

## Crossing Disciplinary Borders: *Thegns* in Northern Europe (the British Isles and Scandinavia)

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Ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century no survey of the Anglo-Saxon social structure – regardless of its scale and perspective – has been able to leave out the *thegns* (OE *þegn*) when describing the social stratification in pre-Norman England. Different research methodology has been applied throughout the time: historians from a thorough philological background (e.g. L.M. Larson, *The King's Household in England before the Norman Conquest*, 1904) relied primarily on the literary sources (Old English poems and prose), while those trained in the classical traditions of *Verfassungsgeschichte* (e.g. H.M. Chadwick, *Studies in Anglo-Saxon Institutions*, 1905) found inspiration in the Anglo-Saxon legal texts. Yet despite a great amount of research done in the field of Old English social history, the term *þegn* has not yet been studied in its entirety throughout the period. Following the lead of Wulfstan, Archbishop of York in 1002-1023, modern historians usually quote his work *Gebyncðo* (“Dignities”) in establishing a *thegn* to be any man, rich enough to have a certain amount of land, kitchen, church, bell house, gatehouse and serving the king in his hall. Existing works have either concentrated on the *ad hoc* usage in individual sources (e.g. *The World before Domesday: The English Aristocracy 900–1066* (2008) by A. Williams), or glanced over their multitudinous use with little regard for their chronological order and possible mutual influences (e.g. *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary* (1976) by J. Lindow).

At the same time, with a cognate word being present in Old Norse (ON *þegn*), Scandinavian scholars have carried out a lot of parallel research, too. It was first conceived by a very influential 1927 article *Old Danish Thegns and Drengs* by S. Aakjær and later promulgated by K.M. Nielsen, N. Lund, K. Randsborg, J.P. Strid, J. Jesch, L. Goetting, *et al.* The focal point of the discussion has for the most part been concentrated on the problem of whether the Scandinavian *thegns* were kings' retainers or the top level of the free landowner class. Though some Scandinavian scholars could not avoid comparing their material with that from England, due to the absence of a similar initiative by the Anglo-Saxonists, this attempt seems secund.

Today, the problems in the study of the *thegnly* stratum are manifold. On the one hand, they belong to the field of historiography. British scholars rarely read on the Scandinavian runic material – our prime and only contemporary source about the *thegns* in this region – thus leaving a lot of available evidence out. At the same time, historians in Scandinavia, when executing comparative research, usually work with English second-hand works that, as outlined above, show little to no knowledge on the cognate term in Old Norse. On the other hand, the source critique does not always meet the modern standards either, e.g. authors tend to trust the vivid but complicated accounts of aforementioned Archbishop Wulfstan all too much. The paper I would like to deliver thus aims at presenting a summarising review of how this striking methodological yawning gap in the current state of research can possibly be bridged, hopefully falling in line with the 7<sup>th</sup> Austmarr Symposium's announced topic.