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## CONCLUDING REMARKS: LANGUAGES OF POWER AND ELITE LEGITIMISATION IN POLAND AND NORWAY, 1000–1300\*

**Abstract:** The articles in the volume demonstrate that comparative history can break out of the straight-jacket of supposed geographical constraints, and show how more detailed comparative studies of various aspects of legitimisation can reveal the nuances behind seemingly uniform patterns. The concluding remarks further elaborate on these points and raise questions concerning the terminology of centre and periphery.

**Keywords:** power, elite, power legitimisation, comparative history, centre and periphery

This collection of articles has sought to elucidate the strategies of elite legitimisation used in two peripheral regions, Norway and Poland, that adopted Christianity in the second great wave of Europe’s Christianization. More or less in parallel to religious change, rulers were trying to strengthen and consolidate their power, which often entailed violent confrontations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to Thietmar of Merseburg’s account, Mieszko I, the first historically attested ruler of Poland,

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<sup>1</sup> On these processes and the sources, see Przemysław Wiszewski, *Domus Boleslai: Values and social identity in dynastic traditions of medieval Poland (c. 966–1138)* (Leiden, 2010); Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway, c. 900–1350* (Copenhagen, 2010).

left the realm divided among several claimants, but Bolesław I the Brave (Chrobry) exiled his half-brothers and had some of their noble supporters blinded before gaining power over the whole country and eventually being crowned king.<sup>2</sup> In Norway, according to the kings' sagas, Olaf Trygvason gained the throne after promising rewards and honours to the man who would kill Jarl Hakon, but once Hakon was killed, Olaf had the Jarl's killer executed.<sup>3</sup> Nor did violence stop after these first rulers successfully gained power, it was a recurring phenomenon in fights for the throne. Because primogeniture did not even become an ideal, much less a reality, for inheriting rulership until much later, conflict was baked in to the very process of gaining the throne every time. Nonetheless, brute force was not enough, and all rulers also wished to legitimise their position: constructing legitimacy is part of every political system, even in cases when violence plays a large role in gaining and maintaining power. Yet the means of legitimisation differ widely between various periods and areas. Such divergence in the construction and deployment of legitimising strategies can be studied particularly well by comparing two areas that more or less simultaneously developed very divergent systems of legitimisation in at least superficially similar circumstances as new Christian polities.

The articles collected in this special issue predominantly focus on the legitimation of royal dynastic power; even the emergence of the cults of holy bishops and petitions for their canonisation, on which Steffen B. Hope's and Grzegorz Pac's article focuses, can only be fully explained by considering the relationship between royal power and the local ecclesiastical organisation. There are two key reasons for this focus. First, royal power, that set a dynasty, or even just one member of a dynasty, above others among the social elite necessitated special justification in an age when the resources and military power of warrior elites often rivalled those of a ruler. Secondly, medieval narrative sources often focused on the dynasty when they related the history of a realm, and therefore, historians possess incomparably richer material when it comes to dynastic legitimation, especially

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<sup>2</sup> Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, ed. by Robert Holtzmann, MGH SS rer. Germ. N.S. 9 (Berlin, 1935), book 4, chap. 58, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay, Anthony Faulkes, i (London, 2016<sup>2</sup>), 184–5 (chap. 49).

in the central medieval period for Central Europe and Scandinavia.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as the comparisons in this special issue demonstrate, multiple possible strategies existed to validate a dynasty's or a ruler's power. As Zbigniew Dalewski and Hans Jacob Orning demonstrate, dividing power between branches of a dynasty (as happened for a long time in Poland) or fighting to establish one person's power (in Norway) were radically different ways of exercising power, therefore the recourse to distinct strategies of legitimisation should not come as a surprise. However, practices of power were not stable, and could even be radically altered within the same realm quite rapidly. This is shown by the Polish example: Poland went from an early use of royal coronation, which far predated the use of coronation in Norway, to power-sharing between princes, even giving up the royal title, whereas Norway, after a late start, developed a trajectory towards increasingly centralised power held by one monarch. The corresponding legitimising narratives in the Polish case emphasised the original change of dynasty to establish Piast power, whereas, in the Norwegian example, the narratives offered a fictitious dynastic continuity that concealed very real ruptures.

