

# The *Erikskata* in Medieval Sweden c.800–1300: A Political Ritual, a Legal Necessity, or an Identity Marker?



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*This article is about the eriksgata, a journey undertaken by a Swedish king-elect across the realm to be confirmed as new leader by the local provincial assemblies. The focus is on the centuries between 800 and 1300, which saw a period of state formation, and important socio-economic and religious developments. The aim of the article is to look at the eriksgata from several perspectives, including as a ritual, but also as a political and diplomatic act. It seeks to answer several questions about the intent behind the tradition, and its practical consequences. In a first section, further details about the eriksgata will be given. Its history and development will be explained, and comparisons will be made with similar traditions in other Germanic kingdoms during the same period. In a second instance, the question of whether the eriksgata should be seen as a ritual and/or religious act, as medieval coronation ceremonies often were, will be addressed. The journey's legal aspect and necessity in enabling a smooth power transition will be scrutinised too. The third part will look at the more concrete role that the eriksgata played in enabling the political minority to have a say in the election of their leader. Following a brief overview of the ancient rules governing the election of kings in medieval Sweden, it will also be suggested that the eriksgata allowed the people outside of Svealand to reaffirm their own ethnic identity. It will be concluded that rather than being a diplomatic effort to unite the realm, the journey could also have served to accentuate regional differences.*

Rituality is a much-discussed aspect of medieval society. The regal traditions and coronation rituals of well-documented kingdoms such as France and England have been studied at length, and their intricacies much explored, analysed, and interpreted.

But while it is less often the subject of scholarly study (mainly owing to the lack of sources), medieval Sweden also had a monarchy, the Church also greatly influenced politics, and society was just as stratified and codified as any other. The election of kings in early and later medieval Sweden followed complex rules which were not based on agnatic primogeniture. Indeed, until the late sixteenth century, Sweden's monarchy was elective, and the king was chosen by local assemblies representing the provincial elites.<sup>1</sup> These assemblies consisted of powerful landowners who administered local affairs following the guidance and authority of a lawspeaker. They also had the power to veto a king's election, as will be shown in this article. Upon election, medieval Swedish kings had to embark on a journey throughout the kingdom – a fluid concept in the medieval period when borders were not fixed yet, and the population could be subjected to several different overlords – to present himself to the provincial assemblymen for them to confirm his election and cement his claim to power.<sup>2</sup> This trip was called the *eriksgata* and is Sweden's most distinctive regal ritual. A crowned king touring the realm to introduce himself to the population and assert his authority after coronation was common across the medieval world. Such royal tours often allowed the king to install trusted friends in local positions of power and tighten his grip over local affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> A thirteenth century legal text describing the process is quoted on p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> The whole process is described in Olof Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals in the Medieval Swedish Laws', in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Michael Stausberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), pp. 620–50 (pp. 622–5).

Similarly, regal processions were also very common, and coronations were often preceded by a procession through a city or region, leading to the place of coronation.<sup>3</sup> This kind of parade is not the object of the current article. Instead, as will be shown in this article, the *eriksgata* functioned as a requirement for a newly elected king's position to be confirmed. This paper will thus study the *eriksgata* as a political ritual and investigate its broader symbolic meaning and practical implications for the holding, sharing, and purpose of royal power.

The first part of this essay will provide background information concerning the *eriksgata*. It will give an overview of the primary sources in which the practice is discussed and will also look to the rest of Europe to try and find contemporary equivalents. The second section will focus on whether the *eriksgata*, as practiced until the late thirteenth century, should be understood as a ritual in medieval Scandinavia. This same section will question whether it had any real legal value or only served to legitimise one's claim to power. An alternative interpretation of the *eriksgata* will be given in the last part. Rather than looking at it from a purely symbolic perspective, the journey's actual implications on the negotiation of power in Sweden will be investigated. It will be shown that the *eriksgata* may have served as an identity marker for the Götar and, rather than unifying the population behind one king, may have played a role in cementing distinct regional identities and reaffirming the province's

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<sup>3</sup> Björn Weiler, *Paths to Kingship and Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 361.

power and influence in political affairs. The article will conclude that while there might have been a ritualistic aspect behind it, the *eriksgata* served a very practical purpose first and foremost and helped the general population uphold its ancient rights and power in the face of an increasingly centralised monarchy.

## WHAT IS THE *ERIKSGATA*?

Firstly, it is necessary to explain what the *eriksgata* is. Medieval Swedish kings did not inherit kingship. Instead, they were chosen by a small group of noblemen. We know from several sources, including multiple law texts, that of all the different tribes inhabiting medieval Sweden, the Svear chose the king who was to rule the entirety of the Swedish kingdom. The oldest source making this claim is Saxo's twelfth-century *Gesta Danorum*, in which he writes that it was the 'old privilege of their race' for the Swedes to elect the king.<sup>4</sup> The ethnonym 'Swedes' (in this paper, the modern Swedish 'Svear' is used instead) refers to the inhabitants of Svealand, of which the most populous region was Uppland. The Svear had long been considered superior to their southern neighbours, the Götär, by numerous authors, including Adam of Bremen, who considered the Götär to be subjected to the Svear.

