

verse form a journey made for political reasons across Sweden. He tells how one evening he came to a homestead; the door was closed; and in answer to his questions the people within roughly bade him begone, for they were busy with holy things, a sacrifice to their household gods. 'I fear the wrath of Odin,' said the wicked woman. 'We worship the old gods!'

It was into this primitive and fierce community that new ideas were introduced by the Catholic Church, which preached peace as one of the main virtues and relegated retribution to the world to come. This new doctrine contained much more that was not immediately acceptable, and at the same time the organization of the Church came into direct collision with the old traditions. The uncompromising family loyalty that was revealed in the legal order was applied not only to questions of honour but also to property; and now the Church was preaching that one of the most effective ways of winning salvation was to endow her with legacies. Marriage, too, which had long been concerned with the kin, was also to come under the regulation of the Church; and since priests and churches were to be maintained by the parishes, the Church demanded a uniform taxation in accordance with the new unity which it imposed. It took time for these unaccustomed ideas to find acceptance in communities and overcome the primitive desire for independence and the family traditions; nevertheless, they ultimately proved to be an important influence in furthering the fusion of the organized communities with the more scattered settlements.

At the beginning of the twelfth century there was a temporary respite from religious and dynastic strife; and in the 1130's Sverker, a member of a tribe of Östergötland magnates, was acknowledged as King. He lived on the most important royal manor in his home region near Lake Vättern, and this district thus took over the supremacy which had formerly been wielded by the Mälaren region.

Sverker kept on good terms with the Church and, in

consultation with Archbishop Eskil of Lund, supported the founding of the Cistercian monasteries in Sweden. But the throne was not yet secure. Somewhere around 1156 a Danish prince, Magnus Henriksson, effected the murder of Sverker; and a little-known claimant, who later became the legendary 'Eric the Saint', then made his appearance, though he was soon put to death. He was succeeded by Sverker's son Karl, who was killed in 1167 by Knut, the son of Eric the Saint. Knut seems to have been a forceful monarch who made short work of other claimants; and a period of calm ensued. In order to protect Lake Mälaren against pirates he founded a stronghold on the site of modern Stockholm; the coinage was regulated, and, with the King's co-operation, the Church was organized on a more systematic basis. After 1196, however, the throne was the object of a series of confused struggles whose true significance has never been fathomed. The descendants of Sverker and Eric were in constant conflict right up to the middle of the thirteenth century, with sometimes one line in power, sometimes the other; and these conflicts extended beyond the frontiers of the country, for in this period Danish kings and magnates often took part in the domestic feuds of Sweden. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Zealand family of Sunesson supported the claims of Sverker the younger, grandson of the first Sverker, and soon afterwards the Danish kings rallied to the support of the rival dynasty.

In the midst of this confusion new and significant trends were becoming apparent. In 1164 the first Swedish archbishop was installed in the see of Old Uppsala, where the founder of the Eric dynasty became first the local saint and later the patron saint of the whole country. The boundaries of the dioceses were now fixed: apart from that of the archbishop, the five sees were Linköping, Skara, Strängnäs, Västerås, and Växjö, and in Finland there was Åbo. In the middle of the century the Cistercian monks arrived in Sweden and founded monasteries in fertile valleys on the pattern of

Clairvaux. The Church acquired her own canon law and her own courts, and she also secured a separate system of taxation by royal privilege. The kings began to seek ecclesiastical sanction for their coronation, a practice which, so far as is known, was employed for the first time in Eric Knutsson's coronation by the archbishop in 1210.

A class of magnates now emerged, recruited from the old 'great peasants', or families of more prosperous peasantry. This class at first gave the kings a great deal of trouble, but was later to become a characteristic feature of the country as a whole. Its contribution to the government of the kingdom was made through a Council (*Råd*) composed of magnates and churchmen; and it was this Council that acted as Regent during the minority of the last of the Erics. These former peasant proprietors were, ultimately, in conjunction with the King's personal retainers, to form the nucleus of a new Estate: the secular *frälse*,¹ or nobles. These nobles and their Council, assisted by the Church organization, played an important part in welding together the various Swedish provinces.

