The Chronicle of Duke Erik

A verse epic from medieval Sweden

TRANSLATED BY
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A masterpiece of Swedish medieval literature

The Swedes of the High Middle Ages

'God let us praise and celebrate! For He did all good things create'. Those are the opening lines of the verse chronicle that occupies a unique place in Swedish literature and the historiography of the High Middle Ages. Unique, but also controversial.

Several of Sweden's leading medieval historians have produced acute analyses of the text, among them Ingvar Andersson, Erik Lönnroth and Jerker Rosén. The *Chronicle* has also attracted international interest from Corinne Péneau and others. The general opinion has been that the *Chronicle* does more or less accurately reflect the real politics of Sweden during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. But it also forms part of Europe's courtly literature. Thus the text of the chronicle constitutes an attempt at writing history, while at the same time it is constrained by the stylistic demands of the genre and the ideological currents of its epoch.

God is to be honoured for His power in heaven and on earth. He has conjured forth hills and meadows, leaves and plants, earth and sand, writes the anonymous author of the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*. Among the many countries created by God is Sweden, far up in the North. A land of doughty warriors, noble knights, and brave heroes:

> The world He made so much contains:
> woodland, pastures, hills and plains,
> leaves and grass, water and sand,
> so much joy and many a land,
> and there among them Sweden lies.
> He who northward turns his eyes
> will that country see outlined.
> There good warriors you will find,
> many a hero and noble knight.

Already from this one extract we can see certain basic facts about the context of the *Chronicle*. It was quite clearly produced after the conversion of Sweden to Christianity, which in the main occurred some time before or during the eleventh century. As we proceed further through the text, it emerges that the story in the *Chronicle* extends from 1229 to 1319. It must therefore have been written down shortly after that. We also realise that the author was a man who was able to read and write, and had some knowledge of the map of Europe. He was interested in the glorious deeds of brave knights, dukes, and kings but also in legislation and church buildings. On the other hand, what Sweden looked like, how far north the kingdom extended and what people inhabited the country, apart from kings and magnates, are subjects passed over in silence in the prologue to the *Chronicle*.

During the Middle Ages and long afterwards, Sweden was in fact a predominantly agrarian region. Farms and villages were thinly dispersed across a landscape of vast forests and numerous lakes and – further north – hilly and mountainous areas. The climate was often severe. Socially speaking, those farmers who owned their own land were the dominant group, Sweden's elites being small. In the early fourteenth century, when the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* was written, what might be called a Swedish realm still only embraced parts of the present-day Sweden. The provinces of Bohuslän, Halland, and Skåne in the west, south-west, and south belonged to Norway or Denmark during that period. Finland, which subsequently would belong to Sweden for centuries, was still only partially integrated into the Swedish dominions. Large regions in what is now northern Sweden were likewise barely incorporated into the territory of the Swedish crown, while other parts of the country had hardly even begun to be cultivated. A strong and stable Swedish State was a distant prospect. Instead, fierce internal conflicts raged between the various elite kindreds – or within a single kindred – during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

It was nonetheless precisely during the period covered by the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* that the foundations were laid of a more effective state structure. How far the exercise of power by Sweden's kings should extend was gradually defined more closely. The economic basis for a central authority was expanded. Spiritual and secular elite groups were by degrees associated with royal power by means of privileges. An extensive process of legislation was initiated.

In legislative terms a significant step towards common norms was taken when the laws of the various provinces were written down during the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. They would later be

followed by a nationwide legal code in 1350 (the National Law Code of Magnus Eriksson). Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the Crown had introduced tax exemption for magnates in return for their readiness to serve under arms with their followers in defence of the realm (the Statute of Alsnö, 1280). That signified the beginning of a process by which the native nobility became associated with the Crown in a feudal relationship of loyalty. The Church and the monasteries received land through donations. The Crown not only possessed land of its own, but was also given the right to receive some of the fines from the administration of justice and to raise taxes from the Swedish people. The taxes replaced the old obligations to participate in war or to feed the king's retinue when he visited an area.

It is uncertain, should one wish to have exact figures, how large the population of Sweden was during the High Middle Ages or its breakdown by different social strata. The approximate proportions between the population groups are scarcely in dispute, however. An overwhelming majority of the population consisted of farmers and their households; people who made a living from agriculture, cattle farming, hunting, and fishing. To all appearances the population increased considerably during the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century. Written sources, analyses of place names, and archaeological evidence all point to large parts of central Sweden being brought under cultivation during the High Middle Ages. But then, like so many other European countries, the kingdom was struck by the Black Death in around 1350, and later by other pestilences in the early fifteenth century. These epidemics decimated the population in certain regions. Some scholars have therefore been of the opinion that the Swedish population around 1350 may have been of roughly the same size as it would become around the middle of the sixteenth century, once the demographic consequences of the pandemics had to some extent been reversed. Other scholars refuse to speculate at all.

