

**KINSMEN, FRIENDS OR MERCENARIES? PROBLEMATISING THE
PRESENCE OF INTERNATIONAL FORCES IN SCANDINAVIA BETWEEN THE
TWELFTH AND THE FOURTEENTH CENTURIES**

**¿PARIENTES, AMIGOS O MERCENARIOS? UNA PROBLEMATIZACIÓN EN
TORNO A LA PRESENCIA DE FUERZAS INTERNACIONALES EN
ESCANDINAVIA ENTRE LOS SIGLOS XII Y XIV**

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Abstract: This article explores the growing presence of foreign troops in Scandinavia between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, and aims to elucidate the causes behind the changing patterns of mercenary service in the region. After conceptualising the term ‘mercenary’ from a medieval perspective, the article examines the narrative and administrative corpora in order to identify the origins and motivations of foreign troops in Scandinavian service. The exposition of the primary sources is followed by a comparative discussion, which aims to understand the presence and development of international troops from an inter-Scandinavian perspective.

Keywords: Mercenaries, medieval Scandinavia, migration, state formation

Resumen: Este artículo explora la creciente presencia de fuerzas extranjeras en Escandinavia entre los siglos XII y XIV, y tiene como objetivo dilucidar las causas de los patrones cambiantes del servicio mercenario en la región. Tras conceptualizar el término de ‘mercenario’ desde un punto de vista medieval, el artículo examina los corpus narrativos y administrativos con el fin de identificar los orígenes y las motivaciones de las tropas internacionales en servicio escandinavo. La exposición de las fuentes primarias es seguida por una discusión comparativa que tiene como objetivo entender la presencia y el desarrollo de tropas internacionales desde un punto de vista interescandinavo.

Palabras clave: Mercenarios, Escandinavia medieval, migración, formación del estado

Throughout the Early Middle Ages, Scandinavian magnates and their retinues were renowned for their activities as hired troops elsewhere in Europe; the exploits of the Varangians or the Jomsvikings, for instance, exemplify the important role that these

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mercenaries played many European polities from the Frankish kingdom to Byzantium. From the late eleventh century onwards, however, Scandinavian stipendiary forces disappear from the Continental written sources, while the number of mercenaries employed in military campaigns soared. Mercenary troops from Flanders, for example, became ubiquitous in many of the wars waged by the English kings on both sides of the Channel, as Flemish contingents often comprised the majority of these armies' core of professional soldiers.

Between the twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries in Scandinavia, on the other hand, foreign mercenary forces are very seldom mentioned in the written corpus. Although the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden consolidated their structures of governance and greatly expanded their treasuries, most military campaigns were chiefly waged by the aristocratic strata of society and their personal retinues, as well as non-privileged troops drawn from the *leiðangr*, the Scandinavian naval levies. The main reasons behind the participation of these forces were, indeed, existing obligations towards the established authority, rather than the promise of payment. Only from the closing decades of the thirteenth century onwards, when opposing interests and overlapping family ties caused decades of warfare between the Scandinavian kingdoms, would foreign mercenary forces become a frequent component of military campaigns.

This article will identify the instances in twelfth-, thirteenth-, and early fourteenth-century Scandinavian sources where foreign troops are mentioned, and it will discern their origins, as well as their motivation for armed service. Did these forces come from within Scandinavia, or from other European polities? How can their presence in Scandinavian conflicts be explained – were there meaningful ties of kinship or friendship with the local elites, or was this participation primarily fuelled by the promise of monetary gain? By examining these instances in the narrative and administrative corpora, the main aims of this article are to analyse how the presence of foreign mercenaries can be understood from a wider, Pan-Scandinavian perspective; and to elucidate why international stipendiary forces were so uncommon in Scandinavia between the twelfth and the early fourteenth centuries.

In this study, I examine a broad array of primary material where foreign forces are referenced. These sources include the contemporaneous Icelandic kings' sagas *Sverris saga* and

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, which cover the reigns of Sverre Sigurdsson (r. 1177-1202) and Hákon Hákonsson (r. 1217-1263) respectively. The descriptions found within the fourteenth-century verse chronicle *Erikskrönikan*, which details the main developments in Sweden from c. 1250 to 1319, are also scrutinised, as are the detailed narratives of the Latin-language chronicle *Gesta Danorum*, written in the early thirteenth century. While these narrative texts provide in-depth descriptions of events, financial and administrative details can often be lacking; to this end, I also examine a number of charters from the Scandinavian national *diplomataria* that include mentions of payments and regulations related to mercenary troops. Finally, both more succinct and less relevant materials – such as shorter sagas, annalistic sources, or treatises – are also considered when weighing the evidence provided by the longer and more detailed texts.

In order to fully understand the importance of mentions of foreign troops in the narrative and administrative corpora, this study begins by problematising the term ‘mercenary’ itself. While the modern meaning of the word usually refers to a paid soldier serving in a foreign fighting force, the nature of medieval warfare calls for a more nuanced and exhaustive definition of the concept. This theoretical discussion is followed by an examination of the textual evidence, which is presented in three separate sections that focus on Denmark, Norway and Sweden, respectively. The main aim behind this division is to elucidate whether there are any discernible ‘national’ traits, and to highlight the main developments within each of the Scandinavian kingdoms. Finally, the evidence reviewed in these sections is discussed and considered from a comparative viewpoint, thus aiming to problematise and understand the presence of international forces from a broader inter-Scandinavian perspective. This approach seeks to reveal common patterns that might clarify why foreign mercenaries were so uncommon in Scandinavia before the twelfth century, and which conditions facilitated the arrival of international forces in the region.

Mercenaries and Mercenary Work in the Middle Ages

One of the most contentious terms used throughout this article is, somewhat peculiarly, the word ‘mercenary’ itself, as well as its meaning from a historical perspective. The nature of the pre-modern – and, indeed, medieval – mercenary was rather different from its modern

successor, and what could be perceived as stipendiary work in the Middle Ages should be addressed. In a modern setting, a mercenary is a person who is paid to serve in a foreign army or other military organisation², but in the Middle Ages, mercenary work was not necessarily individual or international – although it was invariably remunerated.

In popular culture, the medieval mercenary is often regarded as an individual who put their martial expertise at the service of employers in exchange for payment. In all likelihood, such perceptions stem from the free companies that were founded in France following the Peace of Brétigny in 1360, which ended the first phase of the Hundred Years' War.³ Large mercenary groups, such as the famed White Company, were composed of individual soldiers who found themselves unemployed after hostilities between the French and the English ceased (Caferro 2006, pp. 43-44). Such provisional and relatively democratic mercenary institutions, however, were the exception throughout the Middle Ages, rather than the rule. The Flemish mercenaries hired by English kings during the twelfth century, for example, were primarily professional knights and men-at-arms with military obligations towards their count; the conditions of service and payment of these troops were negotiated through comprehensive and well-established treaties between English and Flemish princes, instead of by ad hoc agreements (Oksanen 2008). Moreover, the famed Swiss pikemen who were employed by several European princes during the Late Middle Ages – especially in the Italian Wars – were originally cantonal forces, and these troops were usually hired by negotiating with local authorities, not directly with individuals (Bonjour, 1975, pp. 59-60). The majority of the examples included in this article, indeed, show a similar pattern: Scandinavian kings and

² The modern concept of mercenary, albeit widely known and used in everyday parlance, has not been excluded from debate either. The term itself refers, as mentioned above, to an individual who provides armed service in exchange for payment, rather than out of loyalty to a state or an ideology. It should be considered, nevertheless, that several modern private security companies – often regarded as mercenaries in the media – were awarded contracts due to ideological and political affinity with NATO and US values, while many 'soldiers of fortune' during the Cold War – such as former SS members – offered their services exclusively to anti-Communist governments. As such, modern mercenaries should be regarded as paid fighters serving outside the established authority of state actors, but not necessarily operating outside ideological and political considerations (Wittmann, 2017, pp. 236-239).