There is ample literature about whether this interpretation of ethnic dynamics is accurate – not least the present author's recent PhD thesis about identity in medieval

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<sup>4</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), p. 919.

Sweden – and therefore, this paper will not delve into this subject.<sup>5</sup> But the understanding, as shown in legal texts and contemporary outside sources, is that the Götar answered to the Svear. And this is where the relevance of *eriksgata* lies. The *eriksgata* allowed the new king to travel his kingdom and seek confirmation from its different provincial assemblies. *Upplandslagen*, written down in the late thirteenth century or early fourteenth century, explains that the king needed the approval of the 'Thing of All Götar' in Skara (Västergötland) to truly become king of both Swedes and Götar.<sup>6</sup> The practice thus allowed the Götar some form of agency and gave them a say in the election of their new ruler. This crucial aspect of the 'ritual' – the power-sharing element – will be discussed in the third part of this paper. The word's etymology is debated. Those familiar with modern Swedish will recognise that '*gata*' today means road or street, and, likely, it is also what it means in '*eriksgata*'.

On the one hand, some scholars have posited that the journey began on Saint Erik's feast day, which would make the invention of the term relatively late, considering that Saint Eric only died in 1160 and was sanctified many years later. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that '*erik*' in this case is to be taken literally as Old Norse *éiríkr* for 'strong ruler'. Thus, the *eriksgata* may be translated as 'the strong ruler's route'. An Old Norse origin would confirm the presumption that the *eriksgata* may have pre-Christian origins. Olof Sundqvist gives a thorough overview of the

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Wilhelmsson, 'The Concept of Swedish Identity, 800–1288' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> A full quote from *Upplandslagen* is given below.

philological reasoning behind the latter conclusion in 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals'.<sup>7</sup>

As suggested above, it is unclear how old the practice is. None of the sources which mention it discuss its origins. Scholars such as Sundqvist have identified possible links between the Swedish kings' coronation ceremony and pagan traditions. By extension, it has been suggested that the *eriksgata*, which *Upplandslagen* says preceded the actual coronation, was likely to have been practiced in pre-Christian times too.<sup>8</sup> In medieval Sweden, however, this rough dating is not particularly helpful. Indeed, the kingdom remained pagan much longer than its other Scandinavian neighbours. There is evidence of a strong pagan influence in Uppland as late as the eleventh or twelfth century.<sup>9</sup> The *eriksgata* being pagan in origin, may thus still place it anywhere between the Migration Period (or earlier) and the High Middle Ages. The latter option is what some legal scholars have argued, especially Elsa Sjöholm, who rejected the possibility that thirteenth-century law texts from Sweden could be used as sources for pagan times.<sup>10</sup> Historians of the Viking Age in Sweden, such as Stefan Brink, have led credence to the hypothesis that the *eriksgata* may be an ancient practice. Indeed, the principle of having a king travel across different provinces to seek his

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<sup>7</sup> Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals', pp. 634–5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 625–8.

<sup>9</sup> Nora Berend, 'Introduction', in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. by Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–46 (p. 25).

<sup>10</sup> Elsa Sjöholm, *Sveriges Medeltidslagar. Europeisk Rättstradition i Politisk Omvandling* (Stockholm: Institutet för Rättshistorisk Forskning, 1988).

people's approval mirrors the network of *husaby*-sites found across Sweden. Locations named *husaby* are widely considered to be ancient royal farms used to supply the kings with food and other resources whenever they visited his realm.<sup>11</sup> This network of royal farms is thought to date back at least to the Viking Age and possibly earlier.<sup>12</sup> Medieval Sweden was fragmented and could not be considered a single political unit until at least the 1290s.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that any single king – especially unilaterally elected by the *Svear* – commanded genuine respect across all provinces until then. Instead, travelling throughout the realm regularly may have allowed a king to maintain good relations with his countrymen. It is unclear who owned these royal farms. Brink has suggested that they belonged to a sort of Crown estate (the 'Uppsala Öd'), which was disconnected from provincial rivalries and belonged to the current elected monarch regardless of his ethnic origins.<sup>14</sup> It is in this context of itinerant kingship and travelling courts that the *eriksgata* may have developed.

The *eriksgata* is briefly mentioned in *Västgötalagen* (Sweden's oldest surviving medieval law written down around 1220) in connection with King Ragnvald Knaphövde, whose unfortunate fate will be studied in the next section of this article. But apart from this short mention and later legal texts such as *Upplandslagen* and

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<sup>11</sup> See Stefan Brink, 'Political and Social Structures in Early Scandinavia: A Settlement-Historical Pre-Study of the Central Place', *Tor*, 28 (1996), 235–82, and more recently Johan Runer, 'The Husabyar in the Unification Process of the Kingdom of Sweden', in *Husebyer: Status Quo, Open Questions and Perspectives*, ed. by Lisbeth Eilersgaard Christensen, Thorsten Lemm and Anne Pedersen (Copenhagen: National Museum, 2016), pp. 165–72.

<sup>12</sup> Runer, 'Husabyar', p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Line, *Kingship and State Formation in Sweden: 1130–1290* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Runer, 'Husabyar', p. 166.

