ff.), to royal or, at least, aristocratic social heights, regardless of whether the carvers were rulers or ruled.

Comments on the iconography

The face

On top of side II there is the only partially preserved image of a face. It is strangely stylized and it appears to be a depiction of a masked (Almgren 1940, p. 116) or helmeted head. In a royal context a helmet is the obvious choice, bilmîr being one of the most common beiti for ‘king’. The accentuated ‘eyebrows’ and eyes, looking like a pair of glasses from the early 1960s, suggest a face-protection in the manner of the late sixth to early eighth century helmets from the ship- or boat-graves in Sutton Hoo, Vendel and Valsgärde. The lines running down from the eyes could possibly illustrate a beard but also a hanging mail attachment like the one on the Valsgärde 8 helmet. In a way this kind of helmet is also a mask, de-individualising the wearer, transforming him from physical subject to a subject of heroic poetry. Therefore, it is probably of little importance whether
we see Øyuls or Alrik behind the helmet. The position of the helmet/face on the stone makes the full-grown observer look at it face to face, perhaps as a way to personalise the experience of the monument.

*The owl and the other fowl*

The iconography on the stone has been alternately described as decorative (Svärdström 1958, p. 228; von Friesen on side III, 1940, p. 26) or symbolic-descriptive (Jungner 1938; Nielsen 1970). I agree with the last standpoint. On side III we have a relief of a descending owl and a rising, long-necked bird of seabird type, maybe a swan. The birds are intertwined with inverted, S-shaped figures which have been interpreted as snakes (Jungner 1938, p. 200; von Friesen 1940, p. 26). Jungner regards owl and snakes as death symbols, but as the owl is a nocturnal bird and its companion diurnal, I suggest that they could signify night and day, and their meeting at dawn (night descending, day ascending) or at a particular time of the year. The impression of aggressiveness conveyed by the image of the struggling birds is congruent with the interpretation of night and day as opposed principles, engaged in a constant trial of strength. Thus, the birds would graphically represent the words *ammats natu ok dagaR* (II:3).

The schematic appearance of the ‘snakes’, in contrast to the clear-cut details of the birds, makes me doubt that they should be assigned an independent symbolic meaning. I rather suspect that their role in the composition is to enhance the feeling of motion and the intertwinement of the bird symbols.

*The journey to Frey?*

Jungner interprets the sequence of pictures on side IV as depicting the ‘apotheosis’ of Øyuls, his journey from the land of the living (the ‘hunting’ scene) by ship (the attribute of Frey) to the hall of Frey, marked with a sun (the circle) (Jungner 1938, p. 227). He is probably right in reading this iconography from bottom to top in the same direction as the text. Hyenstrand has a similar opinion, stressing the transitional aspects of the motif composition in a comparison with Gotlandic picture-stones (Hyenstrand 1991, pp. 207 f.).

Most appropriate, the mounted warrior is fully armed with his sword held aloft, ready to strike if need be (the symbol of his martial power in open display). His armament makes little sense in a hunt, as von Friesen (1940, p. 30) once remarked, so perhaps the picture should be interpreted differently. We could regard it as two pictures ‘superimposed’, the king at work and the king at leisure. For Nielsen the rider is an obvious depiction of Alrik, proudly displaying the sacrificial sword (Nielsen 190, p. 123).
It also appears that the rider has long hair, reaching halfway down his back. Alternatively, the ‘hair’ could be interpreted as a neck-guard like those on picture-foils of the helmets in Vendel XIV and Valsgärde 8 (Arbman 1980, p. 27; Arwidsson 1954), but why would it have been depicted in such disproportion compared with the crest? If we accept that the feature really is hair the rider shares the hall-mark of the Merovingian kings, opening a tentative link to Frankish royal ideology, even though the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, was deposed as early as in 751 (Wood 1994, pp. 290 ff.). It has been suggested that long hair was originally ‘commonly worn long by barbarians of rank and that it only later acquired special significance because the Merovingian dynasty maintained a hair-style long since abandoned by everybody else’ (Wallace-Hadrill 1982, p. 157).

The fact that some heads on gold bracteates are depicted with long hair (Axboe 1991, p. 191, and figs. 6, 13 and 19) makes it possible that the hair of the Sparlösa rider reflects an old, indigenous custom which survived the Merovingians.

