SOCIETAS
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vol. 23 • 2018

Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae

ISSN 1427-4418

ISBN 978-83-65548-40-5

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Fundacja Centrum Badań Historycznych

SOCIETAS VISTULANA

Warszawa 2018

QUAESTIONES MEDII AEVI NOVAE

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Published and financed by:
Ministry of Science
and Higher Education
(no. 0163/NPRH4/H3b/83/2016)

NATIONAL PROGRAMME
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANITIES

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ISSN 1427-4418
ISBN 978-83-65548-40-5

Printed in Poland

Subscriptions: Published in December. The annual subscriptions rate is:
in Poland 38,00 zł; in Europe 32 EUR; in overseas countries 42 EUR

Subscriptions orders shoud be addressed to:
Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Naukowego "Societas Vistulana"
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Account: Santander Bank Polska, O/Kraków, pl. Szczepański 5
55 1910 1048 4003 0092 1121 0002

Impression 550 spec.

Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae (2018)

Margaretha Nordquist
Stockholm

Eternal Bonds of Love or Foreign Oppression?

Entangled Identities in Late-medieval Scandinavia

In 1397, a union monarchy between the three Scandinavian kingdoms was established in Kalmar. It became a key framework for the political development within and between Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the 15th century, in spite of the fact that it was only periodically fully realized.[1] An initial period of strong union monarchy was interrupted by political turbulence in the 1430s that led to the dethronement of the union king, Erik. From the second half of the 15th century until its dissolution in the early 16th century, the Kalmar Union was only implemented during shorter periods of time in all three realms. Sweden had its own king or regent (*riksföreståndare*) for much of the time. Throughout the later Middle Ages, the political development in Scandinavia involved attempts to maintain union government, to negotiate the conditions for a continued union between the realms, or warfare to achieve or withstand such a goal. The idea of a union between the Scandinavian kingdoms was remarkably resilient; it could serve as a flexible political tool for the power ambitions of kings and elites, as well as for the mobilization of broader social strata.

In the political sources from the period, there are many more or less formulaic statements of the particular bonds of affinity and solidarity that were presumed to exist between the three realms. In numerous treaties resulting from negotiations between leading men from the Scandinavian kingdoms in the 15th century, the essential unity of the realms is solemnly

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1 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater: statsbildning, politisk kultur och identiteter under Kalmarunionens upplösningsskede 1512-1541*, Stockholm 2000, pp. 52-62; C. Rock, *Herrscherwechsel im spätmittelalterlichen Skandinavien: Handlungsmuster und Legitimationsstrategien*, Ostfildern 2016, p. 422.

stated. Ideally, the relationship entailed mutual trust, solidarity and love for the benefit and continued existence of the three realms. "The three realms" or only "the realms" was an established concept in late-medieval Scandinavia; it was the common way of referring to Denmark, Norway and Sweden.[2] The unity and affinity between the Scandinavian realms constituted one theme in the political imagination of the period. It coexisted with another theme of alterity and antagonism that could be applied to wrongful and unjust, or "foreign" rule. In Sweden, the latter theme in particular was translated into chronicles, songs and other forms of narratives about the past, while official treaties as the results of negotiations, could reflect both themes.

The aim of this article is to highlight the interplay between the conceptions of unity and alterity that marked union politics and conflicts in the 15th century, as documented in contemporary narrative sources and treaties.[3] As will be elaborated below, the forms and norms of the political imagination, such as collective identities, ideals, and references to the past, are elements that influence the exercise and consolidation of power. What kind of identities and relationships of unity or alterity did the political interaction on the union level generate or provoke, as indicated by treaties and narrative sources?

The two themes mentioned above will serve as a framework for analysis: on the one hand proclamations of affinity and unity between Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and on the other hand expressions of alterity and hostility against what was seen as threatening, unjust or foreign elements in the political life. It is important not to approach these two themes simply as opposites, nor as equal to either a preference for union government or national government. What may at first appear as contradictory themes, can instead be seen as a mutually reinforcing or interdependent notions.

In the contemporary political discourse, the realm was conceived as a legal community and a safeguard of rights and privileges of particular groups as well as the inhabitants of the realm. National, or regnal identities were important, if not fundamental parts of the interplay between unity and difference, but, as I will argue, the pragmatics of other kinds of loyalties and bonds as well contributed to the formation and expression of complex notions of identities, or entanglement, in the sources. The notions of entanglement, cultural memory and identity will be used as analytical tools to show the complexity of identity formation.

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2 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, pp. 52-53.

3 The article is part of an ongoing research project on memory, conceptions of the past and identity formation in late-medieval Scandinavia, financed by Anna Ahlström and Ellen Terserus Foundation. The article format does not allow for a more comprehensive review of the source material, which includes mainly historiographical texts.

Cultural Conceptions of Past and Present as Means to Power

The study of identity formation and the interplay of unity and difference within the union of Sweden, Norway and Denmark in the Middle Ages is also a study of cultural memory. The extant sources include narratives of political events, letters or treaties documenting the formal recognition of the outcome of negotiations and meetings, or references to traditions and commonly acknowledged ideals that have or have not been violated in the past. This article is not primarily about memory processes as such, but departs from the notion of memory, and more specifically collective memory, as a crucial part of what connects and keeps people together as communities, by means of linking past and present and future.[4] As an analytical approach, this temporal dimension is one aspect that distinguishes memory from other concepts used to study cultural phenomena.[5] As will be evident from the analysis, ideas of both unity and alterity are based on references to the past; to a continuous historical community, to time-honoured laws and traditions, and to agreements made by forefathers. According to Astrid Erll, the carriers of collective memory are "groups which are restricted both chronologically and spatially […] A central function of remembering the past within the framework of collective memory is identity formation. Things are remembered which correspond to the self--image and the interests of the group."[6] It is primarily this link to collective identities that is examined here.

Memory studies have been an expansive field of research in the last decades.[7] An important and well-known approach to memory has been the theoretical work developed by Aleida and Jan Assmann on cultural memory. In his book on cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis*), Jan Assmann explores the link between memory, identity and cultural continuity that he considers crucial for the formulation of connective structures that bind people together on a social and temporal level. Justice systems have a binding effect on the social level, while history and myths create cohesion through time.[8]

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4 J.V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, Cambridge 2002, p. 31; A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, Houndmills-Basingstoke-Hampshire 2011, pp. 109-11; J. Assmann, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, in: *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. A. Erll, A. Nünning, Berlin 2008, pp. 109, 113-14.

5 See for example the definitions by Astrid Erll in A. Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction*, in: *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, p. 2; A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 7.

6 A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 17.

7 L. Bond, S. Craps, P. Vermeulen, *Introduction*, in: *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, eds. L. Bond, S. Craps, P. Vermeulen, New York 2017, pp. 1-2.

8 J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 2-3.

The concretion of identity is one of the foremost characteristics of cultural memory, although this is not a singular, homogenous process.[9] Identity must be seen as a *plurale tantum*; a dynamical process that also demands concepts of alterity and multeity, as a precondition for unity.[10] Therefore, solidarity and antagonism are significant elements in the formation and reinforcement of collective identities.[11] Norman F. Cantor also stresses the interrelatedness of unity and identity. Unity presupposes identity, which is "a consciousness of cohesion, of corporate belonging together, and cultural homogeneity". Unity depends on identity but is also a broader concept "the applied form of identity through institutions, programs, and leadership practices".[12]

Jan Assmann describes collective identity as belonging to the "category known as the social and political *imaginaire*".[13] Both memory and collective identity is part of the political imagination, and thus connected to power. Power needs to be explained and linked to a meaningful origin in the past, but also to a future of remembrance and justification. The temporal dimension of power is thus manifested in memory, but also in forgetting; power holders are served by a selective celebration of past occurrences, and selection also involves forgetting.[14] Assmann also sees memory, cultural identity and political imagination as elements of ethnogenesis. When cultures and societies grow and expand, the original congruence (in face-to-face societies) between social (ethnic), political and cultural formations ceases to exist, which creates a need for a renewed cultural connective structure that can bind people together. According to Assmann, this leads to a search for means of both integration and distinction. When communities expand through conquests, migration or alliances, this changes the ways in which symbolic meanings are created and sustained. It can also change the ways in which histories, myths and other forms of symbolic meaning are communicated. Instead of the close and direct circulation of meaning through generations and kin that Assmann labels communicative memory, institutions and ceremonies for the preservation and maintenance of cultural memory developed. The expansion of societies, territorial or demographical, requires means of stabilization (of people, institutions and political organization) that promotes a sense of community. Such expansionist changes produce cultural reflectiveness,

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9 J. Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, "New German Critique" (1995), pp. 129-130.

