Debating the Thing in the North I: Introduction and Acknowledgments

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The study of lordship and power in medieval societies in northwest Europe has seen considerable attention in historical as well as archaeological scholarship, with a particular focus on the transition between chiefdoms and petty kingdoms to supra-regional kingdoms and states. The study of military and royal institutions has largely dominated the scholarly discourse, however, at the expense of discussion on what can be considered perhaps the most important agent in the process of medieval power: the assembly. Around the North Sea littoral, by the 9th to 12th centuries A.D., kingdoms were governed using systems of power in which assembly—both royal and public—were integral elements in the processes of negotiating, achieving consensus and exercising authority. In Norse society, assemblies referred to as thing, which were both parliaments and courts, are evidenced in runic inscriptions and written documents from the 11th century onwards. The term thing is, however, much older in origin, and the existence of a thing organization in other areas of Germanic settlement, can be gleaned in sources from, e.g., Neustria, Austrasia, Saxony, and East Frisia.

Assemblies may in some regions have drawn on late prehistoric antecedents (e.g., Anundshög, Västmanland, Sweden and Lunde, Vestfold, Norway) and they could also prove enduring, surviving as an activity in certain places into the late medieval, early modern, and even modern eras (e.g., Pingvellir, Iceland and Tynwald Hill, Isle of Man, Great Britain). In contrast to other power centers, such as palaces and castles, the assembly seems to have been more focused around a collective ethos, where decisions and verdicts were made jointly by groups of assembly participants. The thing institution, despite often being labeled “democratic”, was a place where those with power often seem to have been able to push decisions in their favor, even before Scandinavian kings, through new legislation and legal reform, took full control of the assemblies from the late 13th century (Helle 2001, Sanmark 2006).

The Assembly Project (TAP) represents the first international collaborative project dedicated to investigating the role of assemblies in the emergent power structures of medieval northwest Europe (A.D. 400–1500). TAP is led by the Museum of Cultural History (University of Oslo) and involving principal investigators from the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, the Department of Prehistory and Historical Archaeology, University of Vienna, and the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands. TAP is studying the northwestern European assembly-institution in its widest geographic and temporal contexts. By means of archaeological and historical enquiry from a landscape perspective, the project seeks to explore the role of the assembly in the development and maintenance of these complex networks of power and authority.

This renewed interest in assembly is prescient in an era in which the investigation of social networks via material culture has risen to prominence (e.g., Knappett 2011). Most social networks in pre-modern societies integrated both hierarchical top-down and peer-to-peer relations, with one type of relationship likely to dominate the other (Iversen et al. 2007). The assembly was an institution that often sat at the axis of lordship and peer-to-peer relations (Adolfsen 2000). The balance between these major forces of society changed and varied through time, and throughout, the assembly or thing played an integral role in the shaping and balancing of these power systems. At the assembly, information was exchanged on many levels and power relations were negotiated. According to Norse written sources, assembly attendants represented different social levels to some extent, while active participation was limited to landowners. The existence of assemblies across medieval societies in northwest Europe demonstrates their significance at this time. They could be fluid, powerful, and even dangerous places where authority could be consolidated or challenged. Through the dynamics of those attending and participating in the meetings, they could at times act as a sort of independent agency. To control the assembly was therefore vital in the formalization, expansion, and consolidation of power, e.g., for kings in the Scandinavian kingdoms and for the Norse elite in the newly settled territories in the west.

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