³ English-language classics focused on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century mercenaries, such as Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward* or Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, have further contributed to the eschewed perception of hired troops in the Middle Ages.

aristocrats seldom hired individuals or small groups as mercenaries, but rather negotiated with princely actors to secure the service of their commended men.

Since the negotiation of mercenary contracts usually happened between aristocratic individuals, rather than between smaller groups or persons, the varying motivations behind stipendiary service should likewise be taken into account, as these were not merely limited to monetary gain. For instance, the counts of Flanders, mentioned above, were generously compensated for providing mercenaries to the English kings, but both polities were also staunch allies throughout the twelfth century (Oksanen, 2008, pp. 269-270). As such, existing interpersonal bonds – based on either kinship or friendship ties – between employers and employees were often crucial when arranging mercenary contracts. In addition, not every waged soldier was necessarily a mercenary; for instance, the members of the Anglo-Norman royal *familia*, the standing household of the English kings, were paid a monetary *stipendium* in exchange for their service, which included escort duties, garrisoning castles and, of course, taking part in military expeditions (Morillo, 1994, pp. 51-56, 60-66). In the Holy Roman Empire, princes and knights alike were paid stipends to ensure their active participation in warfare (Arnold, 1985, pp. 250-251). The payment of such sums was undoubtedly a well-established *quid pro quo* between rulers and their standing retinues, but the armed service of these forces must have likewise been regulated by existing obligations towards the public authority represented by the Crown. These examples, moreover, are not limited to the European mainland. Harald Sigurdsson, the Norwegian king (r. 1046-1066) whose career included extensive mercenary activities in the Byzantine Empire, did not only offer his own personal service, but rather that of his entire retinue to prospective masters (Anonymous, *Fagrskinna* 51). According to *Fagrskinna*, Jaroslav of Kiev already employed numerous Norwegians and Swedes by the time of Harald's arrival, and the presence of Varangians of Scandinavian origin in Byzantium must have likewise helped Harald's initial successes in Byzantium (Anonymous, *Fagrskinna* 51). Although Harald's Byzantine adventures ended badly – either due to his involvement with an imperial princess or due to misappropriation of funds –, Jaroslav's close relation to the Norwegian mercenary is exemplified by the marriage between Harald and Jaroslav's daughter, Ellisiv (Anonymous, *Fagrskinna* 51). Existing political alliances and friendship ties are likewise be an important factor to be taken into consideration when

assessing the presence of hired troops in Scandinavia during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as it is further detailed below.

In addition, the foreignness of medieval mercenaries can be difficult to ascertain, as individuals' origins did not always match the provenance of the forces they served with. Kelly DeVries, for instance, has determined that many of the Flemings who participated in William the Conqueror's conquest of England were in fact from contingents from Boulogne, even though they are identified as Flemish in the sources (DeVries, 2008, pp. 50-51). Similar 'mistakes' or simplifications can be found when examining companies of Brabançon mercenaries during the twelfth century, or even among the ranks of the famed Catalan Company in the fourteenth, which counted many Greek, Byzantine or Turkic soldiers among its ranks (DeVries, 2008, pp. 51-53). The composition of mercenary forces, therefore, can be particularly difficult to determine, but within this article I will primarily⁴ focus on the perceived foreignness of entire bodies hired troops, rather than trying to ascertain the backgrounds and origins of the individuals serving in these groups.

Finally, the examination of these different aspects brings us to the problematisation of the term 'mercenary' itself. Throughout this article, I use the words 'mercenary' and 'stipendiary' interchangeably. Terminologically, these are sometimes regarded as separate: a mercenary is a waged soldier in foreign service, while a stipendiary is any warrior who is paid a stipend. As DeVries highlights, however, this distinction can often be muddled, and it is unlikely that waged warriors themselves saw any discernible difference, if any, between the two (DeVries, 2008, p. 55). Moreover, some of the sources examined in this study use the term *stipendiarius* when explicitly referring to foreign soldiers (e.g. SDHK no. 2317).⁵ It is very likely that both *mercenarius* and *stipendiarius* were used in a variety of contexts to mean a variety of things. In a similar study, Thomas Heebøll-Holm has argued that the term *pirata* was used with different connotations in medieval texts, from seaborne raiders to warriors specialised in maritime warfare, with the latter meaning being wholly embraced by twelfth- and thirteenth-century Danish chroniclers (Heebøll-Holm, 2012).

⁴ The only exceptions will be the rare cases where individual mercenaries, and not entire groups, are named in the source material.

⁵ *Stipendiariis, videlicet, militibus et armigeris extraneis* (Mercenaries, namely, foreign knights and squires).

It is clear, therefore, that the term ‘mercenary’ (as well as ‘stipendiary’ in this case) can be a problematic construct, even when the nature of mercenary work during the Middle Ages is taken into consideration. Unfortunately, since there are no equally descriptive or nuanced alternatives at hand, I will use both terms extensively and interchangeably throughout this article. When referring to individuals and groups as mercenaries, I will base this definition upon two main aspects, namely, the lack of any pre-existing formal obligations of service between the mercenaries and their employers (often exemplified by the foreignness of the former); and a relatively well-discerned *quid pro quo* between the parts, whereby armed service is provided in exchange for payment, monetary or otherwise.

Denmark: Foreign retainers and mercenary princes

Most explicit mentions of foreign stipendiaries in Denmark are from the middle of the twelfth century; the dating of these examples is quite different from the Norwegian and Swedish cases, which appear mostly from the thirteenth century onwards. The main reason for this chronological concentration of cases is the aforementioned *Gesta Danorum*. Written in the early thirteenth century, Saxo’s account of Danish events focuses primarily on the reign of Valdemar I (sole ruler 1157-1182), and it ends in 1186, during the early rule of Valdemar’s son Knud (r. 1170⁶-1202). In addition, book fourteen provides in-depth descriptions of the ‘civil war’ of 1131-1157 – which pitted Valdemar I against his rivals, co-kings Svend III and Knud III⁷ – as well as retelling the main campaigns from 1157 to 1178, when Absalon, who likely commissioned *Gesta Danorum*, was elected archbishop (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, pp. 970-971). It is, rather unsurprisingly, this lengthy and detailed book that contains most mentions of mercenaries. There are very few mentions of mercenaries during the thirteenth century, but this lacuna is likely caused by the comparative dearth of detailed sources, since from the fourteenth century onwards, narrative texts such as the Swedish *Erikskrönikan* highlight the prevalence of German stipendiaries in Danish service.

⁶ Knud was made co-king in 1170, and became sole ruler following Valdemar’s death in 1182.

