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<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4628-3517>UNION QUEEN MARGARET VALDEMARSDOTTER  
AND THE CHALLENGES OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP  
IN THE MIDDLE AGES\*\*

## Abstract

Under the leadership of Queen Margaret Valdemarsdotter (1353–1412), the three Nordic kingdoms – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – were united in the so-called Kalmar Union that lasted until 1523, when Sweden seceded. In this article, the rule of Queen Margaret Valdemarsdotter will be analysed in light of earlier and contemporary medieval queenship. Queen Margaret was confronted with all the challenges posed by female rule. She dealt with them in a way that shows her awareness of contemporary and historical models, but she also contributed to creating a new form of government when she was elected ‘authorised lady and the right owner of the realm’ in the Kingdom of Denmark in 1387. This model was subsequently introduced also in Norway and Sweden. We will look into possible role models for Queen Margaret. We will also investigate some aspects of her rule to see what may be learnt about her style of government. Her choice of collaborators is a significant part of her politics. A queen regnant of the fourteenth century was dependent on men to carry out her orders and act as her representatives and intermediaries in her lands. Where did Queen Margaret find her associates and what were the virtues she expected them to display in her service? Further, we will make use of Niccolò Machiavelli’s concept of ‘New Rulers’, to find out if it may help us analyse Queen Margaret’s actions.

**Keywords:** Margaret Valdemarsdotter, Valdemar IV of Denmark, Håkon VI of Norway, St Birgitta of Sweden, Kalmar Union, Schleswig, Holstein, elective monarchy, finances, historiography

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Was it possible for a woman to be the ruler of a kingdom in the Middle Ages? Could she take up arms to defend her people against foreign armies? Could she even make her own army obey and respect her? And was it not the role of women to be subordinate to men, not to be their ruler? The Bible offered the figure of Jezebel as an archetypical example of a perverted rule by a woman. Nonetheless, female rule was far from unknown in the Middle Ages.

The title of *queen* and its equivalents in other European languages, such as *regina*, *reine*, *królowa*, *karaliene*, or *drottning*, normally denoted the consort of a king. It was less obvious that it should be the title of a ruler<sup>1</sup>. Jadwiga, daughter of Louis the Great, was crowned as king of Poland in 1384. Ten-year-old Jadwiga was not married and thus not a queen in the ordinary sense of the word.

Also, the title *domina*, Lady, was sometimes used to design a woman who exercised power<sup>2</sup>. Matilda of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine are both known to have been styled thus. By assuming this title, they let it be known that they exercised, or intended to exercise, *dominium* (lordship) over a territory.

In her acclaimed book *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England before Elizabeth* (2010), Helen Castor traces the long, complicated history of female rule in England from William the Conqueror's granddaughter, Matilda, to Elizabeth I. It is something of a paradox that the first female rulers who ruled England in their own right, as queens regnant, were daughters of a king, Henry VIII, who had refrained from nothing to produce a legitimate male heir to the throne. Before the reign of Mary I and Elizabeth I, there was, nevertheless, a long line of queens who had – more or less successfully – exercised power as dowagers or otherwise in the fortuitous absence of a king<sup>3</sup>.

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*i U. M. Перцава. Да 140-годдзя з дня іх нараджэння, Мінск, 16–17 лістап. 2017 г., рэд. Віктар А. Фядосік [et al.], Мінск 2017 [Listapadawskiya сустrechy – XII. Materyyaly Mizhnar. navuk. vykladchyts.-students. kanf. u honar akad. M. M. Nikol'skaha i U. M. Pyertsava. Da 140-hoddzya z dnya ikh naradzheniya, Minsk, 16–17 listap. 2017 h., red. Viktor A. FYADOSIK [et al.], Minsk 2017], pp. 150–159; also available online at <https://elib.bsu.by/handle/123456789/196406> [accessed online 24 March 2023]. The text has profited from comments offered on those occasions. I also thank the anonymous reviewers of this text for their valuable remarks. My work on Union Queen Margaret originated in the framework of a university course on powerful women in fourteenth-century Europe in which Dr. Anna Herbert (Linnaeus University) and I collaborated. Her ideas are present in this text, which would not exist without her input. Mention should also be made of a conference on Queen Margaret and the Kalmar Union as models for our time which took place in Ronneby, Sweden in February 2011.*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Helen CASTOR, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England before Elizabeth*, London 2010, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–33.

THE RULE OF QUEEN MARGARET VALDEMARSBOTTER IN THE LIGHT  
OF EARLIER AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIEVAL QUEENSHIP

The rule of women in medieval Europe was thus mainly a function of the absence or immaturity of a king. The absence might be coincidental and brief, or it might last for several years when a dowager queen assumed the government in the place of a son who had not yet come of age. Such was the case of Margaret Sambiria (c. 1230–1282), widow of King Christopher I of Denmark, who was the regent of Denmark during the minority of her son Eric, nicknamed Eric Klipping.

In fact, it was quite normal for a queen to share in the royal power. In large kingdoms, the queen could fulfil a valuable complementary role by presiding at assemblies or delivering justice in royal tribunals when the king was occupied in distant parts of the realm. In medieval thinking, the married couple was fundamentally one person; thus where the queen was present, so was in essence also the king.

The reality of a woman who ruled in her own right was not unknown in medieval times. When the King of Naples, Robert the Wise, passed away in 1343, the heir apparent was his granddaughter Joanna, who ruled this kingdom for almost four decades. A recurrent threat to her sovereignty was, however, her husbands. She married no less than four times in order to secure her kingdom by producing an heir. None of her three first husbands were satisfied with the role of consort. They desired true kingship<sup>4</sup>. Did not the teaching of the Church say that in marriage, the man should be the head of his wife? Consequently, the man who married a queen would also govern her, and thus the kingdom. Joanna's wish for an heir resulted in a life-long struggle for her right to govern. Examples such as this were certainly not unknown for Margaret Valdemarsdotter, who decided to remain a widow after the death of her husband in 1380.

Queen Margaret Valdemarsdotter was confronted with all the challenges posed by female rule. She dealt with them in a way that shows her awareness of contemporary and historical models, but she also contributed to creating a new form of government when she was elected 'authorised lady and the right owner of the realm' in the Kingdom of Denmark in 1387. This model was subsequently introduced also in Norway and Sweden, something that will be discussed further below. With a bold mixture of dynastic, republican, and judicial elements, she created a union that would last for more than 120 years.

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<sup>4</sup> The standard work on Queen Joanna is Émile G. LÉONARD, *Histoire de Jeanne Ire, reine de Naples, comtesse de Provence (1343–1382)*, Monaco–Paris 1932–1936. See also the section 'Possible Role Models for Margaret' below.

## THE LEADERSHIP STYLE OF QUEEN MARGARET

An investigation into the exercise of power may depart from several different angles. Some students of the subject have considered power to be its own meaning and its own purpose. They find it meaningless to ask the question of why a certain person has strived to achieve a certain position and which objectives he or she has had. If, on the other hand, we talk about leadership it is clear that in order to be a leader a person must have some idea of a goal which should be achieved. Furthermore, modern leadership research underlines the social aspects of leadership. It is a relationship between the leader and the persons who are led<sup>5</sup>.

In the following, we will look into possible role models for Queen Margaret. We will also investigate some aspects of her rule to see what may be learnt about her style of government. Further, we will make use of Niccolò Machiavelli's concept of 'New Rulers', to find out if it may help us analyse Queen Margaret's actions. But before doing this, some elements of the biography of Queen Margaret will be presented.

MARGARET, PRINCESS OF DENMARK,  
SCANDINAVIAN UNION QUEEN – A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Queen Margaret Valdemarsdotter (1353–1412) is a recurrent point of reference in Scandinavian historiography. Under her leadership, the three Nordic kingdoms – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – were united in the so-called Kalmar Union. Queen Margaret's reign has been judged very differently by posterity, and divergent national traditions are still discernible in the historiography of the Kalmar Union and its founder<sup>6</sup>.

An international audience in quest of texts on Queen Margaret and the Scandinavian Union does not have a very large offer. The only English-language monograph on the union queen was written by Vivian Etting in 2004. Also, William Layher's *Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe* from 2010 contains material on Queen Margaret. Apart from that, the reader is directed to book chapters and journal articles, of which some will be referred to below. One aim of the publication of which this text is a part is to further amend this lack of English-language publications and to facilitate the integration of Scandinavian data in the scholarly discussion on medieval queenship and medieval unions.

