Interdisciplinary and Comparative Methodologies

№ 14

Exploring Circum-Baltic Cultures and Beyond

Guest Editors:
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INTERDISCIPLINARY AND COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGIES
EXPLORING CIRCUM-BALTIC CULTURES AND BEYOND

Abstract: The core of this special issue engages with the constructedness of ideas and understandings rooted in the discourses of scholarship. This introductory article explores perspectives on discourses and practices of interdisciplinarity. The discussion of topics related to these issues develops in dialogue with individual contributions to the collection in ways that make their interconnections and complementarity apparent.

Abstract: This article presents a new interdisciplinary methodology successfully developed for the identification and detailed analysis of Viking-Age outdoor assembly sites. This methodology draws on archaeological evidence, topographic information and a wide range of written sources, from laws to eddic poetry. It is hoped this approach will inspire a new way of thinking, leading to the identification of outdoor assembly-sites in areas of the world where they are not yet known.

Abstract: The article addresses the possibilities for a methodological reassessment of the phenomenon of the thegn*s in England and Scandinavia in the late Viking Age (ca. 900–1066). The historiographical overview reveals that the* thegn*s have never been examined for their own sake, and that the recent developments in source studies open new methodological prospects in anthropological research. The case study of the* thegn*s hopes to outline some of them.*

Abstract: M.A. Castrén's Föreläsningar i finsk mytologi *['Lectures on Finnish mythology'] represents an important phase in the study of mythology and religion. It is the first comparative study on Finnish and related mythologies that draws on contemporary international scholarship. The* Lectures *are here reviewed critically both as an emblem in the history of the discipline and as a case study on challenges in combining methodologies from different disciplines and approaches.*

Abstract: The present article discusses a historical tendency among scholars to focus on male-gendered deities in the Germanic corpus, a boom period of goddess studies in the 1990s under the influence of Marija Gimbutas, and the place of Great Goddess theory in the field of ancient Germanic studies today. Great Goddess theory is proposed to remain an influence in ancient Germanic studies, particularly in the field's tendency to identify goddesses as extensions of a single entity.

Abstract: The Finnish and Karelian word runo *['poem'] has been viewed as reflecting a loan from Proto-Germanic* *rūnō, *the ancestor of Old Norse* rún *['rune']. However, given its limited distribution in Finnic and the meanings attested in Germanic and Finnic languages, the word was more likely borrowed at a later stage, from Early Norse*

Abstract: This paper confronts the research tendency to treat a performance tradition as a semiotic phenomenon in isolation from its performance environment. Karelian funeral lament offers an example of a tradition with a customary soundscape that contextualizes and reinforces the performance arena, while performance participates in the soundscapes of additional ritual activities. The case's analogical value is illustrated through comparison with Old Norse examples.

COMMENTS, PERSPECTIVES AND REPORTS

Abstract: This paper explores the periodisation of pre-documentary Scandinavian language and its synchronisation with that of Finnic, the era in focus being the first millennium CE. Stratification of loanwords is discussed both as a means to refine periodisation and as an aim in itself. The problems as concerns the latter half of the first millennium are highlighted. The account is built on dissertation research defended in September 2018.

Abstract: This paper complements my model for combining archaeological and lexical material with relevant indicators, a discipline-neutral tool that provides information on cultural processes enabling comparison of research results of different disciplines. It shows how the model is applied to South Sámi material, and how relevant indicators should be used in the data. I suggest that a degree of probability be added to the concept, distinguishing strong and weak relevant indicators.

Abstract: Since 2012, an archaeological excavation has continued on a Late Iron Age (AD 800–1050) settlement site and a medieval and early modern village plot of Tursiannotko in Pirkkala (near Tampere). The very well-preserved materials found at the site give a lot of information regarding the modes of subsistence, building techniques, material culture, ritual practices and trade contacts of a relatively wealthy farmer and hunter community.

Abstract: This report offers an overview of recent research being conducted on Jómsvíkinga saga.

Abstract: This article introduces Russian laments of the Vologda region in relation to other lament traditions of the Baltic Sea region. The tradition of this region and lament collection there are briefly introduced as well as the Russian Lament database developed and used in connection with the current research. The language and poetics of the laments are outlined followed by a rhythmical analysis and comments on parallelism, alliteration and practices.

Abstract: This report briefly presents on evidence of a lament tradition among the Skolt Saami. The lament tradition was recognized when documented by earlier scholars but has never entered discussion of lament traditions and has remained generally unrecognized in discussions of lament traditions in the Baltic Sea region.

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*Thegn*s in the Social Order of Anglo-Saxon England and Viking-Age Scandinavia: Outlines of a Methodological Reassessment

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Abstract: The article addresses the possibilities for a methodological reassessment of the phenomenon of the thegn*s in England and Scandinavia in the late Viking Age (ca. 900–1066). The historiographical overview reveals that the* thegn*s have never been examined for their own sake, and that the recent developments in source studies open new methodological prospects in anthropological research. The case study of the* thegn*s hopes to outline some of them.*

If the period from ca. 1800 to the 1950s could be described as the 'age of grand narratives', to a certain extent promoted through European National Romanticism and the search for 'origins', then recent decades might be termed 'a period of revision of received wisdom'. Calling it, in Thomas Kuhn's terminology, a 'scientific revolution' or 'paradigm shift' is, perhaps, going too far, but earlier frameworks are undoubtedly being constantly revised. At the close of the 20th century, there appeared important *ad fontes* works, many of which sought to re-evaluate established terminology in order to challenge and clarify existing concepts of the medieval social order (e.g. on the much-debated problem of feudalism, see Abels 2009). Closely intertwined Nordic, 'Germanic', and Viking Studies followed suit. The present article is positioned on the trajectory of such re-evaluations. It concentrates on a particular empirical case that arguably deserves a reassessment, the case being the phenomenon of the *thegn*s (also spelled 'thane' in Modern English) in late Anglo-Saxon England and Viking-Age Scandinavia (cognates of the Old English/Old Norse *þegn* are also recorded in continental Germanic languages). When the available evidence is pieced together, it is impossible to deny the *thegn*s their historical role: both in England and Scandinavia, literate people considered this role important enough to give it space in their limited media (be it parchment, stone or an oral skaldic stanza).

Understanding categories behind medieval vernacular terminology and associated texts is a fundamental research problem for a number of disciplines. The concept of a *comitatus* as a social institution characteristic of the early medieval pre-state tribes, variously termed in the Germanic languages (Lindow 1976: 10–84), reached a virtual research stalemate until recently reassessed by Petr Stefanovich, who in his 2012 book applied it to the Old Russian lexeme дроужина (*družina*) ['(military) retinue'] (Stefanovich 2012), proving its terminological potential (at least in Slavonic studies). Doubts about the often-postulated prevalence of blood feud and hence the meaningfulness of the term *wergild* [lit. 'man price'] in early Germanic and later Scandinavian societies have been expressed (Sawyer 1987). Even before then, Alexander Murray, it seems, overthrew the hitherto prevailing notions of an agnatic kinship among the early Germanic peoples (Murray 1983). The very pages of this journal saw a dispute between Rudolf Simek (2010), questioning the concept of *vanir* as a family of Nordic gods, and Clive Tolley (2011), and Frog and Jonathan Roper (2011), who critiqued Simek's scepticism. Many further examples of such debates and reassessments could be enumerated – *holmgangr* and *óðal* in the Nordic studies, *hall*

and *bretwalda* in the Anglo-Saxon spring to mind, to name but a few. Yet despite the variety of philological, theoretical, and analytical tools brought to bear on these questions, a current, coherent methodology for addressing issues of this type remains wanting.

It seems that academic discourse currently displays a tendency to inadvertently turn certain historical lexemes, such as *družina*, *barbari*, *barones*, *víkingar*, *væringjar*, or indeed *þegnas*/*þegnar*, into somewhat ideal, self-sufficient concepts, often as analytical constructs, that are then retrospectively projected back onto the culture in question. As a result, such constructs may converge with the actual usage in the sources and receive a status of a 'common knowledge'. With those problems in sight, the global goal of this paper is, by bringing a particular case study to the fore, to suggest a possible methodology with which those may be overcome, or at least compensated for. Readers are kindly asked to bear in mind, though, that before them is only an illustration of this methodology in ongoing research, rather than final historical conclusions about the *thegn*s.

Sketching **Thegn**s' *Presence in the Sources*

*Thegn*s' importance in both England and Scandinavia is difficult to overestimate and is highlighted by an abundance of sources referring to them, and the role *thegn*s play therein. Thus, reporting the nadir of the Old English monarchy, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* complains:

> ⁊ com Æþelmær ealdorman þyder ⁊ þa westernan þegenas mid him, ⁊ bugon ealle to Swegene ⁊ hi gisludon. Þa he ðus gefaren hæfde, wende þa norðweard to his scipum ⁊ eal þeodscype hine hæfde þa for fulne cyng [...] (*ASE*, manuscripts C, D, E: *s.a.* 1013 AD; Whitelock 1979: 246.)

> *Ealdorman* Æthelmær came there, and with him the western *thegn*s, and all submitted to Swein, and they gave him hostages. When he had fared thus, he then turned northward to his ships, and all the nation regarded him as full king [...] (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

Few doubts exist concerning the position of a late Anglo-Saxon *ealdorman*, a provincial civil governor and military leader, appointed by a king (see e.g. Molyneaux, 2015: 66–67; 111–112). But who were those 'western *thegn*s' who also played an essential role at one of Northern Europe's crucial points in history by unanimously changing their allegiance and paving the way for a new, albeit short, English dynasty that in the closing years before the Norman Conquest arguably reoriented the Anglo-Saxon culture and politics towards the North, imparting them with a 'Nordic' flavour?

When answering this question, most anglophone authors rely on a contemporary text, traditionally called *Geþyncðu* ['Ranks' or 'Dignities'], which maintains:

> And gif ceorl geþeah, þæt he hæfde V hida fullice agenes landes, [kycenan], bellan ⁊ burhgeat, setl ⁊ sundornote on cynges healle, þonne wæs he þanon for þegenrihtes wyrðe. And se þegen þe geþeah, þæt he þenode cynge ⁊ his radstæfne rad on his hirede, gif se þonne hæfde þegn, þe him filigde, þe to cynges [utware] V hida hæfde ⁊ on cyninges sele his hlaforde þenode ⁊ þriwa mid his ærendan gefore to cynge, se moste siððan mid his foraðe his hlaford aspelian ⁊ his onspæce geræcan mid rihte, swa hwar swa he þorfte. (*Geþyncðu*, §2–3: Liebermann 1903: 456; Rabin 2015: 68–69.)

