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Violence, Conflict and Order in Medieval Norway

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ABSTRACT

Juxtaposing violence and order sounds like a contradiction in terms. Our modern concept of violence is intrinsically linked to illegitimacy and the disruption of order. This concept is succinctly expressed in the definition of a state by Max Weber, as the instance that has a monopoly on the exercise of legitimate violence, thus making all forms of private violence illegitimate. However, the antithesis between violence and order goes much further back in time. According to the historian David Armitage, the Western notion of civil war builds closely upon Roman ideas of a breakdown of order – a theory which was promulgated in the early empire and served as an ideological justification of the Empire and a correspondingly harsh attack on the republic as a political system.

KEYWORDS

Violence; historian; conflict; civil war; medieval; Scandinavia

1. The Construction of ‘Civil Wars’ in Medieval Norway

Juxtaposing violence and order sounds like a contradiction in terms. Our modern concept of *violence* is intrinsically linked to illegitimacy and the disruption of *order*. This concept is succinctly expressed in the definition of a state by Max Weber, as the instance that has a monopoly on the exercise of legitimate violence, thus making all forms of private violence illegitimate. However, the antithesis between violence and order goes much further back in time. According to the historian David Armitage, the Western notion of civil war builds closely upon Roman ideas of a breakdown of order – a theory which was promulgated in the early empire and served as an ideological justification of the Empire and a correspondingly harsh attack on the republic as a political system.¹ The association between state and order was petrified in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, but the view that the alternative to a central authority was chaos also had strong proponents in the Middle Ages. Around 1180, the cleric Theodoricus Monachus wrote the first preserved history of Norway, which he chose to end in 1130 for the following reason:

A few years after that, King Sigurðr [the Jerusalem-farer] put off his human form [1130].
And here I too shall end this little document of mine, since I deem it utterly unfitting to

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record for posterity the crimes, killings, perjuries, parricides, desecrations of holy places, the contempt for God, the plundering no less of the clergy than of the whole people, the abductions of women, and other abominations which it would take long to enumerate. All these things so flooded in, as if in one cesspit, after the death of King Sigurðr ...²

Theodoricus' statement has been viewed as signalling the start of the Norwegian 'civil wars', which were to last until Duke Skule Bårdsson was executed on 24 May 1240 after having rebelled against King Håkon Håkonsson (r. 1217–1263).³ Theodoricus used Roman history as a comparative frame of reference for Norwegian history, and after the quoted passage, he went on to cite Lucan's *De Bello Civili*, the standard work for anyone writing on civil war in the Middle Ages.⁴ However, in his account he did not apply the term for civil war – 'bellum civile' – even if it figured in Lucan's title. Instead, he used words describing more specific misdeeds ('scelera', 'homicidia', 'perjuria', 'parricidia' etc.), which in total amounted to render an image of lawlessness and chaos, much in the vein of Lucan and Hobbes.

In Old Norse, there are no terms for civil war; the closest we get are terms for battle ('bardagi', 'orrusta') or literally 'un-peace' ('úfriðr').⁵ Yet in spite of the absence of any term for civil war, the notion of a condition of chaos in society as formulated by Theodoricus was elaborated and expanded by later writers. A main contribution was made by the anonymous author of *The King's Mirror* writing in the mid-thirteenth century, who compared a situation of conflict between various pretenders to a condition of famine in nature.⁶ Here Theodoricus' view was further developed in three ways. First, chaos in society was compared to chaos in nature. Second, the chaotic condition related to a struggle among multiple contenders. Only by introducing a sole monarchy could the strife come to an end. Third, the erosion of order was connected to the people's natural inclinations to commit wrongs whenever they had the opportunity to do so: 'Everywhere where a population is split into numerous groups [...], the populace endeavors to act according to their own desires, and then the good customs of the realm are destroyed'.⁷

The vision of a breakdown of society caused by strife between power mongers was taken up by the kings when formulating laws. Three years before his death, King Håkon Håkonsson promulgated a new law for the northern part of the realm (the newer Frostathing law, 1260). He began the prologue by stating:

how big and manifold damage most men's lineages have incurred from manslaughter and the execution of good men, something that has been more common in this country than in most other countries.⁸

In King Magnus Lagabøte's National law from 1274, the chaotic condition was simply referred to as 'the large fog of confusion from which most of this country's people have been so lamentably blinded'.⁹ The image of the period 1130–1240 as one troubled by endemic, violent strife caused by struggles between contenders for the throne has passed essentially uncontested to modern historians, who have termed these struggles 'civil wars'.¹⁰

2. Alternative Conceptions of Violence and Conflict

Over the last few decades, historians have adopted an alternative view of societies with weak kings, or no kings at all. Inspired by anthropological surveys, this view refuses to

see conflicts as inherently disruptive, but rather as an inherent part of the political culture. As formulated by Paul Richards:

Anthropologists try to avoid becoming lost in this dangerous terminological terrain by denying “war” any special status. They see ‘civil war’ as part of society. It is a normal rather than exceptional condition.¹¹

An early inspiration for medievalists came from Max Gluckman’s seminal article ‘The Peace in the Feud’ from 1955, where he argued that feuds broke out less frequently than was generally supposed and often ended with settlements.¹² However, the concept of feud has been criticised for viewing conflict too ‘optimistically’, and for focusing on small-scale conflicts, implying a contrast between feuds and large-scale conflicts linked to states. Accordingly, feuds emerge as distinctive for a type of pre-state society that disappears in course of the state formation process in the Middle Ages.¹³

In order to avoid the potential pre-state, functionalist bias of the feuding perspective in the study of medieval violence, I will launch a new conceptual framework for understanding how conflict works in a decentralised society: ‘constant crisis’. Crisis is a Greek term that means rupture or turning point; it was originally used in Hippocratic medicine but adopted by historians such as Thucydides to describe tensions and conflicts within the Greek world.¹⁴ Whereas the term fell nearly out of use for centuries, after the Second World War ‘notions of crisis have cropped up everywhere’ as a sign of dramatic ruptures, and have also been linked to shifts in paradigms.¹⁵

However, what happens in situations where crisis does not signal a rupture but is rather a permanent condition? The Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh has done fieldwork in contemporary Guinea-Bissau, a society where violent conflict is something that occurs all the time and constitutes the very frame within which lives play out. Vigh argues that ‘social, political and existential crisis play a very real role as a constant in the lives of many people around the world’.¹⁶ Drawing on the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, he states that:

What we call disorder and ruin, others who are younger live as the natural order of things and perhaps with ingenuity they are going to master it precisely because they no longer seek their bearings where we took ours.¹⁷

I will call this state of affairs, where violence is always in the air, a ‘constant crisis’. The fact that violence is ever-present, maybe even ‘normal’, does not mean that this condition is viable. As the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas argues, ‘civil wars are bloody not so much because people are inherently violent, but because they are not: most are repelled by the prospect of acting violently, and so they will not, unless someone else handles the gory details while shielding them’.¹⁸ Yet, this situation of constant crisis is equally far removed from constituting an extraordinary breakdown of social norms. Living with conflict, in Vigh’s words, makes people ‘constantly attentive and alert, seeking to predict and move in relation to perceived and experienced social stimuli, oncoming movements and possibilities’.¹⁹ Or, as Patrick J. Geary formulated it for twelfth century France: ‘conflict was a constant and ongoing part of life’.²⁰ In more general terms, the sociologist Georg Simmel in his conflict theory stated that conflict or opposition is not only a presupposition for a society (‘Opposition is not merely a means of conserving the total relationship, but it is one of the concrete functions in which the relationship

in reality consists’); he also argued that it was beneficial to its well-functioning (‘opposition [...] permits us to preserve a consciousness of energy, and thus lends a vitality and a reciprocity to relationships’).²¹

The concept ‘constant crisis’ implies that conflicts neither originate nor are handled by a central body, but rather flow from the constant shifting of alliances and rivalries between groups that are variably held together and separated by social networks. Such a dynamic resembles the one studied by anthropologist Fredrik Barth among Swat Pathans in Afghanistan in the 1950s, and which political scientist Fotini Christia still finds in the Afghan ‘civil war’ in the 1990s.²² She terms this ‘multi-party conflict’. In conflicts where there are more than two opposing parties, boundaries and divisions become much more fluid and varying, and switching sides is more common, than in two-party conflicts. All parties opt for dominance, but becoming a minority faction within a winning coalition is not viable, as one risks being dominated by the majority. Therefore, defections from winning coalitions are widespread, and, as a result, a balance of power between roughly equal parties tends to prevail.

The artificiality of distinguishing sharply between violent and non-violent conflicts is reflected in the Old Norse language, where the term for violence – ‘vald’ – can be translated as ‘power’.²³ Contrary to the Latin ‘violentia’, which underlies our modern notion of violence, the term ‘vald’ did not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and thus a ‘valdsmaðr’ – literally a violent man – meant a powerful man.²⁴ This does not imply that all violence was legitimate. Drawing a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate ‘vald’ was a crucial issue in Norwegian medieval laws, but the issue of legitimacy was decided on basis of factors other than whether physical force had been applied or whether the state was involved.²⁵ Indeed, one could argue that the modern concept of violence signifying the use of illegitimate force by private individuals is rendered meaningless in a medieval context.²⁶