This period also saw the emergence of a political figure, second only in importance to the crown, whose office similarly embraced the whole kingdom. This was the *Jarl*, who was chosen from among the leading noble families. The most outstanding *Jarls* of the first half of the thirteenth century, such as Birger Brosa and his younger kinsman (known in Swedish history as Birger Jarl), belonged to a family that has since often been wrongly given the name of 'Folkung'. The chief function of the *Jarl*, it seems, was to organize and

¹ There is no exact English equivalent of this term. It denoted the total or partial exemption of both persons and, by extension, the land they owned from taxes and services owed to the crown. Since the nobles chiefly enjoyed this exemption in return for knight service (although it could also be enjoyed by some others, e.g. mine-owners), the word '*frälse*' generally means the 'free' noble Estate and its members. The Church was also 'free' (*andligt frälse*). Those who were not 'free' were called *ofrälse*.

command the *leding*, i.e. the traditional levy of armed men and ships from the eastern provinces. At a given order this force would be assembled early in the summer for campaigns across the sea, with the object of renewing the attempt, not always with success, to gain control of the old and profitable trade routes in the east. Echoes of the Viking era are to be heard in these later expeditions; on the other hand, the *leding* was sanctioned by the Church provided its attacks were directed against pagan tribes, and these expeditions thus became 'crusades' against Finns, Estonians, and Russians.

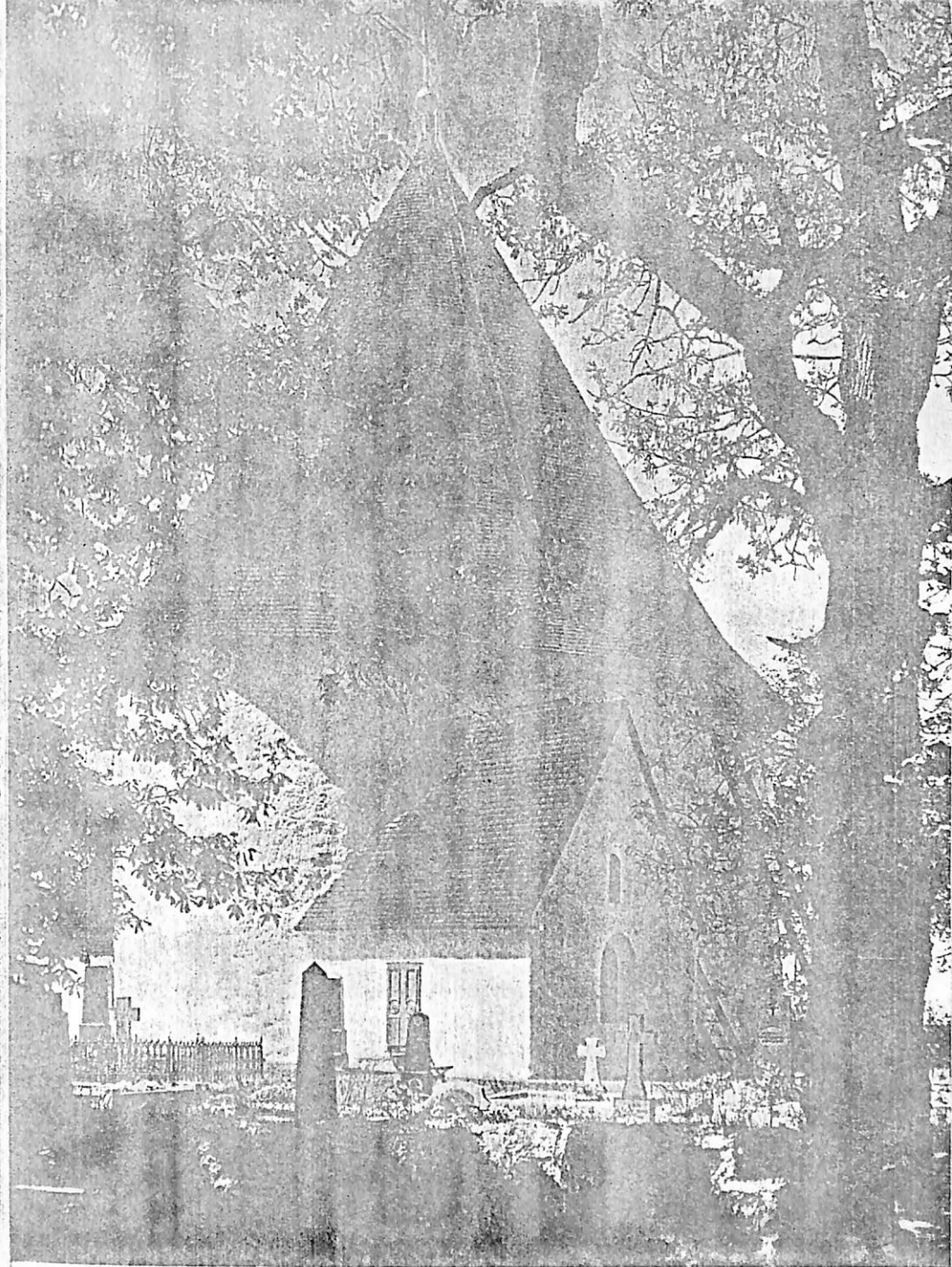
These battles in the east are distinct landmarks in an otherwise obscure period, and Finland now begins to assume the prominent place in Swedish annals that she was to retain for seven centuries. Russian chroniclers describe how Sverker, sailing towards the east with sixty ships, fought against Russia; while a much later legend states that St Eric led a crusade against Finland, though the background of this narrative is obscure. At all events, by the beginning of the thirteenth century the south-west region of Finland was part of the Swedish Church and possessed its own bishop in Abo. There is also evidence of Swedish campaigns round Lake Ladoga in 1164, while in 1220 a *leding* fleet sailed against Estonia, clearly in order to forestall Danish expansion in the same area. This 'crusade', however, ended in disaster. It was becoming increasingly evident that the aim of these campaigns, and also of the colonization of Finland which was going on at the same time, was to gain control of the old trade route to Russia, which was at that time being used by the inhabitants of Gotland and by the German merchants who travelled between Lübeck and Novgorod. The chief men of the country – King, *Jarl*, magnates, and churchmen – were all variously concerned in this policy of expansion, and this provided a common interest which further helped to consolidate the kingdom. Internal strife during the reign of the last of the Erics, Eric Ericsson (1226–50), temporarily