The authors' specific topics, chosen for analysis here, have been much less studied than the more usual focus for scholars studying the ways in which medieval power was legitimised, such as coronation rituals,<sup>5</sup> enthronement,<sup>6</sup> symbols of royal power,<sup>7</sup> or festive entries into towns.<sup>8</sup> They demonstrate how attention to nuances in the narratives,

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<sup>4</sup> See the overviews on medieval dynastic histories by Leah Shopkow, 'Dynastic history', in Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (ed.), *Historiography in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2003), 217–48; Charles West, 'Dynastic Historical Writing', in Daniel R. Woolf, Andrew Feldherr, Grant Hardy, Ian Hesketh (eds), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* (Oxford, 2012), ii, 496–516.

<sup>5</sup> János M. Bak and Géza Pálffy, *Crown and Coronation in Hungary, 1000–1916 A.D.* (Budapest, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Dušan Třeštík and Agnežka Merhautová, 'Die böhmischen Insignien und der steinerne Thron', in Alfred Wiczorek and Hans Hinz (eds), *Europas Mitte um 1000* (Stuttgart, 2000), ii, 904–6.

<sup>7</sup> Karel Otavský, *Die Sankt-Wenzelskrone im Prager Domschatz und die Frage der Kunstauffassung am Hofe Kaiser Karls IV* (Bern, 1992); János M. Bak, 'Holy Lance, Holy Crown, Holy Dexter: Sanctity of Insignia in Medieval East Central Europe', in János M. Bak, *Studying Medieval Rulers and Their Subjects. Central Europe and Beyond*, ed. by Balázs Nagy (Aldershot, 2010), part vi, 56–65.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Johaneck and Angelika Lampen (eds), *Adventus: Studien zum herrscherlichen Einzug in die Stadt* (Cologne–Weimar–Vienna, 2009).

even in the case of short episodes, can contribute to our understanding of medieval constructions of legitimacy.

Moreover, the comparison across separate 'historical regions' as usually conceived, Central (or East-Central or Eastern) Europe and Scandinavia, reveals that meaningful comparative history can break out of the straightjacket of supposed geographical constraints. Such historical regions are the creations of historians, rather than solid frameworks that determined historical development.<sup>9</sup> That, however, is sometimes forgotten in studies taking the 'historical regions' as their starting point. As long as historians only focus on comparisons within such supposed regions, they merely naturalise the construct, and therefore it is important to breach such a limitation. The comparison between Norway and Poland demonstrates that a similar socio-political situation (in this case, Christianizing realms with rulers who were eager to consolidate their power) rather than geographical position alone determines parallel historical developments. These studies reinforce the significance of building comparisons from the ground up, taking medieval evidence as the basis for deciding on both the areas and topics of comparison. Such an approach is a counterweight to modern and even politicised agendas that can influence comparative frameworks.

Further, a focused comparison on specific aspects of building legitimacy in two places that share some core characteristics, yet also diverge on many points, highlights the role of local agency. While both realms adopted Christianity and a variety of institutions and legitimising elements from Western Europe in roughly the same period, local adaptations changed the way in which institutions were borrowed: for example, the size and location of bishoprics or the local saints who were venerated were determined by such local agency. This is also true in terms of how institutions, practices, and literary motifs that originated in the parts of Europe that had been Christianized earlier were deployed as legitimising strategies.

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<sup>9</sup> See my two articles: 'The mirage of East-Central Europe: historical regions in a comparative perspective', in Gerhard Jaritz and Katalin Szende (eds), *Medieval East Central Europe in a Comparative Perspective* (London, 2016), 9–23, and 'L'Europe centrale, une région historique? Problèmes et débats', in Marie-Madeleine de Cevins (ed.), *Démystifier l'Europe centrale: Bohême, Hongrie et Pologne du VII<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 2021), 17–38.

In this way, for example, the cutting of hair, which had great symbolic significance and social meaning in multiple ways, whether we think of the story of Samson in the Bible, the ‘long-haired kings’ or clerical tonsure, features in both Poland and Norway in legitimising myths about purported first rulers.<sup>10</sup> Yet the stories about these haircuts serve very different aims, facilitated by the fact that hair was a very versatile instrument of social symbolism: its meaning depended entirely on the context. Therefore, wearing a beard, for example, could have diametrically opposite significance: it signalled clerical status in Orthodox Christianity and its lack in Latin Europe. The cutting of hair also had various meanings in different medieval contexts: it could signal servile status or becoming an adult. The first haircut of boys in Frankish law was an important rite of passage and milestone, with the person cutting the boy’s hair becoming a patron or father-figure, and this early medieval Frankish practice is quite similar to the ideas found in the Polish sources about the legitimising ritual haircut discussed in the article by Ben Allport and Rafał Rutkowski.<sup>11</sup> Yet in the Norwegian case, the vow of not cutting Harald’s hair until he becomes king of all Norway echoes more Biblical and penitential practices.<sup>12</sup> Thus, stories about the first haircut of the founder of a royal dynasty, while both serve purposes of legitimation, in fact, draw on and engage with very different systems of meaning.