3. Deconstructing the ‘Civil Wars’ in Medieval Norway

Previously we saw that a vision of Norway as haunted by disorder and unrest after 1130 was established already in the late twelfth century, to be expanded in the following century. Contemporary sources did not label this disorder ‘civil war’, but rather a ‘cesspit’, ‘famine’ or ‘fog of confusion’, playing on the imagery of anomaly and chaos. Modern historians have considered the period 1177–1208 to be the climax of the civil wars in Norway. This is the period of King Sverre (r. 1179–1202) and the Birchlegs, whose main opponents were the Heklungs (1177–1184) and the Croziers (1196–1208). Two factors contributed to the intensification of struggle in this period. First, in contrast to most previous contenders, King Sverre was not part of the elites when he started out, but a newcomer who had to fight his way to the throne against an established elite, utilising guerilla tactics that made the struggle less prone to end in compromise. Second, as Sverre’s opponents were allied with the reformed Church and the newly established archbishopric in Nidaros, the struggle became ideologically infused, resulting in King Sverre’s excommunication by the Pope.²⁷

Battles, sieges and plunder / ravaging were the main ingredients of European warfare in this period.²⁸ To these dimensions we should add, in this Scandinavian context, naval warfare.²⁹ During the period 1177–1208, fourteen battles were fought in Norway – more

than beforehand and afterwards, and far more than in contemporary Europe over the same span of time.³⁰ King Sverre was moreover the first Norwegian king to build castles resembling their contemporary European counterparts, erecting stone fortifications in the main towns of Bergen and Nidaros.³¹ He also conducted large-scale ravaging in areas disobedient to the king – as in Sogn in 1184 and Viken in the years around 1200.³² Ships played an important role in the struggles, and great resources were put into shipbuilding. For instance, in 1183 Sverre probably built the largest ship in Norwegian history, and during the winter 1205–1206 the Croziers built 22 ships in Viken.³³

The costs of war were formulated in dire words in Håkon Sverresson's letter of reconciliation with the Church issued shortly after Sverre's death in 1202:

This realm has suffered great trouble [...] because almost all have perished who could guard the realm and the laws with fairness and loved God and the holy Church. But they survive who pursue life in cupidity and injustice, enmity and evil will [...]³⁴

However, there are reasons to be suspicious of a view that the level of violence and conflict was as extreme and unbearable as described by Håkon Sverresson and modern historians. In the following, I will argue that the so-called civil wars had a rather limited impact on society as a whole, along two lines: first that the scope of the violence is overrated, and second that the power struggle reflects a power balance which was more stable than has been assumed.

Concerning the level of violence: even if the conflicts are described in the sagas as devastating, their actual scope and destructive potential was usually quite limited. First, although there were a substantial number of battles, few of them were decisive or extremely bloody.³⁵ In his early days, Sverre managed to kill in battle his main opponents Erling Skakke (in 1179) and King Magnus Erlingsson (in 1184). With the Croziers, such easy and decisive victories were a thing of the past. There were some battles between 1196 and 1202, but none of them were decisive or very bloody. After this point there very few pitched battles – if any – until 1240.³⁶ King Sverre repeatedly referred to the shame of fleeing from battle, but he himself frequently did so if he was outnumbered, and even justified his behaviour by saying that his honour would not prosper from being slaughtered.³⁷ Pragmatic thinking about honour was so natural that the author of *Boğlunga søgur* did not even reflect upon it. This suggests that parties were always considering the prospect of success before engaging in battle, and if they were inferior, there was always an option to withdraw. Therefore, encounters normally took the form of surprise attacks and ambushes. Increased experience made the parties better at averting ambushes, and in cases where an attack went wrong, the inferior party was quick to flee the battlefield before too much harm had been inflicted. *Boğlunga søgur* refers to only two successful ambushes, both conducted by the Croziers, in which respectively 200 and 90 Birchlegs were killed, but no major leaders.³⁸

Second, the kings' sagas seldom refer to plunder or violent behaviour towards peasants, which was commonplace in European warfare.³⁹ One could suspect the silence to be a result of the sources failing to report on this issue, but this objection falls short, as plunder is not camouflaged in some cases where the sagas could easily have put a lid on it. Most conspicuously, *Sverris saga* did little to conceal that the Birchlegs had a reputation as plunderers. This reputation originated in the early years when the Birchlegs operated as a guerilla group, but it was repeatedly invoked by their opponents

