

The Ceremony of “King Taking” at the Swedish Mora Stone

A Medieval Invention or Traces of an Ancient Initiation Ritual?

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ABSTRACT: There are no sources which explicitly describe the complete initiation ritual of a pre-Christian king in ancient Scandinavia. However, there are sources from Scandinavia and Europe more broadly describing medieval royal inaugurations that may be based on older ceremonies related to the initiations of pre-Christian rulers. Whether or not elements in the medieval royal inauguration at Mora, south of present-day Uppsala (Sweden), are based on pre-Christian traditions is an old research problem. This royal initiation ritual is visible in the medieval provincial laws of Sweden and other sources. This study argues that there are traces of older traditions behind the medieval versions of the ritual sequence called “king taking” (OSw taka konong) performed at the Mora Stone. Focus is on the location of the ritual site, the terminology used in the preserved textual sources, and the ritual actions and paraphernalia applied when performing this ceremony. A comparative method is applied, which includes archaeological finds and written sources related not only to ancient Sweden and Scandinavia, but also to the Germanic, Slavic, and Celtic areas of Europe. Finally, the question of the mythical dimensions of inaugurations are discussed and the study's results are related to theories about cultic continuation during the transition to Christianity and theories about religious legitimation of rulership.

RESUME: Der er ingen kilder, som eksplicit beskriver en initiation af en førkristen konge i Skandinavien. Til gengæld er der kilder fra Skandinavien og andre dele af Europa, som beskriver kongelige indsættelsesritualer i middelalderen, ritualer som kan være baseret på ældre ceremonier knyttet til initiationer af førkristne herskere. Hoorvidt elementer af kongelige indsættelsesritualer ved Mora, syd for nutidens Uppsala (Sverige) er baseret på førkristne traditioner, er et gammelt forskningsspørgsmål. Dette studie argumenterer for, at der er spor af ældre traditioner bag de middelalderlige

versioner af den ritualekvens, som kaldes "at tage konge" (OSw *taka konong*), som fandt sted ved Mora sten. Studiet fokuserer på ritualpladsens lokalitet, den terminologi, som anvendes omkring ritualen i de overleverede skriftlige kilder og de rituelle handlinger og genstande, som benyttes ved udførelsen af ceremonien. En komparative metode benyttes, idet studiet baserer sig på arkæologiske fund og skriftlige kilder, som knytter sig ikke blot til Sverige og Skandinavien, men også til de germanske, slaviske og keltiske områder af Europa. Til slut diskuteres den mytiske dimension af indsættelsesritualerne, og studiets resultater relateres til teorier dels om kultkontinuitet ved overgangen til kristendommen og dels om religiøs legitimering af herskerrollen.

KEYWORDS: *Initiation; rulers; royal inauguration; Mora Stone; comparative method; cultic continuation; religious legitimation of rulership*

Introduction

In his important book *Initiation between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, Jens Peter Schjødt has a section called "Initiations of Kings" (2008, 373–377). Initiations, sometimes referred to as *rites de passage*, are rituals marking entrance or acceptance into a group or society. In an extended sense, they can also signify a transformation in which the initiate is 'reborn' into a new role with a new identity. In relation to pre-Christian Scandinavian kingship, Schjødt states that the "situation of the sources concerning such rituals is very problematical [sic], and we may argue with some justification that there are no sources at all for them – at least no sources that explicitly describe a specific initiation" (2008, 373). With no doubt this statement is true, there are no sources that explicitly describe the complete initiation ritual of a pre-Christian king. On the other hand, there are sources from Scandinavia and Europe, describing medieval royal inaugurations which may be based on older ceremonies related to the initiations of pre-Christian rulers.

Royal initiations were, for instance, performed in Sweden during the Middle Ages. Just south of present-day Uppsala, there is an old *þing* place (assembly site) called *Mora*, where such rituals took place (see map). Medieval provincial laws report that a ceremony called "king taking" (OSw *taka konong*) was performed at Mora *þing* by representatives from the three *folkland*-units of Uppland around 1300AD.¹ Several medieval sources mention that this initiation ritual took place at a specific rock, onto which the candidate was lifted. After this rite, the future king embarked on a ritual journey or procession in his kingdom, called *Erikskata*, in order to be "deemed king" (OSw *til kununx dömæ*) by the lawmakers at the *þing* places in the various provinces. According to the oldest sources (see below), this journey or procession went all the way down to Västergötland and "the *þing* of all Götar" (Brink 2000; Sanmark 2019,

¹ The Old Swedish *folkland* constituted an administrative district with its own lawman and a *folklandsting*. See Liedgren 1959; Lindkvist and Sjöberg 2009, 36, and below. Translations are my own unless otherwise attributed.

105). This procedure probably reflects a relatively late stage in the development of the royal investiture route, namely when a more stable kingship with a foothold the provinces of both the Götär and Svear began to take shape (Sundqvist 2002, 293–305; cf. Lindkvist and Sjöberg 2009, 31–158).

Whether the medieval royal inauguration is based on a pre-Christian tradition is an old research problem. In the present study, I will argue that there are traces of an old tradition behind the medieval versions of the ritual sequence called “king taking” at Mora. I focus particularly on the location of the ritual, the terminology used in the preserved sources, and the ritual actions and paraphernalia applied when performing this ceremony. In the discussion below, I will use a comparative method, which includes archaeological finds as well as written sources related not only to ancient Scandinavia, but also to the Germanic, Slavic and Celtic areas in Europe.² Finally, I will also address the question of mythical dimensions of inaugurations and relate my results to some general theories about cult continuity during the transition period and the religious legitimation of rulership. Before I delve into the discussion and present my arguments for the hypothesis, I will survey the sources related to the ceremony at Mora and address the state of research.

The Sources to the Ritual at Mora

The oldest indication of the ritual is to be found in *The Older Laws of Västergötland* (Äldre Västgötalagen), from c. 1225.³ There it says in “Rätlösabalken” [Lawlessness], ch. 1: “Sveær egho konong at taka ok sva vrækæ” (To the Svear belongs the right to take a king and to reject him as well; Lindqvist 2021, 47).⁴ Most likely “Svear” here refers to the people of the three *folkland*-units of Uppland (Holmbäck and Wessén Vol. 5 1979, 117). After this piece of information, the law only considers the part of the initiation ritual that concerns the province of Västergötland. The “Rätlösabalk” prescribes that the king must embark on a ritual journey down to Östergötland with a “hostage” (OSw *gïslan f.*), and at Junabäck (present-day Jönköping) new hostages should be exchanged.⁵ When the king arrives at the *þing* of all Götär, he must swear to

² By the comparative method, I am referring mainly to what Jens Peter Schjødt calls “comparisons of the first level” (2012, 275–280), i.e. comparisons made between source information from the Late Iron Age and Medieval Scandinavian area. In the latter part of the present study, I will also refer to comparisons of the second and third levels, i.e., comparisons with the neighboring cultures and religions as well as other Indo-European cultures and religions. The comparative perspectives in the history of religions has been a hot topic. Nowadays, scholars often defend such perspectives, even if they argue that such an approach should rather be described as a research design and not a single method, see Stausberg 2014.

³ See ÄVgLR 1, SSGL 1, 36–37. Manuscript *Codex Holmensis B 59*, dated to c. 1285–1295, has the best-preserved text, but it includes several scribes. There is a fragment B 193 dated to 1240 (Wiktorsson 2011).

⁴ The verb *ægha* is translated ‘have the right to, shall, ought to, bound to, obliged to’, while OSw *taka* ‘take, choose, designate’, and OSw *vræka* ‘dethrone the king’ or ‘reject a candidate’. Schlyter 1887. Cf. Holmbäck and Wessén, Vol. 5 1979, 117–119.

⁵ On the customs of hostages, see particularly Olsson 2019, 190–193, 251–320, and *passim*.

be faithful to the Götar and the law of the province. Then the lawman first “deems him king” (til konungs dōmæ), followed by others present.