The kind of comparative work demonstrated in these articles is only possible by scholars with a deep knowledge of both areas that

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<sup>10</sup> Ian N. Wood, ‘Hair and Beards in the Early Medieval West’, *Al-Masaq*, 30 (2018), 107–16; Maximilian Diesenberger, ‘Hair, sacrality and symbolic capital in the Frankish Kingdoms’ in Richard Corradini, Maximilian Diesenberger, and Helmut Reimitz (eds), *The construction of communities in the early Middle Ages: Texts, resources and artefacts* (Leiden, 2003), 173–212; Pauline A. Stafford, ‘The meanings of hair in the Anglo-Norman world: masculinity, reform, and national identity’, in Mathilde van Dijk and Renée I.A. Nip (eds), *Saints, scholars and politicians. Gender as a tool in Medieval Studies. Festschrift in Honour of Anneke Mulder-Bakker on the Occasion of her Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Turnhout, 2005); Roberta Milliken (ed.), *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages* (London, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Bartlett, ‘Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 6, iv (1994), 43–60, here at 48–9.

<sup>12</sup> Gábor Klaniczay, ‘Fashionable Beards and Heretical Rags’, in Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power. The transformation of popular religion in medieval and early-modern Europe*, trans. Susan Singerman, ed. by Karen Margolis (Princeton, 1990), 51–78, at 69–71.

are to be studied, and co-authoring each article, therefore, ensured that expertise was evenly spread, allowing a nuanced approach. The authors are also alert to the need to consider the comparative method explicitly, with its advantages and pitfalls. Writing comparative history is never easy, even in the most ideal circumstances, and it is especially challenging when dealing with societies that left patchy sources, which are also often hard to interpret. In such cases, the complexities surrounding any comparison increase, because historians are prisoners of the primary sources they have at their disposal. Medieval history is exactly one such problematic field. The narrative sources are often idiosyncratic; to what extent do they provide windows into the practices of the past, or merely into the mind of a particular author? To what extent did individual authors reflect broader views, widespread in society, or merely create learned stories accessible to a very few people? How are modern historians to distinguish between patterns that characterised a given society and the mere historical accident of a writer's fertile imagination, for example when it comes to legitimising the rulership of a specific individual, when we often have a very limited number of sources? The authors of these articles offer their responses to such questions; by necessity, they can only be tentative in many cases.

Some of the main sources that recur in these articles are interesting in their own right. Written by foreigners, who were nonetheless deeply engaged in creating legitimacy for (or in some cases, delegitimising) local rulers, the texts eventually even became foundational in the national stories of Poland and Norway. The so-called Gallus Anonymus, whose origins have been the subject of much debate without any firm resolution, is not known from any other source, so all hypotheses about his identity derive from the *Gesta* itself.<sup>13</sup> This has led to ideas about his possible French origins, which are not universally accepted.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the work and the author, see more recently for example: Krzysztof Stopka (ed.), *Gallus Anonymus and his chronicle in the context of twelfth-century historiography from the perspective of the latest research* (Kraków, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Danuta Borawska, 'Gallus Anonymus, or Italus Anonymus?', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 112 (2015), 313–26 (the original article in Polish was published much earlier and has, in turn, been criticised); *Gesta Principum Polonorum. The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*, ed. and trans. by Paul Knoll and Frank Schaer (Budapest, 2007<sup>2</sup>), xxvii–xxix; Krzysztof Stopka, 'Introduction', in *Gallus Anonymus and his Chronicle*, vii–xi, here at vii–ix.