long after they had come to power.⁴⁰ Plunder as an integral part of war, for the sake of provisioning and enrichment, was of course never absent in Norway. King Sverre once held a speech where he complained that his warriors acted recklessly towards peasants.⁴¹ His warning certainly attests to the problem of ravaging during military campaigns, but above all it shows that such behaviour was considered inappropriate and inopportune. The proposition that plunder was relatively less widespread in Norway than elsewhere is strengthened by the fact that in the two instances where King Sverre applied the strategy of large-scale plunder, in 1184 and 1200, the consequences were disastrous, as it resulted in major peasant uprisings.⁴² After this, the parties seem to have learnt from his experience and seldom tried to coerce and harass peasants into obedience. It is thus reasonable to assume that the conflicts between armed groups in this period primarily involved professional warriors and did not have serious repercussions for society at large. In line with this, *Bøglunga sǫgur* describes numerous members of the Birchlegs and Croziers being killed in violent encounters, but the saga found it worthy of specific note when the victims were common men who had been summoned to serve on ships in connection with their naval duty (the *leiðangr*), no doubt because their deaths were uncommon and probably unintentional.⁴³

So far, I have argued that conflicts were quite limited in scope and in their impact on society at large. However, they also functioned in a more stabilising way than it appears. This argument necessitates drawing a distinction between agents' aims on the one hand and the functional aspect of conflict on the other; it should be underlined that the logic of balance does not apply on the individual level. No man would prefer a compromise settlement to a victory over his enemy. Military tactics and strategies aimed at conquering opponents, by defeating them (through battles / ambushes at sea or on land) or by trying to dominate territories permanently (with castles and plunder). This means that in order to scrutinise how conflicts contributed to a balance of power, we need to study how conflict *worked*, not how it was described and understood by the agents themselves.

To take ships first: according to Sverre Bagge, 'the established king was [...] the strongest at sea, because he could command the *leidang* [naval] summons', whereas rebel groups normally were land-based.⁴⁴ Being inferior at sea would in the long run undermine a group's support, since an inability to move around seaways restricted a group's core area to one region, and feeding a large armed following from one region only was bound to ruin local resources, and thus local support.⁴⁵ Yet, for all of its 'winner takes all' logic, dominance at sea had its limitations when it came to controlling the whole realm of Norway. Norway for all practical purposes consisted of three regions situated along the coast: the eastern part (Viken, centres in Oslo and Tunsberg), the western part (Vestlandet, centre in Bergen) and the northern part (Trøndelag, centre in Nidaros). With dominance at sea it was possible to control two out of three regions, but seldom three at the same time, because none of the competing groups had the resources to split their forces into three efficient military units, one for each region. Opponents would normally be capable of taking control over one of the three regions, if necessary through ambushes and guerilla warfare.⁴⁶ Hence, a superior fleet was conducive to establishing a *relative* dominance in two out of three regions, but opposition control of the third region would make sure that the power balance remained in place. On a more practical level, seaborne clashes were no more decisive than encounters on land. *Bøglunga sǫgur* describes a situation where parties utilised intelligence and spies to keep track of

their opponents, and were no more willing to take risks at sea than at land. They therefore usually had an exit option at hand.

Next, castles: castle building in stone was initiated in Norway by King Sverre. As Sverre is reckoned as the greatest military innovator in Norwegian history, and castle building has been considered a step towards bringing Norwegian military practices into line with those on the continent, Norwegian historians have praised this development.⁴⁷ However, the actual *use* and *function* of castles in the struggles shows that they were largely failures as tools for imposing more stable territorial power. First, they could provide safe zones for defendants only to a limited degree.⁴⁸ Second, they served no purpose in controlling larger regions, and they were even weak instruments for controlling the towns in which they were built. The shortcomings of castles were clearly revealed in two instances – in 1198 and 1206 – when the Birchlegs held the castle in Bergen while the Croziers held the town. The pro-Birchleg sagas boasted that the Birchlegs succeeded in launching surprise attacks against the Croziers. However, the fact remains that the Croziers continued to stay in town, and that this stalemate in the long run undermined the Birchlegs' authority.⁴⁹ For all the troubles that the Birchlegs could cause through surprise attacks, as long as the Croziers had their ships in the harbour, they not only had a safe shelter from the Birchlegs, they also controlled the surrounding region. A telling expression of the military failure of castles is the fact that the Croziers were quick to adopt King Sverre's military tactics when it came to ship building, ambushes and elite forces. However, they disregarded Sverre's concern with building castles and never tried to emulate him in this matter, but on the contrary always tore down castles whenever they had the chance. Tellingly, efficient castles were not erected in Norway until the fourteenth century, and then the absence of warfare made them more important as centres of internal suppression than as military strongholds.⁵⁰

