

# Denmark

Dictionary of the Middle Ages, 1989

Denmark

## Land and People

"Water unites, but land divides" could be called the theme of the first millennium of Danish history. Consisting of peninsulas and innumerable islands, the country was originally settled by people who inhabited the coastlines, used the sounds, bays, and inlets for transportation and communication, and only slowly penetrated the forests. Consequently the moors and swamps north of the Eider River in Germany and the forests and mountains south of the Göta River in Sweden became impassable boundaries. Efforts dating back to the mid thirteenth century by the nobility of Holstein and Slesvig to merge the Danish with the German principality effectively moved the southern boundary north to the Kongeå River, but the northeastern boundary held firm until the mid seventeenth century, making the present-day southern Swedish provinces of Halland, Skåne, and Blekinge important parts of medieval Denmark. In addition to effecting the unification of the Danish kingdom, the sea provided the foci of the expansion, first across the North Sea to England and later into the Baltic, incorporating northern Germany, Poland, and Estonia.

Although the ubiquitous water furnished ample supplies of fish, thus sustaining an early primitive society, the Danish countryside with its flat terrain and gently rolling hills was easy to farm, in contrast with the rest of Scandinavia. The relatively fertile soil made agriculture the most important economic activity. The village was the key feature and owed its origin to the introduction of the heavy iron plow. The expense of the plow and the draft animals necessitated the communal features of the village; the peasants worked the fields together and acted as a council in all community matters.

This system led earlier historians to postulate a society of free, equal farmers, but the existence of a distinct class of great property owners and nobles by the mid thirteenth century makes it probable that social distinctions were pronounced already in the Viking period. These great property owners characteristically possessed several villages, each supervised by a bailiff and inhabited by peasants in various degrees of economic and personal dependence. The land was exploited in a wide variety of patterns of crop rotation known elsewhere in Europe, but the efficient three-field system was probably not introduced until about 1300. Crops consisted primarily of rye, with barley and oats ranking second, and wheat very rare.

After agriculture, trading was the second most important economic endeavor, closely allied to piracy in the Viking period. Two towns, Hedeby (later renamed Slesvig, modern German name Schleswig) and Ribe, appeared at least by the eighth century. Coins and evidence of imported finery show that these places were centers of mercantile activity and owed their existence to the long-distance international trade. This trade, in turn, stimulated local commerce, which soon became centered in new towns that enjoyed royal protection. By the middle of the thirteenth

century more than eighty towns, mainly situated on royal land, can be identified. This number is more than twice that found at the same time in the rest of Scandinavia. Besides catering to local needs, the towns exported grain and butter.

The greatest export was, however, herring from Skåne. From the end of the twelfth century and for the next 300 years, the herring appeared yearly from August to October in such quantities that at times it was difficult to row through them. The fish could even be caught with bare hands, though the normal method was by net. By the end of the thirteenth century the catch was six times that at the beginning of the twentieth century. The herring were cleaned, salted, and packed in barrels--jobs handled largely by women--and shipped to the rest of Europe, where they became an important staple on meatless Fridays and during Lent. Since Hanseatic merchants, particularly from Lübeck, brought the necessary salt from Lüneburg and in addition contributed capital investments, they dominated the export trade. Because of the frenzy of human activity stirred up by the herring, the area became a lively trading center for northern Europe, similar to the fairs of Champagne, with seasonal concentration in Skanør and Falsterbo.

These economic activities sustained a population that reached a peak of 1 million, estimated from a survey partially preserved in Waldemar's Land Book (1231). The economy was not able to maintain this population by the end of the thirteenth century, and a decline set in, accentuated, as elsewhere in Europe, by the Black Death in the following century. The medieval figure was not attained again until the nineteenth century.

## **Religion**

With the rest of the Scandinavian-Germanic world the Danes shared the Nordic mythology and religion. Odin and Thor were the most prominent gods, whose importance can be gauged not only from the mythological texts preserved in Iceland but also, more significantly, from numerous place names. Holding its rituals out of doors, the pagan cult was led by male chieftains but also may have allowed roles for women. There were large cult centers in Viborg, Odense, and Leire where human sacrifices were performed. Of more importance for ordinary people was the worship of minor deities, including trolls and dwarfs, and the veneration of nonpersonified powers in nature. The purpose of religion at all levels was to protect life and ensure the harvest by propitiating hostile powers. This purpose remained the same for centuries in the popular religion, though the outer forms changed from paganism to Christianity. During the late Middle Ages an important ceremony in village life was to carry the cross or images of saints around the village and over the fields in the same way that Tacitus reported the Germanic tribes acted with their pagan idols.