The Law of Uppland (Upplandslagen) from 1296, which is 70 years younger than *The Older Laws of Västergötland*, gives a somewhat more extensive description of the ceremony in “Konungabalken” (Kg I):

Nu þorfwæ land kunung wæliæ. þa skulu þry folkland fyrstu kunung takæ. þæt ær tyundæ land ok attundæ land. Ok fiæþrundæ land. vpplandæ laghman. a han wiþ upsalar. fyrst til kununx. dōmæ þær næst hwar laghmaþær æptir aþrum. Suþærmannæ. östgiötæ. tyu hæræþæ. wæstgiötæ. nærikia. ok wæstmannæ. þer aghu han til krunu. ok kununx dōmis skilia. landum raþæ. ok riki styræ. lagh at styrkia. ok friþ haldæ. þa ær han dōmbdær til upsælæ öþæ. (Kg I, SSGL 3, 87–89; Holmbäck and Wessén, Vol. 1 1979, 43, 52–53).⁶

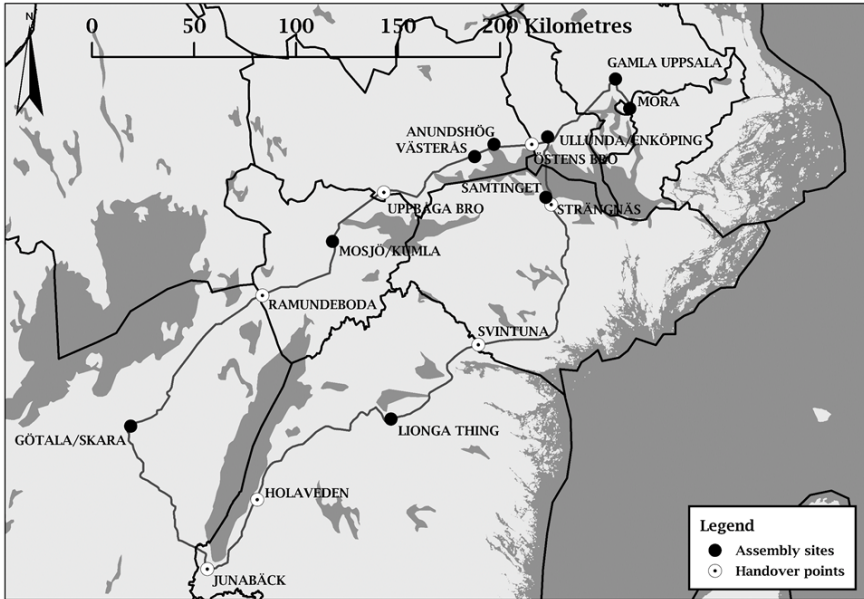
Now the lands need to elect a king. Then should the three *folkland* units first take the king. That is Tiundaland and Attundaland and Fjädrundaland. The lawman of Uppland shall first deem him king at Uppsala. Thereafter the other lawmen [should deem him king] one after another: Södermännen’s [lawman], Östgötar’s [lawman], Tiohärads [lawman], Västgötar’s [lawman], Närkingar’s [lawman] and Västmännen’s [lawman]. They have the right to deem him to crown and kingdom, to reign the lands and rule the realm, to strengthen the law and maintain the peace. Then he is deemed to Uppsala Öd.

In this law it is pointed out that it is representatives of the three *folkland*-units who “take the king”. However, it is not mentioned where this ceremony will take place. The Lawman of Uppland will then deem (dōma) him king in Uppsala, and the other lawmen will do the same either during his Eriksgata at the various provincial thing-places, or possibly by representatives from the provinces in Uppsala. The law also includes a formula, which was probably recited as a performative speech-act during the investiture: “þer aghu han til krunu. Ok kununx dōmis skilia” (they have the right to deem him to crown and kingdom). The enigmatic name Eriksgata appears in this law and it is described in detail in “flock” 2 (Kg II, SSGL 3, 88–89), where there is also a further ritual act, when the candidate must be crowned king by the archbishop and the bishops in Uppsala cathedral (Kg III, SSGL 3, 89).

In *The Law of Södermanland (Södermannalagen)* from 1327, there is the important addition, that the taking of a king must take place *a morum* (at Mora; SdmL A-codex, Kg I, SSGL 4, 47).⁷ The statement that the entire council of Sweden (*alt swearikes raþ*), together with representatives of the three *folkland*-units of Uppland, come to Mora to “take king” is new. Similar regulations exist in *Magnus Erikssons Landslag* (c. 1350), where committees of twelve men from all legislatures (OSw *laghsaga* sg.) gather at *Mora Äng* (Mora meadow) to choose the king (Kg 4, SSGL 10, 7).

⁶ Schlyter explains *dōma* in this context as “förklara den valde konungen vara laglig konung” (declare the chosen king to be the legal king; 1887, 130).

⁷ In SdmL Add I, *til moro þings* is added (Holmbäck and Wessén, Vol. 3 1979, 49).



The royal route of the *Eriksgata* in Sweden, including the top-level assembly sites and handover points along the route. The route is reconstructed on the basis of the provincial laws, old maps and Mannerfelt (1936). Map: Alexandra Sanmark, Brian Buchanan and Tudor Skinner. Reprinted from Sanmark (2019) with permission.

Erikskrönikan (*Rimkrönikan*) from the 1320s (preserved only in 15th-century manuscripts) reports for the first time on the royal election at Mora sten (Mora Stone).⁸ In connection with the election of King Magnus Eriksson in 1319, it is mentioned that his grandfather Magnus Birgersson Ladulås was chosen there – at the stone – in 1275.⁹ In a 1434 note by Petrus Tidechinis, a Notary at the chapter of Uppsala, it is said that the royal election was documented by carving the new king's name on a small stone, which was then laid on the Mora Stone (quoted in Holmgren 1954, 5). This reference to document stones placed on the Mora Stone is based on an eye-witness account, and is the only contemporary source that describes the Mora Stone (more on this below). In *Vadstenadiariet* (16th century) it is mentioned that Erik of Pomerania was “Ac postea apud Upsalium, ut moris est Morasten est sublevatus” (raised on Mora Stone close to Uppsala, according to custom; 89, 2).

In a small museum erected at *Mora Äng* in 1770, there are nine fragmentary or entire document stones. At least some of them derive from completed royal elections, such as the stones of Erik of Pomerania from 1396 and Karl Knutsson Bonde from 1464. In *Strängnäskaledariet*, from around 1450, it is said that the Mora Stone has been removed

⁸ “warder konunger a morasten walder ... war walder widh Morasten” (Jansson 2003 [1992], 177, 179).

⁹ “... tha waldo the widh Morasteen, konung Magnus ...” (Jansson 2003 [1992], 59).

from its original place (quoted and paraphrased in Holmgren 1954, 14–22). The monarchs Gustav Vasa (r. 1523-1560) and Johan III (r. 1569-1592) had to search for the stone, but it could not be found. In Olaus Magnus’s 1555 work *Historia De Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, mention is made of a large flat rock, surrounded by twelve smaller stones, which had allegedly been called the Mora Stone since ancient times.¹⁰ A woodcut included in the work shows how a king, standing on the stone, is praised by the common people (see fig. 1). However, this description is not based on an eyewitness account, nor is the Austrian diplomat Erich Lassota von Steblaus’s information from 1593 that the Mora Stone was “ein Weisser Stein” (a white stone; quoted in Holmgren 1954, 3).



Figure 1. Olaus Magnus. Mora Stone. (Olaus Magnus *Historia de gentibus Septentrionalibus*. Farnborough 1971).

Previous Research

In the first half of the 20th century there was a consensus among scholars that parts of the ceremony described in the laws were ancient, perhaps even pre-Christian. However, it was disputed whether the act of deeming originally took place at Mora in connection with the taking ceremony, or at the Uppsala *þing*. Gustaf Holmgren (1937a and 1937b) argued that the ceremony was split into two parts: firstly the taking ceremony, a “rite of passage” where the king was elevated on the Mora Stone, was connected with an ancient initiation ceremony during which the king received his symbols of dignity and his honor name from the Svear. Secondly, the deeming and the oaths were younger, additional ceremonies, legal acts made at the Uppsala *þing* of and at the other provincial assemblies (*land-þings*) during the *Eriksgrata*. Holmgren

¹⁰ “... lapis ingens, & rotundus ... Morasten dictus ... super latum, & ingentem lapidem Rex electus stans” (I:31, 52; XI:45, 401); “est lapis campestris amplius, ab incolis perpetuo tempore Morasten appellatus, in circuitu XII. continens lapides paulo minori forma humi firmatos” (VIII: 1, 243).

proposed that the procedure gradually changed during the 14th century to the point that the entire ceremony, including the rite of *døma*, was performed at Mora (Holmgren, 1937a; 1937b). Karl Olivecrona (1942) was inspired by Holmgren's interpretation. He, like Holmgren, thought that the taking and lifting onto the Mora Stone was an old initiation ritual, during which the king also received his dignity and royal name. Olivecrona, in contrast to Holmgren, claimed that even the act of deeming king (*døma til kununx*) was an ancient magical and performative ritual associated with pre-Christian sacral kingship. These ritual actions were allegedly aimed at transforming the candidate into a king, i.e. at endowing him with the qualities necessary for kingship. The act of *døma* was thus characterised as a form of 'verbal magic', which was even preserved in *The Law of Uppland*: "They have the right to deem him ..." (see above). According to Olivecrona, by pronouncing this formula and handing over regalia, the king obtained a supernatural power necessary for the office.