<sup>5</sup> I thank the Leadership Seminar at the Business School of Linnaeus University, Kalmar on 9 April 2015 for a valuable discussion on these questions.

<sup>6</sup> See Anne BRÆDDER, Małgorzata DĄBROWSKA, Anders FRÖJMARK, Giedrius JANAUŠKAS, *Margaret, Jadwiga, and Unions*, [in:] *Baltic Sea History: New Perspectives on the History of the Baltic Sea Region: A Sourcebook*, ed. Anders FRÖJMARK, Jörg HACKMANN, Janet LAIDLA, Christian PLETZING, Oeversee 2019, pp. 82–93.

Margaret, born in 1353, was the junior of the two daughters of King Valdemar IV of Denmark, called Atterdag, and his consort Helvig. There was also a senior brother, who died in 1363 when he was in his early twenties.

During the childhood of the future King Valdemar, Denmark had disintegrated and ceased to exist as a kingdom. Valdemar, however, made it his long-term mission to win back his kingdom and made successful use of his talents as a warrior and diplomat to restore the disintegrated realm. One of his first steps, in order to achieve his goal, had been his marriage to Helvig, the sister of the duke of Slesvig (Ger. Schleswig) in June 1340. He could thus for the time being put aside the conflict with the duchy. Further, he gained some territories in northern Jutland, which could serve as a base for further expansion. He was elected king and spent the remaining 25 years of his life reuniting the disintegrated Kingdom of Denmark with remarkable success<sup>7</sup>.

In 1363, his then ten-year-old daughter Margaret was married to King Håkon of Norway and Sweden. Håkon was the son and co-ruler of King Magnus Eriksson. The two kings faced an uprising in Sweden and turned to their arch-enemy Valdemar in a desperate move to keep the reins of power from slipping out of their grasp. The betrothal between Håkon and Margaret sealed the alliance with Valdemar but did not save Magnus and Håkon from being bereft of their Swedish kingship the following year. They were still the rulers of Norway, but eleven-year-old Queen Margaret lost her position as queen of Sweden in the coup. The rebellious Swedes brought the nephew of King Magnus, Duke Albert III of Mecklenburg, to the Swedish throne. Parts of western Sweden remained under the rule of Magnus and Håkon according to a peace treaty of 1371<sup>8</sup>. While this does not change the general picture, nor Albert's status as legitimate king of Sweden, it facilitated Margaret's later accession to the Swedish kingdom.

In Norway, young Queen Margaret's education was taken care of by Märta Ulfsdotter, the daughter of Birgitta Birgersdotter, the future St Birgitta of Sweden. Märta and her daughters were like a family to Margaret, and she struck up a life-long friendship with Märta's daughter Ingegerd, who was later to become abbess of Vadstena Abbey – the first monastic institution of the Bridgettine Order.

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<sup>7</sup> Bjørn POULSEN, *Hertugdømmets dannelse 700–1544*, [in:] *Sønderjyllands historie*, Bd. 1: *Indtil 1815*, ed. Hans S. HANSEN, Lars N. HENNINGSEN, Carsten PORSKROG, Aabenraa 2008, pp. 136–138.

<sup>8</sup> Michael LINTON, *Drottning Margareta. Fullmäktig fru och rätt husbonde. Studier i Kalmarunionens förhistoria* (Studia historica Gothoburgensia, vol. 12), Göteborg 1971, p. 165; Ole G. MOSENG, Erik OPSAHL, Gunnar I. PETERSEN, Erling SANDMO, *Norsk historie*, Bd. 1: *750–1537*, Oslo 1999, pp. 312–313.

As a wife, Margaret was supposed to obey her husband, but a letter that was probably written in October 1370 – she was then seventeen years old and pregnant with the future Prince Olav – talks another language. She admonishes and advises her husband on several urgent matters and one is almost given the impression that most important dealings in the kingdom were run by her. Certainly, the final decisions were his to take, but in this letter, she more or less orders him to take certain measures and then report back to her. Furthermore, it is clear from the letter that the queen and her household suffered hardship at Akershus from want of food and drink<sup>9</sup>. We have no information about the king's whereabouts when the letter was written, but he was apparently in another part of the kingdom.

In her letter, the young queen intervenes for a good number of men who rendered different services to herself or the kingdom. From an early date, Queen Margaret realised the importance of building and maintaining networks. Throughout her career, she saw to it that she was surrounded by loyal and competent men – prelates, councillors, warriors and merchants. Some examples will be given further below.

The Akershus letter is not the only one that shows the queen assuming an active role in Norwegian politics during King Håkon's lifetime. In a letter to their counterparts in Stralsund on 3 February 1376, the councillors of the Prussian towns express their bewilderment that the queen of Norway and Sweden has announced that she is sending two representatives with the mission to negotiate a peace treaty between the king and the Hanseatic towns. The councillors would have expected such an initiative to come from the king himself, and find it puzzling that he puts so much trust in his wife<sup>10</sup>. Could the situation be, we might perhaps ask, that it was the queen who did not put enough trust in her husband?

In late 1370, around 1 December, a son was born to Margaret and Håkon<sup>11</sup>. He was given the name of the Norwegian royal saint Olav – a name which likewise had been borne by kings in all three Scandinavian kingdoms earlier in history.

When his grandfather Valdemar IV died in October 1375, Olav was put forward as a candidate for the throne. Denmark was an elective monarchy, but Valdemar himself had favoured Albert IV, the son of Margaret's elder sister

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<sup>9</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 1, ed. Christian C. A. LANGE, Carl R. UNGER, Christiania 1849, no. 409 (18 October 1370?); Vivian ETTING, *Queen Margrete I (1353–1412) and the Founding of the Nordic Union* (The Northern World, vol. 9) Leiden–Boston 2004, pp. 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 4, Bd. 1: 1376–1379, ed. Herluf NIELSEN, København 1984, no. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Peter A. MUNCH, *Det norske folks historie*, Hovedafd. 2: *Unionsperioden*, D. 1, Christiania 1862, p. 830.



Ingeborg and Duke Henry of Mecklenburg, as his successor. Meanwhile, Sweden was ruled by Albert's uncle Albert III, and the Danish noblemen could see how their Swedish counterparts were marginalised in their own kingdom by German knights in the service of King Albert. Furthermore, the Duchy of Mecklenburg had been part of an alliance that had waged war against Denmark in King Valdemar's days, and an important goal for Danish foreign policy was to break the anti-Danish alliance and weaken the powers that threatened Denmark's sovereignty. The majority of the Danish nobility rallied behind five-year-old Olav, who was elected king of Denmark in 1376<sup>12</sup>.

Olav's father, King Håkon, died late in the summer or early in the autumn of 1380. Since Norway was a hereditary monarchy, Olav inherited the throne. Margaret had a strong position as guardian of her son in both kingdoms<sup>13</sup>.

An unexpected event gave abundant proof of the confidence held by the Dowager Queen Margaret in the two kingdoms. On 3 August 1387, when Olav was in his seventeenth year, he died after a brief illness at Falsterbo Castle in Scania (Dan. and Swe. Skåne). Political chaos threatened. Without a doubt, the Mecklenburgers would put forth Albert IV as a candidate for the Danish throne again, and in the hereditary monarchy of Norway, the law of succession made another Mecklenburger, King Albert of Sweden, heir apparent to the throne. Margaret, regent of the two kingdoms, did not lose her head. A week after the death of the young king, an assembly was held in the nearby archepiscopal city of Lund, where representatives of the people of Scania swore allegiance to Margaret as 'authorised lady and the right owner of the realm'. She was to hold the position of regent in her own right, and not as the king's mother as before, and she would govern the kingdom until she and they had agreed upon a new king<sup>14</sup>.

On 2 February 1388, the Norwegian Council of the Realm declared that Queen Margaret was to hold the position of authorised lady and rightful master also of the Kingdom of Norway<sup>15</sup>. She was to hold this position for life, which gave her a position similar to a king who had inherited the throne. Two weeks later, on 16 February, the council deemed that the right of inheritance should belong to Queen Margaret's line. While her sister's son Duke Albert IV

<sup>12</sup> V. ETTING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 12–14.