> [...] if a layman prospered so that he had fully five *hides*[1] of his own property with a church and kitchen, a bell-house and fortified gate, a seat and an appointed role in the king's hall, then he was worthy of a *thegn*'s rights ever after. And if a *thegn* prospered so that he waited upon the king and rode on his business among his retinue; then, if he had a *thegn* who followed him, who had five *hides* for the king's service, and had waited upon his lord in the king's hall, and had gone three times on his business to the king, then [his *thegn*] afterwards might represent his lord in various obligations with his initial oath and handle his litigation, wherever he must.

Such a clear-cut explanation is rather appealing to those modern encyclopaedic views that favour monosemantic definitions. However, it poses a great many problems: no instance of such upward social mobility is known for sure; this is but one unique source's testimony, and *unus testis non testis est* ['one witness is not a witness']; the author of this text was established in 1950 to be Wulfstan, archbishop of York (d. 1023), a famous homilist and political figure with a markedly strong interest in the moral 'deterioration' of his age; *Geþyncðu*'s genre is hardly legislative but

rather polemic (see a further elaboration below) – to name but a few concerns. Moreover, Wulfstan's statement contradicts other sources that either undermine *thegn*s' connections with the monarchy or directly oppose them to it (such as in the quote from the *ASE*, where the *thegn*s abandon their supposed lord). At first glance, Wulfstan's vivid description finds good support in at least 188 diplomas from the years 900–1066 that attest land grants to the *thegn*s (see below):[2] faithful servants to kings, who sit on their councils, get rewarded with estates, where they surely take over existing manor complexes or build new ones. But if one looks beyond the West Saxon perspective, a different picture emerges. It has not escaped scholars' attention that the *Domesday Book* records hundreds of *taini* (a Latin rendering of *thegn*) – according to Michael Costen's (2007) calculations, about 820 (*sic*!) of them in Somerset, Wiltshire, Devonshire, and Dorset alone – whose positions seem hardly distinguishable from those of top-tier peasants – something bizarre for the accepted monosemantic understanding of the term. Thanks in large part to the multicultural background, local differences might equally worry an aspiring student: thus, the so-called *Regulation of Thegns' Guild in Cambridge* (Whitelock 1979: 603–605) meticulously describes the circumstances in which blood feud should ensue, something strictly prohibited by the royal legislation of the period.[3]

Compared to England, far fewer individual *thegn*s are known east of the North Sea, yet their regional prominence, reflected in 46 known 10th–11th-century Danish and Swedish commemorative runic inscriptions, is still clear in the landscape today. In Södermanland, for instance, one reads:

> **styrlaugʀ : auk : hulmbʀ : staina : raistu : at : bryþr : sina : brau(t)u : nesta : þaiʀ : entaþus : i : austruiki : þurkil : auk sturbiarn þiaknaʀ : kuþiʀ** (Sö 34.)

> Styrlaugr and Holmr raised the stones next to the path in memory of their brothers. They met their end on the eastern route (*Austrvegr*, i.e. in Russia), Thorkell and Styrbjörn, good *thegn*s.

Perhaps, because a *Geþyncðu*-like text is absent from the Old Norse corpus and due to the vagueness of the relevant runic material

and skaldic verse, for almost a century, while agreeing on the *thegn*s' local prominence, scholars have been arguing about whether Scandinavian *thegn*s bore any similarity to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts and served in kings' military retinues or assumed the status of provincial aristocrats / petty chiefs / clan leaders. To this must be added the much weightier arguments archaeologists wield in Scandinavian academia when it comes to the pre-medieval period. The most recent examination of the matter was undertaken within an archaeological survey (see below) and aimed at reconciling the conflicting views: Danish and West Swedish late 10th-century magnates voluntarily chose to join Kings Sweyn and Cnut's raids in England, where they adopted the titles of *thegn*s (though not the lexeme itself) and brought them back to Scandinavia. This was done in line with a long-standing tradition of outlining the process of early medieval state building in Scandinavia, in which *thegn*s have frequently played one of the pivotal roles, being interpreted as the agents and officers of the new political units that were forming.

The attention in the sources as well as the supposed level of influence *thegn*s' probably exerted within Anglo-Scandinavian society/-ies warrant us to apply to these people a modern sociological concept of a [lay] *elite* (< Fr. *élite* [lit. 'chosen person']) or an echelon thereof. For the purpose of the present discussion, I engage the definition of an elite adopted by the French historians Laurent Feller and Régine Le Jan:

> tous ceux qui jouissent d'une position sociale élevée [...] [ce qui signifie] la détention de la fortune, du pouvoir et du savoir ainsi que la reconnaissance par autrui (Feller 2006: 6).

> all those who enjoy a high social position [...] [which means] the possession of wealth, power, and knowledge as well as recognition by others.

Unlike original native terms like *nobilitas*, *proceres*, *optimates*, *æþelboren* or *góðir menn*, which could at times demonstrate a judgemental character, this word *elite*'s emotional and moral neutrality gives it flexibility and scientific applicability.

Interpreting the *thegn*s' position within the social environment has always been regarded as a tool to paint an intricate portrait of early

medieval communities in England and across the North Sea. Among the many questions, understanding the *thegn*s' standing in the socio-political orders allows us to broach the subject of power distribution in Anglo-Scandinavian polities. The debate in the Scandinavian historical community, briefly alluded to above, serves as a prime example. If one agrees with proponents (mostly historians and archaeologists) of Svend Aakjær's idea that, in the runic inscriptions' *thegn*s, we see kings' retainers, then one advocates a top-down power structure in which rulers establish their control by asserting their presence through dependent agents. Should one take the side of his critics (mainly runologists and philologists), a bottom-up hierarchy emerges, where the power resides with the wealthy local 'clan' leaders. This is just as relevant for the Anglo-Saxon situation. On the one hand, historians working on the development of kingship normally treat the *thegn*s from the charters as a certain extension of the court in the provinces (e.g. Larson 1904: 103); on the other, *Domesday* scholars emphasise the *thegn*ly class' territorialisation and embeddedness in the social fabric (e.g. Hollister 1962: 64–65). But the important role of the *thegn*s and their place in society were studied in the aforementioned 'age of grand narratives', and the subsequent progress in source criticism, methodology, and overall discourse calls for revisiting the received wisdom, as well as bringing the national and disciplinary foci of research into a dialogue.

In the narrow sense, this paper aims at outlining a feasible methodological solution to this case study, as well as its historiographical background and state of current research. Besides casting new light on the social and political arrangements of the Viking Age and their interconnectedness, the suggested approach may contribute to scholarly knowledge by finding a wider application in (pre-)medieval studies and, possibly, beyond. However, on a larger scale, the suggested solution might also, where sufficiently large corpora exist, provide an applicable tool for investigating socially constructed categories linked to historical terminology in other languages and periods. This application of the methodology can be extended to not only the stock of an indigenous

lexis in a given language or a group of related languages (see e.g. Lindow 1976), but also linguistic loans, which in turn can help to form a dynamic view on contact patterns or mechanisms, social systems and their variation throughout recorded history.

The State of Research
Before proceeding to the methodological case study, I will briefly review the extant scholarship on the topic, highlighting some of its inner controversies that, I believe, advocate a reassessment. Furthermore, since *thegn*s have, as far as I have been able to explore the relevant works, not been researched for their own sake, there currently is no similar comprehensive historiographical overview. Naturally, it is hardly possible to cover all relevant monographs, book chapters and articles in just one paper, so only the most important 'milestone' works shall be mentioned below. Because of the methodological character of the current article, multiple related texts had to be left out for the sake of brevity. Paralleling the geographical distribution of the source material, the following historiographical sketch is organized through the developments of discussions in scholarships of different languages.

Anglophone Historiography
The first British 'scientific' examination of the *thegn*ly phenomenon perhaps began with the opening volume of the *Constitutional History of England* by William Stubbs (1874), where the word *thegn* appears a minimum of 160 times. Stubbs' description largely stems from Wulfstan's treatises. In a nutshell, his view is that *thegn*s used to be warrior members of the royal *comitatus*, but that this group split by about the 930s: some of its members absorbed the upper crust of the free population, while others consumed the former aristocracy by blood and became the new 'vassal' nobility:

> On the one hand the name is given to all who possess the proper quantity of land whether or no [*sic*] they stand in the old relation to the king; on the other the remains of the older nobility place themselves in the king's service. (Stubbs 1874: 156.)

For a commoner to become '*thegn*-worthy', he needed to "acquire five hides of land, and a

special appointment in the king's hall, with other judicial rights" (Stubbs 1874: 155). The idea of social mobility is of prime importance to Stubbs: "[...] there is no impassable barrier between the classes: the *ceorl*[4] may become *thegn*-worthy, and the *thegn*, *eorl*-worthy" (*ibid*.: 81), and he briefly mentions that a *thegn*'s *wergild* was 1,200 shillings (*ibid*.: 157).

Stubbs' condensed overview has probably served as the primary point of departure for generations of English-speaking historians.[5] For example, whereas Stubbs was content to mention *thegn*'s 1,200-shilling *wergild* in just one sentence, when Henry Chadwick wrote his *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (1905), he dedicated almost 40 pages to proving this statement arithmetically (Chadwick 1905: 76–114), and ever since then this idea has acquired the status of a common knowledge. In order to prove these claims, Chadwick came up with "one of the most insightful and influential essays on the Anglo-Saxon monetary system" (Naismith 2015: 143) that served as a "prelude to the main business, which was using the data in law codes to shed light on aspects of Anglo-Saxon society" (*ibid*: 146). At the same time, Chadwick also laid the foundation for the tradition of studying kings' *thegn*s from the charter evidence, and was echoed by his American contemporary Laurence Larson (1904).

Medievalist Rachel Reid (1920) joined the discussion and offered an original view on the problem at a time when the ongoing debate had been developing for a few dacades surrounding the continuity/discontinuity between the Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods. In a 38-page article, she brought extensive Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and Scottish sources from over a millennium and postulated that kings' *thegn*s were officials endowed with the judicial rights of *sake* and *soke*, *toll* and *team*, and *infangenetheof*[6] "and duties akin to a sheriff's" (Reid 1920: 172). After 1066 (the Norman Conquest), these privileges were appropriated by Norman barons, but the institution's essence remained the same, so "the Norman clerks who identified the king's thane with the baron must have had regard chiefly for the one thing that they had in common" (Reid 1920: 173). By the end of the 20th century, this idea of institutional continuity, it seems, had not received universal acceptance. It was, nevertheless, adopted by one of the leading *Domesday* scholars, David Roffe, who, contrary to Reid's focus on the judicial privileges, spotlights the *bocland*-type of land tenure (Roffe 1989; 2000: 28–46). Roffe's ideas have seen some support (Reynolds 1992), but his and Reid's rather dogmatic assertions have been sharply criticised both by students of the law (Hudson 2012: 58–62) and by specialists in lordship (Baxter 2001; Baxter & Blair 2006).

