

# VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

## VIKING AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

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Russell Poole (rpoole@uwo.ca), Stefan Brink (s.brink@abdn.ac.uk), Carolyne Larrington (carolyne.larrington@sjc.ox.ac.uk), and Judy Quinn (jeq20@cam.ac.uk)

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# POLITICAL CONFLICT AND POLITICAL IDEAS IN TWELFTH-CENTURY DENMARK

Lars Kjær

On 7 January 1131 Magnus, son of King Niels of Denmark, killed his cousin Knud Lavard, duke of Slesvig, in the forest of Haraldsted on Zealand. Like Magnus, Knud was also the son of a king of Denmark, Niels's older brother and predecessor, Erik I Ejegod ('the Good'). For a generation the Danish throne had passed down through the sons of Sven Estridsen. Of these Niels was the last, and as he entered his later years speculations about the next succession appear to have become widespread. The later sources, almost all hostile to Magnus, alleged that it was anxiety about Knud Lavard's popularity and the threat he would pose after Niels's death that drove Magnus to eliminate his rival. The murder, however, provoked a rising of the Danish aristocracy that culminated in the killing of Magnus and his father three years later, in 1134, and saw Lavard's half-brother, Erik Emune, ascend to the throne in Niels's place. The conflicts have deservedly attracted considerable attention from medieval historians. It is the first major political event in Danish history for which we have extensive narrative sources as well as contemporary diplomas. It thus offers a rare opportunity to learn about the structures of political life in the period before the development of a more ideologically and administratively centralized kingship under Valdemar I (sole-king 1157–82) and his descendants.

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Lars Kjær ([lars.kjaer@nchlondon.ac.uk](mailto:lars.kjaer@nchlondon.ac.uk)) is Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at the New College of the Humanities, London.

**Abstract:** This article investigates the nature of political life and conflict in medieval Denmark, focusing on the case of the rebellion against King Niels between 1131 and 1135. The article engages with previous scholarship that has identified the basis of the rebellion, and the governing feature of political life in the period, as the material interests of the competing kin-networks. Through an investigation of both the documentary and the narrative sources for the conflict, the reigns of King Niels and his successor Erik II Emune, the leader of the rebellion, this article argues that in fact political and religious principles were much more important. Building on this it argues that we need to pay much more attention to the stated principles of political actors as found in the contemporary sources and the way these enabled aristocrats and would-be kings to mobilize support.

**Keywords:** conflict, political ideas, kingship, ritual, Christianity, medieval Denmark

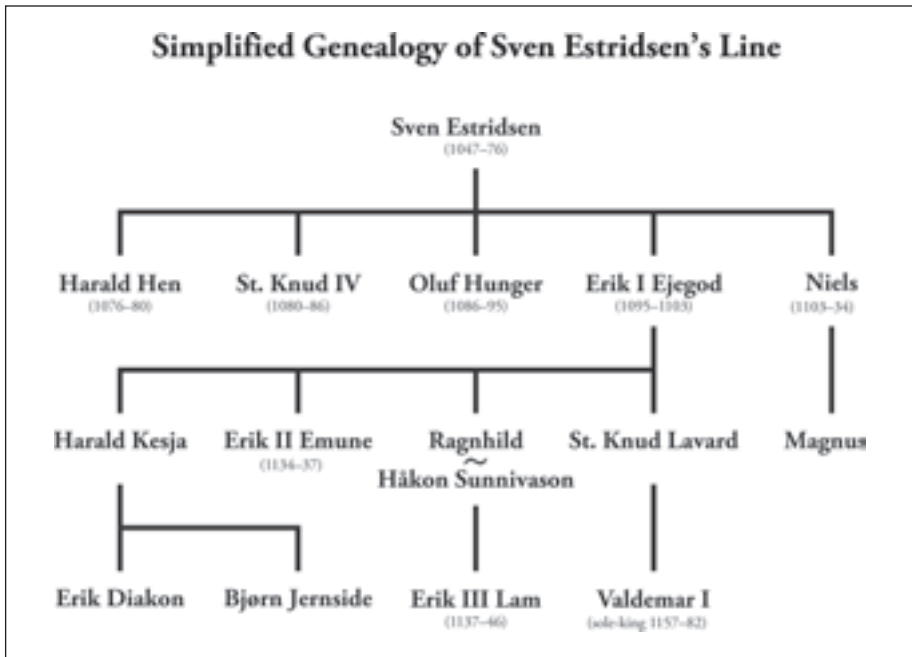


Figure 8. Genealogy of Sven Estridsen's line.  
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For most of the twentieth century, Lauritz Weibull's 1928 interpretation of the conflict, and of political life in medieval Denmark more generally, dominated. For Weibull the conflicts of twelfth-century Denmark were domestic offshoots of the so-called Investiture Crisis. The 'guiding, mutually-conflicting ideas' of the freedom of the Church, *libertas ecclesiae*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the national monarchy, 'dominate the century' (Weibull 1928, 112). According to Weibull, the major sources for twelfth-century Denmark each identified with one of the two political movements: the anonymous chronicle of Roskilde (c. 1138) and the list of kings found in the obit-book of the cathedral of Lund, the *Liber daticus* (c. 1137-45), supported the freedom of the Church, while the chroniclers Sven Aggesen (c. 1185) and Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1208) were on the side of the Crown. By contrasting their various portrayals of the twelfth-century kings of Denmark, Weibull established a model of two parties who had struggled for control of Denmark throughout the century: the 'white party', who supported the Church, to which King Niels and his son Magnus belonged, opposed by the royalist 'black party', which included Knud Lavard and Erik Emune.

Weibull's model has been subjected to significant criticism, both in the details of his treatment of the sources and his view of medieval Danish society (Breengaard 1982). Weibull's central idea that the political conflicts were caused by clashes between ideologically opposed 'parties' has, however, continued to dominate the historiography of medieval Denmark until 2000, when the Swedish historian Lars Hermanson published a radical reinterpretation. According to Hermanson, political ideas played at most a tangential role in the conflicts, which he interprets, instead, as the result of the competition for resources between various kin-groups and their allied friends and followers. What caused the outbreak of dynastic conflict in 1131 was not differing ideas about the relationship between Church and Crown but the conflicting ambitions of Magnus and Knud's respective networks among the Danish aristocracy (Hermanson 2000, 52, 92–99, see also Gelting 2000; 2002, 57, 71–78). Hermanson's reinterpretation has been immensely valuable for Danish historiography, removing the need for Weibull's anachronistic political parties. In forming it, Hermanson draws on wider developments in medieval historiography, especially associated with the works of Gerd Althoff (1990) and the growing interest in social anthropology, which have side-lined traditional obsessions of modern historians, such as state-development and constitutional ideas, in favour of supposedly more medieval interpretative schemes such as kinship, friendship, and ritualized communication.

There are, however, two related problems with Hermanson's interpretation. Firstly, the surviving evidence does not in fact show that the leading figures in the rebellion were part of Lavard's 'extensive network of magnates and members of the royal family' (Hermanson 2000, 52). Secondly, the sources consistently present the conflict as one driven by political ideals rather than personal connections. This points to a wider difficulty for the social-anthropologically inspired approach to medieval history. Discussions of and reflections on the exercise of power occupy a central role in much of the literature of the Middle Ages, from chronicles and charters to theoretical writings produced by churchmen and university scholars (Bisson 2009). But it has often proved difficult to integrate these into analytical models derived from small-scale societies without a tradition of literary analysis of politics (Carpenter 2004; Gelting 2010). The discussion of power, responsibility, and what might justify rebellion was never more pertinent than in the wake of the eleventh-century confrontation between the papacy and the German emperors, in which long-established ideas about the right order of the world were thrown into doubt (Robinson 1978; Melve 2007).<sup>1</sup> As we will see below, a closer examination of the

<sup>1</sup> On the concept of 'right order in the world', see Tellenbach 1993, 1.

Danish sources confirm Weibull's idea that this movement influenced political struggles in Denmark. Much has changed, however, in historians' understanding of the reform movement since Weibull wrote. Among the most important results is that it has become clear that the struggle for reform was not restricted to a narrow church-party but was shared and often directed by lay aristocrats (Howe 1988). This has important implications for how we approach the struggles over religious matters and political power in medieval Denmark. It would be naïve to always accept at face value the sources' claims about actors' elevated principles, but equally we cannot ignore what this insistence on invoking political and religious principles tells us about the processes through which kings and aristocrats sought to marshal support. The purpose of this article is therefore to investigate the place of ideas in political life in medieval Denmark through an examination of the way contemporary writers sought to frame the conflict of the 1130s.

Part one examines the reign of King Niels and discusses the roots of the rebellion, looking in particular at Niels's flawed reputation as a military leader and supporter of religious discipline. Part two looks at the rebellion itself, focusing on the charters issued by Erik Emune himself and the presentation of the rebellion and its ideas found in narrative sources. The final section looks at Erik Emune's short reign and discusses the extent to which the ideals that he had championed in the rebellion affected his reign and the challenges he faced. The conclusion, finally, distils the implications of these discussions for the way we understand political life in twelfth-century Denmark.

### *The Long Reign of King Niels, 1104–34*

The twelfth-century sources only allow a superficial outline of the events of the 1131–35 rebellion. The first months of 1131 saw attempts at a peaceful settlement. At the judgement of the *landsting* (regional assembly) of Zealand Magnus was forced into exile, only for King Niels to quickly revoke the penalty. By April 1131 the rebellion had turned violent: Erik Emune was elected anti-king in Scania and also received support from Zealand and Jutland. In the first years of the conflict fortune favoured Niels and Magnus. In 1131–32 Erik was defeated in three battles in Jutland and Niels was able to pay off the German king Lothar from interfering on the side of the rebels. In 1133 Niels invaded Zealand and Erik fled into exile in Norway. The next year Niels sought further reassurance by having Magnus perform homage to Lothar, now emperor, on Whitsunday 1134. In June the same year, Niels led an expedition into Scania, where some of his forces had already placed the city of Lund under siege. Niels's army was,

however, surprised and defeated at the Battle of Fodevig by Erik's army, which also included a contingent of German mercenaries. In the battle Magnus was slain alongside several bishops and leading aristocrats. Now it was Niels's turn to retreat. He fell back to Jutland where he incautiously entered the city of Slesvig. Here the citizens turned on him and his retinue and killed them. Niels died on 25 June 1134 (Nielsen 1971, 71–72, 76–77; Breengaard 1982, 209–11).