damped their interest, but it had revived again by the 1240's.

The leading figure in Swedish politics at this time was Birger Jarl, a member of the so-called Folkung dynasty. He had married the sister of the childless King Eric; and consequently, according to current practice, his sons were next in succession to the throne. In his capacity of *Jarl* he had led a successful 'crusade' against Tavastland in Finland, as a result of which this part of the kingdom had been consolidated and enlarged. This exploit was celebrated seventy-five years later in the famous *Chronicle of Eric*, and though the anonymous poet has written the episode in the heroic style of the period, his account is based on actual events which occurred in the course of the traditional expansion towards the east.

Meanwhile another factor was emerging which was to be the core both of the new constitution and of the future unity of the country; the farming-peasant community. Place-names provide no more than an indeterminate guide to its development; as in the Viking era, however, a considerable number of new villages seem to have sprung up during the early Middle Ages, with name-endings such as *-torp* (croft), *-säter* (shieling), and *-hult* (copse); and it is interesting that certain names of these types are also to be found in Swedish Finland. That a fair degree of economic prosperity prevailed at that time is confirmed by the many hundreds of country churches which began to be erected in stone, a building enterprise unparalleled in scope until the rapid expansion of urban communities towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus the settlements began to grow, spreading along valleys and watercourses even farther into the great forests.

Life in these expanding Swedish communities can be studied most easily in the provincial codes which give detailed regulations for all aspects of daily life and work, and which were without doubt already in force, although they were not



7. Round church at Hagby, Småland, 11th century.

written down until the next period. Despite conflicts between kings and nobles, the villager was guaranteed protection by both the Church and the embryonic State, and in return for this security he was prepared to accept the new taxes which were gradually imposed on him. In their turn, these taxes provided the State with fresh resources and opportunities.

It is not known at what date the various field systems were introduced into Swedish agriculture; it is certain, however, that the farming-peasant community constituted by this time an economic unit, and that all the great annual agricultural operations were carried out in common. The peasants had drawn up rules for the settlement of all the disputes that inevitably arise in the everyday life of a farming village. The earliest of these provincial codes, the Law of Västergötland, is full of detailed instructions, revealing the anxiety of the peasants to live in harmony at all costs according to the new Christian ideals of peace and justice: 'Christ is first in our community. Then comes our Christian doctrine and all Christians: king, peasants, and all propertied men, bishops and all learned men.'