If we move further ahead in time, it has proved possible to calculate the population of Sweden, Finland excepted, to have been approximately 600,000 people in around 1570. The great majority lived and worked in the countryside. Only a couple of per cent of the people lived in the towns. Those who were members of the clergy and the nobility each represented no more than the odd per cent of the population. More than 45 per cent of the land within the realm (excluding Finland) at the beginning of the sixteenth century was owned by farmers who held their land as long as they paid their taxes to the Crown. The Church owned about 25 per cent and the nobility 24 per cent of the

land, while the possessions of the Crown as such did not amount to more than about 6 per cent. The land that did not belong to the farmers themselves was as a rule cultivated as small-scale farms by tenant farmers who paid rent to the landowners. Only a fraction of the land was occupied by castles, major estates or small towns.

These facts concerning the Swedish kingdom in the sixteenth century cannot simply be transposed to the early fourteenth century, of course. Yet they do indicate what Sweden *may* have looked like in the early fourteenth century. It is unlikely that more than half a million people lived in the Swedish kingdom as it was then, just as it is likely that around 95 per cent of the population consisted of farmers and their households. The elites were in quantitative terms very small. They, too, were rooted in the various centres of the rural regions. Stockholm had not yet developed into an obvious centre of the realm, and instead the kings and their retinues moved around between various castles.

Most people lived and worked in the countryside in the rest of Europe as well at this time. In countries like Italy, France, and England, however, the urban population played a more significant role than in Sweden, and more farmers were attached to the large estates of the feudal lords. Certain regions in Europe were particularly urbanised, such as the Netherlands, northern France, and the Thames valley. The giant city by the standards of the time was Paris, the population of which reached about 90,000 by the end of the thirteenth century. In Sweden, on the other hand, the few existing towns, apart from Stockholm, were very small, generally with populations of fewer than 2,000 people. Thus, however much one reconfigures the social and demographic data, Sweden, Norway and Finland, stands out during the fourteenth century as a sparsely inhabited agrarian society. That makes it all the more interesting to consider the circles in which the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* could have been initiated and written, and where it would have found a responsive audience. For, in spite of everything, there were aristocratic milieux prepared to absorb the cultural influences coming from other parts of Europe.

People and elites in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*

In striking contrast with the down-to-earth background that life in Sweden provided is the remarkable description in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* of a courtly culture of chivalry, Swedish crusades on the other side of the Baltic Sea, and a dramatic struggle for political power.

Of farmers and craftsmen we do not see much in the *Chronicle*. Yet it should be emphasised that they are not entirely invisible. They are

glimpsed as participants in military campaigns, for example when King Erik the Lisper and Stumbler (1222–1250) by force of arms compelled a part of Finland to submit to the Christian Swedish State. The king, the *Chronicle* says, summoned his knights and their equals, but the call to arms was also sent 'to peasants and to fighting men – as rulers still do now, as then' (3:2). The author of the *Chronicle* even pays regard to the poor wives of the soldiers. The women did not know if their men would come home alive, and they were desperate: 'Hands were wrung and tears were shed by many a wife left on her own.' (3:24–25) That soldiers could fall ill because their food had rotted is described in graphic terms in connection with a later siege of a fortress: 'When they at table took their seat, seeming well, to drink and eat, their teeth fell out upon the table – what man that to endure is able? So many from that scourge did die, the fort did almost empty lie' (37:9–11). Commoners likewise served as infantry alongside mercenary troops in the bloody civil conflicts between the claimants to the throne, as at the Battle of Hova in 1275, when King Valdemar Birgersson (1250–1275) was defeated by his brothers:

> Then a man came running from the fray,
> badly wounded and in disarray,
> and advised the king that he should flee
> and to fight elsewhere prepared to be.
> 'Our men in bogs and marshes are all stuck;
> We have this battle lost, worse luck!' (17:17–20)

The presence of the broad masses is similarly implied as craftsmen or labourers when castles or monasteries are built, or as onlookers at tournaments and royal weddings. Both men and women are referred to as the individuals covered by legislation. The leader of the country during the minority of Valdemar (1250–1260) had been his father, Earl Birger. The latter laid down how the rules of inheritance and how household peace should be maintained.

> Earl Birger then the law ordained
> that has since been long maintained,
> that a sister shall inherit with her brother
> a third from both their father and their mother,
> and if there other relatives should be,
> she shall inherit then as well as he.
> He also did domestic peace defend. (9:1–7)

The women are said to have mourned Earl Birger especially deeply and to have prayed for his soul, as he 'gave them legal rights so strong, punishing those who did them wrong, that no one dared them to abuse, unless prepared his head to lose.'

