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Beñat Elortza Larrea, *Polity Consolidation and Military Transformation in Medieval Scandinavia. A European Perspective, c. 1035–1320*, Leiden: Brill 2023, ISBN 9789004518773, 382 pp.

In *Polity Consolidation and Military Transformation in Medieval Scandinavia*, Beñat Elortza Larrea aims to investigate the political, societal, economic, and military developments in Scandinavia during the High Middle Ages, a period that, as indicated by the title, stretches from the short eleventh century through the long thirteenth century; that is, from the 1030s to the end of the second decade of the 1300s.

Historically, Elortza Larrea argues, scholarship has studied the above-mentioned developments in the context of *Europeanisation*, which he defines as “the adoption of a package of socio-political, economic, military, religious and ideological models that developed in western Europe from the tenth century onwards” (p. 1). The conclusions of such studies have therefore focused on whether or not Scandinavian developments fulfill the criteria of *Europeanisation*. This has led to the establishment of a dichotomy that Elortza Larrea aims to problematise. His fundamental point of departure is that *Europeanisation* need not be seen as the adoption of a complete package, as the developments in western Europe generally used as models are themselves far from homogenous. Rather, *Europeanisation* should be defined as a set of developmental trends in the socio-political, economic, military, religious, and ideological spheres amongst the political entities of western Europe, with varied results based on local conditions. Thus, any study of the *Europeanisation* of political entities in the European peripheries needs to analyse how these western European trends interacted with local conditions to bring about the developments seen in these polities, rather than whether or not these polities adopted set western European models wholesale.

Elortza Larrea begins with two introductory chapters that provide an overview of regional conditions at the start of the period, as well as contemporary European developments, in order to provide the analytical framework and departure point for his empirical chapters. The analysis itself is broadly structured as a tripartite chronological comparative study, examining each realm in turn. Each part consists of parallel investigations of socio-political, economic, and military developments, which are analyzed century by century. Overarching comparisons and conclusions are laid out in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of theoretical terminology, centred on the use of *State Formation* in previous scholarship. Elortza Larrea problematises this term, and ultimately rejects it entirely, mainly due to issues with *the State* as an analytical concept for the Middle Ages. Instead, he prefers *Polity Consolidation* as a more nuanced term, free from the teleological baggage of the Early Modern model of *the State*, for describing the recurring attempts by the Scandinavian Crowns to exert control over political and military power during the period. The author then problematis-

es the concept of *Europe* in the High Middle Ages, as well as that of *Europeanisation*. He presents the available primary sources for the period, providing a clear and easily followed overview of all available source-types, and provides a methodological discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each type, as well as a discussion of how the various sources can complement each other to overcome individual weaknesses. For example, he discusses poetic sources as valuable testimonies in their own right, but also considers their value as independent testimonies that can augment and corroborate the details in narrative sources, which places the author amongst a growing number of historians working on medieval military history arguing for more focus on poetic sources within historical research (Livingston 2022: 33–41, 115–118).

The chapter includes an extensive presentation of previous scholarship, and a brief introductory overview of the political and economic situation in the region, as well as a more extensive overview of the military organisation, in the era preceding the time-frame of the study. The author shows they have a strong grasp of the prevailing societal and martial conditions at the beginning of the period, as well as the scholarship surrounding it. The inclusion of a popular historical work in the references stands out as unusual, but that in and of itself does not detract from the overall quality of the outline in any significant way.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of consequential developments in the political, economic, and military spheres in western Europe<sup>1</sup> between the mid-tenth to the thirteenth centuries, establishing a framework to facilitate later comparative analyses with Scandinavian polities and their development. The chapter elucidates the processes that were instrumental in these developments, tying in aspects from governance, finances, and warfare to contextualise them. The chapter is organized chronologically, with the developments in each sphere analyzed century by century, allowing for a well-structured framework detailing the dominant trends of each sub-period, and thereby facilitating clearer connections between developments in the various spheres. The chapter also shows how the spheres of governance, politics, social ties, economics, and military developments are all inter-connected and a fruitful selection to study together for a more complete understanding of each process.

This section, as well as the work overall, would nevertheless have benefited greatly from a discussion on the urban naval levy of England, particularly the role of the Cinque Ports, and its development during the period (Bennett 2021: 193–195). This would provide additional evidence of the heterogeneity of the western European states, as well as add a naval aspect on the continent as a point of comparison, considering the heavy focus on the Scandinavian naval levy in the following chapters of the work.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 comprise the main body of the study. In these chapters the author details the historical developments in governance, economy, and warfare in the Kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, respectively. Each chapter begins with a brief general overview of the historical background contextualising the following analysis. The analysis is detailed and informative, though at times slightly difficult to follow due to the recurrence of personal names in both the royal and aristocratic kin-groups. Although this is hardly the fault of the author, the appendix, which contains

<sup>1</sup> Defined as the Holy Roman Empire and the French and English kingdoms.

regnal lists for each polity, could perhaps also have included some family trees as an aid to the reader.