This Västergötland Law, which dates from the first half of the thirteenth century, also contains the oldest decrees in existence which deal with the political constitution of the country. Its nature is made clear in the opening words: 'The Swedes may take a king but may also depose him.' Much of what it then says is obscure, but one thing is obvious: Sweden was a country with an elected monarchy, and it was the will of the country – the folk – expressed first at the *Ting* of the Svear and subsequently in the other provinces, which determined who was to rule. Another fact that emerges is that the provinces had not yet been wholly absorbed into the kingdom of Sweden; the King who was chosen by the Svear was a stranger to the other regions which he visited on his *Eriksgata* – a tour of the realm after his coronation to receive their allegiance. This ancient division is also illustrated in those parts of the Västergötland Law which deal



8. Wooden font from Alnö Church, Medelpad,
12th century.

with murder and its penalties, which varied according to the home province of the victim.

In the middle of the thirteenth century the Swedish Church was far from being a closely-knit part of the universal Roman Church. The parish and its church were far more real to the Swedish peasant than was the diocese, to say nothing of Rome. A change was not long in coming, however. Towards the end of the reign of the last Eric, Sweden was finally incorporated as a province in the Universal Church at a meeting in Skänninge in 1248, attended by the Papal Legate, Cardinal William of Sabina. A papal bull in 1250 gave this meeting particular significance. The rule of celibacy was laid down, the cathedral chapter was organized on stricter lines, and the study of canon law was prescribed. The mendicant orders had also obtained a firm footing in the country by this time. The first stage of the development which Ansgar had initiated had now been concluded and the Church was henceforth to make a significant contribution, both as a force working for the unity of the kingdom and as an important economic factor.

All these new social, political, and ecclesiastical trends combined to produce, towards the middle of the thirteenth century, a Swedish kingdom which, if not so far advanced, possessed a standing similar to that of the other Scandinavian countries. The loosely linked provinces had become a State which already revealed that homogeneity in tradition, language, and culture that was to mark the whole of its subsequent development, a homogeneity which is unparalleled outside Northern Europe.

V

The Age of the Folkungs

1250-1363

On the death of Eric Ericsson in 1250, his nephew Valdemar, Birger Jarl's eldest son, was elected King of Sweden, and the first of the dynasty later known as the Folkungs ascended the throne. Valdemar ruled jointly with his father until the latter's death in 1266, after which he ruled alone. Soon afterwards, however, he was overthrown as a result of a quarrel with his younger brother Magnus Ladulås, who now held a duchy and the title of Duke, according to the *Jarl* tradition; and with the support of Denmark Magnus was elected to the throne, which he retained until his death in 1290. The quarrel was dramatized in the *Chronicle of Eric*, in which particular stress was laid on King Valdemar's questionable liaison with his wife's sister, Jutta of Denmark. The epoch owes its historical significance, however, to other events; and indeed, the four decades between Valdemar's accession and the death of Magnus Ladulås constitute a remarkable period. Though more is known of the reign of Magnus Ladulås there is evidence that even in Valdemar's time the King managed to increase the power of the central government, both by keeping down the nobles and by better organization. In foreign policy close contact, manifested in fluctuating alliances and frequent inter-marriages, was maintained between Sweden and the two other Scandinavian kingdoms. The most important of the intermarriages were those between King Magnus's son Birger and the sister of the Danish King Eric Menved, and between Eric Menved himself and Magnus's daughter Ingeborg – the latter union was a clear dynastic alliance against Norway and the obstreperous Danish lords. Apart from King Magnus's desire to maintain

Swedish rule on the island of Gotland, projects of eastern expansion were temporarily abandoned. Yet in spite of this active foreign policy the most interesting developments, which had their origins in the preceding period, took place at home.

In these years the Church, whose power was steadily increasing, had become an important ally of the crown in the work of stabilizing the monarchy. This was particularly true in the case of Magnus Ladulås, and he showed his gratitude by extending the privileges of the Church and granting more extensive immunities from taxation to Church land. A proof of the Church's growing power can be found in the large number of cathedral buildings which were either completed or begun from this time onwards. Of these by far the most important was Uppsala Cathedral, which was founded in the 1280's. It was from this cathedral that St Eric was proclaimed patron saint of the realm, and his remains were transferred from Old Uppsala to the new archiepiscopal see. By this time the bishops were powerful lords with large armed retinues.

The result was a new and more powerful monarchy, in which the King was more than just a figurehead and a war lord. The taxation system was organized and expanded to meet the increased needs of a centralized government, as the King could no longer 'live of his own' on the proceeds of the royal estates. A system of dues replaced such services as the *ledung* and the enforced provision of hospitality for the King's troops, and customs duties furnished the government with a new source of income. New laws and ordinances, which had formerly grown spontaneously out of the day-to-day life of the community, were enacted by the central government to meet specific needs, exemplified particularly by the laws for the preservation of the King's peace.

