

ABSTRACT

Title: *Thegns* Around the North Sea: Elite, Nobility, Aristocracy of The Late Viking Age

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This cross-disciplinary doctoral thesis examines *thegns* (OE/ON *þegn*) in late pre-Norman England and Viking-Age Scandinavia, departing from the problem of interpreting *thegns* commemorated in 45 runic inscriptions from around 1000 AD. The thesis highlights that *thegns*' socio-conceptual roles stemmed from concrete historical processes and changing social meanings. Studying them provides insights into the social order and interconnectedness of the North Sea region. The dissertation comprises five research chapters, five accessory vignettes for historical context, and two excursions into related but not decisive matters.

CHAPTER 1 presents the problem and research questions on: 1) social structures communicated through OE/ON *þegn*; 2) power distribution illuminated by *thegns*' socio-economic and political conditions; 3) interactions between England and Scandinavia that follows from the answer to the former two questions. The chapter also charts the historical and theoretical background, methodology, and study design. It emphasises the need to sidestep the few and potentially problematic sources and to instead use digital language corpora for a maximum range of contextualised meanings of OE/ON *þegn*.

CHAPTER 2 outlines the historiographical background, summarising previous scholarship and potential hurdles in interpretation of primary sources: Archbishop Wulfstan of York's texts in England; post-Viking-Age English sources and native toponymic material in Scandinavia.

CHAPTER 3 establishes that OE *þegn* always connoted non-humiliating service by a free man to a lord, usually a king. Through royal co-optation during the studied period, the term evolved to denote lay landowning aristocratic elites. This process involved tenurial and interpersonal relationships, which are in the monarchocentric discourse attracted the name "bookland" for the landed property and "*thegn*" for its owner. The chapter wavers to definitively pronounce if such elites internalised the *thegnly* identity as a master status and became a historical ontology. With that, the chapter concludes by offering a new possible reading of Wulfstan's writings.

CHAPTER 4 shows that ON *þegn* rarely meant "servant" and instead denoted lay elites and/or kings' junior partners, and that Scandinavian kings sought to turn the former into the latter. The chapter argues that their common trait was an economic powerbase in ancestral landed property, the "odal". The chapter explores the *hóldr* status group associated with "odal" and the *thegnly* elites' transition from royal liegemen to subjects through expanding royal lordship. The chapter concludes by interpreting runic *thegns* as local magnates rather than immediate royal agents.

CHAPTER 5 summarises the conclusions, positing that pre-Conquest England's social order was strongly affected by a monarchocentric discourse, unlike in Scandinavia. The chapter emphasises recognising the bias in the term "*thegn*", especially in England, and that in Scandinavia, senses imbued in ON *þegn* appear independent of each other and irreducible to one "core" meaning, unlike in England. The chapter harmonises these conclusions by suggesting that thanks to a closely knit socio-conceptual space, social ideas traversed the North-Sea region. A possibility is entertained that due to significant interactions at the turn of the 9th–10th and 10th–11th centuries, Old Norse inherited late OE *þegn* senses in received forms and adapted them to local social conditions, the results of which, among others, got engraved in the 45 runic inscriptions in question.

Keywords: *thegn*; Viking Age; Anglo-Saxon England; Old English; Old Norse; historical social studies; elite; nobility; aristocracy; runic inscriptions; digital language corpora; semasiology; onomasiology; historical semantics; historical ontology; Archbishop Wulfstan; Cerdicings; Ynglingar–Hárfagri; King Cnut; kingship; lordship; *hóldr*; bookland; odal; "Danelaw"; heterarchy; monarchocentric discourse

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