*Södermannalagen* (written down in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, respectively), few medieval sources tell us about the *eriksgata*. It is discussed in Magnus Eriksson's law from the mid-fourteenth century. Still, it is unclear whether this version of the *eriksgata* is a good representation of the practice's earlier incarnations. Nevertheless, thirteenth-century laws still give us glimpses of what the journey would have entailed. *Upplandslagen*, written down around 1296, provides the most thorough description of the ritual. It tells us that:

I. Now, the lands need to elect a king. Then should the three folk lands 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, Ostgötar's, Tiohärad's, Västgötar's, Närkingar's and Västmännen's. 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 [the Crown estate].

II. Now, he shall ride the *Eriksgata*. They shall follow him and give him hostages and swear him oaths. And he shall promise to hold their law and swear them peace. From Uppsala, they shall follow him to Strängnäs. ... Svintuna ... Holaved ... Junabäck... Ramundeboda... Uppbåga bro ... Östens bro ... back to Uppsala. Then this king has legally obtained the land and realm at Uppsvear and Södermän, Götar and Gutar, and all Smällänningar. Then he has ridden the right *Eriksgata*.



III. The archbishop and folk bishops shall then consecrate him to the crown at Uppsala Church. Then he has full right to be king and wear the crown. Then he has right to Uppsala Öd and to *dulgadråp* and *danaarv*. Then he shall give fiefs to those who do him service.<sup>15</sup>

This extract shows that the *eriksgata*, as codified in the laws, had several aspects. It was meant to have legal value, as the law explicitly enunciates, but it was also just one of several steps in choosing a king. Indeed, the *eriksgata* had no impact as long as the king-elect was still to be crowned by the bishops, thus adding a religious value to the whole process. This leads one to question whether the *eriksgata* was a strict ritual, a loose tradition, or a customary practice that followed the king's election. The ceremony is known to have been much more codified and was undoubtedly a ritual.

But interestingly, while this thorough description was written down in the late thirteenth century, there are no records of an *eriksgata* undertaken by Magnus Ladulås upon his accession to the throne in 1275, nor for his son Birger Magnusson who was crowned in 1290.<sup>16</sup> These two kings, belonging to the illustrious Folkung dynasty (also known as the House of Bjälbo), notably spearheaded by Birger Jarl – Sweden's foremost medieval statesman – was also the first to adopt a more openly centralist stance on power. This will be discussed below.

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<sup>15</sup> Translated in Olof Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals', pp. 622–3. The standard edition is Åke Holmbäck and Elias Wessén, *Svenska Landskapslagar: Tolkade och Förklarade för Nutidens Svenskar. Ser. 1, Östgötalagen och Upplandslagen* (Stockholm: Geber, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> Line, *Kingship and State Formation*, p. 203.

It is worth noting that there are similar traditions elsewhere in medieval Europe, especially in Germanic contexts. For example, it was common for early medieval Frankish kings to travel around their kingdom to maintain amicable relations with their subjects. Several scholars of medieval Sweden have drawn this parallel, including Sundqvist and Philip Line.<sup>17</sup> Medieval polities across Europe faced many of the same logistical and political challenges as early Sweden. Namely a fragmented realm and nascent state apparatus, it is thus to be expected that similar strategies – itinerant kingship and consultative leadership – were employed to the same ends. In France, there is evidence that Merovingian rulers also travelled within their realm and visited several royal residences (perhaps akin to *husaby* farms). However, this was much more limited than later Scandinavian kings and eventually stopped after the unification of a single Merovingian kingdom.<sup>18</sup> This development echoes that of the *eriksgata*, which, as will be discussed later, became obsolete after the consolidation of the kingdom of Sweden in the late thirteenth century. The Capetian kings, who exercised power in a less stable political context than their Merovingian predecessors, travelled much more widely. Robert the Pious (who reigned between 996 and 1031), for instance, visited most parts of his kingdom, venturing far outside his capital, and maintained amicable relations with the local elites, which ensured the

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<sup>17</sup> Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals', p. 634.

<sup>18</sup> Yitzhak Hen, 'The Merovingian Polity: A Network of Courts and Courtiers', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, ed. by Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 217–37 (pp. 224–31).

stability of his kingship. His actual power was weak, much like that of contemporary Swedish kings, but he was nevertheless recognised as symbolically superior by the kingdom's foremost princes.<sup>19</sup>

The closest equivalent to the *eriksgata* can be found in Germany, where until 1273, newly elected kings toured their empire to gain the population's support. This is called the *Königsumritt*. Several German kings are recorded as having undertaken such a tour. In his *Chronicle*, Thietmar of Merseburg narrates a tour that a newly crowned Holy Roman Emperor, Henry II, undertook across his realm, encountering praise and resistance. He was by then, however, already formally king, having been crowned by Archbishop Willigis of Mainz in 1002.<sup>20</sup> His successor, Conrad II, elected in 1027, faced opposition and unrest after he was elected king. The situation was particularly dire in Italy, where local princes wished to sever ties with the empire. In Conrad's case, his kingship only gained acceptance after he visited his reluctant subjects, and his journey was marred by violent rebellions which required quashing.<sup>21</sup> His tour, more than being a diplomatic exercise, essentially became a peace-keeping mission. However, Conrad's son Henry III (d. 1056) did not face such a challenging ascent to kingship. Accordingly, upon his appointment as Emperor in 1046, he did not

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth M. Hallam and Charles West, *Capetian France 987–1328* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 87–8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg*, trans. by David Warner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 213–25.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Schutz, *The Medieval Empire in Central Europe: Dynastic Continuity in the Post-Carolingian Frankish Realm, 900-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 115–20.

immediately travel to Italy (a volatile part of the empire), unlike his predecessors. However, he later visited Italy for his formal coronation.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that the *Königsumritt* could take on a slightly different form and meaning depending on the circumstances of each king undertaking it.