It is difficult to determine what species the rather crudely depicted animals belong to, but at least it seems that the rider is followed by his faithful dog (von Friesen 1940, p. 30; note particularly that the ‘antlers’ which would make this animal a deer, as in Hyenstrand 1991, p. 208, are unconnected, decorative elements). This dog is fairly large and deep-chested but slender and reminds us of the large dogs of sighthound type interred with their masters in some Merovingian and Viking Period high-status graves in Scandinavia, like Valsgärde 6, Vendel III and Årby in Uppland, and Errindler on Lolland (Arwidsson 1942, p. 111 with refs.).

To the left of the large unidentified animal above the rider (sometimes tentatively called ‘lion’) there is a smaller one, turning its head and facing the large animal. In the hunting scenario this could also be a dog, intercepting the large animal that would be the prey. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Russian aristocracy organised great wolf-hunts. In 1889 F. C. Lowe gave an account of such a hunt:

The plan of a regular hunt was fully described to me. It is decided to draw a reed bed, and very quietly a mounted chasseur with three wolfhounds is stationed on some vantage ground near. Other points are guarded in the same manner, and then the head huntsman rides into the covert with a pack of foxhounds. The oldest wolves will break covert at almost the first cheer given to the hounds; but the younger ones want a lot of rattling. However, the keen eyes of the men and hounds soon detect wolves stealing away; the three hounds are slipped, a gallop begins and generally in the course of a mile or less, the wolf is bowled over. The chasseur then dismounts, cleverly gets astride the wolf, then collars him by the ears... (Gordon 1973)

The galloping hounds were borzois, Russian wolfhounds, and ideally they would pin the wolf to the ground by the neck, holding it until the chasseur arrived.
Each hunt did not follow exactly the same pattern but this example shows the logic of using different types of dogs for different tasks in the same hunt. There is hardly any reason to assume that this logic would have eluded a king or chieftain of the Scandinavian late Iron Age.

Perhaps a border-line between the physical and ‘spiritual’ world (if we stick to Jungner’s model) is implied in that the rider and the bodies of the animals face left, whereas the boat and the birds’ heads face right. The intentional position of the rider forces him to—probably unnaturally—hold the sword in his left hand. The eye of the observer is directed upwards in a serpentine movement, similar to the inverted S-shapes (snakes?) in the iconography on side III. The feeling of an upward movement is enhanced by the extreme backward-leaning position of the rider and that of the dog behind him.

The weakest link in the argument suggesting a connection with Frey is, perhaps, the identification of the circular figure in the house with the sun. There are certainly other round things in the universe: shields, for example. It could be that the gate of Valhalla has conveniently opened to make visible the shield of Øyuls, hung up above the mead-bench to which he is heading to claim his appointed seat (cf. O. Almgren 1940). Von Friesen tentatively associates the circle with ‘the sacred ring on the altar’ (von Friesen 1940, p. 27). Whether there were rings on pagan altars or whether proper pagan altars even existed may be a matter of debate, but there is enough evidence to make it justified to regard the ring as a symbol of bonds of loyalty. It would also have signified law (iustitia), the king’s status as the ultimate source of justice in the kingdom, and cult, the king as the ultimate link between gods and men (pietas); in short: the king as véor (see Brink 1996). Perhaps we can see the hall/ring picture as the illustration of an expression like beagas ond bregostol in Beowulf, ll. 2369 f.: Per him Hygd gebead bord ond rice, / beagas ond bregostol (‘There Hygd offered him [Beowulf] treasure-hoard and kingdom, rings and high-seat’: my translation).

In a society where literacy was still exclusive (if less so than a couple of centuries earlier) and where an important political statement was made (according to my interpretation of the text) it must be considered likely that the iconography was intended to transmit very much the same message as the text. The similarities between the motives on the picture sequence on side IV and those on Gotlandic picture-stones (which must be interpreted as pictorial narratives) support this assumption. The man—if we identify him as Alrik—rides, wears a boar-helmet and wields a sword, the attributes of a king or chieftain; having the appearance of a king Alrik is worthy of being king. The ship marks movement, transition, and is guided by two birds, meaning that it will reach its destination; moreover, the ship is as fitting a vehicle for a war-leader as a horse. The destination is the hall with the ring, the symbol of ríki. If the rider is identified as Øyuls, the transition is from living king to king among the dead in the land of the gods. The ambiguous
nature of the symbols, which makes it equally justified to identify the subject of
the picture as Øyuls or Alrik, and the context as worldly or other-worldly, may
well reflect the intentions of the eighth-century carver.