10 A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, p. 109.

11 J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization…*, pp. 115-16.

12 N.F. Cantor, *Ideological and Cultural Foundations of European Identity in the Middle Ages*, in: *The Birth of Identities: Denmark and Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. McGuire, Copenhagen 1996, p. 11.

13 J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization…*, p. 115.

14 Ibidem, p. 54.

consciousness and codification of norms, precepts and values. It can also result in cultural stratification and distinction.[15] It thus seems as if Jan Assmann sees development of power and politics as highly conducive to processes of cultural formation.

For Assmann, cultural processes work at two levels: on one level, they promote integration, and thus a stronger internal identity and sense of community. But, as mentioned above, on another level, there are concurrent processes of alienation externally. Culture has a limitic dimension – it distinguishes itself from other cultures.[16] At the same time, the processes of integration and distinction are multidimensional and may result in different kinds of shared cultural identities, which not necessarily encompass everyone within a society. Social stratification and cultural complexity can result in the creation of self-images that only apply to a small group – the elite, that considers itself the representative of the whole population – or – as the exclusive carrier of cultural identity.

The question of identity and political imagination in terms of a particular social elite as the primary exponent of such notions is relevant in a discussion of the medieval context, where the extant source material represents the cultural and political activities of the elite. It is particularly relevant in a discussion of identity formation that is claimed to encompass broader social strata, and not only the aristocratic elites. The analysis of identities and the interplay of difference and unity in medieval Scandinavia will show the complexity of cultural and political stratification and distinction. In my opinion, it is important not to overlook the role of the legal system for the formation of collective identities that also included common people, since it linked people together both horizontally and vertically. Mia Korpiola argues that the legal authority of the common people in medieval Sweden, referred to as the "consent of the people", was too firmly entrenched in society to be seen as an empty formula used by the elite.[17]

In this context, the concept of nativism is also useful. A key element of nativism is a conscious distinction between what is perceived as indigenous and what is perceived as foreign. The distinction then becomes an important feature in defining threats to the own group, and in attempts to protect and safeguard those interests or essential elements felt to be threatened by outsiders. As a concept, nativism shares some features with nationalism, such as the emphasis on the particular status of those belonging to the community. However, nativism does not necessarily presuppose a nation or a national

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15 Ibidem, pp. 124-29.

16 J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization…*, pp. 132-134.

17 M. Korpiola, *"Not without the Consent and Goodwill of the Common People": The Community as a Legal Authority in Medieval Sweden*, "Journal of Legal History" XXXV (2014), p. 118.

community, but may just as well describe the beliefs and attitudes of smaller sociocultural communities or groups.[18] This flexibility makes the concept of nativism useful in studies of medieval societies, with their particular social structures.

In this article, I would also like to approach the formation of identities and interplay of unity and alterity within the Kalmar Union as entanglement, inspired by a study on Jewish culture in the 13th century. While the context of that study is different, and the interplay of hostility and cooperation very different from the one highlighted here, the authors emphasize how connections between groups and peoples are created and maintained through both hostile and friendly encounters: "[e]ntanglement implies complexity; the things being tangled (threads, vines, branches) can cross many times, becoming difficult or impossible to pull apart, but still remain distinct, as with two colors of thread or two types of plant".[19] In fact, there is a very literal illustration of such entanglement in one of the fifteenth-century sources from medieval Scandinavia. In *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle* (ca. 1460-1474), Queen Margaret describes her ambition to create a strong and lasting union of Denmark, Sweden and Norway:

Then snor som leggis aff strenge tree
hwn brøsther fuld neppeligæ
Th3 syer wijsman for wthen spee
om hwn leggis lemppeligæ
Ieg lade en snor m3 allæ sterck
tha ieg wand swerigis krwne
Och erffde norgæ tijl danmark
ath the skullæ staa i lwne
Inth3 wold elder wærdsens macth
kan the same rigæ beskade
Ee medhen the bliffue w3 samme pacth
som ieg them sammen lade.[20]

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18 I.P. Grohse, *Nation and Nativism in Medieval Scandinavia. A Workshop Introduction*, "Frühmittelalterliche Studien" LI (2017), pp. 397-405. See also the application of this concept in idem, *Nativism in Late Medieval Norway*, "Scandinavian Journal of History" XLII (2017), pp. 219-44.

19 E. Baumgarten, R.M. Karras, K. Mesler, *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, Philadelphia 2016, p. 4.

20 *Den danske rimkrønike* – the bond twined with three threads will scarcely break, the preacher says without scorn, if it is done appropriately. I twined a bond with all strength, when I won Sweden's crown, and inherited Norway to Denmark, that they should remain in peace. No violence or worldly power can harm the realms, as long as they keep the pact through which I united them. See *Den danske rimkrønike. 1, Ghementrykket 1495: med variantapparat*,

The metaphor from *Ecclesiastes* 4:12 adds authority to the image of the queen's political legacy. Queen Margaret appears as the mastermind of the union, who skillfully unites the realms that have legitimately come into her possession into a durable union. It is a vision of a strong and lasting union, that will protect the realms from violence and worldly powers. But the promised benefits will only come out if the realms keep together in accordance with the queen's intention.

Below, I will first briefly introduce some of the issues raised in scholarly research on the Kalmar union, before discussing some of the sources. The analysis will mainly focus on vernacular 15th-century rhyme chronicles from Sweden and Denmark, since there are few traces of literary endeavors in Norway from this period.[21]

The Kalmar Union

In scholarly research about the Kalmar Union, various themes have been brought up. The union has been described as the dynastical project of an astute and skillful regent, Queen Margaret; as a result of inter-Scandinavian aristocratic aligning or collaboration to counter pressure from the Hanseatic League and German influence; as a polity characterized by monarchical ambition clashing with aristocratic interests; as precursor of the later Nordic "national" states, or in the case of Norway, as a period of national decline. As argued by Harald Gustafsson, the Union of Kalmar can also be seen as a potentially viable state alternative that ultimately "failed".[22]

The Kalmar Union had been preceded by other forms of unions in Scandinavia, such as the personal union between Norway and Sweden from 1319, or between Sweden and Scania in 1332. In Norwegian historiography, the beginning of the personal union under Magnus Eriksson in 1319 has

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ed. H. Toldberg, København 1961, p. 151; L.B. Mortensen, *Danske Rimkrønike*, in: *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, 2016 [electronical source, accessed 7 April 2018].

21 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, p. 311; S. Bagge, K. Mykland, *Norge i dansketiden: 1380-1814*, Oslo 1987, pp. 60-61.