These similar practices all took place in other Germanic kingdoms, suggests a common origin for the *eriksgata* and its continental equivalents and deserves further research. But while it shares common points with them, the *eriksgata* remains different from the practices mentioned above in that it was not the public performance of itinerant kingship seen with the Frankish and Salian kings but a steppingstone towards establishing one's legitimacy to kingship. It was at once a tool to preserve (or build) national identity but also a legal requirement among others in the election process. At least, this is true for the early Middle Ages. Indeed, the practice of the *eriksgata* (in its medieval form) continued until the early modern period, when it was last recorded in connection with Charles IX, who became king in 1604.<sup>23</sup> However, scholars of early modern Sweden have interpreted the early modern *eriksgata* as an attempt to revive medieval traditions and bolster the Crown's image as a long-established, stable, and ancient institution in the context of turbulent state formation

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<sup>22</sup> *Die Urkunden der die Deutschen Könige und Kaiser, Herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft für Ältere Deutsche Geschichtskunde. Fünfter Band 5: Die Urkunden Heinrichs II*, ed. by H. Bresslau and P. Kehr (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1931), pp. 22–3.

<sup>23</sup> Cathleen Sarti, 'Sigismund of Sweden as Foreigner in His Own Kingdom: How the King of Sweden was Made an Alien', in *Dynastic Change: Legitimacy and Gender in Medieval and Early Modern Monarchy*, ed. by Ana Maria S. A. Rodrigues, Manuela Santos Silva and Jonathan Spangler (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 86–102 (p. 97).

and the Reformation.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is unknown whether the practice had the same meaning, at a personal level, to early modern kings as it had to their medieval counterparts. It is also unclear whether the crowds reacted to it similarly. This late use of the *eriksgata* is nevertheless a telling sign of the inherently political dimension of this tradition and how it could be used as a tool for propaganda even long after the kingdom had been formally united.

## THE *ERIKSGATA* AS RITUAL

Gerd Althoff defines ritual as 'chains of actions of a complex nature [that] are repeated by actors in certain circumstances in the same or similar ways, and, if this happens deliberately, with the conscious goal of familiarity'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that rituals contribute to a community's sense of identity and shared culture. But while rituals are systemised actions, it has been mentioned that the *eriksgata* did not happen with every king despite its codification in law. This raises the following question: how necessary was it? In the absence of sources clearly answering this question, several criteria may be studied to gauge the importance of the *eriksgata*. Firstly, its religious aspect should be investigated. Sundqvist has identified a possible remnant of the magico-pagan ritual in the legal stipulation that the *eriksgata* should be

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Gerd Althoff, 'The Variability of Rituals in the Middle Ages', in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. by Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried, and Patrick Geary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 71–88 (p. 71).

undertaken clockwise.<sup>26</sup> He does not elaborate on why this direction of travel should be automatically seen as a magical feature of the journey. The stipulation seems odd and arbitrary to the modern eye, which may signify that it is rooted in ancient rituals. Still, it may also have reflected that this would have allowed the king to visit the realm's most populous areas first (Östergötaland and Västergötaland) before moving inland to less densely populated regions such as Närke on his way back to Uppsala. As such, this element cannot be considered indicative of a religious focus. Other scholars, including Alex Sanmark and Triin Laidoner, have connected the monuments and places alongside the *eriksgata* route with ancestor worship, thus underlying the journey's symbolic importance. However, the few sources mentioning the *eriksgata* do not highlight this aspect of the tour or mention any cultic considerations. It is, therefore, unclear whether the *eriksgata* travelled past funerary monuments because this was a conscious attempt to give the journey a religious dimension or because anything public needed to take place on the main road for both symbolic and practical reasons.

As mentioned, many well-established medieval kingdoms had coronation ceremonies, including France, England, Sicily, Germany and Jerusalem. Still, they were not necessary everywhere and could change from one ruler to another, even within the same kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Medieval Iberian kingdoms, for instance, had fluid

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<sup>26</sup> Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals', p. 637.

<sup>27</sup> Weiler, *Paths to Kingship*, pp. 310–11.

coronation practices that changed from one generation to another, with some kings skipping the ritual without impacting their legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> A similar situation may develop in Sweden, and it remains unclear how significant the *eriksgata* truly was. As mentioned, it is even vague when the practice began. The *husaby*-farms suggest it could be as old as the Viking Age and earlier, but we also know that Sweden was far from being united during the Viking Age. Several kings could compete at any given time, and sometimes multiple leaders co-ruled.<sup>29</sup> Did they all embark on an *eriksgata*? Were all these petty kings subjected to the same complex process outlined in *Upplandslagen*? It seems very unlikely, especially as there are no mentions anywhere, not even in oral history, of any *eriksgata* undertaken during the Viking Age.

