

CHAPTER FIVE

SLAVERY IN THE VIKING AGE



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Early Scandinavian society was more or less until the 1960s looked upon as an egalitarian peasant society, with free farmers, kings and chieftains (Sw *bygdebövdin-gar*). In the Icelandic sagas and the earliest provincial laws there were, of course, mentions of slaves, most commonly known as *þrælar*. So the existence of a slaving class was known, but not given any particular notice. Kings could have many *þrælar*, farmers some. This fact did not alter the view of the prehistoric society; it was still looked upon as fairly homogeneous. When the number of thralls was discussed, some scholars reckoned with large quantities in society, as many as c. 25 per cent of the population.

No modern and serious discussion of slavery in prehistoric Scandinavia has, however, seen the light so far. When the topic has been under analysis, the two main sources consulted have been the provincial laws and the Icelandic sagas; the former evidencing the last phase of thralldom in Scandinavia with the manumission of thralls, and for the latter sources – the sagas – we always have the creeping suspicion that they describe more the time of the writing of the sagas (thus mainly the thirteenth century) and what these authors thought of or had heard of thralldom in the Viking Age.

It would hence be hazardous to use sagas and the provincial laws to reconstruct the Viking Age situation of the thralls. In the sagas the thrall is always a stereotype – dark, short and stupid, no doubt used as spice in the narrative to contrast with the blond, tall and wise hero. The descriptions of thralls in these stories are far too stereotypical to use in any serious analysis of Viking slavery (see below). What we can deduce from the stories is the fact that many of the thralls in Iceland seem to have been seized abroad; very often slaves from Ireland are mentioned. Another interesting aspect in the sagas is the stories where a child of a female slave and an Icelander grows up as a free man and makes a reputation for himself.

The provincial laws are the most important sources for us in our study especially of medieval slavery (hence from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries). Here we get a wide range of terms for slave, and we get an insight into the judicial dependence of the slave in society (Nevéus 1974; Iversen 1994); there must have been legal rules in these laws, which were based on old customs, hence older than the Middle Ages. In order to understand prehistoric slavery, and to complement what we can learn from the laws,

archaeology, onomastics, and especially the semantic and etymological analysis of slave terminology are vital (Lindkvist and Myrdal 2003; Brink 2002, 2003, 2007, forthcoming).

However, the first question to ask is, what is a slave? This may sound self-evident, but the attempts to define a slave have been complicated, wide-ranging and problematic. One prominent scholar has written on this topic: 'The ambiguities of this word [slave] are indeed so confusing that sociologists might be well advised to eliminate it from their discussion altogether' (Leach 1967: 14). A definition of slave and slavery must contain social, economic as well as judicial aspects. What is characteristic of a slave in all societies is that he or she is the property of another, being looked upon as a tool, a 'thing', not a human being, to be used or abused at the master's will or whim. The slave has no family, hence no social context, and the child of a female slave belongs to the owner. The slave has no legal rights. He or she is a judicial subject insofar as slaves are often mentioned in law-rules, but a slave could not act legally; it was the master of the slave who talked and acted for the slave.

The philosophical justification for slavery, mentioned already by Roman lawmen such as Ulpian and Justinian, was that a man who was defeated and caught in war and not slaughtered had given up his right to live (Watson 1987: 8; Turley 2000: 3). In war all defeated men not killed in battle should be slaughtered afterwards; that was the custom not only in ancient Europe, but also among North American Indians and other people. If their life were spared, they had forfeited their right to be free. They had been given a gift, their life, but had to pay back by giving up their freedom, the right of being looked upon as a human being; instead they became a tool for their master.

When we try to understand early society in Scandinavia it is obvious that it was decisive for an individual to be part of a family and a social group. You were in a way identified by your affiliation to a family, a group and a society. The worst punishment you could thus get was to be cut off from this group and society, to be excommunicated or outlawed, which has been described as a 'social death'. In other words we can see that our forefathers had another concept of freedom than we have. Freedom was not defined as an individual freedom, but a right to belong to a fellowship, to be part of a social group. A stranger was often considered as an enemy. It is from this perspective that we have to understand how our ancestors could accept and even justify slavery.