Hermanson's invocation of Knud Lavard's extensive network of friends and kinsmen certainly has credibility when we consider the breadth of the rebellion. It included leading members of magnate families from across Denmark: Peder Bodilsen from Zealand; the sons of Skjalm Hvide, also based on Zealand; and Kristiarn Svensen of the Trund family, with a power base in Jutland and Scania. Also active were the citizens of Slesvig. Among these, however, only the Hvide family and the city of Slesvig had personal links to Knud Lavard. He had been fostered by Skjalm, the father of the Hvide brothers, and was the patron of the guild of the citizens of Slesvig. No evidence survives, however, to indicate similar connections with either Peder Bodilsen or Kristiarn Svensen. Hermanson (2000, 154) suggested that Peder Bodilsen's place among Knud's avengers 'indicates that he had a close relationship with the victim'. But the only indication we have is Saxo's allegation that Peder, alongside the Hvide brothers and Håkon Sunnivason, referred to Knud as his friend, *amicus*, after his murder (Saxo XII.7.4 (II, 942)). Similarly, Hermanson suggests that Kristiarn was 'troligen' (probably) feeling excluded from Magnus Niels's circle and thus felt moved to abandon Niels (Hermanson 2000, 163–64). According to the historian Sven Aggesen, Kristiarn, Sven's grandfather, had been one of Niels's retainers and had wounded one of his fellows. But Sven also noted that Niels went to great lengths to prevent Kristiarn from being expelled from his court as a result of this (Sven Aggesen, *Lex Castrensis*, 11 (*SM*, I, 82–83)).

Undoubtedly personal connections existed within the Danish elite, but it is much more difficult to substantiate that it was these that motivated the rebels. In many cases aristocrats would have had connections tying them to both Magnus and Lavard and their respective networks. Thus Håkon Sunnivason was married to Ragnhild, Knud Lavard's sister, but was apparently also close to Magnus (Hermanson 2000, 168–72). Indeed Håkon had been among the magnates with whom Magnus shared his plans to eliminate Knud. According to a later life of Knud Lavard and Saxo Grammaticus, however, Håkon had withdrawn from their league once he learned of their plans, although he also refused to betray Magnus's confidence by revealing the murder. Håkon and his son Erik Lam ('Lamb'), future king of Denmark, would both later join the rebels (*VSD*, 195; Saxo, *Gesta*, XIII.6.2 (II, 932)). For Håkon, as undoubtedly for many, the rebellion of

1135 did not present an easy choice between two sharply divided parties but an unwelcome shock that forced them to make difficult choices. In negotiating these difficulties ideals of right behaviour either really did help Håkon make up his mind or at least provided him with legitimate justifications for prioritizing one set of connections and obligations over the other.

In order to explain why the rebellion drew such broad popular support we will look first at the developments of Niels's reign. Sparse as the sources are, they make clear that both the Bodilsen and Trund families had reasons for being dissatisfied with and hostile towards Niels that predated the killing of Knud Lavard. Both families were closely involved in the life of the Danish Church: Peder Bodilsen was a proponent of ecclesiastical reform; Kristiarn's brother, Asser, had been the first archbishop of Lund; and Kristiarn's son Eskil, Asser's successor, became the great champion of *libertas ecclesiae* in the later twelfth century. The Trund family was also involved in the cause of the Holy Land: two of Kristiarn's brothers were to end their lives there as pilgrims (*De Eskillo et patruis eius*, 9 (*SM*, II, 441)).

A commitment to religious reform did not, however, necessarily mean opposition to a strong Crown. Over the previous half-century, Niels's father and brothers had fostered a reputation as champions of the Danish Church and religious discipline. Its influence is prevalent throughout the earliest Danish historical writings: the lives of St Knud IV, the *Passio sancti Canuti regis* (the Passion of St Knud the King) (c. 1095–1100), and Ælnoth's *Gesta Swenomagni regis et filiorum eius et passio gloriosissimi Canuti regis et martyris* (The Deeds of King Sven the Great and his Sons and the Passion of the Most Glorious Knud King and Martyr) (c. 1111–12, Gelting 2011, 38–39) presented Sven Estridsen and Knud IV as supporters of the Church and religious reform and noted that 'the royal family was more distinguished in the Christian faith than was usual among their people' (*Passio*, 2–5; Ælnoth, 2, 8–9 (*VSD*, 63–67, 85–86, 93–96)). The anonymous chronicler of Roskilde also adopted the idea that good kings ought to take an active role in the life of the Church. He dwelt at length on how past kings of Denmark had supported the life of the Church, sometimes rewriting the information he had obtained from Adam of Bremen to emphasize their independence and agency (Gelting 2002, 49–50, 86). He presented the Danish kings in accordance with Carolingian models of the good king as a *rector*, a minister with responsibility for the souls as well as the bodies of his subjects: Harald Hen, for instance, is a 'uir optimus, rector iustissimus' (great man and a most righteous ruler); a just judge who curbs the arrogance of the powerful (*CR*, 10 (*SM*, I, 23)). It is unlikely that this vision of kingship was solely a clerical invention: Ælnoth's *Gesta* had been presented to King Niels with many prayers for future favour, an indication that the author expected Niels to react

well to seeing his brother presented as a passionate reformer. More actively, the numerous letters exchanged between Sven Estridsen and his sons and successive popes show that the royal family was well aware of the advantages to be gained from a close relationship with this centre of religious legitimacy. For them, as for the Carolingians two centuries before, association with the papacy and moral reform served to substantiate their claim to a recently acquired throne. Sven Estridsen was the sister-son of Knud den Store ('the Great'). Knud's family, the Jelling dynasty, presented an uneven but still formidable example as conquerors and religious reformers: it was, as the rune stone at Jelling proclaimed, Knud's grandfather, Harald Blåtand ('Bluetooth'), who had 'made the Danes Christians' (Gelting 2007). As Gregory VII formulated it in one of his letters, through their piety and virtue it would become clear that Sven's sons descended from a 'line of the most noble blood' and were equal to this formidable example (DD, I.2, no. 20, p. 42). Shortly before Niels ascended to the throne this relationship had culminated, under his brother Erik Ejegod, in the establishment of the independent Danish archbishopric in Lund (Breengaard 1982, 180).

Contributing to the Bodilsen and Trund families' dissatisfaction with Niels was the fact that he failed to live up to the example set by his predecessors. The chronicle of Roskilde described Niels as 'virum mansuetum et simplicem, minime rectorem' (a mild and straightforward man, not at all a *rector*). The interpretation of the description is much debated (CR, 13 (*SM*, I, 25); Christensen 1977, 99), but in the context of the chronicle's descriptions of earlier Danish kings as forceful *rectores* there can be little doubt that the anonymous chronicler wanted to convey that Niels, despite his personal qualities, was a failure as leader of the kingdom in both worldly and spiritual terms. The Roskilde chronicler was writing after the civil war that engulfed the last years of Niels's reign and this must have influenced his evaluation of the reign. The few contemporary records from the reign, however, indicate that Niels's reputation as *minime rectorem* predated the killing of Knud Lavard.

In 1117 Niels received a disappointing letter from Pope Paschal II. The king had written to enquire if it was possible to obtain a dispensation from the demand that priests be celibate. Paschal, however, bluntly let the king know that neither the apostolic see nor the Danish clergy could change the eternal laws of God and that Niels should remember that his power came from God and strive together with the bishops of Denmark to enforce His laws (DD, I.2, no. 41, pp. 86–88). The refusal was problematic because it showed that the king did not have his predecessors' ability to obtain benefits from the papal see. But it also indicates that Niels had aligned himself with those circles in the Church that resisted the increasing demands for clerical celibacy that were spreading across Europe

(Cushing 2005, 98–99). By abandoning the traditional position of the king in the vanguard of reform, Niels created a vacuum in Danish religious politics. In 1123 the dangers that this presented became apparent when Peder Bodilsen launched a violent campaign to ensure celibacy among the clergy of Zealand. According to the Roskilde chronicler Bodilsen and his supporters among the *bundones*, i.e. the lesser landowners, demanded that the clergy should promise to live in celibacy and that those who were married should separate from their wives. In the ensuing campaign against the married clergy ‘some were mutilated, some killed, some driven into exile.’ The disorder was not contained until the next year when a new bishop, Peter, former chaplain of Magnus, was installed and managed to quell the insurrection and ensure that prelates would no longer be tried at the local assemblies. The Roskilde chronicler was no supporter of the celibacy campaign but he nevertheless condemned Niels for his weakness that allowed the great ‘persecution of clergy and people’ (*CR*, 13 (*SM*, I, 25–26)).

Peder Bodilsen’s actions are likely to have been inspired by the First Lateran Council’s rulings against clerical marriage the previous year (Brengaard 1982, 201) — another witness of how attentive members of the Danish aristocracy were to developments in the struggle for religious reform. The decision to turn to violence in persecution of this may also have been related to one of Niels’s other failures that same year. According to the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* (c. 1230), Niels had asked Sigurd Jerusalemfarer of Norway to join with him in a campaign against the apostate people of Småland in the summer of 1123.<sup>2</sup> While waiting for the Norwegian king to arrive, however, the Danes began to ‘complain’ and eventually Niels disbanded the fleet (*Magnússon saga* 24 (II, 263)).<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Peter’s campaign was the result of the frustrated reformer’s desire to fight for good religion having to find expression at home, now that the opportunity to do so abroad had disappeared. The Norwegians did, however, eventually arrive with a large fleet and, angered at Niels’s failure to meet them, plundered the village of Tommarp, near Lund, before continuing on to Småland.

The plundering of Tommarp would have been particularly humiliating for the Trund family. In 1155 Asser’s nephew and successor Eskil was to found a monastery there, possibly using his own family lands (*DD*, I.2, no. 116, pp. 215–

<sup>2</sup> An alternative date of 1124 has been suggested, but see the arguments in Blomkvist 2005, 308–09.

<sup>3</sup> Snorri was building on a twelfth-century source, *Ágrip*, whose account of the campaign only survives in fragments. *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, 56, pp. 74–75.



17). The Trund family, themselves closely involved in the crusading movement, cannot have relished seeing an area so close to Lund, one in which they themselves probably already owned lands, ravaged by an army about to undertake a war of religious conversion. They might have regarded it as a disaster caused by Niels's inability to maintain discipline.

A potentially much greater blow occurred ten years later, in 1133, when Innocent II declared that the Danish Church should be subject to the see of Hamburg-Bremen, possibly to take effect once the elderly archbishop Asser died (DD, I.2, no. 57, pp. 109–12; Gelting 2004, 187–89). For the Trund family this presented a formidable threat to their status, power, and identity as leaders of the Danish Church. The question of the independence of the Danish Church was not, however, just a question of private privilege for one family. In 1127 Asser had informed Bishop Otto of Bamberg that he could not allow him to send missionaries to Rügen without first consulting 'the Danish princes and magnates' (DD, I.2, no. 52, pp. 101–02). Asser apparently thought that the Danish magnates were interested in and believed they had a say over the relations between the native Church and its German neighbours. If they objected to granting Bamberg the right to preach in Rügen they were likely to have been still more offended by the subjection of the Danish Church to Hamburg-Bremen. It all reflected very badly on Niels, whose own brother and predecessor, Erik Ejegod, had secured the establishment of the independent archbishopric three decades earlier.