But be they farmers, foot soldiers, or craftsmen, they are not assigned any independent roles as political actors in the *Chronicle* – nor of course are their women or children. That is not so surprising. Any ambition on the part of the author of the *Chronicle* to write what modern historians would call 'history from below' scarcely existed in the historiography of that period, which generally preferred to dwell on great men and their exploits. Against that background, we ought rather to note those occasions when the *Chronicle* does nonetheless explain the necessary participation of the people, as in the election as king in 1319 of Magnus Eriksson, that is to say the son of the principal character, from whom the *Chronicle* has acquired its name – Duke Erik.

It is thus above all rival royal kindreds and their supporters, queens and high-born wives, the highest office-holders in the kingdom and other magnates, together with the representatives of the Church, who are presented in the text – as well as magnificent banquets, splendid weddings, coronations, chivalrous games and battles, together with the building of monasteries and the handing down of law. The action does not take place in a wilderness completely devoid of social order, but the social order was different in appearance to that of the strong national-states that were to arise a couple of centuries later throughout Europe. In the thirteenth century, Sweden was only an emerging kingdom, Christian and in contact with the rest of Europe, with a monarchy that attempted to take responsibility for peace in the kingdom and the defence of its borders.

It was furthermore a period when what scholars call the twelfth-century renaissance was well established in Europe. It brought about a flowering of literature and art, in religious texts as well as in heroic tales and courtly love poetry. Consciousness of the individual increased, and customs became somewhat more civilised, at least among the educated elites. Chivalric ideals developed at royal and aristocratic courts, not least in France and Germany; among other things, they involved faithfulness towards feudal lords, friends and noble ladies, who were courted in ritualised forms. The culture of chivalry was expressed in court ceremonial, but was defined from the twelfth century onward in literary genres such as troubadour poems and chivalric romances. Those romances dealt above all with love, war, and adventures. Many heroes were derived from the world of Celtic legends, including King

Arthur, Perceval, and Tristan. In the form of the so-called 'Eufemia ballads' (named for the Norwegian queen, Eufemia, mother of Duke Erik's wife Ingeborg) courtly literature was introduced to Sweden towards the end of the thirteenth century. Together with the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*, the three chivalric romances of the Eufemia ballads have been characterised as the foremost literary manifestations of courtly culture in Sweden.

The Swedish kingdom of the thirteenth century undoubtedly showed the first signs of a stabilisation of those forces that would later dominate the politics of the kingdom (king, Church, council). Yet we must be wary of taking for granted that those political structures were already firmly established during the period covered by the *Chronicle*. Modern research emphasises that earlier historians often exaggerated the effectiveness of the institutional and constitutional process. There has been a tendency to underestimate how long the king continued to be regarded as merely one among equals (*primus inter pares*) rather than as a representative of State power. There were often several claimants to the throne. Shifting coalitions among the elites, arising from alliances based on kinship or friendship, continued to play a significant role in power relations even in the High Middle Ages. As the Nordic countries had a system in which kinship was reckoned on both the mother's and the father's side, potential relatives could be numerous. Within that densely ramifying structure of kinship it was therefore the degree of proximity, contacts, and friendship that had to decide which part of the kindred really functioned as a social alliance. Women could be as important as men in those networks. Nor was it a foregone conclusion which young man in a set of royal sons would succeed to the throne as long as kings still had to be elected. Patrilineal succession with precedence given to the eldest son was only introduced later.

The period with which the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* deals – roughly the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century – was thus a transitional period in several respects: politically, culturally, and socially. That is also noticeable in the *Chronicle*. It is one of the things that makes it such a fascinating and ambiguous text.

Who wrote the *Chronicle* – and when?

The author of the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* is unknown. Scholars have argued both about when the text was composed and who initiated and wrote it. The *Chronicle* survives only as manuscript copies from the second half of the fifteenth century, which makes the dating uncertain.

Following analyses of the *Chronicle*'s biases and the named individuals on whom it focuses, several scholars have concluded that it was probably written some time between 1322 and 1332, as the *Chronicle* mentions that a certain nobleman (Sir Bo) had died, while other documents show that a Bo Nilsson wrote his will in September 1322. The presumed identification of Sir Bo with Bo Nilsson would provide a *terminus post quem*, a point in time after which the *Chronicle* must have been written. Other scholars think it is uncertain who Sir Bo was. That point of view would allow for the *Chronicle* to have already been written as early as 1320–21, immediately after the concluding event in the text, the royal election of 1319. Opinions thus differ both with regard to the author and to the exact dating.