In recent debate concerning the value of the medieval laws as sources for pre-Christian matters a more sceptical attitude prevails. Legal historians have argued that the Swedish medieval laws say nothing about culture before 1200: Elsa Sjöholm, for instance, argues that *The Law of Uppland's* description of the investiture of kings can only be considered as contemporary with the time when the law was written down, i.e. 1296 (Sjöholm 1988, 50, 206–207). She believes the rules of election in these medieval laws were novel and not built on tradition; i.e. they were nothing but a propaganda myth, created in a situation where the sons of the Swedish ruler Jarl Birger were claiming sovereignty in opposition to clerical power. Historian Dick Harrison (2009, 277–280) argues along the same lines via *argumenta ex silentio*. According to him, there is no information about the election of kings before the 13th century. He states that the traditions related to Mora were probably created during the reign of Magnus Eriksson (1319–1364), although the traditions about *Eriksgata* could be older. Stefan Brink (2000) and Alexandra Sanmark (2019) have shown that archaeological evidence from pre-historical times along this route, indicates that the ceremonies related to *Eriksgata* could be ancient, and the historian Thomas Lindkvist (2002) states that the ceremonies at Mora Stone may also be old. Nils Blomkvist reaches a similar conclusion regarding the election at Mora as described in the medieval laws (2011), proposing that the evolving constitution of 13th and 14th century Sweden was built on "references back to the network realm of the Viking Age, whether in their own right as surviving traditions or as historicisms in revitalisation efforts for legitimising purposes" (Blomkvist 2011, 171).

I cannot accept Olivecrona's speculations about an ancient 'verbal magic' associated with the ceremony of *døma*. The problematic concept of 'magic' may theoretically be defined as something separate from religion.¹¹ Such a definition cannot, however, be applied to these materials. Other scholars tend to distinguish too sharply between legal and religious ceremonies (e.g. Holmgren 1937a; 1937b), but such

¹¹ On the complicated discussion of the relationship between religion and magic, see e.g. Otto and Stausberg 2014, 5–6. Perhaps Olivecrona's expression "verbal magic" was intended to refer to a performative ritual, which is a more plausible interpretation.

a distinction usually has no application to ancient societies. Sjöholm's position is not convincing either. The weakness of her argument lies in not taking into consideration the strength of oral traditions in preliterate societies, and in her rejection of the idea that the law may consist of several strata of traditions. The verse-formula in *The Law of Uppland*, for instance, may reflect a period of oral tradition. Sjöholm also disregards the Old Norse sources, as well as runological and archaeological evidence, all of which must, in my opinion, be taken into account when discussing the source value of the laws concerning the period before 1200.

The investiture ceremony in the laws should thus not be regarded *a priori* as solely high medieval (i.e. as pertaining to the 13th and 14th centuries). There is actually evidence indicating that aspects of the ceremony reflect ancient structures. If the notions of kingship in these laws are incompatible with medieval Christian ideas, and are sometimes even in contravention of canon law, there is nothing to prevent us from regarding them as old notions (see Sundqvist 2002, 306–333). Hence we must scrutinise individual factors in the inauguration described in these laws and turn to the testimony of other sources.

The Mora Þing and the Mora Stone

An Icelandic tradition deals with a quarrel between the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson and the lawman of the *Uppsviar*, Þorgnýr Þorgnýsson, in the early 1000s. It was written down by Snorri Sturlason in *Óláfs saga ins Helga*, ch. 80 c. 1230. At the þing in Uppsala, Þorgnýr accused King Óláfr Eiríksson of a slack political stance and lack of energy and enterprise when it came to foreign affairs. Þorgnýr also attacked the king (Óláfr Eiríksson) for his ambition to keep the dominion of Norway in his power, which no other Svea-king had previously held. The lawman finally threatened the king that if he did not make peace with Óláfr Haraldsson, the Svear would attack and kill him, as their forefathers had previously done, said Þorgnýr, with kings who had acted overbearingly to their subjects: “Þeir steypðu fimm konungum í eina keldu á Múlaþingi ...” (They [the forefathers] threw five kings into a *kelda* at Múlaþing; ÍF 27, 116). The Old Norse word *kelda* is usually interpreted as a ‘spring, wellspring’ (cf. ONP, s.v. *kelda*). Details of the *kelda* at Múlaþing can also be found in *Flateyjarbók*'s recension of the saga (II, 84; c. 1390), although it records only two kings being drowned there. Several researchers believe that the Icelandic tradition distorted the name Múlaþing which had originally been Mora þing (**Moraþing*; e.g. Dillmann 2018, 116–118).

Snorri's information about Múlaþing has been important when trying to locate the þing place at Mora. Almost all researchers agree that this site was somewhere at Mora Äng (see however Bornfalk Back below). During the Iron Age, there was a waterway, the Långhundraleden, which could take boats from the Baltic Sea all the way up to Uppsala. Mora Äng is directly adjacent to this route. The name *Mora* contains a word meaning ‘marshland’ or ‘marsh’ (Strandberg 1993, 42–47), and was probably a suitable term for the wet terrain on the site. The information about the *kelda*, interpreted as a well, has been crucial when attempting to identify the location of the þing site more

precisely. Some scholars believe that the *þing* place and the Mora Stone were located on a large cliff at Morby, about 1.5 km southeast of the present museum; in Morby there is a well called *Nyckelkällan*. Others have suggested they were located at the site of the present museum, where there is still a well (see discussion in Olsson and Berglund 1993, 20–26).

Archaeologists Mats G. Larsson (2010; 2013) and Torun Zachrisson (2010) have come up with a new proposal. They have both independently concentrated on a well located at the so-called *Juthögen* on the northern edge of Mora Äng, directly adjacent to the river Storån. The mound and the well are mentioned in *Rannsakingar efter antikoiteter* from 1673 (ed. Ståhle 1960, 59). Today, however, the mound is almost completely gone (Larsson 2010, 295). Moreover, Larsson thinks that the plain ground around *Juthögen* may have served as a gathering place for *þing* assemblies, arguing that this part of the meadow was the only place sufficiently drained during the Late Iron Age and the Middle Ages to hold the *þing* meetings, and that this is therefore probably where the Mora Stone was originally located. About 400 meters east of *Juthögen* there is another interesting structure, which was previously interpreted as an ancient bridge or road bank across the meadow towards the present museum. However, there is nothing to suggest that a road may have gone out into this murky terrain in ancient times. Post-holes, on the other hand, suggest that this may have been a dock, which a magnetometer mapping has shown to have had a total length of 145 meters (Larsson 2013). There are also two stones, which, according to Larsson, have been erected and marked a processional road leading from this structure to the drained area at *Juthögen* (Larsson 2010, 297–298).¹² Thus, we have several indications of a prehistoric *þing* site: a large mound, a well, a possible processional route and a dock (see e.g. Zachrisson 2010; Sanmark 2019). Larsson does not rule out that this place for gatherings may have been built already during the Vendel Period (550–750AD).