Sir Frank Merry Stenton developed his predecessor's connection of the post-Conquest feudal gentry to the *Domesday taini* (an idea was much later promoted by John Gillingham, esp. 1995) and Norman barons – with the royal *ministri*, though both strata enjoyed a 1,200-shilling *wergild* "irrespective of the duties which he might happen to owe to his lord" (Stenton 1932: 130):

> It is more than probable that many thegns of the eleventh century were country gentlemen, with no special aptitude for war. In most cases, the estates of a thegn of 1066 must have come to him by inheritance, and not by the gift of a king or any other lord. But his obligation to military service represented the ancient duty of attending a lord in battle. (Stenton 1932: 119.)

Following Stubbs, Stenton further explained the differences between a *thegn* and a *ceorl* also through their relations to military service: *thegn*s served in the army due to their rank, whereas *ceorl*s reported to the army due to alleged old Germanic custom (Stenton 1932: 116–118).

Three decades after Stenton's monograph, Charles Hollister, working with the Wulfstanian texts and the *Domesday Book*, opposed part of his interpretation that concerned marshal duties (Hollister 1962). He claimed that, in late pre-Norman England, military obligation stemmed not from one's rank but depended upon the so-called 'five-*hide* principle', which predicated army service for one man from every five *hides* of land, regardless of one's status. Characteristic of many works, Hollister uses the word *thegn* at least 216 times in his 170-page book (an impressive number, given that it is not his main focus), but not once does he actually explain what a *thegn* is. And the

notion of a Germanic 'nation in arms', inherited from Stenton[7] and his Victorian precursors,[8] was later largely debunked by Richard Abels, who, elaborating on the preceding work of Eric John (1960), conclusively argued that Anglo-Saxon military institutions had always been rooted in lordship and land tenure (Abels 1988).

A major breakthrough came in an article by Henry Loyn, who applied philological methods to the Latin–Old English translations of the late 800s and tackled the semantic evolution of the term *thegn* in Old English:

> [...] as late as the end of the ninth century, a *thegn* was still, customarily, one who served a lord in a personal capacity. By the time of the Norman Conquest *eorls* and *thegns* were the two recognized social divisions between freeman and king. (Loyn 1955: 543.)

In Britain, the most recent assessing of the *thegn*ly phenomenon was undertaken by Ann Williams (2008). Unlike many, she dedicates the whole of her nine-page introductory chapter to setting the scene and establishing the position of a *thegn*. Her study may be seen as emblematic of the British historiographical empirical tradition of dealing with the subject. For one thing, Williams would rather describe a *thegn* than suggest a definition, and, for another, she would restate some of the established views: the division of the free populace into *ceorlas* and *þegnas*, and upward mobility by virtue of land ownership and possession of military ammunition (Williams 2008: 2, 4).

Despite this well-developed scholarship, there persist some contradictions that, it may be argued, are difficult to eliminate within the prevailing paradigm. The historiographic 'elephant in the room' is the apparent lack of synthesis. Preceding paragraphs exemplify only some of the various terms employed to describe the phenomenon of *thegn*s (aristocracy, retinue/*comitatus*, vassal, class, nobility, official, et al.), as well as the multitude of approaches (through *comitatus*, military history, land tenure, legal status, *Domesday* social patterns, etc.). Such variance clearly stems from discrepancy between the sources, but it seems that no coherent mechanism of explaining such dissimilarity has been suggested, save the oft-repeated claim for *wergild* as the 'missing

link'. That at least some kings' *thegn*s, as attested by the charters, were members of the social elite cannot be denied. Neither can the *Domesday* evidence of the numerous petty *thegn*s be discarded. But how does one bridge the gap between these enormously different groups? Viewing them as strata of one and the same social group requires a further explanation. Hollister's generous equation of the *Domesday taini* with the peasantry, in contrast to Senton's identification of the former with the gentry, also inadvertently reaches a theoretical deadlock: if *thegn*s and *ceorls* alike performed military duties on the same principle, why did the former allegedly enjoy a more advantageous social position?

The 'whiggish' notion of upward *ceorl*-to-*thegn* social mobility hinges on a somewhat problematic source. As already mentioned, its oft-reiterated form stems from but one authority: Archbishop Wulfstan of York. Sadly, in assessing *Geþyncðu*, its first modern publisher, Felix Liebermann, might have done a great disservice to subsequent research by putting *Geþyncðu* in his edition of the Anglo-Saxon laws, presumably on the basis of its opening phrase (Liebermann 1903: 456–458). More and more, it has been realised, to quote Andrew Rabin, that "many of the practices it describes are unsupported by contemporary evidence" (Rabin 2015: 67). It might be argued that a very similar passage can be found in an actual legal code, *Norðleoda laga* ['The Laws of the Northern People (presumably the Northumbrians)']. The problem is that this legal code was also edited by Wulfstan and therefore cannot be treated as wholly independent evidence. Wulfstan's relation to these documents is also why it took Chadwick almost 40 pages to prove the prevalence of a 1,200-shilling *thegn*ly *wergild*: though such rate is attested in the laws on multiple occasions, only one legislative piece actually connects it with the *thegn*s – the so-called *Mircna laga* ['The Law of the Mercians'], which is also attributed to Wulfstan (Rabin 2015: 71). Even after Wulfstan's authorship has been established, these texts are normally the 'go-to' reference material in general works (e.g. Molyneaux 2011: 266–267; O'Brien 2011: 86). The problem with such a point of departure is twofold: *a*) even within the Viking

Age proper, these are somewhat late texts; *b*) one author's testimony should not be uncritically taken as historically accurate, especially in view of Wulfstan's strong personal interest in orderly societal organisation and the turbulent epoch in which he was writing. To polemise: Wulfstan's assertions might well not be as representative as one would wish, and potentially a politically-driven construct. As Ryan Lavelle said of Wulfstan, "social mobility was a long-standing concern for conservative churchmen" (Lavelle 2010: 63). Naturally, nothing of this was known at the time of Stubbs and Liebermann, and so these developments in source criticism call all the more for a comprehensive revision of the common interpretations of Anglo-Saxon social practice, especially given the scepticism on the function of *wergild* some scholars have expressed (Sawyer 1987).

In sum, very seldom have the Anglo-Saxon *thegn*s been the direct interest of academic inquiries, often being reduced to a subsidiary role in one theoretical argument or another. This shortcoming sometimes reads a bit like a Picasso – the same object has been addressed in fragmented pieces which occasionally contradict each other to the point that they become incompatible. Surprisingly, Anglophone scholarship sometimes reveals little knowledge of the occurrence of the lexeme *þegn* in Old Norse in the same period, and this may be characteristic of its prevalent "interests in England's particularities", in the words of Ryan Lavelle (2010: 64).

Scandinavian Historiography
In Scandinavian academia, the discourse has been very different but no less intricate. For a while, scholars showed little interest in the lexeme *þegn* in Old Norse, and treated it just like any other entry in a dictionary. For example, when analysing Norwegian laws in 1890, legal historian Ebbe Hertzberg understood it as "[...] fri og uafhængig udøver af alle en fuldtberettiget persons rettigheder" (Hertzberg 1890: 266) ['a free and independent practitioner of all rights of a person, fully vested with liberties'], deriving this meaning from the oldest Norwegian law codes (*Gulaþingslǫg* and *Frostaþingslǫg*).

Everything changed when, in 1927, Danish historian and archivist Svend Aakjær published his ground-breaking article. He drew attention to the frequent appearance of the Old Norse *þegn* and *drengr* in runic commemorative inscriptions throughout the "old Danish kingdom", and concluded that, "though the meaning of these various expressions shows through but vaguely, there seems nevertheless little reason to believe that they should only stand for 'man' pure and simple" (Aakjær 1927: 9). Aakjær postulated that *thegn*s and *dreng*s were members of the kings' *comitatus*, known in Scandinavia as *hirð*. Noticing that Old English also featured words *thegn* and *dreng* (the latter being a loanword from Old Norse), he extended their meanings, borrowing them from Stubbs' and Chadwick's interpretations. Curiously, though Aakjær never mentions Reid's article, his comparative methodology is very similar; another parallel between the two authors is that neither was a specialist in the early medieval period, and both specialised in the High Middle Ages.

Not everyone has agreed with Aakjær's interpretation. His greatest opponent on this matter, the Danish runologist Karl Martin Nielsen, pointed out that, looking at the runic material as it is while not having *comitatus* in mind, it is impossible to render the terms in question as the kings' retainers. Moreover, Nielsen and his German colleague Hans Kuhn argued forcefully that the empirical observations on skaldic poetry (the earliest datable Old Norse coherent texts) do not support Aakjær's interpretation. Thus, Kuhn found that only six of the 72 examples he identified of the lexeme *þegn* in skaldic verse were used as a *Rangbezeichnung* ['designation of rank'], distinguished as a combination of a noun for 'man'/'warrior' (*maðr*, *rekkr*, *þegn* and *drengr*) with a possessive pronoun or *genetivus possesivus* of another noun rather than forming a kenning (Kuhn 1944: 105–106, 110–111). Nielsen conceded that *dreng*s could have become chieftains' followers, but this certainly was not the case by default, whereas the *þegnar* were the 'backbone' of the Viking-Age Danish society, the well-to-do *bœndir* (Nielsen 1945). Today, however, Martin Syrett characterises such "notions of a free independent class of farmer-chieftains" as "outdated", and calls the "speculation concerning the independent status

of the late Viking-Age freeman" romantic (Syrett 1998: 249, 252).

By and large, these two standpoints still hold in the Scandinavian historical narrative up till now. Scholars with a thorough philological background hold fast to the Norse literary sources that do not support Aakjær's claims. Such, for example, was the opinion of John Lindow (1976), who agreed with Kuhn that in the Viking Age the word *þegn* did not convey the sense of a social rank. Today, this view is supported by Judith Jesch (e.g. 2013) in her comparison of the runic inscriptions and the skaldic poetry. On the other hand, some historians have seen Aakjær's argument as conclusive and supported it from a theoretical perspective. Niels Lund, for instance, aimed at reconciling the two opinions, suggesting that "peasant leaders, such as Alle at Glavendrup [...] with an armed force of their own" had to acknowledge the growing power of the Danish monarch, thus becoming, "at least in theory, members of his *hird* and, thus, his *thegns*," even if they never were his retainers in the narrow sense (Lund & Hørby 1980: 62). It has also been pointed out that philologists generally tend to overlook place-name evidence: apart from two instances in south-eastern Norway, Sweden has preserved a minimum of 12 toponyms *Tegneby*/*Tängby*/ *Tägneby* (from Old Swedish *ÞægnabyR*) (Elgqvist 1947: 113), which can hardly mean 'settlement of men/people' (Strid 1986: 305). This dichotomy between the philological and historical approaches was first noticed already by Martin Syrett (1998: 249).