The *Chronicle* shows a bias in favour of Duke Erik Magnusson, the father of the infant Magnus Eriksson who, at the end of the *Chronicle*, is elected king. According to one theory, the text must therefore have been created at the very beginning of the 1320s, in the aristocratic circles around the chamberlain Mats Kettilmundsson, who actively championed Duke Erik, or even at the court of Erik's wife, Duchess Ingeborg, at Varberg. Mats Kettilmundsson emerges as a brave knight in the *Chronicle*. His courage is, for example, praised in a passage concerning the battles of the Swedish forces with the Russians: Mats proudly invites the very best of the knights on the opposing side to confront him alone and try to unsaddle him. The Russian 'pagans', according to the *Chronicle*, are cowardly and take no risks. Mats, on the other hand, is described as a splendid knight who bravely challenges the enemy to single combat! And Duchess Ingeborg is consistently eulogised throughout the *Chronicle*. The positive images of Mats and Ingeborg would thus not contradict the hypotheses that the *Chronicle* was written in close proximity to them, possibly in the early 1320s.

According to other scholars, the *Chronicle* was more likely created later, more specifically at the time when King Magnus Eriksson was declared of age in 1332. What provides support for that hypothesis is the fact that the *Chronicle* not only sides with Duke Erik in the conflicts over royal power, but also has an aristocratic bias in its implicit opposition to any increase in the powers of the king. When the little boy Magnus Eriksson is elected king at the Stone of Mora in 1319, the *Chronicle* emphasises that it was just that: a matter of election, in accordance with the wishes of all the provinces and with the law. Magnus should therefore be good and benevolent towards the people all his life – the message the magnates wished to impress on Magnus when he came to power as an adult.

It is evident that the *Chronicle* also expresses a positive view of what the Church and the monasteries represent. It consistently lauds the building of churches and monasteries, and devotes much space to the crusades by the Swedes. Some scholars have therefore found it plausible to seek the origin of the *Chronicle* both in aristocratic circles and among churchmen. According to one hypothesis, the *Chronicle* was created in around 1325, on the initiative of a lawspeaker (a regional head of judicial administration). A cleric from Västergötland was supposedly responsible for the writing itself. He had an ecclesiastical background, but served as secretary to Duke Erik and Duchess Ingeborg. The author of the *Chronicle* would in that case have been a man who was in touch with the representatives of the law as well as those who occupied the seats of power. That would explain how oral traditions, information from monastic annals, and knowledge of legal reforms all formed part of the background material of the *Chronicle*. The author, according to that hypothesis, would also have interacted on familiar terms with those individuals of royal descent (Duke Erik and Duchess Ingeborg) who, through Ingeborg's mother, Queen Eufemia of Norway, strongly contributed to the introduction of courtly literature in Scandinavia.

Much effort has been expended on gathering circumstantial evidence for these diverse conceptions through studies of the content, biases, and language of the *Chronicle*. No scholar can be said to have arrived at an unchallenged conclusion. All in all, however, the hypotheses have delimited the origin of the *Chronicle* in a positive manner: it came into being some time between 1320 and 1332 in circles with a sympathetic attitude to Duke Erik and the elite group around him, as well as to the Christian notions and ideals of the European nobility. The conclusion to be drawn is that the originating milieu in a wider sense of the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* was presumably aristocratic circles. The actual author cannot be identified with any certainty. But he appears to have been well-informed about political conflicts, chivalric life, crusades, and the law. That he was a cleric and secretary at the court of the duke and duchess, as Bengt R. Jonsson has suggested in the latest contribution to the debate, is undeniably an interesting possibility.

The *Chronicle of Duke Erik* as political history

The *Chronicle* thus covers the period from 1229 to the election of Magnus Eriksson as king in 1319. But the text is most detailed from the middle of the thirteenth century until 1319.

How reliable, then, is the *Chronicle* as a work of history? Does it provide a reasonably reliable picture of the turbulence of political events? And what *is* that picture? In order to establish that, we can compare the information given in the *Chronicle* with other source material from the period and with what subsequent research, including archaeological, has discovered. But as all the other sources are unsubstantial, scholars are to a large extent obliged to argue on the basis of the internal evidence: themes, contradictions, clear standpoints, stylistic devices, portrayals of individuals, and so forth.

Due to its bias in favour of Duke Erik, the *Chronicle* has sometimes been regarded as notoriously unreliable as an historical record. If so, its only importance would lie in its being a relict from the period when it was written down; a cultural artefact that reveals a good deal about the ideological outlook in aristocratic circles at the precise time when it was created. It certainly appears to be a dubious narrative source for establishing the actual course of political events, especially those which unfolded before 1320. Despite that, the *Chronicle* has had to be relied on for a certain amount of information about the labyrinthine political history of the thirteenth century. The author was relatively well informed, and clearly had access to other sources (annals, ballads, administrative records), although he did not aspire to be neutral, but remained firmly partisan. Medieval historians almost always openly took sides.