22 L-O. Larsson, *Kalmarunionens tid: från drottning Margareta till Kristian II*, Stockholm 2003, pp. 21-23, 454-459; E. Opsahl, *Norwegen 1319-1397: ein "willenloser Trabant" der Nachbarländer?*, in: *"Huru thet war talet j kalmarn": Union und Zusammenarbeit in der nordischen Geschichte. 600 Jahre Kalmarer Union (1397-1997)*, eds. D. Kattinger, D. Putensen, H. Wernicke, Hamburg 1997, pp. 83-96; A. Bøgh, *On the Causes of the Kalmar Union*, in: *"Huru thet war talet j kalmarn": Union und Zusammenarbeit in der nordischen Geschichte...*, pp. 9-13; H. Gustafsson, *A State That Failed?*, "Scandinavian Journal of History" XXXI (2006), pp. 206-207, 216-217. For a long time, research on the Kalmar Union was influenced by nationalistic or Scandinavist attitudes, see A. Bøgh, *On the Causes...*, p. 9; T. Lindkvist, *Schweden auf dem Weg in die Kalmarer Union*, in: *"Huru thet war talet j kalmarn": Union und Zusammenarbeit in der nordischen Geschichte...*, p. 45.

traditionally been attributed great significance as the beginning of a long era of union government and a weakened position of the state in relation to its neighbouring realms. Swedish historians instead tend to emphasize the election of Queen Margaret in 1389, or the Kalmar meeting in 1397 as the decisive moments.[23] As regards Denmark, the royal election in 1376 has been described as the starting point of the later Nordic union.[24] For Aksel E. Christensen, the recognition of a common king in two or more realms was an important (but not decisive) element in the concept of a Nordic union, in addition to an agreement of mutual support and cooperation sanctioned by representatives of each realm, and the maintenance of independence in terms of laws and institutions. Christensen argues that there were in fact few substantial obstacles for a Nordic union in regard to areas such as language, law and justice, religion or culture, where there were considerable overlaps and mutual understanding. The inter-Scandinavian dynamic was rather driven by political forces, to which Christensen counts more elusive elements such as national consciousness or sense of community, and more tangible realities such as monarchical ambition and a striving to uphold regnal integrity.[25]

In his study of the political development within the Kalmar union in the early 16th century, which eventually led to the final dissolution of the union and the establishment of two new states, Harald Gustafsson investigates the political culture, state formation process and the various arguments used to initiate and bolster up political action in the period. He departs from the notion that much previous research has taken the outcome of the process, the creation of the states of Sweden and Denmark-Norway, for granted, as a "natural" endeavor towards national unity. Instead, he argues that the union of the Scandinavian realms remained a viable option for much longer than previously acknowledged. The conglomerate state was a common early--modern phenomenon and the medieval Scandinavian union monarchy could have evolved into an early-modern state. So why did it not?

As Gustafsson concludes, the establishment of the *new* territorial states of Sweden and Denmark-Norway in the 16th century never replaced the old, medieval realms that continued to exist as fundamental political-cultural entities.[26] The realms and sub-regnal levels constituted the primary levels of identification and political-cultural imagination in the medieval era.[27] The

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23 *Norsk historie. 1: 750 - 1537*, ed. O.G. Moseng, Oslo 2007, pp. 170-71; E. Opsahl, *Norwegen 1319-1397: ein "willenloser Trabant" der Nachbarländer?*, p. 117.

24 A.E. Christensen, *Kalmarunionen og nordisk politik 1319-1439*, København 1980, pp. 100--103.

25 Ibidem, pp. 23-28. See also H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, pp. 333-334.

26 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, p. 335.

27 Ibidem, p. 331.

fundamental role of the notion of the realm and its corollary "in service of the realm", as a forceful and rallying concept that signified the continuity of the realm as an imagined community, is also emphasized by Martin Neuding Skoog, in his recent study of the development of the military institutions and political processes in late-medieval Sweden.[28] Skoog argues that more groups and levels of society were included among those in service to the realm and thus supposedly aware of, or somehow motivated by the idea of the realm, than previously acknowledged.

The prominence of the regnal level in the political culture of the union period in comparison with the idea of "the three realms" is one important factor in the dynamics of the late-medieval state formation process, according to Gustafsson. He also observes the lack of a contemporary common historiography or other types of narratives on the level of the union, which indicates an absence of cultural conceptions that could bind people together on the basis of the union. The kingdom, and the ancient common past of its people, was a self-evident point of departure for the history writers, even within the Danish-Norwegian kingdom after 1537, when history writing received new impetus.[29] The importance he attributes to questions of a common historical past, identity formation, norms and values, makes his study relevant for the present article.[30]

The question of to what extent there were feelings of national allegiance in medieval Scandinavia has been debated, frequently in terms of the applicability of concepts such as nationalism to premodern societies.[31] To some extent, the positions taken have been a consequence of the different meanings attributed to the analytical concepts. According to Thomas Lindkvist, there was no national consciousness as such in Sweden in the Middle Ages. During its development as a Christian kingdom, Sweden had retained a profoundly federal and regional character while the church, the aristocratic elites and the development of an increasingly centralized monarchy constituted a (fragile) regnal level. The development and articulation of a more distinct Swedish self-image, combined with a repudiation of foreign influence in the realm, occurred as an aristocratic response to increasing monarchical power, and

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28 M.N. Skoog, *I rikets tjänst: krig, stat och samhälle i Sverige 1450-1550*, Lund 2018, pp. 498--499, 509-510.

29 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, pp. 309-318, 331.

30 Ibidem, pp. 329-334.

31 S. Bagge, *Nationalism in Norway in the Middle Ages*, "Scandinavian Journal of History" XX (1991); E. Opsahl, *I hvilken grad oppstod norsk nasjonalfølelse og identitet i middelalderen?*, in: *Tankar om ursprung: forntiden och medeltiden i nordisk historieanvändning*, eds. S. Edquist, L. Hermanson, S. Johansson, Stockholm 2009; M.B. Larsen, *National identitet i dansk senmiddelalder?*, "Historie" II (1998); F. Hervik, *Nordisk politikk og europeiske ideer. En analyse av nordiske forfatningsdokumenter 1282-1449*, Bergen 2012, pp. 74-83.

can thus be linked to the formation of a regnal elite.[32] An early expression of such an aristocratic program, he argues, was the Charter of Liberties, issued in 1319 in connection with the election of King Magnus Eriksson. Nevertheless, Lindkvist and other historians also point out that a somewhat paradoxical outcome of the Kalmar Union was the strengthened awareness of a collective identity linked to the realm as a political community in the late Middle Ages, both in Sweden and Norway, and probably also for broader segments of the population.[33] Even for Finland, which was part of the Swedish realm at the time, the Kalmar union was a period of consolidation in terms of evidence of a sense of *patria* linked to the Finnish territory, and increased institutional and structural development.[34]

As mentioned above, the roles and respective interests of the union kings and the aristocratic elites in union politics have been the focus of much research into the union era. The secular and ecclesiastical elites were a mainstay of the political system, and occupied positions that linked them both to royal power, to their peers and to the people in the Scandinavian realms. The intermarriages of the Scandinavian aristocracy as well as their acquisition and possession of estates in more than one realm, particularly in border areas between Denmark and Sweden, became an important factor in the political development of the period.[35] Gottfrid Carlsson argued for the significance of a sense of aristocratic Scandinavism for the establishment of the Kalmar Union. This interpretation has been disputed by historians who argue that the existence of a sense of aristocratic community should be seen more as a consequence of the unions and became more evident in the 15th century.[36] In his study of the dissolution phase of the Kalmar Union,

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32 T. Lindkvist, *Schweden auf dem Weg...*, pp. 45-46. In regard to the question of a medieval Danish identity, Ole Feldbæk somewhat reluctantly concedes the existence of a Danish national identity among the elite, but stresses the limited scope of such feelings. See O. Feldbæk, *Is there Such a Thing as a Medieval Danish Identity?*, in: *The Birth of Identities: Denmark and Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. McGuire, Copenhagen 1996, p. 133. See also M.B. Larsen, *National identitet…*, pp. 330-331.