Some prominent runologists joined Aakjær's stance. Erik Moltke, a towering authority on the Danish runic material, wrote that since the earliest appearance of the word *þegn* in runic inscriptions was:

> associated with *lið*, host, warband or the like, we may reasonably assume it denoted a kind of military status. *Thegn* is then a title of rank [....] Private individuals do not seem to have had *thegns*, so it must have been the ruler's prerogative to appoint *thegns* (and certain *drengs*). We thus come to the same conclusion as Svend Aakjær – or not far off it. (Moltke 1985: 285–286 [1976: 235–236].)

Moltke's expertise has been keenly accepted by some archaeologists both in Denmark and Sweden. In a 1980 monograph, Klavs Randsborg interpreted runic *þegn*s as agents of the Jelling kings who granted 'fiefs' to their vassals in exchange for various services. Rune stones in his explanation in a way served as titles to land, since such land-tenure praxes were hitherto absent from the Scandinavian societal practice and required further support (Randsborg 1980: 29–44). To Randsborg, this is an important point in his argument for the state formation in Viking-Age Denmark: the elite position of the king's followers in the localities speaks for a strong central power.

In settling the opposing views, Carl Löfving, a Swedish archaeologist and lawyer, took Randsborg's views further. One of the main arguments of his doctoral thesis (2001), a product of nearly two decades of research, is that, at the turn of the millennium, Götaland was governed and influenced not by a ruler from Uppsala but by the Danish king, who from 1018 to 1035 was King Cnut. Bearing in mind that he was also the English monarch, and in England (including in Cnut's own laws) kings' followers were known as *thegn*s, Löfving maintains that this interpretation should also be accepted for the Scandinavian toponymical and runic material (Löfving 1984; 2001: 79–102). The rune stones' *þegn* inscriptions, in this explanation, therefore mark both the authority the Danish monarchy wielded and the social support it could recruit. One has to give Löfving credit as apparently the first to try to put those rune stones in their proper historical context. Peter Sawyer (1988: 34), describing politogenesis in Sweden, followed in Löfving's footsteps and also identified the runic *þegn*s as 'under lordship' of Cnut. The idea of borrowing the sense of a title for the pre-existing lexeme *þegn* from Old English was, however, briefly criticised as unlikely by Eric Christiansen, who pointed out that, "to Nordic intruders, they [*thegn*s] can only have appeared as local bosses, district defenders; which is how they appear in the skaldic verse of ca. 1030 onwards [...] not [as] officials or royal retainers, but sometimes of their opponents" (Christiansen 2002: 335).[9]

Closely resembling the situation in Britain, the debate between Aakjær's opponents and supporters has to a certain extent overlooked the source work. A few examples will suffice.

Aakjær, as one would expect, relied on secondary English works, but even his most dedicated challengers have not noticed that a weighty chunk of his argument was invalid already in 1927. To substantiate his point, Aakjær had to prove that *dreng*s were a subclass of the Anglo-Saxon *thegn*s, so he retreated to a text known as *Constitutiones de Foresta* ['Forest Regulations'], which he interpreted as the forest law of King Cnut and combined this with the evidence from 13th-century Northumbrian charters as retold by Frederic Maitland. However, *Constitutiones de Foresta* was written in the 12th century by an anonymous Norman clerk who probably did not even speak English and has nothing to do with Cnut (Harris 2014).[10] Even though Felix Liebermann pointed this out as early as 1894, Aakjær mentions *Constitutiones de Foresta* as a reliable source in his last published piece (Aakjær 1962) and thus was likely unaware of the argument. In another case, Aakjær's 1927 article takes an erroneous reference to an original source for granted: he defines *þegngildi* as the "fine paid to the prince for having killed his *thegn* (a free man in the king's service)," and refers to *Eiðsivaþingslǫg* 1, 28 ['The Law of *Eidsivathing*'] (1927: 11). However, the paragraph in the actual source runs as follows:

En ef þionn mannz etr kiot i langu fastu. þa er hann utlægr. oc skal uera i uallde skapdrottens hans er a. huart hann uill løysa hann undan þui giallde. halft þægngilldi kononge. oc kaupa honum sua larønzuist. eða hit ælligr. at hann fare af larønde brot. (*Eiðsivaþingslǫg* 1, 28; Halvorsen & Rindal 2008: 28.)

And if a man's slave/servant eats meat during the long fast, then he is an outlaw, and his lord, who owns him, should decide whether he wishes to release him from punishment [by paying] half a *þegngildi* to the king and [thereby] buying him the right to stay in the country, or lets him leave the country.

Though Aakjær's definition of *þegngildi* is generally correct, *Eiðsivaþingslǫg* 1, 28 reveals little about the nature of a *þegngildi* and certainly says nothing about murder exculpation. My initial suspicion of fact juggling proved incorrect: Aakjær, it turns out, copied this passage from Johan Fritzner's dictionary (Fritzner 1867: 774) without referring to or checking it, which, granted, was standard practice of scholarship at the time.[11] These faults, of course, do not undermine the historical importance of his article: after all, he was the first to raise the question of how Old English and Old Norse handle the same social term, and an allowance for the state of the methodology at the time must be made.

To recap, the heated discussion has, to a large extent, not revolved around the interpretation of the sources *per se* but around a retelling of an interpretation. Note that in various discourses (Lund, Löfving, Randsborg, Sawyer), mirroring the British counterparts, *þegn*s themselves were not the object of study but served as yet another methodological element in the general sketch of early medieval state building in the North. Martin Syrett was probably the first to subtly identify the likely stimulus for such a persistence:

That historical approaches have tended to link the thegns and drengs of the runic inscriptions with the growth of a royally sanctioned aristocracy derives largely from the necessity of positing some royal officers somewhere to account for the development of the Danish state in the tenth and eleventh centuries. As Peter Sawyer put it, 'kings must have had agents ... not only to lead local defences but also to gather royal resources'. (Syrett 1998: 268.)

Aakjær's explanation was simply too good for the "state-formation addicts", as Christiansen (2002: 335) pejoratively called the disciples of this school of thought, to subject it to a critical source-study test: theory prevailed, the cart was put before the horse.

All these circumstances once again call for a methodological return *ad fontes* and predicate the necessity for a reassessment.

Methodological and Source Overview

To break free from at least some of the constructions of the discourse described above, a wide range of options are available. In my opinion, the three cornerstones among them are as follows:

1. Context analysis and methods from Corpus Linguistics
2. A discriminant approach, chronological analysis, particular attention to inner features

3. Approaching the historical reality behind a fleshed-out concept

It is my belief that such methodological devices have a wider range of application in historical examination of actual social phenomena, and in fact elements of this triad have indeed been used in previous research in one way or another. For instance, context analysis was used by Lindow when he went through most of the relevant skaldic stanzas and then generalised his conclusions. An example of an approach through corpus linguistics is observable in an article by Jane Roberts (2000), in which she searched the *Thesaurus of Old English*, a massive project hosted by King's College London and the University of Glasgow, for Old English words for nobility, and she analysed their usage in the language. Similar methodology was employed by Petr Stefanovich in his reassessment of the Old Russian *družina*: instead of relying on the most telling evidence, he meticulously went through nearly all extant and available source evidence, organized by chronology, region and genre. The major but essential advancement proposed here lies in the 'triangulation' of these methods, i.e. bringing elements together in one investigation. Combining these techniques is aimed at a multidimensional presentation: we will probably be able to follow the evolution of both an actual social phenomenon and its reflection in a given language, thus abandoning the 'synthetic' picture. In doing so, I hope my undertaking can serve as a *sui generis* case study, and, should it prove to be successful, this methodology could receive a wider application in the broader anthropological studies. I do not propose that applying this methodology will realise the Rankian dictum about reconstructing 'how it really happened' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), much cherished in the positivistic school of thought. At best, the methodology enables us to approach the reflection of 'how it really happened' as preserved in the extant sources.

Context Analysis
The first cornerstone on the list above is *context analysis*, i.e. examination of the environment to which an object of study belongs, coupled with quantitative methods from Corpus Linguistics, introduced in the following section. The linguistic presupposition for contextual analysis seems to reside with an enquiry into the etymology of the lexeme *thegn* in order to conceivably reconstruct its possible Proto-Germanic semantics. *Thegn* and its cognates are present not only in Old English and Old Norse, but also in Old High German and Old Saxon, as well as in Scots (though here it is almost certainly a borrowing).[12] Knowledge of a word's origin may help us understand the subsequent development of the term in the different societies in historical times, though it is worth bearing in mind that such reconstructions always remain hypothetical. Consequently, etymology *per se* should not be used as an absolute tool in historical research, as is warned by Hans Kuhn (1944: 120).

The general methodological premise of the subsequent study should manifest itself in a fundamental alteration of the hierarchy of the research procedures. Contrary to previous approaches, rather than taking for granted the definition of the lexeme *þegn* as used in current academic discourse, an investigation that seeks to bring a historical phenomenon behind this word into focus should first and foremost critically review the contexts of the lexeme's occurrence in the sources. Only then may definitions or concepts arrived at inductively be brought back into dialogue with conventional views in scholarship and the sources which have dominated those definitions.

With Old English, the need for such an approach has already been alluded to above: because Wulfstan's *Geþyncðu* and similar texts offer, at first sight, a very straightforward definition of what an Anglo-Saxon *thegn* was, modern explanations follow that definition closely. Nevertheless, an assumption that all uses of a word by all users in all contexts will mean the same thing or refer to the same category contradicts both common sense and current sociolinguistic theory. It has not escaped historians' attention that the word *thegn* can describe different social realities with observable gaps between them:

> Among the thegns, at one end of the scale, were men who possessed estates in many shires acquired through generations of royal service, and, at the other, were men indistinguishable from land-holding freemen

except by their rank. (Barlow 1988: 6; cf. Reid 1920: 170.)

The reasons for such discrepancies are not hard to come by and include such factors as regional peculiarities in both language and social conditions, social progress through history, potential variations in register and/or type of discourse, etc.