The Sparlösa stone as a sign of its times

The theory that the Sparlösa stone is an ostentatious material manifestation
of a transfer of kingship from one person to another does not depend on the
identification of a particular dynasty or ancestor god in text or pictures. I do
not find the links to Frey as obvious as the majority of earlier scholars. While
it is likely that Øyuls and Alrik were Svear they may not have belonged to the
Ynglinga dynasty; it is impossible to share Nerman’s (1960) belief in an absolute
dynastic monopoly on the names Alrik and Eirik. Furthermore, in my analysis of
_Ynglingatal_ (chapter 4) I questioned whether the name Ynglingar was ever used
for a Swedish dynasty. However, the name-combination is certainly intriguing
and one cannot avoid wondering if this historical pair of brothers could have left
an imprint in strophe 10 of _Ynglingatal_.

The fact that the stone has no real counterpart hints at extraordinary cir-
cumstances around its erection, circumstances which could have been caused by
an attempt to impose ‘foreign’ rule. Also, it also would not surprise me if the
monument was created in considerable haste (cf. Lindquist 1940, p. 204). The
iconography is rather crude and simplistic, despite the fact that sophisticated
relief technique was partially employed; the text contains obvious errors (for
example, line II:3, ‘...as Alrik...’), and the end of line I is almost ridiculously
thronged with runes (one can almost hear the ‘Oops!’ of the carver when he got
half-way!). Compared with the careful spatial composition of the Rök stone, it
gives an almost amateurish impression (cf. Lindquist 1940, p. 29). If a victorious
war-lord had suddenly (and perhaps violently) departed hence, perhaps soon after
his accomplishment, his kin would indeed have had to act with speed and deter-
mination to perpetuate the overlordship, stressing the legitimacy of their claim by
all possible means.

Two questions concerning chronology must be addressed: When was the
stone raised? Did Øyuls’ and Alrik’s achievements leave a lasting effect, and if so,
for how long?

In regard to the second question, the stone is not an evidence of an early
united, ‘Swedish’ kingdom. Along the right edge and top of the front (side I)
there is a runic inscription from the eleventh century, stating:

| kíslí : karþi : ifiþr : kunar : bruþur kubl þisi |
| Gisli gerði eftir Gunnar, broður, kumbl þessi. |
| Gisli made after Gunnar, [his] brother, this memorial (Svärdström 1958, p. 229). |
Even though a romantic vein might be tickled by the image of the resistance man Gisli sneaking up to the stone by night with his chisel and hammer to subvert the symbol of the oppressors (and at the same time commemorating his slain partisan brother), it is by far more plausible that the stone had lost its original symbolic value several generations before, and that no sneaking was called for. Its colouring faded after three or four centuries, to Gisli it may have been nothing more than just a good stone, although the patterning would have been as discernible to him as it is to us; and if people in the neighbourhood had stories to tell about it, these no longer concerned a political hot potato. It is not even unlikely that the stone had already been overturned. If Gisli had raised it again his claim to have ‘made the memorial’ becomes more than an empty boast (the ‘making’ refers to Gisli’s act, not the stone).

Even if some members of a royal dynasty of the Svear did manage to enforce political control over the Västgötar it is likely that their achievement was short-lived. It may have made a great enough impact on the minds of contemporaries to be the source of the Norwegian king Eystein’s epithet iðfor gauzkom (the Gautic lord) in Ynglingatal, generally considered anomalous (Åkerlund 1939, pp. 74 f. with refs.), but this is a very speculative suggestion. All the same, this takes us back to the question of when this ambitious venture took place.

Linguistic considerations have favoured a dating of the stone to the late eighth century, not least because the runes seem to be older than those on the Rök stone (c. 850) and those in the Oseberg find, where the late runic alphabet is fully developed (Svärdström 1958, pp. 228 f. with references; von Friesen 1940, pp. 33 and 97). Bertil Almgren came close to this dating in his analysis of stylistic elements, c. 800 with a margin of fifty years in each direction (Almgren 1940, p. 127). Other archaeologists reached similar verdicts. Sune Lindqvist pointed out that the house, ship and rider on side IV are common motives on Gotlandic picture-stones, and that there are particular similarities with the stones Ardre VIII and Tjängvide I, which he dated to the eighth or ninth century (von Friesen 1940, p. 30). Birger Nerman dated the Sparlösa stone on stylistic grounds to the late eighth century or the time around 800 (von Friesen 1940, p. 31).

