

Aspects of Rulership Ideology in Early Scandinavia with particular references to the Skaldic Poem *Ynglingatal*

In earlier stages of the history of religions, it was argued that the ancient Svear had a “sacral kingship” with a centre in Uppsala (e.g. Schück, 1904; von Friesen, 1932–34; Ström, 1954). There the ruler was regarded as a god, contracting a symbolic marriage with a goddess, playing ritual roles in cultic contexts, and even letting himself be sacrificed to guarantee the welfare of his people. This theory was largely built on the skaldic poem *Ynglingatal* which was considered to be of pre-Christian origin. In 1991, Claus Krag published his dissertation *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga*, in which he questioned the traditional dating of *Ynglingatal*, arguing that this poem was young and should be dated to the 12th century. Although this opinion was not new in the research on *Ynglingatal* (cf.

Bugge, 1894, pp.108–153; Neckel, 1908, pp. 389–421), Krag emphasised it even more strongly. He also stated that the content of the poem never originated from Eastern Scandinavia, but was rather built on traditions circulating in medieval Iceland. Hence this poem lost most of its relevance as a source for a pre-Christian kingship in Svetjud. This criticism of Krag represents serious problems for those supporting the “sacral theory”. The question is whether the arguments on which it has been based are tenable and valid. I will therefore examine some of Krag’s arguments and discuss the value of *Ynglingatal* as a source of information about the religious and political conditions which prevailed in ancient Svetjud. Thereafter, I will illuminate some aspects of the rulership ideology discernible in this poem.

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***Ynglingatal* – dating and provenance**

Ynglingatal has been preserved to the present via Snorri Sturluson’s prose text *Ynglinga saga* (c. 1230), where it is quoted. According to Snorri, it was composed by Thjodolf of Hvin who was King Harald Finehair’s skald sometime towards the end of the 9th century. It is a genealogical poem composed in his native tongue, which recounts the reigns of 29 rulers from the Swedish-Norwegian royal Ynglinga family. This poem was made in honour of King Rognvald, a minor ruler in Vestfold, Norway, the son of Olaf Geirstadaalf and a relative of King Harald. *Ynglingatal* has 27 stanzas. Each stanza briefly describes the deaths, burials and sometimes

the burial places of the kings. The first eight stanzas concern heroic rulers of the Svear. The next 13 stanzas are about legendary Svea kings. Finally, the last six stanzas describe six possibly historical Norwegian kings.

Scholars have commonly held that Snorri's information concerning the dating of *Ynglingatal* is reasonable, i.e. c. 890 (see e.g. Åkerlund, 1939). This dating was, however, challenged by Krag (1991). He argued that there are medieval Christian values and ideas present in the poem, indicating an anachronism, and he presented a few examples of this. Krag stated, for instance, that the *kenning* of fire in the poem, *sævar niðr*, i.e. 'the relative of sea', presupposes the Christian medieval teaching on the four elements. This doctrine of Empedocles was disseminated in Christian Europe through Bede's commentary on the Bible and a Latin translation of Plato's *Timaeus*. According to Krag, the poem must have been composed after this doctrine had become known in Scandinavia, i.e. in about the 12th century. In my opinion, this argument is questionable. Ideas about the relations of the different elements to each other are not exclusive to Christian culture. There are expressions similar to *sævar niðr*, for instance, in Vedic literature (see e.g. Krause, 1930, p. 17; Fidjestøl, 1994, p. 195). The Indic fire-god Agni is sometimes called *apām napāt* 'the child of water'. Perhaps this is an ancient formula connected to a fire god among those people who spoke Indo-European languages. Thus the *kenning* *sævar niðr* could not be used as an argument indicating an anachronism in *Ynglingatal*. There is actually no reason to abandon the traditional dating of *Ynglingatal*. The formalistic language, its metre and its important content, could all have allowed it to retain its original shape for centuries. Snorri's attitude towards old poetry makes it difficult to imagine his attributing a poem from the 12th century to a 9th century skald. It would definitely have risked his reputation in the view of all educated contemporary Icelanders who would have known the actual creator of *Ynglingatal*. In my opinion, there are therefore reasons to adopt Snorri's view on the dating of the poem (for a more thorough criticism on Krag's thesis, see e.g. Fidjestøl, 1994; Dillmann, 2000; Sundqvist, 2002, pp. 43–52).

The question of *Ynglingatal*'s background is also very important in the perspective of present study. *Ynglingatal* can only be used as a reliable and valid source for the rulers of the Svear if it is based on traditions with an eastern Scandinavian origin. Krag thinks, however, that these traditions originated elsewhere. He argues that most of the content in *Ynglingatal* was built on late Western Scandinavian traditions, i.e. the same traditions which also formed the unreliable *fornaldarsögur*. According to him, the connection between the name Ynglingar and the Uppsala dynasty was nothing more than a 12th century construction. In my opinion, this is highly unlikely. There are, in fact, several indications connecting the *Ynglingatal* to Eastern Scandinavia. Strong support for an eastern origin of the traditions is provided by the place names occurring in the poem. In fact, names such as *Uppsala*, *Fýri*, *Taurr* and *Reningi* can be identified with toponyms in the Mälars region (see e.g. Sundqvist, 2002, pp. 47ff.). Specialists on toponymy have made a distinction between close-horizon and remote-horizon names in *Ynglingatal* (see Vikstrand, 2004). The remote-horizon names do not say anything about the provenance of the poem. *Uppsala*, for instance, was known throughout Scandinavia. The name *Skúta*, however, i.e. a close-horizon name, was probably unknown

