

The Arrival of the Hospitallers in Norway

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In *ultimus finibus terris*. In this way the Grand Master Dieudonne de Gozon described the Scandinavian possessions of the Order of Knights of the Hospital of St John in Jerusalem in a letter from 1347. The northernmost establishment of the Hospitallers was situated in Norway. Here the order had received a donation of an old royal estate, and the centre of this estate was a farm called *Varna*, or *Værne*. It is situated on the eastern shore of the Oslo Fjord, approximately fifty kilometres south of Oslo and close to the modern town Moss. It lies in a district which has been well suited to agriculture since the Last Ice Age ended 12,000 years ago. Archaeological evidence shows that this was a regional cultural and political centre for centuries before the arrival of the order.

The Hospitallers never became a dominant religious order in medieval Norway. Only one house, or commandery, was founded in the country. By the late Middle Ages at least two houses had been established in Sweden, and eight in Denmark. The Norwegian branch of the order enjoyed its most prosperous period in the late fifteenth century.¹

The main topic of this article is the introduction of the order to Norway and the establishment of a Norwegian commandery. In spite of their long

¹ For a full discussion of the properties and development of Varna, see Svandal 2005.

presence, we have only a few written sources for their history here. What is left today mainly deals with economic issues and the estate, and some judicial matters. By interpreting what sources we have in the broader Scandinavian and European context, it may be possible to get a better understanding of the hospitallers' history in their northernmost outpost.



Figure 1. Remains of Varna Abbey Church. Photo: Mona Beate Buckholm Vattekar, Østfoldmuseene.

The arrival of the Hospitallers in Scandinavia

The establishment in Norway was closely linked to the spreading of the order in Scandinavia, and Denmark was the first country where the order established itself north of the German lands. They were granted a royal estate called Antvorskov in western Sjælland. A commandery was established here, and this would be the main Hospitaller house in Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages. The later Scandinavian priory, called *Dacia*, which was established in the thirteenth century, would be administered from Antvorskov, and the ‘provincial prior’ of the Scandinavian province

resided here. This was thus the seat of the regular *provincial conventions* (Reitzel-Nielsen 1984–91, esp. vols. 1–2).

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seven more houses of the order were established in Denmark: Viborg from before 1274, Odense before 1280, Ribe, Svenstrup and Lund mentioned in 1311 and Dueholm and Horsens in the late fourteenth century (see Carlsson, this volume). Written sources from this early period are scarce, and it is not possible to date the foundations precisely. What is clear, though, is the precedence of the house at Antvorskov, and the fact that it was founded decades earlier than all the other houses. Could the foundation of Antvorskov also have a direct link to the introductions of the hospitallers to Norway?

The traditional dating of the foundation of Antvorskov is the year 1170. The background for this is a note in an early sixteenth-century chronicle put together by a former Franciscan friar, Petrus Olai, or Peder Olsen. It states: *Fundatur Adourskog a Waldemaro I et Absalone, episcopo Roskildense (Annales danici medii ævi, p. 206)*. This says explicitly that Antvorskov was founded by King Valdemar I (1157–82), together with his close friend and ally, Bishop Absalon of Roskilde. But is Petrus Olai's chronicle to be trusted?

The chronicle was written down centuries later than the events it describes, and this has led some historians to question the value of the entire chronicle. The Danish historian Niels Skyum-Nielsen, however, suggested that the foundation could have been as early as the 1160s (Skyum-Nielsen 1971: 129). His source for this dating is a dubious letter from *Vor Frue Kloster* (Priory of Our Lady) in Roskilde. This letter is reputed to have been written by Bishop Absalon, stating that some hospitaller brethren witnessed it. They should also have signed the letter of foundation: *Fratres de hospitali Johannis in Hierusalem subscripserunt* (DD Ser. 1, vol. II: 163). Skyum-Nielsen stated that the letter must have been written sometime between 1164 and 1178, and based his dating of Antvorskov's foundation on this. There are two grounds for treating this view with a certain degree of caution. Firstly, a period of fourteen years does not alone really substantiate a claim that Antvorskov had been founded as early as the 1160s. Secondly, the letter from Roskilde only says that hospitaller brethren were present, not that they resided in a commandery in Denmark.

There are other sources that can lead us to a more precise dating, while also confirming the king's role in the foundation. There exist two royal letters of protection of Antvorskov from 1231, issued by Valdemar's son and grandson (the later kings Valdemar II and Valdemar III). The letters state that Valdemar I and his son Knud gave gifts to Antvorskov:

Let it be known to present and future (people) that all benefices that our venerable father (...), Valdemar the First (...) and king Knud, our brother, gave to the hospital at Antvorskov, and also other hospital churches within our realm ...²

Valdemar's role is also confirmed in a note in *Kong Valdemars jordebok*, a registry of royal lands in Denmark. It is dated to around the same time as the letters from 1231. The registry states that royal land was given to the hospital at Antvorskov (*Kong Valdemars jordebok*, I.2: 28). Another source that confirms the royal involvement in Antvorskov's foundation, is the so-called *huspenning*. This was a tax put on every household in Denmark, to be paid to the Hospitallers for their involvement in the fighting in the Holy Land (DD Ser 1, vol. 8: 156). This is a very strong indication of strong royal support.

Other people than the king might have played roles in bringing the Hospitallers to Antvorskov. One of them is Archbishop Eskil of Lund (1137–77) (Lorenzen 1927: 6; Nyberg 1991: 172–173). He is known for introducing other religious orders to Denmark, among them the Cistercians and Premonstratensians. Eskil might have come into contact with Hospitallers in France, during his exile between 1161 and 1167, or during a visit to Jerusalem in 1164. A source tells us that Eskil donated a parish church in Lund to the order. Still, there can be little doubt that the king surpassed the archbishop as a benefactor to the order.

The main ecclesiastical ally of the Hospitallers in Denmark was Bishop Absalon of Roskilde. His involvement is explicitly stated in Petrus Olai's chronicle. Absalon was a childhood friend of King Valdemar and was born into one of the most powerful families in Denmark. He became a

2 DD Ser. 1, vol. VI: 120–121: *Notum sit presntibus et futuris quod omnia bona que felicis recordationis uenerabilis pater [avus] noster, rex Waldemarum Primus, et que pie memorie domunus rex Kanutus frater [patruus] noster, hospitalis in Andworescogh contulerunt et quecunque etiam alii ecclesie hospitalis infra terminus regni nostril erogauerunt.*

close supporter of Valdemar during the latter's rise to power in Denmark, and also of the king's crusading activities in the Baltics. The connection to the crusading movement and its ideology can be an important clue to understanding why Valdemar wanted to introduce the Hospitallers to Denmark and Scandinavia in the first place.

Danes went on crusades to the Holy Land, but Danish crusading activities focused mainly on the pagan lands in the Baltic. Some of these lands even bordered on the Danish kingdom. By the twelfth century the main opponents were the Vends, a Slavic people living just south of the Danish border. Later in the Middle Ages Danish crusading activities in the Baltics brought them as far east as Estonia.

Crusading ideas were well known and may have been integrated in society and culture in Denmark by the late twelfth century. Denmark may have been looked upon as a 'border land' to the pagan east. Danish historian Thomas Riis has even claimed that the Danish king put his realm under the protection of the Order of St John, like kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula. This is probably reading too much into the meagre source material, and there is no evidence that the Hospitallers ever took a direct military role in the Danish crusading adventures in the eastern Baltics. But the status the order had in the Christian west, its connection to the crusades, and the ideology they brought with them, may themselves have been reasons for King Valdemar to support and donate a royal estate to them.

The main role of the Hospitallers in Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages would be to recruit new members, propagate the order's cause to the local population, collect money and gain resources for their main activities in the east. The ideological effect of having one of the main military orders present in his kingdom may have been important to Valdemar and Bishop Absalon. To introduce an order which had the support of both the Pope and European kings and nobility may have given prestige to a new, strong 'Valdemarian' kingdom.

The firm support from King Valdemar and Bishop Absalon, and the establishment of the commandery at Antvorskov in 1170, do not seem to have sparked a sudden growth of the Hospitallers in Denmark. Not until the second half of the thirteenth century can we see a new wave of

foundations, those houses, mentioned above, which were founded from the 1270s until the late 1300s.

But even though the order did not seem to spread more in Denmark in the twelfth century, it established itself in Sweden in the late 1100s. The first brethren probably came and established a hospitaller commandery in the Swedish town of Eskilstuna. The order was given an old parish church, which had briefly served as a cathedral, and housed the remain of Eskil, a local saint. We cannot say exactly when the hospitallers came to Eskilstuna, but a thirteenth-century source dates it between 1174 and 1185 (Reitzel-Nielsen 1984–91, I: 206).

As in Denmark, the Hospitallers were introduced to Sweden as a result of royal support. The crusading ideas were well known also here. A special privilege was granted to the order in Sweden, just like the *huspenning* i Denmark. One twelfth of the so-called *Peterspenning* ('St Peter's Penny') from the diocese of Strängnäs was given to the order. As in Denmark, there is no indication that the order played any military role in Sweden, but rather had the same ideological role for the king as for King Valdemar in Denmark.

The development of the order in Sweden differs to the situation in Denmark, as there was no new wave of foundations in the late thirteenth century. Not until the late fifteenth century, just decades before the Reformation, was a new house founded in Kronobeck in the province of Småland. A possible third house was founded in Stockholm in 1491, but the status of this remains very uncertain.

What may be concluded from this? The order was introduced to Scandinavia with the foundation of the commandery of Antvorskov in 1170. The order established itself a few years later in Sweden, sometime between 1174 and 1185. The way the order was able to establish itself in Scandinavia is comparable to the situation elsewhere in Europe. It happened through royal support, and donations, and a strong will to grant lands and rights to the order.

Before the establishment of a Scandinavian province, the *Priory of Dacia*, in the thirteenth century, the houses in all three countries were linked to the German priory. This pattern of establishment broadly matches the development in the German lands. The order established

itself in Duisburg in 1152, came to Brandenburg in 1158, Bohemia in 1162 and Pomerania by 1182.

The establishment in Scandinavia must be closely linked to the crusades. The function of the early hospitallers here was not military, but rather to act as money collectors and to propagate the order's crusading activities in the Holy Land. The particular privileges granted to them in Denmark and Sweden, granting them a slice of taxation income, clearly show this. It does not seem like the hospitallers ever played a military role in the northern crusades in the Baltics, as their fellow brethren did in the *reconquista* on the Iberian peninsula. Even if Valdemar had hoped the order could play such a role, it is unlikely that the hospitallers had either the will or the economic strength to do so.

The arrival of the Hospitallers in Varna - previous theories

When and how did the hospitallers reach Norwegian shores? Historical research on the order's history in Norway has been scarce. Only a handful of articles and studies exist. Among these the most discussed topic has been the arrival of the order, and the foundation of the house at Varna.

The earliest serious study dates from 1847. Historian Christian Lange wrote a book on the history of monasteries and religious orders in medieval Norway (Lange 1856: 462). Lange referred to Varna's status as a former royal estate. He concluded that a king had to be the founder. This was the usual way a religious institution was founded in medieval Norway. Lange concluded also that the foundation had taken place later than the reign of King Håkon Håkonsson (1217–63), and thought that his son, Magnus Håkonsson (1263–80), was the most likely founder. There were two written sources in particular that Lange relied on for his dating. First, a note in the will of King Magnus dating from 1277. Second, Varna is mentioned in the *Hirdskrå*, a collection of laws regulating aspects of the king's retainers and court, the *hird*. The *Hirdskrå* dates from the 1270s, and it stipulated that the king's men should give one third of their pay to the 'hospital at Varna'.

Lange thought the reason for the foundation of Varna was that it should function as a hospital, or a home for old men in the king's guard. Thus the institution would have a very strong connection to the king. Elsewhere in the *Hirdskrå* it says that old men of the *hird* should be helped *till klaustrs* ('to a monastery'). Lange interpreted this to be a rule that the old and sick royal guardsmen should be sent to Varna in their old age.

The second theory was that another important medieval king, Sverre Sigurdsson (1177–1202), was the royal founder. This theory was originally put forward by Peter Andreas Munch in the 1850s, yet he offered no new arguments for his view (Munch 1858: 609). The theory was picked up by historian Gustav Storm, another leading Norwegian historian of the nineteenth century, a generation later. Storm had access to more sources than Lange in the 1840s, not least a more complete manuscript from a registry of letters from the Hospitallers' medieval archive at Varna (*Akershusregisteret af 1622*). Storm upheld Lange's view that Varna was planned as a place where old retainers (*hirdmenn*) could live in their old age, but pointed to King Sverre as a more likely king to have established this tradition. Two issues that did not interest Storm were the role of the Hospitallers in the crusades and the possible link to Denmark. His interpretation is marked by a strong tendency to write the foundation of Varna into the national historiography of the late nineteenth century.

Storm's argument dominated most discussions of Varna for over a century, until church historian Erik Gunnes revisited the sources and arguments (Gunnes 1997). Rather than linking the arrival of the Hospitallers to King Sverre, who was after all an opponent to the archbishopric and a papal excommunicate, Gunnes pointed to his rivals, Earl Erling Skakke ('Wry-neck') and Archbishop Eystein Erlendsson, as more likely founders of Varna. This suggestion is interesting, especially the fact that Erling Skakke had a strong political influence over south-east Norway. The Norwegian church organization was strong in the late twelfth century, not least following the establishment of a separate Norwegian church province in 1152/53. But there does not seem to be any evidence of a direct link between the archbishop in Trondheim and the Hospitallers, nor is Archbishop Eystein mentioned in any of the sources dealing with political events in the Viken era in the 1160s and 1170s. Erling Skakke, who

had been a crusader in the 1150s and a promoter of his son's claim to the throne, is, on the other hand, mentioned frequently.

A Norwegian commandery

These theories put the foundation of the Norwegian Hospitaller commandery within a hundred-year period. The foundation of Antvorskov in 1170 is the *terminus post quem*, while the royal letter of protection from King Magnus Håkonsson, dated 1270, is the *terminus ante quem*. But is it possible to get any more out of the few written sources available to us, and can more be read out of them than former historians achieved?

Let us begin with the important law book, the *Hirdskrá*. All previous theories have been based heavily on two passages from this text. One is the text concerning the tithes to the hird, supposedly given to Varna. The origin of these *hird tithes* is also important, as it can give a vital clue. The other passage is the supposed the role of Varna as a hospital, or retirement home for old hird men. In ch. 16 of the *Hirdskrá* we read:

It is ancient custom among the Birchlegs (*birkibeinar*) and retainers (*hird-manna*) and guests (*gestir*) to give tithes of their pay, and it shall be divided in three, one evenly divided among the bishops (...), the second is taken by the priests, the third goes to the hospital at Varna.³

This is the only passage in the text where Varna is explicitly mentioned. The members of the hird were to give one third of their pay to the hospital. First of all, this tells us the Hospitallers must have had a particular status among the king's men. But what was the reason for this particular role? Was it, as Gustav Storm thought, because Varna functioned as a retirement home for the old members of the hird? The background for his view is found in ch. 51:

3 *Hirdskráen*, p. 96: *En þat er forn siðr oc hæit birkibæina. at gera skal tivnð af mala sinum. bæðe hirdmanna oc gesta oc skipta .i. þriðunnga aller biskopar aller jamnt. Oc oðlazt. konongs menn þar .i. staðen græpt .i. þeim stoðin sem forn er vane a. Annan taka hirdprestar firir sina sýslu. Þriðia spitalenn .a. Varnu.*

Thus is agreed among us liege men, that if one of us becomes so poor that he cannot help himself in old age, or because of ill health, then shall the king and his lawful friends help him to a monastery (*til klaustrs*), half the provent paid for by the king, the other half by his friends.

...

But another penny (*aure*) is necessary that they pay for the need of their fellow retainers (*hirdmanna*). So that they who earlier have paid when someone had to be helped to a monastery, do not need to add so much.⁴

The question is whether these passages can be linked to the *hird tithes* mentioned in ch. 16. What we clearly see is that Varna is only mentioned in ch. 16. The second text does not say that old *hirdmen* should be brought to Varna, only that they should be helped to a monastery. The use of the term *klaustr* (Old Norse for monastery) is noteworthy. By the late 1200s a Hospitaller house like Varna would not be called a monastery, but rather commandery or *commendata*, or hospital (*spitall* in Old Norse). It is the latter that is used in ch. 16.

The paragraph stating that old retainers should be helped to a monastery should therefore be interpreted in more general terms. It cannot be used as an argument that all retainers should be brought explicitly to Varna. If this is accepted, there is no longer an argument for seeing Varna as being founded by a king as a kind of *hird* hospital.

But could the text in ch. 16 rather be linked to crusading ideology? Could it be that the *hird* men gave one third of their tithes to Varna, and the hospitallers, for their engagement in the crusades? If we look at it this way, the payment may be compared to similar gifts to the order elsewhere in Scandinavia. We have already seen the examples of the *huspenning* in Denmark and the so called *peterspenning* from the diocese of Strängnes in Sweden. The tithe of the Norwegian *hird* should, in my view,

4 *Hirdskráen*, pp. 176 and 178: *Sua er oc mælt með os handgengnom monnum at ef ein huer værdar firi sua mikilli fatøkt at han gerez hilplaus firi ælli saker eða vanheilssu. Þa skal konongr oc hans logunautar hialpa þeim manne til klaustrs. Geve halva prouenðo. Konongr. en halva loghunautar [...] En annann øyri þurfandinn logunautum sinum. At þui minna þurfui þæir til at leggja sem aðr hava greitt. þan tima sem þufandom skal til klaustars hialpa.*

be interpreted in this way, and be seen in a broader tradition, rather than as a peculiarly Norwegian institution linked to the king's hird.

Can we also date these passages in the *Hirdskrå*? The use of the term *birkibeinar* as a reference to the king's men could give us a clue. This term is usually linked to King Sverre Sigurdsson (1177–1202) and was used as an important argument by Gustav Storm. However, this term was still in use decades after Sverre's death in 1202. By itself it cannot be used as an argument for the dating of Varna.

However, the custom of giving a third of the tithes to Varna could lead us one step further. This arrangement may be dated to the reign of Magnus Håkonsson (1263–80), but it could have been introduced much earlier, perhaps as early as Magnus Erlingsson (1163–77) and his father Erling Skakke. The kings' sagas say that Magnus Erlingsson ordered his retainers to give tithes. Could it be king Magnus, and his father Erling, who initiated the regulation that a part of the hird's tithes should be granted to the Hospitallers?

The registry of letters from the archive at Varna, the so-called *Akershusregisteret*, contains short notes of documents from the hospitallers' archive at Varna, still in existence in 1622. The letters and documents were later destroyed in a fire, yet the registry does give us some vital information. As mentioned earlier, this registry was available to historian Gustav Storm when he published his study in 1892. Some papal letters from the twelfth century are mentioned in the registry made in 1622, but, unfortunately, it is not made clear if these were sent to Varna.

The Danish influence

The cultural and political connection between Denmark and south-eastern Norway (Viken) had been strong for centuries, and this continued until the early thirteenth century. Could the introduction of the Hospitallers to Norway have something to do with this long-standing Danish influence on Viken? Were the first Hospitallers even sent to Norway as a result of Danish aspirations to control this part of Norway?

An important written source from the late twelfth century is the *Gesta Danorum* by a Danish chronicler, Saxo Grammaticus. Saxo does not

write explicitly of Varna, or the Hospitallers in Norway, but we can read of important political events in the 1160s that may have been relevant. In particular, there were two Danish military expeditions to the Oslo Fjord region in the 1160s, and both expeditions were led by King Valdemar himself.

Saxo's descriptions of the military expeditions in the 1160s are of great interest. The same events are also mentioned in two sagas, *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*. The events are described somewhat differently here than in Saxo's version, but there is every reason to believe in the importance of the expeditions. A problem is the 'national' tendency in the various texts. Saxo is inclined to side with the Danish king, while the Norwegian sagas are more positive to the Norwegian side.

Saxo's chronicle is considered a relatively trustworthy source (Gathorne-Hardy 1946–53: 328). Saxo knew Bishop Absalon, Valdemar's close friend and ally, well, and the text was written shortly after the events he describes. The Norwegian sagas, on the other hand, may contain local traditions that the Danish chronicler did not have any knowledge of.

The main character in the Norwegian accounts of the events was Erling Skakke, earl and father of the king, Magnus Erlingsson, who was still a young boy at this time. Erling was thus *de facto* ruler of Norway during most of the 1160s. The first contact between him and Valdemar was in 1161. As a result of events during a period of civil war in Norway, Erling was forced to flee the country with his young son for a short period. He sought refuge with Valdemar in Denmark. According to *Heimskringla*, Erling promised king Valdemar the control of the region called Viken, if Valdemar would support Erling and Magnus in the attempt to regain control of Norway. Erling's plan was to make young Magnus the sole ruler of Norway.

Their next contact was in 1164. This year King Valdemar led his first military campaign to Norway. This is mentioned in both the sagas and in Saxo's text, but the reason for the expedition is unclear. The sagas tell us it took place because Erling had not fulfilled his promise to Valdemar from 1161. Saxo on the other hand has another explanation. He writes that Valdemar was hailed as a king on his arrival in Østfold, east of the Oslo Fjord, and was even proclaimed king at the regional assembly

Borgarthing. He also went west across the fjord to Tønsberg. Here he was met by Erling's men, ready for battle against the Danes. Valdemar did not engage the Norwegians and left for Denmark shortly after.

The Danish king may also have led an expedition to Norway in 1168, but it is solely Saxo who mentions this, not the sagas (Saxo, 14.38.1–9). Saxo writes that Bishop Absalon accompanied him on this expedition. Again, the reception from the local population is supposed to have been good.

For us the most interesting aspect of these events is their result: a truce, or even peace, between the Danes and Norwegians in 1170. According to Saxo, the bishops of both Oslo and Uppsala were present at an important meeting (*riksmøte*) between the king and the most prominent men of his realm. This took place in Ringsted on the island of Zealand that year. The two bishops' main mission here is said to have been to make peace between Valdemar and Erling.

The *riksmøte* in Ringsted in 1170 was an important event in Valdemar's reign. At this meeting his son Knud was crowned co-king, and his father, Knud Lavard, was sanctified. Valdemar made it clear to the world, and all his potential adversaries, that he was the most powerful man in Denmark. At the same meeting a conflict with the church was also laid to rest, as he acknowledged Pope Alexander III. Taking this stance, Valdemar showed his opposition to the German emperor, who supported the rival pope. Valdemar must at this time have felt strong enough to show his resistance to his powerful German neighbour.

The sagas tell us that Erling went to Denmark and Ringsted, and here he was met by Bishop Absalon. Acting as a mediator, the bishop supported a peace treaty between the Norwegian earl and *de facto* ruler Erling Skakke and Valdemar. The fact that Erling went at all to Ringsted in 1170 must have been carefully planned in advance.

One last detail can be read in another saga text, the *Orkneyinga saga*. According to the saga, Erling received his title of earl from Valdemar himself, and it thus seems that a crucial condition of the peace treaty was that Erling became vassal of the Danish king (ch. 89). Valdemar showed that he refused to give up his claims to Viken, the region promised to him by Erling in 1161. Erling gave this to Valdemar, yet in return was made a vassal, and given the title of earl, with a degree of control over these lands.

He also promised to give military support to Valdemar. A rather peculiar political situation arose, with the *de facto* ruler of Norway being made the Danish king's vassal in a part of what had previously been his realm.

What does all of this have to do with the Hospitallers? Could these important political events in Scandinavia have played a role in the arrival of the first brethren to Norway in the 1170s? The fact that the two main benefactors of the order in Denmark, King Valdemar himself and Bishop Absalon, were present in Viken in the 1160s, is interesting. The same area became part of Erling's 'earldom', under *de jure* Danish control, in 1170. Even though we have no written sources telling us explicitly of a direct connection between the events of the 1160s and 1170 and the arrival of the Hospitallers in Norway, these events may have provided the background situation that made Norway attractive to the Hospitallers, or that encouraged benefactors to sponsor their arrival.

If we follow a possible Danish connection, two possible benefactors, or even founders, of a Norwegian Hospitaller's house may be put forward. The first 'candidate' is Valdemar, possibly under influence of the powerful Bishop Absalon, and the second is Erling Skakke. Let us look at each candidate in turn.

First, Valdemar. The Order of St John had enjoyed royal support in Denmark, and their new commandery at Antvorskov was donated by Valdemar. There could have been both a political and an ideological reason for Valdemar to support the Hospitallers in Norway. Valdemar was himself strongly engaged in the crusading movement, in particular against the Wends, a Slavic people living in the border areas between Denmark and Germany.

Second, Erling Skakke. We know from other sources that he founded other monasteries and religious institutions in Norway. One of these was the Augustinian abbey of Halsnøy in south-western Norway, in connection with the coronation of his son Magnus in 1163. Another institution possibly founded by Erling was the Premonstratensian St Olav's Abbey in Tønsberg. This was also an order which had strong connections to Denmark during the medieval period. This institution was most likely founded in the 1160s or 1170s (see Bandlien, this volume). With its round church the connotations to the crusading movement are made visible.

The other main character was Erling Skakke. We know from other sources that he founded other monasteries and religious institutions in Norway. One of these was the Augustinian abbey of Halsnøy in south-western Norway, in connection with the coronation of his son Magnus in 1163. Another institution possibly founded by Erling Skakke was the Premonstratensian St Olav's Abbey in Tønsberg. This was also an order which had strong connections to Denmark during the medieval period. This institution was most likely founded in the 1160s or 1170s (see Bandlien, this volume). With its round church the connotations to the crusading movement are made visible.

Erling was himself strongly associated with the crusading movement and familiar with crusading ideology. According to both the *Heimskringla* and the *Orkneyinga saga* he participated in an expedition to the Holy Land in the 1150s. He in fact shared this connection to the crusading movement with the Danish king, even though Valdemar's main focus was the Baltics while Erling's was the Mediterranean and Palestine.

There could have been several reasons for Erling to introduce the Hospitallers to Norway. First, it could have been a tactical political measure. By granting a royal estate to the order, which enjoyed the support of Valdemar, Erling may have hoped to please the powerful Danish king. Second, there may have been a religious and ideological aspect to the foundation. Erling must have been familiar with the order, both from his stay in the Holy Land, and through the general political culture of Northern Europe in the 1160s. He must also have known the role the Knights of St John, as well as the other religious military orders, played in the crusades. Even though we have no sources explicitly stating this, his enthusiasm for the order may have been a strong factor in encouraging him to grant support to them by giving them lands and privileges in Norway.

So both Valdemar and Erling may have had their own personal, political and ideological reasons to support the Hospitallers in Denmark and Norway. Valdemar may have wanted to bring a friendly order to his 'new' lands in Norway, and thereby strengthen his political position. Erling, on the other hand, may have introduced the hospitallers to Varna as a friendly act as the vassal of the Danish king in Viken. At the same time,

they both supported an important international order fighting for the faith in the crusades, which itself would have been a reason for them to give support to the Hospitallers. It is, of course, possible that these two strong personalities cooperated on this project.

Conclusion

The main interest in the somewhat meagre historiography of the Norwegian hospitallers has centred around the question of the foundation of the house at Varna. Earlier historians have launched various main theories of when and who introduced the order to Norway, based on a few written sources available at the time of their research, or more or less nationalistic historiography. The most influential theory was launched by Gustav Storm in 1892, putting forward King Sverre Sigurdsson as the most likely founder. His lack of political control of the areas east of the Oslo Fjord and difficult interpretation of the passages in the *Hirdskrå* cast doubt on this theory. In the 1990s Erik Gunnes put forward Erling Skakke and Archbishop Eysteinn as the two likely founders of Varna.

No written sources can tell us exactly when Varna was founded, nor who the royal donator was, but as argued in this article there are reasons to believe that the conflicts and negotiations between Erling Skakke and Valdemar concerning the control of Viken played a more important role in the introduction of the Hospitallers to Norway than traditionally believed. While Gunnes' dating is supported by the present study, the foundation of Varna should also be considered as part of a broader Scandinavian context. The peace treaty of Ringsted in 1170 between Erling Skakke and Valdemar seems to be the likely backdrop of the introduction of the Hospitallers to Norway. This means that the establishment of the Hospitallers in Norway should be seen in relation to the establishment of the order in the rest of Scandinavia.

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