Holger Arbman, consulting with Ivar Lindquist, considered the ornamentation to be strongly influenced by eighth century late Merovingian and early Carolingian art. Lindquist suggested that Frankish influence extended to the large and narrow runes on side I, pointing out how the introductory text line of Frankish royal diplomas, on which the king’s name is given, in this period are normally written with strongly elongated and narrow letters; so also is the king’s signature below the text. The same relationship between the introductory line (with the king’s name) and main text is found on the Sparlösa stone (Lindquist 1940, pp. 20 f. and PL. 8). We are reminded of Rimbert’s report of the Svear’s visit to the Frankish court in the ninth century and of Frankish (particularly
Carolingian) influence on and political interest in Scandinavia in general. No doubt the trading centre at Dorestad, founded in the late seventh century, provided an important link between Scandinavia and Western Europe (Sawyer 1989, p. 70). There is also the rider’s long hair of ‘Merovingian type’ to consider.

Almgren sees a western influence also in the owl on side III of the stone. Stylistic counterparts can be found in manuscript illuminations from Frankia (the so called Tours school) and southern England, as well as on a casket from Gandersheim, also a southern English work. All these date from the late eighth century and c. 800. The relief technique employed for the owl – and for the ‘lion’ on side IV – also indicates western influence, and the stone is the only Nordic rune-stone apart form the Jellinge stone on which this technique has been employed (Almgren 1940, pp. 124 f. and fig. 33–35). Almgren makes further comparisons with Northumbrian and Pictish seventh- to ninth-century sculptured stone crosses regarding technique, motive elements and picture composition (Almgren 1940, pp. 125 f.). There is a particular type of Pictish cross-slab (Class II monuments, Driscoll 1988, p. 184) with a representation of a cross on the front and figurative representations on the reverse (often hunting or battle scenes), all made in relief technique, which shows close similarities with the Sparlösa stone. These cross-slabs form a narrow chronological group, restricted to the late eighth century (Stevenson 1970, p. 72; see also Driscoll 1988, pp. 178 ff.). Note, for instance, the S-shaped animals on the front of the cross-slab Aberlemno 2, and on the back the straight-sided building with a gate, placed above the riders in the battle scene below (Stevenson 1970, Tafel 51:4–5; it lacks, however, the roof of the Sparlösa building). The Pictish symbol-stones have been seen in relation to royal politics and marriage alliances (Johnson 1993, pp. 23 ff. and 100).

All these indications of artistic influences – or, at least, parallels – from Northern Frankia and the British Isles could be seen as a weighty argument that the Sparlösa stone was raised by Västgötar and not Svear, since western Sweden traditionally is considered to have had a westward orientation (for example, Hyenstrand 1989, p. 162). As we are dealing with members of the uppermost social stratum, however, such general trends in the material sources may be misleading frames of reference. Anyway, even if Alrik was a prince of the Svear the man responsible for the ornaments on the stone was, likelier than not, a local craftsman. It would have been prudent of Alrik to adopt local symbolism and tradition to back his case, for instance, letting his hair grow long.

Leaving the linguistic discussion to those better trained to pursue it, I shall make some further points concerning the archaeological dating. First, one find of importance as analogical source to Almgren (and von Friesen) can today be precisely dated, namely the Oseberg ship burial. Dendrochronology has secured a date to the year 834 (Christensen et al. 1992, p. 274). Since the iconography on the Sparlösa stone seems decisively though not significantly older (Almgren
we have already reached the same conclusion regarding the runes, cf. above), the likelihood of a ninth century dating is somewhat diminished. Even archaeologically we thus appear to close in on the linguistic dating.

Secondly, there is one element not brought into the discussion by Almgren: the helmet on the rider on side IV. In my opinion it is certainly meant to be a crested helmet, and although its contour is simplified into the resemblance of a Phrygian cap, it is still strongly reminiscent of the bird- or boar-crested helmets familiar to us from the picture-foils on Merovingian Period helmets from boat-graves in Valsgärde, Vendel and Sutton Hoo. These graves have been dated as follows:

*Vendel XIV*: c. 600 (Arbman 1980); c. 560/70 (Arrhenius 1983, p. 64 and fig. 6).
*Sutton Hoo*: c. 625 (Evans 1986, pp. 109 f.).
*Valsgärde 8*: 625–650 (Arwidsson 1954); 560/70–600 (Arrhenius 1983, fig. 6).
*Vendel I*: 675–700 (Arbman 1980); c. 650 (Arent 1969, p. 135); 600–630/40 (Arrhenius 1983, p. 65 and fig. 6).
*Valsgärde 7*: 700 or somewhat later (Lindqvist 1936, p. 233); 675 (Arwidsson 1977, p. 131); early seventh century (Arrhenius 1983, fig. 6). An analysis of three radiocarbon samples from the grave points to the late seventh century (Norr 1997).