33 T. Lindkvist, *Schweden auf dem Weg…*, p. 48; *Norsk historie. 1: 750–1537…*, p. 272.

34 A.-P. Palola, *Finnlands Stellung in der Kalmarer Union*, in: *"Huru thet war talet j kalmarn": Union und Zusammenarbeit in der nordischen Geschichte…*, pp. 346-47; J.A. Eriksson, *Finland*, in: *Den nordiske adel i senmiddelalderen: struktur, funktioner og internordiske relationer*, eds. O.J. Benedictow, T. Dahlerup, K.-G. Lundholm, København 1971, pp. 130-131.

35 J.E. Olesen, *Inter-Scandinavian Relations*, in: *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia. Vol. 1, Prehistory to 1520*, ed. K. Helle, Cambridge 2003, p. 710; P. Enemark, *Fra Kalmarbrev til Stockholms blodbad: den nordiske trestatsunions epoke 1397-1521*, København 1979, p. 12; S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang*, Oslo 2002, pp. 40-41.

36 G. Carlsson, *Medeltidens nordiska unionstanke*, Stockholm 1945, pp. 38, 56-57; A.E. Christensen, *Kalmarunionen og nordisk politik…*, pp. 36-39; K.-G. Lundholm, *Sverige*, in: *Den nordiske adel i senmiddelalderen…*, pp. 99-104.

Harald Gustafsson stresses the evidence for a strong sense of regnal belonging among the aristocrats; to be a Swede was the same as being a subject to the Swedish king and law, and the aristocratic elites ultimately chose to act for their "team" rather than for a Scandinavian elite.[37]

For Steinar Imsen, writing about the unions from the perspective of a Norwegian decline in the late-medieval period, the kings were the driving force in regard to the attempts to establish a Nordic union between 1319 and 1537, when Norway was incorporated in the Danish kingdom.[38] He relates the history of the Kalmar Union as a development from the initial attempts to create a monarchical federation (rather than a confederation) under the rule of Queen Margaret and her foster son King Erik, to a union characterized by strong aristocratic-constitutional factions which opposed unrestrained monarchical rule in accordance with a constitutional program that was forced through in Kalmar in 1436. Imsen refers to the well-known idea of the Kalmar Union as a construct of the opposing principles of *regimen regale* and *regimen politicum*, introduced through Erik Lönnroth's radical reinterpretation of the historical context of the union in 1934. This means that even if dynastical and monarchical ambitions were decisive for the instigation of the Kalmar Union, the union era also included periods of more prominent aristocratic initiatives that involved a much more significant role for the councils of the realms. In the absence of a king, the council of the realms represented the level of sovereign power.[39]

Power relationships in the Middle Ages were largely personal. From a present-day perspective, the elite groups in medieval Scandinavia were small. The social and political interaction between the members of the secular and ecclesiastical aristocracies and their latitude were guided by their personal interests, family assets and political allegiances, but also, I will argue, to some extent curtailed by conditions related to prevailing cultural conceptions of ideal or proper forms of government. The relationship between pragmatic considerations of material, dynastical and personal power and gain, and the exploitation and expression of cultural conceptions of history, norms and values, constituted one important dimension of the game of power in medieval Scandinavia.[40]

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37 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, pp. 317, 330. There is also evidence that the aristocratic families increasingly divided inheritance and estates according to existing regnal borders at the end of the Middle Ages, and that fewer families owned estates on both sides of the Swedish-Danish border. See K-G. Lundholm, *Sverige*, pp. 102-103.

38 S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang*, p. 34.

39 Ibidem, pp. 38-39.

40 H. Gustafsson, *Gamla riken, nya stater...*, p. 334.

UNION AND UNITY?

As Harald Gustafsson has concluded, the union is a somewhat elusive phenomenon in the sources. It lacked a specific designation other than "the three realms".[41] Instead, the separate realms and their rulers provided the framework for history writing in medieval Scandinavia. This was so even before the period discussed here. As a legacy of the golden age of Danish historiography, the *Compendium Saxonis* (ca. 1342-1346), an abbreviated version of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1200), was composed at a time when the Danish kingdom was in a process of re-union. It provided much of the matter for the 15th-century vernacular rhyme chronicle discussed here, *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle*.[42] Through such historiographical links, the distant past of the realm was connected to the political realities of 15th-century Denmark. *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle* was composed around 1460-1474, probably in a monastery in Sorø on Sealand and printed in 1495.[43] It was the first known text in Danish to be printed, which can be taken as a sign of its presumed relevance to a contemporary audience. *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle* shares a somewhat unusual narrative structure with the Old Swedish *The Little Rhyme Chronicle* (ca. 1450s).[44] In both chronicles, history is told in monologues held by the successive rulers of Denmark and Sweden. The dynastical *Karl's Chronicle* (ca. 1452)[45], written and composed on behalf of King Karl Knutsson (Bonde), is the longest of the vernacular rhyme chronicles written in medieval Sweden. It was traditionally seen as one part in a series of rhyme chronicles (together with *Erik's Chronicle* (ca. 1320s), *The Connecting Poem* (ca. 1450s, written to connect the narratives of *Erik's Chronicle* and *Karl's Chronicle*) and *The Sture Chronicle* (1497)[46] that covers the period from mid-13th century to the end of the 15th century. The mid-15th century was a productive time for

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41 Ibidem, p. 52.

42 *Den danske rimkrønike...*; M.B. Larsen, *National identitet...*, pp. 325-27. See also A.L. Knudsen, *The Use of Saxo Grammaticus in the Later Middle Ages*, in: *The Birth of Identities: Denmark and Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. McGuire, Copenhagen 1996, pp. 151-56.

43 According to Pernille Hermann, most scholars believe it was written between ca. 1470--1477, see P. Hermann, *Politiske og æstetiske aspekter i Rimkrøniken*, "Historisk Tidskrift [Denmark]" CVII (2007), pp. 393-395.

44 *Lilla rimkrönikan*. It was written by an anonymous writer, probably on behalf of Karl Knutsson (Bonde).

45 *Karlskrönikan.* A thorough analysis of the composition of the chronicle showed how the chronicler incorporated and adapted earlier verse composition into a chronicle that served to gain support for King Karl Knutsson. Johan Fredebern, secretary to the council of the realm, has been identified as the author of original parts that were incorporated in the chronicle. See H. Schück, *Engelbrektskrönikan: tillkomsten och författaren*, Stockholm 1994, pp. 148-149, 173-184.

46 *Erikskrönikan, Förbindelsedikten* and *Sturekrönikan.*

vernacular history writing in Sweden. Part of the impetus was undoubtedly linked to the needs of the king, Karl Knutsson (Bonde) to mobilize support for his rather fragile power position. The main part of *The Sture Chronicle* eulogizes Sten Sture the Elder, the ruler of Sweden in the decades after 1470. The realms consequently constitute a basis for a discussion of the union as unity and difference.

In *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle*, the monologue of Queen Margaret describes her acquisition of the three kingdoms as the legitimate outcome of lineage, inheritance and conquest, as the quotation above illustrated. She creates the conditions for a threefold power that should be duly maintained by good men, knights and squires in all three realms. The unity of three different realms also creates a common border that sets the realms apart from other polities, or "worldly powers".[47] Such a projection of unity was part of King Hans' royal duty. He was enjoined by the representatives of his realms to secure the capacity of the universities of Uppsala and Copenhagen eternally, "thenne try rige till hether oc werdighet" (to the honour and dignity of the three realms) as a precondition for his accession to the throne in 1483.[48] This is an image projected to an imagined external world (distinction), that also conveys qualities that unite the realms (integration). The expansion of monarchical power that the dynastical union entailed can be interpreted in terms of Jan Assmann's theory of the processes of political expansion that initiates an interplay of integration and distinction.

