

Summary of
FORMATION AND RESOLUTION OF IDEOLOGICAL CONTRAST IN
THE EARLY HISTORY OF SCANDINAVIA

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Some recent studies concerning early medieval Europe have suggested that Scandinavia and Francia represented two ideological poles with which other populations within the Germanic world might have intended to align themselves. While such a view sometimes may be useful, it may also over-simplify a more complex situation. Scandinavians must have recognised cultural distinctions between themselves and Christian Europeans, but may not have viewed these distinctions necessarily as emblems of opposition unless faced by a direct political or military threat. Indeed, ideological contrasts concerning the way society was structured and power was wielded may have cut across apparent ethnic boundaries.

Roman influences on early Germanic society may have assisted in the creation of a 'Germanic' identity. Roman pressure also may have affected the development of Germanic governmental structures, encouraging king-centred governmental ideologies that contrasted with possibly older, assembly-centred systems. Scandinavia, never threatened by Roman domination, may have retained assembly-centred structures longer than other Germanic societies. Southern Scandinavia's 'central places' of the Early Germanic Iron Age, such as Gudme, may have had functions comparable with those of the later Old Saxon Assembly and Icelandic Alþingi. Such sites may have provided a focus for an emergent Scandinavian identity. This assembly-centred system may have been disrupted as chieftains struggled to attain the kind of power enjoyed by their counterparts in king-centred societies (much as happened in medieval Iceland), perhaps explaining the poverty of archaeological finds in the region from the Late Germanic Iron Age.

The growing Frankish threat to Scandinavia in the eighth century may have both spurred further consolidation of power in the hands of the élite and, initially, provoked an ideological reaction against Christian Europe. Yet while wary of domination by Christian European kingdoms, the Viking-Age Scandinavian élite may have envied their powerful model of lordship and had an interest in accessing elements of their culture. Such a situation may be reflected in historical legends, particularly the Scylding-Skjöldung cycle, which perhaps developed during the Viking Age. These legends might represent not source material for historical glimpses of early northern Europe (as is often assumed) but rather Scandinavian attempts at self-definition in relation to the burgeoning and powerful cultures of Christian Europe. Scandinavia's eventual adoption of Christianity and Christian lordship in the course of the Viking Age largely resolved the ideological contrasts that had existed both within Scandinavian society and between Scandinavia and Christian Europe.