

Birgit and Peter Sawyer. *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*. The Nordic Series, 17. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press. 1993. ISBN 0-8166-1738-4/0-8166-1739-2. Pp. XVI+265.

Here it is at last: a concise, scholarly description of Scandinavia in the Middle Ages, written in a non-Scandinavian language. Till now, those interested in the history of the northern countries in the Middle Ages were hard pressed to find good material, even in the Scandinavian languages. Books written in Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian or Swedish only deal with

the history of a part of the North, as a rule. Books written in other languages are few and out of date. But now we have it. *Medieval Scandinavia*, written by Birgit and Peter Sawyer, is a book that describes Scandinavia from the time of the Conversion (ca 800) to the Reformation (ca 1500). Birgit Sawyer is an associate professor at the Institute of History at Gothenburg University and has published several books dealing with the role of women in medieval Scandinavia and the perception of early Scandinavia in modern times. Peter Sawyer was a professor of history at the University of Leeds, where he specialised in the history of the Vikings. In *Medieval Scandinavia*, the authors each wrote about their own specialities and subsequently adjusted the texts.

*Medieval Scandinavia* consists of ten chapters, the first of which reports the sources that can be referred to for information on Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. For the early period, these sources are the historic work, *Descriptio insularum Aquilonis*, written by Adam van Bremen in the eleventh century, and a number of Icelandic sagas, which were put into writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These sources are important, but have the disadvantage that the information they give is not on all accounts reliable. For the period before 1100 or thereabouts, more value can be attached to the information provided by archeological finds, place-names, runic inscriptions and laws.

The second chapter, 'Lands and Peoples', makes clear that Scandinavia in the Middle Ages was no more a unity than it is today. It is certainly true that the inhabitants - with the exception of the Sami - spoke roughly the same language until about 1500, but the circumstances they lived in were different. These differences are described more precisely in the third chapter, 'Political History: An Outline'.

Chapters four and five ['*Things* and Kings'; 'Christianization and Church Organization'] especially deal with the transition from pagan belief to Christianity. The authors tell that there already was contact between Scandinavians and Christians in the South before the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West. It was, however, in the 820s, that missionaries first had the opportunity to preach the gospel. So Christianization of Scandinavia began in the ninth century. The period in which the old and new religions overlapped, was long - in some regions as much as two hundred years. The twelfth century saw the end of the transitional period and now archbishoprics and dioceses were formed and churches

built. The thirteenth century was a time of consolidation, but in the fourteenth century there was a period of regression which was mainly due to the Black Death. The church recovered in the following period, yet it lacked the strength to resist the decision - a decision which was taken for political rather than religious reasons - of the Swedish and Danish kings to renounce their obedience to the pope.

The sixth chapter, 'Landowners and Tenants', deals with the country people in Scandinavia. The authors reach the conclusion that in the early Middle Ages only a small proportion of the owners of Scandinavian farms and other properties can be identified, but that it is possible to discover how most land was classified on the eve of the Reformation. At that time, about thirty-five percent, including most of the best land, was held by churches, about ten percent by the kings, the rest by free landowners.

Scandinavia, as we read in 'Trade and Towns', the seventh chapter, had never been completely cut off from Western Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and by the year 800, commercial links between western and northern Europe were well established. At that time, there were several trading centres, such as Hedeby and Ribe in southern Jutland, Skiringssal near Larvik in southern Norway and Birka in Mälaren. Later, following the increased demand for Scandinavian produce elsewhere in Europe, other cities, such as Århus, Lund, Roskilde, Viborg and Trondheim were founded. By 1500 there were around a hundred towns. Most were very small and functioned as craft and market centres for their districts. The larger towns attracted numerous foreign merchants, but even these towns were small by European standards.

It has generally been supposed that in prehistoric Scandinavia women had a higher status and a greater freedom than later. How true is this supposition? Certainly some church rules, like the regulations for monogamous marriage and the laws against divorce and concubinage, were not always advantageous for women. On the other hand, the rules governing women's inheritances were better in Christian than in pagan times, and Christian teaching was, generally speaking, friendly to women. They were, as we may assume, glad to believe that in the sight of God they were men's equals and that their worth did not depend on their fertility, family or social status. It may also be supposed that many mothers were gladdened by the attempts of the church to restrict the custom of infanticide. On the grounds of these and other considerations, the authors

maintain in the conclusions to the eighth and ninth chapters ['Family and Inheritance'; 'Women: Ideal and Reality'] that those who believe women were better off in early medieval Scandinavia than later are stating the case too simply. At the most, one can conclude that Christianity improved the lot of women in some respects and did not in others.

In the tenth and last chapter, 'Uses of the Past', the authors refute another opinion which is commonly held to be true. This opinion is that Scandinavia was a region in which Germanic society remained uncontaminated by Christianity and other outside influences longer than elsewhere. By a careful study of the sources, Birgit and Peter Sawyer come to another conclusion, namely that Scandinavia in early medieval times had great similarities to other European regions.

The account given in *Medieval Scandinavia* of the history of the North between around 800 and 1500 is not exhaustive. This would not have been possible in a book of about two and a half hundred pages. It was not the intention of the authors either to give a full report. Rather, what they wanted was to write a reasonably rounded, scholarly account of developments in Scandinavia in the time between Conversion and Reformation.

At this, the authors have been successful. *Medieval Scandinavia* is a book marking the great lines of the history of Scandinavia in the period between about 800 and 1500. It is also a work in which old theories are tested for their truth by a careful study of the sources and of older and more recent publications. Several times this leads to new insights. The most remarkable of these is the one mentioned above, namely that, contrary to popular belief, during the early Middle Ages, Scandinavia did not remain uncontaminated by outside influences, but had a great resemblance to other European regions.

'A provocative and stimulating book, a must for scholars dealing with medieval Scandinavia', we read on the cover. This is a correct presentation of the case, but needs an amplification. The book is not only intended for scholars, but also for students and interested laymen, as is clear from the fact that the authors give many examples to clarify the occasionally somewhat concise facts. In the chapter 'Trade and Towns', for instance, a lively description is given of the way of life of the inhabitants of a little fisher-village around the year 1430. The description is taken from an account of Pietro Querini, a Venetian nobleman, who - after a shipwreck - stayed three months on the island of Röst, near the Lofoten. He found

shelter with a Dominican, the island's priest, with whom he communicated in Latin.

Another clarifying example we find in the chapter 'Family and Inheritance'. There, the observation that the Church emphasized the voluntary character of marriage with consent as the sole requirement is illustrated by an example taken from the *Sverrisaga*. During the 1180s, Cecilia Sigursdotter left her husband, Folkvid, in Värmland and took refuge with her brother, King Sverri. When, with her brother's consent, she married a Norwegian magnate, Archbishop Øystein refused to allow it and ordered her to return to Folkvid. Cecilia claimed that she had been given to him against her own wish and had not known what to do about it until she saw her brother. The truth of Cecilia's claim was confirmed by witnesses, and Øystein was forced to annul the first marriage and approve the second.

Not only the clarifying examples, but also the way in which the book is published - with a handsome dust jacket, a well-ordered arrangement and a large number of illustrations - make clear that *Medieval Scandinavia*, except for scholars, is intended for students and those interested in the history of the Middle Ages in the North.

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