There are also the well known dies (for picture-foils) from Torslunda, Öland, commonly dated to the seventh century (Lindqvist 1936, p. 127) mainly based on a comparison with the grave finds.

In Benty Grange, Derbyshire, an Anglo-Saxon burial mound produced an actual boar-crested helmet in 1861, a find that has been dated to the mid–seventh century (Bruce-Mitford 1974, pp. 223 ff.). In April 1997 a similar helmet was sensationally found in a grave in Northamptonshire near Wellingborough by an amateur with a metal detector, working with a team of archaeologists. It is being called the ‘Pioneer helmet’ after Pioneer Aggregates, the developing company that owns the land on which it was found and pays for its conservation. The helmet was entirely made of iron and is of Spangenhelm type, and the boar-crest was visible on x-ray. According to Rosemary Cramp the grave is also dated to the seventh century, possibly the earlier part. Apart from the helmet it contained a bronze hanging-bowl, decorated with a small escutcheon inlaid with glass in millefiori technique (there were originally two escutcheons), and a high-quality sword with pattern-welded blade (*The Times Internet Edition*, April 23, 1997; *UK News Electronic Telegraph*, Wednesday 23 April, 1997, Issue 698).

It would thus appear from the evidence, sparse as it is, that although helmets with animal-crests existed as real physical objects they are primarily restricted to the seventh century, both in Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England (following Arrhenius and/or admitting the likelihood that these helmets may have been old when put in the grave, we would also include the sixth century, at least its
later part). In the latter area they in fact seem to be out of fashion already in the late part of the century, but this may be a consequence of Christian influence (Newton 1993, p. 42). That they continued to be part of the heroic imagery for centuries afterwards is, however, evident, not least from the Beowulf poem (see, for example, Arent 1969 and the quotation above, p. 174).

We seem to be left with two alternatives. Either we believe that a depiction of an animal-crested helmet must be temporally connected with other such pictures or with the real objects to be appreciated for its symbolic value, or we can consider oral tradition as a fully valid ‘bridge’ between temporally distant material manifestations of an idea. In the former case we might be reluctant to see the Sparlösa stone as later than the mid-eighth century, whereas in the latter case an early ninth century date would be equally plausible. My personal opinion is that a deliberate, symbolic archaism would fit well within the frames of my suggested scenario. It would be a message that the monument was raised by a member of an old lineage with a heroic past, the stuff of which legends were made, a true hilmir.

In Sweden the (animal- or comb-)crested helmets appear to be associated with the Upplandic–Gotlandic cultural hemisphere rather than the Gotlandic, and the rider’s helmet thus stands forth as the most obvious non-Gotlandic element in the Sparlösa iconography. But these helmets point in much the same direction when it comes to foreign ‘influence’ as the other investigated motives. Crested helmets of Scandinavian type occur, as we have already seen, also in England. A related form, the Frankish type, is known from aristocratic Reihengräber in the north-eastern part of the Frankish kingdom, in Austrasia and the Rhineland (Hedeager 1993, p. 129 and fig. 4). The ultimate derivation of the Scandinavian crested helmets from late Roman imperial types of the fourth and fifth century is well known (Almgren 1983).

In the wider context, the main difference between the crested helmet and the other motifs on the Sparlösa stone is that the former belongs to an earlier (sixth and seventh century) ideological horizon, together with objects like ring-swords, that seems to have had its greatest impact in eastern Scandinavia (Hedeager 1993, p. 129 and fig. 3).

Finally, it has been suggested that a link might exist between the Sparlösa stone and the Kälvesten rune-stone in Östergötland (Ög 8). This stone was raised to the memory of a certain Auint (Öjvind), who lost his life on an expedition ‘to the east’, led by a certain Aiuisl (Öyuls or Ejvisl). Being the earliest known commemoration of an eastward expedition, it is considered to date from the ninth century. Identifying the one Öyuls with the other would concomitantly hint either at a later dating of the Sparlösa stone or at an earlier dating of the Kälvesten stone. The connection is, however, entirely hypothetical (Jansson 1984, pp. 43 ff.).

