Part VII: Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this study is to investigate the taking and giving of hostages in peace processes during the Viking Age and early Middle Ages in Scandinavia and adjacent areas. The giving and taking of hostages is understood as a ritual act in peace negotiations and as an opportunity for both parties – winners and losers – to influence their negotiating position and also as a way to exert influence on relations within as well as between societies.

In Part I previous research on hostage-taking and hostage in the Viking and Early Medieval traditions in Scandinavia is presented. A summary of Roman, Continental Germanic, and Old English hostage traditions is put forward. In this part, the problems of a methodology is discussed. In order to adopt a new approach to hostages in relation to war and peace treaties, I present a theoretical model of peace processes and, in addition, various perspectives on 'ritual acts' are given.

Part II deals with the myth of the Æsir–Vanir War in various text sources, with special focus on how hostages were presented, and a discussion of earlier research on this myth. The peace processes and ritual acts as described in the myth of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir are analysed.

In Part III the theoretical approaches outlined in the first part to examples of hostage exchanges in Viking Age societies is applied to societies such as the Danelaw in England and the encounters between Scandinavians and Franks during the Merovingian rule. This part concludes with a synthesis that gives an overview of various ritual acts within peace processes.

Part IV addresses two themes: who became a hostage and his or her rights. The relationship between law and tradition is discussed using examples from various parts of Scandinavia and from areas with a Scandinavian population outside Scandinavia. Because the examples are retrieved from different texts it is relevant to try to understand the intentions of the writers. This raises the question of who was made subordinate, something that was not always evident. Further, the possibility of female hostages is discussed. The information is scarce, but some sources indicate that women could be leaders – at least in various ritual contexts – which might have made them politically valuable and therefore possible hostages. The question of violence against and violation of the hostages is also discussed. Medieval Scandinavian contexts governing violence against hostages are analysed. Finally, two major case studies with examples of mutilation of hostages and their ethical and moral implications are considered in relation to areas of confrontation.

In Part V, the idea of what I refer to as 'available hostages' is further developed. This phenomenon can be found in place names that suggest organizational forms around the hostages. In this part the Swedish place name *Gyslamarchia*, mentioned in the *Gesta Danorum*, is discussed. This place name is then put in relation to place names with a similar meaning in Finland and Estonia.

In Part VI all the threads in the thesis are tied together in an analysis of *The Elder Westrogothic Law* (Sw. *Äldre västgötalagen*). The focus is on two cases of hostage taking during the so-called Eriksgata, the ritual royal tour before the coronation. The study closes with an analysis of Christian II's royal Eriksgata in the early 16th century and the possible end of hostage taking as a mean to control the *landskap*, the provinces, in Sweden.

In the introduction, five research questions were formulated as a starting point for the investigation. These are answered as follows.

1. How and why can the giving and taking of hostage be understood as a ritual act in peace processes during the Viking era until the late Middle Ages (16th century) in Scandinavia? How did the hostages function as objectives of negotiations?

In order for an action to qualify as a ritual act it must be filled with content. When it comes to hostages – bilateral as well as unilateral – the 'content' can be related to many contexts. In this study, I have particularly stressed the social, religious, economic, and legal factors. Ritual acts often took place at specific locations. Research on Old Scandinavian religion has therefore often emphasized the connection between ritual acts and fixed places (in the landscape), such as *vi*-places. At these places, both judicial and religious acts were associated with 'ritual taboos' and 'ritual restrictions'. I have related taboos and restrictions to what I refer to as 'sanctioned protection'. This type of protection could be applied at places that were temporarily established – or fixed in the landscape – during a conflict (they could later be fixed in the landscape). These mobile (cult) sites included temporarily established *vi*-places around which *vi*-bonds were tied. As described in the book, areas of communication were established temporarily as meeting places, for example at the mouth of the River Göta in the border areas between the Danes and the Norwegians. At these places hostages were used, who probably had some kind of protection, even if we do not know exactly how this protection was designed.