The natural point of departure for all discussions on slaves in early Scandinavia has been the ancient Edda poem of *Rígsþula*. Here, we find an allegorical description of society, in which named persons represent the social classes, among them the slaves. In the poem, descriptions are also given of each person's (i.e. each social category's) behaviour, name, daily occupation and physical appearance. This poem has therefore been used as a kind of description of the tasks of a Scandinavian slave in the Viking Age ('to make stone fences, to manure the arable land, to herd pigs and goats and to dig peat').

Unfortunately, one has to use the *Rígsþula* with great care and caution, especially if the aim is to use it as a kind of cultural-historical source for life in Viking Age Scandinavia (Dronke 1992: 671 ff.). The poem is a very special one, a mythical allegory, in which the principal character, *Rígr*, as the god *Heimdallr* is called in the poem, bears an Irish name (*Ir rí*, Old Irish *ríg* 'king'). Also the dating of the poem is problematic. Earlier, the *Rígsþula* was looked upon as an ancient poem, while later research has tended to place it in the thirteenth century (Simek 1993: 294 ff.; Karras 1988: 60). However,

there are scholars who even today are prepared, at least tentatively, to place the *Rígsþula* as early as the Viking Age (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 164).

The relevant part of the *Rígsþula*, in which we learn about the slaves, starts with Rígr coming to Ái and Edda, and eventually begets a child with Edda:

Edda bore a child,
[. . .]
In rough linen she [wrapped]
the black-[skinned] boy.
[Heavy were his eyes] –
they called him Thrall [*Þræll*].
[. . .]
There was on his hands
wrinkled skin,
gnarled knuckles,
[scabbed nails,]
fingers thick –
face unlovely,
bent back,
long heels.

He began more than
to test his might
plaiting bast,
packing burdens.
He carried home then
kindling through the cruel day.

There came to the homestead
a gadabout girl.
Soil was on the soles of her feet,
her arm sunburnt,
down-curving her nose –
her name, she said, was Thrallwoman [*Þír*].

Children they bred,
had a home and were happy.
I think they were called
Bawler and Byreboy,
Clump and Clegg,
Bedmate, Stinker,
Stump, Stout,
Sluggish and Grizzled,
Stooper and Longleg.
They fixed fences,
dunged fields,
worked at the pigs,

watched over the goats,
dug the peat.

The daughters were
Stumpy and Dumpy,
Bulgingcalves and Eaglenose,
Shouter and Servingmaid [*Ambátt*],
Greatgossip,
Tatteredcoat
and Craneshands.

From there have come
the generations of thralls [*Þræla ætt*].
(from *Poetic Edda*, vol. 2: *Mythological Poems*,
ed. and trans. U. Dronke (1997)
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It is very clear that the author is following a certain slave topos that is always found whenever slaves are mentioned in Old Norse literature. The thrall was dark, short, stupid, gloomy and ugly; this was in contrast to the tall, blond, handsome and attractive hero. The picture of the thrall is often used in contrast to the free human being (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 161 ff.).

It is apparent that we are here dealing with literature. Therefore, one has to approach the text with the utmost care, if one wishes to extract historical facts from it. This literary topos is found again and again in the Old Norse texts. The thralls were not only ugly, but also cowardly and stupid, as in the story of *Þórðr inn huglaus* (*Þórðr* the coward) in the *Gísla Saga Súrssonar*. This *Þórðr* was so cowardly and stupid that he put on another man's clothes, whereby, owing to his stupidity, he was killed in that other man's place.

To sum up, the qualitative aspects of the slaves and their situation during early times are difficult to obtain in the Old Norse literature. The picture drawn here is based on stereotypes and clichés.

THE TERMINOLOGY FOR SLAVES IN EARLY SCANDINAVIA

An excellent point of departure for a discussion on the terms for slaves in Scandinavia is to be found in a paragraph in the Old Law of the Gulathing (198): *Tvær ero hans hinar bezto ambatter. Seta. oc deigja. oc tveir þrælar. þjónn oc bryti* (i.e. 'Two bondwomen are counted as the best, the housemaid and the housekeeper. Two thralls are counted the best, the foreman and the master's personal servant'; GL trans. by Larson 1935: 144). Here, we see that the early West Scandinavian *ambátt* was obviously some kind of collective term for a female slave, while the male counterpart was *þræll*. The *seta* and *deigja*, and the *þjónn* and *bryti*, were hence slaves with some kinds of special functions.