The conversion of the Danish people, therefore, cannot be dated precisely, but officially Denmark became Christian about 960, after 250 years of aggressive activity by the church and increased receptivity among the Danish leaders, many of whom had been exposed to the new religion on their Viking journeys. In the first half of the eighth century the Anglo-Saxon missionary Willibrord took time from his labors among the Frisians to launch a preliminary expedition among the Danes. It was not until Saxony had been conquered and Christianized by the Franks, however, that the church was able to focus its attention on Scandinavia. In 823 Archbishop Ebo of Rheims, the northernmost metropolitan see in the Frankish empire, journeyed

to southern Denmark with the expressed desire to convert the Nordic world. This wish was realized in a small way a few years later, when one of the pretenders to the Danish throne, Harald Klak, came with his wife and children to the court of Louis the Pious to ask for help against his enemies. He was baptized and returned to Denmark accompanied by two monks, of whom one, Ansgar, has been called the Apostle of the North.

Ansgar's achievements, however, were only modest in Denmark, where he established churches in Slesvig and Ribe, but he had more success in Sweden. He was nonetheless able to bring Denmark into the orbit of the church when he obtained a papal letter establishing a new archbishopric at Hamburg and appointing him as its first occupant. The prime purpose of this new see was the conversion of the Nordic world. A century later--about 960 according to tradition--Harald Bluetooth, one of the first kings of the united monarchy, was so impressed with the hot-iron ordeal performed by a Christian priest named Poppo that he accepted baptism and attempted to induce his people to follow his lead. Apparently he felt that he had succeeded, because he identified himself as "the Harald who won for himself all Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christians" on a magnificent runic stone erected at Jelling to commemorate his parents.

The period of conversion lasted at least until the middle of the next century and resulted in an incipient Danish church. It was less influenced by the mother church in Hamburg-Bremen than by English Christianity, because renewed Viking attacks brought the Danes into contact with the English. The subsequent history of the church will be examined in the context of political development.

## **Political History**

### **The Viking period: 800-1042**

Denmark entered the historical period about 800, when Carolingian sources report frontier skirmishes with a Danish king named Godfred. At one time historians dealt extensively with a more remote past, centered on the so-called Leire monarchy. Because of important discoveries since the 1920's, archaeologists dominate this field today. The two outstanding features of the historical period--besides the Christianization--are the Viking expeditions and the unification of the country under a single monarch.

Spurred by land hunger and avid in the search for both international and domestic trade, the Vikings started out in smallish groups, each headed by a chieftain. When Gorm the Old and his son Harald Bluetooth, the first of the Jelling dynasty, achieved prominence over other war leaders, they profited from this position by staging large-scale attacks and expeditions beyond the North Sea and the Baltic. In the 980's Harald's son, Sweyn (Svend) Forkbeard, embarked on a systematic conquest of England, where he was accepted as king in 1014. The organization and impact of this Viking monarchy can be judged from the massive, circular fortified camps, four of which have been discovered in Denmark. (They are often called Trelleborgs from the name of the first one, uncovered in the 1930's.) While earlier they were seen as training camps to ready soldiers for attacks on England, they are now generally recognized as impressive fortifications intended to subdue a recalcitrant people.

The Viking monarchy culminated with Cnut (Canute, Knud), Sweyn's son, who was accepted as English king after his father's death in 1014. Cnut (Knud) was the first Danish king to spend considerable time in England. His contact with the superior English civilization encouraged him not only to continue Anglo-Saxon customs in England but also to imitate them in Denmark. On the English pattern, for example, he initiated the regular minting of coins. With the death of Cnut, however, Denmark and England went their separate ways. For the Danes this period of playing a leading role on the north European stage had come to an end. Their goal was henceforth reduced to the more modest ambition of bringing the country abreast of the general European development.

### **Growing pains: 1042-1157**

A good sign of Denmark's increased absorption into the mainstream of European culture is the greater availability of historical sources beginning in the middle of the eleventh century. Foreigners showed more interest in the Nordic scene, as is evidenced by Adam of Bremen's History of the Bishops of the Church of Hamburg from the 1070's, in which Denmark figures prominently in the bishopric's mission field. A native group of historians also emerged, among whom Saxo Grammaticus was outstanding. His massive Gesta Danorum, written about 1200, was a national history similar to Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, covering the period from the origin of the Danish monarchy to about 1185.