From the text itself, it has been shown that he was a Benedictine monk, he had some knowledge of Hungary and perhaps spent time there; he went to Poland probably in the early twelfth century and started to write the *Gesta* soon afterwards.<sup>15</sup>

Snorri Sturluson was the son of one of the chieftains of Iceland, and after his father's death, he was fostered by the most powerful family in Iceland. He became one of the most influential chieftains and a lawspeaker at the Althing of Iceland. A womaniser, prolific writer and poet, he spent time in Norway between 1218 and 1220, where he became a friend of Earl Skuli (Skule Bårdsson), who governed during King Hakon IV's minority. Snorri became a royal retainer and promised to help with the unification of Norway and Iceland. He returned to Iceland, and then, once more, went to Norway. In 1239, however, he sympathised with Skuli, who tried to wrest the throne from Hakon, resulting in a Norwegian civil war; Skuli was killed in 1240. Snorri left Norway against the king's wishes in 1239; in 1241, on the order of King Hakon, Snorri was assassinated in Iceland by one of his former sons-in-law.<sup>16</sup>

These early architects of legitimacy were thus at least partly legitimising rulers whom they depended on and served. Yet we also need to be alert to the potentially different levels of freedom the authors enjoyed in shaping their narratives: the anonymous author could write without the constraint of earlier histories, whereas Snorri based the *Heimskringla* on already existing sagas. Their works eventually came to constitute the cornerstone of national history; thus, both legitimacy and national stories began to be formulated by people who arrived from outside and were linked to the royal court or elites. The Gallus Anonymous named the archbishop and bishops of Poland and the chancellor Michael as supporting his enterprise, and Boleslaw III as his subject.<sup>17</sup> Snorri probably wrote the *Heimskringla*, the history of the kings of Norway, between his two visits to Norway. Both authors wrote about rulers and expressed views on power and legitimacy. Did they write for a broader audience? Or for a courtly circle?

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<sup>15</sup> Knoll and Schaer, *Gesta*, xxix.

<sup>16</sup> See Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1991), 12–3; and the recent collection Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir and Helgi Þorláksson (eds), *Snorri Sturluson and Reykholt: The Author and Magnate, His Life, Works and Environment at Reykholt in Iceland* (Copenhagen, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Gesta*, 2–5, 10–11 respectively.

When studying constructions of legitimacy, a logical question concerns the consumers of narratives that aimed to legitimise rule. Who were these texts written for, and how widely did they circulate? Regardless of the original intended audience, who read them in the original text or in some version repeated in other written texts or ‘consumed’ them in some other form, such as through hearing stories that were relayed orally? The articles consider, to some extent, whether the legitimising strategies were meant for domestic purposes or for the elites of other European regions. Drawing firm conclusions can be tricky, given the patchy evidence. For example, no early manuscript of the *Gesta* by the so-called Gallus Anonymous survives, and only three late medieval copies are extant from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but we cannot know how many have been lost. Further, his stories clearly influenced later medieval authors of Poland’s history, such as Master Vincent Kadłubek and Peter of Byczyna.<sup>18</sup> Yet the extent to which his stories were known in Poland at the time, or the reactions of medieval readers of his text – whether, for example, they were convinced by, or even understood, the stories of legitimisation – remain impossible to establish. In Snorri’s case, the manuscripts were mostly Icelandic.<sup>19</sup> Snorri sought to analyse and provide an explanation for political events. According to Sverre Bagge, his aim was mainly pragmatic: history served to offer lessons from the past to the present, in this case, about success (and failure) in politics.<sup>20</sup> Who took these lessons to heart, however, is not so obvious; it may have been his Icelandic audience, who were less interested in the legitimacy of particular kings and more attuned to ways to succeed in political life.

The Catholic Church, which was at times an ally and at other times a critic of rulers with its own institutional interests, was, at the local level, intertwined with the local elites. The same families provided members for monasteries and for the royal court, although, as was seen in the case of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, the assumption of ecclesiastical office could change one’s priorities and obligations. The Church, in part, provided legitimacy for the ruler through coronation and often through the pen of ecclesiastics who

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<sup>18</sup> *Gesta*, xx–xxi.

<sup>19</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, especially 230–1.



were writing dynastic histories. Yet, especially as Gregorian ideas about the sphere of a ruler's power penetrated more widely into European societies, ecclesiastics, primarily bishops and archbishops, started to stand up to royal power, which led to repeated clashes and, indeed, the murder of some of these clerics. The local interpretation of such figures, however, could transcend the original dispute between ecclesiastical and secular power; they could gain a symbolic significance, as was the case with St Stanislaus (Stanisław) in Poland, who came to represent the unity of the Polish realm despite the earlier fragmentation of political power.

The attempts made by both Polish and Norwegian ecclesiastics to have local bishops canonised by the papacy demonstrate how rapidly the new papal monopoly on canonisation and the revalued figure of the holy bishop as a champion of the Church was used for local purposes. The very different outcomes of these petitions, however, show that not all local cases could be presented in a manner to gain papal approval, although the reasons for that may lie in the locality itself.