Even if we cannot know exactly how the 'sanctioned' protection of the hostages was expressed in the areas of communication during the Viking Age, it may be related to terms like *grið* and *friðr*, found in the source material from both the Viking Age (skaldic poetry and Edda poetry) and the early Middle Ages (laws), through the Old Swedish formula *mæþ gruþum oc gislum*, 'with peace and hostages'. Hostages and peace are then closely connected, and the legal texts seem to indicate that the two concepts presupposed each other and denoted protection to a third part. Some medieval laws specify it as an offense to harm hostages (Old Swedish *gislingabrut*), even though the offense may have concerned private hostages. Legal and religious aspects are in this case mutually dependent. Although protection may have been prescribed for hostages, this does not mean that they were inviolable in the sense of enjoying 'sacred protection'; the sanctioned protection only existed within certain boundaries.

The above-mentioned examples can be compared with Anttonen's discussion about the boundaries of the sacred, with the help of the

Finnish term *pyhä*, 'sacred', as an analytical category. In order for something to be perceived as sacred, it must be filled with a content that usually appears when people interact during meetings. The interaction rather than the theological position determines the ritual content of the ritual act. *Pyhä* can be defined as something that is not questioned by the performers of the ritual acts. Similar arrangements can be found at things and other types of areas of communication, where existing agreements on hostages were not allowed to be broken.

The giving, taking, or exchange of hostages as a ritual act can also be related to the performative ritual models that point to active rather than passive roles for the participants. A performative model was proposed by Catherine Bell and applied to the study of Old Scandinavian religion by Olof Sundqvist. The latter points out that a 'ritual' has the capacity to change society: the ritual action has a 'power' or 'effect' on the group (the community).

Formally, hostages were used as security within an area of confrontation, with negotiations taking place at an area of communication. The purpose of the hostages during negotiations was as a form of security for a person. But hostages were, of course – as Ryan Lavelle states – also important as a symbolic factor indicating the ruler's dignity, or they could be used to facilitate relations between different groups, as in Anglo-Saxon England. To 'give' and 'take' hostages were ritual acts; hostages therefore became important as a means to acknowledge people's identity, something that is generally important in ritual contexts. These ritual acts, among other things, determined the superiority or inferiority of the participants, but were also a means to relate to one another. Thus hostage taking, along with other ritual acts, was important to rulers and the identities of different groupings. In Part IV, several examples of these issues from different areas of confrontation, Anglo-Danish/Norwegian as well as Anglo-French, and with different ritual acts such as gift giving, oaths/pledges, the performance of skaldic poems and other praises, baptisms, the casting of lots, and other kinds of events, including feasts and hunts, are given.

All these ritual acts were thus designed both to confirm a ruler's person and the status of a grouping, although the intent of the ritual acts could vary. Various rulers (and groupings) could have

different intentions. Olaf Haraldsson's confirmation exemplifies different perceptions of what confirmation meant as a symbol. In cases like this, the superiority or inferiority of the different participants was not always evident from the symbolic display. This can also be seen in the early medieval traditions described in *The Elder Westrogothic Law* (Sw. *Äldre västgötalagen*). According to this law, the purpose of the hostage was to confirm the identity of the king-to-be during the Eriksgata, his ritual journey before his election. When the king arrived at the Thing of all Geats (Sw. *Alla götars ting*), he had to be recognized by the lawmen, bishops, and other members of the community (Sw. *tingsmenigheten*). Even more important was that the king could use the Eriksgata as a form of propaganda, with the hostages – who were known to the Geats – confirming him as king in the eyes of the country folk. In this case, the hostage constituted more of a symbolic component than a real means of exerting pressure or a 'life insurance policy'. For the society (province; Sw. *landskap*), the hostage handover was important because it meant that one could relate to the new royal power, which in turn thereby had its formal supremacy confirmed. In this way, both parties made their views known, and a change – or confirmation – of society had taken place.

2. Were there similarities and differences between hostage traditions in different parts of Scandinavia and continuities from the Iron Age into medieval Scandinavian societies?

It is uncertain how far back in time the hostage phenomenon can be traced in Scandinavia. The age of Eddic poetry is debated, and the skaldic poetry that mentions hostages is from the early 11th century at the earliest. In medieval law codes, alliterative and formulaic expressions that contain a word for 'hostage' could indicate old traditions. Therefore alternative sources (besides the text sources), such as inscriptions and place names, source categories previously ignored by the research on hostages, have been referred to.