The main body of each chapter is divided into subsections titled “Kingship and Royal Power,” “Royal and Aristocratic Finances,” “Military Organisation,” “Strategy and Tactics,” and “Martial Equipment,” and further organised by century. In this way the socio-political, economic, and military developments are clearly presented, and in a manner where the reader can see the differences and similarities with the European material in Chapter 2, as well as the other Scandinavian kingdoms. In cases where there is a notable lack of scholarly consensus on a specific point, such as between Niels Lund and Gareth Williams on the Danish *lething*, the author provides a detailed overview of each argument, but also takes a stance well supported by the primary sources.

Each topic is explored at length, and the treatment is generally thorough. The author occasionally makes claims that could have warranted further discussion; for example, the perfectly reasonable description of horse armour in the thirteenth century Norwegian *Konungs Skuggsjá* is dismissed as “rather unconvincing” (p. 238) without any further explanation. The analyses of economic developments specifically could also have benefited from more concrete examples. The conclusions in regards to the economic resources available to the respective Crowns are clearly well referenced and as such represent a scholarly consensus, but only in a single instance is this illustrated by an estimate, specifically the annual income the Danish Crown received from the *Stud* tax in the twelfth century. It is possible that the extant evidence is not detailed enough to calculate such estimates for other income sources, but if so that could have been discussed.

The author’s own comparative analysis with the *European* developments outlined in Chapter 2 are generally given in the conclusion of each chapter, though certain sections, such as those on martial equipment, draw more parallels with continental developments in the analysis itself than others. Some aspects of the study could perhaps therefore have benefitted from more explicit contextualization within the main body of the chapters, especially where a Scandinavian development appears to have some similarities to a Continental one, but the author treats it as autochthonous.

Chapter 6 summarizes the main results of Chapters 3–5, and draws more overarching parallels between the three polities, drawing in comparisons with European developments from the second chapter, as well as discussing how these developments were adapted to fit local conditions. The chapter also highlights those developments the author considers to be entirely due to local factors, which deviate from the overall continental trends.

Overall the work succeeds in its main argument. Western Europe is itself not a homogenous entity, where trends that are observed within multiple polities on the continent often have wildly different consequences, and Elortza Larrea shows that any study of the *Europeanisation* of the Scandinavian periphery must also account for how local conditions shaped the reception and implementation of those influences, without teetering into the extremes of assimilation on the one hand or local exceptionalism on the other.

The study is a fruitful contribution to the field as there has been a dearth of comparative studies of the three Scandinavian monarchies with such a broad focus that examines the political, administrative, social, economic, and military de-

velopments together. While it could have benefitted from additional proofreading, this does not detract from the overall quality of the work, which is a valuable addition to the scholarly discourse. The analysis itself is holistic and interdisciplinary, and draws upon a variety of scholarship from different fields, including history, archaeology, numismatics, history of philosophy, and art history, to augment the author's reading of the primary source material. The end result is an overall excellent comparative study, and, in addition to its value as a scholarly work, its thorough treatment of quite a broad scope makes it well suited as didactic material, either as a general introduction to the Scandinavian High Middle Ages at undergraduate levels, or at more advanced levels as a case study on *Polity Consolidation*.

### References

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Stefka G. Eriksen, *Oversatt litteratur i middelalderens Norge*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk 2024, ISBN 9788202753405, 298 pp.

This book deals with translations of medieval literature in Norway. Starting in the thirteenth century, a considerable literary cultural heritage was made available to the Norwegian elite of the time thanks to the many translations produced, primarily during the reign of King Håkon Håkonsson (1217–1263) but also during the reigns of his closest successors. The various kinds of literature made available through these translations are presented in the book, which also provides a picture of those who commissioned the translations, the translators, the readership and why these works often became so popular. There had, of course, been contacts between Norway and continental Europe also prior to the reign of Håkon Håkonsson, and these are addressed in a section on the Europeanisation of Norway. The author points out that the literary activities in Norway must be viewed in relation to writing milieus in Iceland, which is a reasonable starting point. All of this is covered in Chapter 1, which also contains a concluding section on writing, translation and reading in the Middle Ages.

In Chapters 2–11, ten different translations of French, Latin or German origin are presented. The first one is the Old Norse version of one of the best-known romantic stories of the Middle Ages, the legend of Tristan and Isolde, which is a translation of a French verse novel by Thomas d'Angleterre. Motifs from this legend subsequently appeared in many works of Old Norse literature. This is followed by an account of the novels of court poet Chrétien de Troyes, which in Norway appear as *Parcevals saga*, *Ivens saga* and *Erex saga*. French *lais* ['songs'] inspired *Strengleikar*, a collection of 21 short stories about kings, queens, knights and others, and their lives, love affairs, and intrigues, which the reader is acquainted with in Chapter 4. It is not known who