⁷ Often also referred to as Knud V. Regarding the opposing numbering systems for Danish medieval kings, see Birger Bergh’s article on the subject (Bergh, 1988). Throughout this article, I will use Bergh’s proposed numbering system; therefore, the co-king of the ‘civil wars’ is Knud III, while Valdemar I’s son is Knud IV.

Many of these early instances make reference to individuals or small groups of mercenaries warriors, almost invariably Germans, who took up service with Danish kings, claimants and aristocrats in the course of the internecine conflicts. Several of the examples narrated in *Gesta Danorum* are particularly interesting, not least because they usually refer to the households of minor magnates. For instance, Magnus Eriksen, the natural-born son of Erik III, had Germans – *Theutones* – serving in his retinue in the mid-1170s (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.54.2). In 1157, the abbot of Ringsted abbey, too, was escorted by the German knight – *equite Theutonico* – Radulf, who likely belonged to Svend III's retinue.⁸

Larger mercenary forces are also mentioned, and these are sometimes led by their own princes. Knud III, for example, marched into Jutland with a body of foreign troops – *peregrina manu*, later identified as *Saxones* – around 1153, and besieged Svend and Valdemar in Viborg; the Saxon knights, who were eventually defeated and returned home thereafter, seem to have been provided by Hartwig, Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.5.4-14.5.10). Svend III likewise sought Saxon support in 1156, this time promising money to Henry, Duke of Saxony, in exchange for his military aid (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.17.1). Valdemar, however, withdrew to northern Jutland, and forced the retreat of Henry's army through wile and subterfuge, as he used his contacts among the Saxon nobility to sow mistrust and insecurity among the attackers (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.17.5-14.17.6).

Lastly, the presence of non-aristocratic specialists in the sources should likewise be addressed. While the majority of mercenaries mentioned in the narrative corpus were aristocrats and their professional retinues, changes to the ways war was waged in Scandinavia also created a demand for experts; the construction of castles, for instance, meant that master builders and siege specialists became particularly useful, if not crucial, for campaigns (Villads Jensen, 2009). One of the earliest of foreign warriors of the 1131-1157 war in *Gesta Danorum*, in

⁸ The narrative around Radulf in *Gesta* is rather curious. Although a member of Svend's retinue, he is portrayed as a brave and resourceful warrior when fighting the Wends (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.15.2-14.15.3). He later appears accompanying the abbot, and he is identified as a German. Shortly after, when Svend attempts to kill his co-kings in Roskilde (killing Knud but only wounding Valdemar), Radulf loudly protests at the treachery of his master (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.18.8). It is a possibility that, following Svend's demise later in 1157, Radulf found himself employed in Valdemar's household, and perhaps even attained a measure of wealth or status.

fact, refers to such specialists. During the early stages of Erik II's revolt in 1131, he was besieged in Roskilde by Harald Kesja, who had built a fort outside the town. Unable to break out, Erik recruited the assistance of the Saxons living in Roskilde, who built a siege engine – *tormentorum artificia* –, which destroyed Harald's fort; soon after, the Saxons actively participated in chasing Harald's forces away (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 13.9.5-13.9.7). Considering the Saxons' assistance as an expression of mercenary work might indeed be problematic, but the excerpt nonetheless highlights the importance of external martial expertise. A similar instance that took place in the early thirteenth century further strengthens the idea of foreign specialists in German service. In the 1220s, shortly after the conquest of the Estonian mainland, Valdemar II endowed considerable estates to an Ulrik 'trebuchet master' in Harrien (DD 1.7.299, Villads Jensen, 2009, p. 192). The circumstances surrounding this event are unclear, as it cannot be discerned whether the donation was given due to Ulrik's connections or as a reward for the rendered services (Villads Jensen, 2009, p. 192). It is possible, nevertheless, that Ulrik was of German origin, especially when his name is taken into account.⁹ As the Scandinavian royal treasuries grew and the employment of aristocratic mercenaries became commonplace, it is not unlikely that non-aristocratic specialists were also hired, although their presence in the sources is virtually non-existent. As Kurt Villads Jensen highlights, however, the source material surrounding these specialists is fragmentary, and wider conclusions cannot be extrapolated from the fragmentary data (Villads Jensen, 2009, p. 192).

As far as the motivation of these early mercenaries is concerned, economic gain – as well as social mobility – seems to be one of the main reasons behind their employment with Danish magnates. In the case of Henry's expedition in 1156, promise of a large payment – *pecuniam pollicetur ingetem* – is explicitly mentioned, although it is unclear whether this payment was exacted following the failure of the campaign (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.17.1). Moreover, further payments to German princes are also described in the text: Lothar III, then

⁹ The Scandinavian form of the name, UlfríkR, was relatively uncommon in the Middle Ages; a Swedish study has identified only a single case in its national onomastic corpus, which mentions an Ulfric, canon of Lund, whose death is recorded in the *Libri Datici Lundenses* (Weeke, 1884, p. 92). According to the unpublished datasets from the Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore, however, the name Ulrik/Vlrek was of German provenance (<https://www.isof.se/arkiv-och-insamling/digitala-arkivtjanster/sveriges-medeltida-personnamn---fornamnsregister-abbe-oxvidh>).



king of Germany, received a payment from the future Erik II (r. 1134-1137) in 1131 in exchange for military support (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 13.8.5), and the aforementioned Henry of Saxony was also given 1,500 pounds in silver in the early 1150s (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.15.6). In both cases, the promised military support never materialised, but the very mentions of payment are nevertheless meaningful. Individuals and small groups of stipendiary forces, on the other hand, must have also served on promise of payment, although possibilities of creating meaningful friendship ties and opportunities for social mobility must have likewise been an important factor. Saxo, for instance, highlights the Danish kings' own eagerness to stay on friendly terms with German mercenaries, even with those who had been hired to oppose them. In the aftermath of Knud III's unsuccessful invasion of Jutland in 1153, a Saxon knight called Brune was captured by Svend's supporters. According to *Gesta Danorum*, Brune had left Knud's forces before the defeat at Viborg and, while the population of Ribe expected that the Saxon would be punished, he was treated well by Svend, and was even allowed to leave after having received gifts (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.5.10). Although Brune's story does not end well – he was ambushed shortly after his departure – it is meaningful that Svend's attitude was conciliatory at worst, and outright friendly at best; the claimant must have expected to hire stipendiaries himself – as he indeed would do in 1156 –, and as such sought to cultivate relationships south of the Danevirke. While it is virtually impossible to gain any insights into the backgrounds of individual mercenaries, it is also feasible that they aimed to find some form of long-term societal advancement that was unlikely or unattainable at home. During the 1130s and 1140s, the Danish kings granted estates and royal rights to individuals in exchange for armed service; in the late 1140s, one of these estates was granted to Count Adolf II of Holstein by Knud III (Helmold, *Chronica Slavorum*, 1.67; Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, p. 1212 apud Skyum-Nielsen, 1971, pp. 137, 208). It is possible that one of the aims of these individual low-ranking aristocrats was to receive estates and positions from their patrons, thus taking advantage of the internal struggles in order to establish themselves as landowning magnates in Denmark. There is no evidence to suggest that this was indeed the case, and in any case these land grants would rapidly disappear after Valdemar I's victory in 1157 (Gelting, 2011, p. 168); nevertheless, similar developments in Sweden during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries – described below – suggest that such motivations could have been a distinct possibility.

