

Comments on the Social Context of Settlement in Norway in the First Millennium AD

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The interpretation of the social and political organization in Norway during the Iron Age and the Viking Period is about to change. Norwegian historians studying the intermediate period between the Viking Age and the High Middle Ages give more attention than before to Continental and English history and are challenging the traditional view that the structure of the Norwegian society was very different from the neighbouring countries to the south. The works by Tore Iversen, in particular, about the history of slavery and tenancy in Norway (1994/97, 1995, 1996) have been the inspiration for a debate about the development of agrarian society and the social organization before the High Middle Ages (Dørum 1995, 1999, Lunden 1995, Fyllingsnes 1999). Among Norwegian archaeologists there has been a stronger tendency to use historical analogies when interpreting archaeological material, and to rely more on contemporary written sources from the Germanic societies in England and on the Continent (Opedal 1998, F. Iversen 1998, 1999, Stylegar 1999, Myhre 2000a, b).

At the centre of this new theoretical approach we find the thesis by Dagfinn Skre, from 1996 (1998a), and several of his later works (1997, 1999a, b). The article now under discussion is in many ways a summary of his earlier publications. Among his main inspirations are recent studies by Danish archaeologists, and the already mentioned works by Tore Iversen, but also the archaeological material from his own investigations at Romerike, East Norway. His views on the political organization of Iron Age societies, the social differences between members of the farming communities, the establishment of estates run by the aristocracy, the use of slaves and half-free and free men in large households, and the social meaning of grave mounds as markers of freedom and ownership of land are challenging and inspiring for further research within this field.

My comments are linked to the following topics; (1) the theoretical attitude of the article, (2) the size and complexity of polities, (3) continuity or change of settlements, (4) the meaning of grave mounds.

THE THEORETICAL ATTITUDE OF THE ARTICLE

Skre claims that the theoretical development has moved from 'the application of anthropological parallels and general theories about human societies' to 'thorough empirical studies conducted in a comparative perspective taking into account the main structural developments and cultural features in the North Germanic areas'. This change of attitude has, according to Skre, made it possible to focus more on cultural, religious and ideological themes, and 'enabling archaeologists to lay aside the depressing burden of generalizing and all-encompassing theories' (p. 2).

Skre is of the opinion that it is the use of written sources that has led archaeologists to study mental and ideological topics of this period, and that without written material, archaeology cannot fully investigate such themes. I would rather emphasize that the great interest in cultural, religious and ideological perspectives since the 1980s is a tendency found within all cultural and social sciences, and also within anthropology. It has also been a widely discussed topic within general archaeological theory, which thereby has influenced the interpreting of archaeological material, with or without information available from written sources. I would find it more adequate to claim that the new research approach emphasizes both anthropological and historical analogies, as well as general archaeological theory, when archaeological material from the Early Middle Ages is interpreted. In some ways this situation makes the foundation for interpretation broader, but also more difficult and challenging, since it includes the difficult task of source critique of written material, and the evaluation of the source value of both archaeological and historical material. It seems to me that Dagfinn Skre's comparative approach sometimes leads him to permit the written sources dominate the interpretation of prehistoric societies, especially when he uses Norse written sources from the High Middle Ages (12th–14th centuries) as the 'the third pillar' of his interpretation, even though he is studying an 800 years older society (p. 3).

THE SIZE AND COMPLEXITY OF SOCIETIES

Dagfinn Skre is very modest when he discusses the size of polities. In his thesis he underlines that large regional and overregional polities did not exist over longer periods of time before about AD 900 when the high king Harald Fairhair succeeded in establishing an overlordship over a large part of Norway (1998a:323–324). In the article he is describing the societies' aristocracy as the only superior political level of power, and he claims that kings did not exist as landlords and landowners in Norway before the late 9th century (p. 6). The main arguments for this statement he finds in studies based on written sources from the Viking Age and the High Middle Ages (among others, Sigurdsson 1993, Wenskus 1961, Hachmann 1975, Schlesinger 1953, 1956, Meulengracht Sørensen 1993).