There is a paradox relating to military dominance in this period. On the one hand, the parties aimed at defeating their opponents, and in some cases they succeeded, mainly through ambushes; these were the only military measures that could alter the power balance drastically, if they resulted in the killing of enemy leaders and the decimation of their core troops. On the other hand, what looks like total victories often proved to be less total in the longer run. Enemies might be defeated, but an uncompromising attitude had the unfortunate effect of fostering protracted resistance among those who were excluded from power. This formed the background of Sverre's own career, in that a precondition for his success was that his opponent Erling Skakke had pursued his enemies so relentlessly that a pool of men were ready to follow anyone who would stand up against Erling. Sverre also had continuously to face new oppositional groups popping up. We can observe the same dynamic in the struggle between the Birchlegs and Croziers. The Birchlegs usually had the upper hand, and sometimes used this advantage to try to expel the Croziers from their core area in Viken, but the same goes for the Croziers when they were the strongest group.⁵¹

However, the long-term success of this strategy of expelling one's opponents was quite limited, and the reasons for this were threefold. First, ousting a group from their core area could lead the expelled group to turn to guerilla warfare. When the Birchlegs sailed to Viken in 1197 and 1199 with massive fleets, the Croziers and the peasants from Viken sought battle to settle scores, both times unsuccessfully due to the asymmetry of the parties. Accordingly, the Croziers then changed strategy, leaving the norms of

conventional warfare based on battle to cultivate the unconventional dimension of guerilla warfare. In 1201 the Birchlegs once again conducted a large-scale expedition along the Viken coast. On this occasion the Croziers did not seek battle (apart from in one instance when it was inescapable),⁵² but resorted right away to guerilla tactics involving small-scale, targeted, surprise assaults.⁵³ On the one hand, this battle-avoidance strategy was not without costs, as the Croziers risked having the local peasants lose faith in their ability to protect them. On the other hand, the peasants' support was not lost in a day. Submitting to the Birchlegs did not necessarily change their allegiances immediately; it took longer to gain their trust. Moreover, the strategy of coercing peasants in hostile territories also had its costs for Sverre, as his ban on looting peasants who surrendered removed much of the motivation for fighting among his rank-and-file warriors. It is no coincidence that Sverre experienced outright mutiny when the Viken campaign dragged on in time.⁵⁴ The advantages for the Croziers of following a battle-avoidance strategy are fully exposed during Sverre's siege of the castle in Tunsberg during the winter of 1201–1202, which lasted for twenty weeks. Here the Croziers not only resisted the temptation to engage in battle to terminate the siege, but their main army in Opplanda repeatedly turned down requests to come to the aid of their besieged fellows. Sigurd Jarlsson formulated the principles of asymmetric warfare succinctly:

We have ventured around in small groups now for a while, and whereas we have often lost men to King Sverre, we have also done harm to his men. Let us now not travel into the open hell even if Reidar wants to show us the way.⁵⁵

The Croziers had few chances to prevail if they confronted the Birchlegs in conventional battle. However, by splitting up their forces and conducting small-scale guerilla raids at various places, they were able to undermine the militarily superior Birchlegs. A guerilla strategy was seldom sufficient as a means of winning popular support in an area, but when targeted against Birchleg leaders, it was an effective way of demonstrating the Birchlegs' inability to protect the population.

A second critical spin-off of subduing opponents too harshly was that the latter could seek refuge – and potentially support – abroad. This mechanism was at work both during the first and second Crozier establishments. In 1196, the Birchlegs were uncontested as the group in power, and had been so for several years. However, their control was precarious even in times of so-called peace, in particular in Viken, which had been their opponents' home territory. Sverre himself was acutely aware of this. When a magnate called Reidar Sendemann brought a letter from the Byzantine emperor urging the king to send troops to his aid, Sverre responded negatively, arguing that 'I hear that the Danes are breeding wolves against us again, if they succeed in doing so. There are sitting some men around in the country whom I do not trust in case a *flokkr* [an armed group] is established'.⁵⁶ In the end, Reidar gathered men for himself and took them to Denmark, where a group of Norwegians was ready to establish a group in opposition to Sverre.⁵⁷ There evidently existed a pool of potential opponents outside Norway awaiting the right occasion to strike. They stayed on the fence as long as the present king was popular or did not rule too harshly, but as soon as an opportunity arose, they were ready to act. The same story unfolded in 1203, when a man called Erling Stonewall appeared at Skanør in Denmark claiming to be a son of King Magnus Erlingsson. The Norwegians there did not hesitate to rally behind him, but Erling refused the offer to

become Crozier king, arguing that ‘all people are now in friendship with King Håkon [Sverresson] and therefore I have little desire to start such an enterprise without a larger force than I can now expect’.⁵⁸ However, when Håkon Sverresson died the following winter, the situation changed and Erling was elected king. The opportunity to go abroad, in particular to Denmark, was an important safety valve for conquered parties and discontented elements in Norway, and served to maintain a power balance between contending parties, in particular in situations where one group seemed to prevail.

