Dagfinn Skre, *The Northern Routes to Kingship: A History of Scandinavia AD 180–550*, London and New York: Routledge, 2025, 666 pp.

Dagfinn Skre's *The Northern Routes to Kingship: A History of Scandinavia AD 180–550* is a significant and innovative contribution to the study of early Scandinavian history. This work, published by Routledge in 2025, offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of the emergence of kingship in Scandinavia during a formative period that predates the Viking Age. Skre's book is distinguished by its ambitious scope, methodological diversity, and its challenge to established historiographical paradigms. It is positioned to become a foundational reference for scholars interested in the sociopolitical evolution of Northern Europe, as well as for those engaged in comparative studies of early state formation. Skre's book is structured into five major parts, each of which focuses on a different aspect of the transition from tribal societies to early kingdoms in Scandinavia. The work is grounded in a wide body of evidence, including archaeological material and runic inscriptions, place names, and historical accounts. The author employs a pan-Scandinavian and comparative approach, situating developments north of the Baltic within the broader context of late Roman and post-Roman Europe. This constitutes a substantial departure from the more conventional, nation-centred studies that have historically dominated Scandinavian historiography since the 19th century.

The temporal frame (AD 180–550) has been carefully selected. Skre's argument is that this period was characterised by significant transformations, including the arrival of Roman-trained warrior groups, the establishment of lordly centres, the monetisation of Scandinavian economies, and the eventual rise of kingdoms that were modelled, at least in part, on Roman and Continental precedents. The book's structure is indicative of an emphasis on contextual, multi-thematic analysis, with each section and chapter addressing a particular set of research issues through a distinct lens of evidence. A notable feature of the book is its explicit methodological stance. Skre proposes a "multilinear and multilayered research practice" (p. xxv) as a theoretical framework, which integrates diverse lines of evidence to construct robust historical explanations. He is sceptical of both purely systemic (neo-evolutionary) models and narrow disciplinary boundaries, and instead argues for an integrated, problem-driven approach drawing on insights from archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, and history. This methodological pluralism is evident throughout the book. For instance, Skre's analysis of personal names in runic inscriptions and place names is employed to trace the emergence of new social identities and power structures. Moreover, the author uses sociological theories of agency and structure, as well as evolutionary psychology, to explain the motivations and values of key historical actors, notably warriors, lords, and kings.

A central thesis of the book is that the "route to kingship" (p. 13) in Scandinavia was decisively shaped by the arrival of warrior groups dismissed from the Roman army after the Marcomannic Wars (AD 166–180). These well-equipped, experienced warriors, familiar with Roman institutions and practices, seized land and established new lordships across Scandinavia. Skre's argument is that their presence catalysed a series of political, economic, and cultural changes, including the founding of lordly centres, the stimulation of artisanal and commodity production, and the cultivation of a heroic warrior ethos. This "military twist" (pp. 119–200) is evidenced by a thorough examination of archaeological sites, armament deposits, and the distribution of Roman coins (denarii) in Scandinavia. Skre's analysis of the chronology and circulation of denarii provides novel insights into the monetisation of Scandinavian societies and the integration of local elites into broader networks of exchange and patronage.

Skre challenges the dominant narrative of a gradual, linear evolution from tribes to chiefdoms to kingdoms. Instead, he argues that the arrival of Roman-trained lords led to the creation of new, non-tribal polities which coexisted with traditional tribal structures for several centuries. These lordships were distinguished by the presence of sworn retinues, control over commodity production, and a focus on long-distance trade and warfare. It was only in the latter 5th and early 6th centuries, under the combined pressures of the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the influx of gold from the south-east, that these lordships began to evolve into kingdoms, particularly among the early Danes. This argument is supported by a nuanced discussion of the evidence for land rights, settlement patterns, and the role of personal names in both runic inscriptions and place names. Skre's interdisciplinary analysis allows him to trace the shifting boundaries between tribal, lordly, and kingly authority, and to highlight the contingent, often conflict-driven nature of early state formation in Scandinavia.

Another major theme is the centrality of wealth acquisition and distribution in the consolidation of power. Skre examines the production and trade of iron, arctic wildlife commodities, and slaves, as well as the role of raiding and warfare in generating the surplus needed to reward retainers and allies. He shows how control over key resources and routes, both maritime and overland, enabled certain lords to accumulate the wealth and prestige necessary to claim kingly status. The book further explores the symbolic and ideological dimensions of kingship. Skre analyses the development of a heroic warrior ethos, hall culture, and the use of gold bracteates that were modelled on Roman medallions as religious amulets and political media. These cultural innovations, he argues, were both products and instruments of the new political order.

A notable strength of the book is its sustained engagement with continental and British parallels (p. 45). Skre situates Scandinavian developments within the broader context of migrations and the formation of kingdoms among the Franks, Goths, and other Germanic peoples. However, he is careful to avoid simple

diffusionist models, and instead emphasises the complex, bidirectional flows of people, ideas, and institutions between Scandinavia and the continent. Skre demonstrates impressive interdisciplinary breadth, reflected by his command of diverse evidence and scholarship. The author moves seamlessly between archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, and history, and thus offers a model for genuinely interdisciplinary research. The book's methodological reflections are notably explicit and thoughtful. Skre's critique of both systemic models and disciplinary insularity is well-argued and persuasive. The analysis is grounded in a meticulous examination of primary evidence, from armament deposits and runic inscriptions to settlement patterns and material culture. Numerous illustrations, together with the various statistical representations, serve to enhance the clarity and accessibility of the argument. Skre's challenge to the conventional, nation-centred narrative of Scandinavian state formation is both timely and convincing. The emphasis placed on the role of Roman-trained warrior groups and the coexistence of tribes and lordships has added new complexity to our understanding of early Scandinavian polities.

The book's breadth and depth, while indicative of its strengths, also render it a challenging read. Specialists from particular disciplines may encounter chapters that fall outside their area of expertise; however, Skre offers guidance for selective reading to facilitate comprehension. Another factor to be considered is that some of his arguments, particularly those concerning the motivations and identities of individual actors inferred from personal names and limited archaeological evidence, necessarily involve a degree of speculation. Skre is generally careful to acknowledge this, but readers should be aware of the interpretive risks involved. Lastly, while the book discusses the Sámi and other non-Germanic groups, the primary focus remains on Germanic-speaking Scandinavians. Future research is therefore encouraged to engage in a more comprehensive examination of the interactions that occur between these populations.

In conclusion, *The Northern Routes to Kingship* is a landmark study that redefines our understanding of early Scandinavian history. Its interdisciplinary methodology, revisionist arguments, and empirical rigour set a new standard for the field. While demanding, it rewards close reading with a wealth of insights into the complex processes that led to the emergence of kingship in the North. Skre's book will be indispensable not only for specialists in Scandinavian studies but for anyone interested in the dynamics of early state formation, the legacy of Rome, and the complex history of European polities.

Carina Damm
University of Silesia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7981-8520