A powerful image of the three realms united against an enemy, worthy of a modern film, also appears in *The Connecting Poem*. The battle between Queen Margaret and King Albrekt at Åsle in 1389 is described as a confrontation between arrogant, self-assured Germans in their shining suits of armour, who completely lose heart when their enemies appear under the banner of the three realms, with the Swedes at the front.[49] The Germans and King Albrekt are the target of hostility, that unites the Swedes, Danes and Norwegians under Margaret. This may be a sign of a relative hierarchy of antagonism: hostility between the union realms is secondary to the hostility against German influence. But the narrative of Queen Margaret's assumption of power in Sweden continues in *Karl's Chronicle*, where the chronicler describes it as a kind of madness: "mik tykte the svenska ey wara kloke" (the Swedes

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47 *Den danske rimkrønike...*, p. 151.

48 *Kong Hans' norske og danske håndfesting, 1. Februar 1483*, in: *Norske middelalder dokumenter* (henceforth: NMD), eds. S. Bagge, S.H. Smedsdal, K. Helle, Bergen 1974, p. 474.

49 *Förbindelsedikten (Fortsättning af Gamla Krönikan för att sammanbinda henne med den Nya till ett helt verk: skrifven vid år 1452)*, in: *Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor. D. 1, Gamla eller Eriks-krönikan: folkungarnes brödrastrider: med en kort öfversigt af närmast föregående tid, 1229-1319* (henceforth: SMR 1), ed. G.E. Klemming, Stockholm 1865, p. 191.

appeared imprudent to me).[50] The lack of prudence is apparent in that the Swedes allow a *foreigner* to exercise power in realm, something that their law prohibits. Foreign rule is detrimental to the realm; and to the chronicler, the queen is a foreigner. Alterity has a strong impact within the political imagination.

The lodestar for the government of the realm, "rikens besta oc bestanda" (the best and the duration of the realm) is also repeated as a formula for the government on the union level.[51] Pledges are made for the welfare and duration of the three realms and the monarch. What is desired is an eternal peace and loving commitment between the king on the one side, and the three realms on the other, and all inhabitants (*inbyggare*) and subjects (*wndersate*).[52] The union does not presuppose a unitary relationship of power or identification. Inhabitant and subject are two modes of identification, that may diverge or become oppositional. This is apparent for example in *Karl's Chronicle*, where the need to choose between king and realm, and implicitly to give priority to the identification as subject or inhabitant is demanded from the men of King Erik during the Engelbrekt uprising.[53] The elements that made up political identities also created entanglement: relationships of allegiance or subordination that were intertwined but remained (conceptually) distinct.

The interplay between unity and separation is visible in the account of a meeting of secular and ecclesiastical aristocracies, burghers and common men at Tälje after the dethronement of King Erik in 1439. The Swedish archbishop argues that they should elect Duke Christopher, whom the Danes have chosen, since that would secure the union of the realms. Those present at the meeting refuses, since the rule of foreign kings had always brought misfortune upon the Swedes.[54] Later on, the king's envoys urge the Swedes to elect Christopher, who is praised as the fairest lord in the world. But the chronicle also relates that the delegates confirmed through promise and letter, that peace would persist between the realms irrespective of whom the Swedes elected as their king.[55] The marshal, Karl Knutsson (Bonde), agrees to Christopher's election, against a substantial reward, then becomes king in Sweden after Christopher's death in 1448. After his accession to the Swedish throne, King Karl is willing to uphold the connection between the realms. The

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50 *Karlskrönikan*, in: *Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor. D. 2, Nya eller Karls-krönikan: början av unionsstriderna samt Karl Knutssons regering, 1389-1452* (henceforth: SMR 2), ed. G.E. Klemming, Stockholm, 1866, p. 3.

51 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 255-56.

52 *Sverges traktater med främmande magter: jemte andra dit hörande handlingar. D. 3, 3, 4, 1409-1520* (henceforth: ST), ed. O.S. Rydberg, Stockholm 1895, no. 516, p. 319.

53 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 41, 186.

54 Ibidem, p. 219.

55 Ibidem, pp. 227-228.

Danish and Swedish councils agree to meet and pledge themselves to the old union that should be maintained irrespective of the conflict about Gotland and the election is not an obstacle to the union as such.[56]

The realms and their rulers are the narrative, emotive hubs in the chronicles and each chronicle focuses on one realm, even if certain experiences and conditions become entangled across regnal communities. The shorter chronicles in Old Swedish, such as *The Little Rhyme Chronicle* pay no attention to the establishment of a Scandinavian union as a commitment on the part of the realms, which is apparent in the short monologue of Queen Margaret for example.[57] In *Karl's Chronicle*, the chronicler explicitly states that his attention will be focused on Sweden in his account of King Erik's government, even if, as he acknowledges, the realms have similar reasons to complain.[58] The chronicler intends to describe Sweden's suffering, and to keep silent about the suffering of Denmark and Norway even if he acknowledges that they share much the same experience. The three realms have the same king and his rule causes despair and suffering on all levels of society.[59] The suffering of the Swedish peasants under the king's bailiffs is emphasized. In contrast, *Karl's Chronicle* emphasizes the patience and mildness of Karl Knutsson (Bonde), who seeks to avoid conflicts that spill the blood of Christians and devastate the peasantry.[60] But it is King Erik's treatment of the aristocracy that occasionally places Swedish and Danish aristocrats in the same position vis-à-vis the union monarch. King Erik willfully creates estrangement between himself and the aristocracies of his realms, and he also attacks Danish aristocrats and robs them of their castles, according to the chronicle's account of the efforts to conclude the treaty of Kalmar.[61] Swedish and Danish aristocrats also find themselves humiliated and ignored at the wedding of King Christopher and Queen Dorothea in Copenhagen in 1445, when King Christopher instead favours his Bavarian men, bestows precious gifts and land upon them, and makes even the poorest into a rich man.[62] The presence of lords and princes from the German areas puts emphasis on

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56 Ibidem, p. 260.

57 *Lilla rimkrönikan*, in: *Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor. D. 1, Gamla eller Eriks-krönikan: folkungarnes brödrastrider: med en kort öfversigt af närmast föregående tid, 1229-1319* (henceforth: SMR 1), ed. G.E. Klemming, Stockholm 1865, p. 230. See also *The Prose Chronicle* (*Prosaiskakrönikan*), in: *Småstycken på forn svenska*, ed. G.E. Klemming, Stockholm 1868, pp. 238-239.

58 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, p. 9.

59 As established by Herman Schück, the initial part of *Karl's Chronicle* is in fact an originally separate composition, a plaintiff's poem that systematically accounts for the king's violation of his royal oath. See H. Schück, *Engelbrektskrönikan…*, pp. 48-49.

60 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, p. 292.

61 Ibidem, p. 158.

62 Ibidem, pp. 245-246.

the Swedish and Danish men as a group alienated from their king and his preferred associates; they are wronged by their king.

COMMUNITY AND TIME

The political imagination comprised not only references to a distant past, but also pledges made for eternity. Formulas and phrases in treaties and historical narratives refer to old freedoms and privileges, to the traditions and agreements of forefathers and parents, but also to coming generations, born and unborn, current and future inhabitants of the realm, and to dynastical continuity.[63] Temporal continuity is an essential element in the collective self-image of communities, as mentioned in the introduction. The assumption of the political continuance of the community is a basis for political action towards other groups, whose continued existence is also presupposed.