However, the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* is actually ambivalent even with regard to its biases. That is most likely to be explained by the actual circumstances of the period on which the *Chronicle* focuses. As suggested above, modern research indicates how undefined Sweden's institutional power relations still were during much of the thirteenth century. Open conflicts were common even within single families and kindreds. In the light of that, it is easier to understand what may appear to be the contradictory and inconsistent portrayals of individuals in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*. On the one hand the text is manifestly positive towards those individuals who achieve peace, promoting the monasteries, unity, the rule of law, justice, order, and prosperity in the country be they kings or magnates employed in the service of the realm.

Earl Birger (who ruled the country 1250–1266) and the marshal Tyrgils Knutsson (who headed the government 1290–1302), are both

portrayed in laudatory terms for their merits in those respects. Of Tyrgils Knutsson it is said:

> Lord Tyrgils then to power was promoted,
> a judicious man, to concord devoted.
> Peasant and priest and squire and knight,
> they all at that time did unite.
> To dance and joust and entertain
> was common, as were pork and grain.
> Herring and other fish plentiful were.
> Nor did unrest in the kingdom occur,
> but peace and joy and harmony reigned.
> None to treat others wrongfully deigned. (30:1–10)

Later in the *Chronicle* Magnus Birgersson, later called Ladulås, (1275–1290) receives similar praise. He is said to be the benefactor of the Church, and there were 'chivalry and good manners' at his court. But at the same time he is criticised for his tendency to bring in foreign men as his advisers. This is something that the author of the *Chronicle* always clearly opposes. It is excellent if there is peace and order, as long as foreign magnates do not insinuate themselves into the kingdom and gain power! Not every magnate, in other words, is to be commended.

Peace at home and abroad, Christian values, and the rule of law are thus upheld as good things in the *Chronicle*. On the other hand, the accounts of battles are extensive, in the tradition of chivalric literature. The attacks by bold knights on the enemy are glorified, and worldly splendour is described with obvious relish for the details of, say, weddings in royal families. If one examines this more closely, however, it is above all the campaigns against pagans in Finland or Karelia that are heroised, that is to say the crusades in the service of God. That, too, was in line with the courtly ideals. The author of the *Chronicle* occasionally notes, moreover, that it is uncivilised to show unnecessary cruelty towards the enemy. Theological authorities in Europe strove during the Middle Ages to clarify the nature of just war (*bellum iustum*), the correct reason for starting a war (*ius ad bellum*), and how warfare should be conducted in order to be just (*ius in bello*). The values of *pax* (peace, tranquillity), *iustitia* (justice), *temperantia* (self-control), *concordia* (unity), and *clementia* (clemency), as well as *fortitudo* (physical courage, bravery), could all coexist in one and the same author. They formed part of the fusion of Classical and Christian ethics of virtue that occurred during the Middle Ages.

The *Chronicle* sometimes describes a person first in positive terms and later in negative formulations. That does not seem so strange if we accept that much remained unclear in thirteenth-century Sweden with regard to the power of the Crown, the Church, the council, and other elite groups. Nor had the borders between the Scandinavian kingdoms yet become permanent. Power struggles could occur between parallel coalitions of magnates, which varied over time. Those who lived through the events and could describe them were presumably not always certain themselves which factions had emerged or would cease to exist. Still less did they know who in the long run would be triumphant. At times the witnesses had changed their allegiances in the course of the conflicts.

The uncertainties were transmitted to the author of the *Chronicle* or to the circles in which he moved. This may be one of the reasons why the portrayal of individuals in the *Chronicle* is not consistently divided into portraits of heroes and villains. It sometimes provides us with a hint of changes and ambivalences in one and the same individual. Only when the *Chronicle* approaches its conclusion, the reign of Magnus Eriksson, does the picture become clearer. The hero Erik is handsome, good-hearted and gives gentle answers. Yes, if an angel from heaven should appear, it would not be better formed than Erik, the *Chronicle* exclaims. The excessively cruel manner in which he was done away with by his brother assured him a saint-like posthumous reputation. That contributes to providing a religious legitimacy to the choice of his infant son as king.