Otherwise, Skre relies heavily on Heiko Steuer's studies of the kingdoms of the Franks and Alamannis between AD 500 and 750, and his description of their so-called open-ranked society and 'Personenverbandstaat' (1987, 1989, 1992). According to Steuer, the political organization of these Germanic societies was not based on power over geographical territories, but on personal relationship between high-ranking leaders, the king, the subrulers and the aristocracy with their retainers and warriors. These leaders were also landowners and rulers of estates, while most of the population consisted of farmers, tenants and slaves. The political situation was unstable, with shifting alliances and struggles for power between persons and families within the kingdoms.

Steuer argues that the open-ranked society with a king and the aristocracy as the superior leadership was a common Germanic institution that was found both on the Continent and in Scandinavia in the Migration and the Merovingian Periods. His view is documented by an archaeological material which includes helmets, special swords, golden rings and other status objects found in richly furnished warrior graves from France and England in the south to Norway and Sweden in the north. According to Steuer, such objects expressed the same ideas and attitudes in Scandinavia as on the Continent. Lotte Hedeager (1997) has shown how special objects and styles, together with origin myths, tales of tribal histories and a common Germanic political ideology have connected and bound together the leading families of the Scandinavian and Continental kingdoms (see also Nielsen 1997a & b, Näsman 1997, 1998, Fabech 1999, Ringvedt 1999).

Dagfinn Skre is inspired by this discussion, but he finds that the archaeological material from Norwegian regions is not of such a character and complexity that it is possible to sustain a hypothesis of regional kingdoms in the Early Medieval Period (1998:292–293, 324–326). He also rejects the evidence of *Getica*, the contemporary written history of the Goths from 551, which mentions a king Rodwulf of some of the West Swedish or South Norwegian tribes with the title of *rex*, an expression used about kings holding an overlordship over other political leaders (1998:256–257). True enough, he interprets *Raknehaugen*, the largest burial mound in Scandinavia, as evidence of an aristocratic family which obtained a short-lived overlordship of Romerike between 550 and 650. But according to Skre, this family was not led by a king, but rather a leader among equals, who for a short period managed to elevate himself and his family to a higher rank than the others. Soon this large polity broke up into small units again (1998:326).

The result of this rejection of a political overlordship is that the Early Medieval societies in Norway were reduced to small political units with only three social levels; The aristocracy with their retainers, the free peasants with ownership of land, and the free or half-free tenants of different categories. (The slaves were not considered to be part of the society.) Skre draws a picture of a relatively static political society in which the aristocracy with their small estates and submitted farms were continuously fighting and competing with one another over land, privileges and labour force within limited geographical areas for nearly 700 years, from about AD 200 to 900, while most of the North European Germanic societies were going through major political changes during these centuries (1998:324–326). According to Skre, it was first the high king Harald Fairhair and his successors who managed to establish a longer lasting power over the aristocracy and the landowners (p. 6). His interpretation therefore comes very close to the view presented by historians using mainly written sources from later periods (Sigurdsson 1999).

Such a conclusion is understandable when Skre uses an empirical material from the relatively small area of Romerike, where only a few grave finds, hoard sites and settlements from the Early Middle Ages have been found. But it is difficult to follow his argumentation when the

results from his study at Romerike are used to describe the political organization of all the Norwegian regions. From the areas around the Oslofjord, in West Norway and Trøndelag comes a much richer and more complex archaeological material, as well as artefacts and monuments of a similar kind to those found in Denmark and on the Continent, and which have been used by, among others, Lotte Hedeager and Heiko Steuer to predict kingdoms and large polities in the Migration and Merovingian Periods (e.g. Myhre 1987, 1992, Ringstad 1992, Opedal 1998). In his thesis, Dagfinn Skre argues that such artefacts found in Norway must have had a different symbolic meaning than those found south of the Skagerak (1998:293). His argumentation leaves the impression that he is guided more by the political organization presented in sagas and in the written sources of the High Middle Ages than by the archaeological material itself (p. 3).

Another interpretation would be that from about AD 500 there existed a number of petty kingdoms along the coast of Norway. Using analogies from the Continental and Anglo-Saxon political developments, rivalry and/or cooperation between the kingdoms would gradually lead towards a more permanent, overregional overlordship in the Viking Age (Sawyer 1993, Näsman 1998). If such an interpretation is accepted, a fourth social level of society, the royal lineages, has to be taken into consideration when discussing the development of settlements and the ownership of land in pre-Viking periods.