Moreover, it should be considered that Saxo's markedly anti-German – and, to a degree, anti-mercenary – attitudes might have led him to omit well-known cases of stipendiaries from the text. One of the most meaningful omissions is related to the Battle of Fotevik, in 1134, when Erik II soundly defeated his uncle Niels. In traditional historiography, this victory has been attributed to the presence of 300 German knights among Erik's ranks; the *Annals of Erfurt*, for example, mention the CCC^{tis} *militibus Teutonicis fortissimis* who took part in the battle, as do the near-contemporary *Annals of Paderborn*, which highlight the German involvement in the engagement (Holder-Egger, 1899, p. 40; Scheffer-Boichorst, 1870, pp. 82-84, 160). One of the likely reasons for this omission could be that Erik II's rebellion had been spurred by the murder of Knud Lavard – Valdemar I's father – and Saxo thus chose to portray Erik in a positive light.¹⁰ Shortly after Saxo's account of the engagement at Fotevik, his distaste for mercenaries is highlighted: when the sons of Harald Kesja requested their father's estates from Erik III (r. 1137-1146), the king refused, arguing that Harald's lands had been seized because he had used mercenaries:

Patrem siquidem eius peregrino milite aduersum patriam usum decretam hac lege sententiam incurrisse.

Oluf's father [i.e. Harald Kesja], he [Erik III] said, had laid himself open to the sentence prescribed by this statute in employing foreign troops against his native land (Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum, 14.2.5).

In addition, it is meaningful that those who Saxo aims to present in a positive light – Absalon, Valdemar I or Knud IV, for instance – are very seldom portrayed as employers of mercenaries. Adolf II of Holstein's relationship to Valdemar, for instance, is shown as one of clear subservience, even though Adolf was the emperor's vassal (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.28.23). As mentioned above, Adolf might have indeed held an estate in Denmark from the 1140s, given to him by Knud III, but this benefice was in all likelihood held in exchange of military assistance (Friis-Jensen and Fisher, 2015, p. 1212 apud Skyum-Nielsen, 1971, pp. 137, 208; Gelting, 2011, pp. 167).¹¹ Therefore, it is plausible that hiring mercenary

¹⁰ It is true, however, that it was Erik who offered money to Lothar III in exchange for military support in 1131.

¹¹ Moreover, the bequeathment of royal estates as gifts is not only condemned by Saxo, but also attributed to Erik III's German wife (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.2.13). For semi-feudal forms of tenure in twelfth-century Denmark, see Skyum-Nielsen, 1971 and Gelting 2011, pp. 166-167.



troops more common than what *Gesta Danorum* leads us to believe, but the conditions of service and the motivations of these mercenaries must have been similar to the cases highlighted above.

Examples from the early fourteenth century, on the other hand, show an increased presence of German princes in Danish armies, while individual mercenaries are seldom mentioned in the sources. For instance, during one of the Swedish campaigns launched by Erik VI (r. 1286-1319) in 1308, *Erikskrönikan* mentions that many Danish and German contingents had joined the expedition:

Aff Danmark konung Erik / han samfnade starklika sik / med däni ok tyzska med ibland / Margin man aff främada land / wäl räddir i hans thienisto foor, / thy war hans här mykin ok stoor. / Adhirtan landzherra, / summi med flere örss ok summi med färre / komo honom tha til trööst / Jak tror at therä panter wart wel lööst (Jansson, 2003, p. 134).

King Erik of Denmark set about / a powerful army to fit out, / with German and well as Danish bands. / Many men from foreign lands / well-equipped there came along, / making his army large and strong. / Lesser princes, eighteen in all, / with troops of horsemen large or small, / came to his aid and, it would seem, / did their pledges well redeem (Carlquist and Hogg, 2012, p. 173).

Possibly making reference to the same campaign, the *Chronica Jutensis* also mentions German involvement in Danish armies, and explicitly highlights the loyalty shown by *dominum Mægelburgh* and his *extraneos Teutonicos* – which must be a reference to Henry II of Mecklenburg (r. 1302-1329), who had a rather bumpy relationship with Erik VI, as Erik had taken Rostock from Henry's control (Gertz, 1917, pp. 448-450; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2008, p. 366). Indeed, both Erik VI and his brother and successor, Christoffer II (r. 1319-1326, 1329-1332) relied heavily on the northern German princes' military assistance; unable to pay for these services, both kings mortgaged parts of their kingdom as safeties, and Denmark would be occupied by German aristocrats after Christoffer's death in 1332 (Olesen, 2008, pp. 714-715).¹² One of the most meaningful aspects of these fourteenth-century contracts is that many German princes had kinship ties to the Danish royal dynasty: John III of Holstein-Plön, for example, was Erik VI's maternal half-brother, while Gerhard III of Holstein-Rendsburg was the uncle

¹² The services provided by these German princes, chiefly the counts of Holstein-Rendsburg and Holstein-Plön, must have been near-continuous and prohibitively expensive, even when compared to similar twelfth-century agreements. The agreement with Henry of Saxony in the 1150s, mentioned above, involved a payment of 1,500 pounds of silver. The mortgage for Skåne and Blekinge in the 1330s, on the other hand, amounted to 34,000 marks, or 17,000 pounds, of silver (Olesen, 2008, pp. 714-715).

of Valdemar V of Schleswig, who also reigned Denmark as Valdemar III between 1329 and 1332. Both friendship and kinship ties, therefore, had been cultivated for decades between the Danish and German aristocracies, which led to an increase in mercenary contracts, as well as to an eventual growth in German immigration and political dominance in Denmark and Sweden, as it is discussed below. Due to the nature of the fourteenth-century sources, very little is known about individual mercenaries during this time, but as the Swedish sources – see below – suggest, it is possible that such armed service persisted throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The Norwegian kingdom and the English connection

Mentions of foreign warriors in the Norwegian – as well as in the Swedish – corpora are considerably more limited than the examples discussed above, but the few instances where mercenaries are referred to are likewise meaningful. The scarcity of Norwegian cases is particularly puzzling: although direct mentions of foreign warriors are quantitatively much poorer than the Danish examples highlighted above, the Norwegian period of internal struggles lasted for much longer. These dynastic wars were periodic outbreaks of violence between different scions of the royal kin-group, and lasted between c. 1130 and c. 1240. Mentions of mercenary forces, however, continue throughout the rest of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, as a greatly strengthened Norwegian kingdom sought to establish itself further in the Scandinavian arena.