Impressive by literary standards, Saxo provided detailed knowledge both of his own period, the Waldemar age, and of the preceding century. His account was taken at face value until the early twentieth century, but historians now realize that Saxo, deeply inspired by--indeed, perhaps responsible for--the ideology of the victorious Waldemar monarchy, tried to give it a suitable past by tailoring the history of the previous century according to this view. Recent historians, therefore, shy away from Saxo and prefer other narrative sources, which are often in opposition to his history. More reliable evidence is contained in letters and charters, which, however, are far less abundant than in the rest of western Europe. The oldest royal charter of which the text is known dates from 1085 (the only one before 1100), and the oldest royal letter preserved in the original is from 1135.

The period from the mid eleventh to the mid twelfth century may be characterized by attempts to create identities by the monarchy and the church, the two powers that dominated the next several centuries. At home the monarchy sought to define its authority over the local chieftains. In particular this involved striking a balance between the older, elective principle, by which the aristocracy participated in choosing the king from a pool of throneworthy candidates, and the newer ideal of lineage, by which the kingship devolved through hereditary succession. Abroad the kings reluctantly gave up their marauding Viking activities, but toward the end of the period their relations with the German emperors threatened their independence. The church attempted to shake off dependency on Hamburg-Bremen and to obtain a Danish archbishopric in direct communication with the papacy.

### **The monarchy**

The most important of the kings was the first, Sweyn (Svend) Estridsen, son of Cnut's sister and an Anglo-Saxon earl. From his uncle's vast North Sea empire he secured Denmark in 1042 and ruled there until his death in 1074. Working hand in hand with the archbishop of Hamburg, he reorganized the church and by about 1060 had eight bishoprics. Despite his unorthodox sexual life he seems to have impressed the papacy, because the reform pope Gregory VII sent him a series of friendly letters.

During the next sixty years five of Sweyn's sons were elected king in succession, which both avoided dividing the kingdom and prepared for the later principle of hereditary succession through primogeniture. Two of the five, Cnut IV (1080-1086) and Eric I (1095-1103), were particularly noteworthy. Cnut entertained such exalted ideas concerning the monarch's prerogatives that he caused an uprising. Seeking refuge in a church in Odense, he was killed. When Eric in turn became king, he capitalized both on the years of bad harvest following Cnut's murder and the alleged miracles at his tomb to have Cnut declared a saint by the papacy. When Eric and his wife Bodil made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he designated his son regent. This scheme was intended to endow his own family with royal dignity by hereditary right and to strengthen the dynasty with a native saint. When he died on Cyprus, however, the nobles overlooked this arrangement and elected Niels, Sweyn's last son, as king (1104-1134). Unlike those of his predecessors, his long reign was largely peaceful.

Eventually, though, the problem of succession required a solution. In theory all sons of the last five kings could claim the royal title, but in fact a contest resulted between Magnus, son of Niels, and Eric's son, Cnut Lavard (Bread Giver), whom Niels had made duke of Slesvig. In addition Cnut obtained the contiguous area north of the Elbe as a fief from the German king after a successful campaign against the Wends. In 1131 Magnus, jealous of his rival's accumulation of power, treacherously killed him. The German king Lothair took the murder of his vassal as an opportunity to interfere in Danish affairs, and in 1134 he forced Magnus to accept him as overlord. The same year Magnus died in battle against Eric II, who had taken up the cause of his brother Cnut Lavard, and Niels was assassinated.

The next quarter of a century brought to fruition the worst tendencies in the electoral monarchy. After the murder of one king and the withdrawal to a monastery of another, the rivalry between the pretenders resulted in a dual election of Sweyn and Cnut, sons of Eric II and of Magnus, respectively. Following a period of civil war they both appealed to the German emperor. In 1152 Frederick Barbarossa gave Denmark to Sweyn as a fief of the empire; Cnut received smaller territories; and a third candidate, Waldemar, son of Cnut Lavard, obtained his father's position as duke of Slesvig. A few years later these three attempted a more equitable division of the monarchy, but in 1157 the rivalry among them surfaced again, causing Sweyn to kill Cnut. Sweyn died later that year in battle near Viborg, thus making possible the single rule of Waldemar, during whose reign the monarchy finally came of age.