The rise of the monarchy was interwoven in a peculiar way with the growth of the secular nobility. Reference has already been made to the way in which this class, forming as

it did a unifying factor in the different provinces, helped to weld the kingdom together, and it continued to develop, sometimes in opposition to the monarchy and sometimes with its co-operation. King Magnus's rule provides a good illustration of this interplay, for the close co-operation which plainly existed between King and Church was paralleled by equally obvious persistent differences between the sovereign and certain noble families – the famous Algotsson brothers from Västergötland, for example, who had thrown in their lot with Norway and the unruly Danish lords. It is clear that Magnus gathered round him men who did not belong to the old families, though the old first Estate of the 'great men' simultaneously acquired an organization which came to include the King's immediate servants and the vassals of temporal and spiritual lords – the *frälse* or privileged noble class mentioned in the preceding chapter. Their greatest privilege was freedom from taxation (by the Statutes of Alsnö), and on the basis of this exemption an army of mounted knights was formed, similar to those which existed in other parts of Europe. The co-operation between these nobles and the King is illustrated by the emergence of the great offices of the kingdom: the old-established post of *Kansler* (Chancellor) was supplemented by those of *Marsk* (Marshal) and *Drots* (Lord High Steward),¹ and the appointment of a *Jarl* was discontinued.

The combination of conflict and co-operation which characterized this period merely constitute two sides of the same picture. In all essentials feudalism – not the Continental form, however, as this never existed in Sweden – went hand in hand with the monarchy, despite all apparent signs to the contrary. As the Norwegian historian Halvdan Koht puts it: William the Conqueror and Charlemagne were both great and powerful rulers and yet they both furthered feudalism; and it was therefore perfectly natural that feudalism in

¹ These translations are only approximate. The titles have no exact equivalent in English.

Scandinavia should have been founded by a new and powerful monarchy in each country: the Valdemars in Denmark, the Sverre house in Norway, and the Folkungs in Sweden.

Another significant development during the last part of the thirteenth century was the increasing importance of Swedish towns and mining districts. Birger Jarl, like former rulers, co-operated with the German trading towns, and German immigrants obtained a recognized civil status in Sweden. Stockholm, which could boast not only the Royal Castle and a number of churches and religious houses but also an enterprising class of merchants and artisans, was soon to become the capital of the kingdom. Magnus Ladulas himself often held his court on the island of Visingsö in Lake Vättern, where a royal hall had been built in the new Gothic style; the *Chronicle of Eric* also states that Magnus Ladulas was responsible for the erection and embellishment of the Riddarholmen Church, the main sanctuary of the Franciscan monks in Stockholm. Foreign trade flourished, much to the government's satisfaction, as the customs duties made a significant contribution to its coffers. The European market was eager to receive Swedish goods, including butter, skins, and furs, and, above all, silver, iron, and copper from the mines. New methods of working the mines were introduced, mainly from Germany, and fresh abundant sources of ore were found in the central Swedish district of Bergslagen to supplement the older bog and lake ores. These rich assets were exploited with the help of capital and techniques imported from Germany, particularly from Lübeck, and thus was born the oldest real mining industry of Sweden. King, Church, and nobles each took an interest in the new concerns, and crown taxes from the mines undoubtedly helped to stabilize the monarchy at this period.

As a result, new types of communities and settlements began to emerge: the coastal towns which, since they were centres of a flourishing foreign trade, differed in character from the old markets and cathedral towns; the foundries

in Bergslagen; the solid castles and new types of manor houses which the King and his nobles built in towns along the coast and elsewhere. There was also an active cultural life. New laws were passed and old ones revised, the newly-organized nobility began to be influenced by conceptions of chivalry, and Swedish students made their way to the University of Paris. One of the most important changes was the gradual disappearance of slavery, which was finally abolished in 1335, and the slave trade of the Viking Age was superseded by better and more profitable methods of obtaining labour.