CONTINUITY OR CHANGE OF SETTLEMENTS

A similar static situation is described by Dagfinn Skre when it comes to the settlement development in the Norwegian regions. He argues that the natural conditions for farming and agrarian settlements 'made the running of large estates difficult. It was more efficient to maintain the small farms as individual units, and make the farmer pay land rent'. As a consequence, he claims 'that the main structure of settlement in these areas is about 1500 years old, in some areas even several centuries older' (p. 4).

Based on a broader settlement source material than that found at Romerike, I agree with Skre that there seems to have been a definite change in the agricultural exploitation about AD 200 when the establishment of farms with a permanent location of house sites and with an infield/outfield pattern seems to have occurred in most regions (Lillehammer 1979). I also agree that there seems to have been another main change of settlement pattern at the end of the 6th century when there was a major relocation of settlements, and a new layout of infields and farm borders (Pedersen 1990, 1999, Pilø 2000, Myhre 2000b).

But even so, we have very few archaeological examples of houses and farm sites from the period between AD 600 and 1000. Within his research area at Romerike, Skre has not found any houses from this period. He has to rely on the distribution of burial mounds and graves when establishing the number of farms being in use, and he argues his view very convincingly. A main problem is, however, to decide what form and structure the houses and settlements had during the late Iron Age and in the Viking Period. After the excavation of a village from about AD 200–600 at Forsandmoen in Rogaland (Løken 1998), the hypothesis has been launched that similar village-like, nucleated settlements were more common in Norwegian regions than we hitherto have thought, both in the Migration Period and later. The Medieval and post-Medieval clustered farms of West Norway and the so-called farm mounds on the coast of North Norway are nucleated settlements that may be considered as a form of village (Lillehammer 1999, for a definition of a village, see Riddersporre 1999). Since the development of house types and settlement forms is so similar in Jutland and South Norway during the long period between 1500 BC and AD 600, it is highly likely that villages of Danish types may also have existed here during the Early Medieval Period.

So, I will question Skre's statements that 'the settlement structure survived fairly unchanged' (p. 4) and 'that the size of farms, . . . as a general rule has been fairly constant through the centuries' (p. 9). I will suggest that we have to be open to the possibility that future excavations will reveal similar settlement types to those known from Denmark; estates with one large farm complex, villages with a nucleation of farm houses, as well as smaller, dispersed, single and two-farm settlements (Mikkelsen 1999:190–191). As in Denmark, the settlement pattern may have changed during the 7th–11th centuries, and the geographical distribution of small and large farms may not have been as constant, as Skre claims (compare, for example, Borg in Lofoten, where the very large hall of the 8th–10th centuries was followed by smaller buildings (Johansen 1990:27)).

Skre's claim that since the main settlement structure was static for 1500 years or more from the 6th century onwards, the relative sizes of farms may therefore '... with a high degree of reliability be reconstructed from medieval and 17th century sources' (p. 9). The source of error of such a method is obvious, when he is trying to explain prehistoric Iron Age societies from much later written sources.

THE MEANING OF BURIAL MOUNDS

I support Dagfinn Skre's statement that 'settlement history is social history or nothing' (p. 4), which I understand also includes the political relations of society. It has been very inspiring to read Skre's analysis of the different social strata of people and farms within an estate organization. His interpretation of the meaning of graves and burial mounds forces us to rethink the development of social and political organization during the Iron Age and the Viking Period. Here I will reflect only on some ideas that came to me during my reading of his works.

He argues convincingly for the interpretation that a burial mound was a symbol indicating that the family of the deceased belonged to the free population. I have, however, asked myself if the mound also meant that the family had the right to inherit the farm on which the mound was built? Heiko Steuer claims that many of the rich 'Reihengra"bern' from the 6th–8th centuries on the Continent belonged to free families of high ranks who had been given land for their lifetime, but not rights to inheritance. The richly furnished graves should therefore be considered as an expression of the rivalry within and between families to keep the once acquired land or positions. When cemeteries went out of use during the 7th–8th centuries, it was not because of the introduction of a Christian burial custom (most free people had long been Christianized), but the main reason was that inherited rights to land and positions had now been regulated by law, and that manorial lordship had been consolidated. Material marking and demonstrations at the cemetery were no longer necessary by the aristocracy and the freeborn families (Steuer 1989:116).