The most commonly used contemporary term for a slave was ON *þræll*, OSw, ODa *þræl*. This word, which is assumed to go back to a Proto-Scand. **þrabilia-*, has an obscure background. Several etymologists connect the word with Goth. *þragjan* and OE *þrægan* 'to run', thus 'the one who runs for someone'. The word *ambátt*, *ambótt* f. as a name for a

female slave is believed to be a loan from Vulgar Lat. *ambactus* ‘servant’ (cf. Sw *ämbete*). Other names for female slaves were *deigja*, which is derived from the word *deg* ‘dough’ and which thus had the meaning of ‘the one who bakes’, and *þý* f. (< **þiuþō*), which is closely related to Goth. *þiwi* and OE *þeowu*. There are several other slave words formed on the same stem, such as Goth. *þius* m. ‘slave’, OE *þéow* m. ‘servant’ (cf. *þéowian* ‘make someone a slave’), ON *þjónn*, OE *þéowen* ‘slave, servant’, ON *þjá* (< **þewan*) ‘keep in slavery, treat as a slave, torment’, Goth. *þiwan* ‘keep in slavery’ (found in the compounds *anaþiwan* and *gapiwan*) (Hellquist 1948; de Vries 1962).

In Old Swedish we find the words *fostri* m. and *fostra* f. for male and female slaves. The words have the meaning of ‘the one who is brought up in the household/on the homestead’, which probably alludes to the fact that these slaves were not prisoners of war, but were born and raised on the farm.

Names for foreigners sometimes have a secondary meaning of ‘slave, unfree’, which has an obvious background in the fact that prisoners of war and kidnapped or bought foreigners were vital as sources of new slaves. This is obviously the background of the word *slave*, Sw *slav*, which is thus really the ethnic name, and also the word OSw *val*, ON *valir* ‘Celt; slave’, also in the adjective *valsker*, which goes back to *Wales*, *Wallonia*, etc. The OE equivalent, *wealh*, pl. *wealas*, with an older meaning ‘foreigner, Briton, Welshman’, had in Anglo-Saxon a secondary meaning of ‘slave’, which is believed to have the same background – Britons and Welshmen taken as prisoners in all the battles between the ethnic groups (Bugge 1905: 43; cf. Faull 1975).

The thralls did not make up a homogeneous mass. Some were labourers, working the land and herding the cattle. They were probably – legally and economically – equal to the cattle they herded. However, there were also thralls with some special tasks, such as the *deigja* (above), and some obviously had qualified duties. We are here getting close to a social category of trusted servants and officials. This was the case with the ON *bryti*, originally an unfree servant, according to handbooks, who during the medieval period was transformed into a person of high status. The word *bryti* goes back to a Proto-Scand. **brūtjan*, a formation from the stem of the verb ON *brjóta* ‘break’. Thus, it is believed that the original meaning of *bryti* was ‘he who breaks (and distributes the bread)’, hence a semantic pendant to the OE *hlāfbrytta*. The word *bryti* was also borrowed into Finnish, as *ruttio*, *ruttia* ‘steward, slave’. A *bryti* seems therefore originally to have been some kind of steward on a farm, a supervisor over the rest of the thralls. Later on, we meet the *bryti* as a steward on royal and lordly estates.

However, when we consult contemporary sources, such as runestones, we get a different picture. In for example the inscription on the famous runestone at Hovgården (U 11) on the island of Adelsö, opposite the more famous island of Björkö where Birka is located, we can read: *lit rista toliṛ bry[t]i i roþ kunuki, Rett let rista Tolir bryti i Roð kunungi*, which has been translated as ‘Tóliṛ the steward of Roþr had them [the runes] rightly carved for the king’. This very important historical runic inscription from probably the middle of the eleventh century is not easy to interpret. Elias Wessén (in U) assumes that the erecting and carving of the inscription was commissioned by the king. Wessén, and many with him, have connected the passage ‘bryti i Rodh’ with the case in the Östgöta Law (Dråpsb. 14) which deals with *iarls bryti i roþzs bo*, and he thinks that *Tolir bryti* was the king’s ombudsman in the district called *Roden* (i.e. the coastal area). Erland Hjærne (1947: 25–55; cf. Rahmqvist 1994: 109) argues – in my opinion quite convincingly – against Wessén’s interpretation, and instead proposes that *Tolir bryti* was a bailiff, a