The *eriksgata*, by definition, only makes sense in the context of a kingdom where only one king would be elected but whose realm was still fragile enough to require a confirmation from his subjects. This period in Swedish history corresponds to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries approximately. An *eriksgata* in pre-Christian Sweden, when the different provinces were independent, and kingship was ill-defined and highly unstable, would not have worked. *Västgötalagen* gives a list of kings from tenth-century Olof Skötkonung to King John, who died in 1222.<sup>30</sup> The *eriksgata* is mentioned (although the term itself is not used) in connection with only one of these kings: the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Line, *Kingship and State Formation*, p. 273.

<sup>30</sup> *Yngre Västgötalagen*, 'Vidhemsprästens Anteckningar', <<https://project2.sol.lu.se/>> [accessed 25 May 2022], (para. 15 of 21).

ill-fated Rognvald Knaphövde, who, the law says, was killed for not respecting the traditional taking of hostages during his journey.<sup>31</sup> The fact that no other king's personal experience of the *eriksgata* was mentioned in the list may reflect the fact that they all took place without any issue. Still, it also makes it unclear whether every single king completed one. It is, therefore, challenging to gauge the *eriksgata*'s rituality, and it seems to the present author that the practice was too loosely enforced to count as a systematic chain of actions.

Another way to determine how crucial the *eriksgata* was and whether it was important enough to be considered a ritual is to decide whether it had any real legal value. However, the legal significance of rituals, traditions, and other symbolic behaviours is difficult to assess because these processes are often older than the laws themselves. In the case of Sweden, all surviving laws were written down in the thirteenth century at the earliest, but it is clear in several cases that they may have incorporated much older elements. For example, we may mention the clause in *Västötalagen* relating to emigrants to Byzantium, which is completely anachronistic for a thirteenth-century law text and clearly references a Viking Age phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> Medieval Nordic laws were also not exhaustive, and entire topics, which may have been considered obvious or natural to all, may have been skipped. Indeed, a few Swedish provincial laws are severely lacking in some categories. *Gutalagen*, which is

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Äldre Västgötalagen*, 'Ærfpær Bolkaer', < <https://project2.sol.lu.se/fornsvenska/> > [accessed 25 May 2022], (para. 12 of 25).



the law of Gotland (written down in the thirteenth century), does not discuss the king at all, and it is, therefore, impossible to know whether the Gotlanders expected their island to be part of an *eriksgata* or whether they ultimately rejected the Swedish king(s). Thus, the fact that the *eriksgata* was codified does not tell us whether it was practiced as stipulated in the law, and likewise, its absence from earlier records does not mean that it did not exist at all.

Nevertheless, Magnus Ladulås, who may be considered the first king of Sweden following his incorporation of Gotland into the realm and consolidation of the central authorities and aristocracy, did not need an *eriksgata*, seems to point to it being a custom rather than an actual legal requirement. Following dynastic unrest, King Valdemar passed on the kingdom to his brother Magnus.<sup>33</sup> This smooth transition was enabled thanks to the Church's support, itself secured by the brothers' father, Birger Jarl, whose vast influence on the consolidation of the kingdom will be discussed in the next section of this paper. Magnus reigned as king from July 1275, although it must be noted that he was not formally crowned in the cathedral of Uppsala until May 1276.<sup>34</sup> King Magnus did not follow the normal process in his ascent to the throne. He was not elected by the people but chosen by the previous monarch. He did not tour the kingdom and reigned long before his coronation. The present author's interpretation is that all three elements, codified in the laws, were

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<sup>33</sup> Svenskt Diplomatariums huvudkartotek (SDHK) nr 984, <<https://sok.riksarkivet.se/SDHK>> [accessed 24 May 2022].

<sup>34</sup> SDHK nr 1001.

meant to ensure trouble-free continuation in leadership. But King Magnus' new brand of centralist monarchy made proper procedure irrelevant.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that the *eriksgata* was solely for show. The murder of Ragnvald Knaphövde around 1120 proves that the practice was taken very seriously in earlier and less politically stable times. Regardless of how systematic it was, it had meaning and consequences. The taking of local hostages aimed to show that the king feared the inhabitants of the provinces he visited. Whether he genuinely feared them or not, this was a sign that he respected their input and that the local hostages could vouch for him as an adequate leader.<sup>35</sup> Ragnvald skipped this crucial part of the tradition and insulted the people whose approval he needed. But unlike in religious rituals, he was punished not by the wrath of a deity but by that of his fellow men. About Ragnvald, *Yngre Västgötalagen* says: 'The tenth (Christian king) was King Ragnvald, bold and proud. He rode to Karleby without hostages, and he received a shameful death for the offence that he caused all west Götar'.<sup>36</sup> As mentioned previously, a religious dimension was nevertheless suggested by Laidoner and Sanmark in the actual location of the *eriksgata* route. Indeed, they identified many important locales through which the route passed, including funerary

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<sup>35</sup> Stefan Olsson, *The Hostages of the Northmen: From the Viking Age to the Middle Ages* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2019), pp. 325–6.