The French philologist François-Xavier Dillmann (2018) has recently analyzed the above-mentioned phrase by Snorri, “*Þeir steypðu fimm konungum í eina keldu á Múlaþingi*” from a lexical, philological, and narrative perspective. He argues that “the reading *á Múlaþingi* must be considered an error on the part of the Icelandic author – or of his scribe – for a form like **á Moraþingi*” (Dillmann 2018, 138). Dillmann also discusses the meaning of the word *kelda*, and states that here it must designate ‘a swampy or marshy area’, i.e. “a meaning found in numerous examples from Icelandic works contemporary to Snorri Sturluson’s *Óláfs saga ins Helga*” (Dillmann 2018, 138). He concludes that the passage must be “put into the context of the political institutions of Sweden, death penalties of the ancient Germanic peoples, and Swedish traditions that Snorri might have been able to collect during his visit to Västergötland in the summer of 1219” (Dillmann 2018, 138). As support for the statement about methods of death penalties, Dillmann (2018, 129–130) refers to Tacitus’ *Germania*, ch. 12 (c. 97 AD), where it is reported that “*ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames caeno ac palude,*

¹² Similar processional routes have been found in connection with other assembly sites, for example in Gamla Uppsala and at Anundshög outside Västerås. Cf. Beronius Jörpeland et al. 2017; Nygaard and Murphy 2017; Sundqvist 2018; Sanmark 2019.

iniecta insuper crate, mergunt” (cowards and poor fighters and sexual perverts are plunged in the mud and marshes with a hurdle on their heads) and to ch. 11 of *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, which relates the death of Gunnhildr: “þá var hún tekin ok sökkt í mýri einni” (she was taken and sunk in a bog; ÍF 29, 15). A reasonable conclusion when taking Dillmann’s analysis into account is thus if attempting to locate the *þing* site from literary sources, it is probably meaningless to search for a well at Mora Äng, since Snorri’s word *kelda* actually refers to a swampy or marshy area – which could be anywhere on the meadow at Mora or in its vicinity. Based on Dillmann’s interpretation of the term *kelda* and the etymology of the name *Mora*, archaeologist Anders Bornfalk Back (2021) has recently suggested that the hilly forest south-west of the meadow agrees better with Snorri’s description of the *Múlaping*. In this forested area a stone frame has been discovered, which according to Bornfalk Back displays strong similarities to stone frames at other known *þing* places. Whether Dillmann’s interpretation of the word *kelda* is correct must, however, remain an open question, as must Bornfalk Back’s proposal, since it is dependent on Dillmann’s suggestion. It is also somewhat uncertain whether the stone frame is pre-historic.

In the immediate area of Mora Äng, there is also a burial field in *Söderby* that includes finds with high status indications from the Middle and Late Iron Age. Torun Zachrisson has summarized these finds in an article published in *Sigtuna dei* in 2010. Most interesting is a rich deposition of bracteates from c. AD 500 found in a marsh in the forest just above *Söderby*, located approximately five hundred metres from the stone frame mentioned by Bornfalk Back (Lamm, Hydman and Axboe 1999). This demonstrates the presence of political power near Mora Äng as early as the 6th century. *Söderby* was actually a powerful central place throughout the Late Iron Age, as witnessed by the now-lost runic inscription (U 954) from the site, which is now known only from 17th-century paintings. The presence of a political power at Medieval *Söderby* can also be found demonstrated. The nobleman Hagbard of *Söderby*, for example, participated in the committee that compiled *The Law of Uppland* in 1296 (Holmbäck and Wessén Vol. 1 1979, 6). In *Lagga* parish there was also an enormous mound called *Kashögen* with a diameter of 100 meters, marked on 18th-century maps and mentioned in 19th-century sources. It was since used as a gravel pit and thus obliterated (Zachrisson 2010, 169). Just next to the museum building with the Mora Stones is another burial field from the Late Iron Age, with some seventy mounds and stone-settings, which were investigated in 1933–1934 (Holmgren 1937a; Olsson and Berglund 1993; Larsson 2010). Some of them contained east-west oriented inhumation burials and remains of wooden coffins, indicating graves that are in accordance with Christian custom. Among the few finds is also a Frisian coin with a date between 1030–1057.

The Mora Stone has not yet been located with certainty. The only eyewitness account of it is the one made in 1434 by the Notary Petrus Tidechinis, who states that the stone was located in the open field and that a flat stone was placed on top of it (or perhaps that it had a flat top; Holmgren 1954, 5). We do not know what happened to it in (or after) the 1440s, but on the basis of Erich Lassota von Steblau’s information

that the Mora Stone was “a white stone” Mats G. Larsson argues that fragments of it are preserved in the museum among the other stones. Several of the stone fragments in the museum building are made of “Vattholma marble” (*Vattholmamarmor*), i.e. a rock that is whitish in uncontaminated condition. Larsson thus proposes that both the “three crown-stone” and Karl Knutsson’s stone, as well as most of the other stones in the museum building (with the exception of Erik of Pomerania’s coronation stone, which is made of another rock type) are fragments of the original stone, the Mora Stone. As long as Mora was used as a place for royal elections, the Mora Stone (or parts of it) was probably nearby to give the candidate legitimacy (Larsson 2010, 299).

Mora *Þing* and the *Folkland*-Units of Uppland

It has long been observed that the *þing* site at Mora was located on the border between Tiundaland and Attundaland, and that the royal elections primarily affected the peoples living in these areas. The names of the *folkland*-units contain a word element that reflects an old military system, namely the concept of *hund* (later *hundare*) ‘one hundred [men]’. This term refers to an administrative district or in ancient times a collective, intended for military use, more specifically a navy for the *leding*. This *leding* was part of the old naval war and defence organization. Each *hund*-district was responsible for raising a “(unit of) one hundred men” (SOL, 134–136; Lindkvist and Sjöberg 2009, 133–135). Tiundaland thus comprised ten *hund*-districts, while Attundaland had eight districts, and Fjädrundaland four. On the basis of linguistic arguments, Thorsten Andersson has suggested that the *hund* division dates back to the early Viking Age or even earlier (2004, 8; cf. 1999, 11–12; SOL, 136). The younger term *hundare* is attested on a runstone at Vallentuna church (U 212) from about 1050. The *folkland*-names thus indicate not only an old military organization with roots in the Late Iron Age, but also a political-military power that coordinated this system. Perhaps the early royal power in the Lake Mälaren area was the pivotal point of this system, which also had a connection with the *þing* site at Mora Äng.

The locality of Mora *þing* site on the border between the old *folkland*-units, the presence of Late Iron Age political power in the immediate area, and the characteristic traces of a prehistoric *þing* place at *Juthögen* indicate that the legal practices there may be rooted in prehistoric times. Snorri’s information about the five kings who in olden times were plunged into a *kelda* ‘a swampy or marshy area’ *á *Moraþingi* gives similar indications.

Taka Konong – A Lexical-Philological Perspective

The investiture ceremony “taking King” – i.e. the ritual design of the Svear’s acceptance of a candidate at Mora *þing* – is mentioned in several provincial laws and also in *The Older Laws of Västergötland*. We do not know what kind of action the expression “king taking” actually referred to. Scholars have suggested that it denoted the specific action of lifting the candidate up onto a rock or a shield (or into a chair) at the assembly. The

opposite was the ceremony whereby a ruler was “thrown off” (OSw *vræka*) the stone, i.e. when he was rejected or deposed (see Sundqvist 2002). In the early medieval period, offices other than kingship had similar investiture procedures and terminology.¹³ Even the Church used such ceremonies and concepts when appointing bishops, as in *The Older Laws of Västergötland, Rättlösabalken*, ch. 2:

En biscop skal taka. þa skal konong allandæ at spyriæ hauarn þeR uiliæ han skal bonþæ svn væræ. þa skal konongær hanum staf i hand sæliæ ok gullfingrini siþan skal han i kirkiu leþæ ok i biskups stol sættie. þa ær fulkomen til valdær uten uixlt. (Wiktorsson 2011, 86–87)

When a bishop is to be chosen, the King shall ask all men of the province whom they want to have. He must be a householder’s son. Thereafter the king shall hand him his staff and a golden ring. Then he is led to the church and placed on the bishop’s stool. He has then all the authority except consecration.¹⁴ (Lindkvist 2021, 48)

Canon law, which was established in Sweden during the middle of the 13th century, came to react against this ritual procedure. Despite the fact that a chapter of the cathedral of Skara existed at that time (Lindkvist 2021), the ritual was predicated on the influence of the King, a layman. Eventually the introduction of episcopal appointments to the chapter without secular intervention was introduced (Hellström 1971, 212–254). As this system of “taking” a bishop was in contravention of canon law, we may assume that it was rooted in native customs.

The expression “king taking” seems thus to be older than the time when the canon law was established in Sweden, i.e. around the assembly of Skänninge 1248 (Lindkvist and Sjöberg 2009, 83–84). It is difficult to determine how old this terminology can be. But, in fact, Tacitus also tells in *Germania* chap. 7: “Reges ex nobilitate ... sumunt” (They [Germanic people] take their kings on the ground of birth). The verb *sumere*, ‘to take’ in this phrase is notable, as Tacitus could equally well have used the verb *eligere* ‘to choose’. In medieval Latin sources from Europe, however, a varying terminology is used in descriptions of royal elections, for example, *eligere/eleccio*, *sumere*, *ordinare*, *facere*, *sublimare*, *levare*, and *elevare*. Whether these Latin terms can say anything about Germanic conditions is highly uncertain (cf. Schneider 2000).