Hitherto, a balance had been maintained between monarchy, Church, and nobles. After the death of Magnus Ladulas in 1290, however, the position of the nobles was considerably strengthened by the fact that the late King's oldest son Birger was still a minor. The government was taken over by the Council, which, having begun as an informal gathering, was now a well-organized assembly of the foremost men of the kingdom. The Churchmen moreover soon found themselves opposed by the temporal lords led by the *Mark*, Torgils Knutsson. His importance is clear, despite the meagre records; at home he was the leader of a powerful group of nobles in opposition to the Church, and abroad he vigorously pursued and developed the policy of expansion towards the east which had been in abeyance since the time of Birger Jarl. From 1293 Torgils Knutsson undertook various 'crusades'; he built the fortress of Viborg near the important Russian trade route through the inner part of the Gulf of Finland; his troops pushed forward to Lake Ladoga and the Neva, and the Hansa merchants revealed in their active diplomacy how seriously they regarded this threat to their lucrative Russian trade. Indeed, Torgils Knutsson unconsciously perpetuated in his foreign policy the traditions of the Swedish Vikings. These 'crusades' have been described in glowing terms in the *Chronicle of Eric*, which dwells with considerable pathos on the beleaguering of the

Swedish outpost on the Neva. Nevertheless, though the stronghold eventually fell, the greater part of Torgils's conquests were retained for centuries to come.

Torgils Knutsson continued to exert considerable influence, though of a rather different nature, even after the coronation of Birger Magnusson in 1302, and at first no very significant changes appear to have been made in the government. The first signs of unrest appeared with the attempt of the King's younger brothers, Dukes Eric and Valdemar, to introduce a policy of their own with the help of a group of nobles. In the subsequent quarrel with Birger, the Dukes were forced to flee to Norway (1304), where the Norwegian King presented them with the fief (*län*)¹ of Kungahälla on the west coast (the southern part of what is now Bohuslän). The Dukes were soon reconciled with their brothers, however; they returned to Sweden, where Duke Eric's position was further consolidated as a result of the gift of the Danish fief of Northern Halland together with Varberg; and thenceforward the complex inter-relations between Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, all concentrated round the mouth of the Göta river, tended to centre to an increasing extent on the person of Duke Eric.

Soon after the return of the Dukes a new faction obtained political supremacy in Sweden. The leading Churchmen, who had long been kept down by Torgils Knutsson, gained the support of a group of nobles, including the Dukes, and proceeded to challenge the *Marsk*. He was overthrown, imprisoned, and executed — ostensibly as an enemy of the Church, for to begin with his dead body was not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground — while King Birger, conforming to his father's policy, granted the Church another comprehensive charter. By now, however, Duke Eric had prepared a fresh coup, and in the autumn of 1306 he and his brother Valdemar took the King prisoner at Hätuna. Thus

¹ The Swedish *län* was not a heritable fief but a temporary enjoyment of the incomes and administration of the district concerned.

Duke Eric, whom the *Chronicle of Eric* depicts as possessing all the virtues of the knight, but who in fact was a singularly ruthless and unscrupulous opportunist, became the leading figure in the land.

Birger was liberated soon afterwards, however, and naturally made an attempt to recover what he had lost. It would be impossible to follow all the vicissitudes of the next ten years. Duke Eric sometimes co-operated with Denmark and Norway, and on other occasions fought against them both — though Eric Menved remained loyal on the whole to his brother-in-law Birger — and treaties, negotiations, and campaigns followed in rapid succession. The Duke's possessions on both sides of the Göta river became the nucleus of a feudal state extending within the frontiers of all three kingdoms and forming what might be called the rough draft, geographically, of a Scandinavian union. In 1310 the kingdom of Sweden was divided between the claimants; Birger received large areas of eastern Sweden, Gotland, and Viborg in Finland, while the Dukes took the western provinces of Värmland and Västergötland. In addition, they claimed the key defensive and trading bases in the east: the Castles of Stockholm, Kalmar, and Borgholm, with their adjoining fiefs, and most of Finland. The Dukes subsequently divided their share into two portions, and Eric was to rule over western Sweden, northern Halland, southern Bohuslän, and Kalmar. His 'Scandinavian' kingdom seemed within sight, and his dynastic aims were further revealed by his marriage with the Norwegian Princess, Ingeborg.

This was without question a critical point in Swedish history. Was the unity of the kingdom to be preserved or was it to be split up into feudal states? A gruesome family tragedy provided the answer. In December 1317, both Dukes were invited by the King to the Castle of Nyköping in Södermanland. After a banquet had taken place, the Dukes were taken unawares in their sleep and thrown into prison, where they subsequently died — either from starvation or

ill-treatment, according to contemporary report. King Birger made an immediate attempt to conquer the entire kingdom; the Dukes' adherents had already taken up arms against him, however, and their rising was soon joined by most of the Swedish nobility. Notwithstanding the support of the Danish King, Birger was forced to flee the country in 1318, while his son Magnus was taken prisoner and subsequently executed. King Birger died in exile in Denmark, where his grave now lies, and with considerable help from the widows of the Dukes and the *Drots*, Mats Kettilmundsson, the nobles seized power.