<sup>36</sup> *Yngre Västgötalagen*, 'Vidhemsprästens Anteckningar' (para. 15 of 21).

monuments, thing sites, and other places of power.<sup>37</sup> According to the laws, the journey was not undertaken as communication between the king, a deity or his ancestors. It was merely to be witnessed by all, including ancestors and the dead. The religious element is therefore present but tangential to the journey itself. This emphasises the argument that the *eriksgata* was a political and diplomatic act rather than an actual religious ritual.

It is worth noting that there is no evidence, except for Ragnvald Knaphövde, of any failed *eriksgata* during which an elected king would have been eventually rejected by the Götar. It is possible that such short-lived 'kings' did not receive any coverage in the sources, and it is equally likely that the *eriksgata* was mostly symbolic and that most kings passed the test smoothly. The murder of Ragnvald, however, suggests that it was not simply a pageant. Still, it remains unclear through what mechanisms the provinces' assemblymen could reject a king-elect and how the Svear proceeded in such an event.

## **THE ERIKSGATA AS IDENTITY MARKER?**

The notion that the *eriksgata* was a diplomatic exercise is essential in understanding the practice's more profound ramifications. As mentioned briefly at the beginning of

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<sup>37</sup> Alexandra Sanmark and Sarah Semple, 'Places of Assembly: New Discoveries in Sweden and England', *Fornvännen*, 103 (2008), 245–59 (pp. 250–5). Triin Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia: A Grave Matter* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 96.

this article, the Götar did not get to choose the king of Sweden. The exact reasons for this are unclear, but they likely have to do with the fact that the Svear were traditionally considered superior to the Götar. In the Viking Age, primary accounts of the geo-political situation in Sweden suggested that the Götar, as well as all other smaller tribes dwelling in the north and east of Sweden, were subjected to the Swedes. Adam of Bremen, for instance, described the Götar as being 'of these Swedish peoples'.<sup>38</sup> In Svealand, the great religious complex lying at the heart of Old Norse religions was located in Old Uppsala.<sup>39</sup> The Svear also held supremacy of the seas and controlled most nearby coastal areas as evidenced by contemporary observers such as traveller Wulfstan of Hedeby, who wrote in the ninth century: 'Blecingaeg and Meore and Eowland and Gotland on bæcbord, and þas land hyrað to Sweon'.<sup>40</sup> Religious, military, and financial power was therefore concentrated in Uppland. Thus, before Christianisation and Europeanisation shifted the centre of power from the north to the southern provinces from the late twelfth century onwards, the people of Svealand dominated Sweden's political landscape. Whether the Götar were truly legally, financially or politically tributary remains debated, but the Svear left their mark on Viking Age history and its records. It is still unknown exactly how and why it was

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<sup>38</sup> Adam of Bremen, *The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. by Francis Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'The Material Culture of Old Norse Religion', in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 249–56 (p. 250).

<sup>40</sup> *Old English History of the World: An Anglo-Saxon Rewriting of Orosius*, ed. and trans. by Malcolm Godden (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 45; 'Blekinge, Möre, Öland and Gotland on the port side, all belonging to the Swedes' (Godden's translation).

decided (and accepted) that the Svear would elect the king, but we know that it was considered a vital part of the Svea identity. Indeed, after Birger Jarl, through political manoeuvring, established himself as *de facto* ruler of Sweden around 1248 and positioned his son Valdemar as *de jure* king in 1250, the inhabitants of Uppland rebelled. The trigger may have been the introduction of taxes, but Matt Larsson posits that these uprisings may have reflected a deeper discontentment with a new political system that deprived the Svear of their ancestral rights.<sup>41</sup> Just like the right to choose the king was considered an intrinsic part of Svea's identity, it is likely that the right to reject the king was considered an inherent part of Göta identity.

Because of the king's obligation to promise the provincial leaders that he would uphold their laws and refrain from attacking them (as per *Upplandslagen* quoted above), the *eriksgata* can be interpreted as a peace negotiation. In medieval Sweden (pre-Magnus Ladulås), power was negotiated at all levels. First, the king needed to be elected by noblemen. Secondly, he had to be accepted by the provincial assemblies. Once crowned by religious men, medieval Swedish kings were still not free to reign as they pleased. Local assemblies retained significant power and influence well into the thirteenth century, and before the establishment of an aristocracy in 1280 by Magnus Ladulås, landed free farmers constituted a political and economic elite that could pressure and even rival the king.<sup>42</sup> The *eriksgata* was the

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<sup>41</sup> Mats Larsson, *Götarnas Riken: Upptäcktsfärder till Sveriges Enande* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2002), p. 178.

<sup>42</sup> Line, *Kingship and State Formation*, p. 297.

physical manifestation of this fragmentation of power. Thus, the journey had the seemingly contradictory dual role of both uniting the kingdom in agreement about the new king and reaffirming the provinces' distinct identity and political independence.