Kings, queens, and other leading figures

When the *Chronicle* gets into its stride after the homage to God, it is the king Erik Eriksson the Lisper and Stumbler (1222–1250), who occupies centre stage. His government rested on a fragile foundation. Other magnates rebelled, which led to the king occasionally being deprived of power and obliged him to flee the country. The *Chronicle* states that Erik promoted 'justice and law' and provided the farmers with 'firm peace', but also that he was solicitous for his own kindred and did not care much for 'chivalrous games'. He also limped a little and 'lisped somewhat'. That is a rather confusing mixture of characteristics. Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that the magnates regarded Erik as unsuitable to be a ruler. But it could also be the way in which the *Chronicle* attempted to catch the combination of human frailties and respectable aspirations (peace, justice) that the public

often identifies in their rulers. Precisely that mixture is sometimes even perceived as charismatic.

King Erik had no children. It was instead to be his brother-in-law Earl Birger, married to Erik's sister Ingeborg, who until his death in 1266 would control the government of the realm, when his son Valdemar Birgersson (king 1266–1275) was able to take over. Before the time of Earl Birger the struggles for power in the kingdom had been conducted between *different* noble kindreds. After that, they would instead for two generations be fought *between brothers*, within the same family. For two generations many bear same names, although in a varying order, which makes for confusion.

It is thus a dramatic and bloody conflict between brothers that twice makes virtually a Greek tragedy of Swedish political history during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The battles are first fought between King Valdemar Birgersson and his brothers Magnus and Erik and subsequently between King Birger Magnusson and his brothers Erik and Valdemar. In both cases the brothers seem to demonstrate a lack of loyalty towards the elected kings, their elder brothers. However, the fraternal conflicts become more intelligible if one takes into account the ruptures between an older form of society and the new one touched upon above. Neither the monarchy as a strong institution nor the rules of succession that made it self-evident that the eldest son should inherit the central political power had yet been established. Different aristocratic circles could choose to support the young nobleman who appeared to be most suitable. Personal alliances and multiple regional centres of power played a large role; for that reason the strategic choice of marriage partner is also clearly emphasised in the *Chronicle*.

Valdemar Birgersson (1266–1275) had three brothers. One of them, Bengt, became a bishop. Duke Magnus received Södermanland as a fief from the king, while his brother Erik was less favoured. Both Magnus and Erik were dissatisfied and became attached to aristocratic factions that were likewise dissatisfied with King Valdemar. The king was defeated in the Battle of Hova in 1275. As a result his brother Magnus (Ladulås) became king (1275–1290). He is praised in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* for his founding of monasteries. He evidently attempted to conciliate former opponents and to create peace and order in the country, yet he had to suppress further attempts at revolt by the deposed King Valdemar and his supporters. During the reign of Magnus Ladulås both the Church and the nobility were more closely tied to the monarchy by means of privileges.

Magnus Ladulås ensured that his eldest son Birger was elected king as early as 1284, in other words while he himself was still alive, yet when he died in 1290 Birger Magnusson was not yet of age, so it was a group of magnates headed by the marshal, Tyrgils Knutsson, who formed a regency. In 1302 Birger was crowned king and his younger brothers Erik and Valdemar were granted separate duchies, Södermanland and Finland. Duke Erik was engaged to the Norwegian king's daughter Ingeborg. Through his marriage to her he also acquired a claim to the Norwegian crown and received fiefs in Halland and Bohuslän in the west. In that way Duke Erik came to be a powerful factor in Scandinavian politics. His relationship with King Birger grew increasingly tense. In 1306 the king and his men were taken prisoner by the dukes (the 'Håtuna game'); however, the king was released again. The following years saw an alternation of agreements and conflicts. The situation ended when King Birger hit back ruthlessly at his brothers. During a great feast at Nyköping in 1317 the king had the dukes incarcerated ('the Banquet at Nyköping'). They were placed in neck-irons and brutally fastened in stocks in a dungeon. According to tradition, as transmitted by the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*, the king threw the keys into the river and left his brothers to starve to death.

The deed horrified in the country. In that situation King Birger was expelled by a group of magnates led by Mats Kettilmundsson. Duke Erik's son Magnus Eriksson was elected king in 1319, only three years old.

Stylistic devices and character portrayals

Several episodes in the course of these fraternal wars – regular battles, marriage alliances, and enfeoffments – are also historically documented elsewhere. But we dare not regard as authentic every colourful detail of the judgements on individuals or the exchanges of words that are put into their mouths in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik*. These could possibly be derived from oral traditions and may have had some basis in reality, even if that connection was vague and distorted. Alternatively, they are nothing but the author's method of giving his text life and vigour. In character portrayals and verbal exchanges he also proves to be a skilled and not infrequently nuanced narrator, not to say subtly ambiguous. To take one example, consider how the *Chronicle* describes some of the principal characters in the text: Earl Birger, King Valdemar and his queen, Duke Erik and his wife Ingeborg.