The earliest example involving foreign warriors in Norway is repeated by *Gesta Danorum*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*; unlike most other mentions, this one refers to intra-Scandinavian mobility and it might, indeed, demonstrate that armed service within Scandinavia was not always noticeably reliant on payment. In 1134, Harald Gille was soundly defeated by his co-ruler and opponent, Magnus IV, and promptly sought refuge with Erik II of Denmark. According to *Gesta Danorum*, Harald's aim was to gather troops from Erik – *ut ab Erico aliquid uirium contraheret* –, and while Erik seems to have been willing, the threat of Wendish attacks prevented him from providing Harald with an army (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.1.5). Both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* tell a slightly different story, as these sources narrate that Erik gave a number of unrigged longships to Harald (Anonymous,

Fagrskinna, 94; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Magnúss saga Blinda ok Harald Gilla*, 3). In addition, *Heimskringla* asserts that Harald received the right to move around Halland – *yfirferð* – and to collect royal revenue – *veizla* – from the same region, which he used in earnest to recruit troops there: *Eptir þat fór Haraldr konungr norðr um Halland ok þá kom lið til hans* (Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Magnúss saga Blinda ok Harald Gilla*, 3). In his translation, Hollander (1964, p. 718) attributes this gesture to the support that Magnus had shown to Erik in the past, and Erik's exile in Norway is likewise recounted by Saxo (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 13.11.1-13.11.7).¹³ Shortly afterwards, in 1137, Erik II would support Harald's opponent Magnus IV against Harald's sons by launching a large-scale expedition against Oslo, but he was repulsed; *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* merely state that Erik's goal was to support Magnus, rather than highlighting any further agreements (Anonymous, *Fagrskinna*, 98; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Haraldssona saga*, 3-4).¹⁴ These examples highlight how important friendship ties could be when securing military support, especially when no monetary payments are mentioned in the sources, but the reasons behind these supposedly selfless acts from the Danish kings might very well hide a more pragmatic aim. Control over Viken was contested between the Norway and Denmark throughout the twelfth century, and it is likely that the unmentioned reward behind these expeditions was to establish a Danish foothold along the Oslofjord; when Valdemar I launched a similar enterprise in 1167-1168, its aim had been to conquer the area by force, and he eventually forced Erling Skakke, Magnus V's father and guardian, to accept Viken as an earldom from the Danish king (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.38.1-14.38.3; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Magnúss saga Erlingssonar*, 2, 23, 27-30).

There are considerably fewer examples from the 1180s onwards, as *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Gesta Danorum* end their narratives in the course of Magnus V Erlingsson's

¹³ Saxo also describes Harald's attempt to murder Erik, which was ultimately instigated by Niels. The support provided by Erik in 1134 casts some doubt to this narrative, especially when the omissions in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, neither of which mention the episode, is considered.

¹⁴ These events are also included in *Gesta Danorum*, but the expedition is said to take place earlier – possibly in 1135 –, and it is shown as a continuation of Erik's support for Harald. This is, in all likelihood, a mistake on Saxo's part (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.1.8).

reign (1161-1184). One of the most meaningful cases is the mention of English soldiers in Sverre Sigurdsson's service in 1201. *Sverris saga* recounts the nature of these troops:

Jón Englakonungr hafði sent Sverri konungi áðr um sumarit eitt hundrað hermanna, þeira er Ribbaldar váru kallaðir. Þeir váru svá skjótir á fæti sem dýr. Þeir váru ok miklir bogmenn ok yfrit djarfir ok spörðu eigi illt at gera (Þorleifur Hauksson, 2007, p. 271).

In the summer when King Sverri was in Bergen, John, King of the English, had sent him two hundred warriors¹⁵ of those called Ribbalds. They were swift of foot as deer, excellent bowmen, very brave, and did not shrink from evil deeds (Sephton, 1899, p. 224).

Considering that these troops had been made available to Sverre, the eponymous subject of the saga, the text's description of the Ribbalds' activities is scathing: they plundered and murdered as they marched from Hallingdal to Telemark, and did not spare women or children. The usage of the term *Ribbaldar* is consistent with this view, as it must be a derivation of the medieval Latin word *ribaldus*, meaning knave or bully (Niermeyer, 2002, p. 1201). Although the saga does not the conditions of service of these forces – they are, in fact, not mentioned anywhere else in the text –, English administrative documents can further elucidate the origins and composition of the Ribbalds. The exchequer's Pipe rolls from 1201 show that a number of troops were gathered and sent to Norway; these were mostly Welsh infantrymen – *pedites* –, but a knight, several *constabularii* and four mounted archers are also mentioned (DN 19, nos. 75, 76 and 77). More interestingly, the documents show that the wages, equipment and provisions for these forces were paid by English sheriffs, as well as the costs of sending them to Norway; finally, 300 *summae* of grain were also sent to Sverre as a gift. The costs of furnishing and transporting the Ribbalds were indeed considerable, so it is unlikely John did not expect a payment in return, especially when his ongoing efforts to secure English possessions in Normandy are taken into account. Rather, the sudden appearance of English mercenaries should be attributed to the formation of an English-Norwegian political alliance designed to counteract the marriage between Ingeborg of Denmark and Philip Augustus of France (Benham, 2005, pp. 45-49; Bagge, 2010, p. 50).¹⁶

¹⁵ Some Old Norse editions, such as the one used by Sephton, mention *toau hundruð hermanna*, hence the discrepancy. See Unger, 1871.

¹⁶ Another possibility is that Sverre had spent time in Henry II's court during his youth, where he honed his military abilities and created friendship bonds with Anglo-Norman aristocrats. This eventuality is unlikely, and even Kåre Lunden, who first suggested Sverre could have lived in England before traveling to Norway, calls the theory an educated guess (Lunden, 1976, p. 109).

There is yet another instance where English mercenaries are mentioned in the Norwegian corpus, although this does not occur until the late thirteenth century. In 1286, Eirik II Magnusson sent jarl Alv Erlingsson to England; this envoy's assignment was to gather English troops that could be employed in an upcoming expedition against Denmark. The composition of these forces is, however, unclear: Edward I of England allowed English knights and others – *de regno nostro militibus et aliis* – to depart with Alv if they wished, but an Icelandic annal mentions that the Norwegian jarl brought *Fiportungar* with him, which probably refers to maritime specialists recruited from the Cinque Ports (DN 19, no. 321; Fagerland, 2005, pp. 116-118; Opsahl, 2007, p. 102). The military specialisation and background of these mercenaries cannot be further discerned, as they promptly disappear from the sources, but Edward I's mention of *milites* and the annals' reference to maritime warriors does suggest these could be combination of aristocratic and non-aristocratic troops, not unlike the *Ribbalds* mentioned in *Sverris saga*. Furthermore, it is clear that these forces were, in fact, mercenaries, as Alv Erlingsson's first assignment was to secure a loan of 2,000 marks of silver from Edward I – which he was to spend to hire troops under Edward's own authority (DN 19, no. 318; RN 2, no. 419; Ersland, 2000, p. 100; Fagerland, 2005, p. 116). These negotiations also took place during a period of excellent relations between the English and Norwegian kings (Bagge 2010, pp. 92-93), which leads us to believe that the costs of the *Ribbaldar* in 1200 were not necessarily borne by the English treasury either.

The last mention of mercenary troops in a Norwegian context took place in the early fourteenth century, during the wars between Birger Magnusson of Sweden (sole king 1290-1319) and his brothers, dukes Erik and Valdemar, which saw considerable Danish and Norwegian interference. In 1307, Håkon V Magnusson of Norway promised a considerable sum to Erik and Valdemar in exchange for an attack against Denmark, which was to be conducted by the Swedes' own retinues and German mercenaries, *stipendiariis de alamannia* (SDHK no. 2223). *Strictu senso* – at least from a Norwegian perspective –, both the Swedes and the Germans were acting as mercenaries, and this impression is further reinforced when the Swedish dukes' unpredictable behaviour is taken into account. In 1308, Erik and Valdemar led a campaign against Oslo and besieged Akershus castle, acting in the rash and violent manner

one would sometimes expect from hired troops (Carlquist and Hogg, pp. 160-166).¹⁷ Finally, the small sum mentioned in the diploma is interesting: only 1,000 marks of pure silver and another 1,000 old Norwegian marks were promised, an extremely low sum when the 34,000 marks owed to German princes are taken into account.