Niels was not indifferent to the traditional religious obligations of the king. He supported St Knud IV's monastery in Odense and in his charters he began, as the first Danish king to do so, to describe himself as 'dei gratia rex Danorum' (by God's grace king of the Danes) (DD, I.2, nos 32, 34–35, 42, pp. 73–90; Nyberg 2007, 356–58). He also made abortive attempts to align himself with the expansion of the Christian faith in the proposed expedition to Småland. Similarly, in 1117/18 he had pledged his support to a campaign against the Wends that also came to nothing (Constable 1999, 286, 293). Why did these activities fail to enhance Niels's reputation as a *rector*? An external comparison can help point to possible answers. In 1247 Henry III of England sought to sponsor a cult around a relic of the Holy Blood acquired from the patriarch of Jerusalem and thus generate enthusiasm for his own proposed crusade. The cult, however, failed to attract any widespread interest. The explanation for this seems to have been related to the general lack of respect and authority that Henry III was able to command, not least as a military commander (Vincent 2001, 189). There was, as we have been recently reminded, nothing magical about rituals — including the pious declaration of support for the crusade — to automatically generate support and respect (Pössel 2009; Buc 2001).

Niels's devotion to the cause of Christendom and his commitment to his brother Knud's cult failed to win him support because he was unable, or unwilling, to live up to Knud's example and to present himself as an effective champion of Christendom, internally or externally. Sometime in the first two decades of Niels's reign, Ælnoth, priest at the church of Odense, dedicated his life of St Knud IV to the king. In the dedicatory letter Ælnoth praised Niels as a glorious king, a vicar of Christ on earth. But intermingled with the praise is a strong suggestion of criticism: 'Just as the shameless, impudent or mad detest your renowned, gentle mercy' so all right-thinking men should praise it, considering that it imitates the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord. So far, so good, but the rest of Ælnoth's work praises Knud IV for very different virtues: his steadfast and uncompromising promotion of Christian morals and his persecution of wrongdoers. The overall effect of the work is to encourage Niels to change and 'aspire still more eagerly to emulate [Cnud's] outstanding virtues' (Ælnoth, Pref. 2 (*VSD*, 78–79)). The portrayal of Niels, with its emphasis on his (excessive) meekness and mercy, is very similar to that found in the chronicle of Roskilde, discussed above. If this was the mixed praise Niels received in Odense, the promotion of whose church and monastery was the greatest (and, as far as we know, only) triumph of the first decades of his reign, one shudders to think what was said elsewhere (Nyberg 2007, 360). It might not have been far off the portrait of a weak and indecisive king we find in the later histories of Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus.

Niels's military record did nothing to stem the loss of prestige. A series of marriage alliances had helped secure good relations with the kings of Norway and Sweden (Nyberg 2007, 362–63), but his offensive campaigns were blunders. As noted, not merely did the planned expedition of 1123 fizzle out but the aftermath saw Denmark plundered by its would-be allies and Zealand descending into domestic conflict. Another campaign against the western Wends also ended in fiasco and was, according to Saxo, followed by Wendish plundering expeditions in Slesvig (Saxo XIII (II, 900–06); Paludan 1966–67, 509).<sup>4</sup> Niels's failures were, however, somewhat alleviated by the successes of his son Magnus. As Helge Paludan demonstrated, Magnus appears to have become an important political figure in the later years of Niels's reign (Paludan 1966–67, 513–14). Crucially, Magnus had success in the fields that eluded his father: he was elected king of Gotland and launched plundering expeditions against pagans in eastern Sweden. From one of these he brought back to Denmark the treasures of a pagan shrine that according to Saxo, who is otherwise very negative towards Magnus, caused

<sup>4</sup> Saxo, XIII.2.1–8. See discussion in Paludan 1966–67, 509.

much amazement (XIII.5.1, 5.5 (II, 918, 923)). Magnus's combination of external success and promulgation of the faith aligned perfectly with the expected behaviour of a good Danish king.

Niels's reliance on Magnus, however, placed him in a very difficult position in 1131. According to Saxo the king caved in after the settlement and rescinded Magnus's sentence to exile under pressure from his advisers who argued 'that it would be better for him to resign power' rather than uphold his only son's exile (XIII.8.1 (II, 946–47)). This may not have been far off the mark: the Roskilde chronicle, our closest equivalent to a source from Niels's camp, praised Magnus extravagantly while, as we have seen above, disparaging his father's ability as a ruler (*CR*, 15 (*SM*, II, 29)). It is possible that Niels believed that without Magnus he would not be able to maintain power in the face of the expected hostility from Erik Emune and his supporters. Saxo's insistence that Erik only turned to violence after Niels's breach of the sentence of exile bears the mark of a retrospective tidying-up of a situation that must have been full of mutual suspicion and rumours. Rescinding Magnus's exile was, however, a breach of the compromise hammered out at Ringsted. At this critical point, Niels's weakness and unwillingness or inability to uphold the sentence of exile became a threat to the political order of the kingdom. The safety and status of all landholders, and all magnates, were rendered unsure if the king's son could kill the duke of Slesvig without reprisal and the judgement of the *landsting* be overruled by the royal will.

Half a century later Sven Aggesen, grandson of Kristiarn Svensen, described the murder of Knud Lavard as a breach of all laws human and divine. Drawing on his classical learning, he compared Magnus to the Tarquinian kings of Rome, the dictators that destroyed the Republic, and the cursed house of Oedipus. Like them he was a tyrant and could not fail to fear Knud's virtues, since 'uprightness is always suspect' to tyrants (Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* VII.2; Lucan, *De bello civili* I.92–93). As a result of Magnus's lawless ambition:

Right, law and goodness perish,  
And all respect for life and death

(Sven Aggesen, 13; Statius, *Thebaid* I.154–55  
(*SM*, I, 130; trans. Christiansen 1992, 68))

The classical guise in which Aggesen dressed his complaints does nothing to disguise the shock that the murder still presented half a century later to the members of the aristocratic families of Denmark. Magnus had to be punished, not just because his actions hurt the fortunes of a particular kin-group but because they imperilled the fortunes of the magnates as a group and the internal peace on which they depended.

### *The Rebellion and its Ideas, 1131–35*

The most important sources for the rebels' understanding and presentation of their cause are two charters issued by Erik Emune shortly after his victory at Fodevig. On 6 January 1135 Erik granted lands to the church of St Lawrence in Lund, the unfinished archiepiscopal cathedral of Lund, for the maintenance of a priest to pray for his soul. The timing was important: the chronicle of Roskilde recorded that Erik celebrated Christmas 1134/35 in Scania (*CR*, 17 (*SM*, 1, 30)). This was the first Christmas court after Niels's death and an opportunity to gather the Danish aristocracy, especially Erik's supporters in Scania, around their new king. It was also four years to the day since Knud Lavard was murdered in Haraldsted Forest on 7 January 1131 while returning from Niels's Christmas banquet. The grant marked the restoration of the right order of the world that had been disrupted by the killing (Breengaard 1982, 227). What that restoration entailed was hinted at in the opening section of the charter, composed of a rich melange of biblical quotations:

*Having been delivered by God out of great tribulations and distresses, we give him great thanks [II Maccabees 1. 11 and II Corinthians 6. 4], because He has liberated His people, because He has restored us to our kingdom and inheritance [II Maccabees 2. 17], and placed me on my ancestors' seat. [III Kings 2. 24] (DD, I.2, no. 63, pp. 122–23).<sup>5</sup>*

Erik's charter to St Lawrence in Lund shares traits with other royal donations and seems to have been produced under the instruction of royal scribes (DD, I.2, no. 63, p. 122). This, then, was not the pious fabrication of the Lund clergy but the official verdict on the conflict promulgated by Erik and his supporters. The charter's carefully composed melange of biblical quotations paints the struggle as a conflict of deep religious significance. The 'tribulations and distresses' come from II Corinthians: they are the sufferings that unbelievers impose on the servants of God. But it is the Maccabees with whom the charter most insistently compared the rebels. The Maccabees were a second-century BC Jewish sect who had led a rebellion against Antiochus Epiphanes, king of Syria. Since the Carolingian period the Maccabees had been understood to prefigure Christian reformers and holy warriors. Their struggle to '*cleanse the holy places*' and elect '*priests without blemish, whose will was set upon the law of God*' (II Maccabees 4. 41–43; Buc 2015, 95–99) signified contemporary struggles against impure clergy. When the

<sup>5</sup> All biblical quotations are in italics.

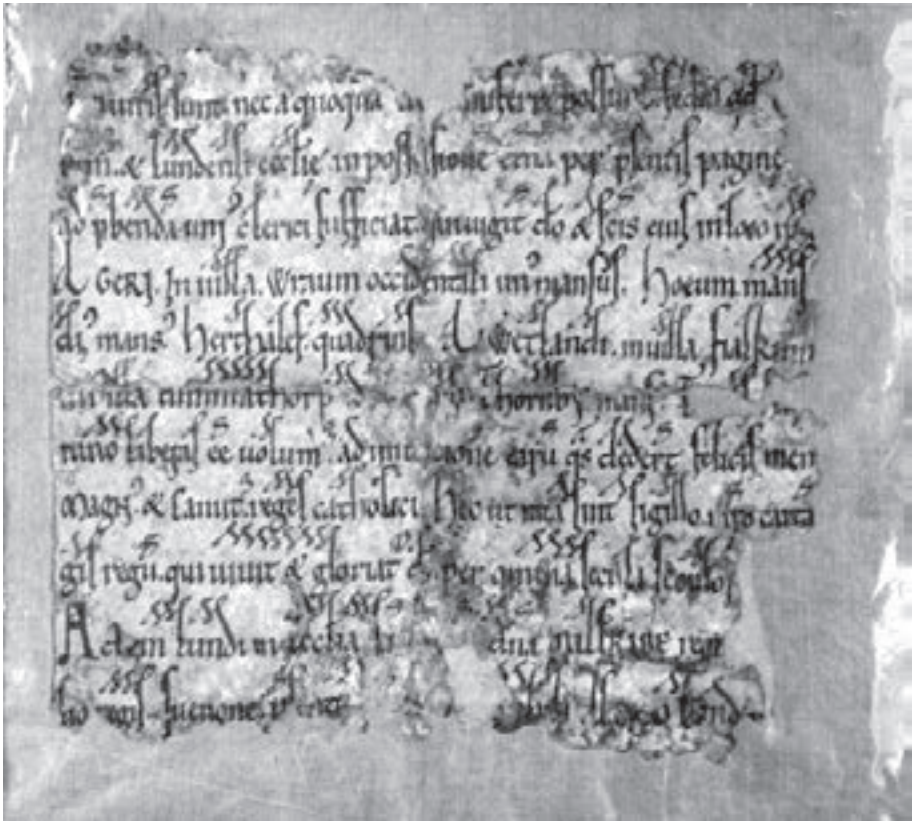


Figure 9. Erik Emune's Charter for St Lawrence, Lund, 6 January 1135.  
 Reproduced with permission of Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet), Stockholm.

book of Maccabees thanked God for having 'liberated' his people it was not just from tyranny, but also from sin. Theirs was the freedom to subject themselves, and all Israel, to God's law. The Maccabees enemy, Antiochus, was perhaps the most familiar type of Antichrist in Christian exegesis (Emmerson 1981, 28). By associating himself with the Maccabees Erik was presenting himself as a champion against Niels's lawless, devilish tyranny and against the impurity among the clergy that Niels had allowed to flourish.