The references to the past are sometimes specific. Documents from the negotiations in Kalmar in 1436 refer to the memory of the late Queen Margaret and her sagacity, which brought about the union of the realms.[64] The truce negotiated in the aftermath of the Battle of Brunkeberg between the respective supporters of Sten Sture the Elder and the union king, Christian I in 1471, expresses the Swedes' wish to restore matters between the realms and the monarch as they were in the time of King Christopher.[65] The fortunate years of the union during Christopher's reign are also a theme in *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle*. In the king's monologue, he describes how he was summoned from Bavaria by Danish men, to take on the government of the three realms and was successful in upholding peace and unity: "I medhen ieg leffde the stode i fred" (while I lived there was peace between them).[66] For some political factions, the reign of Christopher thus seems to have represented an ideal of the past, that could be cited as a model for the government of the union.[67]

This is not the attitude of *Karl's Chronicle*. Christopher's reign is not what God intended for Sweden. *Karl's Chronicle* recounts several signs and visions that confirm God's plans for Karl Knutsson and Christopher. One of the

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63 ST, *473a*, pp. 147-152; *475*, pp. 160-165; *495a*, pp. 257-258; *Svenska rådet…*, pp. 165-167; NMD, *114*, p. 430; *116*, pp. 436-441; *122*, pp. 456-457; *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, p. 280.

64 ST, p. 171.

65 ST, *514*, p. 303. This is not mentioned in the contemporary *The Sture Chronicle*, where the outcome of the battle is construed as a miraculous escape from Danish oppression. See *Sturekrönikan*, in: *Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor. D. 3, Nya krönikans fortsättningar eller Sturekrönikorna: fortgången af unionsstriderna under Karl Knutsson och Sturarne, 1452-1520* (henceforth: SMR 3), ed. G.E. Klemming, Stockholm 1866, pp. 82-83.

66 *Den danske rimkrønike…*, p. 153.

67 L.-O. Larsson, *Kalmarunionens tid…*, p. 258; J.E. Olesen, *Rigsråd, Kongemagt, Union: studier over det danske rigsråd og den nordiske kongemagts politik, 1434-1449*, Aarhus 1980, p. 376.

visions is that of an old, godly maid who says that God revealed Karl's future as Swedish king to her. She predicts that war, starvation and pestilence will cause destruction in the realm as long as Karl is prevented from fulfilling his destiny.[68] The destiny of kingship and government is thus also a matter of obeying the will of God. In *The Skiby Chronicle* (ca. 1534), Povl Helgesen claimed that the Swedish realm had been suffering from calamities from the day they chose to elect their own candidate as king, instead of Christian I. They had had to live with the consequences of not abiding with the union pact until the present day.[69]

According to *Karl's Chronicle*, when King Karl Knutsson attempts to become king of Norway, the Norwegian peasantry receives him with open arms. They have summoned him, because they seek protection from the bailiffs' violence. The king brings good fortune and ample harvests; and his wondrous luck in journeying across the country clearly marks him out as a king graced by God.[70] Nature itself confirmed the appropriateness of a Swedish-Norwegian union monarchy. The political imagination also encompasses a future that is in God's hands and sometimes is revealed by signs and visions.

As argued by Jan Assmann, political power is served both by remembrance and forgetting. The political efforts to restore peace and unity between the realms sometimes resulted in explicit vows to forget about past events. This is what Christian I promised in his communication with the Swedes, both as new king in 1457 and in his attempts to regain the throne in 1465.[71] A collective forgetting and an agreement to act as if the acts of war and hostility never had happened was seen as part of the process of restoring the bonds between the realms and royal power.

Alterity and Union

The fear of foreigners and their potential political and economic power was a principal concern in the political discourse in all Scandinavian realms in the later Middle Ages. It was voiced over and over again in treaties, historical narratives, songs, pamphlets and letters as demands for an exclusion of foreigners from political positions and a monopoly of castles and council offices for native-born inhabitants of the realms. The reality was pragmatic; the interplay of cooperation, family connections on the one side, and competition and political factions on the other was a fundamental part of the political

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68 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 230-231, 249-250.

69 P. Helgesen, *Den skibyske Krønike*, in: *Historiske kildeskrifter og bearbejdelser af dansk historie især fra det 16. aarhundrede. R. 1. Bd. 1*, ed. H. Rørdam, København 1871, p. 15.

70 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 272-278.

71 ST, *496*, pp. 263; *509*, p. 285, *X*, p. 665.

game. The control of castles and fiefs was central for the control of the realm and for the power of the aristocracies of the realm and brought questions of birth, national belonging and loyalties to a head. The castles of the realm were only to be given to indigenous men; this was the demand of the regnal elites and the law as stated in treaties.[72] The power of foreign men, lords and rulers was seen as a very palpable threat against this principle. *The Danish Rhyme Chronicle* relates the struggles of Valdemar IV Atterdag against the German power in Denmark, and states that the intention of Count Gerhard of Holstein is to completely destroy the Danish aristocracy.[73] But the foreign threat could also target other groups. *Karl's Chronicle* describes in visual detail how foreign (Danish and German) bailiffs torment and exploit the peasants in Sweden as a justification of the later uprising against King Erik.[74]

The alterity of foreigners in positions of power could be reinforced by gender aspects. A foreign woman holding a castle, such as Ida Henningsdotter Königsmark, who held Kastelholm on Åland in 1434 after her husband's death, challenged both male, indigenous and aristocratic prerogatives of power, as the remarks about her in *Karl's Chronicle* show.[75] In nativist terms, shifts of power that benefited external groups, could constitute a threat towards the own community. The control of crown castles by foreign men (or women) threatened the power of native-born men according to a kind of zero-sum-logic. In 1483, King Hans had to promise the representatives of his realms not only to exclude foreign men from the governing institutions, but also that he would place no man of dishonourable birth (*wanbyrding*) in positions of influence.[76] Native birth was thus not enough, but some level of social distinction was also required.

Who counted as foreigner then? In connection with the negotiations with the union king in Kalmar in 1436 regarding the restoration of the union monarchy in Sweden, the precise meaning of key terms such as native (*inländsk*) and foreign (*utländsk*) became the subject of discussion. The Swedish council proposed a somewhat circular definition that identified every man in Sweden as a foreigner who was not Swedish. Norwegians and

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72 See for example ST, *469c*, p. 134; NMD, *118*, pp. 446-447, *119*, p. 449.

73 *Den danske rimkrønike...*, p. 145.

74 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 25-26, 35-36.

75 Ibidem, p. 34. Ida Henningsdotter had German ancestors, and was the widow of a member of the Danish council of the realm. "Königsmarck, Släkter – Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon" <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/Sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=11939> [accessed 15 April 2018]. The gender of Queen Margaret is also stressed as an anomaly, for example in *The Little Rhyme Chronicle*, where she states that she, a Danish woman, used her prudence to succeed where Danes had previously failed – in conquering Sweden. See *Lilla rimkrönikan*, in: SMR 1, p. 230.

76 NMD, *130*, p. 469.

Danes were not Swedes, and thus they were counted as foreigners in Sweden. Moreover, native should be seen as synonymous with native-born (*infödd*). To be a resident in the realm, or inhabitant, was thus not enough to count as Swede and to be eligible for appointment to council, castle or fief in Sweden.[77] The union king opposed the stricter interpretation of *inländsk* based on birth and its political and constitutional implications. In 1435, he had assured the Swedes of his intention to follow the Swedish law in regard to the rights of native men.[78] The king, however, held the view that foreigners who had settled in Sweden could count as naturalized Swedes.

The idea of alterity was a structuring element in political contexts, and linked to ideas of power and political representation. It could also be expressed as stereotypical and vilifying characterizations of enemies, that drew on their allegedly inherent vices. In the Swedish 15th-century rhyme chronicles, there is a tendency towards a more marked antipathy towards the Danes as a collective in the later instalments of the chronicles.[79] The beginning of *Karl's Chronicle* describes mainly *royal* transgressions, perpetrated by bayliffs and other men serving the Danish union king.[80] Later on in the narrative, agency is increasingly transferred to Danes as a collective. The conflict over the status of Gotland in 1449 is used by the chronicler to portray the Danes as ungodly murderers, who attack defenseless babies and mothers.[81] The foul deeds are linked to the group as such. The *inherent* faithlessness of the Danes as a group is a prominent topic of *The Sture Chronicle*, which illustrates the importance of visualizing alterity in a process of unification against an enemy.[82]

In the Swedish rhyme chronicles, the relationship between Norway and Sweden is rarely described in antagonistic terms, but rather as a particularly close relationship of solidarity.[83] There are some exceptions, for example the account of a siege of Älvsborg in *Karl's Chronicle*, and the clash between Swedish and Norwegian forces in *The Sture Chronicle.* The latter passage in particular clearly depicts the event as a conflict between different communities, Norwegians and Swedes, rather than as a war about power and kingship within the Kalmar union. The narrative itself represents the military encounter

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77 ST, *Svenska rådet…*, p. 165; M. Nordquist, *Swedes and Others – Identity Formation in Medieval Sweden*, "Frühmittelalterliche Studien" LI (2017), pp. 438-441.