Those who took control did not, however, intend to abolish the monarchy. Their aim was to ensure their own power and make clear their view that the King of Sweden obtained his throne by election and not by hereditary right. The next candidate was an obvious one; the infant son of Duke Eric and his Norwegian consort Ingeborg. In July 1319 the gentry and peasants of the kingdom assembled in Uppsala from the different provinces; and, shortly after he had become, in his own right, King of Norway, the young Magnus Ericsson was elected King of the Swedes. A significant document, embodying an attempt to establish a Swedish constitution, was drawn up, which endorsed the privileges of the nobility and of the Church, confirmed in certain respects the status of the Council; and, in order to prevent the King from imposing arbitrary taxation, gave the Council and people the right to consent to new taxation. Much stress was laid on the election of the King, as opposed to the tendencies of certain Folkungs to establish a hereditary monarchy.

Power was then assumed by the nobles, who had plenty of opportunity to consolidate their position during the thirteen-year Regency, which, indeed, formed one of their most notable periods. Their qualifications were certainly of the highest. They had acquired political training in the Council and in the work of administration; moreover, from

a very early date, members of the great peasant families had acted as 'lawmen' in the administration of justice, and they carried on this tradition by revising the laws of Sweden; the Uppland Law was accomplished by the middle of the 1290's, and the Södermanland law in 1327. It is largely thanks to this work of compilation and revision that a coherent picture can be obtained of the Swedish community in the Folkung era, and linguistically these documents are among the most valuable of Swedish records. The nobles had also learnt a good deal about complicated problems of foreign policy during this period of fraternal strife, and the *Chronicle of Eric*, which was actually written at the time of this Regency, bears witness to a thorough familiarity with the life and ideals of the Age of Chivalry.

This ruling class managed affairs with considerable success during the following decade. Sweden's interests in Finland were asserted in opposition to Russia by the *Drots*, Mats Kettilmundsson, who held the castle fief of Viborg; and the Peace of Nöteborg in 1323 established the frontiers between the two countries for many years to come. On one occasion the Regency government intervened to prevent Duke Eric's widow, Ingeborg, and her Danish-born second husband, Knut Porse, from embarking on a policy of their own, thus saving the country from an awkward situation. Nevertheless, the Duchess Ingeborg had been making the most of the great confusion in Denmark, where she had managed to obtain a footing. She and Knut Porse had designs on Skåne and had already succeeded in annexing southern Halland and parts of Zealand. The Swedish government finally took over the province of Skåne, where Magnus Ericsson was proclaimed as ruler in 1332. On payment of a ransom his title was formally recognized by Count John of Holstein, to whom the province had been pledged by Denmark, then in a state of disintegration. In 1335, when King Magnus made his 'Eriksgata' - the traditional tour made by the King to receive the homage of his people - he

ruled over the largest combination of nationalities that Scandinavia had yet known: Sweden and Finland, Skåne, Blekinge, northern Halland, and Norway. His realm was further extended at the beginning of the 1340's when he purchased southern Halland from Valdemar Atterdag of Denmark and became the unconditional ruler of Skåne.

A significant step towards national unity was taken during the reign of Magnus Ericsson with the preparation of a body of law ('*landslag*', literally: law of the land), which, in contrast to the old provincial codes, was to apply to the whole of Sweden. This task was completed in 1350, and the new law embodied Sweden's earliest form of constitution. It defined the position and scope of the monarchy, incorporating ideas that had been formulated at the election of the King in 1319, and stated explicitly that it should be elective; the only qualification was that the King should be chosen whenever possible from among the previous King's sons. The old custom by which he rode round the country to receive homage, the '*Erikskata*', was retained, and the mutual relationship between King and subject was established in solemn oaths to be sworn by, both parties, each undertaking to accept and honour his rightful obligations. These principles, stated in powerful terms, were to form the basis of the Swedish constitution for many centuries. And the towns subsequently obtained a new municipal law, which regulated their life and gave extensive rights to their strong German element.