manager on the royal farm Hovgården. This runic evidence indicates that a *bryti* in the tenth and eleventh centuries was to be found rather high up the social ladder, in the case of the Hovgården stone a man in close proximity to the king, probably his bailiff, and hence not a slave on the very lowest rung.

It has to be admitted that we have very little knowledge of the status of the thrall and the number of slaves in prehistoric Scandinavia. Probably it is quite wrong to compare the situation of a Scandinavian thrall with that of a slave in the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago or in North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the etymological evidence of the contemporary terms for 'slave' in early Scandinavia, the diversified meanings found may suggest different kinds of dependence on an authority. The original meaning of several terms is 'servant'. This dependence may not have been an extremely repressive relation between the servant and the master and may instead have been more of a 'client-patron' relationship.

It is not possible to rely on the fact that the meaning 'slave, thrall, unfree', found in lexica and encyclopaedias, was valid and adequate also in prehistoric times. From the etymological list above, it is evident that an often recurring, semantic component was 'servant'. There is nothing that excludes the possibility that a word in an earlier language stage had the meaning '(free) servant', that later on was changed to '(unfree) servant, slave', and vice versa. Hence, it is possible that, for example, in the word ON *þræll* we have a semantic component of 'servant', in the form of a kind of dependence between a superior and an inferior, maybe a warrior, craftsman or a priest, that is, a patron-client relationship.

We know that a free man could give himself as a slave to another, to settle a debt or because of poverty. From this fact it is close to a case where someone is giving up his freedom and accepts a judicial slave status as, for example, a warrior in a *hirð*. By taking an oath of fidelity a young man could be taken up as a warrior in a king's or a chieftain's personal *hirð*. By doing this, he accepted to come under the master's personal jurisdiction, literally he laid his life in his hand, but he was probably socially elevated, being close to the king or chieftain, having a seat in his hall. This kind of warrior could be called a *karl*, ON *rekkr*/OSw **rinkr* or *sveinn*. This is to be illustrated with, for example, the ON *væringi*, Sw *våring*, institution (Russian *varjagu*, Greek *varangoi*). A *våring*/*varjag* was the name for a Northman gone east and taken up duty in the *hirð* of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. The word goes back to a Proto-Nordic **wāragangja-*, a compound of *vār*, OE *wær* f., OHG *wāra* 'oath, treaty, fidelity' and the verb *gangjan* 'walk', hence 'someone who takes an oath, enters into a treaty'.

WHAT WERE THE FUNCTION AND THE NUMBERS OF SLAVES?

The numbers of slaves assumed in early research are in my opinion grossly overestimated. When Northmen were dealing with slaves, in Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England or Francia, large quantities could have been taken. But the custom seems to have been either to take them as hostage and then ask for a large ransom, or to sell them at some slave market. The bringing home of slaves to Scandinavia was certainly a fact, but in my opinion only on a small scale; probably the slave was seen as a precious commodity, to show off. I think slaves were fairly uncommon in society. There might have been working slaves on ordinary farms, but larger quantities were probably only to

be found on chieftains' and well-to-do farmers' farms. This could be reflected in some 'double graves', found in Denmark and Sweden, where one of the buried is often beheaded and has his or her hands tied (interpreted as a slave) and the other one is obviously a wealthy man or woman with rich grave goods.

Regarding the function of slaves, they were probably of a wide range, from the chattel slave, the *þræll*, working on the fields and herding cattle, sheep and swine, via household slaves, as the *þý*, *deigja*, *fostra* and *amma*, to officials and stewards fairly high up on the social ladder, but judicially on a slave rank, as probably were the *bryti*. A warrior in a personal *hirð* was probably in reality legally unfree, but had a fairly high social status. The slave institution in prehistoric Scandinavia was hence, depending on economic, social and legal aspects, probably rather complex.

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