In the twelfth century the people of the north began writing about their own past. Saxo Grammaticus (c.1160–c.1220) in Denmark, Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148) in Iceland and Theodoricus Monachus (writing in the late twelfth century) in Norway narrated how the Danes, Icelanders and Norwegians had cast away paganism and embraced Christianity. Further, these histories highlighted how the identity of these nations had been moulded by the development of political institutions. In Norway and Denmark this meant the monopolisation of royal power in the hands of specific dynasties. In kingless Iceland, however, the so-called Alþingi (‘General Assembly’) served Ari as the core of the country’s history and identity. These historical works, which are some of the earliest Nordic compositions in the Latin alphabet, relate events that took place in the Viking Age (here defined as the period between c. 800 AD and 1050 AD). Even more importantly, they reveal what these authors thought about the history of their people and how they wished to portray this history to their contemporaries. Above all, they show that by the twelfth century the notion that Scandinavia was divided into separate nations, each with its own distinct history, had become an established idea.

Around 800 AD Scandinavia was both pagan and politically fragmented. There were certainly no Swedish or Norwegian kingdoms, while the nature of Danish kingship in this period is uncertain. By 1200 AD there were kings who claimed rulership over lands which broadly (but by no means entirely) correspond to our modern notion of Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Further, apart from the Sami in the north, every inhabitant of the region would expect to be baptised into the Christian religion. There was, however, nothing inevitable about the emergence of separate Scandinavian...
kingdoms and the conversion to Christianity. Complex cultural, political and geographic factors brought about these momentous changes.

This chapter does not aim to offer an overview of the state-formation or the Christianisation of Scandinavia. These two interrelated themes are well served by authoritative and easily accessible recent studies (see for example Winroth 2012 and 2014). Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce salient ideas, problems and perspectives about Viking-Age Scandinavian society. In particular, the chapter highlights the importance of regional and local levels of religion, politics and identity and their relation to national identity. Following a brief introduction, the chapter will crystallise the chosen themes through the examination of four objects, each of which carries an inscription in the runic alphabet. These are the ninth-century Forsa ring from Hälsingland in Sweden, the two rune-stones of the famous Jelling monument(s) from tenth-century Jutland in Denmark, and the so-called Frösö stone which was crafted in eleventh-century Jämtland, a border region between Norway and Sweden.

‘Scandinavia’ in Early Sources

There are plentiful descriptions from various parts of Europe about marauding and invading people from the pagan north. Not surprisingly, Irish and Anglo-Saxon annals as well as Frankish chronicles depict Scandinavians in a decidedly negative way. The sources frequently present the belligerent people of the north as infernal agents of God, which, like plagues or swarms of locusts, were sent to punish the Christians for their sins and flawed religious observance. Such accounts comprise the earliest sustained writings about Scandinavia and its inhabitants.

For the centuries preceding the Viking Age, however, written references about Scandinavians are scarce. But the handful that do exist mention that the Scandinavians were prone to emigrate from their homeland. Around 550 AD Jordanes, writing in Constantinople (today’s Istanbul), reported that in the past the island of ‘Scandza’ had served as ‘a hive of races and a womb of nations’ (since classical times the northernmost lands of Europe had been believed to form an island) (Jordanes 1908, 7). Jordanes recounts this near the beginning of his The Origin and Deeds of the Goths. The Goths constituted a tribe or people that was associated with the fifth-century collapse of the Roman Empire in Europe. Jordanes relates how in the distant past the Goths emigrated from their homeland and, following a long and circuitous route, became the most
powerful enemies of the Roman Empire and eventually the founders of kingdoms in their own right. The term ‘Goth’ approximates to some familiar names in Scandinavia, most notably Västergötland in Sweden and the Baltic island of Gotland. Whatever the truthfulness of Jordanes’ account about an emigration from Scandinavia – and scholars have long debated its veracity – this is the one thing writers thought worth reporting about the northern people.