The expression *konungstekja* or *taka til konungs* often appears in connection to royal inaugurations in Old Norse prose texts from the 12th and 13th centuries, also in pre-Christian contexts. In the introduction of *Ágrip*, dated to c. 1190, it is stated about the inauguration of Haraldr hárfagri: “[var] hann þá tekinn til [konungs]” (he [was] then taken as king; ÍF 29, 3).¹⁵ Christian kings were also taken to be king at the *þing* places. Snorri describes in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* how Óláfr Tryggvason was “taken king” (*til*

¹³ In *The Law of Hälsingland* we read that the lawman was “taken” (*Nu skulu laghmæn takas...; þingmalæ*, I, SSGL 6, 85). In *The Law of Uppland* the same is said about judges (R1, SSGL 3, 258). *The Law of Östgötland* has similar expressions regarding priests (Kk 4, SSGL 2, 5).

¹⁴ See also ÄVgLR 2, SSGL 1, 37.

¹⁵ *Ágrip* uses the terminology *taka til konungs* also in connection to Haraldr gráfeldr (ÍF 29, 12). In *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, ch. 6 (1230), Hákon Sigurðarson was taken as jarl (þá tóku þeir til jarls; ÍF 26, 207).

konungs tekinn) at the main þing (*á allsherjarþingi*) in Trondheim to rule the entire country (ÍF 26, 299). Snorri's most important source for this passage was *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, written in Latin by the 12th-century monk Oddr Snorrason. The Latin version is lost, but an Old Norse translation of it is preserved. In this text it is stated that Óláfr was taken king at Eyraþing at Niðarós (Trondheim) around 995: "ok taka þeir Ólaf til konungs á Eyraþing" (ÍF 25, 205).

In *Hirðskrá* (c. 1270) there is a ceremony called ON *konungstekja*. The one who was about to be taken as king (*til konungs taka*) was regarded as a *konungsefni* "the material for kingship", i.e. a legitimate "candidate" or "future king" (NGL II, 395–396; see below). The concept *konungsefni* is attested in a *lausavísa* by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson from the 1060s (SkP 2, 174), which may indirectly give an indication that the taking ceremony – including its terminology – occurred in Norway as early as the Late Viking Age. In *Sigurðarbálkr* st. 13, from the first half of the 12th century, it is said that the Hǫrðar and Sygnir socio-political groups took (*tóku*) Sigurðr Slembe as king after (his brother) Haraldr gilli's fall (14 December 1136) and that the men at the assembly swore that they would be like a brother to him (SkP 2, 509). Also in *Nóregs konungatal* st. 22 (19; c. 1190), the expression of *til konungs taka* appears in connection with the description of Óláfr Tryggvason's ascension to the throne in 995 (SkP 2, 774). I have not been able to find any evidence in the oldest poetry of the term *taka til konungs*. Despite this there are still indications in the sources that the phrase was applied during the end of the Viking Age (c. 1050–1100).¹⁶

The Swedish Provincial Laws provide similar indications for Eastern Scandinavian conditions. The verb *taka* there is in all likelihood an older expression in the royal investiture which is related to the interests of the local *folkland*-units and assemblies (Lindkvist 2002; Sundqvist 2002). The 1296 *Law of Uppland* alternates between *taka* and *vælia* (Kg 1, SSGL 3, 87–89), and in the younger laws the latter concept has become prevalent. The verb *vælia* must be regarded as something new and is here probably influenced by the Latin term *electio* (*eligere*) found in Canon law (cf. Olivecrona 1942, 35–43; Hafström 1964, 11; Hellström 1971, 245–249). In the younger laws, there were representational elections with a constituency that elected the king to his position. *Magnus Erikssons Landslag* (1350) reports that representatives from all legislatures gathered at Mora Äng to choose their king (Kg 4, SSGL 10, 7). In this law, the verb *vælia* occurs frequently, reflecting the younger terminology. It seems that the ceremony at Mora Äng was transformed at the end of the 13th century, from the older ritual of taking to a more pronounced election procedure in the presence of a representative constituency (cf. Hafström 1964, 11–12; Hellström 1971, 164, 245–249). In the 13th century, the ecclesiastical coronation also became an important ritual in the investiture, as outlined in *The Law of Uppland*. This rite had no connection to Mora þing, but was performed in Uppsala Cathedral. Before this, however, in the older and traditional society, the assemblies had significant authority and the farmers gave the king

¹⁶ The expression *taka til konungs* actually appears in mythic contexts as well. In the prose prologue to the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* we meet the expression: "Var þá Geirroðr til konungs tekinn" (Then Geirroðr was taken as king).

legitimacy. The king was only regarded as a *primus inter pares* “the foremost among equals” (Sundqvist 2002, 83–92).

The Lifting up onto a Stone

Erikskrönikan, written in the 1320s, is the earliest text to mention that an election took place at Mora Stone (see above). The Notary Petrus Tidechinis, who was an eyewitness, describes the rituals at Mora in more detail during a visit there in 1434:

...ad lapidem vulgariter dictum Mora steen, in quo et super quem reges Sveciæ de novo electi statim post eorum electionem consueverunt ab antiquissimis temporibus sublimari & intronizari. (Quoted from Holmgren 1954, 5)

...to a stone, commonly called the Mora Stone, on which newly elected Swedish kings were lifted onto and celebrated immediately after the election, since ancient times.

The woodcut in Olaus Magnus’s work (1555) shows how the newly-taken king stands on the Mora Stone and receives tribute (fig. 1). In the picture, the stone is marked with a runic inscription that says “*mora stan*”. Even in the notes of the *Vadstenadiariet* (16th century) it is said that when Kristofer of Bavaria was elected king in 1441, he was “raised in accordance with the laws and customs of the Fatherland on a stone called Mora Stone”.¹⁷

According to several sources, the Danish kings were taken from the royal kin at the *þing* at Viborg (Hoffmann 1976, 170–190). As in Sweden, the king was lifted up onto a stone at *Danaerigh* (*Danaerygh*, *Danaerugh*), where they were assigned their royal name. This is mentioned as early as the *Chronicle of Lejre* (from about 1170) in connection with the election of the first legendary Danish king Dan.¹⁸ According to Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200), it was the Danish lawmen who stood on a firm stone when they proclaimed the election of a new king. A stone imbedded in earth was considered to contribute to their permanence of some kind (Saxo 1.2.1). This procedure was used in connection with the election of Dan’s son Humli. Arild Huitfeldt (I,3) points out in his 16th-century chronicle that the Danish royal election was performed in connection with a large stone in Jutland, which was found at a heath called *Danerliung*.

We meet similar ceremonies during the Middle Ages in Central Europe. In Kärnten (Austria), for example, where Slavic and Germanic groups lived from at least the 600–700s, medieval sources describe how the Duke (*dux*) would be placed on a stone at the beginning of his installation. The stone used for this ceremony is preserved, it is actually the (ornate) capital of an ancient Ionian column from the Roman city of Viunum, commonly known as *Fürstenstein* (Graber 1919; cf. Fräss-Ehrfeld 1984, 343–350; 2006; Wolfram 2000). In 1340–41, Johannes von Viktring wrote that “*princeps stans*

¹⁷ “est secundum leges et mores patrie sublevatus super lapidem, qui dicitur Morasten” (*Vadstenadiariet* 511:2; cf. 89:2).

¹⁸ “Videntes autem Jutones Dan strenuum uirum et fortem et uirtuosum duxerunt eum ad lapidem, qui dicitur Danaerigh, posueruntque eum super lapidem, inponentes ei nomen regis...” (*Chronicon Lethrense* II, 45).

super lapidem, nudum in manu gladium habens" (the prince stands on the stone, holding a bare sword; Graber 1919, 91). The stone was originally found at Karnburg am Zollfeldt, near the bishop's seat of Maria Saal, just outside Klagenfurt, and is believed to have been in use since the 8th century (Wolfram 2000, 239). After a mass in the cathedral inside the town, the candidate would swear an oath at the so-called *Herzogstuhl* (ducal seat) at Zollfeldt. Just as in the Scandinavian countries, the inaugural ceremony at the stone was linked to an assembly, where a Slavic language was used. The church ceremony was performed in Latin, while the closing oaths at the "chair" were sworn in a Germanic language.