## **The church**

The goal of an independent Danish archbishopric was already envisioned by Sweyn Estridsen, but it was not achieved until 1103/1104, when Lund was transformed into an archbishopric by direct negotiations between Eric I and Pope Pascal II. Asser, who as bishop of Lund since 1089

had brought his wealthy family's prestige to the hierarchy of the church, now as archbishop became the leader not only of the Danish church but also of the whole Scandinavian province, including Iceland and Greenland. In return the pope obtained the establishment of the tithe, which gave the church an improved economic base. A monument to Asser's tenure is the splendid cathedral at Lund, built in an Anglo-Norman and Italian style and consecrated in 1145, only eight years after Asser's death.

How far the Danish church was still removed from the European norm, however, can be seen from the king's request in 1117 that the pope have the requirement for clerical celibacy relaxed. Only with Eskil, Asser's nephew and successor as archbishop, did the Gregorian reform movement gain entry into the Danish church. An impressive sign, however, of the church's popular strength is found in the 2,000 stone and brick Romanesque parish churches that were erected from the middle of the eleventh century. Still in use today, they testify to the control of Danish society and its resources by the political and ecclesiastical regimes.

### **The glory of the Waldemar age: 1157-1241**

The period of nearly a century that is called the Waldemar age represents the high point in Danish medieval history. Victimized by the civil wars resulting from the elective principle, the monarchy now became hereditary, thereby enabling the kings, in close collaboration with the church, to reinforce their position within the country and to pursue an active policy abroad. Initially securing independence from the German emperor, they subsequently created a vast Baltic empire, but only of short duration. The architects of this development were three kings--Waldemar I (1157-1182), his sons Cnut VI (1182-1202) and Waldemar II (1202-1241), and three successive archbishops of Lund: Eskil, Absalon, and Anders Sunesøn.

Eskil's support of the Gregorian ideals at Rome inevitably brought him into conflict with a monarch determined to increase royal power. Siding with Pope Alexander III against the antipope Victor IV supported by the German emperor, Eskil expected Waldemar I to follow his example. When the king, obeying political necessity, supported the choice of the emperor, an impasse resulted. In 1161 Eskil exiled himself to France for six years. When Alexander's position improved during this period, Waldemar saw the need for reconciliation with Eskil. In 1170 the archbishop officiated at a splendid ceremony in the church at Ringsted, where Waldemar's father, Cnut Lavard, was canonized and his young son Cnut crowned.

During Eskil's absence the leading figure next to the king was Absalon, the bishop of Roskilde, who succeeded Eskil as archbishop. Like Eskil, he had studied abroad, but was less influenced by the extreme Gregorian theory of ecclesiastical superiority over monarchy and more inspired by the ideal of co-operation between the two powers, expressed in the *Polycraticus* of his contemporary, John of Salisbury. Such a program suited the young monarchy perfectly. Leading the royal party, Absalon crushed a threatening rebellion. He and the king summoned nobles and peasants to yearly expeditions against the Slavs. Disguised as crusades, these wars were conducted sometimes in collaboration, at other times in conflict, with Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony and a rival to imperial leadership in Germany. They were possible only because Emperor Frederick Barbarossa was preoccupied with Italian affairs, and later because the premature death of his son, Henry VI, caused strife between the Welfs and the Hohenstaufens.

Three phases can be distinguished in this Baltic expansion. From 1160 until the 1190's the areas immediately south of the Danish isles and the Swedish provinces were attacked, resulting in the conquest of Rügen in 1169 and the coast of Germany to the mouth of the Oder by the 1180's. The 1190's saw the conquest of Holstein to the Elbe and Elde rivers, including important cities such as Hamburg and Lübeck. The third period, comprising the first two decades of the thirteenth century, resulted in the acquisition of distant Estonia, an achievement that Waldemar II and Archbishop Anders Sunesøn shared. The archbishop, however, was less of a warrior than his predecessor, and more adept at scholarly and literary pursuits.

The significance of these conquests can best be illustrated by the changing relations between Denmark and the German empire. While Waldemar I had been obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to Frederick Barbarossa, Cnut had refused to do so, and in 1214 his brother Waldemar II obtained a golden bull from Frederick II, formally granting him all the conquered territories. Waldemar II exhibited the self-confidence of the monarchy in 1218 when he personally crowned his nine-year-old son. As hereditary monarch he also felt free to grant his other sons sizable territories on the feudal pattern known elsewhere in Europe, thus laying the basis for the fratricidal wars of the following era.

The Baltic empire, however, was jerry-built, as became clear in 1223, when King Waldemar and his son were captured by a German count during a hunting expedition at Lyø in Denmark and imprisoned in Germany. Forced to pay a huge ransom and to return all German territories granted by the emperor, the king was not released for two years. When Waldemar tried to reverse this decision by military action, he suffered another serious defeat at Bornhöved in 1227. Of the vast Baltic territories only Estonia remained. A more ominous sign for the future was the marriage between his son Abel, duke of Slesvig, and the daughter of the count of Holstein, which initiated a union between the Danish and the German principalities and brought repercussions far beyond the Middle Ages.

### **The rise of the aristocracy and the dissolution of the monarchy: 1241-1340**

Although the monarchy made advances in the judicial field during this century, it encountered serious problems, which sapped its vitality and resulted in a constitutional monarchy that offered Danish nobles an important role in the government. In the long run, however, they were unable to maintain their participation, losing out to German nobles. The kings were forced to mortgage the country piecemeal to the latter as a consequence of an expensive foreign policy, for which the resources, depleted by a concomitant agrarian crisis, were not sufficient. These German nobles became the virtual rulers of the country and eventually did not even deign to appoint a king.

Among four noteworthy problems that of the succession was the most persistent. Waldemar II's habit of distributing important provinces to his younger sons had set a dangerous precedent and created a new brood of potential royal candidates, always ready whenever the succession failed to proceed smoothly. Three of Waldemar's sons succeeded him: Eric (1241-1250), Abel (1250-1252), and Christopher I (1252-1259); Abel probably murdered Eric, and Christopher ignored Abel's sons. Christopher was followed by his son Eric V, who was murdered in 1286; and he, in

turn, was succeeded by his two sons, of whom the younger, Christopher II, was elected to the position in 1320. Thus the elective principle had returned in full force.

Previously, hereditary succession was possible largely through the prestige lent by the church to the coronation ceremonies. Though requested, such support was refused in this period. The earlier cooperation between church and state, best exemplified by Absalon, was replaced by serious conflicts between the kings and the archbishops, of which the most dramatic episodes involved the archbishops Jakob Erlandsen in the 1250's and Jens Grand in the 1290's. Both prelates appealed to the papacy. When the popes did not respond with as serious sanctions against the kings as might have been expected, given the royal transgressions in both cases involving imprisonment, their actions can only be explained by the fact that the papacy preferred the alliance of the distant Danish king over the freedom of the local church.

The third problem, encompassing the nobles' dissatisfaction, is the most interesting because it resulted in new ways of governing the country. Resenting the civil wars involving the three first kings, the nobles had been disturbed by the vicious struggle between Christopher I and Jakob Erlandsen. In 1214, when Eric V wanted his infant son crowned immediately in order to secure the succession, certain nobles demurred. The coronation did take place two years later, but when dissatisfied nobles further conspired with the large group of pretenders, Eric acceded to their demands. The result was a Danish Magna Carta, the handfastning signed in 1282, which limited the king's juridical authority and curtailed excessive taxation. It also stipulated yearly meetings of the Danehof, a parliamentary body that had emerged by the middle of the century. (About this time a council of state was also created that became a permanent feature of royal administration.)

During the next few years the aristocracy and the king worked together on important legislation. Eric's murder in 1286 brought this fruitful cooperation to an end. The group responsible for the charter was unjustly accused of the crime and outlawed, and a royal autocratic reaction set in during the reign of Eric VI. Since he did not have a son, the nobles were able in 1320, at his death in 1319, to write a new charter as their condition for electing his brother Christopher II. But this handfastning went so far in curtailing the king's power that it made his job virtually impossible.

Foreign policy, however, and not restrictions imposed by the nobles, eventually brought the monarchy down. Considering the internal difficulties, the monarchy was surprisingly aggressive and showed interest in both Norwegian and Swedish affairs that would be of importance in the following period, and in the traditional Waldemar policy of expanding along the Baltic. The kings maintained peaceful relations with Lübeck, thereby wisely fostering the mercantile elements of Denmark. By relying, however, on mercenary troops against the other north German cities and by constructing expensive stone castles to maintain internal peace, they overtaxed the resources of the country. After having borrowed heavily, they could solve their financial difficulties only by handing over castles and whole provinces to their creditors, the German princes, who became the real rulers. When Christopher II died in 1332, the country had already been divided between Count Gerhard of Holstein in the west and Count John the Mild of Holstein in the east, and no new king was appointed. The monarchial idea was kept alive only in Skåne, which Magnus VII joined to his holdings as king of Norway and Sweden by paying off



the mortgage to Count John. Gerhard fared worse. In 1340 he was killed by Niels Ebbesen, the leader of a rebellion in Jutland that had been brewing for a decade.

### **From Danish monarchy to Nordic Union: 1340-1523**

In the late-medieval period Denmark regained its national independence. Abandoning the earlier fixation on German affairs and turning to the other Nordic countries, Danish leaders were instrumental in creating a Scandinavian union.

The difficult task of reuniting the kingdom was accomplished under the leadership of Waldemar IV, the youngest son of Christopher II, who in 1340 was accepted as king by the German creditors. Raised at the German imperial court, he was restless and ruthlessly ambitious, and held much in common with the new type of Renaissance ruler appearing in Italy at this time. During the first twenty years of his reign Waldemar reunited Denmark west of the Sound by peacefully redeeming some castles and provinces and by conquering others outright. The money came from heavy taxation and the sale of Estonia to the Teutonic Knights. Throughout the period he enjoyed the support of the church and most of the nobles, though the traditional resentment of the monarchy grew as Waldemar's strength increased. Rallying the country behind him in 1360, Waldemar conquered the remaining provinces of Skåne, Halland, and Blekinge, thus achieving his goal of reunification. But by proceeding one step further and taking the island of Gotland with the important Hanseatic stronghold of Visby, he alienated his former Hanseatic allies. This resulted in an anti-Danish coalition consisting of Sweden, most of the Hanseatic cities, Slesvig, and Holstein.

Able at first to defeat his enemies, Waldemar stood at the pinnacle of his power in the early 1360's. When he continued to increase tolls and confiscate the cities' merchandise, the Hanseatic League enlisted all its members, traditionally numbered at seventy-seven, and declared an all-out war against Denmark. Waldemar responded by leaving the country and letting the council of state manage the government. After two years in which cities and castles were systematically destroyed, the council was forced to sign a treaty with the Hansa, relinquishing control over castles on the western shore of Skåne and thereby allowing them access to the lucrative herring market. When Waldemar finally returned to Denmark, he faced a situation almost identical to the one he had encountered more than twenty years earlier, replete with local uprisings and foreign occupation. Before his death in 1375, however, he had once again brought the country, with the exception of Slesvig, back under control.

His heir was a daughter, Margaret, married to the Norwegian king Haakon VI. Their son Olaf was accepted by the Danish nobles as king. When Haakon died in 1380, Olaf became king of both countries, thereby starting a union that lasted more than four centuries. Since Olaf was only a child, the real ruler was his mother. Margaret promoted the idea of incorporating Sweden within the dynastic net of her family. Here Olaf claimed hereditary rights through his grandfather. When the Swedish nobility became disillusioned with their German king, Albert of Mecklenburg, Margaret persuaded them to accept her son in 1386. Olaf died the following year, and Margaret became regent in all three countries. The nobility, moreover, promised to take as common king whomever she suggested.

At a meeting in Kalmar in 1397 Margaret's grandnephew, Eric of Pomerania, was accepted as king in all three countries. At the same time she attempted to formalize the Nordic Union, which lasted intermittently until 1523. By origin the union was dynastic, and the leadership remained with Denmark, the most fully developed among the Nordic countries. It was supported, nonetheless, by large groups of the aristocracy from all three nations, who through intermarriage often held land in more than one country and therefore found the blurring of national boundaries to their advantage. The union represented an effort by the Scandinavian ruling classes to present a solid front against the overwhelming German economic and political infiltration that had threatened Denmark, Norway, and Sweden throughout the fourteenth century.

The union functioned reasonably well during Margaret's able reign, but Eric managed to alienate the Swedes to such a degree that both they and the Danes deposed him in 1439. His cousin, Christopher of Bavaria, was accepted as king of the union from 1440 to 1448. The following three kings, of the new Oldenburg dynasty--Christian I (1448-1481), John (1481-1513), and Christian II (1513-1523)--fought for their position in Sweden. Noble resentment against Danes and other foreigners in prominent positions in Sweden, as well as intense nationalism among the lower classes, especially the miners, rendered the union impossible. It was further made obsolete by the decrease of German economic influence under competition from Dutch and English merchants, who went around Skagen to get to the Scandinavian markets, thereby providing a lucrative source of income for Danish kings, who levied a toll at Helsingør (Elsinore). In 1520, after having conquered Sweden, Christian was the last ruler of a united Scandinavia. When he subsequently staged the infamous Stockholm Bloodbath, in which more than eighty prominent Swedes were executed, this brutal act caused an uproar in Sweden and resulted in his dismissal as king of Denmark and Norway as well. His uncle, Frederick I, followed him as king in Denmark and Norway only, while Sweden chose a native king, Gustavus I.

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