To conclude, the archaeological considerations indicate that the stone was raised some time between 750 and 800 rather than in the early ninth century, but the evidence is not conclusive.
There is little doubt that the social context of the Sparlösa stone was royal. The king and the circle of people around him were literate, and, in addition, they may have been familiar enough with Frankish principles of composing a royal letter to transfer these principles onto the stone. If so, we get a picture of a king who obviously thought he could measure himself against the Frankish (and English) rulers, if not in actual power at least ideologically, ‘typologically’. He probably also shared the practice of wearing his hair long with the former Frankish kings, the Merovingians. If the model for the stone was the Frankish writ, it aspired to the same symbolic status, the material manifestation of the royal will, the king’s word as the people’s law (whether rulers like Charlemagne or Offa would have been impressed or not by their Scandinavian counterpart is irrelevant). At the same time, the imagery of the stone is to a large degree traditional and heroic.

The analogy with Frankish royal letters is very speculative, but Sawyer has commented on the surprising degree of ‘compatibility’ between Scandinavian and continental rulers indicated by the written sources. For example, the Frankish Royal Annals (entry for 808 AD) narrate how ‘the Danish king Godfred deliberately removed merchants from Reric, an unidentified site in Slav territory, to his own lands because the Vectigalia were of great benefit to his kingdom’. Sawyer is careful to stress that this apparent ‘adoption by a Danish king of imperial and post-imperial prerogatives’ may be dependent on the interpretation of the Frankish writer, but, added to the information of the Vita Anskarii on the active interest of kings in important trading centres like Birka and Hedeby, ‘it does suggest that some Scandinavian kings by then had rights that were very similar to, and may even have been based on, those enjoyed by rulers in Christian Europe’ (Sawyer 1989, p. 73).

Late royal runic inscriptions

Almost two centuries later a series of well-known, Danish, royal rune-stones from Jelling and Haithabu shows the far more straightforward way of expression which we have come to expect from late Viking Age runic inscriptions (examples from Samnordisk runtextdatabas):

DR 3, Haddeby 3, Gottorp amt, Sønderjylland


[A] Sveinn konungr setti stein eptir Skarþa, sinn himþiga, er var fariinn vestr, en nú [B] varð dauðr at Heiðaby.

[A] King Sveinn placed the stone in memory of Skarði, his retainer, who travelled to the west, but who then [B] died at Hedeby.
DR 4, Haddeby 4, Gottorp amt, Sønderjylland

[A] ð osfrïðr ð karþi / kubl ð þausi ð tutîr ð uþinkaurs ð oft ð siktriuk ð kunuk ð [B] ð sun ð sin ÷ / ÷ auk ð knubu ÷ [C] kurmr (÷) raist (÷) run(a)(r) (÷)


[A] Ásfríðr, Óðinkárr’s daughter, made this monument in memory of King Sigtryggr, [B] her son and Gnúpa’s. [C] Gormr carved the runes.

DR 41, Jelling 1, Vejle amt, Nørrejylland


[A] King Gormr made this monument in memory of Þorvé, [B] his wife, Denmark’s salvation.

DR 42, Jelling 2, Vejle amt, Nørrejylland


[A] King Haraldr ordered this monument made in memory of Gormr, his father, and in memory of Þorvé, his mother; that Haraldr who won for himself all of Denmark [B] and Norway [C] and made the Danes Christian.

The obscure, ambiguous and more or less ‘codified’ expressions of the early runic inscriptions seem to have disappeared from the official, political discourse. Jelling 2 also carries the image of the triumphant Christ in relief, a sign of simultaneous changes on several planes, in religion as well as in royal ideology and discourse. These inscriptions are also the first in Denmark on which the word konungr occurs (Skovgaard-Petersen 1991, p. 326). In Sweden the word appears about one century earlier, on the Rök stone.

At the time when the Jelling and Haithabu monuments were made the Svear were involved in a sustained argument on the pros and cons of Christianity, a debate which had been going on for at least a century and which was not to be settled for another two. The Danes appear to have made up their minds, at least if the testimony of their kings is to be trusted.
Obscure inscriptions still occur in the late Viking Age and the Middle Ages, but we can generally refer them to the category of ‘magic’, and they do not take the appearance of official discourse. The following example from *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* is also the only inscription I have encountered apart from the Sparlösa stone in which the word *véor* occurs:


[A] ik • ak • uk • ris d=u • i • ueg on_=R • tun=glunum _ sifgeuinum oyr þæ=t an=ge • æub þæct skin [B] × ek • þ • sig þ=rio × nauþR niu _ uiur nank

[A] ... Rís þú í veg undir tunglunum, sifgefnum! Ær þat angi! Eyð þat skin! [B] Ek þ [þurs] seg þrjú, nauðr niu. Véurr nan’k?