Perhaps the most well-known "coronation stone" is the "Stone of Scone", which was used in the appointment of Kings in Scotland in ancient times. Several medieval sources report that it was taken from the Monastery of Scone to Westminster Abbey in the 13th century, where it was placed in the coronation chair under the seat. The Yorkshire chronicler Walter of Guisborough (c. 1340s) states that the stone was very large, concave and made to the shape (*ad modum*) of a round chair. Whether this throne was a chair-shaped stone, or the present stone enclosed in the wooden chair is impossible to tell (Duncan 1975, 115–116, 555–556). It was used during the coronation of Alexander III c. 1249, and when Elizabeth II was crowned 1953.

Also well-known is the stone *Lia Fáil* at Tara in Ireland, where pre-Christian kings were installed according to Old Irish sources.¹⁹ When a future king was standing on the stone, it was supposed to make a screaming noise as a sign that the candidate was legitimate. In a tradition concerning the inauguration of Conaire Mór, a legendary high king in pre-Christian Ireland, we meet a similar motif in the Old Irish text *De Shíl Chonairi Mór* 'Of the Descendants of Conaire Mór':

Batar da liaic hi Temuir .i. Blocc 7 bliugne; inti arfoentis, arosilctis fris co teged in carpat etarru. 7 bai Fal and, Ferp Cluche, for cind oenig in charbait; inti arfemath flaith Temrach gloedad in Fal fri fonnad in charpait conidcluneth cach.

There were two flag-stones in Tara: 'Blocc' and 'Bliugne': when they accepted a man, they would open before him until the chariot went through. And Fál was there, the 'stone-penis' at the head of the chariot course; when a man should have the kingship of Tara, it screeched against his chariot-axle, so that all might hear. (Quoted from Blustein 2007, 26).

The stone also appears in Celtic mythical traditions. According to a euhemerised account in the first redaction of *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (§57), found in the Book of Leinster (compiled around 1000AD), the stone came to Ireland with the mythical Túatha Dé Danann.

In the context of the medieval Swedish inaugurations at Mora, a stone had a prominent position as inauguration paraphernalia. Most likely several rites were performed at this stone during the taking-ceremony. When the coming king was raised onto the stone at Mora, sources report that oaths were sworn, for instance. A document detailing an agreement made in Nyköping 1396 between the Swedish Council on the

¹⁹ The written sources are collected and discussed in Ó Broin 1990. Cf. Byrne 2001 and Blustein 2007.

one hand, and Erik of Pomerania and Queen Margareta on the other, refers to a recent election. It describes how noble men swore oaths and paid homage to the King when he stood on Mora Stone.²⁰ Similar information can be found in the conciliation treaty between Erik of Pomerania and the Swedish Council, which was completed in Stockholm in 1435.²¹ If we take into account Erich Lassota von Steblaus's information that Mora Stone was white, there are several interesting parallels of such rituals to be found in the sources. In the Eddic lay *Guðrúnarkviða III*, Guðrún, Atli's wife, is accused of having slept with Þjóðrekr by one of Atli's serving-maids called Herkia. Atli was very upset and turned to Guðrún with this accusation. Guðrún responded that she was not unfaithful to Atli: "ek ... eiða vinna at inum hvíta helga steini" (I'll swear you oaths about all this, by the sacred, white stone; st. 3, transl. Larrington 2014, 197).²² Interpreters have associated *inn hvíti helgi steinn* with marble, but also other white rocks (von See et al. 2009, 804). It has been argued that this poem reflects very old customs, such as the punishment of Herkia, where she was drowned in a foul bog (*í mýri fúla*; st. 11). The drowning of criminals in a bog is a well-attested Germanic death penalty (see above). A cult of so-called "white stones" is archaeologically attested in Norway, with uncertain dating. These stones have a phallic form and have previously been associated with a fertility cult. However, Björn Myhre (2006) believes that they may have appeared in a variety of ritual contexts during both the Middle and Late Iron Age, including as cult images at pre-Christian cult sites. The round, white tombstones (Swedish *gravklot*) from Medieval and Late Iron Age Sweden are also interesting in this context, since they undoubtedly appeared in cultic contexts. They are often found in connection with burial mounds, for example Inglinge hög in Småland and Anundshög in Västmanland.

There are several sources that indicate that Germanic people considered stones to have a special power and that rites were performed in connection with them. In the *Indiculus superstitionum et paganiarum* (c. 750), which was written during the mission among the Saxon people and the people of northern Gaul, there is a heading preserved that indicates that some native customs and deeds performed on stones would be banned.²³ In *The Law of Uppland* there is a prohibition against pagan cult and belief in stones: "ængin skal aff guþum blotæ. ok ængin a lundi ællr stenæ troæ ..." (Nobody shall worship pagan gods or believe in groves and stones; UL Kk 1 pr, SSGL 3, 11–12). Poetic traditions also mention that rituals were performed on stones. According to *Grógaldr*, st. 15, which is found in late manuscripts, Gróa was standing on a grounding stone as she chanted her incantation: "Á jarðföstum steini stóð ek innan dura, meðan

²⁰ "oc swa sidhan wi hanom hylladom oc sworom oc vntfyngom rættelika til warn rætta herra oc konung ouer Suerikes rike oppa Mora sten" (Quoted from Holmgren 1954, 35, note 1).

²¹ "oc then hyldning oc edher, som rikesens mæn honom giordo oc sworo vppa Mora sten, ... then tiidh han sina eriksgathu reedh" (Quoted from Holmgren 1954, 35, note 1).

²² In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, st. 31 there is an indication that oaths should be sworn in the presence of a special stone. See also *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, ch. 12 for similar rituals performed at stones.

²³ "De his quae faciunt super petras" (Fontes, 43).

ek þér galdra gól” (I stood within the doors by an earth-fast stone, while I chanted these chants for you; transl. Larrington 2014, 258). The evidence related to sacred stones indicates that the taking-ceremony at Mora Stone was built on an ancient tradition.

To Raise and Place the Claimant in a High-Seat during Inauguration

We have no information from Norway on the lifting of the claimant onto a stone. However, medieval sources often report that Christian kings and *jarlar* in Norway were placed high in their high-seats and given their royal names at their investiture. The most detailed description of the ceremony called *konungstekja* is found in Magnus Lagabøter’s *Hirðskrá* from about 1270 (NGL II, 391–450). It was performed at the *valþing*, where only a rightful claimant – a *kongsefni* – was taken as king. After a sort of pre-assembly where the chieftains and the retinue participated in a discussion with the claimant, they gathered for the ordinary *þing*-meeting. The *konungsefni* would, however, first attend a mass in the church and receive the bishop’s blessing there. Then he would go in procession with all the men to the *þing*-place, where several high-seats were set up for the nobles. One of the seats in the middle was the most splendid one, the “high-seat” (*hásæti*), and the claimant was supposed to sit on the step (*skǫr*) below it. There, the bishops and the nobles would give the claimant his royal name, and then they raised and placed him in the high-seat.²⁴

The last part of the procedure corresponds to Snorri Sturluson’s accounts of investitures of both kings and *jarlar* in Viking Age Norway. When King Magnús (the Good) appointed Sveinn Úlfsson (also called Sveinn Ástriðarson) to *jarl* (c. 1047), for instance, Sveinn had to sit on the foot-board (*á fót-skǫrinni*) in front of the king who sat in his high-seat (*i hásæti*). Then the king declaimed publicly: “Hefir hann [Sveinn] ætt til þess at vera höfðingi” (he [Sveinn] has the birth to be a chieftain; ÍF 28, 37). Thereupon the king stood up and gave a sword and a shield to Sveinn, finally setting a helmet on Sveinn’s head and bestowing the title of *jarl* on him. Thereupon the king led the *jarl* to share his high-seat with him.²⁵

Snorri reports that similar types of ceremonies related to the high-seat were performed when pre-Christian legendary kings were inaugurated in office at funeral feasts (*erfi*) in ancient Svetjud. In his *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 36 (c. 1230), King Ingjaldr held a funeral feast for his father, King Qnundr, at the pre-Christian royal site of Uppsala. According to Snorri, Ingjaldr prepared a hall in no way smaller or less stately than the hall called *Uppsalsr*, and “hann kallaði sjau konunga sal” (he called it the Hall of Seven

²⁴ *Hirðskrá* 5 states “læggja a konongs æfni konongs nafn ... skulu up standa byskupar oc lender men hirðstiorar oc loghmen. oc hæfia konong up i hasæti” (NGL II, 396).