A third danger that an ambitious group applying all its war-power to expel another group could face was that of leaving its core area unprotected and vulnerable to attack. When the Birchlegs sailed with their main fleet to Viken in 1197, the Croziers not only resorted to guerilla attacks and travelled to Denmark to acquire support; they also used the opportunity to travel to Nidaros, the Birchleg stronghold, where they had no trouble winning the town. As Sverre chose to stay in Bergen for the winter, the Croziers were able to remain in Nidaros in spite of local resentment.⁵⁹ Without Sverre and the main bulk of the fleet there, even the core town Nidaros lay open for the taking.

The challenge of keeping forces at multiple places connects to the issue of delegating authority. This problem was particularly acute under King Sverre, who in modern terms would be called an authoritative leader with a non-participatory style of leadership.⁶⁰ The Croziers had a more divided style of leadership, and whereas this sometimes led to internal strife, it often made it easier to delegate authority and divide the army into several operational units. However, the problem of delegating authority extended beyond the leadership style of an individual, as it was not unique to Sverre. In Norway around 1200, ambitions for dominance were persistently kept in check by factors working in the opposite direction. Politically speaking, Norway was not a pyramid of power, it was a pendulum, where threats of imbalance were always compensated for by countermoves that restored the balance of power, or, in other words, the condition of constant crisis.

4. Conclusion

The conflicts in Norway between 1130 and 1240 did not become ‘civil wars’ until medieval historians termed them so in the twentieth century. However, medieval authors had started the construction work; they described the period after 1130 as a ‘cesspit’, ‘famine’ or ‘fog of confusion’, implying a violent break with a normal and viable condition of peace. In this essay, I have argued against such a dichotomy between war and peace by showing that violent conflicts in this time and place were more contained, less chaotic, and more orderly than they seem. Violence did not *per se* function in a stabilising way, but it normally played out as an element of power struggles between roughly equal parties. The Birchlegs usually had the upper hand, but it was a big leap from being *relatively* stronger to becoming *supreme*, which is vividly exposed in situations where the dominant group tried to expel the other from its core area. I have called this condition ‘constant crisis’. It is *constant* because the power struggles were endemic and internal to the political structure. It is a *crisis* in that it encompasses fluid and varying power constellations where nothing is fixed. Yet, the fact that the parties were incessantly struggling

against and therefore balancing one another made the crisis permanent, normal, and therefore an antithesis to our conception of crisis as a turning point and moment of breakdown. Constant crisis shares with 'the peace in the feud' the permanence of conflict, but avoids the romanticising tendency of the latter concept, as well as its automatically self-perpetuating character. Constant crisis was always on the verge of turning into something else: into an escalated conflict that was more detrimental for society at large, or into a situation where one party had gained a more permanent dominance – that is, what historians usually label a state.

It is difficult to get a grip on the stability and permanence of the constant crisis. First, there is a contrast between agents' intentions and the functions of their actions. Both we as historians and the agents themselves (as described in the sources) tend to focus on the ideals of martial honour, bravery and revenge, pointing towards a hostile, violent culture of aggressive self-assertion. Yet, this culture had mechanisms working towards reconciliation and compromise, and the whole structure of the society, with its bilateral understanding of kinship and its crisscrossing bonds of loyalty, usually worked in the direction of peaceful and pragmatic conflict solutions.⁶¹ We easily recognise efforts by parties in conflict to gain supremacy, but it is harder to uncover the forces working in favour of a balance of power. This goes for military assets like ships and castles, or tactics like battles, which were poorly suited to establishing dominance for one party, and primarily functioned instead to uphold a balance of power between contending parties. This duality applies as well to military strategies. Both parties tried to expel their opponents whenever they were in a position to do so, but such attempts normally ran into troubles; a group facing expulsion had an arsenal of means to counter such threats, including employing guerilla tactics, obtaining foreign support, and attacking unprotected areas.

We tend to regard political stability as a result of one power being in command, not of two powers fighting – and balancing – one another. This has been the fundamental flaw in political thinking in particular since Hobbes, who restricted legitimate violence to the state. Here I have tried to show that a situation of constant crisis can be fairly stable. To be sure, kings tried to introduce a concept of war and peace governed by royal concerns, where peace was defined as a condition where one king ruled uncontested, and war was a legitimate way to combat opponents or insurgents. However, these were contested notions. Here we should keep in mind that the alternative to fluctuating success among various rival groups was not the instalment of a *rex iustus*, who was capable of terminating the power struggles in favour of eternal peace and the rule of law – even though that is what most of the sources would have us believe. The alternative was the rise of a strong leader who would try to monopolise resources and positions for his own clientele.