<sup>13</sup> Eldbjørg HAUG, *Queen Margaret's Legitimate Power Base at the Change of Dynasty in Scandinavia, 1387–1388*, Scandia. Tidskrift för Historisk Forskning, vol. 85: 2019, no. 1, pp. 11, 24. A formal guardianship council was probably installed in Norway at Queen Margaret's side, cf. O. G. MOSENG, E. OPSAHL, G. I. PETTERSEN, E. SANDMO, op.cit., p. 315.

<sup>14</sup> V. ETTING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 54–57; E. HAUG, *Queen Margaret's Legitimate Power Base*, pp. 14–17.

<sup>15</sup> E. HAUG, *Queen Margaret's Legitimate Power Base*, pp. 19–24; M. LINTON, op.cit., pp. 166–167. See *Regesta Norvegica*, no. 1412, [https://www.dokpro.uio.no/cgi-bin/middelalder/regest\\_vise\\_tekst\\_2020.cgi?b=8743&s=n&str=](https://www.dokpro.uio.no/cgi-bin/middelalder/regest_vise_tekst_2020.cgi?b=8743&s=n&str=) [accessed online 24 March 2023].

of Mecklenburg was rejected because the house of Mecklenburg had waged war against Norway, the son of Margaret's niece Mary, Duchess of Pomerania, was declared rightful heir<sup>16</sup>. This boy was adopted by Margaret and renamed Eric, a royal name in all three Scandinavian kingdoms. Eric was formally accepted as king of Norway the following year and coronated in 1392<sup>17</sup>.

Meanwhile, great events had transpired in the third Scandinavian kingdom, Sweden. Swedish law contained the right to depose monarchs who disregarded the laws and traditions of the land. Within the Swedish nobility, discontent had grown with King Albert and the Germans in his service.

A possibility to act occurred after the death of the powerful *drots* (seneschal) Bo Jonsson in 1386. Before his demise, the seneschal had named a group of prelates and members of the high nobility, most of them councillors of the realm, to be executors of his will. This group now disposed of several strategic castles. In March 1388, a representative group of Swedish councillors – including St Birgitta's son Birger Ulfsson – met with Dowager Queen Margaret. They formally offered to place most of the castles that had belonged to Bo Jonsson at her disposal and accept her as authorised lady and rightful master of Sweden as well, if she helped them to depose King Albert<sup>18</sup>. For Margaret, this was a way to regain the position of which she felt that she had been unjustly deprived in 1364.

In the documents that were issued on this occasion and most other documents pertaining to the negotiations between the Swedish councillors and the queen in the spring of 1388, Margaret is addressed as 'queen of Norway and Sweden and rightful heir and *førsttinæ* (here approximately 'regent') of the Kingdom of Denmark'. In some of the documents, among which are two issued by the queen herself, the order of the kingdoms is inverted so that Sweden is mentioned before Norway<sup>19</sup>. That she styles herself as 'rightful heir' to Denmark is a bit puzzling, since Denmark was, in contrast to Norway, an elective kingdom. It is interesting to notice that the same title had been used by her son Olav in relation to Sweden, also an elective kingdom. Should we see herein a program to introduce hereditary kingships in Denmark and Sweden? I think

<sup>16</sup> E. HAUG, *Queen Margaret's Legitimate Power Base*, pp. 24–26; O. G. MOSENG, E. OPSAHL, G. I. PETTERSEN, E. SANDMO, op.cit., p. 316. See *Regesta Norvegica*, no. 1415, [https://www.dokpro.uio.no/cgi-bin/middelalder/regest\\_vise\\_tekst\\_2020.cgi?b=8746&s=n&str=](https://www.dokpro.uio.no/cgi-bin/middelalder/regest_vise_tekst_2020.cgi?b=8746&s=n&str=) [accessed online 24 March 2023].

<sup>17</sup> Eldbjørg HAUG, *Margrete. Den siste dronning i Sverreætten. Nordens fullmektige frue og rette husbonde*, Oslo 2000, pp. 158–164, 193–194.

<sup>18</sup> Aksel E. CHRISTENSEN, *Kalmarunionn og nordisk politik 1319–1439*, København 1980, pp. 116–117; M. LINTON, op.cit., pp. 168–172; E. HAUG, *Queen Margaret's Legitimate Power Base*, pp. 26–30.

<sup>19</sup> The relevant documents are collected in *Sverges traktater med främmande magter*, D. 2: 1336–1408, ed. Olof S. RYDBERG, Stockholm 1883, pp. 458–476.



that this would be to attach too great importance to these titles. Such a program would have awakened fierce resistance in both kingdoms, something the queen was well aware of. Moreover, there was no necessity for that, since the Swedish counsellors, like their Danish and Norwegian counterparts, agreed to accept as king the person the queen advised them to take.

On 24 February 1389, the troops of the queen clashed with King Albert's to great extent German troops on boggy grounds at Åsle near Falköping in Västergötland. King Albert's knights got stuck in the treacherous terrain, many were slain or captured, and the king himself was taken prisoner and brought to Queen Margaret at Bohus Castle. After six years of imprisonment, he finally agreed to step down from the Swedish throne.

Queen Margaret now proceeded to set down the foundation of a union monarchy. Eric, already king of Norway, was formally elected as king in the two elective monarchies of Denmark and Sweden in 1396. The following year, the queen summoned a meeting in the Swedish port town of Kalmar. Here, the coronation of fifteen-year-old Eric was completed in order to be valid for all three kingdoms. Deliberations were held to establish a constitution for a real and lasting union between the three kingdoms, but an act that was drafted was never ratified<sup>20</sup>. The reason why a formal union act was never issued during Queen Margaret's lifetime has been debated by later historians. It is possible that the queen wished to see an absolute monarchy and thus could not accept being bridled by constitutional documents. Still, the union treaty was preserved in the Danish Royal Archives, and in 1425, King Eric had a copy made which was presented to the Councils of the Realms<sup>21</sup>. The further history of the union created in, and in historiography named after, the meeting place of Kalmar is the subject of other scholarly articles in this journal issue. A stream of constitutional documents produced during the union's existence shows that particularly the councils of Denmark and Sweden were keen to overcome the many tensions that threatened to tear the kingdoms apart, especially

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<sup>20</sup> The most recent study of the Union Treaty of 1397 is Claes GEJROT, *The Kalmar Treaty: Texts and Language: Some Formal and Diplomatic Aspects*, [in:] *Quellen zur Geschichte der „internationalen“ Beziehungen zwischen politischen Zentren in Europa und der Mittelmeerwelt (ca. 800–1600). Briefe – Urkunden – Verträge*, hrsg. v. Wolfgang HUSCHNER [et al.] [forthcoming]. See also contributions by Anders Leegaard Knudsen and Markus Hedemann in this forthcoming volume.

<sup>21</sup> Svenskt Diplomatariums huvudkartotek, <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sdhk> (hereinafter cited as SDHK), no. 20568 (Kalundborg, 11 September 1425); Olof S. RYDBERG, *Om det från unionsmötet i Kalmar år 1397 bevarade dokumentet rörande de nordiska rikenas förenig. Inträdestal i Kongl. Vitterhets historie och antiqvitets akademien den 15 maj 1883*, Stockholm 1886, pp. 41–43; Markus HEDEMANN, *Danmark, Slesvig og Holsten 1404–1448. Konflikt og konsekvens* (Skrifter udgivet af Historisk Samfund for Sønderjylland, Bd. 114), Aabenraa 2018, p. 47.

after 1448<sup>22</sup>. The idea was kept alive until 1523, when the Swedish nobleman Gustav Eriksson of the aristocratic family of Vasa was elected king of Sweden on 6 June, after which Sweden never returned to the union.