The place-name evidence that is referred to is not so ambiguous when it comes to words for 'hostage'. However, it is uncertain how old these names are. Although the place name *Gyslamarchia*

is referred to by Saxo, it is unclear what sources he had access to. The *gisslalag* in Finland – earliest attested in the *Erikskrönikan* – was fixed in writing in the 1320s. The Estonian *maa*names, however, confirm that the *gisslalag* was an old organization. In addition, place names may be much older than the sources where they are first mentioned. These place names – from the Viking Age or older – indicate an ancient organization that can confirm that hostage taking and hostage giving was fairly routine. The evidence also leads us to assume that hostages were probably used in a similar manner in eastern Scandinavia as they were in Danish and Norwegian confrontation areas (in England and France) during the Viking Age. Myths and legends often build on oral traditions, and if they do so here, then it is reasonable to infer that hostage taking was an established practice long before these stories were fixed in writing. For example, the *Ynglinga saga*, compiled by Snorri, could be based on older models when it comes to the hostage tradition in the story of the Æsir-Vanir war. Other stories about hostages – primarily in continental chronicles – highlight the assumption that hostages were an important theme in the narrative traditions; the continental and Old English chronicles confirm early forms of hostage practices. Thus it is quite possible that many traditions about hostages were first fixed in writing in these chronicles, where, however, the perspective of the adversary is sometimes neglected or missing. The relationship can be compared with my model of peace processes, which characterizes the areas of confrontation: the experiences drawn from previous conflicts influenced the way peace agreements were designed. The peace processes were long, drawn-out processes in which both parties could have various degrees of influence.

The above-mentioned sources are independent of each other and, therefore, independently suggest that these are older traditions – dating back at least to the early Viking Age – although we do not know exactly how old they are. The sources indicate that hostages were used in both Western and Eastern Nordic countries, but only sporadically in Iceland. In other words, hostages were used primarily by the Norwegian monarchy.

The traditions that survived into the Middle Ages include the issuing of safe conduct letters, which, at least according to a late

medieval source, meant protection for the hostages. The purpose of the hostages during this time was as security in the interaction between individuals (i.e. kings and nobles), but also between different provinces, which were more or less loosely organized. In the 16th century, however, the latter type of hostage lost its importance as a factor in regulating the Swedish provinces.

3. What kind of relationships or social bonds occured between hostages and hostage takers? How were the power hierarchies and influences expressed? Were these relations violent or non-violent?

The investigation has shown that there could be close bonds between hostages and hostage takers, but these were not unconditional, because the hostages were integrated into a new collective.

There was a close connection between the *fóstri* institution and growing up as a hostage in a foreign collective (with the hostage-taker). Some literary examples, both Continental Germanic and Old Scandinavian, mention that it would be a question of subordination in which the moral may be that the main character – given as hostage as a young person – could turn against the hostage taker. But some cases – such as *Getica*'s story of Theodoric (the Great) and *Heimskringla*'s depiction of Rögnvald, Earl Brusi's son – give examples to the contrary. This reflects, therefore, that construction of superiority and subordination is not always evident in peace processes.

Kosto has pointed out that the status of the hostages was determined by how they were expected to be treated. But even the actual hostage giving might have been crucial for the hostage's welfare. It was important to get the right person as hostage, and consequently, knowledge about possible hostages was important for both sides. It was probably the lack of information (the hostages did not identify the ruler) that was the reason for the killing of the king-to-be Ragnvald Knaphövde outside Karleby in the province of Västergötland in the early 12th century. The desire to retain valuable people can be explained by Annette Weiner's paradox 'keeping while giving'.

Hostages seem generally to have been treated well, and the conclusion must be that violence directed towards hostages was

extremely rare. The exceptions consisted of unilateral hostages, which in the first place were taken *en masse*, and some examples of individual hostages, as in the case with Archbishop Ælfeah, who was taken hostage in order to stand as security for a tribute. One cannot point to any general reason for violence, however. Possible mechanisms could be stressful situations resulting from a crisis, the desire for revenge or to enact a warning, or even a misconception about the value of the people given (their social capital). The aspect of power was crucial, and thus how 'safe' the hostage taker felt in relation to the other party, something that did not necessarily have to do with military power, but could also be due to the degree of trust in the other party. The more distant one was from the counter-party, the more inclined one was to use violence, as is illustrated by, for example, the mass mutilations at Stade and Sandwich. In both cases people were dehumanized.