We have no way of establishing to what extent the content of the charter, or its religious significance, was explained to the 'many priests and deacons and the great multitude of people' who had witnessed it alongside the archbishop, the queen, and Erik Emune's son Sven Grathe. But there are reasons to believe

that elements of the charter's message would have resonated with the wider aristocratic audience. The Maccabees as models for Christian warfare and the idea of fighting in the name of *libertas* had both been popularized in the wake of the struggles for church reform and the First Crusade. Both conflicts had been framed as wars for *libertas*: to free, respectively, the Church from lay influence and the Eastern Christians from the tyranny of the heathen (Buc 2015, 218). Lay champions of reform, such as Erlembald, the leader of the reform movement in Milan, and the anti-king Rudolph of Swabia were both compared to Judas Maccabeus. So too were the first crusaders in several chronicles (Lapina 2015). In 1107/08 a letter circulated in the courts of Northern Europe urging princes and prelates to offer support for a war against the Wends and comparing the fight to that of the Maccabees. Like them the Northern Christians should endeavour to free 'our Jerusalem which from the beginning *was free, is made a slave* by the cruelty of the gentiles' (1 Maccabees 2. 11). According to the letter, 'the king of the Danes with his people' had offered his help in this war. The identification of the Christian Church in the Slavic lands with 'our Jerusalem' clearly shows how concepts and ideas associated with the fight for the Holy Land could be adapted to other locations in Christendom under threat from pagans and false believers.<sup>6</sup>

Several of the most important figures in the rebellion had previously been involved with these movements. We have noted Peder Bodilsen's violent campaign against married clergy. Erik's charter, associating the rebellion with the struggle for religious purity, would have enabled him to see the rebellion of 1131–35 as a continuation of that campaign. According to the later *Knýtlinga saga* (c. 1250), Erik Emune himself had accompanied his father, Erik I Ejegod, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, alongside many of the 'leading men' of Denmark, shortly after the conquest of Jerusalem (*Knýtlinga saga*, 79, 232–33; Jensen 2013, 92–94, see also Bysted and others 2012).

In the lives composed for St Knud IV the reformer-king had been compared to Judas Maccabeus (*VSD*, 65, 106) and his struggle to reform Danish society had been presented by Ælnoth as a struggle for pious liberty. Knud had sought to 'a peccati seruitute eripere et ad iusticiae libertatem conaretur reducere' (rescue the people from servitude to sin and restore them to the liberty of justice) (Ælnoth, 8 (*VSD*, 94)). The preamble to Erik's charter could thus also be read as a commitment to follow Knud's reforming example — an example that even the monks of Odense thought Niels had failed to live up to. That point was made

<sup>6</sup> *Urkunden*, 100, translation and discussion in Constable 1999, 293, see also Morton 2010, 283.

explicit in the following part of the preamble. Erik would act in accordance with the customs of 'our predecessors of blessed memory Svend Magnus [Sven Estridsen] and Knud [IV], *reges catholici*'.

Following these venerable examples, Erik would conduct himself according to the principles of Christian kingship. The charter recorded that Erik had given 'in honour of *the King of kings*' and the saints — a reference to St Paul's first epistle to Timothy, where the apostle spelled out the responsibility of Christian leaders and the need for powerful men to avoid arrogance (DD, 1.2, no. 63, pp. 122–23, 1 Timothy 6. 15). Erik knew that he should suborn himself in front of the Lord; he would be no tyrant. The reference to 'my ancestors' seat' recalled the fact that Erik was the son of a king, Erik I, and thus had a legitimate claim to the throne. But it also implied that Erik would be a king who respected the right order of the world. The words belonged to wise king Solomon, who had by the early Middle Ages become synonymous with just, wise, and above all peaceful rule (Kershaw 2011, 56–58; Riis 1977, 84). While the charter was not an exhaustive programme of government, it clearly and dramatically presented the civil war as a holy struggle to free Danish society from the impious, lawless tyranny that Niels's reign had degenerated into and presented Erik's reign as a fresh start, a return to the good old days of the pious kings Sven and Knud.

Only a fragment of the original charter survives (now in the Swedish National Archives, SDHK 180), but the bold letters with their elongated ascenders stand out confidently. By comparing the fragment with other copies of the text we can conclude that the body of the text would have measured around 21×22 cm (Secher 1882), but we know nothing about the margins, the placement of the royal seal and signature, and related matters of presentation that are now attracting increasing attention from historians (Koziol 2012, 57–59). The context, however, enables us to hypothesize about the impact that the performance of the grant would have made.

By making offerings to St Lawrence, Erik was associating his victory with a saint who had a particularly close relationship with the Danish people.<sup>7</sup> About the same time that Erik gave his charter, the English chronicler William of Malmesbury recorded that it was the custom of the Danes to spend the vigil of the feast of St Lawrence in abstinence. This was done in gratitude for the victory the saint had brought them at the Battle of Lyrskov Heath in 1043. Intriguingly, that

<sup>7</sup> The charter referred to the saints in general, but Erik Emune's entry in the *Memoriale fratrum* noted that he had given in gratitude for the 'help of God and St Lawrence' (*Necrologium Lundense* 94).

victory had been fought against a Wendish invasion led by the progenitor of the royal family, Sven Estridsen (Malmesbury, *Gesta regum*, 259 (I, 479)).<sup>8</sup> Seventy years later, Saxo also noted the special importance of St Lawrence, although he associated the beginning of the tradition with Niels's failed war against the Wends in the beginning of his reign. Here, also, St Lawrence had brought deliverance to the Danes in their struggles with the pagans (Saxo, XIII.2.5 (II, 902–04)). By invoking St Lawrence's support Erik was signalling that his victory too had been won against an enemy of Denmark, and of God, and aligning himself with a power that had in the past helped defeat members of the royal family when they failed to support the forces of righteousness.

It was only the second time that a king had issued a charter in favour of St Lawrence in Lund, the first having been granted by St Knud IV (DD, I.2, no. 21, pp. 43–52). This was part of the point: by granting the charter Erik was demonstrating his willingness to follow the model set down by Knud. For the Trund family, and especially Archbishop Asser, the symbolism of Erik acknowledging St Lawrence and his Church would also have been of the highest importance. It indicated that Erik would continue his father, Erik I Ejegod's, devotion to St Lawrence and the cause of the Danish Church. During the conflict Niels and Magnus had accepted the overlordship of the German emperor Lothar and had probably also had to accept the papal judgement that the archbishopric of Lund would be abolished with Asser's death. In the Lund charter, however, only Erik's regnal year is mentioned and there is no trace of any recognition of the emperor's overlordship (Gelting 2004, 189). Asser — of course still with the title of archbishop — was given a prominent place in the charter as the only named witness outside the royal family. Although Erik may later have accepted imperial overlordship he was, on this occasion at least, demonstrating his support for Lund's status and independence.

When Erik described the rebellion as a holy battle against Satanic tyranny he was speaking to an audience prepared to recognize biblical struggles as models for behaviour in contemporary life. Niels's mixed record as protector of the Church and champion of reform, together with the murder of Knud Lavard, rumours of whose sanctity were beginning to spread, provided the opportunity to frame Niels as a tyrannical king and opponent of God and the right order of the world.

Despite the Lund charter's confident declarations about the reestablishment of peace, the last confrontation of the civil war was still to follow. According to

<sup>8</sup> Neither Adam of Bremen nor the Icelandic sources mention an alliance between Sven and the Wends. For an overview of Sven's career, see Sonne 2016.



the chronicle of Roskilde, while Erik Emune was celebrating Christmas in Scania he received news that his brother, Harald Kesja, who had switched sides from Erik to Niels in the later stages of the war, was gathering support in Jutland. Erik 'immediately left for Zealand and sailed at great speed through the freezing cold towards Jutland'. Here he captured Harald and his sons and had his brother executed. The sons were killed within the year (*CR*, 17 (*SM*, I, 30)). This was the context in which Erik issued the second of his surviving charters. On 2 February 1135, he re-founded the Benedictine monastery in Ringsted in memory of his brother Knud Lavard.<sup>9</sup> In the charter issued to the new community Erik emphasized his steadfast affection for Knud, whom he 'loved more than any other mortal', and stated that Knud had been 'cruelly slain' by Magnus (*DD*, I.2, no. 65, pp. 129–30). The donation was witnessed by some of Erik's most important supporters including Peder Bodilsen, Ebbe Stigsen, possibly a member of the Hvide family, and Agge Pik, who may be identical with Kristiarn Svensen's son who had fought on Erik's side (Hermanson 2000, 161).

Given the date of issue, the charter must either have been granted as Erik and his army were making their way across Zealand towards Jutland or, more likely, very soon after the capture and execution of Harald Kesja. In either case the fraternal confrontation provided the immediate context for the charter. The emphasis on Erik's singular love for Knud and the cruelty of his murder were both intended to remind the audience of the treachery Harald Kesja had committed by abandoning the cause of Knud's avengers. Erik's supporters were being primed to accept that the fraternal bloodletting was not the cruel slaying of a kinsman, but the just persecution of a faithless accomplice of the murderer Magnus. The murder of one brother was commemorated to legitimize the execution of another.

Erik's energetic campaign to control understanding of the conflict was necessitated by the scale of the slaughter that had taken place. By the end of 1135 it included three kings of Denmark, Niels and his sometimes co-kings, Magnus and Harald; four bishops (with a fifth mortally wounded at Fodevig); and many lay aristocrats. Add to this the Roskilde chronicler's report that in 1133 Erik's supporters killed Eskil bishop of Viborg while he was conducting Mass in his church (*CR*, 15 (*SM*, I, 29–30)). To justify such slaughter necessitated hard ideological work. Soon after he assumed the throne, if not before, Erik recruited an English clerk, Robert of Ely, to compose a monumental *vita* for his brother

<sup>9</sup> For the dating see Weibull 1941, 58.

Knud.<sup>10</sup> The work had already been finished before Erik's death in 1137 and must be read alongside the charters as part of Erik's attempt to shape understanding of the civil war in the immediate aftermath of Niels's death. While only a few fragments of the *vita* and later descriptions of its contents now survive, they show that Robert of Ely painted Niels's reign in the darkest colours.