During his adoptive mother's lifetime, King Eric's influence on the government was limited. In 1405, King Eric travelled to Norway to prepare for the reception of his future spouse and supervise arrangements pertaining to her dower. The voyage was also the occasion for 22-year-old Eric to carry out a number of government duties in that kingdom. Queen Margaret set up a booklet of instructions for him which gives us a rare opportunity to look into her mind and learn more about her views on government<sup>23</sup>. She instructs him to be very restrictive in promising anything to anyone and especially when it comes to putting his seal to any such promises. If he is put under pressure, he shall refer to her for settlement. Everything that pertains to finances shall be keenly supervised and local government positions should be granted to noblemen and bishops primarily as compensation for credits given to the Crown. The Council of the Realm is virtually surpassed, and the councillors are regarded with a rather distrustful eye; instead, government affairs are entrusted to royal bailiffs appointed by and accountable to the queen and the king.

After the death of Queen Margaret on 28 October 1412, her adoptive son, now in sole possession of power, had a magnificent tomb erected for her in the cathedral of Roskilde. Here she lies undisturbed to this day, preserving her characteristic secrecy also in death.

Some words should be added about the titles of Queen Margaret. Her queenship was acquired as a consequence of her marriage to King Håkan of Norway and Sweden. After his death, she was dowager queen, but often just referred to as *drotning* ('queen'), as in the Coronation Charter of King Eric of 13 July 1397<sup>24</sup>. This is not to be interpreted as 'queen regnant'. Instead, her title as regent, as has already been mentioned, was 'authorised lady and the right owner of the realm'.

Nevertheless, in some diplomas, Margaret styled herself 'by the grace of God, Queen of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway'<sup>25</sup>, whereas, in other diplomas, she more rightly used the title 'by the Grace of God, Queen of Norway and

<sup>22</sup> See also Anders FRÖJMARK, *Brott eller kontinuitet? Året 1523 i Sveriges historia*, [in:] *Sverige 1523: Riksarkivets årsbok 2023*, ed. Claes GEJROT, Stockholm 2023, pp. 29–36, for a brief discussion of some of these documents.

<sup>23</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 11, ed. Carl R. UNGER, Henrik J. HUITFELDT-KAAS, Christiania 1884, no. 110 (November 1404?); V. ETTING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 146–150.

<sup>24</sup> *Sverges traktater med främmande magter*, D. 2, no. 423; *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 4, Bd. 6: 1396–1398, ed. Aage ANDERSEN, København 1998, no. 344: 'wor nadighe frwe, drotning Margarete'.

<sup>25</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 3, Bd. 9: 1371–1375, ed. Carl A. CHRISTENSEN, Herluf NIELSEN, København 1982, no. 532 (10 November 1375).

Sweden, daughter and heiress of Lord Valdemar, of blessed memory, once King of the Danes<sup>26</sup>. Margaret was never queen of Denmark in the proper sense of the word. Her royal standing in Denmark was based on her being the daughter of King Valdemar, and in some diplomas, she simply styled herself ‘by the grace of God, daughter of Valdemar, King of the Danes’<sup>27</sup>.

#### ANALYSING QUEEN MARGARET’S EXERCISE OF POWER

After 500 years, the exemplary analysis of the exercise of power is still *Il Principe* (Eng. *The Prince*) by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). Machiavelli’s method is well suited for an analysis of Queen Margaret’s style of leadership since he was himself a historian and built large parts of his thesis on historical examples. Queen Margaret would have fit in neatly in his collection of examples, had it not been for his absolute lack of interest in the northern parts of Europe. The Scandinavian area lies beyond the limits of the world that is discussed by him, and he would most likely consider its political situation rather exotic. The republics discussed by him did not exist in Scandinavia, but perhaps to his surprise he might have found a similar spirit of freedom and love for old laws also in the North, had he only tried.

It should also be said that Machiavelli does not have a sympathetic view of female rule. Unlike Boccaccio, he has little to say about female rulers, and what he says is not to their advantage. Now, one might argue that in a position of power, being a man or a woman should not matter all that much. The objectives and the challenges would have been the same, as would in essence the methods employed to deal with them. This, however, would mean not taking into account the reality of socially constructed roles and sets of rules that govern all human societies, including preconceived ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman respectively. No single person can confront the entire web of ideas and concepts that makes societies function, and of which the construction of gender is a more or less fundamental element.

A person who was acutely aware of the restrictions put on women, and who dedicated a large portion of her work to modifying the view of what women could and should achieve in society, was Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–1430). Her *Livre de la cité des dames* (Eng. *Book of the City of Ladies*) from 1405 provides us with an analysis of the female exercise of power from Queen Margaret’s own days, and in this respect might serve as a corrective to the gender-

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 541 (7 December 1375).

<sup>27</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 4, Bd. 7: 1399–1400, ed. Aage ANDERSEN, København 2000, no. 149 (28 December 1399): ‘Wy Margretæ meth guds nadhe Woldemar Dane konings doter’. Also in Sweden, she used this title, as in *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 4, Bd. 6, no. 125 (1 August 1396). Eric was by then elected king of Sweden, which may explain this more humble way of styling herself. See also the letter of 3 May 1403 discussed below.

biased viewpoint of *Il Principe*, written a century later. In this paper, however, Machiavelli will serve as the sole basis of our analysis.

The writings of Machiavelli serve here as heuristic instruments with which questions will be generated that may help to analyse the acts of Queen Margaret. What was her scope of action? Which predominant ideas concerning female government and the place of women in the Church and society had to be coped with? What kind of education might she have received? Which were the traps she had to steer clear of? Did she learn from her mistakes and those of others? How did she manage not to make open enemies of magnates and prelates, even though she not always acted to their liking? On what grounds did she choose her collaborators? How independently were they allowed to act? Is the Nordic Union best understood as a product of a strategic mind or as a skilful response to opportunity and dynastic coincidence?

#### POSSIBLE ROLE MODELS FOR MARGARET

We have no accurate knowledge concerning the education that Margaret received and the place that history occupied in her studies. Did she study the great queens and other politically active women of the fourteenth century<sup>28</sup>? From the histories of Queen Isabella of England (c. 1295–1358) and the above-mentioned Queen Joanna I of Naples (c. 1326–1382), she may have learnt that the political aspirations of powerful women are repeatedly jeopardized by men who desire to govern them, and whose support all too often proves to be conditioned by a self-serving attitude. That widowhood and motherhood offer better opportunities could be learnt from the history of Marie d'Artois, Dowager Countess of Namur and mother of Margaret's mother-in-law, Queen Blanche. Marie d'Artois survived her husband by 35 years, during which she was often in practice the ruler of the county since her sons in the likeness of their father spent lengthy time on military campaigns.

Duchess Ingeborg Håkonsdotter (1301–1361), the paternal grandmother of Margaret's husband, had governed two kingdoms as a regent during her son's minority. Her grand strategies had been counteracted by the Councils of the Realm of her two kingdoms, which finally deposed her – even if she later would prove to be a 'comeback kid'. The futility of alliances with foreign powers, a theme often dealt with by Niccolò Machiavelli, could also be learnt by her example, since an alliance with the duke of Mecklenburg, accomplished by marrying off her daughter Eufemia, had proved to be of doubtful value<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> This is the assumption of a research project proposal 'Women and Power in the Middle Ages' that was subjected to the Tercentenary Foundation of the Swedish National Bank in 2008 by Dr. Anna Herbert and the author of this paper, however without receiving funding.

<sup>29</sup> I will come back to Duchess Ingeborg and the union created by her in a forthcoming paper.

The shadow of the queen's father, King Valdemar, lies heavily over the reign of Margaret. Like him, she pursued a great project of unification. He united the Kingdom of Denmark; she united all of Scandinavia in a union monarchy. Also when it comes to the style of government, the similarities are numerous and significant. Like him, she was a result-orientated and pragmatic politician, often charming, always cunning and sometimes cruel and merciless. One of King Valdemar's hallmarks was his reluctance to issue binding documents and to put his seal to such acts, and in this Queen Margaret scrupulously emulated his methods. She also learnt from her father's mistakes, especially to avoid making enemies in the Church.

One of her first acts after Valdemar's death in October 1375 was to restore the friendship with the diocese of Roskilde by making several donations to make up for the losses suffered by this diocese under the rule of her father<sup>30</sup>. Throughout her rule, the axis between the queen and the cathedral and bishop of Roskilde was lasting and utterly useful for her.

Did King Valdemar actually instruct his daughter in the art of ruling? Did he feel that she was made of the same stuff as he was, and was the one who could carry on his heritage in the absence of a surviving son? This, we cannot know, but there is another source of knowledge that was certainly most valuable to Margaret, namely Henning Podebusk, who had been Valdemar's *drost* (seneschal) and could transfer his legacy to the king's daughter. Apart from this, Margaret also received another brand of education, namely from her *magistra* Märta at the Norwegian court<sup>31</sup>. As has already been told, Märta was the daughter of Birgitta Birgersdotter (c. 1303–1373), the great prophetess issued from the Swedish nobility who was canonised in 1391 as St Birgitta of Sweden. As her mother's child, Märta is certain to have taught her student the rule of law as well as the fear of God, but of even greater importance was probably the legacy Märta represented, being the daughter of a woman whose words were heeded in all of Latin Christendom and who had shown for all to see that there were no limits for what a woman could do.

#### ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN

A queen regnant of the fourteenth century was dependent on men to carry out her orders and act as her representatives and intermediaries in her lands.

<sup>30</sup> *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Række 3, Bd. 9, no. 541 (Slagelse, 7 December 1375).

<sup>31</sup> That Norway played an important role in Margaret's upbringing has also been stressed by historian Erik Lönnroth. Being a hereditary monarchy, Norway offered a significant role for a royal mother *in spe*. See Erik LÖNNROTH, *Drottning Margaretas kvinnoroll*, [in:] *Kvinnans ekonomiska ställning under nordisk medeltid. Uppsatser framlagda vid ett kvinnohistoriskt symposium i Kungälv 8–12 oktober 1979*, ed. Hedda GUNNENG, Birgit STRAND (Kvinnohistoriskt arkiv, vol. 19), Göteborg 1981, p. 105.



Where did Queen Margaret find her associates and what were the virtues she expected them to display in her service?

The Scandinavian nobility was used to have its say in the governing of the three kingdoms and its share of power by holding the positions of county governors. The dowager queen, however, chose her collaborators not because of their standing in the local communities, but because of their usefulness and loyalty. Men from the lower ranks of the nobility, often foreigners in the country where they served, were preferred to members of the leading noble families. Some of her servants were men of dubious reputation, as they had been implied in acts of piracy or had used official positions to enrich themselves. Others were formally men of the Church, but in reality, civil servants in clerical disguise; and their prelatures and bishoprics were only a means to remunerate them. We will look into a number of her closest collaborators in the different Scandinavian countries to see what patterns emerge.

A good number of the most trusted associates of Queen Margaret were men of the Church. Her father had used clerics of the cathedral of Roskilde in the royal chancellery, and this tradition was continued by Margaret. The Great Occidental Schism that broke out in 1378 divided Latin Christendom into two camps, each one with a pope at its head, eager to gather Europe's rulers in their flock. For a far-sighted regent like Margaret, this situation made it possible to negotiate almost complete control over the nomination of bishops in her kingdoms, bringing to nothing the canonical choice by local cathedral chapters. A case that stands out is the appointment of her close collaborator Peder Jensen Lodehat – then a canon at the cathedral of Roskilde – as bishop of the Swedish see of Växjö in 1382, long before Margaret had any real power in that kingdom. This promotion was however certainly helped along by the fact that Peder Jensen, who had participated in one of the very first commissions for the canonisation of the Blessed Birgitta of Sweden, was viewed with a favourable eye by the Bridgettines, whose newly founded monastery in Vadstena was on its way to become the most prestigious religious institution of the kingdom<sup>32</sup>. Peder Jensen was later transferred first to the Danish see of Aarhus, then to Roskilde, and functioned as royal chancellor.

Other canons of Roskilde who thanks to Margaret's good relationship with the Roman pontiff were given bishop's sees were Nicolas Rusare, promoted to the Norwegian archbishopric of Nidaros in 1381, and Jacob Knudsen, who became the bishop of the rich Norwegian diocese of Bergen in 1401. Nicolas Rusare was the bailiff of Als Castle and seems to have remained a layman while he was nominally a canon in Roskilde. A later chronicle claims, that as

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<sup>32</sup> Tore NYBERG, *Birgittinsk festgåva. Studier om Heliga Birgitta och Birgittinorden*, Uppsala 1991, pp. 417–418.

archbishop, Nicolas Rusare never ordained priests or fulfilled other episcopal duties<sup>33</sup>. Jacob Knudsen played an active role in the queen's aggressive policy of de-privatising manors and farms in the Swedish province of Östergötland, where forgery of documents was allegedly used as one of the methods<sup>34</sup>. None of these men spent much time in their dioceses but contented themselves with drawing as many resources as possible from them while continuing in the queen's service.

Jacob Knudsen was transferred to the see of Oslo in 1407, where he could also serve as the queen's chancellor. The arrangement was made over the heads of the cathedral chapter of Oslo, which according to Icelandic annals had elected Aslak Bolt. He was, however, transferred to the now vacant see of Bergen. Queen Margaret's good relationship with the pope allowed her great leeway to dispose of the Nordic episcopal sees<sup>35</sup>.

If Nicolas Rusare and Jacob Knudsen can be said to have been civil servants disguised as clergymen, no disguise was needed for another group of men in the queen's service we will consider. Margaret recruited some of her most valued servants in the province of Halland. Halland nominally belonged to the Danish kingdom but had been disputed for most of the fourteenth century. In Halland, the Swedish Duke Erik Magnusson had established an independent power base in the early fourteenth century that was inherited after his death in 1318 by his widow, Duchess Ingeborg, and by the couple's son King Magnus. Halland had returned to Denmark in 1366 when the Danes had conquered Varberg Castle, but the Hallanders were since long used to disregard the national borders in business as well as in courting. In Halland, the queen found men who were at once battle proven and experienced in dealings with the Swedes. Niels Svarteskåning participated in the negotiations with the Swedish noblemen who wanted help to get rid of King Albert and contributed with success to the queen's military campaign at the beginning of 1389<sup>36</sup>. Some years earlier he and some other men had been accused by the Hanseatic merchants of piracy. The queen had made a semblance of condemning acts of piracy, but in reality, was on friendly terms with many of the perpetrators – some of whom were bailiffs of the Crown – and probably found their clandestine

<sup>33</sup> Cf. E. HAUG, *Margrete. Den siste dronning i Sverreætten*, p. 139.

<sup>34</sup> Eldbjørg HAUG, *Provincia Nidrosiensis i dronning Margretes unions- og maktpolitik* (Skriftserie fra Institutt for historie og klasiske fag, vol. 54), Trondheim 2006, pp. 246–247, with references to earlier studies.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–229.

<sup>36</sup> A number of Danish counsellors who participated in the negotiations are mentioned in a letter in which Algot Magnusson assumes responsibility for two castles on 5 January 1388, see *Sverges traktater med främmande magter*, D. 2, no. 411a: Bihang, pp. 462–464.

activities rather beneficial for her goals<sup>37</sup>. Another battle proven Hallander in the queen's service was Sven Sture, whose usefulness to the queen was so great that she forgave him even when he changed sides in the middle of a campaign against the Mecklenburgers on Gotland in 1396. Sven Sture returned to the queen's camp after the defeat of the Mecklenburgers against the Teutonic Order in 1398 and soon was a trusted commander in the queen's armies again. He was knighted between 1405 and 1407, possibly at King Eric's wedding with Philippa of England<sup>38</sup>.

Niels Svarteskåning and Sven Sture had land and family connections on both sides of the Danish-Swedish border and the same goes for one of the queen's most trusted collaborators and at the same time one of the richest men of his time, Abraham Brodersson. Abraham Brodersson is a typical *homo novus*; not much is known about his family background. He laid the foundations for his huge fortune by marrying a wealthy widow in 1382. He was then a rather young man, but already a trusted civil servant in the queen's service. As her trust for him grew, so did the territories in both Denmark and Sweden that he administered. He seems to have been a zealous administrator, but also one who made use of his position to enrich himself. Not unlike the queen, he especially singled out widows for his treatment, buying land from them when they were in a position of weakness. Occasionally, he challenged more equal opponents. Especially well-known is an episode in 1409 when he threatened the abbess of Vadstena into swapping some property with him. After his death, processing concerning his immense property went on for several decades, since much of it had been acquired by illegal means. This, by the way, included the property offered to Vadstena Abbey in 1409. When he was still in command, his territory was a kind of miniature of the Scandinavian union founded by Queen Margaret, and from it, he was often able to offer her financial help<sup>39</sup>. One might say that he functioned as a kind of minister of finance to her. Apart from this, he was also assigned some military missions, which he solved more or less satisfactorily. This implied occasional transfers to other strategic castles than his ordinary base in Varberg, and thence new opportunities to enrich himself. In his last military mission, he participated in King Eric's campaign against the

<sup>37</sup> E. HAUG, *Margrete. Den siste dronning i Sverreætten*, pp. 128, 154–155; V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 30–34.

<sup>38</sup> V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 104–105; Hans GILLINGSTAM, *Sture (yngre ätten), släkt*, [in:] *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, Bd. 34, ed. Åsa KARLSSON, Stockholm 2013–2017, p. 84; available online at <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=34629> [accessed online 24 March 2023]. Sven Sture's daughter Katarina was the mother of Nils Sture, Swedish councillor of the realm, whose son Svante Nilsson was Swedish regent (Swe. *riksföreståndare*) between 1504 and 1512.

<sup>39</sup> Henry BRUUN, *Abraham Brodersen*, *Historisk Tidsskrift*, Række 11, Bd. 3: 1952, pp. 122–123.

Holsteiners in 1410. He negotiated a temporary peace treaty on the Island of Als, but violated it, according to trustworthy sources by raping a local woman. King Eric had him beheaded for this<sup>40</sup>. This punishment of a knight and councillor of the realm, one of the queen's most trusted servants, resounded greatly in the union monarchy. Later historians have speculated about a disagreement between the king and the queen. The queen did not, however, disavow the judgement – which was probably justified – but took action to calm down the agitated feelings aroused by it. With the money that she had borrowed from Abraham, and according to his will, she made extraordinarily rich donations to the cathedrals in Roskilde and Lund, where chapels should be erected and richly decorated, and masses sung for his soul<sup>41</sup>. She thereby ensured that his memory would be kept alive, and also that his soul would fare better in the hereafter. Also during his living, Abraham had been a remarkably generous donor to the Church, much like the queen herself. He must have been well aware that the methods used for building his fortune were not in good accordance with the teachings of the Gospel. That the queen had such confidence in a man like Abraham Brodersson tells us much about her governance, as the historian Henry Bruun puts it<sup>42</sup>.

Esbjörn Kristiernsson Djäkn was a bailiff and later military commander of the Swedish province of Östergötland. Here he was responsible for carrying out the de-privatising of manors and farms that were supposedly lost to the Crown in an undue manner during the previous regime. Together with the abovementioned Bishop Jacob Knudsen, Esbjörn is known to have forged documents and bribed peasants to give false testimony in several cases<sup>43</sup>. He was an object of much animosity among the higher nobility and clergy, but possibly less so among the commoners. Among the most trusted officials of the queen, a relatively small number were Swedes, but Esbjörn Djäkn belonged to that number. He was seen as a tyrant by the nobles and prelates, but as the historian Jerker Rosén has pointed out, he was first and foremost a loyal and efficient servant of the queen<sup>44</sup>. Among the religious houses that lost property due to his activities was Vadstena Abbey, where the queen was accepted as a sister *ab extra* ('in the world outside') at the same time as the activities of Esbjörn Djäkn and Jacob Knudsen were at their most intense<sup>45</sup>. After the passing

<sup>40</sup> V. ETTING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 165–166.

<sup>41</sup> H. BRUUN, *op.cit.*, pp. 120–121.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> V. ETTING, *Queen Margrete I*, p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> Jerker ROSÉN, *Drottning Margaretas svenska räfst*, Scandia. Tidskrift för Historisk Forskning, vol. 20: 1950, no. 2, p. 246.

<sup>45</sup> E. HAUG, *Margrete. Den siste dronning i Sverreætten*, p. 296; *Diarium Vadstenense: The Memorial Book of Vadstena Abbey: A Critical Edition with an Introduction*, ed. Claes GEJROT

away of Queen Margaret, King Eric swiftly removed Esbjörn Djäkn from his office in order to regain the confidence of the nobility, and many of his judicial decisions were revised<sup>46</sup>.

#### THE INNOVATOR

Much interest in *Il Principe* is devoted to the problems that face new rulers, as opposed to hereditary rulers. 'Men willingly change their ruler, expecting to fare better, but they only deceive themselves', Machiavelli says<sup>47</sup>. The reason is that the prince for causes that are repeatedly dealt with in the book is always compelled to injure those who have made him their new ruler.

Having won a new territory, the prince has the unrewarding task of securing his power by making necessary changes to the constitution. According to Machiavelli, he will inevitably alienate those who prospered under the old order, while finding only lukewarm support in those who profit from the changes. The innovator will meet fierce resistance, and will find that 'men are generally incredulous towards new things'. To succeed, the innovator must be enough powerful to stand alone and force his issue<sup>48</sup>. When seizing a state, the new ruler must determine all the injuries he will need to inflict and inflict them once and for all, so that there will be no need of renewing them. 'Violence must be inflicted once and for all; people will then forget what it tastes like and so be less resentful. Benefits must be conferred gradually; and in that way they will taste better'<sup>49</sup>.

Machiavelli thus has plenty of advice to offer new rulers. If their rule is challenged they can only expect half-hearted support from those who prosper under the new order<sup>50</sup>. If the state was seized with support given from within, which is generally the case, they should carefully reflect on the motives of those who helped them. If the support was based on discontent with the old government this discontent can easily arise once more<sup>51</sup>. If the new acquisition is joined to states which are similar in language and customs, the new ruler can be rather easily accepted as long as old laws or taxes are not changed, but if the

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(Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Studia Latina, vol. 33), Stockholm 1988, § 123 (at Christmas time 1403/1404).

<sup>46</sup> J. RosÉN, op.cit., pp. 200–201, 245–246.

<sup>47</sup> Niccolò MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, trans. George BULL, intro. Anthony GRAFTON, London 2003, chpt. III, p. 8. All quotations are from Machiavelli's *Il Principe* in the Penguin English edition of 2003, only slightly modified to fit the context. The text of this edition was translated by George Bull in 1961 and has since been revised on numerous occasions. It is introduced and commented on by Anthony Grafton.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., chpt. VI, p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., chpt. VIII, p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., chpt. VI, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., chpt. XX, pp. 69–70.



newly acquired territory differs in language, customs and institutions, the new ruler ought to go and live there in person in order to be able to detect and deal with trouble at an early stage. In both cases, it is necessary to destroy the family of the old ruler<sup>52</sup>. Even so, there may still remain nobles to raise insurrections<sup>53</sup>.

#### MARGARET AS A NEW RULER

In a Nordic context, especially Swedish medieval politics abounds with examples of changing of rulers. As we have seen, Queen Margaret's husband and father-in-law were both forced to step down from the Swedish throne in 1364 and replaced by a relative, Albert, who was a son of King Magnus Eriksson's sister Eufemia in her marriage with the duke of Mecklenburg. The reign of King Albert soon gave rise to opposition among the Swedish nobility, and in the late 1380s, it was Dowager Queen Margaret's turn to be contacted by a group of oppositional Swedish nobles. Already the regent of Denmark and Norway, with the help of Swedish magnates she added Sweden to her dominion. In Sweden, she may thus be considered a new ruler.

Queen Margaret gained access to Sweden with help from dissatisfied magnates. These, she should not put too much trust in, according to Machiavelli, and indeed she proceeded to secure her rule independently of them. Her first step was to vanquish the old ruler and his family. King Albert was defeated on the battlefield and captured, but his legal position was still strong and he had powerful friends in and outside of Sweden, so it took six years of negotiations before he finally accepted to step down and go into exile.