[A] ... Rise and go away beneath the benevolent stars! Make this (= the curse) crazy (i.e. confuse this), (magical) mist! Destroy this (= the curse), (sun)shine!

[B] I say three giants, nine needs. I conjure (in the capacity of) overseer of the sanctuary.(?)

It seems that the ‘secret’ discourse has filtered down through the social layers like water through the soil in a plant pot; the surface was not only the first to get soaked, it also dried up first.

The straightforward texts on the late Viking Age rune-stones are contemporary with the gradual introduction of Christianity in Scandinavia. Perhaps one of the effects of this process was that the sacred aspect of ‘rune’ (see chapter 7) was transferred from kings and principes to a new category of specialists, the priests, and a new language, Latin, just as the hall as centre of communal worship was replaced with the church and the king as protector of the *vî* was replaced with the king as protector of the Church. In a situation where polities increased in size these changes could have been advantageous for kings. The greater the geographical area of a king’s rule, the greater the need to rule by proxy. When the ideal of the folk-king merged with the ideal of the monarch and replaced older ideals of rulership, kings could have found that the less power and authority invested in the ordinary princeps the better. A monotheistic religion, stressing the ideal correspondence between heavenly and earthly rule, could provide the necessary ideological framework for the institution of monarchy. Kings could begin to define themselves as different from princeps, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.
There is no straightforward conclusion to an enquiry of this kind, which is concept-centred rather than problem-centred. The sources I have used are of varying character, created at different times in different contexts. They cannot easily be forged into a coherent narrative, and instead of constructing a synthesis on weak foundations I prefer to leave this work very much open-ended.

Early Germanic and particularly Gothic kingship (chapter 3) provides us with analogies for contemporary Scandinavian societies. It shows a kingship based on the units ‘people’ and ‘tribe’, where the different tribes were led by permanent kings, whereas kings of the entire people held a temporary mandate. The comparison with the Old Saxons, described by Bede, indicates that this archaic rulership structure may have been retained among at least some pagan, northern Germanic peoples as late as around 700 AD; the problem here is, however, that our sources may be biased and present a distorted picture of reality.

In chapters 33–41 of Ynglinga saga, written in the early 13th century, Suithiod is presented as divided into provinces, each ruled by a king (chapter 5). However, although the Ynglinga king in Uppsala was only one among several, Snorri still credits him with supreme status. Whether by chance or by the influence of a genuine tradition, the description of Onund’s and Ingiald’s kingdom comes quite close to our picture of early Germanic kingdoms. Ingiald breaks down the old order by force and kills the provincial kings. His transformation of the rulership structure appears to be successful, but because he is a treacherous and murderous king who does not know how to ‘rede’ (take counsel) properly he pays for his achievement with his life, defeated by an external enemy. The Swedish Ynglingar thereby become symbols of an archaic social order.

Rimbert’s Vita Anskarii was written in the late ninth century and describes events which took place earlier in the same century. There is no trace of archaic, tribal kingship in its descriptions of Scandinavian conditions. In Denmark independent kings sometimes rule different parts of the country, and from contemporary Frankish chronicles we learn that joint kingship also occurred at times. The conditions among the Svear are less clear. Although only one king appears at a time in the narrative there is not enough evidence to prove that monarchy had been established; it must be considered unlikely that conditions differed much from those in Denmark. Rimbert uses the word principes for the most powerful men of the kingdom with whom the king takes counsel in important
matters. Of less than royal status in Rimbert’s eyes, some of these principes could be ‘relics’ of tribal or provincial kings, such as appear in the literary past of Ynglinga saga. On the other hand, Scandinavian sub-rulers may have been de-royalised by Rimbert and other continental writers, either deliberately to make their description of Scandinavian rulership structure conform with their own models of rulership, or unknowingly because they were too influenced by the same models to appreciate the differences. If Snorri’s Heimskringla does not entirely misrepresent the structure of rulership in Norway in its description of the Norwegian unification process, it is clear that at least in the Scandinavian west many sub-rulers were still called kings half-way into the Viking Age. Source-critical considerations make it difficult to draw any firm conclusions.

Ynglingatal describes kingship in four evolutionary stages. The main contrast is between Swedish predator kings who claim divine and heroic descent and Norwegian ‘civilised’ kings who fiercely defend their own territory against aggressors but otherwise are good neighbours. Joint rulership and dynastic strife are assigned a place in the remote past which figure in the second quarter of the poem.