The first book shows Niels as manifestly unsuited for the Crown. After Erik's death the people wanted to elect Knud Lavard king but Niels swayed them through costly gifts. Besides that, a sixteenth-century excerptor noted, Robert 'exaggerated Niels' wickedness' and 'attributed all manner of wrong-doing to Niels' (*VSD*, 235). The allegation that the kingship was won through gifts was no innocent comment on the importance of generosity in political life. One of the central objectives of the reform movement was the prohibition of simony, the use of gifts to obtain ecclesiastical benefices. This led some to also question the role of gifts in the choice of kings, an office precariously connected to both the sacred and the profane. For instance, in 1077 a papal legate criticized the German princes for extracting promises from the would-be anti-king Rudolph of Rheinfelden, warning them that the election would be 'polluted with the poison of simoniacal heresy' (Bruno, chap. 91, p. 85; trans. Reuter 2001, 160–61). Robert wished to show that Niels's reign had been illegitimate from the start.

The second book argues that Niels was 'not without guilt in the murder of Knud', as the excerptor summarized it. After the Christmas celebrations of 1130–31, Niels had exchanged rings with Knud, hypocritically claiming he wished to keep Knud's ring as a memento of his love. In reality, however, Niels believed stories that Knud's ring could provide magical protection against enemies and would enable Magnus 'to prevail over Knud' (*VSD*, 239–40). Magnus originally planned to carry out the murder during the Christmas feast itself but a series of accidents forestalled this supreme act of sacrilege (*VSD*, 238; Kjær 2015). Robert's Niels was not simply an incompetent king but an impious hypocrite who abused and corrupted solemn rituals and customs: he bought the Crown with bribes, his Christmas banquet was the scene of attempted murders, and he aided and abetted his murderous son. Here Robert was drawing on a tradition going back to St Augustine's critique of the rulers of pagan Rome, who would manipulate public ceremonies to further their own sectarian ambitions (Buc 2001, 15–50, 143–47).

That Erik presented the rebellion as a principled struggle does not of course mean that these principles were necessarily what motivated him or his

<sup>10</sup> The eighteenth-century scholar Árni Magnússon described it as written 'satis prolixè', *VSD*, 183. See Friis-Jensen 2012.

supporters. The hostile Roskilde chronicle, for instance, presented Erik as an opportunistic villain surrounded by 'faithless and wicked men', whose allegiance he maintained by plundering and redistributing the possessions of honest people (*CR*, 14, 16, 18 (*SM*, I, 27–28, 30–31)). The Roskilde chronicler's focus on Erik's instrumental use of gifts to purchase loyalty served exactly the same purpose as Robert's suggestion that Niels purchased the Crown with bribes. It was a conventional rhetorical weapon designed to undermine the legitimacy of the opposition by insinuating a selfish, materialistic motivation (White 2003; Kjær 2012). That Erik Emune did redistribute lands is, however, confirmed by a charter from 1147 issued by Rikulf, then bishop of Odense, who recorded that he had received part, of unspecified size, of the vill of Geltofte as a gift from Emune in return for his military service (*DD*, I.2, no. 99, 181–84). The question is, however, whether the kind of gifts Emune was able to provide, or could be expected to be able to provide, would compare to the risk involved in rebellion. If we return to the two charters issued to St Lawrence and Ringsted it is notable that the size of the gifts does not live up to the grandiose eloquence of the preambles. St Lawrence received only 7 *bol* — one *bol* corresponding to about one peasant's farm. Ringsted received 2 *bol* on Amager, 1 *bol* in Ejby and Almstofte, and the lands in Bjerger equalling 'almost' 2 *bol*. Erik himself was aware that this did not provide an adequate foundation for a monastery and promised that he would give more in the future should he be able (*DD*, I.2, nos 64–66, pp. 119–30). Given the importance of these two donations it would be unsafe to presume that he had much more land to give to his other supporters. The gift of a few farms or movables obtained through plunder would have been important for the maintenance of mercenaries and household retainers but it is questionable whether they would have been enough to convince wealthy magnates like Peder Bodilsen, Kristiarn Svensen, and the Hvide brothers to risk their extensive possessions in a rebellion. The extent of the holdings of these magnates is difficult to ascertain, but the size of the donations they provided to the Church and monasteries around the time of the rebellion is indicative (Ulsig, 1968, 22–23). In 1133 Asser, of the Trund family, recorded all the lands he had granted to Lund, a total of 28½ *bol* (*DD*, I.2, no. 56, 105–09). In 1135 Peder Bodilsen and his close relatives gave 12 *bol*, besides other rights, to found a monastery in Næstved (*DD*, I.2, no. 64, 124–28). In both cases the leading magnates were able to dispense with larger grants of land than Erik could in 1135. It is then, on the whole, unlikely that it was primarily hopes of increase in their landed fortunes that made the magnates join Emune. If self-interest motivated these rebels it is more likely to have been reactive: the need to protect themselves from being lawlessly killed or persecuted as Knud Lavard had been.

Narrative sources composed after the war indicate that the magnate families saw the war against Niels as a pious duty and necessary for the maintenance of the right order of the world. In the 1180s Sven Aggesen, grandson of Kristiarn Svensen, describing the conflict in his *Brevis historia regum Dacie* (Short History of the Kings of Denmark), made use of scriptural references similar to those in Erik Emune's charter. Erik was stirred into rebellion not by a simple feud but by 'the *finger of God*', recalling Exodus 8. 19 and Luke 11. 20 where, respectively, the plagues that befell the Pharaoh and the casting out of demons are similarly attributed (SA, *Brevis historia*, 14 (SM, I, 132–33)). Sven gave particular prominence to the achievements and sufferings of his own ancestors: Kristiarn was captured at the Battle of Rønbjerg and 'bound with chains of iron'. At the ensuing battle at the bridge at Onsild, Sven's father Agge heroically held back Niels's army while Erik retreated. Agge and his co-commander, Emune's nephew Bjørn Ironside, 'beat back the enraged attackers with such wondrous valour that they might have crossed the bed of the stream dry-shod on the corpses of the slain'. Although having incurred 'numerous wounds' they held the bridge 'with such courage that they were thought to be immovable pillars' (SA, *Brevis historia*, 14 (SM, I, 133–34); trans. Christiansen 1992, 69–70). The trope of an 'immovable pillar' was elsewhere used for the apostle Paul.<sup>11</sup> These tribulations of the Trund family aligned them with the martyrs (compare, for instance, Hebrews 11. 36–37), suffering in the service of divine justice. In Sven's description the divine case for war is intermingled with family legends of heroic prowess worthy of any saga or *chanson de geste*. Religious analogies and vocabulary could coexist with and reinforce very secular celebrations of martial glory, a phenomenon also observed in contemporary histories of the crusade (Paul 2012).

Whereas Sven Aggesen focussed on the achievements of the Trund family, his slightly later contemporary Saxo Grammaticus privileged the perspective of the Hvide family in his *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes). It was Absalon, son of Asser Rig, one of the Hvide rebels, who requested that Saxo compose his history and provided Saxo with information about his own exploits and those of his relatives (Saxo, *Gesta*, Pr. 1.1, 1.5 (I, 2, 6)). Normally Saxo was notoriously reluctant to use direct scriptural quotations or references to the divine (Blatt 1957, viii)<sup>12</sup> and so it is all the more striking that in describing the rebellion

<sup>11</sup> See discussion in Christiansen 1992, 132.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Saxo's portrayal of the conversion of the Danes (x.11.2–3 (I, 716–18)), the murder of St Knud IV (xi.14.15, xi.15.1 (II, 858, 860)), and God's benevolence towards Absalon (xiv.18.8, xiv.22.4–6, xv.6.12 (II, 1094, 1120–22, 1494)). On this and *fortuna* in Saxo, see Friis-Jensen 2006.

against Niels Saxo makes several references to divine intervention. At the opening of the conflict, he draws attention to Niels's and Magnus's lack of reverence for the sacred. When Knud Lavard and Magnus met in Haraldstedskov, the latter had spoken furtively about a certain enemy he intended to avenge himself on. Knud, unaware that he himself was the enemy in question,

solemnly pondered this savage project together with the sacredness of the season – the rites of Epiphany were then taking place – and begged him not to besmirch a public festival with private vindictiveness. (Saxo, XIII.6.8. (II, 938–39))

Knud's pious request was of course violently denied. Like son, like father: Niels was 'careless of perjury' and broke his oath to the *landsting* by recalling Magnus from exile. It was Niels's breaking of his vow ('uoce sacrilegium') that pushed Erik into open rebellion (XIII.8.2 (II, 946)). At the end of the conflict Magnus's and Niels's impious chickens came home to roost: at Fodevig Niels's army was 'fortuna non prelio superatam' (conquered not by fighting but by destiny); Erik's comprehensive victory was 'God's vengeance for Magnus' parricide'. The ensuing rout and massacre of Niels's army Saxo claims to have 'been granted by God in return for the assassination of that most saintly person, Knud' (Saxo, XIII.11.8–10 (II, 966–69)). Even for this most determinedly secular writer the rebellion against Niels and the Battle of Fodevig necessitated the language of divine retribution.

Alongside the evocations of divine intervention, however, Saxo also gave an unusually detailed description of the public debates and the legal arguments that preceded the outbreak of hostilities (Christiansen 1980–81, 283–86, 316–19). The inspiration for this seems to have been partly the stories of the Hvide family, who played a key role in these, and partly Saxo's extensive classical education. Throughout the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo drew parallels between Danish and Roman history and this too influenced his depiction of the aftermath of the killing of Cnud Lavard (Friis-Jensen 1993). After the murder, the Hvide family, together with Peder Bodilsen and Håkon Sunnivason, did the rounds of 'popular assemblies', rousing the 'people' to vengeance. They

brought to everyone's view Knud's cloak, which had been torn with numerous gashes. This mangled garment stirred up the populace in a way which proved of no small benefit to their doleful case. Indeed a great many found that the sight of such ugly rents in his mantle made them yearn intensely for revenge. (Saxo, XIII.7.4 (II, 942–43))

If the reader at this point is reminded of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act 3 Scene 2), that is no accident. Like Shakespeare, Saxo was drawing on classical

descriptions of Caesar's funeral where Mark Anthony showed Caesar's cloak, which had been torn apart by the daggers of his assailants, to the Romans and thus moved the people to vengeance (Appian, *Civil Wars* II.146; Suetonius, *Deified Julius* LXXXIV.1). Saxo was of course very aware that, as with Rome, the ensuing civil would eventually lead to a glorious new future under the murdered prince's heir (Augustus in the Roman case; Valdemar I in the Danish). It can be difficult to disentangle Saxo's classical borrowings from the recollections of the Hvide family but the ease with which he aligned the two in itself tells us something about the nature of political life in medieval Denmark. At the *ting*, as in the Roman senate, the ability to present oneself as a champion of justice mattered. Saxo's accounts of these debates are particularly detailed but other chroniclers confirm the centrality of public debate to political success: even the hostile Roskilde chronicle noted that Erik owed his election as leader of the rebels to his 'eloquence' (*CR*, 14 (*SM*, I, 27)). As we saw above, the Hvide family was the only magnate group that can be shown to have had a personal connection with Lavard. It is noteworthy that the chronicler most closely associated with that family also insisted that the rebellion was not a private feud but a public war (*bellum*) fought in the name of justice (XIII.11.11 (II, 968)). Whatever individual magnates' private motivation they appear to have felt the need to frame the rebellion as being fought in defence of wider, public values.