²⁵ “Síðan leiddi konungr jarl til hásætis með sér.” (ÍF 28, 37). See also Magnúsóna saga, ch. 8 (“þá tok Sigurðr konungr í hönd hertoganum ok leiddi hann upp á hásæti”; ÍF 28, 247) and *Fagrskinna*: “... þá leiddi Sigurðr konungr Rogeir jarl til hásætis með sér ok gaf hönnum konungs nafn” (IF 29, 318).

Kings; ÍF 26, 66). In this hall seven high-seats were erected. The king sent messengers through all of Svetjud, inviting seven kings, *jarlar* and other prominent men. All but one of the kings arrived at Uppsala, where they were given seats in the new hall. Snorri then describes, in general terms, the rituals usually performed at a royal funeral feast in pre-Christian contexts.²⁶ It was the custom, for instance, when a funeral feast was prepared to honour a departed king or earl, that the one who prepared the feast and was to receive the major inheritance was to sit on the step before the high-seat (*á skörinni fyrir hásetinu*) until the beaker (*full*) called the *bragafull* was brought in. He was then to stand up to receive it, make a vow (*strengja heit*), and drink the beaker, whereupon he was to be inducted into the high-seat (*i háseti*) which his father had occupied. Only then would he have come into his rightful inheritance as his father's successor. This duly took place at Qnundr's funeral feast: when the beaker was brought in, Ingjaldr stood up, seized a large drinking horn, and made the vow that he would increase his dominion to twice its size in every direction, or else die, before emptying the vessel. That same night Ingjaldr ordered his retainers set the new hall aflame, killing the other six kings and all their troops, . Ingjaldr thereby seized the realms of the six kings, fulfilling his oath (ÍF 26, 66–67).

This text cannot be regarded as a source for historical reconstruction in a general sense as several fictitious or literary elements may be at play in this account. Ingjaldr's project of making a kingdom under a single monarch by means of burning the other district kings in the new hall, for instance – we do not really know whether King Ingjaldr ever lived in Svetjud in ancient times, or if he held a funeral feast for his father Qnundr at Uppsala. Regardless, there are some details in the text that seem to be based on more solid historical ground, such as the description of rituals, ritual objects, constructions and buildings used by Ingjaldr to claim authority and power in Svetjud (see further Sundqvist 2016, 3–4, 476–502).

There is also an ancient ritual sequence in Snorri's account, which may be interpreted as an inauguration. Such ceremonies often have the character of *rites de passage*, common in cultures all around the world. Arnold van Gennep (1960) identified three successive and distinct factors in such rituals: separation, margin, and aggregation. Victor Turner (1967) proceeded from this framework, but further focused on an aspect of these rituals that had previously been neglected, the marginal or liminal period. In initiation rituals the neophytes are — during a well-marked liminal period — removed, hidden, without rank or insignia etc. “The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” (1967, 95). He is “betwixt and between”, neither here nor there. The neophyte is thus regarded as symbolically dead. He is leaving his former being, but he has yet not achieved what he will become. Only after the “exhibitions”, “actions” and “instructions” (of the “knowledge”), i.e. the ritual actions that comprised the initiation, can he become what he is going to be.

²⁶ *Fagrskinna* (c.1220) has similar expressions when describing the customs of an ancient inheritance feast, where the old gods were involved (IF 29, 124–125).

If we go back to Snorri's account we notice that when the future king "sit[s] on the step" in the hall, (the *skor*), the most sacred object of his father's office and power – namely the high-seat – is displayed for him. In this marginal position he can be perceived of as passing through the liminal phase of a *rite de passage*. He is no longer a "prince", but has not yet become the new king or ruler. He cannot sit in his former seat on the long bench (which followed a hierarchic order; Birkeli 1932, 6–7, 31–36), yet the dead ruler's high-seat is still empty. Not until he drinks the *bragafull* and swears the oath can he be a righteous ruler and allowed to enter the seat. These performative rituals transform his identity so he can become the heir of his father's possessions and power. He might also have acquired numinous knowledge during this ritual process, although evidence in these particular sources is lacking (cf. Schjødt 2008).

Initiation in a High-Seat on a Mound?

The ritual called *konungstekja* found in *Hirðskrá*, the taking of bishop (*taka biscop*) in *The Older Laws of Västergötland*, and Snorri's text about Ingjaldr describe initiations where the claimant is placed in a (high-)seat. In Old Norse sources referring to the pre-Christian period it is sometimes said that the high-seat was placed outdoors, on a mound, perhaps in order to make the king's authority more public (Olrik 1909; Sundqvist 2016, 493–497). The expression *sitja á haugi* refers to rulers who exercised their power on a grave mound or *þing* mound. According to Axel Olrik (1909, 3), it was actually only kings who sat on the mounds.²⁷ As far as I know, we have no descriptions of inaugurations where the coming king was placed in a high-seat on a mound. However, some traditions imply that dethroning ceremonies took place in connection with such ritual paraphernalia. Snorri reports in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* that Hrollaugr, a minor king of Naumadalir, heard that King Haraldr was approaching him:

Hrollaugr konungr fór upp á haug þann, er konungar váru vanir at sitja á, ok lét þar búa konungs háseti ok settisk þar í. Þá lét hann leggja dýnur á fótpallinn, þar er jarlar váru vanir at sitja. Þá veltisk Hrollaugr konungr ór konungshásætinu ok í jarlssæti ok gaf sér sjálfr jarlsnafn. (ÍF 26, 99f.)

King Hrollaugr went up on the mound on which the kings were wont to sit. There he had a king's high-seat prepared for himself, and seated himself on it. Then he had down pillows laid on the footstool where it was the custom of earls to sit. Thereupon King Hrollaugr rolled himself down from the king's high-seat and onto the earl's seat and gave himself the title of "earl". (Hollander 1964, 64)

Whether King Haraldr ever had an encounter with Hrollaugr in Naumadalir is, of course, uncertain. According to several scholars, however, the degradation-ritual described in this text is based on an ancient tradition, as is the opposite act of placing

²⁷ Archaeological evidence has been related to such customs, for instance at Inglingehög with its erected stone and tombstones. These stones are called "virdakungarnes tron" in folklore (Lindqvist 1921, 97).

a new king in his high-seat or on the rock (Vestergaard 1990, 122; Dillmann 2000, 442). A similar story as Snorri's account occurs in *Ágrip*. It is older than *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, and perhaps Snorri was influenced by it when he wrote *Heimskringla*. *Ágrip* narrates that King Hersir of Naumudalir mourned his dead wife, but as he could not kill himself in his capacity of king, demoted himself to the office of *jarl* before committing suicide: "Ok hann fór þá á haug nekkvern ok veltisk fyrir ofan ok kvaðsk þá hafa velzk ór konungs nafni ok hengði sik síðan í jarls nafni" (Then he went up on a mound and rolled himself down from it and said then that he had rolled himself out of the king's name, and he hanged himself in the title of *jarl*; ÍF 29, 18). In connection with this passage, the author of *Ágrip* refers to the skaldic poem *Háleygjatal*, composed by Eyvindr Finnsson (*skáldaspillir*) in the 10th century, although the stanzas mentioning this story are, unfortunately, now lost (SkP 1, 195–196).

The stories in *Heimskringla* and *Ágrip* do not reflect historical events, but the custom whereby the king threw himself down from the high-seat may be authentic and correspond with *The Older Laws of Västergötland* (c. 1225), where the Old Swedish term *vræka* 'heave, evict, throw, reject' occurs (see above). It is possible that the ceremony of *vræka* among the Svear is alluded to in Snorri's *Óláfs saga ins Helga*, ch. 80 (c. 1230), where it is mentioned that five kings were plunged (*steypa* inf.) into a swampy area or a well at the Mora *þing*.