These articles aim to further challenge the model that represents the development of medieval Europe as following a blueprint that spread from a western European core to the rest of the continent, where it was adopted. As has been pointed out before, local people had agency and did not merely slavishly copy Western institutions and practices. These articles, by demonstrating the very diverse ways in which dynastic power functioned and was legitimised, add nuance to our understanding of these local processes. One could go even further and challenge the core and periphery model itself. Favoured by economists and network theorists, do core and periphery help us to explain medieval European processes? While some areas accepted Christianity later and with Christianity, adopted ecclesiastical structures, institutions of government, writing and coinage that had been developed in the areas Christianized earlier, many processes did not conform to a core-periphery model.

While, of course, some of the adaptations, such as the figures of local saints or the size of bishoprics, can still be accommodated within the blueprint model, there are more significant differences that go beyond local variations due to local agency in adaptations of a blueprint. Thus, for example, Scandinavia had its own runic literacy that continued after Christianisation, while Central Europe

had no or very limited literacy prior to its encounter with writing that accompanied the introduction of Christianity. The role of writing in local society, therefore, was quite different, from areas where its use was much more widespread in life to those where only a handful of charters were issued by the ruler.<sup>21</sup> Another example, very pertinent to these articles, is the influence of pre-Christian power structures. Local rulers, who were keen to Christianize their realms, relied on local traditions of holding power and extensive warrior elites prior to Christianization; these traditions, in part, determined how imported structures were adopted. Feasting, examined in Wojtek Jezierski's and Paweł Żmudzki's article, is a case in point. While feasting certainly existed in all types of societies in pre-Christian times as well, the significance of feasting for political communication in Scandinavia seems to stand out. The centrality of feasting was carried over to Christian times, and even 'Christianized' in drinking parties in honour of Christ and the Virgin.<sup>22</sup> Many local traditions of rulership, however, cannot be reliably documented because we lack the source material; for example, local ideas about rulership before Christianization cannot be ascertained in the case of Poland, even though they must have influenced the ways in which Christian kingship was adopted.

Other considerations also lead to the questioning of the applicability of a core-periphery model to medieval Europe. Pope Gregory VII himself, the 'Holy Satan' who wished to redefine the sphere of papal power, corresponded with all the newly Christianized realms, including Poland and Norway.<sup>23</sup> As discussed in these articles, Polish rulers established especially close ties to the papacy early on. The new realms were quite central to the enterprise of papal dominion over the Christian world. At the same time, Poland and Norway were 'peripheries' to the papal 'centre' only in the same way as England and France were 'peripheries', if the papacy was to be Christendom's

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<sup>21</sup> Marie Stoklund (ed.), *Runes and Their Secrets: Studies in Runology. International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Copenhagen, 2006); Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert (eds), *The Development of Literate Mentalities in East Central Europe* (Turnhout, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Sverre Bagge and Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, 'The Kingdom of Norway', in Nora Berend (ed.), *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy* (Cambridge, 2007), 121–66, here at 161.

<sup>23</sup> For Gregory's policies, H. E. J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073–1085* (Oxford, 1998).

centre. Though outside the scope of this special issue, key knowledge in the form of translations from Greek and Arabic was made available to Europe from ‘peripheral’ areas. Finally, all the while, the true core from a medieval perspective, Jerusalem and the Holy Land, lay outside Europe itself. One may, therefore, also continue to think about alternative terminologies that acknowledge the belated start of some regions without the use of the core–periphery model. Two such terms have, for example, been proposed in Polish scholarship: ‘new Europe’ and ‘younger Europe.’<sup>24</sup>

Elite legitimization of power continued to evolve throughout the whole of medieval Europe. Some of the elements, such as royal coronation, were widespread, yet even these ritual aspects of legitimization were not uniform.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as the Polish case itself shows, a royal title was not necessarily a prerequisite for exercising power. One could continue the sustained comparisons to focus, for example, on monumental architecture and art, especially at royal seats, the cult of dynastic saints, or burial practices. The articles in this collection show how more detailed comparative studies of various aspects of legitimisation can reveal the nuances behind seemingly uniform patterns; such an analysis could be extended to other areas of Europe, including Western Europe.

*Proofreading Sarah Thomas*

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<sup>25</sup> See for example the now classic volume, János M. Bak (ed.), *Coronations. Medieval and early modern monarchic ritual* (Berkeley, Ca., 1990), which also includes articles on Poland and Norway.

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