What is proposed instead is that we turn to less loaded sources, using context analysis to deduce one or multiple definitions and to trace the changes these definitions had most likely undergone in relation to regional peculiarities and chronological evolution. Should the results more or less match Wulfstan's formula, proving its validity, the archbishop's description can be integrated into the case, though every unique detail therein should still be taken with a pinch of salt.[13]

Unlike in England, Old Norse authors did not leave us detailed definitions of who was considered a *þegn* in their society. The only definition-like stance is to be found in the early-13th-century *Skáldskaparmál* ['Language of Poetic Art'] section of *The Prose Edda*, attributed to Snorri Sturluson, where it is stated that *Þegnar ok hǫlðar, svá eru búendr kallaðir* (*Skáldskaparmál* 81; Faulkes 2005: 106) ['Freeholders are called Thanes and Yeomen' (Brodeur 1916: 234)]. This laconic and hardly illuminating phrase being the only relevant historical definition, scholars have often tended to take instead the interpretation of Old Norse dictionaries as the point of departure for subsequent investigations (e.g. see: Aakjær 1927: 4; 16; Nielsen 1945: 112; Strid 1986: 301–302; Syrett 1998: 247–249; et al.). The dictionaries' renditions could be summarised as follows (in order of frequency) (see also Fritzner 1867: 774; Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874: 732; Jónsson 1931: 637):

1. A free-born man, man in general
2. A monarch's subject
3. A husbandman, good man
4. A lord's servant

Unfortunately, two hidden dangers can easily delude a scholar. One is that none of these dictionaries actually use the much earlier runic material, which is probably why, in different editions of the runic inscriptions, *þegn* is rendered as 'man', 'warrior', 'yeoman' or left untranslated. The other is that it is not always clear which connotation is applicable in each particular case. Some instances are transparent, for example in the Norwegian alliterative legal formula *þegn ok þræll* ['*thegn* and *thrall*'] *þegn* stands in an opposition to a *þræll* ['slave'] and should be interpreted as 'free-born'.[14] For instance, *Gulaþingslǫg* ['The Law of *Gulaþing*'] asserts compensation for injuries for both the 'free' and 'slaves':

> Aller eigu sarbøtr iamnar þegn oc þræll. Nu ef maðr Særer þræl mannz. þa scal hann hallda upp føðzlo við hann meðan hann liggr í sarom. oc verclaunum ollum við drotten hans. oc lækníngar kaupi. (*Gulaþingslǫg* 215; Eithun & Rindal & Ulset 1994: 129.)

> All have equal right to compensation for wounds, a thrall, as well as a thegn. If a man wounds another man's thrall, he shall provide victuals for him as long as he lies wounded; he shall also [pay] leech money and compensation to the master for loss of labor. (Larson 1935: 149.)

On the other hand, however, in skaldic poetry, due to its metrical constraints and linguistic registers, the meaning can be rather elusive, since it is part of the poetic equivalence vocabulary rather than used to distinguish a social category *per se*. Granted, types of equivalence category and associated constructions (cf. Kuhn's concept of a *Rangbezechnung*) could potentially offer insights into aspects of a word's significance: patterns of verse use likely reflected the perception of the category, to which the lexeme *þegn* pertained (at least in the period of the genesis of the skaldic art). Finally, though it has been noted early on that, in Old Norse, *þegn* can denote both a male person in general and a monarch's subject in particular, few attempts have been undertaken to explain this development, especially since neither of these meanings are attested in other Germanic languages.

Corpus Methods

In order to avoid at least some of the theoretical perils and offer a possibly new reading, methods of Corpus Linguistics are proposed. Corpus Linguistics is an approach developed in the late 1960s and made ever more efficient today due to advances in computer software and mass digitalisation. The underlying premise of this

field is that large-scale analysis of a given language's collected corpus should (at least in theory) minimise a researcher's bias or interference.

Previously, scholars researching the early medieval period lacked such corpora for their respective ancient languages. To borrow the words of Judith Jesch:

> Most dictionary-makers, whether dealing with living or dead languages, have an enormous body of material on which to base their definitions, and have to be selective. [...] Historical dictionaries can further restrict the material through the sources they use [...] (Jesch 2013: 78.)

Research of primary sources made a great leap forward at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st: devoted teams of linguists and philologists have compiled such corpora for both Old English and Old Norse that have been digitised and made them accessible to the general public:

- *Dictionary of Old English* (DOE) is an ongoing project, first conceived back in 1968 and developed by the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. As of 2017, the entries for letters *A–G* have been published (letter *H* is at present available online only). Though the dictionary itself is far from completion: as of 2009, the team released the DOE Web Corpus which is a database of "at least one copy of every surviving Old English text"; "as such, the DOE Web Corpus represents over three million words of Old English and fewer than a million words of Latin" (DOE). This allows researchers to conduct lexical surveys already now.
- *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog – Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP) is a similar enterprise started by the the Arnamagnæan Commission in 1939 and taken over by the Department of Scandinavian Research at the University of Copenhagen in 2010. The first volume appeared in 1995, and in the years 2005–2008 "all of the unedited dictionary citations [were made] available on the Internet" (ONP), thus making possible searches in the entry index (though the creators warn that the current stage of the project is still preliminary).
- The Skaldic Project Database, developed by Tarrin Wills and Hannah Burrows at the University of Aberdeen, is an electronic database of all known (and currently edited) skaldic poetry that began as a digital workspace for editors of the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* publication series (2009–present).

These databases enable research to reach a qualitatively new level, allowing an in-depth search and providing a catalogue of all mentions of a given word throughout the respective corpora.

The initial search of the DOE, ONP, and The Skaldic Database[17] has yielded the following numbers: in Old English before ca. 1150, the word *thegn* appears 1,793 times, with its related and compound lexemes including a further 314 entries (Table 1). The figures for Old West Norse before ca. 1550 are 237 and 137 respectively, to which are added the results for the Old East Norse languages (Old Danish[18] and Old Swedish), not indexed in the databases above: 4 and 9, 21 and 3 respectively (Table 2). Finally, supplementary data have been taken from the texts in continental Germanic languages, Old High German and Old Saxon, which feature at least 73 and 77 cognate words (*theg(a)n/deg(a)n* and their derivatives) respectively (Table 3), predominantly from the 9th century.[19] The relevance of continental lies, first of all, in a general linguistic comparison, and, secondly, it provides additional material for substantiating the etymology of the lexeme *þegn,* since these texts are fairly early yet seemingly independent of either Old Norse or Old English usage. However, despite their number, their value for the sheer historical analysis of the feasible social relationships is largely undermined by the religious and poetic nature of most of these texts. (N.B.*:* the figures do not reflect the actual number of unique occurrences, as many can be found in one and the same text but different manuscripts or fragments thereof).

To conclude, a final immense aid is the Scandinavian Runic-Text Database, created in 1993–1997 by Lennart Elmevik, Lena Peterson, Henrik Williams et al. of the Department of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Uppsala (Peterson 1994). According to their log, the first public version was launched online in 2001. Today, version 3.1 is available for download, with the latest

Table 1. The word thegn *in the Old English corpus.*

Spelling variant	*þegn* and its inflected forms, compounds and related lexemes	*þegn* and its inflected forms	Spelling variant	*þegn* and its inflected forms, compounds and related lexemes	*þegn* and its inflected forms
þegn	849	649	*ðegn*	646	596
þegen	216	188	*ðegen*	66	57
þægn	50	50	*ðægn*	14	9
þægen	6	5	*ðægen*	3	3
þeign	4	4	*ðeign*	22	21
þæign	1	–	*ðæign*	–	–
þein(g)	31	26	*ðein*	4	3
þen	169	161	*ðen*	26	21
TOTAL	**1326**	**1083**	**TOTAL**	**781**	**710**

Table 2. The word þegn *in the Old Norse corpus.*

	'Old Norse' (Old Icelandic + Old Norwegian)			**Old Danish**	**Old Swedish**	**TOTAL**
	Prose	Skaldic verse	Eddic poetry[15]	4 (*þæghn*; 1432–1511)	21 (*þäghn*; ca. 1220–1386)	**253**
þegn	136 (ca. 1200–1543)	88[16] (ca. 900–1300)	13 (date uncertain)			
þegn-compounds	136 (ca. 1225–1542)	1 (*þegnskapr*?)	–	9 (*thæghngjald*; 1241–1515)	3 (*þiængs gæld, *þäghns bani, brödhtäghn*; ca. 1220–1300)	**149**
TOTAL	**272**	**89**	**13**	**13**	**24**	**411**

Table 2. The word theg(a)n/deg(a)n *in continental Germanic languages.*

	Old High German: *Hildebrandslied* (ca. 840); Otfrid von Weissenburg (ca. 860s); *Ludwigslied* (881); Notker the German (ca. 950–1022)	**Old Saxon**: *Heliand* (ca. 800–850); glosses on Prudentius' *Psychomachia* (ca. 1000s)	**TOTAL**
'thegan'	46	30	**76**
'thegen'	4	–	**4**
'thegn'	–	43	**43**
'degen'	2	–	**2**
'degan'	4	–	**4**
'thegan'-compounds and related lexemes	17 (*theganheiti, thegankind, theganlicho, druttthegan*)	4 (*theganlîc, theganscepies, theganskepi, suerdthegan*)	**21**
TOTAL	**73**	**77**	**150**

update being from 19th January 2018. The database contains records of at least 46 mentions of *thegn*s on the Viking-Age Danish and Swedish rune stones ca. 970–1050 (Table 4). Three exceptions to this chronology exist. The famous Glavendrup stone's (DR 209) dating is extremely convoluted (Thrane & Nielsen 1998), but due to allegedly heathen references it is usually placed before the 960s, as is the Gunderup stone (DR 143), whereas Åker stone 3 (DR 372), in contrast, belongs to the years 1050–1150. Also, two inscriptions (DR 129 and DR 150) and one coin (DR M94) have been excluded from this list due to the corruption in their preserved condition. Finally, "there are two certain records of the

personal name *Þægn* in Södermanland and 13 in Uppland" (Strid 1986: 302),[20] and this fact should be further researched in collaboration with the specialists in onomastics.

Table 4. The word thegn *in runic inscriptions.*

Country	Province	Number of inscriptions	TOTAL
Denmark	Jutland	10	**17**
	Skåne	4	
	Lolland	1	
	Fyn	1	
	Bornholm	1	
Sweden	Västergötland	18	**29**
	Södermanland	8	
	Småland	2	
	Östergötland	1	

Whereas highly specialised and poorly attested vocabulary (such as already-mentioned *vanir*) may allow detailed evaluation of each and every example of the word, examples of many such terms, *þegn* among them, are so numerous that reviewing them all in like manner would be impractical. The brief overview above reveals, first, that this would be too strenuous a task,[21] and, second, that it might not produce an expected pay-off. As with plenty of Old Norse and Old English linguistic units, prevalent mentions are found in: *a*) late saga literature that, unlike the theoretically archaising laws, might represent medieval usage; and *b*) Old English religious prose, to a certain extent dominated by Ælfric of Eynsham (d. ca. 1010), who "maintains his focus [...] assiduously on enduring and important spiritual matters" (Amodio 2014: 130). Since these sources, in spite of their abundance, are not as illustrative of social realities of the Viking Age, this limiting factor calls for a discriminant approach with a particular chronological emphasis.