The resilience of a non-centralized and fluid political landscape is illustrated by the history of castles in Norway. Previously we saw that castles were unsuccessful as military means for controlling territories. However, the futility of castles ran deeper than strategic concerns, because their effectiveness presupposed a separation between inside and outside, Us and Them, war and peace, which was alien to people in this society. The magnate Torstein Kugad was twice the head of castles that were besieged and successfully conquered without recourse to violence. Both times the crucial issue was that the besieger threatened to kill people that Torstein were bound to – members of the royal family or of his own.⁶² Castles presupposed and created enmities that were too strong to be

assimilated in a society where power and social relations were much more fluid. Tellingly, Torstein ended up switching sides to the Croziers, only to switch back to the Birchlegs later without any measures being taken against him. Torstein was too important to ignore because of his networks, and networks ran across group boundaries. The stone walls of the castle could be physically solid, but that mattered little as long as they were socially permeable.

This fluid condition of constant crisis was certainly not peaceful, as violence was ingrained into its very structure, but neither was it chaotic. In this society it was extremely important to stay attentive, and to have realistic goals. A man or a group who neglected to take protective measures was bound to run into serious trouble. Similarly, a faction using its ascendancy too ruthlessly would most certainly run into resistance. Yet, staying attentive does not imply that social norms were arbitrary, as it assumes that it was possible to scrutinise actions and signs and reveal their significance.

Notes

1. Armitage, *Civil Wars*.
2. *Theodoricus Monachus: Historia De Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, 53.
3. Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom*.
4. On Lucan as a standard reference, see Hiatt, "Lucan," 209–26.
5. Fritznér, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, s.v. 'bardagi', 'orrusta', 'úfridr'.
6. On the dating and probable authorship see Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*. The author uses the term *uaran*, meaning a year that gives bad crops. See *Konungs skuggsiá*, 51.
7. *Konungs skuggsiá*, 53. This Augustinian conception of people as inherently evil and sinful was in many ways a novelty in Norwegian society.
8. *Frostatingslova*, 1.
9. *Magnus Lagabøters Landslov*, IV 3. On this development see Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*.
10. The historiography on this is ample; see for instance Helle, *Norge blir en stat: 1130–1319*. For a critical overview see Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia*.
11. Richards, "Anthropological and Ethnographical Approaches," 41–53.
12. Gluckman, "The Peace in the Feud," 1–14. The first medieval historian to adopt Gluckman's views was Wallace-Hadrill, "The Bloodfeud of the Franks," 459–87, reprinted in idem., *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in French History* (London: Methuen, 1962), 121–47. With time, the medieval historiography on feud has become immense. See the introduction to Brown and Gorecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe* for an overview of the international discussions; for the Nordic region and connections to the international debates see Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies*, and Netterstrøm, *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Important works include Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*; Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* and numerous works by Stephen D. White.
13. This criticism is addressed in Brown and Gorecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe* and in Esmark et al., *Disputing Strategies*. However, Stephen D. White has argued against functionalist assumptions in "The Peace in the Feud revisited," 220–43.
14. Starn, "Historians and 'Crisis,'" 3–5.
15. *Ibid.*, 14–19. Citation at p. 14.
16. Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity," 7.
17. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 23. This means that "the move from crisis in context to crisis as context entails stretching the notion of 'rupture' into a relative constant, making the concept somewhat self-contradictory in the process" (Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity," 9).
18. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 14.