In the early eighth century a Northumbrian monk by the name of Bede wrote one of the seminal texts of the Early Middle Ages (500–1000 AD). This is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a work that traces the origins of the ‘English people’ from the ruins of the Roman Empire to Bede’s own time. Bede tells how, in the fifth century, people from modern Denmark and northern Germany arrived in Britain. Initially they arrived as mercenaries, assigned the task of fending off other ‘barbarians’, but soon the newcomers became the new masters and founders of new kingdoms (Bede 1969, 49–53). These Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were considered by Bede to be the constituent polities of the people he referred to as the English. Not long after Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* an unknown author recorded the greatest of the Old English poems, *Beowulf*, which narrates the deeds of characters who lived in southern Scandinavia, the old homeland of the Anglo-Saxons. The epic poem follows the adventures of the main protagonist, Beowulf, a one-time king of the Geats (or the Götar) who, among other deeds, performs heroic feats at the court of the king of the Danes (see O’Donoghue 2008). In *Beowulf* we get a glimpse of the ancient and longstanding division of (what is now) Sweden (or rather the southern and central part of the country) into two peoples or tribes. These were the Götar who inhabited Götaland (modern-day southern Sweden, excluding Skåne) and the Svear who lived in south-central Sweden (Svealand).

Jordanes’ *History of the Goths*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and *Beowulf* are quite different kinds of texts. Nevertheless, all three relay the belief that the inhabitants of the north were divided into a number of tribes or peoples. These divisions do not correspond to our present-day division of the region’s inhabitants into, among others, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes. Jordanes, for instance, mentions among others the ‘Hallin’, ‘the people of Halland’ (on Sweden’s south-western coast), ‘Raumariciae’, ‘people of the Raumar’ (who likely gave their name to Romerike in south-eastern Norway) and ‘Screrefennae’, which may designate Finns/Sami of northern Scandinavia (see Brink 2008a). Bede mentions the ‘Jutes’ while, as already noted, Beowulf is a ‘Geat’ who accomplishes his heroic deeds among a people called the ‘Danes’. Such
testimonies, supported by later evidence, indicates that the peoples of Scandinavia formed a number of separate groupings among which the ‘Danes' and ‘Swedes' (‘Svear') only represented two markers of communal identity among many. An early plausible reference to ‘Norwegians' appears in an Old-English source from the end of the ninth century. There, a certain Othere, a merchant who visited the court of King Alfred of Wessex, testified that ‘he lived the furthest north of all northmen [Norðmonno]’ (Bately and Englert 2007, 125). As with the earlier mentioned references to Danes and Swedes, we cannot be altogether certain what Othere understood by the term Norðmonno.

As we examine the four objects and their inscriptions it is useful to keep in mind the two salient points of our discussion so far. One is the established idea – attested in the written records of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – of the existence of distinct peoples called Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Icelanders. The other is the existence of local and regional identities below these ‘national levels', whose existence we can only glean from contemporary skaldic poetry, place-names, stray references in foreign written sources and, not least, runic inscriptions.

The Forsa Ring

Our first object – an iron ring, forty-three centimetres in diameter – has a peculiar story. For centuries the ring was a door-ring in the church at Forsa in Hälsingland, which is a province in eastern central Sweden. Considering the ring’s connection with the local church one might be tempted to conclude that it was a Christian object. In one sense this is a correct assumption because the ring must have been a familiar sight to generations of church-goers. What then about the runes, which have been etched into the iron? There is nothing inherently pagan about runic inscriptions. Runes were carved throughout Scandinavia from at least the third century to the fifteenth century, at which point the region had been Christian for centuries. According to the experts, however, the runes on the Forsa ring are of a kind that date their making to the ninth or tenth century. Thus, it seems highly unlikely that the ring (see Figure 1.1) was crafted around the time the first church in Forsa was built in the eleventh century or the twelfth century. Our object was therefore crafted before the official conversion of the region to Christianity. What then was the ring’s purpose?