Queen Margaret's next step was to have her adoptive son duly elected king of Sweden, according to the law of the land. Sweden and Denmark were both elective monarchies, and by respecting the formal procedure, Queen Margaret avoided alienating the people, which in Machiavelli's eyes is the most unwise thing for a prince to do<sup>54</sup>. Elective monarchies like Denmark and Sweden have much in common with a certain category of states discussed by Machiavelli, namely those which are used to live freely under their own laws. According to him, if a ruler acquires such a state and does not destroy it, it will destroy him<sup>55</sup>. 'When there is a rebellion, such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty and its ancient institutions,' which are never forgotten<sup>56</sup>. When Queen Margaret became master of Sweden she was however already used to

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., chpt. III, pp. 9–11.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., chpt. IV, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., chpt. IX, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., chpt. V, p. 18. Machiavelli, whom one would otherwise perhaps be inclined to see as a crypto republican, here uses surprisingly severe language. Maybe the true meaning of the advice he gives should be interpreted as 'keep your hands off the republics'.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., chpt. V, p. 18.

the spirit of freedom that resided in the nobility of an elective monarchy, and she understood that the election of her adoptive son as king of Sweden must be done in a manner that did not jeopardize the legitimacy of the new regime.

The exile of King Albert of Sweden in 1395 and the Swedish election of Margaret's adoptive son on 23 July 1396, meant that Margaret had won for herself a new country – or, rather, regained it, since she had been the queen of Sweden for a brief moment after her marriage to King Håkon<sup>57</sup>. Her view of government differed from that which was held by the majority of the nobility in Sweden as well as in Denmark. Like many contemporary monarchs, she favoured absolute royal power, accountable first and foremost to God, while the magnates held that the king should rule 'med råds råde', that is with counsel of the Council of the Realm, where they and the prelates were represented<sup>58</sup>. These two notions of government have been termed *regimen regale* and *regimen politicum* respectively<sup>59</sup>. Queen Margaret had not forgotten that her husband and father-in-law, both kings of Sweden, had been deposed. Her actions show that her mind was fixed on a change in the style of government to which the Swedes were used. In Machiavelli's terms, she was an innovator. She was bound to face opposition.

Immediately after the victory over King Albert's troops in February of 1389, she imposed a tax on the Swedes by which they could give material proof of how grateful they were for having been liberated. Taxes in Sweden were generally raised during the first years of her regime, to a level that even the queen herself later found excessive<sup>60</sup>. Sweden had an asset that Denmark had not in the form of a peasantry that to a large extent were owners of taxable land.

Margaret was a monarch with an unusually clear understanding of the need to have a sound financial base for her government. Miserliness is often

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<sup>57</sup> Certainly, she never dropped that title. Nor did King Håkon drop the title of the king of Sweden, but there was no reality to it, even if some provinces of western Sweden were at least partly under their control after 1371. There were in my view no real prospects for King Håkon to come back as the king of Sweden. He and his father had been ousted, and the support for them in Sweden was rather insignificant. With the queen, it was another thing.

<sup>58</sup> This notion was explicitly introduced in the revised Law of the Land (*Landslag*) promulgated by King Christopher of Sweden in 1442, but it was then both an ideal and a practice for a long time. See *Kristofers Landslag*, Konungz Balkar 4:4, <https://litteraturbanken.se/f%C3%B6rfattare/Anonym/titlar/KristoffersLandslagMS/sida/9/faksimil> [accessed online 24 March 2023] (Kungliga biblioteket, Handskrift B 167, c. 1550).

<sup>59</sup> Erik LÖNNROTH, *Sverige och Kalmarunionen 1397–1457* (PhD diss., University of Gothenburg), Göteborg 1934, pp. 22–23 (after Ptolemy of Lucca), 29. The notions should not be read as absolute opposites, especially not in practical politics, but they may serve to highlight two different ideals of government.

<sup>60</sup> See the queen's letter dated in Uppsala on 3 May 1403, *Svenskt diplomatarium från och med år 1401*, D. 1: *Åren 1401–1407*, ed. Carl SILFVERSTOLPE, Stockholm 1875–1884, no. 328; SDHK, no. 16083.

considered a vice, but according to Machiavelli, it is a vice with beneficial effects which will sustain the rule of the prince<sup>61</sup>.

Margaret's way of strengthening the finances of the Crown, while at the same time achieving important political goals, bears the mark of political genius. During her time as regent of Denmark, strategies had been tested out, which were now applied in Sweden on an even larger scale, and incorporated into her taxation policy which has been discussed above. The legal framework was outlined in the Nyköping Concord (Swe. *Nyköpings recess*) of 20 September 1396, two months after the Swedish election of Eric<sup>62</sup>. Manors that had been given away as fiefs during King Albert's regime were now recalled to the Crown. A number of Swedish counties were assigned for Margaret's maintenance. Goods were withdrawn from magnates and churches and given to the Crown. There was a popular note to her programme since it was partly motivated by the abuse of power of the former bailiffs. This had been criticised by ecclesiastical authorities, so Margaret could keep the moral high ground. Notwithstanding the fact that churches and monasteries were also targeted, Pope Boniface IX gave the green light for Margaret's politics on 29 March 1401<sup>63</sup>.

Special courts were set up to decide on which property was to be reassigned to the Crown. Officials appointed by the queen were given great leeway for their actions. One of those was the abovementioned Jacob Knudsen, who, as we have seen, formally was the bishop of Bergen from 1401, but in reality a royal servant who was remunerated with the resources of a rich diocese.

#### THE STRUGGLE FOR THE DUCHY OF SLESVIG

A permanent worry for Queen Margaret – as for most previous and following regents of Denmark – was the relationship with the German territories south of the Danish border. A kind of intermediate territory was the Duchy of Slesvig (also known as Schleswig or Sønderjylland), which nominally was a fief of the Danish Crown, but in reality, frequently sided with the neighbouring German County of Holstein. It was therefore a subject of much discussion, both among contemporaries and among later historians, what made Queen Margaret confer the title of duke of Slesvig to Count Gerhard VI of Holstein on 15 August 1386. It is often thought that accepting *homagium* from Count Gerhard was an acceptable way for the queen to achieve peace in the south

<sup>61</sup> N. MACHIAVELLI, *op.cit.*, chpt. XVI, p. 52. The theme of miserliness may be developed in the context of Margaret's booklet of instructions for King Eric. Further, Queen Margaret is characterised as miserly in annals probably edited in Östergötland after 1412, see M. LINTON, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup> *Sverges traktater med främmande magter*, D. 2, Bihang no. V, pp. 655–664.

<sup>63</sup> Two letters dated in Rome on 29 March 1401, see *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 17, ed. Gustav STORM [et al.], Christiania 1902–1913, no. 213c, 213d; SDHK, no. 15608, 15609.

while she had to deal with King Albert in Sweden. ‘This cunning woman did not want to light several fires at the same time’, says a chronicle from Holstein<sup>64</sup>. Typical for the queen’s governance was that no documents were issued to corroborate the rights of the duke, something that led to disputes long after the queen’s death<sup>65</sup>. Duke Gerhard, however, fell during a campaign in the Ditmarsh in 1404. Out of fear for her relatives, Dowager Duchess Elizabeth asked King Eric – in practice Queen Margaret – to be the custodian of her and her sons. Margaret succeeded in gaining influence in the duchy, with the support of Bishop Johannes (Hans) of Slesvig. Duchess Elizabeth, however, shifted her political track and turned to her Holstein family. A period of conflict and chaos ensued. Bishop Johannes was abducted and maltreated, and on 14 June 1410, the duchess formally declared war against the king<sup>66</sup>. A treaty of an armistice in Kolding the following year left the greater part of the duchy in Danish hands for the time being<sup>67</sup>.

Queen Margaret’s politics in the Duchy of Slesvig echo those of her father, King Valdemar, who in 1373 made a deal with Dowager Duchess Richardis (Regitze), whereupon he became the legal guardian of her and her dower, and subsequently subdued the counts of Holstein and conquered Flensburg<sup>68</sup>.

Concerning the struggle with Duchess Elizabeth, it has been remarked that the queen acted with ‘a remarkable lack of chivalry’ against her opponent<sup>69</sup>, successively stripping her of her property and making her dependent on the queen’s mercy, all under the semblance of dignified friendliness. The duchess was, however, not a simple pawn for the queen to move around. She offered fierce resistance and mustered what allies she could find, which provoked the abovementioned campaign of 1410 led by King Eric. Negotiations alternated with attempts to reach military solutions.

Margaret’s last will of 1411 reflects the ongoing wars. In a supplement to the now-lost testament, women who had been violated during the wars in the three kingdoms are remembered<sup>70</sup>.

