A Treasure Hunt in the North


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**A Treasure Hunt in the North**

In two ways, Louis Sicking’s *De bijl van Sint-Olav* is a treasure hunt. On the one hand, the book traces the literal treasure of the Norwegian church which in 1537 had left the country together with its last archbishop, Olav Engelbrektsson. Fleeing the new Protestant ruler of Denmark and Norway, the archbishop resorted to the Low Countries and took with him valuables and relics, among them the titular axe of St. Olav. On the other hand, the search for the scattered sources around this episode of Northern European history has led the author on a quest for historical gems in Dutch, Belgian, and Norwegian archives. Sicking utilizes his findings to follow the archbishop’s flight along three lines of research. First, by observing Olav Engelbrektsson and his entourage through the lens of microhistory, the author vividly illustrates the European embeddedness of political and religious conflicts in sixteenth century Scandinavia. Second, the book’s analysis of the disputes around the archbishop’s inheritance contributes to the current buzzing research of the New Diplomatic History by shining light on the diplomatic agency of urban magistrates. Finally, the treasure itself serves to comment on the material aspect of Christian belief in the early days of the Reformation.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the political conflicts in the decades following the dissolution of the Union of Kalmar in 1523. The personal union had been incorporating the three Scandinavian kingdoms under the Danish crown since 1397. After Sweden’s separation several pretenders contended for the Danish-Norwegian throne. Their ambitions soon became intertwined with the religious conflicts of the early Reformation and Olav Engelbrektsson manoeuvred between the different parties to secure the autonomy of the Norwegian church. His attempts ultimately placed him in opposition to the Protestant victor of the conflict, Danish king Christian III.

The archbishop’s subsequent flight in 1537 leads to the following two chapters in which Sicking, through the lens of microhistory, illuminates the European scale of the conflict. Due to dynastical interests, Emperor Charles V had interfered in the struggles for the Danish throne. Olav Engelbrektsson’s support for the imperial candidate allowed him to flee Trondheim on several Dutch ships which originally had been intended for a military expedition to Copenhagen. Yet, Sicking does not only follow the steps of the archbishop himself, but also two prominent members of his retinue who had accompanied him into exile. Both men managed to build a career abroad due the need for professionals of violence and diplomacy in the international conflicts of the sixteenth century. Exhibiting a highly pragmatic approach to religious division, both eventually returned to Norway and Denmark into the service of their former enemies.

The fourth chapter turns to the actual treasure of the Norwegian church and its material and liturgical value. Since the archbishop had left a substantial amount of relics and treasures in Norway, Sicking also follows the history of St. Olav’s shrine in Trondheim, as well as gold and jewellery which Christian III had shipped to Copenhagen. Parts of the treasure transported to Denmark have been rumoured to have gone...
lost in a shipwreck. Based on the thorough reading of Dutch privateering documents, Sicking can indeed reconstruct a potential spot of the accident.

In the fifth chapter, Sicking returns to political history by analysing the diplomatic aftermath of the archbishop's death in 1538. Several powerful parties considered themselves legitimate heirs to the Norwegian church's treasure which Olav Engelbrektsson had left in the hands of a trading partner in Deventer. The city's magistrate, therefore, soon found himself at the centre of diplomatic disputes and Sicking illustrates how the council skilfully employed tactics of protraction to prevent damages to its burgheers and merchants. In 1548, the treasure was finally handed over to Elector Palatine Friedrich II who had acted as Charles V's candidate to the Danish throne ten years before. A short sixth chapter provides a brief look into the modern search for the treasure and the archbishop's archive in Germany before the book ends with a conclusion, an epilogue, and an overview of several central sources.

Norwegian late medieval or early modern history, it is probably fair to say, constitute a rather blank spot even for many historians. Just for introducing it to a wider readership – in a highly readable writing style – Sicking would deserve praise. The author, however, does not stop there but also provides original research into a crucial episode of Scandinavian history, the fate of the Norwegian church treasure as well as a valuable contribution to the history of (urban) diplomacy. Of his three chosen strands of research, Sicking's heart appears to be more with these political and diplomatic topics. Although the fourth chapter can provide some insights into the materiality of Christian religion, it sticks out between the more substantial politically themed sections. The extensive description of St. Olav's shrine, the inventories of the treasures and explanations of their liturgical function divert the reader from the otherwise clearly followed narrative path. Yet, these minor points notwithstanding, the book is highly recommended for anyone interested in Northern Europe in the transition from the Middle Ages to early modernity. Considering its value for Norwegian historiography, it stands to hope that a translation into Norwegian or at least English will follow soon.

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