Earl Birger emerges in the *Chronicle* in many ways as a capable strong man. He marries the sister of Erik the Lisper and Stumbler,

as, according to the *Chronicle*, he was the suitor whom the king's advisers recommended, while the people held him in high regard. Birger also conducted a crusade in central Finland (Tavastland) on behalf of the king. While he was away King Erik the Lisper and Stumbler died childless. Another magnate, Joar Blå, therefore engineered that Birger's eldest son Valdemar's election as king. According to the *Chronicle*, that infuriates Earl Birger when he returns from the crusade. He asks why he himself had not been elected instead. In the *Chronicle* Joar Blå answers gruffly that it is he who bears the responsibility. There were, he says, several reasons for the decision. Birger is after all an older man, and they could very well elect a completely different person if Birger is dissatisfied with his own son becoming king. If Birger thinks that would turn out better then he only has to say. Birger then reconsiders and draws back:

> Sir Joar said: 'It was I who did it!
> We see that you are an elderly man
> and likely to die before your son.
> We therefore wish him the kingdom to give,
> in the hope that he will you outlive.
> Your anger, for that reason, stay.
> If you do not want it done this way,
> we then do know of another man;
> of him you may make what you can!'
> …
> The earl did then back down somewhat:
> 'Keep the one you have selected;
> We do not now want him rejected.' (4:26–45)

This is a masterly account of a meeting between two equally strong players in the power game. They know how to balance fury and shrewd argumentation, and know how far they can go in challenging each other. Joar Blå understands very well that Earl Birger sees himself as the natural ruler, but Joar apparently does not want the powerful earl to gain still greater power. To suggest quite a different magnate as king would, on the other hand, be hazardous and could easily lead to civil war. For that reason, it has been decided to put forward Birger's under-age eldest son – despite the uncertainty as to whether he would be equal to the task. Joar coldly counts on Earl Birger not repudiating his own son, especially as the alternative, according to Joar, could be just about anyone! And Earl Birger calms down. He is wise enough

to see that he still holds the actual power, even if he does not wear the royal crown.

Earl Birger is portrayed as combining forcefulness, a hot temper, an interest in legislation, and the ability to accept good advice. That also emerges from other episodes that involve dialogue. Earl Birger, for example, asks for his wife's advice regarding a wife for their son Valdemar, the future king. Birger asks what she thinks of the idea that their son should be engaged to one of the Danish king's daughters. She replies 'from her red mouth in words so sweet' that he ought to lay the matter before his council, both the bishops and the secular nobility. Birger accepts the advice, and all agree that a delegation should be sent to Denmark to arrange the marriage (8:1–10). The description of the wife is, on the one hand, conventional: she has a red mouth and replies with sweet words, according to the norms of courtly literature. On the other hand, it is in fact she who gives Birger the wise political advice to ensure that he gets the council of the realm to agree with the decision.

Earl Birger does not pull his punches when he suppresses a revolt by another group of magnates (6:1–30). Here the chronicler appears to be somewhat ambivalent in his response to the part he played. Birger breaks oaths and pacts with the enemy when it suits him, and pitilessly crushes his enemies, despite the fact that they include nobles belonging to previous royal kindreds. When the leading opponent, a 'Knight of God', dies during a crusade, Earl Birger is said by the chronicler to have turned his eyes to heaven and exclaimed: 'May his soul with God in heaven be, and praise be that he parted is from me!' Thus the *Chronicle* hardly idealises Birger unreservedly. There is a hint of indignation in the account of his oath-breaking and cynical comments on opponents. Earl Birger nevertheless receives the approbation of the *Chronicle* for his legislation and, among other things, for his founding of Stockholm. The earl had 'sagacity', 'sense', and 'foresight'. The people, both young and old, mourned him deeply when he died. He was followed to his grave 'by many respectable men', according to the *Chronicle* (10:18–19, 11:1–5).

Nor is Valdemar Birgersson consistently portrayed as either a hero or a villain. Rather, he becomes a little of each. When the ten-year-old Valdemar is to be engaged to the Danish king's daughter, Sophia, the *Chronicle* describes the young Valdemar very positively. According to his knightly retinue, he was well-built, shows 'sense and shrewdness', and seems to all 'both mild and manly'. He thus seems destined to become a real hero. His betrothed is described as having the qualities of fine 'looks and bearing'. Their wedding is celebrated with tourna-