If we accept this meaning of burial mounds as a common custom among the North Germanic tribes, it would explain the large number of well-furnished graves from the late Roman and Migration Period as a material demonstration of a rivalry between free aristocratic families over permanent positions and land rights. When the number of graves was reduced dramatically after AD 550, it was not because of a decline in the population, and deserted farms and settlements, but because the right of inheritance to land, or tenancy of farms, had been introduced for the free upper social strata of the population. They therefore did not have to invest so much in burials and graves. At the same time, a larger proportion of the population was turned into slavery and as unfree tenants of the aristocracy, as Skre claims, and they were not allowed to build burial mounds. When mounds again became more abundant during the Viking Age, it might be because more people became free farmers or tenants, as is Skre's hypothesis, but it is also possible that more free people now had lost their right of inheritance of land or tenancy, and they had to defend their rights by all possible means, also at the burial place.

Dagfinn Skre tests his interpretation of the meaning of burial mounds on the archaeological grave material from Høyland Fjellbygd in Rogaland. Nearly all 58 farms in that area have burial mounds from about AD 200–550, and according to Skre's hypothesis, this means '... that this area was settled by free men who took land which no one else claimed' (p. 12). This would have been a possible conclusion if the barrows indicate both freedom and inherited rights, and if we look at Høyland Fjellbygd in isolation from the general picture of monument distribution at Jæren. The fact is that two of the largest and most dominating hill forts in Rogaland are found in the area, and special objects and grave finds indicate that a major religious and political centre was found nearby, so it seems unreasonable that so many farms were run by totally free and independent families (Myhre 1998). Another explanation could be that the many barrows from the 3rd to the 6th centuries means that most farmers were free tenants without inheritance rights under neighbouring estates. Only 10 graves from the 7th to the 8th centuries have been found in the whole area. A former conclusion was that most of these farms were deserted because of a demographic and political crisis. After having read Dagfinn Skre's works, I find it more reasonable that many of the farmers were turned into unfree tenants, and according to his hypothesis were not allowed to build barrows. Some of the main farms may have been run by free families with established rights to land, and therefore did not have to build barrows.

Skre's interpretation of the meaning of mounds is partly built on a few written sources from the 13th–14th centuries, which mention that *odal* rights over a farm might be claimed by those who could demonstrate relationship with persons buried in the mounds on the farm. I would question the interpretation that a practice known from the High Middle Ages can be transferred more than 500–1000 years backwards in time. Contemporary runic inscriptions mentioning inheritance must be of a much more convincing source value, but as these inscriptions consider matters of the upper social level of society where inherited rights should be expected, they tell us very little about the general rules of inheritance (Skre 1997, 1998a:201–203). What I find most convincing is Skre's use of contemporary written sources from the Continental Germanic societies when he discusses this subject.

CONCLUSION

Dagfinn Skre has opened new ways and new possibilities for interpreting the large archaeological settlement material from the First Millennium, and his ideas have already formed a basis for new hypothesis for the development of the late prehistory of Norway. To me, his works have been creative reading and are an inspiration for further research.

My comments are connected to the three pillars on which he builds his comparative approach. First, I feel that he has put too much emphasis on his third pillar, the written sources from the High Middle Ages. Second, I feel that he has not fully used the evidence of the contemporary written sources from other Germanic societies, which is his second pillar, especially when it comes to the question of political leadership of the Norwegian tribes and of the size of their polities. And third, in my opinion, the first pillar, the archaeological remains of these mainly prehistoric societies, should be given more attention. I argue that the Iron Age and Early Medieval societies of Norway shared more similarities with other polities and kingdoms of Northern Europe than is accepted by Dagfinn Skre, and they were not so static during these important centuries, but they developed under constant influence from their neighbours to the south. This hypothesis has now to be investigated more closely, elucidated by Skre's very interesting works.