Sven Aggesen and Saxo's histories indicate that Erik's view of the war was shared by his magnate allies but they are both Latin texts composed by highly educated men, who were probably both members of the clergy (Friis-Jensen 1989; Münster-Swendsen 2012, 261). We are much less well informed about how the rebellion was justified in media less dominated by the concerns of the Latinate clergy. According to both Saxo and the Roskilde chronicler, Erik was an eloquent speaker who knew how to motivate warriors (Saxo XIII.9.2 (II, 954)). His speeches may also have contained some of the high-blown moralizing that we have encountered above. According to Saxo, 'rerum a se gestarum uirtutem tantis laudibus prosequi consueuerat, ut ueri interdum fidem excederet' (it was his habit to give such high praise to the quality [virtutem] of his own deeds that he was sometimes taken for a liar) (Saxo, XIV.1.9 (II, 978–79)).

One later source provides us with some idea of how these religious ideas could be translated into the vernacular. *Knýtlinga saga* was written around the middle of the thirteenth century, possibly by the Icelander Óláfr Þórðarson, who had visited the Danish royal court.<sup>13</sup> The author of the saga appears to have had access

<sup>13</sup> On the question of the authorship of the saga, see Mortensen 2012.

to the *Gesta Danorum* (Mortensen 2012; Gelting 2012). From here he lifted the idea that the rebellion was a just and holy war. But Óláfr also transformed it, underlining the centrality of vengeance and at the same time heightening the religious dimension with language reminiscent of the crusading movement (Jensen 2013). Erik was quickly able to gather an army because ‘many believed he had much to take vengeance for against King Niels and his son Magnus’ (*Knýtlinga saga*, 94, 257). Erik’s army grew because he could call on the friends of Knud Lavard and their father, Erik I Ejegod, but also because the king and his son ‘had earned themselves the deep hatred of the common people of Denmark’ (*Knýtlinga saga*, 95, 259; trans. Pálsson & Edwards 1986, 137). Before the Battle of Fodevig, the saga has Archbishop Asser, Erik’s ally, preaching to the army, urging them to confess their sins and promising that the forthcoming battle would serve as an act of *skript* (penance). Afterwards, Erik reminded the army of how shamefully Niels and Magnus had acted by killing Knud, despite the goodness his and Knud’s father had shown them. The slaying was a *níðingsvíg*, a cowardly murder (96, 260). Here a vernacular vocabulary of vengeance and shame thrives alongside pious exhortations. We have every reason to believe that it could have done the same in the 1130s.

On its own, *Knýtlinga saga* is too late a source for us to place much weight on its suggestion that the war against Niels was perceived as an act of penance. This idea could easily have entered the saga from the development of crusading thought in the century that had passed since Fodevig, which had both seen a formalization of the theology of penitential warfare and the application of this to other theatres of war (Tyerman 1975; Jensen 2013, 97–99; Bysted 2014). Two contemporary sources, however, suggest that the conflict was already seen as a form of holy war by some contemporaries. Firstly, there is a cryptic note in the chronicle of Roskilde which has not received due attention from historians stating that shortly before the Battle of Fodevig the people of Scania — who had previously turned against Erik — now ‘quasi penitencia ducti’ (as if led by penance) unanimously re-committed themselves to his cause and promised to ‘live and die by his side’ (*CR*, 15 (*SM*, I, 28)). What the chronicle is describing here is clearly something more than a decision to side with one royal pretender in preference to another. The commitment to fight to the death for Erik and the suggestion that they had felt moved to do so by *penitentia* seem to allude to the religious case for rebellion and the need to make amends for their previous betrayal.<sup>14</sup> Two decades earlier the German chronicler Albert of Aachen had used

<sup>14</sup> Sven Aggesen, whose family was partly based in Scania, notes in the introduction to the

the same words *penitentia ducti* to describe the desire for repentance that moved people to join the First Crusade (Albert of Aachen I.2, p. 4). It is particularly interesting that we owe this description to the Roskilde chronicler who, as we have seen above, consistently sought to put a negative and materialistic spin on the rebels' motivations. Here, he was reduced to add a petulant *quasi* to the report of the Scanian's wish to make repentance. Just before the description of the Battle of Fodevig, *Knýtlinga saga* notes that the war had been described in 'many books of the Danes', which suggests that the author had read beyond Saxo's description of the conflict (*Knýtlinga saga*, 95, 258). He may have known the Roskilde chronicle, which was still being copied and updated in Valdemar II's reign and by circles close to the royal court (Gelting 2002, 92–93). Possibly the chronicle's mention of *penitentia* inspired the saga's more developed analogy with the crusades.

A perception among the landowners and churchmen of Scania that the rebellion was a religious obligation may also lie behind two unusually detailed passages in the obit book of the cathedral chapter at Lund, the *Memoriale fratrum*. Under 1 June it noted:

On this day a great persecution took place in this city. Svend, son of Conrad, really named Thorgrim, and Magnus and Tue, lay men, with many others died for justice's sake.

On 2 June it noted:

Tue, a lay man, son of Atte, of good memory, who had suffered many wounds in the above mentioned massacre, made confession, and receiving holy communion surrendered his soul to Heaven. (*Necrologium Lundense*, 74)

The entries were copied into the obit book of the cathedral church, the *Liber daticus*, written c. 1137–45, and here both entries were further marked out by crosses placed in the margin (*Lund Domkapitels Gavebøger*, 138; Gelting 2004, 206–10, 213). Lauritz Weibull suggested that these men might have been singled out for commemoration because they had died fighting against Niels in the preliminaries of the Battle of Fodevig, 4 June (Weibull 1946, 196). Recently, Michael Gelting argued against this, pointing out that Saxo mentions no military actions in Lund before the surprise attack at Fodevig (2004, 211). But the annals of the monastery of St Peter in Erfurt, which are unusually well-informed

Battle of Fodevig that the 'people of Scania are always upstanding in righteousness' — perhaps seeking to gloss over the embarrassing betrayal of the rebellion (14 (*SM*, I, 134–35)).



about this episode in the Danish civil war, states that before the battle Lund had already been placed under siege by Niels's army (*Annales Erphesfurdenses*, 539). The annalist may have learned details of the battle from Erik's German mercenaries who had been besieged in the city and whose sortie played a central role in Niels's defeat. Some military action does then seem to have taken place in early June 1134 in Lund itself and the entries in the *Memoriale fratrum* may very well relate to these. The obit book's description of the men as having died 'for justice' in a 'massacre' aligns with the martyrological language employed by Sven Aggesen in describing the conflict: martyrs died for *justicia*, in the sense of divine truth. Thus St Knud IV, in Ælnoth's chronicle discussed above, had died seeking to bring the Danes to 'justiciae libertatem' (freedom of justice) (*Ælnoth, Gesta*, 8 (*VSD*, 94)).

So far I have focused on the Danish and Icelandic sources for the war, but the rebellion, especially the Battle of Fodevig, also attracted attention outside Denmark. Interestingly, only one of these focuses on the unusual number of bishops who had been killed: the annals of Magdeburg noted that five bishops had been killed alongside sixty clerks and condemns the treacherous murder of Niels by the people of Slesvig (*Annales Magdeburgenses* 184). Other German sources, however, presented the Battle of Fodevig as the culmination of a holy war waged in the name of vengeance. According to Helmold of Bosau's *Chronica Slavorum* (c. 1171) Magnus ignored his bishops' advice not to attack on the holy day of Whitsunday and proceeded to engage the rebels at Fodevig, where Erik 'brought forth his army, and met him with a strong power' (Helmold 1.51, p. 101). Magnus's defeat was God's vengeance for the murder of Lavard. Like Erik Emune's charter to St Lawrence, Helmold described the struggle with vocabulary from the Books of the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 11. 15). The spiritual value is, however, reduced insofar as Erik is compared not to the Maccabees themselves but to their ally Ptolemy Philometer of Egypt who dispatches the Antiochene king Alexander Balas but dies soon thereafter. From Helmold's perspective the Danes, 'only remarkable for their civil wars' (Helmold 1.51, p. 102), might serve as tools of divine retribution, but hardly as models of Christian warfare.

A more celebratory description of the Battle of Fodevig is found in the annals of Erfurt. Here too Magnus, full of arrogance and confidence, advances against the advice of his supporters, who would rather remain with the ships. The account culminates with the killing of Magnus by Erik Lamb, son of Håkon Sunnivason and Ragnhild, the sister of Knud Lavard and Erik Emune. Erik Lamb had commanded the forces inside Lund and this 'illustrious young David' led the charge that routed Magnus's army. The army defeated, Erik prepared to dispatch Magnus, exclaiming:

O most sinful brigand, most faithless kinslayer, who killed my uncle, your own uncle's son, while kissing him, just as deceitful Judas betrayed the Lord. Now your sins press down upon you; now God's justice overtakes you! Today you will receive what you have earned and when your impious head and sinful hands have been cut off for the greatness of your crime, you will be a spectacle for the whole world. (*Annales Erpbesfurdenses*, 540)

The story of Erik Lamb's condemnation of Magnus is the more interesting since Erik's father, Håkon Sunnivason, was among the people involved in Magnus's plans against Knud Lavard although, as we have seen above, he later joined the rebellion. If the Erfurt annals accurately reflect Erik Lamb's actions at Fodevig it suggests that he had found it necessary to violently assert his and his family's distance from and distaste for Magnus's actions.