Foreign policy during Magnus Ericsson's reign was dictated to some extent by the projects for eastern expansion. The King tried to carry them out, though with little success, by war with Russia, and also by the personal union with Norway, which was later modified by his sharing the rule of this kingdom with his youngest son Hakon. But the most important factor that had to be taken into account was Denmark, where Valdemar Atterdag's energetic attempts to restore the country soon brought him into conflict with

Sweden. Valdemar made some concessions at the beginning of the 1340's, but these were only in the nature of a temporary compromise.

Internal conflicts came to be linked up in a curious way with this Danish problem. It was not long before Magnus Ericsson's attempts to expand his power in accordance with earlier Folkung traditions produced a clash with his nobles. He had already caused his oldest son Eric to be recognized as heir to the throne – another step towards the hereditary monarchy. The King's foremost supporter in his efforts to establish a stronger centralized monarchy was Bengt Algotsson, who had been raised to a dukedom and who was bitterly hated by the nobles on account of his intimacy with the King. These nobles won the sympathies of the young King Eric, and also of King Magnus's brother-in-law, Albrecht of Mecklenburg, who skilfully exploited the unrest in Scandinavia for his own ends; and Magnus was forced to get rid of Bengt Algotsson and share the kingdom with his son. In spite of these setbacks, however, he refused to give up. He leagued himself with Valdemar Atterdag, an alliance that was sealed in 1359 by the betrothal of Magnus's son, Håkon of Norway, with Valdemar's daughter Margaret – the most ambitious dynastic union in the history of Scandinavia. Events now moved fast. The young King Eric died the same year, 1359, and Magnus again became the uncontested ruler. He proceeded to take the significant step of summoning to Kalmar a parliament, a *Riksdag*, in which all four Estates¹ were represented. It is not known whether this meeting ever took place; but the principle of a parliament of the Estates was clearly implicit in the summons, and this principle was ultimately to be followed up with momentous results.

While everything appeared to be proceeding smoothly

¹ The four Estates of the fully developed *Riksdag* were the nobles, the clergy, the burgesses and the peasants. The last three of these were collectively the "unfree" commons (*afrälse*).

Valdemar Atterdag, suddenly changing his tactics, seized Skåne in 1360 and Gotland shortly afterwards (see Chapter VII). This did not prevent Magnus from resuming his alliance with Valdemar, however, as the lords were again proving a source of anxiety, and the marriage between Håkon and Margäret was duly solemnized. Just then another character made his appearance in Swedish politics. Albrecht of Mecklenburg, who was married to Magnus's sister, had a son, also called Albrecht; and in the autumn of 1363 Albrecht the younger set off with ships and troops to conquer Stockholm. He was supported by the Swedish nobles, who hoped to find in him a pliant ruler, and Magnus Ericsson was driven out. His son Håkon was still King of Norway, and he himself retained western Sweden for a time; but they were never able to win back the whole of Sweden either with or without the occasional support of Valdemar Atterdag. The strong north German influence which coloured Swedish economic and cultural life during the Folkung era was thus extended to the sphere of politics; and the Vadstena monks were later to write in their annals: 'Then the birds of prey alighted on the mountain-tops.'

And so the Folkung era came to an end. In many ways it forms a very gloomy chapter in Swedish history. The first half was characterized by violent internal strife, and it concluded in defeat and humiliation. In the middle of the fourteenth century, Sweden, like the rest of Europe, had been scourged by the terrible Black Death, which was interpreted by the mediaeval mind as a punishment from God. In foreign affairs the country met with many setbacks. Yet, in spite of everything, the Swedish communities grew and flourished, strenuously restoring that which had been destroyed by war and pestilence. The areas of settlement and cultivation continued to spread; many new 'crofter-villages' grew up in Västergötland, Småland, and other provinces, and cattle-rearing prospered in these newly-settled areas. Internal colonization had been begun both in Norrland and in the

waste tracts in the interior of Finland. A diverse community was developing, similar in many respects to that which existed in continental Europe, and butter and metals were exported in considerable quantities. The violent clashes between constitutional and absolutist ideas were to have repercussions in the centuries to come. Yet at the same time, and despite German influence, a Swedish mediaeval culture had emerged and was destined to survive the Mecklenburg rule. Few centuries have left behind them such magnificent legacies as the fourteenth, which saw the birth of the *Chronicle of Eric*, the greatest Swedish mediaeval poem, and of the national laws. Moreover, it was this century that produced Saint Birgitta, one of the most exceptional and fascinating personalities of Swedish history, who was herself a typical child of one of the great families of the Folkung dynasty.