References to individual warriors from abroad, on the other hand, are much more limited. *Hákonar saga* briefly alludes to the fact that Skule Bårdsson had Danish retainers, who were good fighters and heavy drinkers: *Hóli gæddusk hirðmenn Skúla / hrukku lítt meðan full var skrukka / drukku þeir av Danmörk rekkar / drógusk lítt um fjöll ok skóga* (Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 191). There also is a very short and cryptic sentence in *Konungs Skuggsjá*, which was written as an instructional manual in the 1250s. When the text discusses martial training exercises, it instructs the reader to train in pairs when dismounted; when choosing a sparring partner, anyone will do – regardless of whether these are foreigners or locals, *ut lænndzkr eða herlænnzkr* (Holm-Olsen, 1945, p. 59). Unfortunately, these two mentions are the only direct references to foreigners in royal and aristocratic retinues within the Norwegian corpus; unlike in Denmark or Sweden, no individuals are identified by name. One of the main causes for this scarcity, even when the narrative corpus of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is quite rich, must be the relative economic poverty of Norwegian kings and high aristocrats, especially from a Scandinavian perspective. The Norwegian kings could seldom afford to hire mercenaries from abroad, and only did so sparingly (Bagge, 2010, p. 105); the royal *hirð* was likewise relatively small, and maintaining its membership cohesive, content and loyal must have been a wiser course of action than to incur the aristocracy's anger by giving generous gifts and benefices to upstarts from abroad. Financial difficulties considered, however, it is nevertheless significant that the comparatively poor Norwegian Crown did hire stipendiary forces to supplement its armies when it was absolutely necessary.

¹⁷ To make negative mercenary behaviour even more interesting, this episode in *Erikskrönikan* is almost immediately preceded by the plundering activities of German mercenaries in Sweden, which was triggered by Erik and Valdemar's careless approach by housing the stipendiaries in Jönköping unsupervised.

Danish allies and German knights in Sweden

The Swedish narrative and administrative corpora are extremely poor for most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the earliest extant chronicle, *Erikskrönikan*, was written sometime after 1320, while very few royal and aristocratic diplomas predate the mid-thirteenth century. As such, very little can be discerned about mercenary activities in Sweden before the inter-Scandinavian conflicts of c. 1280 to c. 1320. While the presence of foreign troops is occasionally mentioned from the early twelfth century onwards, the conditions under which they served are impossible to ascertain. Charters and narrative materials from the early fourteenth century onwards, however, provide a more in-depth view of the mercenary phenomenon, and the employment and financing of stipendiary forces can be discerned more effectively.

Much like in Norway and Denmark, inter-dynastic struggles shaped the political history of the Swedish realm between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries. Following the death of Inge the Younger in 1125, opposing kin-groups vied for kingship, the most notable of which were the *Sverkerska ätten* from Östergötland and the *Erikska ätten* from Västergötland (Line, 2007, pp. 75-80). Conflicts between the two aristocratic houses lasted until 1216, whereby peaceful successions were negotiated, and the issue was put to rest in 1250 with the accession of a new kin-group – *Bjälboätten* – to the throne.

The earliest instance of foreign troops supporting a Swedish magnate, in fact, takes place during these conflicts. In 1207 or 1208, Sverker the younger (r. 1195-1208) fled Sweden, and his opponent Erik Knutsson was elected king. Shortly before or after his flight, Sverker married Benedikte, a member of the powerful Danish Hvide kin-group, probably as a means of securing military support from her brothers (Line, 2007, p. 107). Surely enough, Sverker returned to Sweden in 1208 with a large Danish force, but he was soundly defeated at Lena, where two of his newfound brothers-in-law were killed (Anonymous, *Annales 1208-1288*, p. 258). Undeterred, Sverker gathered yet another Danish army in 1210, only to be defeated again at Gestilren and killed (Anonymous, *Annales 1208-1288*, p. 258). Both of these battles are very succinctly recounted in annals, and thus it is difficult to understand the Hvide aristocrats' willingness to aid Sverker; the initial campaign could have been motivated by the opportunity

to place an ally on the Swedish throne, but the Gestilren campaign – especially after the disastrous consequences of the first expedition – might suggest that further promises had been made by Sverker. It is, nevertheless, impossible to know whether landed estates or monetary payments had been promised to the Danish aristocrats, although it is by no means unlikely.

Foreign warriors reappear in the sources following the accession of the first Bjälbo king, Valdemar Birgersson (r. 1250-1275). Shortly after the young king's coronation at Linköping, a group of dissatisfied aristocrats known as the *folkungar* rebelled against Valdemar and his father, the regent Birger Magnusson, more commonly known as Birger Jarl. Unlike in previous *folkungar* revolts against the kings of the *Erikska ätten*, the leaders of this rebellion enjoyed the assistance of foreign troops, although such support would be in vain, as Birger Jarl tricked the *folkungar* magnates and apprehended them. According to *Erikskrönikan*, the *folkungar* had Danish, Norwegian and German soldiers among their ranks (Carlquist and Hogg, 2012, p. 42). *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, on the other hand, mentions that the rebellious aristocrats tried – and failed – to get Norwegian support, and thereafter sailed to Wendish lands to hire soldiers there; shortly after this excerpt, the saga mentions that a number of Germans were executed by Birger Jarl following his victory over the *folkungar* at Herrevadsbro (Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 320, 323). Philip Line convincingly argues that Hákon Hákonsson would not have provided troops to Birger's enemies, as both aristocrats had cemented a marriage alliance in 1249 (Line, 2007, pp. 125-127), and there is no further evidence that confirms the involvement of Danish forces either. As with earlier instances, it is impossible to ascertain the conditions under which these troops served, but the presence of large numbers of mercenaries in aristocratic service – in numbers large enough to warrant an explicit mention in the Norwegian saga – is all the same significant.

Later conflicts – and their corresponding plentiful written sources – do nevertheless provide more meaningful information regarding the presence of foreign stipendiaries in Sweden. Valdemar Birgersson would be deposed and succeeded by his brother, Magnus Ladulås, in 1275; following Magnus's death in 1290, his eldest son Birger acceded the throne. However, Birger had two brothers, the aforementioned dukes Erik and Valdemar Magnusson, who were unhappy with their weight in governance, and the intra-dynastic tensions between

the king and his brothers would result in recurring outbreaks of internecine conflict during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

These wars were marred by extensive inter-Scandinavian armed interventions, but the widespread employment of German mercenaries by both parties in the conflict was likewise substantial. As highlighted above, Erik and Valdemar Magnusson were promised a large sum by Håkon Magnusson of Norway to hire German mercenaries in 1307, but the dukes' employment of stipendiaries was not limited to agreements with foreign princes. In a subsequent campaign against their erstwhile ally Håkon, probably in 1309 or 1310, the Swedish dukes launched an expedition to capture the Norwegian castle at Kungahälla – modern Kungälv – with a large force of Swedish and German knights. According to *Erikskrönikan*:

Tha reedh hertogh Waldemar / tiit som hertogh Erik war / aff Stokholm med en wänan rotha, / badhe riddara ok riddare nota, / uplenszka ok tyzska i bland, / ok ridhu til Westergötland (Jansson, 2003, p. 139).