Discriminant Approach
The sheer volume of the assortment above (2,668 hits in all corpora) calls for a discrete and balanced approach, and a separation of the primary sources from the secondary ones underlies the suggested study just as in any other anthropological undertaking. In this particular case, Old English laws and diplomas, prose secular texts, and the *Domesday Book*, and Old Norse place names, runic inscriptions, older skaldic verse and the oldest provincial laws are believed to belong to the former category and therefore should be examined in their entirety. In contrast, Old English religious texts, secular poetry, and Old Norse medieval royal legislation, sagas and eddic poetry fall into the latter category and may rather be subject to a more selective analysis. Nevertheless, though the proposed methodology advocates for a possibly maximal inclusion of *all* available Old English and Old Norse vernacular sources, due to the overwhelming volume of the material, secondary sources require a more nuanced treatment for the sake of manageability. It seems only logical that the most instructional of them ought to be treated in a similar way to the primary ones – i.e. assessed in full. Less telling attestations, especially should they be found *en masse*, may undergo a randomised selection (for example, manual picking of every tenth occurrence, or similar) to create a representative yet manageable corpus. Here the study can also benefit from a collaboration with linguistic research of 'distant reading'. This is a relatively new method, pioneered by the Italian literary scholar Franco Moretti (2013), who suggested that understanding literature is possible not only through reading individual texts, but by aggregating and processing massive data thereof with the aid of computational methods. Alternatively, one could turn to the minimal context the databases provide for the search: the brief verbal surroundings that accompany each hit (e.g. the DOE Web Corpus provides the sentence in which a lexeme occurs and sometimes the preceding and following sentences). Conceivably then, the list of results could be briefly skimmed through during the initial analysis, and all examples where the usage appears to diverge from common patterns could be separated for a more in-depth review.

Having offered the solution to the challenge of the volume of the sources, we are still left with the problem of distinguishing the primary from the secondary sources. Traditionally, when conducting social inquires, early medieval historians show marked, somewhat 'positivistic' preference for the following texts as the most representative:

1. Whenever possible written in vernacular, if there are any, or employing vernacular terminology, for it is often believed that Latin lexis might obscure the actual social circumstances of the period[22]
2. Of secular, normative and/or documentary nature, that is to say customary law, royal 'doom books', capitularies, land titles, land property surveys, and the like

To a certain extent, this choice is not without justification, and, when identifying the *primary* sources for the current study, I suggest beginning with similar criteria but conjugated with a strictly chronological principle. For this reason, for example, *Gulaþingslǫg*, though recorded in the 13th century but hypothetically retaining some archaic layers (note, however, the debate between Elsa Sjöholm and her opponents[23]), seems more representative for the Viking Age than the Norwegian *Landslov*

['The Law of the Land'], issued at the instigation of King Magnus VI (r. 1263–1280) between 1274 and 1276 (Agishev 2015). This is also why Scandinavian Viking-Age rune stones, older skaldic poetry and place names have been categorised here due to their apparent contemporaneousness with the period under examination.

In this connection, as stated above, Latin narrative texts, even when meeting the criteria for the primary sources, pose something of a methodological dilemma. On the one hand, they are indeed abundant, and they frequently belonged, and were produced in, similar or even the same social environments – hence they should of course be taken aboard the study. On the other hand, in line with John Kemble's assertion, they resist the corpus approach presented above owing to their lexical variance. Though we can be relatively positive that the normal rendition of the Latin *minister* was the Old English *thegn* (see: Loyn 1955), the opposite is far from being universally the case: on the whole, Latin translations from Old English show a great deal of instability, rendering *thegn* as *tainus*, *minister*, *optimas*, *proceres*, *nobilis*, *comes* et al. (cf. Thacker 1981). Word choice might vary even within one individual text. For example, where other manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* unanimously mention *thegn*s, manuscript F (ca. 1100) has *quidam perdives* for *an þegen* in 465 (Baker 2000: 21), *nobiliores* for *godan ðegenas* in 1010 (*ibid.*: 102) and *primi Occidentalium Saxonum* for *ealle ða westernan ðegenas* in 1013 (*ibid.*: 106). In short, this variability requires a certain degree of caution in dealing with the Latin sources, especially those that are post-Conquest, due to an erosion of the object of study of sorts. When it is conceded that Old English *thegn* used to be an 'umbrella term' for any member of the lay elite (cf. Roberts 2000) and therefore enjoyed multiple Latin equivalents, then a thorough analysis of the vernacular sources is required before turning to those in Latin. The same holds true for the Scottish evidence, first pioneered by Reid (1920). There can hardly be much doubt that this material preserves some older traits from the society the lexeme *þegn* was borrowed from (either Norse or Anglo-Saxon), but it is often challenging to discern them from medieval usage and later influences, not to mention the local peculiarities and language of composition. All in all, Latin and Scottish sources should perhaps be treated in a similar way to Wulfstan's works: discreetly and continuously checked against the vernacular evidence.

Much of the criticism of the state of research laid out above has to do with the exclusion of the manifold additional sources, called here *secondary*. Numerous details and insightful pieces of evidence can be found therein. On the one hand, they are perhaps more informative of the ways the societal composition was actually perceived by its various members, from the high clergy, such as Ælfric, to the anonymous saga-writers. On the other, logically connected to the previous surmise, they might question the acceptance of the views on the social structures, imposed by legislators, should the actual sources present alternative pictures (see above). Hence, 'secondary' as they may be, they ought to be included in the study. At the same time, as elucidated by the case of the Wulfstanian texts, no information warrants being taken at face value, so when being processed, all sources must be checked against their provenance in spirit of the Weibull brothers, which in turn calls for breaking them into categories of one kind or another.

Many a study with large sets of data necessitates various groupings for its data. Organising principles may vary from region to region, period to period, field to field and depend on the type of records, scribal material, provenance, genre, notions of authorship, preservation, circulation in, and indigenousness to, a given culture, as well as numerous additional criteria. One of the arbitrary descriptive patterns for the Old English and Old Norse literary sources is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Possible categorisation of Old English and Old Norse sources.

Parameter	Value	
Language of composition	*Vernacular*	*Latin*
Discourse type	*Secular*	*Religious*
Type of composition	*Prose*	*Poetry*
Society the source describes	*'Germanic'*	*Mythical/foreign*

Applying this subjective scheme to the sources does not necessarily impose an evaluative hierarchy, it merely assists in the assessment of the clues they yield in relation to their types. One can expect that, for instance, the secular and prose *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written in Old English and covering historical events in England, should be regarded as

Table 6. The word thegn *in the Old English laws ca. 690–1066.*[24]

Date	Royal codes	Non-royal codes (recorded ca. 1000–1025)	Private compilations	TOTAL
690–900	3	–	–	**3**
900–975	10	7	–	**17**
978–1012	11	2	–	**13**
1012–1066	10	6	9	**25**
TOTAL	34	15	9	58

more suggestive of an actual society than, say, the eddic poem *Rígsþula* which, though also composed in a vernacular, retells the 'mythological' origins of a similar society. That being said, both sources present answers to scholarly questions, but the questions themselves must be essentially different, and this notion must be accounted for in the actual historical research. In this case, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is perhaps more illuminating of the everyday language used to describe the contemporary society, whereas *Rígsþula* apparently highlights the symbolic categories through which a community perceived itself.

Chronological Analysis
Of paramount importance is *relating the described sources to a timeline*, which for our purposes has been framed twofold. Due to the arbitrary nature of establishing dates for a period such as the Viking Age, and in order to treat the subject in its proper historical contexts, the study cannot avoid employing sources from earlier and later periods, though this ought to be done with great caution. This is especially true for the Old Norse laws: written down in the 13th–14th centuries, they purport to be a codification of the earlier legal tradition, but assessing how much of their material actually dates from before 1100 remains a dodgy problem (Brink 2013).

The methodological danger in this connection has been described above: a tempting prospect of projecting the later information onto the earlier epochs. Nowhere is it more evident than when dealing with the Anglo-Saxon sources. Figure 6 demonstrates the chronological distribution of the mentions of *thegn*s in the Old English legislative texts ca. 690–1066.

Easily observable is the prevalence of the younger pieces in this selection: 43% of all mentions are concentrated in the fifty years before the Norman Conquest. Most of our

knowledge about *thegn*s' legal status is therefore of late origin, a point which seems to have been underestimated by many historians. One could argue that this proportion correlates with the overall chronological preservation of the Old English corpus, hence such a distribution is to be expected. To this may be countered that, first, the Alfredian legislation (late 9th century), despite its extensive volume, bizarrely contains but a single explicit reference to the *thegn*s (Liebermann 1903: 126), and, second, that the later asymmetry is largely the effect of Wulfstan's legislative activity (be it his own unique texts or the remastering of supposedly older customs). Indications exist that elevation and spread of the *thegn*s as a socially elite group chronologically coincide with the elaboration of its features in the legal codes. For instance, King Æthelstan's (r. 924–939) legislation stipulates for the first time ever that king's *thegn*s act in the judicial capacity in the courts and also as 'officials' charged with the authority to provide shelter for persecuted criminals (Liebermann 1903: 168, 171) – at the same time, Æthelstan's diplomas are exceptionally well-witnessed by the royal *ministri*, their overall number known being 127, which is an absolute record (Keynes 2002: Table 39). It seems likely that Wulfstan's personal interests in the orderly society alone might not explain the aforementioned chronological disproportion, perhaps, his attention to the *thegn*s was a response to some actual social shifts (see also below). Whatever the cause for the numerical skew in Figure 7, the bottom line is that projecting the later evidence onto an earlier period needs meticulous argumentation.

Attention to Inner Features
Closely linked to the chronology of the sources is the problem of their provenance, genre and circulation in society. The Anglo-Saxon kings' law codes seem to be the easiest to tackle, as

we are usually aware of their promulgators and the circumstances of their appearance. It is much harder to establish the nature of the so-called 'private compilations' and non-royal legislation. As a matter of fact, they contain just as much relevant evidence, but a great many details for contextualizing the sources are wanting. We often know very little about who wrote them down, when and why.[25] The discriminant analysis referred to above suggests a careful examination of each source's credibility. Particular emphasis should be placed on recent developments in source criticism advanced by philologists and linguists.[26] The same holds true for the Old Norse sources: the formulaic and poetic nature of the skaldic verse must always be considered and given due weight when observing the Nordic *þegn*s' position. Two examples can illustrate the case in point:

> Þegi þú, Þórir! Þegn est ógegn;
> heyrðak, at héti Hvinngestr faðir þinn.
> (Hharð *Lv* 3.)