My analysis has not produced a solution to the problem of Ynglingatal’s dating. The poem could have been composed anytime between c. 900 and c. 1200 AD, and in my opinion the issue is further complicated since the preserved text (early thirteenth century) is not necessarily identical with the original composition. I believe that my observations on the compositional symmetry of the poem comparable with genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels gives an additional argument for a Christian origin of the preserved text; however, this does not automatically place it in the Middle Ages.

The oldest source in this study is the rune-stone in Sparlösa, Västergötland (chapter 8), most likely dating from the late eighth century. I interpret the stone as a monument over a royal succession within a Svea dynasty, and the inscription states that the formal conditions for a succession have been fulfilled. Like Ynglingatal the Sparlösa stone refers to a heroic past, evident not least in the picture of a mounted warrior who wears a crested helmet; as far as we know crested helmets had ceased to be used in the late eighth century. This is the time when Birka and the royal mansions at Old Sigtuna and Adelsö were founded in the Mälar valley, and the Sparlösa monument indicates that now, if not earlier, the political horizon is slowly beginning to reach the boundaries of the later, unified kingdom of Sweden.

There are traces of Frankish influence in the iconography of the Sparlösa stone; indirect Christian influence may be detected in the cross decoration on the front surface of the stone. Ansgar’s mission to Sweden in the early ninth century was initiated by a request from the Svear themselves at the Frankish, imperial court. Ynglinga saga is clearly influenced by continental, Christian, royal
ideology in its descriptions of the good King Onund and the bad King Ingiald. The Scandinavian peoples of the late Iron Age cannot be seen in isolation from the continental (particularly Frankish) or Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The last statement may be a truism, but it could be worthwhile to look more closely on the role of the Frankish kingdom in the process of social change in Swedish society, particularly in regard to ideology.

It is seldom easy to separate between pagan and Christian elements in the sources. We can make sense of a character like Æschere in Beowulf from a pagan as well as a Christian perspective (chapter 7), just like we can understand Ynglingatal as a Viking Age pagan, a Viking-Age Christian-influenced or a Viking Age/Medieval Christian poem (chapter 4). The story of Onund and Ingiald in Ynglinga saga is unmistakably Christian in its preserved form but contains contradictions and elements which may well refer back to pagan times, for example the suicide motif. On this subject, as well, much work remains before a clear picture can emerge.

The studies in chapters 5 and 7 suggest a strong correspondence in meaning and use of concepts like ‘rede’ and ‘rown’ (I use these old-fashioned English words for the original ræd/râð/râd and run) over time and space among the Germanic-speaking peoples, at least their upper classes. There is an obvious danger that this kind of enquiry, going from a set of signifiers in closely related languages to their socio-political signifieds, evokes an image of a culturally, temporally, and ideologically unitary Germanenthum. Walter Goffart (1995) has argued against such over-generalisations, and there are certainly objections to be made. First, we are dealing with expressions of the upper classes of each time and region. Our focus is therefore immediately narrowed to a particular minority stratum within these societies, a kind of possible ‘Adel-Germanenthum’ as opposed to a ‘Volk-Germanenthum’. Diplomatic contacts and intermarriage between ruling dynasties of different kingdoms are sufficiently documented in the sources to be considered part of everyday political life throughout the studied period; a good example is provided by the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish kingdoms (M. Wood 1983). Secondly, where languages are closely related we should not be surprised to find similarities in the conceptual apparatus concerning, for example, kingship, particularly if we focus on very basic concepts like ‘rede’ and ‘rown’. It is, in fact, unlikely that the applications of these concepts in social practice (discourse) would have differed greatly from one kingdom to another. Germanic kings from different times and places would probably have understood each other fairly well and their rule would have been conducted according to similar principles. On the other hand, similarity is not identity; and it is inevitable that an analysis at this level will fail to take full account of local variations in economy, organisation and ideology. Here the archaeological source-material, so much absent from this study, has the potential to make the picture more complex and nuanced.
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THE SIV PROGRAMME
(1996–2001)

Focusing on the two famous archaeological sites Vendel and Valsgärde in Uppland the research programme SIV (Svealand in the Vendel and Viking Periods: Settlement, Society and Power) studied late Iron Age social structure and aristocracy in central Svealand. The programme, which was mainly financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, was an inter-disciplinary joint project of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Uppsala University and the Archaeological Research Laboratory at the University of Stockholm. It has produced seven Ph.D. dissertations.

TO REDE AND TO ROWN ~

Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources