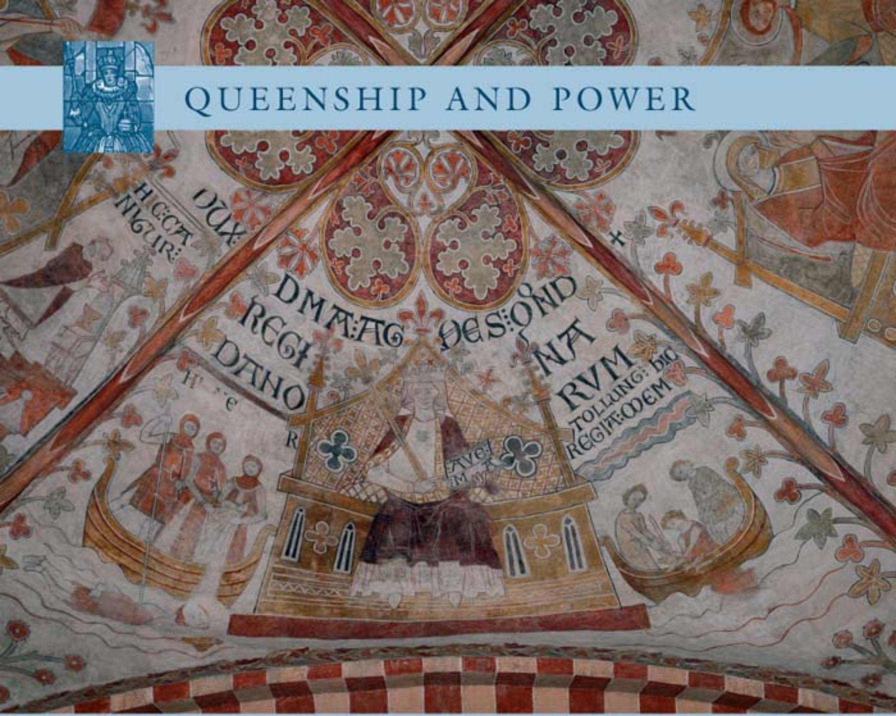
QUEENSHIP AND POWER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QUEENSHIP AND VOICE IN MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPE

WILLIAM LAYHER

Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe

QUEENSHIP AND POWER

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A voice is a sound with significance.

Aristotle, *De anima* II.8.420b5

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Above all else, my heartfelt affection goes out to my wife, Karin, whose support was unflagging even though she had to wait far too long for this to be finished. This book is dedicated to her.

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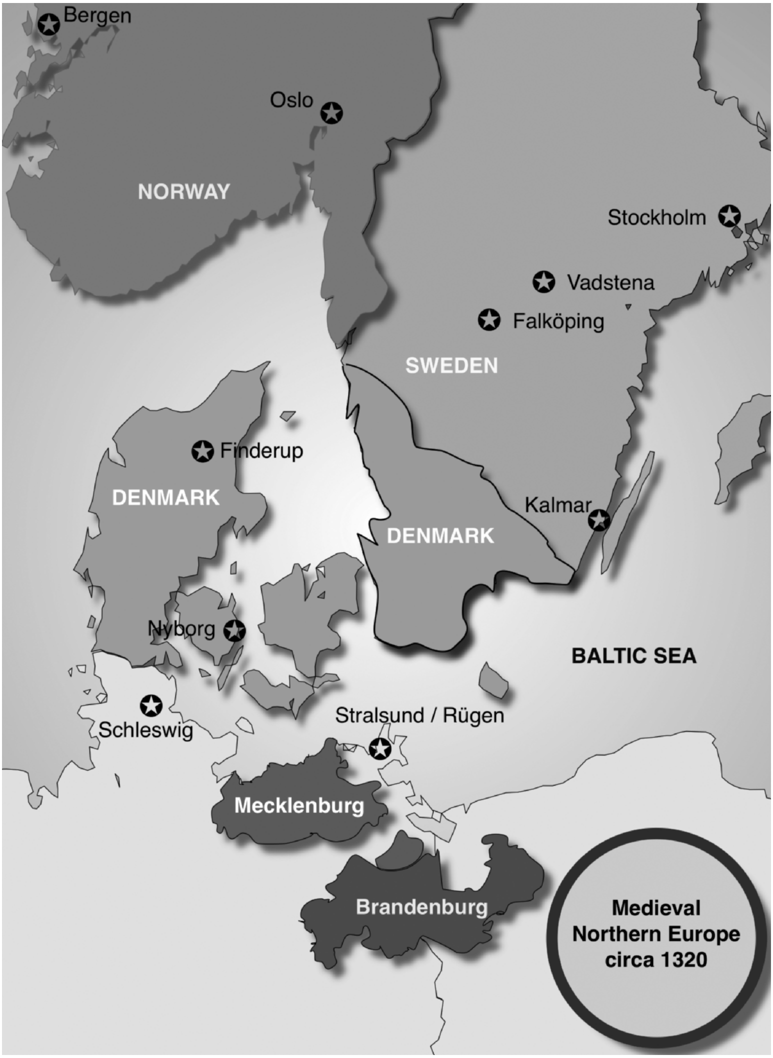
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Schleswig
Stralsund / Rügen
Mecklenburg
Brandenburg
Medieval
Northern Europe
circa 1320

INTRODUCTION

Instead of a formal introduction: a retrospective. The impetus for this book was born out of the fruitful collision of several different realizations.

We Need to Think More about the Variability of Medieval Queenship

Thanks to decades of scholarship by insightful and dedicated scholars, we now know a great deal about medieval queenship in prominent kingdoms such as France and Aragon, we have become familiar with the lives of noblewomen that lived in Thüringen and England and the Netherlands, and the politics of female rulership in Burgundy and Portugal have been made known to us as well. Yet in spite of the considerable distances separating these courts, all of them lay well within the medieval European cultural mainstream. The lives of these queens and the rulership they exercised were far from identical to one another, but taken in the aggregate they give a false impression of queenship's sameness. By comparison, we know very little about queenship as a political institution on the periphery of medieval Europe, such as in Scandinavia. Because courtliness came relatively late to Scandinavia—the first documented use of the Swedish term *riddara* [knights] dates from the late thirteenth century, for example—the cultural prominence of noblewomen at court was likewise slow to develop. This lateness makes the Scandinavian evidence distinctive inasmuch as the queens (together with their courts) had to grapple with the new chivalric ideology that complemented earlier models of female rulership.

While outlines of a history of medieval Scandinavian queenship have already been traced, no detailed synthesis of the evidence has yet appeared.[1] This book does not propose to fill that gap, but instead speaks from the edge toward the middle. It offers lessons about modalities of self-representation in medieval queenship, drawing them in large part from the process of cultural transfer in which the three queens of this study—Agnes of Denmark (d. 1304), Eufemia of Norway (d. 1312), and Margareta of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (d. 1412)—were deeply engaged.

Power and Authority Are Contested Attributes for Medieval Queens—Even More So When Male Lordship Is Compromised

For many historians, social historians, and humanists, the study of medieval queenship is intrinsically also a study of power: how it was used, channeled, amassed, or suppressed. The exercise of power by medieval queens is typically measured according to the yardstick of *potestas*—reconstructing what the queen *did*, determining what changes she was able to enact, and evaluating where she was successful or in which circumstances she was unable to prevail. This book, too, is concerned with queenship and the exercise of power, but what interests me most is the connection between power and authority in the construction and exercise of female lordship. This is a topic that Earenfight has considered at length in publications about medieval queens in Spain and Aragon,[2] and Kimberly LoPrete has likewise called attention to the "peculiarly feminine forms of influence" that queens could bring to bear in crisis situations.[3] Influence is not the same thing as power, of course, yet influence seems to be what medieval queens had in abundance—provided, of course, that it was predicated upon an authority that was imbued in them through their status as a *consors regni* [queen regent] or in some other manifestation of divided lordship. In the vast majority of historical examples, the authority of a medieval queen is predicated upon the tacit acknowledgment of the king's power.

But what happens when that model breaks down? This book examines a small corpus of cases from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scandinavia, in which the ruling power of the king was impeded or ineffective—a lapse of male lordship that, in turn, exposed the fragile underpinnings of queenship as a political institution. These interruptions took different forms. For Agnes it began with the assassination of the Danish king, her husband, in 1286. For the Norwegian queen Eufemia it was a crisis of succession in Norway due to the fact that she and King Hákon had only one child—a daughter. For Margareta it was the fact that for twenty years the foreign-born king of Sweden, Albrecht III of

Mecklenburg, had ruled as an oppressive overlord that was desperately out of touch with his Swedish subjects and did not even speak Swedish. In the absence of effective male leadership, the "soft power" that is intrinsic to queenship was difficult to implement; the playing field had changed. Thus the leading interest of this book concerns the ways in which Agnes, Eufemia, and Margareta sought to assert their own power through the effective augmentation of their own *authority.* This authority was conveyed by the effective use of the voice as a tool for royal representation—more on this in a moment.

In the Study of the Poetics of Royal Representation, the Eye Is Not Everything. What About the Ear?

A great deal of recent work in medieval studies has been devoted to the pictorial turn or the iconic turn, establishing visuality and the gaze as leading paradigms for cultural and historical analysis. As discussed in chapter two, constructing hierarchies of power and courtly authority in the Middle Ages was often accomplished through disciplining the gaze and marshaling the visual appeal of courtly ostentation. Popular didactic treatises such as *der Welsche Gast* (early fourteenth century) warned German courtiers about the dangers of undisciplined vision or gawking, while rulers—both male and female—were urged to modulate the movements of the body so as to present spectators at court with a harmonious and well-crafted public spectacle. According to the poet of the *Welsche Gast*, lords are expected to act in an exemplary fashion, so as to set the correct tone at court. If the courtiers cannot see their masters, the political and moral *ordo* at court is undermined.

> *Wir muezzin sehen durch den tac*
> *an ir herren waz man sol*
> *tuon. ist daz ir tuot wol,*
> *wir volgen harte gern daz guot*
>
> [We must be able to see by light of day, in the example you lords set, what things a man ought to do. If you do that which is proper, we will gladly follow it][4]

Since power and lordship are for naught if they cannot be demonstrated, cannot be made visible, the act of *Inszenierung* [choreography] in the pomp and circumstance of the affairs of state became a political necessity in the Middle Ages. The public staging of processions, tournaments, feasts, and spectacles at court, the elaborate rituals of welcoming and departure, and the performative use of ceremonial clothing, royal gesture, and expression all exploited existing economies of vision and spectatorship and reinforced the status quo of the lord–vassal relationship. When Gerd Althoff points out that visual representation was not only ubiquitous but absolute and inescapable in the medieval court, we realize the extent to which public demonstrations of power began to supplant other modes of lordship and authority. As the court increasingly becomes reified as a *Schauplatz* of power, vision, in turn, is valorized as the primary conduit by which these hierarchies of power are communicated and reinforced.[5]

But what does this paradigm overlook? What happens to political authority when the traditional modes of visibility at court are disturbed, or dysfunctional? How is lordship affected if the standard mechanism of its display—courtly representation—cannot be brought to bear? What are the implications for female rulership when hierarchies of vision break down and the court literally does not know where to look? This book attempts to provide some answers for these questions, as it calls attention to new and unprecedented modalities of courtly representation that were predicated not upon the eye but upon the ear. If the act of looking was a "cultural practice as well as a physiological process" in the Middle Ages[6] I submit that listening was as well. Further, we will see that by harnessing the acoustic reach of sound and the embodied representation of the voice, queens were able to exert political influence effectively at court despite the lack or breakdown of male authority.

This book presents evidence confirming the importance of *auditivity* as a mode of cultural and historical analysis. This approach, it is granted, must grapple with a number of serious methodological challenges that visuality does not face, foremost among which is the impermanence of sound. Although vision, too, is a physiological process that is culturally constructed and not fully recoverable, there is a wealth of material culture surviving from the Middle Ages that is still before our eyes. We can look at these items and reconstruct their value in medieval economies of visuality and vision, pondering the degree of overlap between the medieval gaze and the modern. For sound, such direct mediation is impossible. And yet, through a careful interrogation of literary texts produced for courtly audiences in medieval Scandinavia, we can evaluate how hearing—or more directly, how the process of listening (as a kind of attuned hearing)—functioned as an acoustic equivalent to "the gaze" in medieval Europe.

The dynamics of power that are mediated by hearing differ from those that are commonly ascribed to the gaze. One such difference concerns gender. For much of courtly society in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the gaze is characterized as masculine. It looks at what it wants to; the gaze has agency. Not so with hearing. The ear has no such capability, no means of acting transgressively, no process by which it can listen in one direction. It cannot close itself off as the eyelid shuts the eye. If, for the courts of medieval Europe, the power of hearing were to be evaluated on the same crude scales of masculine vs. feminine that determine the gender of the gaze, then it seems logical to conclude that hearing skews toward the feminine. By the same measurement, the voice, in contrast, falls to the masculine end of the spectrum. This evaluation is not valid in the physiological sense, in reference to the voice's timbre or inflection, but simply by reason of its acoustic range. Sound is the most obstinate of the five senses. It penetrates the ear and even the body of the auditor. Sound has a relentlessness that denies agency to those caught in its acoustic field; they cannot regulate their exposure to it except by removing themselves utterly from its reach. In a real sense, because sound dominates its auditors it denies them the choice to subjugate themselves. This marks a crucial distinction between the ear and the eye, between hearing and the gaze—the former is involuntary while the latter is voluntary, and therefore easily exploited in the political economies of medieval Europe.

And yet, sound is much more than a blunt instrument. This book makes the argument that sound can likewise function as a vehicle for royal power. Sound accomplishes this not by bludgeoning the auditor into submission, but by appealing to the ear to grant an audience; to encourage the act of *listening* instead of *hearing*. Through the skillful instrumentalization of sound and voice, the queens of this study were able to create and exploit distinct listening communities in medieval Scandinavia that were receptive to the queens' political goals. By drawing in (as well as pushing back) the courtly ear, queenship articulated itself in new ways in the Nordic Middle Ages.

Instead of Queenship in Literature, Queenship through Literature

Although this book is deeply engaged with the historical record surrounding three Nordic queens, it does not view the evidence with a historian's eye. By the same token, even though the inquiry focuses on literary texts that were circulating in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scandinavia, it is not a study of representations of queenship in the sagas, in chronicles, or other medieval genres.[7] Instead, I draw our attention to the queens themselves as literary patrons. I make the case that Agnes, Eufemia, and Margareta sponsored the composition and public performance of literary works that articulated the queen's objectives during moments of acute political crisis at their courts. Through a detailed investigation of these literary texts—didactic poems, courtly romances, and an extravagant political allegory featuring lions and foxes and hapless geese—the complexities faced by female rulership come into sharper focus. The inquiry is guided by these monuments, but its goal is to consider more than what the works say about the political realities that Queen Agnes faced after the assassination of the Danish king, for example, or about the accusations of misrule that the Old Swedish allegory *King Albrecht* levels at the king. I mean to consider what audiences *heard* in these works in their thirteenth- to fifteenth-century context, and to evaluate, further, the ways in which the queens' literary patronage marshaled not the power of the gaze but the grasp of the ear. While the goal of any scholarly inquiry is to read between the lines, as it were, I am proposing that it is possible to do far more in these specific cases; namely, to attempt to listen between the lines as well.

How Should We Understand the Voice?

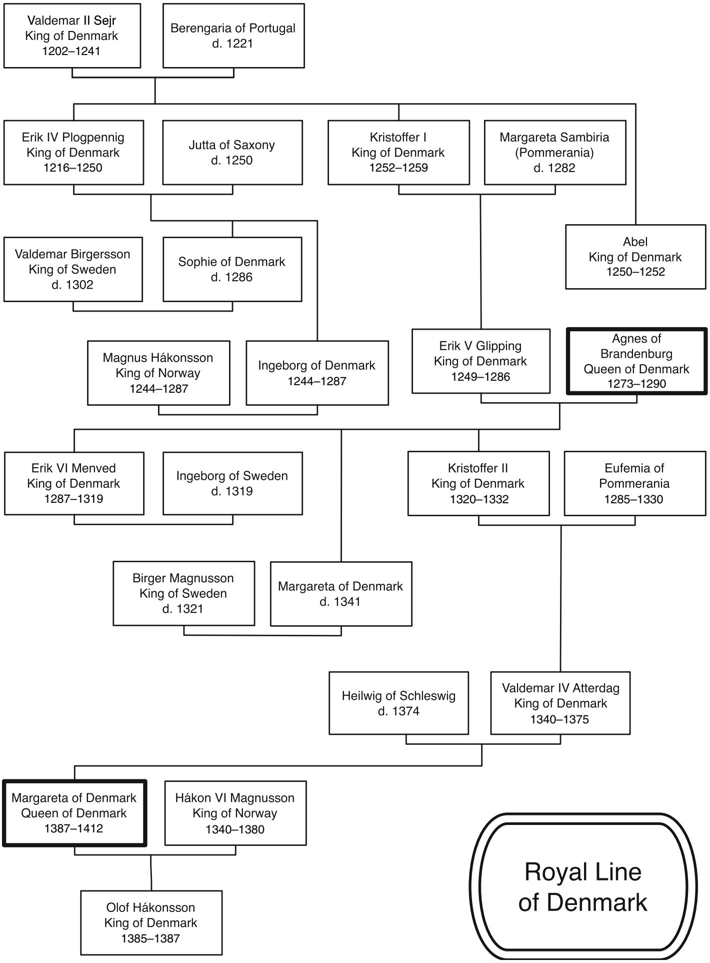
In many discussions of literary works and their historical production the term "voice" is typically used as a metaphor. It appears as a synonym for authorial style or narrative approach (e.g., Hemingway's voice), as a verb denoting the act of revealing ("to voice concern"), or as a paraphrase for the status of agency ("to give voice to"). There is a broad body of research into the voice as a philosophical or phenomenological construct and an agent of the Self as well, as discussed next. These metaphors appear in this book as well, and yet the focus strives at all times to remain with the medieval voice as an acoustic phenomenon; that is, as something that is linked with processes of audition, cognition, and social inclusion.

The challenges to this approach are evident. To begin with, the book is structured around a series of written texts and literary works that appear to slumber on the manuscript page, inert and still. Whatever voices might have flowed into the text and been captured in written form have long fallen silent. Reanimating the voice from such dry material is therefore a matter of interpretation—analysis, that is, that rests in the eye (or the ear?) of the beholder. In this attempt we run a similar risk to that which Dr. Frankenstein faced when he zapped his creature on the slab and jolted it to life again. Can the end result—a text that speaks again!—really embody the grace and nuance that dwelt naturally in the material, in its own time?

In proceeding further, there are several paths to follow that will lead us out of these methodological tangles. Our understanding of the acoustical dimensions implicit in the act of reading in the Middle Ages offers one such pathway. To read in medieval Europe meant to read aloud. Because we know that texts were read as much with the ear as with the eye, reading took place in a three-dimensional common space; the text was voiced, and therefore public. Through the voice of the reader, the author spoke again—and for this reason, all medieval texts are suffused with a latent vocality that, at times, was transformed into a real and audible vocality through the act of reading. A similar act of vocal proxying can be assumed with regard to the medieval poets who performed at court. As we shall see with Queen Agnes of Denmark, the performances she commissioned in the aftermath of her husband's assassination broadcast the queen's message to elite Danish audiences. A close look at these poems confirms that there are acoustical realities in these medieval stanzas that are invaluable for the reconstruction of female lordship in medieval Denmark. It is only through the public act of performance during the winter of 1286–1287 that these poems were able to carry out the political work they were meant to do in Denmark. The fact that these poems were composed and performed by a foreign poet from Germany who sang in Middle Low German instead of Old Danish adds an additional dimension to the complexities of voice in this contested cultural space.

For Queen Eufemia of Norway and the courtly romances attributed to her patronage, the translation of the texts into a different vernacular represented a “voicing” that was forward-looking in its political appeal. I argue here that Eufemia had the romances translated into Old Swedish rather than the Old Norse-Icelandic idiom of her court in order to appeal to a particular listening community that had not yet come into existence, namely the Swedish courtiers that would serve her young daughter, Ingeborg, as soon as she was wed to a prominent Swedish nobleman. The romances, then, serve as a repository for the royal voice—a distinctly Swedish voice—that Ingeborg will assume as a noblewoman in medieval Sweden. The texts ring out “in our tongue,” as the prologues assert; and with that pronoun, thanks to her possession of the romances, Ingeborg would likewise be able to claim membership in that community.

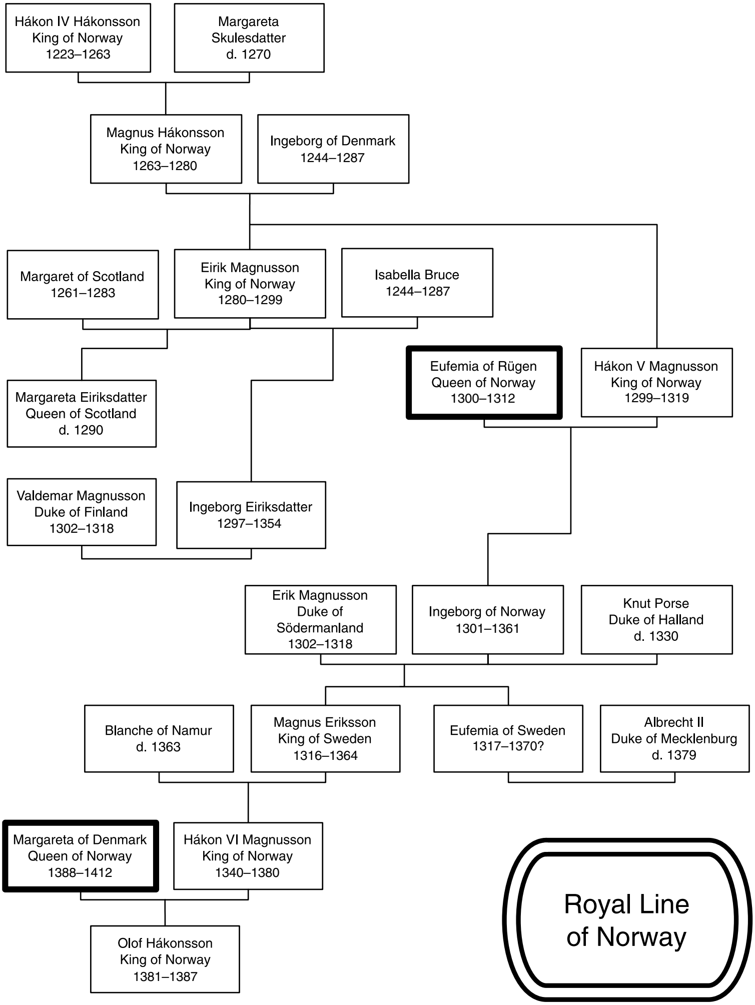
Our third queen, Margareta of Denmark, encourages us to move beyond the concept of the solitary voice and consider, instead, that every voice is implicitly a polyvocal phenomenon. The discussion here focuses on the ways in which different voices of authority—royal, clerical, and prophetic—commingle in the contested political atmosphere of late-fourteenth-century Sweden. The poem I associate with Margareta, *King Albrecht*, is an Old Swedish poem of less than 200 lines that contains a stinging political allegory that criticizes the king of Sweden, the foreign-born Albrecht III of Mecklenburg, who took the throne in 1364. While the poem does not mention Margareta by name, it is nevertheless highly congruent with the diplomatic and political overtures that she made to a number of Swedish barons in 1388, roughly a year before Danish troops marched into Sweden and defeated Albrecht's forces—overtures, namely, that recast Margareta's Danish voice as a Swedish one and reassured the barons that her cause was theirs. We shall see that allegiances and vernaculars run in parallel in this set of written charters. A further congruence between voice and political allegiance rests in the peculiar “echo effect” that we observe in years after 1375, when the Latin revelations of the Swedish mystic St. Birgitta were translated into Old Swedish and put into circulation at Vadstena and other ecclesiastical centers. As Birgitta's visions were brought back into the idiom in which they were originally composed, her series of political revelations that excoriated the previous king of Sweden, Magnus Eriksson, took on a new relevance under King Albrecht; the same critiques of royal misrule could still apply, decades later. There are thematic parallels between these revelations and the poem *King Albrecht* that encourage us to question whether Birgitta's prophetic voice was being drawn upon as an alternate voice of authority during the last years of Albrecht's reign. Two additional dimensions of voice keep us within the text of *King Albrecht*. The first concerns the valence of the royal voice. In the allegorical text the king is shown during a highly dramatic scene to be unable to speak Swedish. This marks a fatal undercutting of his royal persona, for the text makes it clear that the authority to govern rests in the proper sounding of voice. And lastly, at the end of the poem, the text speaks directly to the "noble lady queen"—that is, to Margareta—and asks her to come into Sweden and deliver the kingdom from misrule. Here we are confronted with a text that voices an appeal on the literary level that echoes the political invitations Margareta had secured from the Swedish barons during the final year of Albrecht's reign. In this historical context we see that text, voice, and political realities are intertwined.

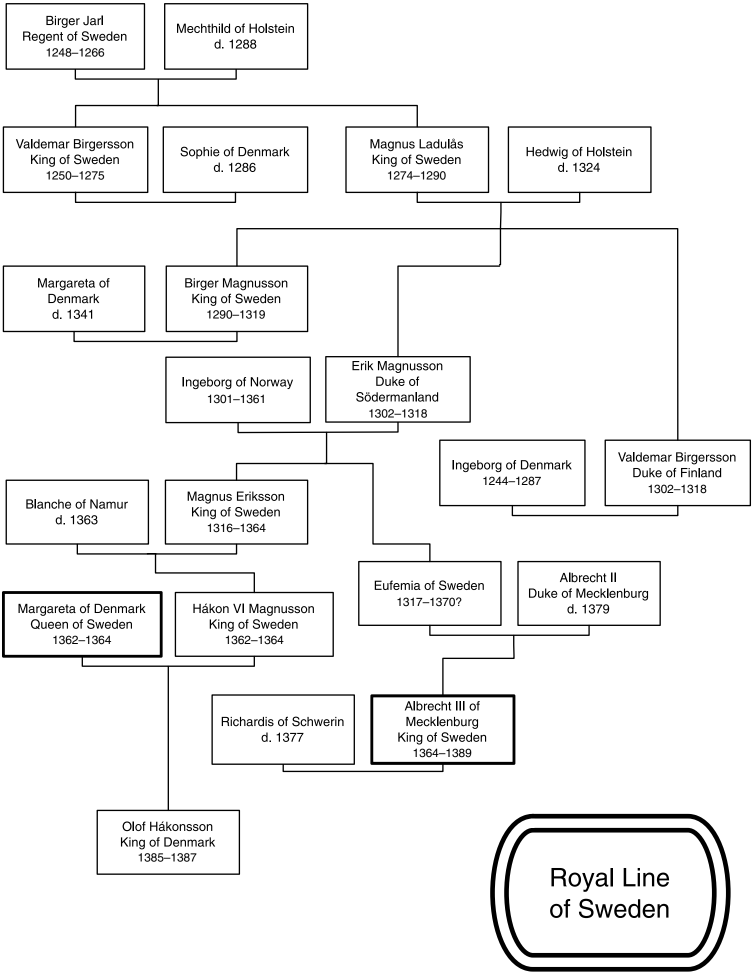


Royal Line of Denmark

Valdemar II Sejr
King of Denmark
1202–1241
Berengaria of Portugal
d. 1221
Erik IV Plogpennig
King of Denmark
1216–1250
Jutta of Saxony
d. 1250
Kristoffer I
King of Denmark
1252–1259
Margareta Sambiria
(Pommerania)
d. 1282
Abel
King of Denmark
1250–1252
Valdemar Birgersson
King of Sweden
d. 1302
Sophie of Denmark
d. 1286
Magnus Hákonsson
King of Norway
1244–1287
Ingeborg of Denmark
1244–1287
Erik V Glipping
King of Denmark
1249–1286
Agnes of
Brandenburg
Queen of Denmark
1273–1290
Erik VI Menved
King of Denmark
1287–1319
Ingeborg of Sweden
d. 1319
Kristoffer II
King of Denmark
1320–1332
Eufemia of
Pommerania
1285–1330
Birger Magnusson
King of Sweden
d. 1321
Margareta of Denmark
d. 1341
Heilwig of Schleswig
d. 1374
Valdemar IV Atterdag
King of Denmark
1340–1375
Margareta of Denmark
Queen of Denmark
1387–1412
Hákon VI Magnusson
King of Norway
1340–1380
Olof Hákonsson
King of Denmark
1385–1387

Royal Line of Norway


Hákon IV Hákonsson
King of Norway
1223–1263
Margareta
Skulesdatter
d. 1270
Magnus Hákonsson
King of Norway
1263–1280
Ingeborg of Denmark
1244–1287
Margaret of Scotland
1261–1283
Eirik Magnusson
King of Norway
1280–1299
Isabella Bruce
1244–1287
Eufemia of Rügen
Queen of Norway
1300–1312
Hákon V Magnusson
King of Norway
1299–1319
Margareta Eiriksdatter
Queen of Scotland
d. 1290
Valdemar Magnusson
Duke of Finland
1302–1318
Ingeborg Eiriksdatter
1297–1354
Erik Magnusson
Duke of
Södermanland
1302–1318
Ingeborg of Norway
1301–1361
Knut Porse
Duke of Halland
d. 1330
Blanche of Namur
d. 1363
Magnus Eriksson
King of Sweden
1316–1364
Eufemia of Sweden
1317–1370?
Albrecht II
Duke of Mecklenburg
d. 1379
Margareta of Denmark
Queen of Norway
1388–1412
Hákon VI Magnusson
King of Norway
1340–1380
Olof Hákonsson
King of Norway
1381–1387


Birger Jarl
Regent of Sweden
1248–1266
Mechthild of Holstein
d. 1288
Valdemar Birgersson
King of Sweden
1250–1275
Sophie of Denmark
d. 1286
Magnus Ladulås
King of Sweden
1274–1290
Hedwig of Holstein
d. 1324
Margareta of
Denmark
d. 1341
Birger Magnusson
King of Sweden
1290–1319
Ingeborg of Norway
1301–1361
Erik Magnusson
Duke of
Södermanland
1302–1318
Ingeborg of Denmark
1244–1287
Valdemar Birgersson
Duke of Finland
1302–1318
Blanche of Namur
d. 1363
Magnus Eriksson
King of Sweden
1316–1364
Eufemia of Sweden
1317–1370?
Albrecht II
Duke of Mecklenburg
d. 1379
Margareta of Denmark
Queen of Sweden
1362–1364
Hákon VI Magnusson
King of Sweden
1362–1364
Richardis of Schwerin
d. 1377
Albrecht III of
Mecklenburg
King of Sweden
1364–1389
Olof Hákonsson
King of Denmark
1385–1387
Royal Line
of Sweden

CHAPTER ONE

THREE NORDIC QUEENS

This chapter introduces the three queens of this study. They are Queen Agnes of Denmark (1256?–1304), Queen Eufemia of Norway (1285?–1312), and Queen Margareta of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (1353–1412). While Margareta is well known as one of the most formidable queens of late-medieval Europe, the other two, Agnes and Eufemia, are surely unfamiliar to most scholars working in the field of medieval queenship. Some research has been done on Queen Eufemia due to her significant engagement as a literary patron in early-fourteenth-century Norway—she sponsored the translation of a series of French and German courtly romances—but the scholarship has focused exclusively on Eufemia's cultural interests, leaving questions about her political impact and her rulership as queen unasked and unanswered. Queen Agnes of Denmark is perhaps even more obscure than her contemporary, Eufemia.

Despite its focus on three prominent queens in medieval Scandinavia, this book does not aspire to present a history of Nordic queenship in the Middle Ages. Nor is its goal to provide an exhaustive treatment of these three queens. Instead, the inquiry presents a series of case studies, focusing on specific moments of political crisis that each of the queens had to confront. In their responses to these challenges, I argue, we begin to see a number of commonalities between Agnes, Eufemia, and Margareta, in that each of them sought to gain political advantage from the targeted "broadcast" of an authoritative ruling voice in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. It is in the connections between voice, text, and authority—or, more appropriately, in the harmonics that ring out from this productive tension—that new aspects of female lordship in the Middle Ages manifest themselves.

Before we can proceed, however, we must first understand how the lordship exercised by Agnes, Eufemia, and Margareta was set and defined by the dynasties in which they lived and reigned, and consider how the crises each of them faced were ones that could not be solved through diplomacy or the exercise of power alone.

Queen Agnes of Denmark

Agnes was born shortly after 1250—the exact year is unknown—in the northern German duchy of Brandenburg. By the year of her death in 1304, she had become one of Denmark's most powerful noblewomen. In that year, the scribe of the medieval Danish chronicle *Annales Lundenses* recorded the passing of Agnes, the widowed queen and queen mother of Denmark. The necrologue takes note of the three different modes of female lordship that Agnes held during her lifetime: *Obiit domina mater regis, quondam Dacie regina*.[1] Agnes was a *domina* by right of her birth as a noblewoman in Brandenburg; she bore the title of *mater regis* as the mother of Denmark's sovereign Erik VI; and in the eyes of posterity she was *quondam Dacie regina* because she had been the consort of her husband, Erik V, from 1273 until November 22, 1286, when Erik V was brutally assassinated in Denmark—an event that plunged the kingdom into crisis.

The murder of Erik V led to a perilous destabilization of the Danish monarchy. It threatened to pass the crown to another branch of the royal family, bypassing her young son Erik VI as the successor to his father. In the months that followed, Agnes, thrust into the political spotlight, faced a daunting challenge. In Denmark, kingship was restricted to members of the royal family, but succession was not guaranteed solely by bloodline; the Danish ruling council of *stormænd* [literally "big men"] had to approve the succession by vote or acclimation. In November 1286, it was doubtful that Agnes' eldest son, Erik VI, would have received the support of the *stormænd*, as he was only twelve years of age and therefore too young to assume the throne. In addition, the electors of the realm that determine the succession were divided in their loyalties. Some supported the royal family, while others preferred a rival, Valdemar IV, from a different lineage of the Danish aristocracy.[2] Rallying the Danish electors and barons to her cause was Agnes' utmost priority. But because the status of her own lordship in the realm was unclear in the months following the assassination, her political authority was compromised. Was she already a queen regent? Or just a king's widow? Or rather the mother of an underage crown prince? With the monarchy hanging by a thread and the realm shaken by an assassination that remained unresolved and unavenged, Agnes turned to an alternative channel of royal representation—that of literary patronage—in order to assert her authority as a ruling woman in Demark and seize the political advantage.

Agnes was the eldest of four children born to Johan I of Brandenburg and his second wife, Jutta, whom he had married in December 1247. The duchy of Brandenburg wielded considerable influence along the northeastern arc of German-speaking Europe in the middle of the thirteenth century, and it held close diplomatic alliances with a number of prominent German political dynasties. Brandenburg's ties with Denmark were particularly close, as Johan's first wife was Sophia of Denmark, a daughter of the powerful Danish King Valdemar II. She died in September 1247, having given birth to four sons and a daughter. With his second marriage, to Jutta of Saxony, Johan I had again secured an advantageous match. Jutta was daughter of Duke Albrecht I of Saxony, a prominent figure in northern Germany and direct descendant of Henry the Lion of the Welf (Askanier) dynasty. Because Agnes left no trace in the historical record until the occasion of her marriage to King Erik V of Denmark in November 1273, we must use that event to estimate the date of her birth. Their first child, Erik VI, was born in 1274, which indicates that Agnes had reached the age of menarche when she married the Danish king. If we assume that Agnes was at least thirteen years old at the time, her birth date would fall somewhere within the years 1256–1261.[3]

Agnes' husband, the Danish crown prince Erik V, was no stranger to the Brandenburgian court. He had spent the years 1262–1264 in Brandenburg, temporarily exiled from the Danish kingdom during a period of intense political strife. The years Erik spent in Brandenburg kept him isolated from the power struggles among rival factions in the Danish royal family that had already claimed the lives of two previous kings of Denmark—both of them Erik's uncles—in 1250 and 1252. The bitterness had flared up again in 1259, when Erik's father, Kristoffer, took ill and died suddenly after receiving Communion host and wine from a bishop that was ill-disposed toward the crown; naturally, this led to rumors that the king had been poisoned. Kristoffer's sudden demise left Denmark with neither a king nor a clear successor. Because Erik V was only ten years old when his father died in the summer of 1259, he had not yet reached the age of majority.

At once, Erik's mother, Queen Margareta Sambiria, a northern German noblewoman from Pommerania, took on the duties of queen regent for her young son and sought to defeat the opposition through military engagement. The forces loyal to the young king were quickly overwhelmed, however, and in June 1261, Erik V and Margareta were taken prisoner and dispatched to Hamburg. A treaty signed in Hamburg in 1262 granted Margareta her freedom, and she returned to her duties as queen regent of Denmark. Erik V, however, was not released. Instead, Margareta's young son was exiled to Brandenburg, where he remained as a political hostage with his uncle, Johan I, until Margareta fulfilled all of the conditions of her negotiated release. Erik's residency in northern Germany was surely in his own best interests as well, for it was unsafe for him to return to Denmark as prince regent. He could return only as king.

In 1264, when the final conditions of the Hamburg settlement were met, Erik V, now almost fifteen years old, won his release from Brandenburg, in large part due to his promise to take Agnes, described in the *Chronica Jutensis* as the *sororem marchionis Brandenburgensis, virginem pulcherrimam*, as his wife when she reached a suitable age. Johan I clearly held the upper hand in the negotiations; the fact that Erik renounced any dowry for Agnes on the event of their marriage can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the weak Danish position in the years around 1264.[4]

For Erik, a marriage to a northern German noblewoman made a great deal of political sense in this turbulent period. In the second half of the thirteenth century it was no longer profitable for Denmark to look northward toward the Nordic "old world" for strength and stability. The royal family of Sweden, for instance, had been wracked by a decades-long conflict over succession, and both Sweden and Norway were lagging far behind the rest of Europe in their appropriation of courtly culture and in opportunities for trade. Instead, Denmark turned its gaze southward. Thus we see in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the emergence of a new trend in marriages with noblewomen from northern Germany. Several Nordic kings had taken northern German wives during an earlier period in the late twelfth and early to mid thirteenth century—King Knut IV of Denmark married Gertrud von Sachsen (Welf dynasty) in 1177, while his brother Valdemar II married Dagmar of Bohemia in 1205—but after 1250 there is evidence of a definitive pattern. Marriages with noblewomen from Holstein, Brandenburg, Pommerania, Saxony, and Schwerin strengthened Denmark's strategic alliances against Mecklenburg and other rival powers in the Baltic region, and helped to secure economic influence with the cities in the emergent Hanseatic League. In addition, these marriages offered linguistic and cultural access to the preeminent courts of northern Germany. In one branch of the Danish royal line, for example, four out of the six sons of King Valdemar II married northern German noblewomen: Knut married a Pommeranian duchess (name unknown) around 1230, Abel was wed to Mechthild of Holstein in 1237, Erik IV to Jutta of Saxony in 1239, and Kristoffer married Margareta Sambiria of Pommerania in 1248. At least one of Kristoffer's legitimate male descendants in each of the next three generations married a German noblewoman: Erik V wed Agnes of Brandenburg in 1273, their son Kristoffer II married Euphemia of Pommerania in 1307, and the son from that union, Erik, married Elizabeth of Holstein in 1330. The political dynamic was similar, albeit somewhat less consistent, in the royal families of Sweden and Norway.[5]

One can only speculate about the amount of contact Erik V had with the young Agnes during his captivity in Brandenburg in 1262–1264. When his exile began, Erik was thirteen years old, Agnes perhaps as young as two. Assuming that two of the prominent children at the Brandenburg court did indeed interact, however, we can be reasonably sure that they would have conversed with one another in Middle Low German. Because Erik's mother, Margareta, was a Pommeranian noblewoman, it is likely that he was exposed to his mother's northern German tongue at a young age. In addition, the three years that Erik spent in political captivity or exile in Hamburg and Brandenburg make it all the more certain that Erik learned Middle Low German with a reasonable degree of fluency by the time he returned to Denmark.[6]

Agnes and Erik V were married in 1273, when he was twenty-four years old and in the fourteenth year of his reign. With the marriage, Agnes took the title of queen of Denmark and Wendland, and duchess of Estonia. She bore Erik V three sons and four daughters during the thirteen years of their marriage, before he was brutally killed on November 22, 1286, by unknown assailants. The assassination set the stage for Agnes' rise as a powerful queen in medieval Denmark—a rise that, I argue, was mediated through, and predicated upon, the authority of a performative voice that was not entirely her own.

In the chapter that follows I explain how Agnes, in the aftermath of the murder of her husband in 1286, marshaled the power of the performative voice in order to "broadcast" a series of political poems that condemned the regicide of Erik V and urged the Danes to repudiate the murderers. I argue here that Agnes used literature as a tool of statecraft, and provide evidence that she was the sponsor of six political poems condemning the Danish regicide of 1286 that are preserved in the fourteenth-century *Jenaer Liederhandschrift*.[7] These poems—composed not in Danish but in the northern German dialect of Middle Low German—were performed by one of the most prominent didactic poets of late-thirteenth-century Germany, Rumelant von Sachsen. As we shall see, Rumelant's poems articulated Agnes' political goals in an innovative and culturally significant way, expressing them in an ostensibly foreign dialect (Middle Low German) that nonetheless held great cultural and political resonance for elite courts toward the end of the thirteenth century. It is also relevant that Middle Low German was both Rumelant's and Agnes' native tongue—a semblance that raises interesting questions about the degree of cultural or political "distortion" that may ensue when the patron's voice is taken up into the voice of the poet. In the discussion about these poems and Agnes' involvement with them, I suggest that Agnes used performances at court to transform a queen's innate cultural lordship into a robust and sovereign political lordship of a type that was unprecedented in the North—a lordship that is voiced through the poet rather than by the monarch herself, one that is performed orally instead of visually (through the "language" of courtly ceremony) or textually by means of a written royal decree. In the acoustic sense, Agnes voiced herself into a position of power.

Queen Eufemia of Norway

Eufemia, like Agnes before her, was born into the northern Germany aristocracy. She was raised at the Baltic court in Stralsund, near the island of Rügen. Given her status as queen of Norway (1299–1312), it is incongruous that she left almost no trace in the diplomatic records of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Although Eufemia was celebrated in her own time as the patron of a sizeable corpus of literary works in the vernacular, comprising some 12,000 lines of rhyming verse, the only known document bearing her signature and seal is a charter drafted by her husband Hákon V on June 22, 1300, granting land and privileges to the church of St. Mary in Oslo. Eufemia served as a witness to the bequest.[8] Aside from this charter, Eufemia appears fewer than ten times in the diplomatics of the Norwegian monarchy. The last of these was issued on August 31, 1314, two years after Eufemia's death, confirming the privileges Eufemia had bequeathed to the church of St. Mary in Oslo, her burial place.[9]

The earliest historical reference to Eufemia does not mention her by name. It appears in a Latin communiqué that was drafted in January 1299 by an official in the Hanseatic League and dispatched to the head *kontor* in Lübeck. Among other items, the letter reports that emissaries from Norway are expected soon in Stralsund, a wealthy trade city on Germany's Baltic coastline, in order to bring "the daughter of the lord of Rügen" to marry Duke Hákon of Norway.[10] This "lord of Rügen" was the influential nobleman Witzlaw II of Rügen (d. 1302), whose court was in Stralsund. No record of Eufemia's birth survives, and we do not know how old she was at the time of her engagement. Since the wedding took place in the spring of 1299 and her only child—a daughter, Ingeborg—was born in 1301, it follows that Eufemia must have been at least thirteen when she married Hákon V in Oslo.

The Hanseatic report identifies Eufemia as *filiam principis Rujanorum*, but this kinship cannot be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt.[11] Nothing is known about Eufemia's mother—not even her name—and the written sources from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Rügen are not only sparse and fraught with gaps but also, on occasion, mutually contradictory. Depending on how the conflicting accounts of Eufemia's genealogy are reconciled, Eufemia could have been Witzlaw's daughter, or perhaps his granddaughter, or even his foster daughter.

The discrepancy appears to have taken root during the middle of the fourteenth century, some fifty years after Eufemia's death. In earlier accounts, such as the Hanseatic letter of 1299 or the written testament of Witzlaw II that was drafted shortly before his death in 1302, the relationship is stated unambiguously to be that of a father and daughter. In his testament, Witzlaw II refers to Eufemia as *domine regine norwegie filie mee predelicte* [her majesty the queen of Norway, my beloved daughter]—the same expression of kinship Witzlaw II used in his testament to refer to his other daughters Margareta and Helena, about whose parentage there