Helmold and the Erfurt annals' accounts share some traits and both may originate with the German mercenaries who had fought on Erik's side. Our final account has a very different tone. A Swedish abbot related at the general convention of the Cistercian order at Clairvaux that on the day of the Battle of Fodevig Icelandic herdsmen had seen the souls of Magnus and his followers 'flying in the shape of black crows and other birds, crying "woe, woe to us, what is it that we are doing? Woe, woe to us, what will become of us?"' They were then seized by immense birds and thrown into the fires of hell (Albert of Trois-Fontaines, 829; Jensen 2011, 188. On the identification of the fires of Hekla with hell, see Jónsson 1997; Falk 2007, 8, 15 n. 27). The abbot had heard the story from one of the herdsmen who later joined the order. Though the story and its transmission are obscure, it is evidence of the kind of stories that circulated about Fodevig. It was a potent, religiously significant battle — one that could attract miracles and marvels. The appearance of the same motifs of divine vengeance in the European sources as we have found in the Danish chronicles favourable to the rebellion is significant. It indicates that the idea that the rebellion was a form of holy war was widely disseminated amongst both Erik Emune's supporters and neighbouring powers.<sup>15</sup>

An interpretation of the rebellion that emphasizes the role of political and religious principles also makes better sense of the events of the conflict. Erik Emune had been able to command support from across Denmark, reaching beyond Knud's power-base in Schleswig or the Hvide family's in Zealand. More importantly, the rebellion proved to be remarkably resilient. Although Erik was

<sup>15</sup> Compare the international discussion of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, Houts 1995.

three times defeated in Jutland and forced into exile the rebellion maintained its coherence and momentum. In these circumstances it seems unlikely that a movement bound together only by the likelihood of mutual advantage would survive. It is also unlikely to have been fear of punishment that maintained the rebellion. Niels had long been known for his clemency but even during the war he had proven a capacity to forgive and forget: he accepted Erik's brother Harald Kesja after his defection and gave him generous rewards (*CR*, 14 (*SM*, I, 27)). To put it another way, Niels and Magnus must have been extremely unpopular for Niels to fail, despite having reigned as king for three decades, to stabilize his control of the kingdom after three military victories. Finally, there is the dramatic bloodshed during the battle at Fodevig. This was not the restrained and strategic employment of force familiar from the feud; this was apocalyptic violence, the kind performed by holy warriors, including crusaders, against the Devil's agents (Rubenstein 2011; Heebøll-Holm 2014; Buc 2015). Contemporaries appreciated the singular scale of the slaughter at Fodevig: Saxo, despite his support for the rebellion, noted that 'no other war was more prolific in its squandering of bishops' blood' (Saxo XIII.11.11 (II, 968–69)). According to Helmold it was the remarkable bloodletting at Fodevig that earned Erik his epithet 'Emune' — 'ever memorable' (I.51, 100).

For the Roskilde chronicler it was a day of great tragedy. The chronicle referred to it as a 'day of darkness', quoting the Book of Joel's prophecies about the tribulations that would afflict Israel when an army of locusts, sent by the Lord, would ravage and despoil the land (*CR*, 15; Joel 2. 2 (*SM*, I, 29)). That affliction was itself a warning of the Day of Judgement that would follow on its heels. For the anonymous chronicler in Roskilde, Erik Emune was not just another would-be king who happened to be on the opposite side in the feud. He was a diabolic figure: 'a scandalous man, full of wrath and lies' capable of simulating piety and virtue through his eloquence, but tyrannical and perverse. As king he was 'arrogant, proud and forceful in evil-doing, assaulting everyone like a bolt of lightning (*more fulminis*)' (*CR*, 14, 18 (*SM*, I, 27, 31)). The comparison of Erik to the lightning hints at the dark forces the chronicler perceived to be at work in him. In Luke 10. 18 Christ declared, 'videbam Satanam sicut fulgor de caelo cadentem' (I saw Satan like lightning falling from Heaven). As we have seen above, Erik had compared Niels to the Antichrist in his charter and now the Roskilde chronicler was repaying the favour, hinting that Erik might be a type of Antichrist, whose traditional characteristic was, like Erik's, the ability to cloak his opposition to God and the Church in simulated piety (Emmerson 1981, 74–107). The tribulations of Joel 2 were, as the chroniclers' contemporary Hugh of St Victor noted, intended to inspire Israel to repentance in preparation for

the Day of Judgement (PL CLXXV, 336). Appalled by the violence and the false, diabolic holiness of Erik and his supporters, and what it portended, the Roskilde chronicler sought to inspire his readers to reform their ways and prepare for the end of time.

### *The Short Reign of Erik Emune, 1135–37*

The forces of reform and resistance unleashed by the rebellion were hard to contain and may also help explain the tumultuous nature of Erik Emune's short, three-year reign. As we have seen above, Erik invested considerable resources in controlling the memory of the conflict and presenting himself as a just monarch who would rule in accordance with the best traditions of his pious family. The first years of his reign show some attempt to put this into practice. According to the Roskilde chronicler, Erik's first action after Niels's death was to journey to Slesvig where he rewarded the citizens for their deed. While in Slesvig, Erik also appointed new bishops to take the place of those who had died at Fodevig: Eskil, Asser's nephew, was made bishop of Roskilde; Nothold, chaplain of Peder Bodilsen, was made bishop of Ribe; Illuge was made bishop of Aarhus; and Ketil became bishop of Børglum in Northern Jutland. Shortly afterwards Erik's own chaplain, Riko, was made bishop of Slesvig (*CR*, 16 (*SM*, I, 30)). Erik's rapid action to restore the Danish episcopacy deserves attention: royal delinquency in appointing new bishops, the better to extract revenues from the lands of the see or gifts from would-be bishops, was a familiar refrain in clerical complaints. The mass promotion of new bishops, even before the final end of fighting, would have been a potent demonstration of the king's traditional role as *rector*. It may not have been in line with reform principles of free election but, as was already evident in Bodilsen's attempt to violently enforce celibacy on the Zealand clergy, influential circles in the aristocracy prioritized the purity of the Church higher than its independence.

While evidently favouring Erik's supporters in the war, the new appointments also included some of the most aggressive proponents of reform in twelfth-century Denmark. Nothold had inspired Bodilsen's campaign against the married clergy in 1123 (*CR*, 13 (*SM*, I, 26)). Eskil had been educated at the monastery church at Hildesheim. Here the young aristocrat had not just imbibed reform ideas but experienced a prophetic vision of the Virgin Mary that inspired him to act as a champion of reformed monastic life (Weibull 1931, 276–79). A year after his appointment, in November 1135, Eskil participated with Peder Bodilsen in the establishment of a Benedictine monastery at Næstved (*DD*, I.2, no. 64, 124–28). We are much less well informed about the careers of Erik's other appointees but

one document, dating from sometime between 1135 and 1139, shows three bishops with close connections to Emune coming together in the cause of reform (DD, I.2, no. 66, 130–32): Illuge of Aarhus; Riko, Erik's former chaplain; and a third, Rikulf, bishop of Odense, who had served under Erik in the civil war but whose date of elevation to the bishopric is unknown (DD, I.2, no. 99, pp. 181–84). The three bishops witnessed a letter renewing the confraternity between the monastery of St Knud in Odense and its mother-house, Evesham in England. The presence of three of Emune's supporters here may indicate that this was a matter of interest to their royal benefactor. It was Erik Emune's father, Erik I Ejegod, who had originally invited monks from Evesham to come to Odense, possibly as part of his support for the cult of his brother St Knud IV (DD, I.2, no. 24, 55–56; Münster-Swendsen 2013, 160–61; Gazzoli 2013, 72–74). By renewing this connection, Emune's bishops were continuing the pious work of his father in service to Knud's cult, while also working for the spiritual strengthening of the Danish Church through association with one of the most vibrant Benedictine monasteries in Northern Europe (DD, I.2, no. 67, 132–33; Cox 2015)

We are better informed about Erik Emune's personal involvement in furthering the cause of Christendom outside Denmark. In 1135 he launched an expedition against the city of Arkona on the island of Rügen. After the surrender of the city, the heathen inhabitants were forced to convert to Christianity and a priest was left behind to instruct them in Christian morals. Erik had been accompanied by Peder Bodilsen, who here found the opportunity to fight for Christendom abroad as he had done at home in Niels's reign (Saxo, XIV.1.6–7 (II, 976–78); Jensen 2013, 94). Erik, however, also attacked other Christians. In 1134 he lent support to Harald Gilli's invasion of Norway and in 1137 he personally led another attack on Norway and burned Oslo (Saxo XIV.1.5, 1.8 (II, 974, 978); *Haraldssona saga* 3–4 (III, 307–08); for the dating, see Christiansen 1980–81, III, 712–13). These expeditions should probably be read in the context of the Danish kings' ancestral claim to Viken in southern Norway. Through these expeditions, Erik was demonstrating that he, unlike Niels, would rule like one of the glorious kings of old, vigorous promoters of the faith and the honour of the kingdom.

Erik's campaigns may also have been intended to alleviate the turbulent situation within the kingdom. According to the Roskilde chronicler, Erik 'behaved everywhere as if he was emperor, overcoming all hindrances, being unwilling to have any beside him or above him', showing no respect for good people or their possessions, which he redistributed to his greedy followers (*CR*, 18 (*SM*, I, 31)). The Roskilde chronicler's hostile opinion of Erik, which we have previously encountered, may be related to the fall-out from one of the most

serious challenges Erik had to face in his short reign. In late 1136 or early 1137 Erik's one-time supporter Peder Bodilsen, in alliance with the recently appointed bishop of Roskilde, Eskil, son of Kristiarn, raised a rebellion in Zealand (for the dating, see Gelting 2004, 192–93). According to Saxo, our only source for the rebellion, they were able to mobilize enough support to drive Erik out of the island. Having done this, Eskil convinced the 'people of the province' to form a 'societas' (fellowship) 'sub titulo libertatis' (in the name of freedom). Among all the Zealanders, only the Hvide family refused to join the insurrection. In the end, Erik was able to defeat it and Eskil was forced to pay heavy compensation (Saxo XIV.1.11 (II, 980–81)). Saxo's description of the formation of a *societas* dedicated to the principle of *libertas* suggests that they had some abstract principles and some structure that went beyond mere personal connections. What the 'freedom' they fought for entailed has, however, proved difficult to establish (Gelting 2004, 193–94). Peder Bodilsen and Eskil's family had been among Erik's most important supporters in the rebellion and it is possible that they saw themselves as fighting for the same 'freedom' that the 1135 Lund charter had thanked God for: the freedom from impious tyranny. Erik had risen to the throne on a wave of anger created by the unlawful killing of Knud Lavard. But as king he too behaved in a manner that could be interpreted as tyrannical. The execution of Erik's own brother Harald Kesja in 1134 and, more especially, Kesja's sons in 1135, appears to have offended Danish landholders newly sensitized to the issue of irregular kinslaying by Erik's own propaganda campaign around the death of Knud Lavard. The Roskilde chronicler, predictably, and Sven Aggesen, more surprisingly, both gave highly negative depictions of the elimination of Harald's children. The Roskilde chronicle describes how the hypocrite Erik 'gloried' in the death of his brother and had Harald's sons kept in chains for half a year before executing them and having their bodies dishonourably 'thrown into the same pit' (*CR*, 17 (*SM*, I, 30)). Sven Aggesen dwelt on the cruelty of the murder of the sons 'some of whom were adults, some flourishing youths, and some little children'. In particular, Sven condemns the ungrateful killing of Bjørn Ironside, who had fought so manfully at Sven's father's side (Sven Aggesen, *Brevis historia*, 15 (*SM*, I, 136)).