To answer this question the runes must be read and interpreted. This is not an easy task, but with time scholars have come to agree on the most
plausible reading. The following is the most authoritative translation to date of the Forsa ring’s Old-Norse runes. (Old Norse words feature in bold and [] signifies an inferred/reconstructed meaning within the text):

One ox and two \textit{aura} [in fine] [to?] \textit{staf} [or] \textit{aura staf} [in fine] for the restoration of a cult site [vi] in a valid state for the first time; two oxen and four \textit{aura} for the second time; but for the third time four oxen and eight \textit{aura}; and all property in suspension, if he doesn’t make right. That, the people are entitled to demand, according to the law of the people that was decreed and ratified before. But they made [the ring, the statement or?], Anund from Tästa, and Ofeg from Hjorsta. But Vibjörn carved.

(Brink 2008b, 29)

Most surviving runic inscriptions from the Viking Age are etched in stone. More precisely, they adorn boulders that were usually erected in memory of a deceased family member, war-companion or friend. These runes frequently relate who commissioned and paid for the monument as well as the name of the carver. Similarly, the Forsa ring mentions three men who were involved in the making of the object: Anund, Ofeg and Vibjörn, the latter presented as the one who carved the runes. The Forsa ring, however, was manifestly not crafted and inscribed with a memorial purpose in mind. Its purpose was different.

The ring seems to express a law or a decree of some kind. The reading stipulates a fine for repeated unwanted activity or desecration
of a holy site or location. As punishment for each transgression the fine doubles in value from one ox and two aura (ørar – a unit of measurement) to four oxen and eight aura. Further, the decree is authorised by ‘the law of the people’. Although the identity of ‘the people’ referred to is not explicitly mentioned, one may infer that the decree refers to the inhabitants of Hälsingland or perhaps a more specific locality within this region. Accordingly, the Forsa ring offers a precious glimpse into the communal laws laid out by the people of this region. The earliest preserved written laws in Scandinavia date to the twelfth century and are therefore uncertain sources for the legal condition in the Viking Age. The origin of the Forsa ring and its inscription in the pre-Christian period is therefore highly significant.

From a still broader perspective, the Forsa ring highlights the importance of local authority in the Viking Age. In this period, power still lay mostly in localities where leading men, such as Anund from Tästa and Ofeg from Hjorsta, decided on law and order. Numerous comparable local polities to the one revealed by the Forsa ring existed throughout Scandinavia. However, due to the nature of our sources – in particular the absence of Scandinavian writings in the Latin alphabet – the working of these local communities are obscured from our view. It is interesting to compare this relative obscurity with the plethora of written sources about the Viking-Age rulers, as narrated in the Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic histories of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see above).

In this respect, Iceland is a fascinating exception. There the origin, development and nature of the Althing became the focus of the earliest Icelandic historical work. This is the earlier mentioned Ari Þorgilsson’s Íslendingabók (Book of Icelanders), which was composed sometime between 1122 and 1133 AD. This brief text recounts the history of the Icelanders from the settlement of their country in the second half of the ninth century to Ari’s own time. The high point of the Book of Icelanders is the Althing’s adoption of Christianity into Iceland’s laws in the year 999/1000. Ari describes a stand-off between pagans and Christians at the Althing over which custom and law should prevail in the country. The matter was resolved through the method of arbitration. The Law-Speaker, a respected person assigned the task of memorising and proclaiming the laws, deliberated on the matter and announced that henceforth it should be brought into law that all Icelanders should adhere to Christian laws (Íslendingabók 2006, 7–9).

Like Ari Þorgilsson’s account of this momentous decision, the Forsa ring illustrates the absence of any barrier between the secular, political
and religious spheres. The sacred site, its preservation and upkeep, is a communal responsibility. Those who damage or defile it are to be punished following the laws commonly held by the people of the region. That said, we do not know whether the cult site (vé) was a grove, a demarcated plot of land or, perhaps more unlikely, a temple of some kind. Neither, for that matter, can we establish whether it was dedicated to a specific pagan god (or gods).

Pre-Christian place names, which contain the names of the gods, reveal considerable regional variation in their popularity. For instance, in Sweden there is a preponderance of place names that reveal the veneration of Freyr, a god particularly associated with fertility and lordship, whereas in Denmark names associated with Óðinn (or Wotan) appear with greater frequency (for instance Odense – ‘Odin’s sanctuary’). By contrast, few if any place names in Iceland refer directly to Óðinn, while many contain the name Þórr (Thor). Each locality or region had its own unique form of relation with its deities as well as other local supernatural identities which, for the most part, have been lost from history. Which god or deity you looked favourably on depended on various factors, but it is likely that the most important factor was simply where you happened to be born (see Gunnell 2015).