78 ST, *473a*, p. 148.

79 M. Nordquist, *A Struggle for the Realm: Late-Medieval Swedish Rhyme Chronicles as Ideological Expressions*, Stockholm 2015, pp. 37-41.

80 As mentioned above, this part of the chronicle is based on a separate "plaintiff's poem".

81 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 268-271.

82 M. Nordquist, *A Struggle for the Realm…*, pp. 228-229, 244-245.

83 In *The Sture Chronicle*, the strong and lasting bond between Norway and Sweden finally breaks, when the deceitful Danes manages to have Hans elected king in both Norway and Denmark. *Sturekrönikan*, in: SMR 3, pp. 87-88.

as motivated by patriotic motives on both sides. The commander, Kolbjørn Gerst, calls on his Norwegian men to force the Swedes off Norwegian land, which indicates that there is a clear demarcation line between the realms and a link between territory, community and an emotional involvement. There is also an explicitly patriotic element in the chronicle's account of how the Swedes are willing to die for the benefit of Sweden.[84] Patriotism is a political virtue which is attributed to soldiers as well as kings: both King Karl and King Christian suffer and risk their lives for the realm according to chronicles.[85] Imsen argues that patriotic sentiments can be traced among rich peasants and low aristocracy in Norway in the mid-15th century, in addition to a skepticism towards foreign men, even if they were "naturalized".[86]

Warfare brings both unity and alterity to the fore in the chronicles. *Karl's Chronicle* ends with an account of the war between Karl and Christian in 1452. The description of Karl's levied troops conveys a picture of military might and splendour, where representatives of all social categories of the realm, aristocracy, townsmen, men from the mining districts and peasants unite under the banners of St George, St Erik, St Olaf, the Virgin Mary and the three crowns, the heraldic symbol of Sweden. King Karl argues that Christian's men "derfua vort land i grundh" (devastate our land), therefore they should march into enemy land and once they have crossed the border, ravage the countryside.[87] The border line is thus very clearly a mark of alterity.

Friendship and Family Bonds: Double-edged Relationships

Relationships of family and friendship appear as distinct threads in the entanglement of political identity as expressed in the political sources from the union era. Kinship sustained networks that involved legal, economic, political and institutional ties on both collective and individual level, in addition to an emotional involvement.[88] Kinship constituted a fundamental form of collective belonging and sense of fellowship that also was a structural

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84 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 212-213; *Sturekrönikan*, in: SMR 3, pp. 1-4. The chronicle's reference to the Norwegian commander, Kolbjørn Gerst, who was a member of the Norwegian Council and supported Christian I, may have been perceived by the audience as a reference to the broader political context. In his survey of aristocratic immigration to Norway in the later Middle Ages, Erik Opsahl mentions Kolbjørn Gerst as one of the powerful men who probably had German ancestors. See E. Opsahl, *'-som ieg tusindfold indfødder war': norsk innvandringshistorie ca. 900-1537*, Tromsø 2007, p. 151. It shows the entanglement of collective identities and political mobilization.

85 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, p. 181; *Den danske rimkrønike…*, p. 159.

86 S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang*, p. 46.

87 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 293-296.

88 L.-O. Larsson, *Kalmarunionens tid…*, pp. 229-230.

element in the politics of the Middle Ages. Erik Opsahl argues that notions of friendship and brotherhood, with their strong Christian implications, were essential elements in the formation of a sense of community of Norwegians in the Middle Ages. This is apparent for example in the letter to the inhabitants in the Agder region, written by the Norwegian magnate Erik Sæmundson, as part of his mobilization of support for Karl Knutsson as king of Norway in 1449. In the letter, Sæmundsson encouraged the peasantry to act in favour for Karl Knutsson by addressing them as friends, countrymen and Norwegians. His interaction with the local population thus involved an activation of the vertical and horizontal bonds that existed between the elite and the common people, and represented mutual and meaningful relationships. For Opsahl, this indicates the existence of a Norwegian national identity, that also must have resonated among broader segments of the population.[89] In Norway, there were strong economic and family bonds between the aristocratic families and Danish, Swedish and German aristocrats. Almost the entire Norwegian elite had kinship bonds to "foreign" aristocrats.[90] In Norway, the exclusive rights of the inborn men were interpreted more liberally than in Sweden, since men married to Norwegian women were included.[91]

Brotherhood occurs in the sources as an image of unity and solidarity. The union treaty between Norway and Denmark from August 1450 stipulates that the realms hereafter remain together "i bröderligh kerlighet" (in brotherly love).[92] Political relationships are also framed in figurative terms of father and son, which implies a close relationship of natural subordination and respect. In the narrative sources, it is nevertheless striking how words describing close family relations can also be used in a figurative sense to underline the threatening character of actions that violate such relationships. In *Karl's Chronicle*, the father-son relationship is used in a figurative sense to emphasize the seemingly subordinate position of Karl Knutsson as "son" in relation to political actors, senior to him either in age or status, such as the seneschal (*drots*) Krister Nilsson (Vasa) and King Christopher.[93] In both cases, the "father" turns out to be more of a threat against the welfare of the "son" and the community and realm that he represents.

The breaking of family bonds involves a destruction of the basis of social cohesion. *The Connecting Poem* recounts how the uprising against King Albrekt

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89 E. Opsahl, *Nasjonal identitet i middelalderen?*, in: *Bohuslän som gränslandskap: före och efter Roskildefreden*, ed. H. Carlsson, Uddevalla 2013, p. 18.

90 S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang*, p. 41; E. Opsahl, *-som ieg tusindfold indfødder war...*; idem, *I hvilken grad oppstod norsk nasjonalfølelse og identitet i middelalderen?'*.

91 S. Imsen, *Noregs nedgang*, p. 45.

92 NMD, *121*, p. 455.

93 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 160-162, 234.

in the late 14th century leads to warfare and destruction in the Swedish realm. The chronicler uses metaphors of both fratricide and patricide to convey an image of a complete dissolution of the community and an erosion of the most fundamental bonds of affinity when brother kills brother and son kills father. In addition, the chronicler accuses the king of giving away Swedish maids and widows to his German men without consulting their kinsfolk, and thus violating the norms of kinship.[94] The relationships of family are used figuratively to illustrate fundamental threats against community, and to provoke emotional responses from the readers or listeners of the narrative. The dimension of foreign – native in the chronicle's narrative also involves a mobilization of collective solidarity and a sense of community under threat.

How did the chroniclers navigate in their representation of a political reality that did not uphold a clear cut division between foreigners and native men? In the rhyme chronicles, the entanglement between political, social and economic relationships in the political interaction is reflected in a somewhat uneasy narrative stance that vacillates between pragmatic and principal viewpoints. This becomes evident for example in the attitude towards kinship, political actions and allegiance.