> Be quiet, Thorir! You're an unreliable man (*þegn*); I heard that your father was called Hvinngestr ('Thief-guest'). (Gade 2009: 45–46.)

In this stanza, King Harald *harðráði* uses the word *þegn* among the variety of poetically equivalent words for 'man' in order to meet alliteration with *þegi* and *Þórir* required by the meter, and simultaneously to rhyme with *ógegn*. Did Harald mean that Þórir was an unreliable 'man' in a general sense, or that he was unreliable in a more specific sense as a 'retainer/warrior'? The second instance is in the *Hǫfuðlausn* (ca. 1023) by Óttarr *svarti*, where *þegn* again rhymes with *gegn*:

> Gegn, eru þér at þegnum
> þjóðskjǫldunga góðra
> haldið hæft á veldi
> Hjaltlendingar kenndir. (Ótt *Hfl* 20.)

> Trustworthy one, you hold fittingly onto the power of good kings of the people; the Shetlanders are known to you as your thanes. (Townend 2012: 739.)

Unlike in the previous stanza, here the meaning seems more transparent: Martin Syrett (1998: 262) and Judith Jesch (1993: 168) comment that the sense conveyed here is that of a 'vassal' or 'subject' (Syrett prefers the former, Jesch the latter). However, Syrett also remarks that the lexical choice "may have been conditioned not simply by its semantic content but also by the necessity of finding a term to alliterate with *þér*," and that "had the verse been composed in either the first or third person rather than the second, then phrases such as *mér at mǫnnum or *honum at hǫlðum might have been equally acceptable with an equivalent semantic force" (Syrett 1998: 262). These observations, naturally, do not destroy the value of these strophes for the aims of the suggested study, but they nevertheless must be taken into account. On the other hand, just as with the case of the 'secondary' sources, the skaldic verse sheds light perhaps not on the hypothesised social structures *per se*, but on the shifting connotations a lexeme could acquire in its changing cultural environment. It is very possible that both King Harald *harðráði* and Óttarr *svarti* consciously chose *þegn* not only for the sake of meter, but for the overtones and morphing senses it conveyed.

Last but not least, the *local peculiarities* of the region under study need to be observed: neither England nor Scandinavia were anything like socially or culturally unified entities, especially the Nordic lands. Though England was indeed politically united by the West Saxon dynasty by 954, this never meant a societal levelling throughout the new country. For example, the *Domesday Book* attests that shires west of the Danelaw were almost totally devoid of *sokemen*, and the free peasantry (*liberi homines*) made up less than 10% of the western counties' populations; in the West Saxon territories proper and their dependencies annexed before the Great Heathen Army's invasion in 870s, only a few enclaves contain small percentages of such a free population (Darby 1977: 61–94). These differences, of course, have a direct bearing on the suggested research, as there are some records (e.g. the *Domesday Book* itself) from the Danelaw that speak of *thegn*s, and it is methodologically hardly warranted to explain them with the West Saxon texts' aid alone.

Scandinavian sources also need to be meticulously analysed against their regional background. The most obvious dissimilarity is associated with distinctions between the three Nordic kingdoms. Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts contain the overwhelming majority

of the literary mentions of *þegn*s and provide the most enlightening context, although, they are all of a medieval origin. In contrast, Denmark and Sweden seem to have lost this term in their day-to-day language rather early on, but it is here that the late Viking-Age rune stones commemorating certain *þegn*s are to be found. Comparing their distribution with the Swedish *Tegneby/Tängby/Tägneby* poses further questions:

> Does the absence of *þægnaʀ* in the Upplandic runic inscriptions imply that these warriors were not *svear* by origin? What was the difference between a *þægn* and a *rinkr*?[27] Is it possible that the term *þægn* was originally used in the *Götarike*, believed to have been subdued by the *svear* sometime in the late Iron Age? (Strid 1986: 305).

After all this has been done, the final comparative stage – a search for probable parallels and influences between the two societies, separated (or, perhaps, united?) by the North Sea – can be commenced.

Approaching the Historical Reality behind a Fleshed-Out Concept

An often-recurring distress in historical research is trying to relate a social or cultural category, identified in the literary sources, with its actual existence and operation in the society of a particular time in terms of factual praxes. Not infrequently are scholars forced to "draw wide conclusions from detailed case studies" (Lavelle 2010: 63) for the lack of 'tangible' data – Lavelle's example from the quote being that of *la mutation feodale*.[28] At times this shortcoming can be remedied by adding essentially alternative material. Exemplary are archaeology as well as further ancillary historical disciplines (epigraphy, heraldry, numismatics, onomastics, prosopography, etc.) that can 'put flesh on the bones' of a literary phenomenon, thus offering case of a 'happy marriage' between 'theoretical' and 'empirical' approaches (cf. Chadwick 1905). Fortunately, *thegn*s are of this sort. After the conceptual framework for the term *thegn* and its evolution in time has been elucidated, the study may endeavour to augment one of the possible social realities behind the literary texts. This venture might be achieved by subjecting an inherently different type of source – the Anglo-Saxon charters and the *Domesday Book* – to a descriptive statistical analysis. Their distinction from all other sources lies in their documentary nature: the charters' (that is, royal diplomas') primary function was that of a land title[29] and whatever the purpose of the *Domesday Book* originally was (for discussion, see e.g. Roffe 2000: 1–16), the Great and Little *Domesday* and their 'satellites' do present a nation-wide land survey, even if their data omit a lot of complexities. As such, these sources are, at first glance, not particularly instructional, as their information is rather repetitive and seems conceptually mostly uniform. On the other hand, such information permits adding a practical dimension to the cultural phenomena; for example, we can inquire about the extent of royal land donations in favour of the kings' *thegn*s, or investigate the presence of the *Domesday taini* in the English localities, both West Saxon and Scandinavian.

Anglo-Saxon England has left us at least 1,875 Latin and vernacular documents, collectively referred to as charters. A full catalogue was put together in 1968 (Sawyer 1968), and later the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at King's College London used it to create an online version, which first appeared in 2007 as a beta version (Electronic Sawyer). It is by far the fullest and most fundamental annotated list of the extant Anglo-Saxon documents and an essential tool for any student of the Anglo-Saxon charters. The earliest specimens date from the late 7th century and these initially served as land titles: kings would record donating estates to the Church and (later) to laymen in their service, the majority of which were styled *thegn*s. As time progressed, other types of documents appeared: wills, marriage agreements, lease contracts, etc., though the single largest portion of the extant corpus is still made up of solemn diplomas (1,060 originals and/or cartulary copies). This is an astonishingly rich material that permits a thorough *descriptive statistical analysis*: how, where, how often and in what amounts was land granted to kings' *thegn*s? Though this approach has been at least partially practiced before (e.g. Keynes 2005 [1980]; Lavelle 2011; Snook 2015), as far as I am aware, diplomas *en masse* have so far not been used a source for social history. The application of such

methodology may cast a lot of light on the *thegn*s' economic standing and relationships with the monarchy (Sukhino-Khomenko 2016). Ideally, a full prosopographical dimension, i.e. studying the careers and lives of all individuals of whom we have documented knowledge, could contribute considerably to our understanding of the composition of the late Anglo-Saxon lay elite. However, reasonable doubts persist as to whether this voluminous task alone, which has sometimes been a topic for entire PhD theses (see e.g. Senecal 1999), will not require a whole team of specialists.

It is especially intriguing to compare these statistics against similar *Domesday* data. A preliminary search has returned hundreds of hits for *thegn* in its Latin form *tainus* (pl. *taini*) in the *Domesday Book*, and looking at the pair of similar information sets can prove beguiling. This, of course, does not mean that there lived only a few hundred *thegn*s at the time of the inquest: in most cases, the word is used in the plural form, and few *thegn*s' names are actually recorded. Regretfully, to my knowledge, existing *Domesday* databases are not designed to search for anonymous persons of whom only their social status is known (Palmer 2016), and that precludes 'old-school' manual searching patterns, although this task is nevertheless much facilitated by modern computer technologies.

Two vital methodological shortcomings must nonetheless always be borne in mind during this exercise. First of all, chronologically, the charters and the *Domesday Book* provide very different evidence – the diplomas demonstrate a dynamic picture; the *Domesday Book*, in contrast, shows merely a static one. Second, the *Domesday Book* was written 20 years after the Conquest by and for the Norman government. Hence, we are dealing largely with a rather Norman, not an Anglo-Saxon, perception of society.

Moreover, even a brief overview of the charter and *Domesday* evidence raises a suspicion that, though both sources belong to a documentary type, they might essentially concern starkly different social groups. The royal diplomas addressed to the royal *ministri* recorded kings' grants to a rather narrow (see the statistics in Keynes 2002) group within the monarchs' inner circle, with the average

donation being about 9.47 *hides* (1,819 *hides* recorded in 192 authentic and/or based upon authentic diplomas) (Sukhino-Khomenko 2016: 279–280). As mentioned in the introduction, numerous *Domesday taini* (colloquially, today they are usually called 'minor *thegn*s') therein seem to have enjoyed only limited economic prosperity: for example, according to Michael Costen's (2007: 65) figures, in Wiltshire, an average tenure of an anonymous *thegn* in 1066 was 1.39 *hides*. This has usually been explained as a sign of the *thegn*ly group's diffusion and erosion, a process which led to many of its members to amalgamate with the non-aristocratic strata while still preserving an elevated legal status, expressed in the *wergild* rate (cf. the opinions of Reid and Barlow above). However, a possibility must be entertained that, similarly to Old Norse *þegn*, the Old English cognate possessed more than one meaning, attested by typologically different sources, which makes this comparison all the more needed and warranted. Practically speaking, a question of why two groups that were so economically incomparable came to be referred to by one and the same term requires further contemplation. As said, the 1,200-shilling *wergild* is often proclaimed to be the uniting factor (see Stenton's opinion above), though it is hardly imaginable that a petty tenant would possess adequate resources, comparable to those of a king's man, to secure such demanding legal privileges (cf. Sawyer's scepticism on the functioning of the *wergild*). Other criteria have also been suggested: particular types of land ownership/tenure or, maybe, military service (Costen 2007: 62; cf. Maitland 1921 [1897]: 164). What seems yet to have received a methodological articulation is the possible notion of symbolic capital. Kings calling the recipients of land grants their *thegn*s might have implied some certain types of personal bonds that entailed military service for the donees. But what the country-folk might have instead observed in their everyday routines is that their affluent secular lords, clothed in lavish garments and armed with expensive weapons, referred to themselves as [king's] *thegn*s. Therefore, it could be hypothesised that, to the populace, any holder of such symbolic objects was essentially a *thegn* and a member of the lay elite. Unexpected support

for this argument may come from none other than Wulfstan, who not only continuously stressed the importance of the royal service, but, in *Norðleoda laga*, went so far as to deny a *thegn*ly *wergild* to a *ceorl* who owns "a helmet and a coat of mail and a gold-plated sword" (Rabin 2015: 71), unless he also possesses land to acquit obligations for the king. Particularly thought-provoking is the apparent wider circulation of swords in the Nordic lands in the Viking Age than in England (Androushchuk 2009), which yet again advocates for framing the study of Old English and Old Norse evidence in tandem and plies the question of whether there has been influence either regionally or in certain social arenas.