In October 1412, the city of Flensburg was ceded by the Holsteiners. On her ship in Flensburg harbour, days after having received the homage of the

<sup>64</sup> The *Chronicon Holzatiae* (c. 1450), cited by M. LINTON, op.cit., p. 159, and by B. POULSEN, op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>65</sup> M. LINTON, op.cit., p. 161; V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 46–49; M. HEDEMANN, op.cit., pp. 41, 50–52.

<sup>66</sup> V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 153–155; M. HEDEMANN, op.cit., pp. 53–59.

<sup>67</sup> B. POULSEN, op.cit., pp. 141–143; M. HEDEMANN, op.cit., p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> B. POULSEN, op.cit., p. 138.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. E. LÖNNROTH, *Drottning Margaretas kvinnoroll*, p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> *Svenskt diplomatarium från och med år 1401*, D. 2: *Åren 1408–1414*, ed. Carl SILFVERSTOLPE, Stockholm 1879–1887, no. 1511; SDHK, no. 17749 (Kalundborg, 8 December 1411); V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 125–127; B. POULSEN, op.cit., p. 143.

population, Queen Margaret was struck by a sudden illness – in all likelihood the plague – and died at the age of 59. Her legacy, including the handling of the Slesvig question, was carried on by King Eric, her adoptive son. Both diplomacy and warfare were put to use by King Eric, but no satisfying solution was attained<sup>71</sup>. The costly wars over the Duchy of Slesvig would in the long run weaken his position as union king. He was deposed in Denmark and Sweden in 1439, while Norway, his first kingdom, formally held on to him until 1442.

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In the language of Birgitta Birgersdotter, King Valdemar IV of Denmark was the ‘Wolf’, and Margaret, his daughter, was consequently the daughter of the ‘Wolf’. In the memorial book of Vadstena Abbey, despite the queen’s status as sister *ab extra* of the abbey, the news of her death in 1412 prompted the following, rather dry judgement: ‘She was during her lifetime, as far as the world is concerned, very successful’<sup>72</sup>. Queen Margaret’s ability to set up long-term goals for her actions and pursue those with relentless resolution inspired awe and admiration in friends and enemies alike. She could be merciless to those who stood against her, but her rule is an indisputable success in most respects, and it should be remembered as – for the most part – a period of peace and increasing – if heavily taxed – prosperity. In her choice of collaborators, she promoted proficiency rather than morality. Her primary concerns were the financial soundness of her regime and her officials were appointed more in order to accomplish this than for their quality of furthering the rule of law. Those who suffered most from this were probably the members of the aristocracy, who saw their ancient prerogatives more or less reduced to nothing. They were used to having a say in the governing of their respective kingdoms but were to a large extent surpassed and pushed aside by the queen’s handpicked servants, often foreigners and thus less rooted in the customs of the land. What the queen wanted was loyalty towards her person and her objectives, and this she got. The opposition of the old ruling elite was not especially visible during her lifetime. When however the same program of unbridled personal monarchy was pursued by her adoptive son Eric, the opposition eventually led to open revolt and he was deposed. This is perhaps one of the rare examples in history when a female ruler has not been more severely judged than her male counterparts.

When her husband died, Queen Margaret chose to remain a widow. In view of the experience of some other fourteenth-century women in positions of power, this seems to have been a wise decision, but also one that exposed her to calumny and the spreading of rumours. Her motherliness was questioned to

<sup>71</sup> Cf. M. HEDEMANN, *op.cit.*, pp. 290–291.

<sup>72</sup> *Diarium Vadstenense*, § 218, in my translation.



such a degree that when her son Olav suddenly passed away in 1387, she was accused of having killed him. The absurdity in this accusation is much greater since his death would in all likelihood have bereft her of all means of power and influence. That this did not happen is another story. The rumours of her involvement in his death did not cease, as is shown by a curious episode in 1402, when a person in Prussia posed as King Olav, and claimed that he had escaped from the queen's attempt to have him poisoned. Queen Margaret had many enemies in Prussia who inflated this rumour, and finally, the man sailed to Kalmar, but instead of being recognised as the rightful king he was put to trial and sentenced to be burnt at the stake. What is interesting in this episode is that Margaret's enemies had a certain success in accusing her of having attempted to murder her own son<sup>73</sup>.

Queen Margaret knew the importance of having the support of the Church. Many of her closest collaborators, as well as her greatest creditors, were men of the Church. In some cases, her appointments of bishops were nothing more than a way of remunerating civil servants with ecclesiastical property, but she was at the same time a great benefactor of churches and monasteries. Both during her lifetime and in her testament, considerable sums were bequeathed to ecclesiastical institutions. She was most certainly a pious woman, and she was eager to have prayers said for her soul after her death.

As a new regent of Sweden, Queen Margaret combined political and economic goals in what appears to be a strategic and well-thought-out policy. Weakening of the nobility, strengthening of the finances of the Crown, gaining a certain legitimacy, if not popularity, with the lower strata, building good relationships with the pope and the Church and giving proof of piety, while being able to use churches as banks and appointing bishops at will were key elements of her programme. There is plenty here that Machiavelli would have been able to use as examples.

Another example of how political goals could be combined with other goals is the demolition of castles erected by magnates, a policy that Margaret implemented in Denmark at an early stage of her government, and that was later applied in Sweden<sup>74</sup>.

It is clear that Queen Margaret inflicted the injuries she found necessary once and for all, just like Machiavelli would advise his readers more than

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<sup>73</sup> E. LÖNNROTH, *Drottning Margaretas kvinnoroll*, pp. 108–109; V. ETING, *Queen Margrete I*, pp. 135–138. A recent film, *Margrete: Queen of the North*, directed by Charlotte Sieling (2021), exploits this story to the extreme.

<sup>74</sup> In Sweden this applied to castles erected since the beginning of the uprising against King Magnus in 1363, see the Nyköping Concord (Swe. *Nyköpings recess*) in *Sverges traktater med främmande magter*, D. 2, Bihang no. V, p. 659.

a century later. She took advantage of the victory over King Albert and the election of King Eric, when she enjoyed the favour of her new subjects, to raise taxes and reclaim alienated estates of the Crown. The prelates and magnates who had negotiated with Queen Margaret in 1388 and paved the way for her regime were – with some exceptions – not spared from the reductions, so Margaret clearly intended to find other supports for her regime. She found those in the consciousness of having been appointed by God, in cooperation with the pope, the Bridgettine Order, and the episcopacy, and in the right she secured for herself to appoint servants at will, even when it meant disregarding the prerogatives of the nobility<sup>75</sup>.

As regent of the three Scandinavian countries, Queen Margaret was the head of a huge empire, encompassing a vast area of land and sea from Karelia to Greenland, and including the populous towns and rolling farmlands of Denmark as well as the great, northern wilderness of the Sami and the rich fisheries off the North Atlantic coast. She is remembered as one of the greatest rulers of the North of all times, but she is yet – due to the lack of sources, but perhaps also to her personal secrecy – an enigmatic personality.

According to a familiar quotation by the Swedish nineteenth-century historian Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1836), the union between the three kingdoms was ‘en händelse som ser ut som en tanke’ (‘an event that looks like a thought’). And certainly, the access to power in three kingdoms by Dowager Queen Margaret and her adoptive son Eric was the result of a series of events that could not all be planned or foreseen. However, her strategic mind certainly saw the possibilities that were created by those events. But this is not true for herself only. During the meeting in Kalmar in the summer of 1397, nothing less than a constitution for a lasting union was drafted. In order for this to happen, the leading politicians of especially Denmark and Sweden invested deeply, both intellectually and emotionally, in this project. Clearly, by then, it was a thought in their minds as well as in the queen’s, and it was carried on by their successors throughout the union period, who made their best to mend the wounds in the union fabric when new crises arrived. That the union treaty was not formally promulgated in the way that was foreseen is less important, since its regulations were in fact respected as the basis for the relationship between the three kingdoms. They were also repeated on many occasions during the history of the union. My conclusion is therefore that the Kalmar Union certainly was much more than ‘an event that looked like a thought’.

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<sup>75</sup> Concerning Queen Margaret and the Bridgettine Order, see Vivian ETTING, *Dronning Margrete, Birgittinerne og den svenske kirke*, Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift, vol. 112: 2012, pp. 33–48.

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