Mythical Dimensions of Inauguration and Traces of Cult Continuity

In the History of Religions, it has often been stated that the context of ritual is myth. Even if this statement can be contested (see e.g. Staal 1979; Clunies Ross 1994, 11–20), it has been argued that myths illuminate the meaning and ideological content of rituals, as well as creating a model for all kinds of human institutions, behaviour, and actions (cf. Honko 1984, 51). Many scholars (including myself) have argued that the pre-Christian royal office in ancient Scandinavia included mythical dimensions and important religious elements and functions – that the king was not only a political authority, but also a cultic leader (e.g. Schjødt 1990; Steinsland 1991; Sundqvist 2002; Bønding 2020). It has also been argued that the old inauguration included religious elements (e.g. Vestergaard 1990). When the coming ruler entered the high-seat, stone, or mound during his initiation ritual, he was expected to obtain certain religious knowledge, which was required for him to mediate between men and divinities in his cultic office. Similar connections between the high-seat, inaugurations and acquisition of religious knowledge also appear in Old Norse myths. Mythical traditions report that the old deities – especially the ruler-god, Óðinn – were endowed with supernatural abilities when entering the high-seat (or the highly-located place) *Hliðskjálf*; for instance, they could see over all worlds. This information is not mentioned in any

Eddic lays, but it appears in the prose introductions to *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*.²⁸ In *Gylfaginning*, ch.17, Snorri writes that Óðinn can see over all worlds when he sits in Hliðskjálf:

Þar er en mikill staðr er Valaskjálf heitir. Þann stað á Óðinn. Þann gerðu guðin ok þökkðu skíru silfri, ok þar er Hliðskjálfinn í þessum sal, þat háseti svá heitir. Ok þá er Alföðr sitr í því sæti þá sér hann of allan heim. (Faulkes 1995, 20).

There also is a great place called Valaskjálf. This place is Óðinn's. The gods built it and roofed it with pure silver, and it is there in this hall that Hliðskjálf is, the high-seat of that name. And when All-father (Óðinn) sits on that seat he can see over all worlds. (Faulkes 1987, 20)

There are some kennings indicating that the connection between Óðinn and Hliðskjálf is old. In a 10th-century *lausavisa*, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld calls Óðinn *Hliðskjálfar harri*, 'the ruler of Hliðskjálf', while Þórólfr skáld half a century later calls the god *Hliðskjálfar gramr*, 'the leader of Hliðskjálf'.²⁹ It is interesting to note that in both kennings Hliðskjálf is related to the old designations of rulers, *gramr* and *harri*. Hliðskjálf thus seems to have been a pre-Christian symbol of authority and power (Steinsland 1991, 69). According to *Gylfaginning*, ch. 37, Hliðskjálf is called "holy seat" (*helga sæti*) and it seems as if it was intended for Óðinn only, i.e. the ruler of the gods, even if Freyr did once sit in it (Sundqvist 2016, 239).

In *Gylfaginning* ch. 9 it is not a high-seat, but rather the place where such a seat stands that is called *Hliðskjálf*: "Þar er einn staðr er Hliðskjálf heitir, ok þá er Óðinn settisk þar í háseti" (There is a place called Hliðskjálf, and when Óðinn sits in the high-seat there; 13). It thus seems that Óðinn's high-seat is located at a place called Hliðskjálf. This site is mentioned in a similar context in *Gylfaginning*, ch. 50 where it seems to refer to a high-located place: "Þá sá hann at Æsir áttu skamt til hans ok hafði Óðinn sét ór Hliðskjálfinni hvar hann var" (Then he noticed that the Æsir were only a short distance away from him, and Óðinn had seen where he was from Hliðskjálf; 48). The etymology of the name *Hliðskjálf* is uncertain. The concept *hlið* means 'opening', while *skjálf* cannot be interpreted with certainty, but it has been suggested that it could refer to a 'shelf' or 'ledge' (Dronke 1997, 404), and Jan de Vries proposed that it actually meant 'Höhe, Bergspitze' (height, mountain summit; 1961, 494). The name *Hliðskjálf* has also been associated with the name of the Swedish royal dynasty called *Skilfingar* (OE *Scylfingas*) mentioned in, for instance, *Ynglingatal*, st. 14, where Egill is described as *Skilfinga niðr*, 'the descendant of the Skilfingar' (SkP 1, 31–34; cf. Gräslund 2018, 78–79, 157–158). Óðinn too was called *Skilfingr* (*Grímnismál*, st. 54). Jan de Vries argues that this name could be interpreted as "der auf einem *skjalf* [sic; 'Höhe, Bergspitze'] wohnende, oder daher abstammende" (he who lives, or comes from, a *skjálf* [height,

²⁸ The prose introduction to *Grímnismál* says: "Óðinn ok Frigg sátu í Hliðskjálf ok sá um heima alla" (Óðinn and Frigg sat in Hliðskjálf and looked into all the worlds; 20). The prose introduction to *Skírnismál* states: "Freyr, sonr Njarðar, hafði einn dag setzk í Hliðskjálf ok sá um heima alla" (Freyr, the son of Njörðr, had one day seated himself in Hliðskjálf and looked over all worlds; 20).

²⁹ Hallfreðr's *lausavisa* is in Skj. B1, 158 and Skj. A1, 168, while Þórólfr's stanza is in Skj. B1, 388.

mountain summit], 1961, 492). It is striking that many aristocratic halls in the Lake Mälaren area, which sometimes include traces of high-seats, were built on artificial terraces or in topographic positions expressing loftiness. The hall at Birka, for instance, was exposed on the upper terrace at “the Garrison”, and must have been easily visible from the fairway at Björkö, an impressive sight for people sailing by (Sundqvist 2016, 206). At this hall, there were high-status objects concentrated in the western parts of the building, e.g. a dragon’s head, glass beakers and sword handles. Archaeologists have suggested that the “high-seat” was located in this place, close to the hearth (Holmquist Olausson and Kitzler Ahfeldt 2002, 16). On Helgö (Lillön;Ekerö parish, Färentuna härad, Uppland), a three-aisled hall was erected on a terrace in an east-west orientation. Inside the building there was an elevated position in the corner of the southern aisle of the banqueting room that has been interpreted as the place of the high-seat. Gold-foil figures and expensive glass were found there, indicating that it was a ritual space (see Herschend 1995; 1998).

Whether the name *Hliðskjálf* designated the high-seat or a high place where this seat stood, it is usually understood to be an old concept (Dronke 1997, 404). It has also a bearing on Óðinn and rulership in the mythic world. It is possible that the high-seat at the *þing* place, or the inauguration stone at Mora Äng in ancient times, was associated with such mythic or sacred places.³⁰ When the king or chieftain was placed on the high-seat, stone, or mound during his inauguration, these places thus reflected values similar to the highly-located *Hliðskjálf*. The mere act of being placed there, enriched the candidate with certain knowledge, which made it possible for him to get in touch with the divinities of the other world (Vestergaard 1990, 121).

If we take these mythical references into consideration, the “taking king” ceremony could be seen as an example of religious continuity, where the candidate is lifted into a high-seat or onto a stone. Several scholars have argued that the Christian form of ideological legitimacy for kingship during the Early Middle Ages in general was adapted to the ancient Germanic ruler ideology (Russell 1994; Steinsland 2000; Sundqvist 2002; Bønding 2020). Such continuity may have taken place in Sweden during the transition period, as raising the incoming king high onto the Mora Stone had a connection with the way kings had been initiated ever since ancient times. Indeed, the meaning of the ritual changed during the Middle Ages, and the mythical aspects of it were dismantled. Regardless, the *þing* place with the stone, and the ceremonies related to it, were perceived as ancient and legitimate for the medieval elite when electing a king.

Concluding remarks

The descriptions of the ceremony called “taking king” at Mora Äng in the medieval sources should not be regarded as a 14th-century invention, as some scholars have

³⁰ On the connection between myths, cosmology, and *þing* places in ancient Scandinavia, see Riisøy 2013.

assumed, as the sources outlining it seem to include ancient layers. There are a number of indications that strengthen such an argument, including the archaeological finds discovered in the environment of Mora Äng, the location of the *þing* place on the border between the two old *folkland*-units, and Snorri's story about the execution of kings at the *kelda* of *Múlaping* (*á *Morapingi*) in older times. Parallel examples of old customs at investitures from Scandinavia and other European areas produce similar indications, such as the application of the ritual terminology (*taka konong*), the use of a (sacred) stone as ritual paraphernalia (regalia), and the ritual of raising the candidate to the throne up high and placing him on a rock or in a high-seat. When the ceremony at Mora is mentioned in the medieval sources it is not presented as a novelty, but rather as an ancient custom. Since some ideas in these descriptions are incompatible with medieval Christian ideas, and are sometimes even in contravention of Canon law, there is nothing to prevent us from regarding them as old notions. The ceremony at Mora actually had nothing to do with the church, but was rather in accordance with the interests of the old *folkland*-units, the provinces and the *þing*-assembly, and thus legitimized a traditional authority. The mythical references to *Hliðskjálf* may even indicate aspects of cult continuity from pre-Christian sacral kingship to the investiture of medieval kings in Sweden. In both ritual contexts, the actors were raised and placed high. By means of such performative rituals, they were also transformed and thereby came to possess new abilities and identities.

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