Brotherhood in particular seemed to be recognized as a double-edged political asset. *Karl's Chronicle* also relates the conflict between Karl Knutsson, then marshal, and the brothers Bengt, Bo and Nils Stensson (Natt och Dag) that culminated in 1439. On behalf of King Erik, Nils Stensson had ravaged the region of Östergötland displaying "danabroca", the Danish flag, which the chronicler mentions several times.[95] After a reconciliation with Karl and the formal recognition of their friendship with him, the three brothers promise to remain faithful to the realm and to the marshal (Karl Knutsson). According to the chronicle, Nils and Bo Stensson then wanted to become their own lords, and turn against the marshal again. When Nils later dies, the chronicler concludes that it was God's will in order to protect the realm from further harm.[96] Here brotherhood constitute a kind of inverted force directed against the realm and its ruler, instead of an example of cohesion and loyalty.

On several occasions, *Karl's Chronicle* relates how Karl Knutsson navigates politically through establishing or relying on family connections, that were inter-Scandinavian. When the sister of Karl Knutsson marries Claus Nilsson Sparre av Ellinge, the groom is described as a man born in Scania, of good family, whose fortune, wisdom and manliness is praised by everyone.[97] Claus

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94 *Förbindelsedikten*, in: SMR 1, pp. 188-190.
95 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, pp. 205-207.
96 Ibidem, pp. 219-223.
97 Ibidem, p. 175. Karl Knutsson's daughter married Erik Eriksen (Gyldenstjerne), described as a pious knight from Jutland in *Karl's Chronicle*, see ibidem, p. 249.

Nilsson later became member of the Danish Council, and was a cousin of the Axelsson brothers, the sons of the Danish magnate Axel Pedersen (Tott).[98] The Axelsson brothers became a powerful force in later union politics, both as individuals and as brothers, and attained positions of influence in both Sweden, Denmark and across the Baltic sea.[99]

In 1450, *Karl's Chronicle* recounts how the king gives Åbo castle to Erik Axelsson (Tott), one of the Axelsson brothers who was married to a relative of Karl Knutsson, and who made his career mainly within the Swedish realm. The chronicler states that Erik Axelsson is "aff thz ypasta slecthe war han/ som j danmarch wara kan" (of the finest family that there is in Denmark), but adds somewhat cryptically that if the king wants to keep Åbo, he should not depend on Danish help in any way.[100] On the same occasion Karl Knutsson confers Örebro castle on Erengisle Nilsson (Hammerstaätten), whom he considers most suited for the position. Again, the chronicler adds a comment: Erengisle's wife is the daughter of Olof Axelsson, but the king does not think that she will take after (*slekta*) her father.[101] The comment is a foreshadowing of future events: as the narrative shows, King Karl is proven wrong.

Olof Axelsson also belonged to the Axelsson brothers, but was member of the Danish council and in the service of the Danish king. He appears frequently in *Karl's Chronicle.* Shortly after the mention above, the chronicle relates how his men are reported to burn and ravage Swedish territory.[102] In connection with the Danish attack on Stockholm in 1452, led by Olof Axelsson, his daughter Birgitta, who was married to the commander of Örebro castle, provided the Danes with information about the whereabouts and the forces of King Karl. She was condemned to death for treason but was eventually pardoned. All of this is related in *Karl's Chronicle* and in *The Sture Chronicle*.[103] The chronicler's comment thus was an allusion to what many of the chronicle's audience knew about; that Olof Axelsson's daughter would remain loyal to her father's cause and betray her husband's lord and the Swedish realm. Family bonds could turn out to be subversive; to threaten rather than strengthen the realm and its ruler when there was a conflict of interests.

In *The Sture Chronicle*, matters are brought to a head in regard to the Axelsson (Tott) brothers. The chronicle describes how their control of strategically important crown castles around the Baltic threatens to evolve

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98 H. Gillingstam, *'Sparre av Ellinge, släkt – Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon'* <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=6234> [accessed 11 April 2018].

99 H. Rebas, *Axelssönerna och det gamla Livland*, "Gotländskt arkiv" LXIII (1991), pp. 178--181.

100 *Karlskrönikan*, in: SMR 2, p. 285.

101 Ibidem.

102 Ibidem, p. 292.

103 Ibidem, pp. 308-309, 321-325; *Sturekrönikan*, in: SMR 3, p. 14.

into a power base in the hands of one family, and beyond the reach of both Sweden and Denmark. The chronicle blames the clever marriage strategies of the Axelsson brothers, which include Sten Sture the Elder, who was married to a daughter of Åke Axelsson, but also the ambiguous political and regnal identity of the brothers.[104] While they act within the same political framework based on kinship, friendship and power, Sten Sture never lets family commitment and interests take priority to the best interests of the realm and its inhabitants. According to *The Sture Chronicle*, he knows how to handle entangled loyalties and tackle the threat from Ivar Axelsson, the last surviving brother who in the end has to decide between his Danish and Swedish allegiance.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to explore some of the identities and relationships that the political interaction within the Kalmar Union gave rise to, as expressed in mainly narrative sources such as the Swedish *Karl's Chronicle*. The analysis of how the relationship between the kingdoms of the union was represented in political discourse involved an inquiry into aspects of identity and belonging within the pragmatics of a game of power in 15th-century Scandinavia. The interplay between unity and hostility that marked much of the history of the Kalmar Union was used as an analytical approach for the examination of identities and relationships. In previous research, the Kalmar Union has been seen as both an arena for aristocratic Scandinavism, dynastical or monarchical ambition, and for expressions of national awareness. In my view, the formation of identities related to the realm or to the union in the late-medieval period has to be understood as a complex process of entanglement, where the different threads remained both distinct and intertwined. The resonance of collective identities linked to the realms in the 15th century was significant, based on the arguments and imaginary of the political discourse.

In the vernacular chronicles of Denmark and Sweden, differentiating between categories of men such as inborn and foreigner, Dane or Swede, was a prominent way of expressing views about legitimate claims to power and privileges in the realm. In the construction of coherent and meaningful narratives of a common past, identities linked to place of birth and regnal belonging were apparently important, which indicate an awareness of a sense of community that also involved obligations towards the community. Nativism, as the conscious distinction between what is perceived as

104 *Sturekrönikan*, in: SMR 3, pp. 89-93. See also M. Nordquist, *A Struggle for the Realm…*, pp. 175-179.

indigenous and what is perceived as foreign, describes a fundamental element in the interplay of unity and alterity, that frequently influenced the political discourse. At the same time, personal bonds based on friendship, kinship and allegiance played a fundamental role in the frequently pragmatic political dealings of the period, and are also acknowledged in narratives of the past and in communication to political audiences. Loyalty based on such bonds was a strong imperative in the political culture, but the narratives also show the potential double-edged implications of such loyalties.

Abstract

This paper investigates the occurrence of two common but contradictory themes in the political discourse in 15th-century Scandinavia: on the one hand proclamations of the essential bonds existing between Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and on the other hand expressions of hostility against what is represented as foreign rule. The aim is to examine how different forms of discourse reveal coexisting and sometimes oppositional expressions of identity, with a particular focus on the role of cultural memory in the elaboration of these themes. A crucial political framework for the analysis is the Kalmar Union, which throughout the century constituted a common, if not always implemented, form of government of the Scandinavian kingdoms.

The article explores the occurrence of nativist ideas of origin and identity within the pragmatics of a game of power in 15th century Scandinavia. In the vernacular chronicles of 15th-century Denmark and Sweden, differentiating between categories of men such as inborn and foreigner was a prominent way of expressing views about legitimate claims to power and privileges in the realms. In the construction of coherent and meaningful narratives of a common past, identities linked to birth and regnal belonging were apparently important. At the same time, personal bonds based on friendship, kinship and allegiance, played a fundamental role in the political dealings of the period. Particular bonds of love were also perceived to exist between the realms, as shown in the treaties negotiated between the realms. Rather than giving priority to the importance of one specific sense of identity in the political game of the period, it is argued that the complex relationships governing political action and discourse in late-medieval Scandinavia should be conceived in terms of entangled identities, where the different forms of identification and allegiance remain distinct, while at the same time inseparable from each other.