outside the local community. It refers to *Skutån*, an obscure tributary of the River Fyris, located in a little parish, north of Uppsala. It is highly unlikely that the name of this little creek was common knowledge among Norwegians in the Viking Age (800–1100). Most likely, it and other close-horizon names were part of an ancient eastern tradition associated with the Swedish Ynglinga kings. This tradition was transferred to Norway, perhaps at the end of the Vendel Period (i.e. 8th century). But even if Thjodolf built his poem on eastern traditions, he could have revised them and added ideas and ideological aspects to reflect contemporary Western Scandinavian society. This is, of course, a problem in my study. In any case, I am inclined to count *Ynglingatal* as an important source for ideological aspects of both Sweden and Norway during the Late Iron Age.

Denominations and rulership ideology

Is it possible to grasp a specific rulership ideology in *Ynglingatal*? Since the content of this poem is fragmentary, scholars have searched for a method to use for analysing it beyond the ambiguous narrative structure. In a previous study, I investigated *Ynglingatal* by studying the denominations of the rulers in the poem (Sundqvist, 2002, pp. 141ff.; cf. Marold, 1987). They appear as poetical expressions, so-called *kennningar* as well as common appellations. Obviously, they served to characterise the ideal image of the ruler. The semantic spectra of these expressions were thus important means for construing royal power. In this study, I classified the denominations into five different groups. Most expressions referred to leadership, power and warlike qualities. A few connoted wealth and generosity. Three kennings emphasised cultic aspects of the king. Four mentioned that the kings were of divine descent. Other genealogical references also occurred frequently. The denominations in *Ynglingatal* thus indicated an ideology where power and warlike qualities, as well as religious aspects, were essential. In what follows, I will investigate the expressions referring to religious matters and discuss their significance to the rulership ideology and its setting in the Svea society.

There are clear indications that the Ynglinga dynasty was really honoured for its divine origin. In *Ynglingatal*, kings carried denominations such as ‘Freyr’s offspring’ (*Freys afspringr*) and ‘the kinsman-of-gods’ (*godkynningr*), and the entire Yngling dynasty is called ‘the line of the mighty god’ (*þróttar Þrós niðkvísl*). Freyr was a fertility god and most likely regarded as the divine forefather of the Ynglinga kings. Adam of Bremen (c. 1075) mentioned that Freyr’s image in the “temple” of Uppsala was phallic. There are several place names in the Mälars region containing Freyr’s name, indicating that he was one of the most important deities in the area (see e.g. Vikstrand, 2001). There are also other genealogical references in *Ynglingatal* to indicate that descent was essential in ideological contexts.

Ynglingatal also refers to the cultic functions of the king. In one kenning, King Yngvi is called *vörðr véstalls*. The basic meaning of the word *vé* is ‘something holy’, but often it refers to ‘cult site, sanctuary’. In the compound form *véstallr*, it means ‘sacred stand’ or ‘altar’. Thus the kenning suggests that the ruler was the keeper or custodian of the altar. There are several similar denominations of rulers in primary sources. In the runic inscription of Rök (9th century), Östergötland (Ög 136), the chieftain Sibbe is called *viaværi* with a meaning similar to *vörðr*

véstairs. Another chieftain appears in the runic inscription from Synnerby, Västergötland (Vg 73), with a byname *Vīurðr* ‘guardian of the sanctuary’. Several sources indicate that the ruler cared for and arranged cult feasts at the sanctuaries. These practices also had economic implications, and were grounded in a redistribution system. During a cult feast in the hall, the ruler distributed gifts to his men under ritual circumstances. In *Ynglingatal*, King Vanlande is called *menglötuðr* ‘spendthrift of jewellery’, i.e. a generous person. The ruler’s gifts created alliances and friendship relations between the king and his subjects. These gifts also required compensation in the form of military service, loyalty, goods, raw materials, labour and other service. The cult was thus integrated into the social, economic and political life of the Svear.

This type of ruler ideology may be supported by recent archaeology. Evidence found at ancient aristocratic residences in Sweden indicates several activities such as production and trade, but also cultic practices. In connection with the Iron Age representation hall of the ruler at Helgö, Uppland, interesting finds have been made, such as the “guldgubbar” and ceremonial glass (see Herschend, 1995). The “guldgubbar” are small gold-foiled figures depicting mythical scenes. They most likely played an important role in the ideological apparatus of the rulers (see Steinsland, 1991). Some of them were deposited near the high seat of the hall, probably as sacrificial gifts to the gods. A concentration of exclusive glass has also been found there. Most likely the ruler of Helgö was sitting at this place when celebrating sacrificial feasts. The ruler’s entering of the high seat probably comprised a complex of religious ideas.

Summing up

Ynglingatal is probably a pre-Christian poem dating back to the end of the 9th century. There are clear indications that Thjodolf based his poem on Eastern Scandinavian traditions. In my opinion, it is therefore possible to reconstruct a pre-Christian rulership ideology by means of *Ynglingatal*, which is valid for both Swedish and Norwegian conditions. This ideology involved religious aspects. The rulers there were related to the mythical world by descent. In addition, they performed important ritual roles in the hall at the royal residence.

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