Viking-Age Scandinavia consisted of many local communities of the kind suggested, however inadequately, by the Forsa ring. These communities served as the political, religious and social foci of Viking-Age Scandinavians. We should not, however, assume that these communities were necessarily, or even likely, isolated and autonomous units of self-government. In the Viking Age their power relative to neighbouring regions essentially depended on three factors. Agricultural prosperity was certainly one such factor, as is shown by the political prominence of regions such as Viken and Uppland in Norway and Sweden respectively. Second, strategic location was a significant factor in the importance of a given locality. Most pertinently, command over regional or even international trade led to the emergence of powerful local elites. Trøndelag in Norway and the southern borderland of the Danes are regions where this condition was met. Third, a threat or pressure from a powerful neighbour, such as the Frankish and later German empires of the ninth and tenth centuries, could concentrate political power in the hands of a smaller elite. All three criteria coalesce in the relatively compact Danish peninsula and its adjoining islands. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the first relatively powerful kingship in Scandinavia emerged, as we shall see, in Denmark.
Turning to the chapter’s second object, our attention is still on the local rather than the national level. The next region of interest is Jämtland, which today is central-eastern Sweden, but which in the Viking Age formed a semi-independent border region between Norway and Sweden. The object of interest is the so-called Frösö rune stone (Figure 1.2), which, on stylistic grounds, has been dated to the second half of the eleventh century. The name of this most northerly of rune stones reflects its present-day location. Until only some forty years ago (when it was moved because of building construction), it stood on Frösön, meaning Frey’s island, in Storsjön, the region’s largest lake. In this location, which is likely the original one, the rune stone overlooked the strait between the island and the mainland. When translated, the inscription on the stone, which is decorated with a cross and an image of a serpent-like creature, reads:

Östman, Gudfast’s son, had this stone raised and this bridge made, and he had Jämtland made Christian. Åsbjörn made the bridge. Tryn and Stein cut these runes.

(Jansson 1962, 119)
As already mentioned, most rune stones were raised in memory of the dead. A common inscription on such stones relates how a son or a widow has raised a monument in memory of a father or a husband. The Frösö stone, however, is somewhat unusual (but by no means unique) in celebrating living individuals, in this case Östman (or Austmaðr), the son of Gudfast, and Åsbjörn. The inscription marks Östman’s three achievements: that he ‘Christianised’ Jämtland, commissioned the stone and built a bridge. Considering the stone’s location, we can assume that Åsbjörn’s bridge once connected the island and the mainland. The combination of a rune stone and the building of a bridge is not unusual. In this way the patron advertised to a grateful traveller his or her dedication to the common good while also memorialising his or her name in perpetuity. In a Christian context the building of a bridge may also have carried religious connotations, namely symbolising the pilgrim’s journey from this world to the next.

Östman’s claim that he ‘Christianised Jämtland’ is certainly the most intriguing feature of the Frösö stone. Jämtland was, of course, not a kingdom or a principality; so we can be sure that Östman was not a king or prince. Rather, the region appears to have been governed through a representative assembly (or assemblies) of the kind we have already encountered. But who was Östman? The name of Östman’s father, Gudfast (or Guðfastr), means ‘the one loyal to God’, suggesting that his family had been Christian for at least a couple of generations. Östman’s claim to have turned Jämtland to Christianity identifies him as a figure of wealth and social standing. He had, after all, commissioned the Frösö stone, which involved the craftsmanship of Tryn and Sten as well as Åsbjörn’s talent to construct the bridge. Perhaps Östman Gudfastson was a local magnate who thought his influence in the local assembly so crucial that he saw himself as effectively the person who had introduced Christianity to Jämtland.

