Knut Helle, Cand Phil (Bergen), MNA, MRDS, MRNS, CorrFRSE
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Knut Helle, who died in June, 2015, was Norway’s foremost medieval historian and was the most active editor and author of books on the medieval history of Norway in the past forty years. He wrote standard authoritative studies of the political, urban and legal history of the formative period when Norway was developing from a domain of Viking sea chiefains into a medieval state. One of his early books was entitled Norge Blir en Stat ('Norway becomes a State')(1965), a profoundly influential study of the kingdom from 1130 to 1319. In the latter year the direct line of male heirs to the kingdom died out, and Norway entered a period of political uncertainty, subject to increasing influence from the neighbouring kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden which led eventually to the uniting of the three kingdoms under one dynasty, and the loss of Norway’s independence as a political entity. Helle’s main research focus was on the history of Norway prior to that loss of independence.

Considering the paucity of written sources for the period on which Knut Helle focused his energies it was a remarkable achievement to write so much about the early medieval period when so little historical information exists. He was not a saga man and used the literary saga sources rarely, being very aware of the dangers of relying on them too heavily for information about early medieval Norway. As the sagas were mostly written down several centuries after the events they relate they are thought to be more reliable as sources of information about that later period than about the earlier Viking centuries. So it was the documentary material and the chronicles which were the sources Helle strove to extract as much information from as was historically possible. Sparse and dry they may be indeed are but in several senses more reliable about the period than the more readable sagas. One of his most solid and long-lasting works of scholarship was the monumental Konge og Gode Menn i norsk rikstyring ca. 1150-1319('Kings and wise men in Norwegian governance c.1150-1319') written in 1972. It was a study of those ‘best men’, the wisest, skilled individuals who had a powerful role to play alongside their king and who participated in the governing of the country. It included an assessment of their role in society and their competence as well as a broad analysis of the different political assemblies they attended, and the royal councils which some of them attended. It remains a standard work of reference for all information about these distant figures in a dimly-lit world in which the structures of a medieval state were only just being formed.

As well as his own studies of medieval Norwegian society Knut Helle also promoted a general understanding of the Viking Age and medieval period in Scandinavia through editorial initiatives and management of many different publishers’ historical series. These culminated in his editorship of the first volume of the Cambridge Medieval History of Scandinavia (2003) which took a very long time to bring to publication (in the intervening period three of the contributors had died). Twenty-eight scholars contributed from throughout Scandinavia; nine were Norwegians and nine were Swedes, three were Danes, three were Finns and two were Icelanders. The sensitivities of the different Scandinavian nations required profound editorial skills in bringing these contributors together, and in co-ordinating the different chapters with their varying political and cultural viewpoints.

This pan-Scandinavian co-ordination was not the main area of Helle’s work. He was a west Norwegian first and foremost and his strong bonds with Sogn and Fjordane and Hordaland are evident in his urban studies of Stavanger (1975) and the early history of Bergen, four volumes of which were published in the 1980s. These books on the most important medieval towns of western Norway and their commerce were greatly enhanced by his search in foreign archives, particularly in the UK, which resulted in the finding of material relating to the maritime contacts between western Norway and the ports of eastern England and Scotland in the medieval period. One of Helle’s great achievements was to put the history of medieval Norway firmly into a European context, which contrasted with the previous generation of historical writers, some of whom tended to focus on Norway in isolation.

The legal history of medieval Norway was another facet of Helle’s interests, and he made a valuable study of the Gulathing law (2001) of west Norway. The Gulathing was the open air public assembly for that legal province (the west coast of Norway) and the medieval provincial lawcode
has survived, some clauses of which are thought to have their origin in the 11th century. The location of the assembly site itself was of special interest to him, and the linking of document, historical event and place to identify its likely location was another of his intellectual involvements. The same Gulathing law is thought to have been the legal code used by the Norwegian colonies (or Skattlands) which grew out of the Viking settlements in the islands around the Scottish coasts, and which were therefore of some interest to Helle. This is rather unusual among Norwegian historians who do not feel too comfortable with the history of the Norwegian-Scottish island communities in the North Sea, regarding them as hybrid societies (which of course they are).

Knut’s empathy with the Norse culture which took root in the islands and which survived far beyond the end of the period of Norwegian dominance led to a flourishing interaction with joint historical events involving in particular the island communities of Orkney and Shetland.

At the Conference commemorating the 850th anniversary of the founding of St Magnus Cathedral in 1987 Helle gave a paper on the organization of the Church in Norway in the 12th century. In 1999 there was a Conference commemorating the 700th anniversary of Shetland’s first document when his contribution focused on one of the main characters in that document, Thorvald Thoresson, and ‘the Political and Administrative Circumstances in Norway in 1299’; and finally at the conference hosted by RSE in 2006 on ‘The Vikings and Scotland: Impact and Influence’ he looked at the establishment of the earldom of Orkney in the late 9th century, the extent to which it was founded by the kings of Norway and the extent of the control exercised by them over the islands in the following centuries.

Helle’s historical interests broadened to include a more material side of medieval life and culture through the influence of his wife, the archaeologist Ingvild Øye. They collaborated on many historical-archaeological projects; particularly those concerning urban development in Bergen using the results of the enormous excavations of the Hanseatic wharf at Bryggen which took place after the disastrous fire of 1955. They traced the physical town boundaries as recorded in King Magnus Lawmender’s Town Law of the late 13th century, and they both were involved in the long-running project using archaeological, historical and place-name evidence to establish the exact location of the Gulathing assembly site. These are but a few of the varying enterprises which contributed so much to the understanding of Norway’s medieval past in the period of its independent monarchy, the period which is known as Norgesvelde (‘Norway’s Domination’ or ‘Greatness’). The period of Nazi domination after the occupation of Norway in 1940, a time of national humiliation which the young Knut lived through, probably increased his awareness of the significance of the medieval period when Norway was a free and self-governing country.

Historical pursuits were only one part of Knut Helle’s professional life and achievements. He did public service in many respects, as Chairman of the Norwegian Historical Association, as member of the Council for the Humanities of the Norwegian Research Council, and in an international capacity as a member of the Commissions for the history of assemblies of estates, and of the history of towns. He was a member of all three Scandinavian national Academies. But Bergen was his spiritual home, and the University of Bergen was where he spent the whole of his academic career. Sailing in the fjords of western Norway was his chosen summer occupation and that was where his heart was. Tall and spare and dignified he epitomized the Norwegian ideal, and if not following in the footsteps of his Viking west Norwegian ancestors, he was the successor and chronicler of the ‘best men’ of whom he wrote and whose path he did follow.

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