Ragnvald's failed *eriksgata* is an excellent example of the fact that the tour indeed had value and could have serious consequences. It is also evidence of the Götar's struggle to get a share of the Svear's power. Certainly, it is worth looking into the unspoken reasons why Ragnvald was murdered. It is known that he rode into Västergötland without taking hostages, which, as seen previously in the law, was considered offensive by the local population.<sup>43</sup> But while that may have been enough to refuse him as king, it hardly justifies his murder, especially considering the significant diplomatic consequences this would have engendered. Instead, Ragnvald's demise inscribed itself in a broader dynastic struggle. While he was elected by the Svear, the Götar had chosen another king, Magnus, of Danish origin but who owned estates in Västergötland through his maternal line.<sup>44</sup> When Magnus' election was rejected by the Svear, it became necessary to kill Ragnvald to allow Magnus to ascend to the throne. Saxo writes:

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<sup>43</sup> *Yngre Västgötalagen*, 'Vidhemsprästens Anteckningar' (para. 15 of 21).

<sup>44</sup> Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, pp. 918–19.

Meanwhile, when the ruler of Swedish territories died, the Götar had the effrontery to confer supreme control on Magnus, even though this gift was wholly at the Swedes' discretion; the former sought to enhance their own status by meddling with the prerogative of others. Consequently, the Swedes rejected their authority, for they would not endure abandoning the old privilege of their race merely to satisfy the envy of a people rather little known. So, giving attention to the character of their ancient powers, they elected a new monarch to nullify the title which had been torn from them by wrongful conferment. But in a short time, the Götar murdered him, and the sovereignty reverted to Magnus.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, under the pretence of offence, which is the official reason for Ragnvald's murder as given in *Västgötalagen*, the Götar used the *eriksgata* as an opportunity to assert their own will and rid themselves of a political rival. While an offence may genuinely have been caused – especially if the *eriksgata* was felt to have ritualistic and/or traditional value – the political manoeuvring that ensued is clear evidence of its broader role in balancing power between the Svear and the Götar.

In fact, the *eriksgata*'s itinerary itself tells a lot about the political situation in medieval Sweden. The sources which describe it enounce clearly that following a successful *eriksgata*, the king became king of all of Sweden. *Västgötalagen*, quoted above, gives a precise list of the king's new subjects: 'Uppsvear and Södermän, Götar and Gutar, and all Smållänningar'.<sup>46</sup> But the royal tour excluded most of these people.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Translated in Olof Sundqvist, 'Features of Pre-Christian Inauguration Rituals', pp. 622–3.

The islands of Öland and Gotland, together with modern-day Småland, were utterly ignored. So were the regions directly north of Uppsala. The king-elect only visited a tiny part of his realm. Of course, there may have been practical reasons for this. Few long-distance roads existed in medieval Sweden, and it is understandable that the king only visited the most populous locations. Småland, for instance, has always been a sparsely populated region, which may explain its relative anonymity in medieval records. Similarly, travelling to the islands of Gotland or Öland would have probably required too much expense. The Salians mentioned previously also had to limit the amount of travel undertaken by their king because of the financial burden of the receiving parties.<sup>47</sup> But in the case of Sweden, this limited itinerary may also have reflected the political dynamics of the kingdom. Gotland maintained a significant political distance from the mainland until it was forcibly incorporated into the kingdom in 1288 by Magnus Ladulås following the Gotlandic civil war.<sup>48</sup> It also took until the end of the thirteenth century for Småland to truly integrate the kingdom, having been relatively isolated until then.<sup>49</sup> Northern regions such as Jämtland were disputed with the Norwegians for most of the period studied in this article.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the *eriksgata*'s itinerary suggests that the lands over which the 'King of Sweden' had

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<sup>47</sup> Schutz, *The Medieval Empire in Central Europe*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> The diplomatic and political aftermath of the civil war, including the Gotlanders' pledge of allegiance to the king, can be found in two charters from 1288. See SDHK nr 1414, nr 1415.

<sup>49</sup> Line, *Kingship and State Formation*, pp. 474–5.

<sup>50</sup> Alex Woolf, 'The Wood Beyond the World: Jämtland and the Norwegian Kings', in *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300*, ed. by Beverley Ballin Smith and Simon Taylor (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 153–66 (pp. 153–4).



any actual claim to power were concentrated in Svealand and Götaland. This observation is not new, but it is interesting to use the *eriksgata* as an illustration. This also suggests that the *eriksgata*'s route reflects a very early stage of Swedish politics, and while the kingdom grew, the route stayed the same, as it had become a tradition rather than an actual reflection of a king's territory.

It has already been discussed that several kings, most notably those from the Folkung dynasty (or House of Bjälbo), eventually exerted enough power to afford to entirely skip the *eriksgata*. The social and political context behind these kings' rise should be briefly explained. The Folkungs were a powerful landed family whose oldest known member was, according to *Gesta Danorum*, Folke den tjocke.<sup>51</sup> Their alternative name is a reference to their most important estate, the manor of Bjälbo in Östergötland. The family produced many prominent members of the Scandinavian elites, including several jarls such as Birger Brosa (between 1174 and 1202) and Birger Jarl (between 1248 and 1266). Birger Jarl is widely credited with accelerating the unification of the kingdom and enabling the consolidation of centralised royal power, notably through establishing new taxes, founding Stockholm and its fortress, securing the support of the Church, and weakening local noblemen.<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned, the Folkungs' ancestral estates were located in Götaland, and the family appeared in the historical record at a time of changing political and

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<sup>51</sup> Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, pp. 858–9.