ments, jousts, dances, fair conversation, 'fine food and noble manners'. Here it is emphasised that the Swedish kingdom is civilised and that magnates and kings are familiar with the rites and rituals of courtly life. Later on in the *Chronicle*, however, both Valdemar and Sophia emerge as more dubious characters. Sophia is a person whose sharp tongue provokes the king's brothers and contributes to the growing antagonism between them (12:10–14). And Valdemar, according to the *Chronicle*, was still handsome, but becomes involved in a love affair that must have caused a great scandal when it happened. Sophia's sister Jutta comes to Sweden on a visit. She is at first greeted as almost an angel 'of celestial grace so proud and charming was her face'. But the terrible outcome is that King Valdemar becomes so deeply infatuated with Jutta 'that he with her was too familiar' (14:17). Even if the *Chronicle* is not explicit, this intimates a sexual relationship that was incestuous (brother-in-law–sister-in-law) in terms of the ethical norms of that period. In all events, the relationship was shocking. Queen Sophia, according to the *Chronicle*, cursed the day that Jutta came to Sweden.

Thus Valdemar undergoes a development in the text of the *Chronicle*; he is not condemned as a potential king from the start, but proves himself unwise in his private life and incautious in war. He thus spoils his chances. It is also interesting to observe how Queen Sophia is described as certainly high-born and beautiful, but at the same time arrogant and sharp-tongued. She fails in the role prescribed by the courtly ideal. Rather she resembles the provocative, strong women that are so common in Old Norse literature. Thus the view of women in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* does not seem to be merely conventional, judged by the notions of civilised conduct. The individuals are described in a far more complex manner. For precisely that reason, they are often strikingly vivid.

In the second dramatic power struggle between brothers Duke Erik is undeniably the hero of the *Chronicle*, as has already been noted. He is supported by the 'noble' Mats Kettilmundsson, who is already part of his retinue when the courting of the Norwegian king's five-year-old daughter Ingeborg is to be undertaken. Duke Erik is a success at the Norwegian court:

> The people therefore him adored
> and said: 'Is that the noble lord,
> the generous Duke Erik, come this way?'
> And many to themselves did quietly say:
> 'God has him well for this world shaped!' (39:22–24)

Erik is handsome and chivalrous and is well liked by Ingeborg's mother; he is charming and amiable. He is, in a word, a real hero: 'He virtue and honour did always uphold' (39:55). He appears before his brother the king in garments appropriate to a court and is polite towards him. But the king perceives the duke and his magnificent retinue as a provocation and suspects disloyal plots against his rule. In that way the antagonisms escalate right up to the tragic deaths of the dukes.

In the description of Duke Erik and Duchess Ingeborg the chronicler hardly lets slip any negative adjectives; here the roles of hero and heroine are more self-evident. Yet the reader can deduce from the course of events that Duke Erik was not a squeaky clean political actor, but one who did not hesitate to engage in breaches of faith and conspiracies.

The complexity of the character portrayals in the *Chronicle* is not only fascinating in literary terms, it probably also reflects an ambiguity in the perception of the leading characters at that time. It is therefore even possible that we can read the *Chronicle* in two ways. At one level we see the evident partisanship, yet we also perceive more or less hidden contrary voices in the very events that are described or in the reservations regarding the morality of the individuals at which the chronicler occasionally hints.

Time-bound ideals and the ambivalences of reality

Some scholars have emphasised that the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* was created precisely at a juncture when there were groups in Sweden that wished to elevate the elite of the country to a more refined cultural level, more like that of other European countries such as France, England, and Germany. The *Chronicle* in that case can be regarded above all as a manifestation of a period when chivalric romance and chivalric culture could be promoted as ideals at royal courts or within rising aristocratic milieux. The *Chronicle*'s accounts of wedding feasts, jousts and banquets are highlighted as examples of an aesthetic ideal, as are certain stereotypes in the character portrayal such as the 'red mouths' of the ladies, and the 'noble', 'mild', yet 'valiant' character of knights and princes. Later Swedish chronicles of the fifteenth century display a more popular and demagogic culture.

There is much substance in these observations. But they do not account for everything. After all, the character portrayals in the *Chronicle of Duke Erik* are in truth not exclusively conventional. The *Chronicle* is sometimes ambiguous in its bias. Nor does it only express an idealised chivalric romanticism. It also reveals a social order that was not yet

structured by a strong State with stable institutions and rules. Various groups of magnates and even brothers within the same royal family could have antagonistic relationships to one another. Oaths were sworn and broken, and political power was to a large extent based on flexible social alliances.

The *Chronicle of Duke Erik* is one of the few examples of outstanding Swedish literature from the early fourteenth century. It is a highly exciting political narrative from a country in Europe's far North. But it is more than that. The *Chronicle* is also well worth studying with regard to the mentality and ideology with which aristocratic elites manifested their cultural identity during the period following the twelfth-century renaissance – and before the fateful progress of the Black Death across Europe.

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