19. Vigh, "Crisis and Chronicity," 17.
20. Geary, "Living with Conflicts in Stateless France," 137.
21. Simmel, "The Sociology of Conflict I," 493.
22. Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*; Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.
23. Fritzner, *Norsk Ordbog*, s.v. 'vald'.
24. Fritzner, *Norsk Ordbog*, s.v. 'valdsmadr'.
25. I am currently writing an article on the conception of violence in medieval Norwegian laws.
26. Cf. Sandmo, *Voldssamfunnets undergang* for the construction of 'violence' in the late 17th century.
27. Helle, *Norge blir en stat*; Lunden, *Norge under Sverre-ætten, 1177-1319*; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold*.
28. France, John. *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000-1300*, 9; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 16.
29. Lunden, *Norge under Sverre-ætten*, 106; Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold*, 72-9.
30. On the frequency of battles in Norway, see Sigurdsson, "The Civil Wars in Norway 1130-64". On battles in Europe, see Contamine, *Warfare in the Middle Ages*, 32-3, 101; Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages*, 329; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 32; Gillingham, "William the Bastard at War," 143-60; Bradbury, "Battles in England," *ibid.*, 182-93.
31. Lunden, *Norge under Sverre-ætten*, 105. In Europe, see Contamine, *Warfare*, 44-5, Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare*, 319-25.
32. *Sverris saga* 81-2, 160-9.
33. *Sverris saga* 80; "Boglunga saga," 17.
34. *Þetta land se at þrotom komet [...] firir þui at þeir ero nesta flestir allir fra fallnir er lanzsens oc lanzlaaana villdu gæta med rettyndum oc gud uilldu ælska oc helga kirkiu*, 5. Knut Helle cites this letter as a report of the actual conditions during this period: Helle, *Under kirke og kongemakt*, 70.
35. Battles fought 1196-1202, see *Sverris saga* 134 (Oslo), 142 (Torsberg), 145 (Jonsvollene), 159 (Strindfjorden), 162-5 (Oslo), 168 (Skarstad).
36. Some skirmishes are labelled *orrusta* in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, but they were not battles in the true sense of the word. Not until the battles of Låka and Oslo in 1240 were large-scale battles fought (*Hákonar saga* 218-9, 230-7).
37. *Sverris saga* 16.
38. "Boglunga saga" 20-1, 23.
39. On plunder in European warfare, see Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare*, 319; Strickland, *War and Chivalry*, 81, 290.
40. *Sverris saga* 24, 90, 96, 131.
41. *Sverris saga* 133.
42. *Sverris saga* 81-2, 160-9.
43. "Boglunga saga" 27, 28.
44. Bagge, "Borgerkrig og statsutvikling i Norge i middelalderen," 186. *Leiðangr* was the royal prerogative of summoning ships manned by peasants for defensive warfare established from the 10th century. See Erslund and Holm, *Norsk forsvarshistorie*.
45. *Sverris saga* 73, 154.
46. King Sverre's initial years offer the prime examples of these tactics (*Sverris saga* 11-31). The pattern was more or less repeated with later groups (*Sverris saga* 101, 110, 114, 116).
47. Lunden, *Norge under Sverre-ætten*, 105; Erslund and Holm, *Norsk forsvarshistorie*.
48. The exception here is Berget in Tunsberg, which endured a 20 weeks' siege without surrender (*Sverris saga* 171-9). However, Berget was more of a natural formation than a human-made construction.
49. *Sverris saga* 145-52, "Boglunga saga" 21-4.
50. Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold*, 70-2.
51. The Birchlegs used this strategy in Viken in 1197, 1199-1202, 1203, 1205 and 1207. The Croziers tried likewise in Trøndelag in 1198-99 and 1206.

52. *Sverris saga* 168.
53. *Sverris saga* 138–42, 166–70.
54. *Sverris saga* 139.
55. *Sverris saga* 177. According to *Sverris saga*, they did not succeed very well, but *Boglunga sogur* paints a brighter picture of their endeavors (“*Boglunga saga*” 1).
56. *Sverris saga* 129.
57. *Sverris saga* 129.
58. “*Boglunga saga*” 5. The longer version of *Boglunga sogur* offers this formulation: ‘Kong Hagen hafuer yndist oc venskab aff alt Folcket i Norrig, oc som mig er sagt, er Baglernis Høfdinger den største part gaet hannem til haande; thi begynder jeg ingenlunde denne handel med saa liden mact oc styrcke’ (“*Boglunga saga*” 61–2). The shorter version is briefer on this: ‘hann sagðisk eigi vilja reisa flokk móti Hákonu konungi eða gera óróa í landi meðan hann væri konungr yfir Nóregi’ (“*Boglunga saga*” 5–6). This was much the same way that King Sverre had (allegedly) refused to become leader of the Birchlegs in 1177 (*Sverris saga* 8–11).
59. *Sverris saga* 137, 142.
60. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*; Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*.
61. On the aggressive concept of honor, see Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*; on the peaceful settlement of conflicts, see Sigurdsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*.
62. In the first instance, the Kuvlungs threatened that they would kill an uncle of King Sverre if he did not yield, and to blame Torstein for having done so (*Sverris saga* 108). The second time, the Croziers threatened to burn down his own farm if he did not succumb (*Sverris saga* 137). Here they made a secret arrangement that Torstein should have a backdoor open so that the Croziers could get inside the castle. The latter strategy was evidently not considered appropriate, as it resulted in Torstein crossing over to the Croziers; the problem may have stemmed from the clandestine appointment, or the fact that the threat here did not concern royal matters, but rather private ones.

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Abbreviations

- Bögl = Bøglunga saga. In *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* 1. Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Sverrir Jakobsson and Tor Ulset. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2013, pp. 1–146.
- DN = *Diplomatarium Norvegicum I-XXI*, Oslo 1849–
- F = *Frostatingslova*. Ed. Jørn Sandnes and Jan Ragnar Hagland. Oslo: Samlaget, 1994.

- Hák = *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* 1–2. Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Sverrir Jakobsson and Tor Ulset. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2013.
- Kgs = *Konungs skuggsiá*. Ed. L. Holm-Olsen, Oslo: Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1983.
- MĹ = *Magnus Lagabøters Landslov*. Ed. Absalon Taranger. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1962.
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