<sup>52</sup> Line, *Kingship and State Formation*, pp. 128–9.

religious dynamics. Indeed, following the Christianisation of Sweden and certainly after Olof Skötkonung's reign (c. 995–1022), Östergötland and Västergötland (as well as Småland) gained prominence on the political scene, as newly-introduced Christian institutions settled in these regions. The Diocese of Skara, initially suffragan to that of Hamburg-Bremen, and then Lund, had been founded around the year 1000. But the rapid spread of Christianity from the twelfth century saw the establishment of many other influential monastic institutions such as Vreta Abbey (1100), Nydala Abbey (1142), Alvastra Abbey (1154) and several others, together with the inauguration of Diocese of Linköping and that Växjö within a few years of each other in the mid-twelfth century.<sup>53</sup> The emergence of these new centres of power changed the kingdom's political balance, with the southern provinces now hosting new burgeoning centres of innovation, education, and institutional power. Thus, Birger Jarl's election as jarl in 1248, following his successful negotiations with the papal prelate William of Sabina to form an alliance between the Church and the Crown, inscribed itself in the context of Göta families increasingly exerting influence over the traditional seats of power in Uppland.<sup>54</sup> Birger Jarl's political ingenuity secured the throne for no less than two of his sons, kickstarting the progressive erosion of the elective nature of kingship in Sweden.

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<sup>53</sup> Catharina Andersson, 'Cistercian Monasteries in Medieval Sweden: Foundations and Recruitments, 1143–1420', *Religions*, 12 (2021), 1–18 (pp. 2–13).

<sup>54</sup> The political and diplomatic results of the Synod at Skänninge (tellingly located in Östergötland), where Birger Jarl met William of Sabina in 1278, and the prelate's wider influence on Swedish politics can be seen in a series of charters including SDHK nr: 610, 613, 621.

Therefore, the Folkung kings who avoided the *eriksgata* were Götär themselves and, as evidenced by the transmission of power between Valdemar and his brother in 1275, by the late thirteenth century, they were not elected by the Svear anymore. The *eriksgata*, whose route originated in Uppland and went clockwise through Götaland, would have made little sense in the case of a Göta king. The change of political regime engendered by Christianisation and the progressive concentration of power within the hands of families based in Götaland deprived the Svear of their ancient right to elect the king. It stripped them of whatever remaining privileges they claimed.<sup>55</sup> It also made the *eriksgata* completely redundant. Thus, the practice's loss of importance coincided with the progressive consolidation of a central monarchy that had the tools – not least through ecclesiastical support – to submit the population without requiring its approval.

In conclusion, this article has sought to introduce the *eriksgata*, a trip undertaken by the king-elect throughout his kingdom, as a diplomatic and political tool rather than solely as a ritual. Unlike similar tours undertaken elsewhere in Europe during the same period, the *eriksgata* was not simply meant to confirm the king's new powers. Instead, it was a necessary stage in the gaining of those powers. A poorly executed *eriksgata* could see the king lose his new status or worse – as evidenced by King Rognvald's murder following public outrage at his lack of respect for traditions. Yet, the tour was not systematic enough and not strictly enforced to count as a ritual

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<sup>55</sup> Schutz, *The Medieval Empire in Central Europe*, p. 15.

on par with religious practices. The *eriksgata* has been interpreted by some scholars as a peace-making process and by others as a stately display. While these two interpretations are valid to an extent, there is a more pragmatic, perhaps more dramatic, facet to this tradition. It was a reminder of the provinces' ancient legal powers and their defiance in the face of a new centralised monarchy that aimed to progressively erode provincial powers and unify the kingdom. This journey was the Götar's formal opportunity to counterbalance the Svear's powers. The latter were traditionally the ones to choose the king per ancient immemorial rules. The Götar, deprived of this critical right, may have used the *eriksgata* to remind their rivals of their authority. The journey's symbolic power probably fluctuated according to the kingdom's political circumstances, and all kings did not undertake the *eriksgata*. Magnus Ladulås, a member of the Folkung dynasty who is known to have consolidated the kingdom's borders in 1288, does not seem to have toured the kingdom, thus suggesting that he did not need to. The *eriksgata*'s complete disappearance coincides with the final stages of state formation in Sweden, following the ascent of the Vasa dynasty, which is further evidence that it had reflected and fostered regional independence, a now obsolete concept by the sixteenth century. Thus, this article has argued that the *eriksgata* is best not understood as a ritual but as a fluid political tool that served a dual, contradictory purpose: it meant to help consolidate the kingdom while allowing regional elites to push back against centralised power. But while the present author has chosen to remain prudent

regarding a supposed religious aspect to the tradition, the links between kingship, its legitimisation and Old Norse religions must be investigated further. Similarly, the question of the *eriksgata's* origins, especially considering the similar practices witnessed elsewhere in the medieval Germanic world, deserves additional research, which is hoped this article will encourage.



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