Saxo, preserving the tradition of the Hvide family, is unique in insisting upon the justice of Erik's reign. But the manner in which he deals with the killing of Harald's sons is itself revealing of the sensitivity of the issue. Harald's oldest sons, Erik the Deacon and Bjørn Ironside, he alleged, were both killed before the end of the war in 1134. Saxo provided a complex story explaining how they had left their father to support Erik but nevertheless secretly received messengers from Harald. Erik, however, pretended not to know this in order to give them the chance to confess. Only when they failed to do so did he order them imprisoned.

Still, he was moved to forgive them during a feast. Only when Kristiarn Svensen of the Trund family insisted that they be killed for the security of the realm did Erik agree to order their execution. Saxo seems not only to suggest that the execution was a legitimate, if harsh, penalty but also to shift any possible blame for it on to Kristiarn, the father of Eskil — the rival of Saxo's patron Absalon (Saxo XIV.1.1–2 (II, 970–74)). The fate of the eight sons arrested together with Harald is still more striking. We are told that Erik 'surprised Harold with his remaining sons during the night, dragged him at daybreak from his chamber and [...] put him to death' (Saxo XIV.1.5 (II, 974–75)). As for the captured sons, they disappear from the text without further comment.

The rebellion on Zealand was not the only insurrection Erik faced in 1136–37. In September 1137, at a public assembly in southern Jutland, Erik was killed by an otherwise unknown Jutlandish magnate named Plov (Danish for 'plough'). We have no contemporary information about why Plov killed Erik. Saxo, again, sought to present the event in the best possible light: Plov, we are told, was a disloyal member of the royal retinue. When Erik forced Plov to answer the complaints made against him by a certain smallholder, Plov seized the chance to murder the unarmed king in the midst of the assembly. Even Saxo, however, recognized that Plov had wider support: having slain the king he made a bold speech that persuaded the people to attack the royal retinue (Saxo XIV.1.13 (II, 982–83)).

Most other sources, by contrast, presented Erik's death as the culmination of his tyrannical reign. The Roskilde chronicler interpreted the killing as God's vengeance on Erik's tyranny. According to the chronicler, Plough was

A misshapen man, short of stature, who could achieve nothing by himself, unless the Lord was in the plough, the Lord was in the spear, just as the Lord was in the sling [and] the Lord was in the stone. (*CR*, 18 (*SM*, I, 31)).

Erik had been laid low by God, just as Goliath had been defeated by David. Goliath, as the Bible-learned chronicler would have been well aware, signified the 'superbiam Diaboli' (1 Samuel 17. 21; *Glossa Ordinaria*, 28). Erik's death provided a final confirmation of his devilish nature and a comforting message to the chronicle's readers: even the Antichrist would not reign forever and, just as in the Book of Joel, God would in the end return to bring succour to his people. For our purposes the most interesting interpretation of Erik's reign and death is that provided by Sven Aggesen. He described how Erik, 'Erectus itaque regno potitio, cause sue ultionis immemor in suos cosanguineos tigride crudelior cepit seuire' (having risen to power [...] forgot the reason for the vengeance he had wrought, and began to rage against his own kinsmen more cruelly than the tiger). Erik's

crime led directly to his end: God avenged the ‘budding princelings’ by having Plough kill Erik in the midst of his warriors (Sven Aggesen, *Brevis historia* 15 (*SM*, I, 134–36); trans. Christiansen 1992, 70–71). For Sven, the killing of Erik was justified by his abandonment of the cause for which his family had fought and suffered. Was this merely pious rationalization of unconnected events? Saxo dated both the rebellion on Zealand and the killing of Erik to ‘around the same time’ as the death of Asser of Lund, on 5 May 1137, probably indicating they both took place in or about 1137 (Saxo XIV.1.11–13 (II, 980–82)). Was Plough’s assault, which evidently enjoyed wider support in his locality, perhaps related to Eskil and Bodilsen’s *societas* for the protection of *libertas*? The experiences of the civil war would have provided kin-groups like the Bodilsen and Trund families with experience in coordinating kingdom-wide political and military alliances. One source does connect Plough’s attack on Erik with the latter’s tyranny in a more direct way. *Knýtlinga saga* rejected Saxo’s version of Erik’s reign and presented him as a tyrant who died a tyrant’s death. According to the saga, Plov was seeking vengeance for the killing of his father, whom Erik had ‘put to death for no worse offence than speaking out against him at a certain assembly’ (*Knýtlinga saga*, 103, 268–69; trans. Pálsson & Edwards 1986, 143).

The most famous evidence for Erik’s contentious posthumous reputation is, however, that found in the *Liber daticus* of Lund. The original entry for Erik’s death was four lines long, significantly longer than any other entries in the obit book and presented with a calligraphic flourish otherwise only used for the commemoration of martyrs (Breengaard 1982, 42). Within a few years, however, the entry was heavily redacted and much of the content erased (Gelting 2004, 203). By then the entry looked as follows:

Rex Ericus rex danorum [...] occisus est [...]  
 tenens regnum cum summa sui principatus potentia [...]  
 [a proprio satellite lancea perfossus temporalis uite cursum consummauit]<sup>16</sup>

(King Erik, king of the Danes [...] was killed [...]  
 He held the kingdom with the full power of his princely rule [...]  
 [...] having been run through with a lance by one of his own retainers  
 he completed his worldly life’s course.)

(*Lund Domkapitels Gavebøger*, 239–40)

<sup>16</sup> The last sentence was erased at a much later date, but was still there in the 1270s when a later copy of the *Liber daticus* was written (Breengaard 1982, 41, 44).



The original entry in the *Liber daticus* seems to have presented Erik in an unusually positive light: he had been a powerful king and he had been killed by one of his own men — with a lance, the details about his murder resembling that of St Knud IV (Breengaard 1982, 43; Antonsson 2007, 156). The drastic erasure means that we cannot reconstruct what had been removed from the entry (Breengaard 1982, 41). It may have included some of the things found under the king's anniversary in the obit book of the cathedral chapter, the *Memoriale fratrum*. Here Erik was described as *gloriosus* and remembered for the gifts he had given in gratitude for aid from God and St Lawrence (*Necrologium Lundense*, 94).

We can, however, get a sense of what the clerk who made the erasures thought of Erik. As Lauritz Weibull argued, the redacted entry presents Erik as a *rex tyrannicus*, who gloried in the fullness of his power without restraint (1924, 90). Breengaard has pointed out that the redactor did not remove the sentence describing Erik's remarkable death and has used that as argument for a more positive reading of the entry (Breengaard 1982, 39–44), but this does not necessarily follow. The complicated reputation of St Knud IV shows that twelfth-century Danish clergy were familiar with the idea that king could be a tyrant in life yet still be redeemed by a remarkable death. The redacted entry for Erik Emune presented him in a very similar way to the portrait given of Knud IV by the more hostile chroniclers: an autocratic king somewhat redeemed by his wondrous death (*CR*, 10 (*SM*, 1, 23–24); Esmark 2009, 24).

Erik's entry was not the only one to be heavily redacted. The anniversaries of Sven/Thorgrim, Magnus, and Tue, the laymen whose deaths in the service of justice had been celebrated in the *Memoriale fratrum*, had, as discussed above, originally been included in the *Liber daticus*. Their entries were, however, also redacted so as to remove all references to the cause in which they died (*Lunde Domkapitels Gavebøger*, 138–39; Gelting 2004, 210). Weibull and, more recently, Gelting have plausibly suggested that the redactions were carried out at the behest of Eskil, after he was promoted to the archbishopric of Lund in 1137 (Gelting 2004, 211). Disillusioned with the tyrannical Erik, Eskil made sure that services conducted in the cathedral ceased to celebrate him as a glorious champion of God and St Lawrence.

In 1928 Lauritz Weibull used the differing judgements expressed by the original and redacted versions as the basis for his model of Danish politics as dominated by two parties, committed to the principles of, respectively, strong kingship and *libertas ecclesiae*. Weibull's idea of two parties with clear-cut political programmes was overly schematic: principles like *libertas* were flexible, malleable. In 1135 Erik could be using it to gather men to his side, by 1137 it could be a slogan for former supporters turned rebels. They do, however, show

the centrality of ideas in the political struggles of medieval Denmark. Erik and the rebellion's long and controversial historical afterlife, the forceful redaction of the entries of Erik and others who had, perhaps, fallen in the civil war, all point to the importance contemporaries placed on the question of why people had fought. Ideas were crucial both to the practice of political conflict and the way it was remembered.

### *Conclusion*

The surviving sources do not support the suggestion that the rebellion against Niels was first and foremost based on personal networks and interest, although undoubtedly the magnates hoped to emerge wealthier and more powerful from the war. The rebellion became a popular cause because Magnus's murder of Knud Lavard and Niels's unwillingness to uphold his punishment offended against the conventions of political and religious life. The murder of Knud as he returned from the royal Christmas banquet was a breach of religious as much as cultural values of hospitality and respect for the holy season. More importantly, it placed the lives of even the greatest magnates in peril. What enabled this outrage to break into a general rebellion was the fact that Niels had already failed to live up to the Danish elite's expectations of a king. He had not been able to safeguard the kingdom, maintain its position against its neighbours, or ensure its spiritual welfare. Most critically, he had proven unable to control the struggles between the magnates, including his son, and, subsequently, failed to act as arbiter in the ensuing conflict. It was these failures that enabled Erik and his allies to present the struggle against Niels as a just and holy war. But it was also the same ideals and principles that would subsequently come back to haunt Erik when he too, in turn, failed to live up to the standards of good kingship he had helped to popularize.

The events of the conflict and the energy expended in controlling interpretation of it also provide more general lessons about the nature of political life in twelfth-century Denmark. It suggests that what determined the success or failure of twelfth-century kings was above all how well they managed to live up to the hazy and malleable ideas about kingship current amongst the Danish aristocracy: assertive maintenance of the kingdom's hegemony and its honour, maintenance of religious discipline, and, above all, protection of the peace and the rights and possessions, the liberties, of landholders great and small. The ruler or would-be ruler that failed to present himself as a champion of these ideals could quickly lose support, power, and his life. Those who successfully appealed to them, on the other hand, could raise support sufficient to challenge even the regime of a long-

reigning king and his well-connected heir. Personal connections, family, friends, and followers, of course mattered but every candidate for kingship could muster these, and often the more prominent aristocrats would be involved in multiple, different networks. It was the ability to reach beyond their personal following and convince the Danish aristocracy at large of a candidate's suitability as king that led to success. In order to do this they had to appeal to the political and religious ideals, vague perhaps but no less deeply felt for that, of the aristocracy.

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