Alternatively, Östman may have been a representative of the Swedish or Norwegian kings. By the thirteenth century, Jämtland formed a part of the Norwegian kingdom, and possibly the kings already had eyes on the region in the eleventh century. On the other hand, the Frösö stone bears stylistic similarities to rune stones raised in the same period in the region of the Svear, specifically around Lake Malar (Mälaren) not far from modern-day Uppsala and Stockholm. These kings of the Svear had seemingly ruled this region for centuries. Jämtland, however, was a region far away from the heartlands of Swedish royal power. The Frösö stone might, therefore, reveal a king’s representative, Östman, boasting about delivering the one policy that preoccupied the Danish, Norwegian
and Swedish kings of this period, namely introducing and furthering Christianity within their realms. If so, this would represent a growing authority of the kings over regional authorities. We must acknowledge the limits of our knowledge about the historical background to the Frösö stone. I have highlighted these alternative explanations to illustrate how our understanding of the Viking Age frequently depends on interpreting the limited sources at our disposal.

The Rune Stones of the Jelling Monument(s)

Our final example, which features two runic inscriptions, shifts our focus from the localised world of the Forsa ring and the Frösö stone to the supra-regional and religious aspirations of a Viking-Age king. The inscriptions in question feature on arguably the most impressive surviving Viking-Age monument, namely the Jelling monument (Figure 1.3) in Denmark’s central Jutland (Jylland). It is more accurate to refer to the Jelling monuments, as the Jelling complex incorporates a number of components, including two large mounds which flank two rune stones of unequal size. The older and smaller mound was raised by King Gorm, presumably as a burial place for himself and his queen, whereas the second mound was erected by Harald Bluetooth who, with this act and the younger rune stone, transformed the complex into an imposing display of dynastic power and prestige.

A translation of the inscription on the smaller rune stone, which is not decorated, reads: ‘King Gorm made this monument in memory of Thorvi (Thyre), his wife, Denmark’s adornment’ (Moltke 1985, 206). This is the earliest preserved reference to ‘Denmark’ from within Scandinavia. Unlike Östman Gudfastson, the sponsor of the Frösö stone, Gorm is a well-known historical figure. He was a Danish king who ruled between c. 936 and 958 AD. Compared to our previous two runic inscriptions, with the Jelling monuments we are manifestly confronted with a quite different political and social setting. While honouring the memory of his own wife, Gorm indirectly reminds the viewer of his rule over Denmark. The inscription is both personal and public and, as such, it illustrates how in this period no separation can or should be made between the two. The concept of the kingdom could not be differentiated from the personal and the dynastic.

The Jelling monuments express the evolving and strengthening idea that certain dynasties – in this case the Jelling dynasty – had claim to rulership over large territories and groupings of people. This notion is
explicitly conveyed on the younger Jelling rune stone which reads: ‘King Harald commanded this monument to be made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thorvi (Thyre), his mother – that Harald who won the whole of Denmark for himself, and Norway and made the Danes Christian’ (Moltke 1985, 176). The other side of the stone depicts the crucified, yet triumphant, Christ. Harald’s message is manifestly conceived as a kind of continuation of his father’s message on the older Jelling rune stone.

Continental written sources show that by at least the early ninth century Danish kings were chosen from a restricted pool of one or two ruling dynasties. On the younger Jelling rune stone, however, Harald links this tradition with a powerful ideology, namely the Christian religion. In this, the inscription on the younger Jelling stone differs from Austmaðr Guðfastsson’s boast on the Frösö stone that he turned the people of Jämtland to Christianity. Harald chose to connect the image of the crucified, yet conquering, Christ with his own claim to have converted
the Danes to Christianity. The image is not of the suffering, bleeding Christ so familiar from crucifixes of the High and Later Middle Ages, but rather of Christ the chosen one who leads men to victory and everlasting life. The younger Jelling stone juxtaposes this with Harald’s victorious assertion of his authority over the Danes and the Norwegians along with having converted the former to Christianity. The younger Jelling stone – indeed the whole Jelling complex – bears witness to the emerging ideology of a new kind of rulership, namely kings who claimed the submission of territories and peoples. Such marrying of royal authority and existing communal identity – in this case involving the Danes – played a significant role in forming today’s familiar division of Scandinavia into three kingdoms and nations.

References