Duke Valdemar rode on his way / to where Duke Erik then did stay, / from Stockholm, by a fine troop guarded / of knights and those as their equals regarded, / Swedes and Germans side by side, / and did to Västergötland ride (Carlquist and Hogg, 2012, p. 179).

A diploma issued in late 1309 further elucidates how the costs for hiring mercenaries could be spared. Through this document, Erik and Valdemar requested an extraordinary payment from the population of Tiundaland and Attundaland in order to pay for foreign knights and squires – *stipendiariis, videlicet, militibus et armigeris extraneis* –, but the inhabitants could avoid the tax by providing armoured service on horseback instead (SDHK no. 2317). Such a measure might have been designed to placate the wealthiest lay and ecclesiastical magnates in the region – those who could indeed afford the training and equipment of a cavalryman –, but it also reveals the uncomplicated, practical reality behind the use of mercenaries: the lack of large groups of well-trained and reliable forces.

As usual, the motivations of the mercenaries themselves are difficult to determine, although extensive records of financial agreements highlight that monetary gain was indeed a crucial consideration. Nevertheless, opportunities for the mercenaries' career advancement can be surprisingly well distinguished in *Erikskrönikan*. Following the capture of Kungahälla from Håkon V in 1309-10, Erik Magnusson replaced the castellan with a German knight – *en*



riddare aff Tydisland –; the name of the new castellan is not mentioned in the poem, but the fact that the administration of a crucial fortress in the dukes' borders was bestowed upon a foreigner is significant. The dukes' brother Birger, too, surrounded himself with German aristocrats, many of whom were awarded important positions of privilege. The foremost of these examples is the Brunkow kin-group; the first known member of the family was Werner Brunkow, a German aristocrat who served Magnus Ladulås in the late thirteenth century; several diplomas call Werner *miles* and *dominus*, and show that he was involved in the sale of considerable landed estates (SDHK nos, 1139, 1898). The assessment of Magnus's reign according to *Erikskrönikan* is consistent with Werner's career, as the king is accused to rely overly on foreign favourites when governing (Carlquist and Hogg, 2012, pp. 74-77). His son, Johan Brunkow, likewise had a stellar career, since he served as Birger's seneschal – *drots* – between 1314 and 1318; he is nevertheless despised by the author of *Erikskrönikan*, and is portrayed as one of the leading villains who orchestrated the dukes' arrest and execution.

The possibilities of princely backing must have indeed motivated other foreign *milites* to try their luck, and *Erikskrönikan* mentions several of these by name, such as Estonian knight Cristiern Skärbek or Walram, a German known by his soubriquet 'crossbowman' – *skytta* (Janson, 2003, pp. 157, 159). Somewhat unsurprisingly, these foreigners are Birger's men, and advise him to do great harm to the dukes – Walram shackled the dukes shortly after their imprisonment, while Christiern maltreated them during their captivity. It is likely that other princely actors – such as Erik and Valdemar – or even wealthy aristocrats also had foreign retainers in their service, but the portrayals found in *Erikskrönikan* are consistent with the patterns presented in *Gesta Danorum*. Only wicked foreigners who serve the narratives' villains are named, while very few – if any – foreigners in the heroes' service are mentioned; it is not quite coincidental that individuals of importance, such as Erik's German castellan at Kungahälla, have their names omitted.

While the Swedish narrative and administrative corpora are notoriously meagre until the mid-thirteenth century, the plethora of diplomas and the detailed descriptions of *Erikskrönikan* are particularly useful when expanding the study of mercenaries to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, at a time when Danish and Norwegian sources become less detailed themselves. The presence of foreign individuals attached to royal

households and the widespread employment of German forces do, in fact, show great similarities in the use of stipendiaries in both Denmark and Sweden, and the representation of ‘foreign favourites’ appears to be largely similar in the literary traditions of both kingdoms. However, the relatively late consolidation of the Swedish kingdom, which only gained significant momentum from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, means that very little can be known about the employment of stipendiaries before this process gained traction.

Problematising international forces in high medieval Scandinavia

The employment of mercenary groups and the presence of foreign warriors in Scandinavian aristocratic circles between the twelfth and early fourteenth centuries can be discerned in the textual material, even though these mentions are fragmentary and often generally biased against the mere mention of such forces and individuals. As such, the chronological evolution of this phenomenon and overall inter-Scandinavian patterns should be identified in order to understand how the presence of mercenaries developed and to comprehend the underlying causes behind this shift.

The initial influx of mercenaries to medieval Scandinavia took place at different times in each of the realms, with German knights and armies appearing in Denmark as early as in the 1150s, while non-Scandinavian stipendiaries do not feature in Swedish events until a hundred years later. However, an important commonality remains: the introduction of well-trained foreign soldiers happened as a response to serious recurring outbreaks of internecine warfare. The reasons behind the increased reliance that kings and claimants had on foreign troops are relatively uncomplicated to interpret, since political factionalism, aristocratic opposition and the constant drain of manpower and resources brought by the internal wars prevented these princes from mustering large numbers of reliable troops from among their supporters and subjects. Indeed, the fluidity within these factions – whereby magnates would change sides depending on their interests, military defeats and existing friendship ties with other aristocrats – made reliable recruitment notoriously difficult.

At the same time, the appearance of stipendiary forces was not merely caused by the outbreak of these conflicts; after all, mercenaries were first and foremost hired troops, and formidable financial capabilities were necessary in order to afford their expensive services. As



such, the arrival and subsequent growth of mercenaries in Scandinavia was largely determined by the development of royal governance, administrative networks and the introduction of new methods of taxation. These processes took place at different times throughout the region, with the Danish kings introducing meaningful reforms by the mid-twelfth century, while the Norwegian and Swedish kingdoms became increasingly consolidated throughout the thirteenth (see e.g. Ulsig 1994, Line 2007, Bagge 2010, Dørum and Holberg 2017). The different speeds found in Scandinavia, thus, explain the contrasting frequency of mentions of mercenaries present in the primary material. In addition, the more limited wealth of the Norwegian kings likewise explains the relative absence of hired troops in Norway, as well as the continued existence of more archaic forms of military service, such as the naval levies – ON *leiðangr* – throughout the thirteenth century.

Nevertheless, it should be considered that the appearance of mercenaries in Scandinavia, while initially reliant on a degree of internal consolidation, also contributed to a further centralisation of power and authority. The arrival of professional foreign forces without any existing political stakes in the realms' governance allowed their employers – predominantly kings – to launch military expeditions or cement their power without the support of their aristocracy; Erik VI of Denmark, for instance, counted primarily on Germans to conduct his campaigns in Sweden (e.g. Carlquist and Hogg, 2012, pp. 173-179). The arrival of individual aristocrats from abroad, moreover, meant that kings could rely on these newcomers as administrators or counsellors, since these foreigners were entirely reliant on princely patronage for survival. In the long term, the growing predominance of foreigners would cause serious problems to the Scandinavian rulers. The lack of negotiation and agreement between the kings and the local aristocracy inevitably created volatile situations, as the magnates demanded an increased role in governance; the open hostility shown by the narrative sources, for instance, highlights how poorly foreign upstarts were regarded by their native-born peers.