4. What methodological concerns does one encounter in studying hostage practices? How can hostages be understood theoretically in the light of peace agreements between communities where Scandinavians acted?

In the material that deals with hostages and concerns Scandinavia, text sources are few, and many of them are written from a Christian perspective and influenced by continental literary text traditions. This bias may be seen in the continental Bishop Chronicles, such as Rimbert's description of the siege of Apulia.

As Adam J. Kosto points out, the fact that women are not mentioned as often as hostages does not mean that they did not function as hostages. The reason for this is that the use of hostages was likely to appear in chronicles and annals without being mentioned as such, and also that women did not constitute central themes in the stories by and about men. To give women away was humiliating for men and would therefore be avoided as a literary theme. Women, however, were politically and socially important and active in various ways in different times and spaces, something which might have made them attractive as targets for

hostage taking. An example of a source category – outside the text traditions – that depicts women in such active roles is the Gotland picture stones.

Obviously, the fact that all the entries in the chronicles, annals, and other literary works are so brief can be explained in a number of ways. Even a single word like *ginslingu* may indicate that hostages were 'positioned' (during the giving or taking of hostages), and it may imply a more tedious process than the text material describes.

Peace agreements in the Viking Ages and in particular the Middle Ages were not linear processes. In the context of peace negotiations, hostages were used as a resource by both parties to the conflict, but sometimes in different ways. This could be compared to Lavelle's remark that hostages had 'multi-layered meanings'. By analyzing societies affected by conflicts that were interrupted by lengthy periods of peace, the giving or taking of hostages can thus be understood as an advocacy opportunity, together with several other ritual acts. It is when analysing such complex situations that my model is useful, because it values the religious, social, economic, and legal aspects related to the development of society. 'The societies' could be lands and properties on the micro level or kingdoms on the macro level, as was described in the initial case descriptions based on material from *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók* and the settlement between Guthrum and Alfred. The fact that several aspects were involved implies that the perspectives of different groups can be analysed even if they do not usually feature in the sources, especially the peasantry, which was the basis of production. Hostages are thus put into context and not only determined by the actions of the elite. These are aspects that emerge in the discussions about the Eriksgata in the *Äldre västgötalagen*, of Snorri's story about Dala-Gudbrand, and some other cases.

5. What are the similarities and differences between Christian and non-Christian traditions and values of peace agreements and negotiation processes that involved hostages? What were attitudes towards the agreements that became established?

This question cannot be fully answered but some observations are possible: It can be noted that both Christian and heathen rulers who concluded a contract had a pragmatic approach to the peace treaties. Regarding the perception of superiority and subordination, this might have been something that had different symbolic implications in relation to the ritual acts that were important (or central) to the respective culture. For example, in the Christian context it was important to illustrate father-and-son type relationships during baptism and confirmation, a symbolism that might have been lost on the 'heathens', as they appear to have had a more pragmatic approach to ritual acts.

There may, for example, have been a symbol that was difficult to interpret behind the assassination of Ælfeah, because he was executed under circumstances that were possibly ritualistic, something that appears to have gone unnoticed, however, by the Christian chronicler. As acts, the mass mutilations at Stade and Sandwich might have been about the boundary between categories like 'ritual', 'legal', and 'criminal', as the status of the hostages was unclear (were they prisoners or hostages?) and as the hostages were not actually murdered. The event at Sandwich shows that it is not possible to conclude that the mutilation was something that was 'pagan', because it was the Christian King Canute who was responsible. The identity of hostages – including their status and relationship to the hostage taker – was probably crucial for their protection. This seems to have been the case in both Viking Age and early medieval contexts. The hostage was also important as an 'investment opportunity' for a possible future alliance. It was likewise important to have the right person as security when it came to protecting borders during a restless period.