The outbreak of internal conflicts and the role played the consolidation of the Scandinavian kingdoms demonstrates why foreign mercenaries were welcomed in the region, but the newcomers' own agency and goals should also be taken into consideration in order to understand the development of this phenomenon. Monetary gain in exchange for military service is a primary motivation that is clearly prevalent in the primary sources; from the early

expeditions of Henry the Lion in Denmark to negotiations between Alv Erlingsson and Edward I's court, promises of payment appear regularly in administrative and narrative texts alike. Providing military assistance, even if this armed service took place in exchange for money, was still a way of forming interpersonal ties with the Scandinavian aristocratic stratum. Henry the Lion himself, who had supported Valdemar's enemies during the Danish wars, married his daughter Gertrud to Valdemar's eldest son, the future Knud IV (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.30.1). The *Ribbalds* that John Lackland sent to Sverre Sigurdsson should also be understood as part of a wider political alliance designed to curb the Franco-Danish *rapprochement* precipitated by Philip Augustus's marriage to Ingeborg, as mentioned above. The nature of these bilateral relationships is also significant: in a Scandinavian context, the majority of mercenaries' employers were princely figures – primarily kings, but also other wielders of public authority, such as the dukes of Schleswig, Erik and Valdemar Magnusson and, as argued by Tor Einar Fagerland, perhaps Alv Erlingsson himself (Fagerland, 2005, pp. 118-122). The cause-effect relationship between mercenary service and the formation of interpersonal ties, however, becomes fuzzy by the early fourteenth century: the counts of Holstein-Plön and Holstein-Rendsburg, for instance, were already related to the Danish royal dynasty when they participated in Danish campaigns in Sweden. The rationale behind these examples might be one of crude economic practicality – i.e. that only those with high offices and large estates were able to afford the prohibitively expensive mercenary forces –, but the eventual diplomatic goals of some of these relationships suggest that the political organisation of the Scandinavian kingdoms might further explain this pattern. 'Feudal' lords, territorial princes who wielded public authority and had the prerogative to hold their own commended men, were extremely scarce in Scandinavia, as most aristocrats were allodial landholders with only personal fiscal privileges and limited jurisdictional powers (Bagge, 2010, pp. 132-135; Gelting, 2011, pp. 175-183; Lindkvist and Sjöberg, 2019, pp. 44-47, 175-178). Thus, forming alliances with large landowners rather than with princely actors could not have been a particularly profitable course of action for the stipendiary leaders, which might have deterred them from doing so.

As far as the motivations of small groups of mercenaries and individuals are concerned, prospects of betterment and higher status must have acted as *primum mobile*. The ongoing

consolidation processes in Scandinavia were combined with territorial expansion, both outwards – by expanding royal authority into neighbouring areas, such as northern Fennoscandia, Finland or Estonia – and inwards, through forest-clearing and the establishment of new farming lands (see e.g. Hybel and Poulsen, 2007). This territorial expansion must have generated an amount of available land and resources that was probably non-existent in continental Europe, especially for minor knightly kin-groups and younger sons of aristocratic stock. By entering the service of princely rulers, foreign retainers could expect to receive generous land grants and positions of prestige within the administrative apparatus; Werner Brunkow, mentioned above, owned considerable estates by the 1280s and was a member of the royal council, while his kinsmen in Brandenburg remained relatively modest knightly fief-holders (Pipping, 1926, p. 526). Not every foreign mercenary could have achieved such status – the minor retainers and knights named in *Gesta Danorum* and *Erikskrönikan* being a case in point –, but the opportunity for mobility must have been a crucial motivator nonetheless. As previously indicated, their foreignness explains why these newcomers often became royal favourites; with no old allodial estates or areas of influence to defend, foreign counsellors could be more subservient and reliable administrators.

The presence of international mercenaries in Scandinavia between the twelfth and early fourteenth centuries can thus be understood by a combination of push and pull factors. The recurring outbreaks of internecine wars, combined with a growing royal administrative apparatus and taxation methods, created a demand for professional, well-trained forces in the region. In addition, the profitable monetary and diplomatic opportunities and possible conditions of service created by these processes, which many mercenaries would have struggled to encounter at home, contributed to the growing prevalence of mercenaries in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Overall, it is clear that the very presence of foreign stipendiaries is an expression of self-interest, both for the Scandinavian employers who sought stronger military forces, and for the foreign employees, who pursued wealth or increased status in Scandinavia. These processes, however, did not end during the early decades of the fourteenth century; indeed, the presence of foreign aristocrats would continue to grow, and the tensions created by new arrivals would culminate in new outbreaks of violence when the old aristocracy revolted.

Concluding remarks: Newcomers, old aristocrats, and the king's men

The negative and often outright hostile depictions of foreign individuals and groups of mercenaries present in the narrative corpus were a symptom of growing animosity among the native-born aristocrats, who saw their influence in governance dwindle following the appointment of outsiders to positions of power and prominence. This influx was particularly pronounced in Denmark and Sweden, where Holsteiners and Mecklenburgers respectively came to dominate politics for a short period in the fourteenth century (Olesen, 2008, p. 711). In Denmark, this domination was particularly dramatic when former German mercenary princes occupied the territories they had been promised as securities – *pant* –, which led to large-scale insurrections and the reestablishment of a Danish king in 1340; the new ruler, Valdemar IV, sought the collaboration of the Danish magnates from the beginning on his reign (Schück, 2008, p. 681). A similar development can also be discerned in Sweden, where King Albrecht, a Mecklenburger himself, was forced to bestow wide-ranging powers upon the Swedish aristocracy in 1371, to the German newcomers' detriment (Schück, 2008, 682-683; Olesen, 2008, pp. 719-720; Christensen, 1980). From an inter-Scandinavian viewpoint, the presence and role of foreign aristocrats should be understood in the context of the opposing models of *regimen politicum* and *regimen regale* put forth by Erik Lönnroth (1934), since outside administrators facilitated the more centralised and autocratic rule sought by the kings.

Following a short lull in the later decades of the fourteenth century, the formation of the Kalmar Union in 1397 brought the conflict between kings and aristocrats – and the role of foreign troops and magnates – to the fore once more. Margrete I and Erik of Pomerania's rule was characterised by their reliance on Danish and German castellans throughout the three kingdoms, as well as the relative disregard shown to the existing royal councils in Norway and Sweden (Olesen, 2008, pp. 731-732). Centralising attitudes led to further revolts, most notably Engelbrekt's rebellion in Dalarna, but also Amund Sigurdsson's in Østlandet, in the 1430s. Continued aristocratic pressure would ultimately culminate in Erik of Pomerania's deposition and the establishment of a more decentralised political system where each realm's aristocratic elite had considerable political power (Olesen, 2008, pp. 733-737). The opposing centripetal and centrifugal political tendencies would remain a mainstay of Scandinavian politics until the dissolution of the union in the sixteenth century.

The tensions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can, thus, be traced to the general trends explored throughout this article. The increased use of foreigners, first as retainers and eventually as administrators, would eventually give way to strong counter-reactions from the native aristocracy. As such, it is undeniable that the arrival of foreign mercenaries in high medieval Scandinavia shows interesting and important facets related to military change and societal patterns. However, at least from an inter-Scandinavian *longue durée* perspective, the influx of mercenaries and foreign warriors should be understood, first and foremost, as part of the consolidation of the Scandinavian kingdoms. These mercenaries were, initially, a side-effect of early consolidation, but eventually also a cause, since they became a crucial tool at the hand of the Scandinavian kings on their drive for further centralisation.

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