Unfortunately, no similar statistics exist for Viking-Age Scandinavia, which is a great pity. Rune stones are very tangible traces of that social reality, but they can only tell so much, and the immediate context is often wanting. Despair is, however, probably premature, as there are yet alternative ways, be they even perhaps not as exhaustive, to at least partially contextualise the possible socio-cultural circumstances of the *thegn*ly phenomenon also in Scandinavia. First, the very runic inscriptions, laconic in their content as they are, exist on a wider background and their general cultural surrounding has seen decades of investigations (e.g. Moltke 1976; Löfving 2001). Though not as vocal as literary pieces, the prestige and symbolic significance embodied by rune stones confer the notion of a commemorated person's prominence in the locality, if even Danish kings – Gorm and Harald Bluetooth – adopted this medium to communicate powerful messages. The sheer cost of transporting, raising and ornamenting such a monument sheds light on the wealth of the corresponding family or clan. Second, Scandinavia features not only *Tegneby* place names, absent in England, but other toponyms with a similar meaning and coined in a similar fashion as well: *Sveneby, Karleby, Rinkeby*. Comparing their patterns of distribution with archaeological data and putting them in the context of landscape can yet yield relevant material for the studies of the social orders in these regions (Brink 1999). Finally, given the Danelaw's uniqueness, should the statistical analysis of the *Domesday* and charter evidence

reveal consistent 'oddities' in this region not present in the 'English' part of the politically united Anglo-Saxon kingdom, they might be cautiously compared to the Scandinavian counterpart, although this shall demand a lot of comparative studies and very discreet approaches: as argued by Dawn Hadley (2000), Scandinavian incursions and colonisation of North-Eastern Britain cannot explain away all regional peculiarities in a *deus-ex-machina* fashion. At the end of the day, fleshing out the social reality of the Scandinavian *þegn*-hood may yet have some resources to fall back on.

Conclusion

The current paper's main goal has been to bring forward one feasible methodology for reassessing certain original historical lexemes in order to better form modern notions of the categories behind them. Achieving this is suggested in a threefold way.

First, one might wish to consider abandoning the search for meanings of a studied lexeme in dictionaries and instead deduce them from concrete literary contexts. This can at first glance seem a duplication of an actual dictionary, but modern progress in digitalisation of the historical sources enables applying methods of corpus linguistics in historical research, which used to be inaccessible for the dictionary-makers of the past.

Second, a corpus search can yield an unmanageable number of results, which in turn calls for prioritising the sources. Those considered 'primary' ought to be studied in full while the 'secondary' ones may receive a more selective approach. However, as a running phrase teaches us:

> There are no good or bad sources, there are only good or bad ways to use them. (Janson 1999: 71.)

Let the word 'primary' not delude a researcher, for it labels only those texts that do not always yield the answer to the immediate question asked. Instead they can illuminate further aspects of a problem under investigation that might get omitted by the 'primary' source material. Therefore, all sources ought to receive their maximum due attention, even if it entails a less exhaustive approach. In this connection, it is necessary to remember the probable chronological, regional, genre and

other distortions of search results. Hence, inner source criticism, not unlike the one hotly propagated and defended by the Weibull brothers (Janson 1999: 70–75; Torstendahl 1981: 117–126), remains as relevant as ever.

Third, upon tracing the probable meanings of a lexeme and their historical evolution, one can try 'putting flesh on the bones' of the reconstructed concept(s). This is usually carried out with the aid of the ancillary historical disciplines and by associating some 'practical' information with the study. That is to say, the third stage presupposes changing the focus of the inquiry from establishing the multifaceted nature of a historical concept to adding an actual practical, 'tangible' dimension to it.

This paper has tried to demonstrate how such a methodology might be applied to the study of the Viking-Age Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian *thegn*s. It is expected that the possible conclusions of the suggested approaches could touch on many problems in current medieval scholarship in England and Scandinavia. It is also humbly hoped that this case study can outline one feasible way to transcend disciplinary borders and add to a more holistic view of the Early Middle Ages. Re-approaching and bringing all available data together in the light of current episteme, as well as comparing it with contemporary material from other geographical regions, can help us better understand both the political and structural organisations of early medieval societies, and, perhaps, human societies more generally.

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Notes

1. A *hide* (Old English *hīd, hiwisc*) was a plot of land, capable of providing for one household throughout a year; later a fiscal unit (see Charles-Edwards 1972).

2. That is not to say that there were 188 *thegn*s in England in 900–1066. The total number of supposed land donations in favour of the *thegn*s in this period is 227, but only 188 of them are unanimously considered authentic by modern scholars (see Sukhino-Khomenko 2016). Some charters might be grants to one and the same person. Every Anglo-Saxon diploma normally contains a list of witnesses, many of whom are titled *ministri*, and *minister* is the standard equivalent for Old English *þegn* (for more detailed statistics see: Keynes 2002; see, however, above). Therefore, we may preliminarily conclude that the overall number of the Anglo-Saxon *thegn*s, whose existence is recorded in the 900–1066 diplomas alone, must be around the figure of a few hundred.

3. The problem of the over-reliance on Wulfstan's and further 'monarchocentric' sources when examining the late Anglo-Saxon aristocracy was touched upon by Christine Senecal in her doctoral thesis (1999: 17–28) and a subsequent article (2000: 251–252).

4. In this social context, a *ceorl* (modern English *churl*, German *Kerl*, Old Norse *karl*, etc.) is usually understood as a 'commoner', a 'rank-and-file' member of the Anglo-Saxon society. Rosamond Faith (1997: 127) characterises *ceorlas* as "a large and loosely defined social category [...], which included all those who were neither unfree nor of aristocratic birth," which also "may preserve vestiges of a social class of a type which escapes our modern typologies, a class in which both peasant farmers and lesser landowners were to be found."

5. To give Stubbs' predecessors credit, most elements of his scheme had been laid out in the preceding seven decades. Sharon Turner (1768–1847) was the first popular writer to transform the *thegn*s from an antiquated curiosity akin to the Scottish thane from *Macbeth* into an object of historical interest and study (Turner 1801: 76–83, 222–231). And John Mitchell Kemble (1807–1857) contributed the notion of the Germanic *comitatus* to Stubbs' description (Kemble 1849: 162–184), for Kemble was the pioneer of the German 19th-century historical scholarship on British soil.

6. As indicated by Reid (1920: 174) herself, "It is not easy to determine with exactness what rights were actually conveyed by a grant of sac and soc, toll and team, and infangthef." David Roffe (1989) and she understand *sake* and *soke* to be synonymous with what was later known as 'leet jurisdiction', *infangentheof* as 'the summary judgement of hand-taken thieves', and *toll* and *team* as the rights to pursue trade in one's estate and to warrant cattle purchases, respectively.

7. Cf. Stenton's (1932: 117) metaphor of "a true national levy".

8. Such as William Stubbs, John Green, Edward Freeman, and Frederic Maitland (see further Lavelle 2010: 47–55).

9. I would like to thank professor Elena Melnikova from the Institute of World History (Russian Academy of Sciences) for pointing this book out to me. Melnikova was in fact also the first colleague to direct my attention to Carl Löfving's works.

10. A similar paradigmatic critique of Aakjær's approach comes from Martin Syrett (1998: 246), who justly points out Aakjær's heavy dependence on the English post-Conquest sources, though even he did not consider *Constitutiones de Foresta*'s invalidity for the proposed argument.

11. For a more complete and exhaustive treatment of the problems of Aakjær's influential article, see Sukhino-Khomenko 2018.

12. Beginning from the 1860s, linguists have linked *thegn* with the Greek τέκνον ['child'] and derived both from PIE **tek-* ['to beget']. In this case, the semantic evolution of the word would be reconstructed: 'to beget' → 'child' → 'boy' → 'servant' (e.g. Aakjær 1927: 18–19). However, linguist Guus Kroonen (2013: 536) has convincingly connected *þegn* with Proto-Germanic **þegjan-* ['to request'] (cf. Old Norse *þiggja*, Old English *þicgan*), thus rooting it in the meaning 'retainer' rather than 'child'. When the present article was published, a paper on this matter involving the word's historical background and its analysis was being drafted by Guus Kroonen and myself for a further publication (preliminary results were delivered by me at the workshop Perspectives on the Nordic Middle Ages at Aarhus University on 4th May 2018).

13. A similar methodology has been recently used by Aleksei Shchavelev (2017) when reconstructing the earliest historical lineage of the Russian Rurikid dynasty in the 10th century. The problem has always been that the only extant Russian annalistic source for this period, the so-called *Primary Chronicle*, compiled only shortly before 1120, includes many folkloric elements and dates events retrospectively. Shchavelev set the *Primary Chronicle* aside and instead called upon synchronous foreign evidence – Byzantine, Latin, Jewish-Khazar and Arabic. His investigation demonstrated that evidence from these sources closely matched the *Primary Chronicle*'s genealogy, thus affirming the *Primary Chronicle*'s (or its prototype's) reliability in this matter. A similar procedure was proposed by Curt Weibull in his 1921 essay on the study of Saxo Grammaticus' works: Weibull insisted that events of Danish 12th-century political history be reconstructed off contemporary documentary evidence, and Saxo's troubled narrative be applied later on (Torstendahl 1981: 126).

14. As pointed out by Frog, this formula is also found in some saga texts, e.g. in *Sverris saga*.

15. For eddic poetry, indices by Hugo Gering (1903) and Robert Kellogg (1988), which for the most part overlap, have been consulted. The only differences are that Kellogg lists the occurrence of the name *Þegn* in *Rígsþula* ['The Song of Ríg'] with personal names, and he includes two occurrences in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* ['The Saga of Hervǫr and Heidrek']. I would like to thank Frog for suggesting incorporating these numbers into the present study.

16. It should be noted that, as in the case with Old Swedish, Old High German and Old Saxon, these figures are likely incomplete, for the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages project is ongoing. Thus, when the database was first consulted in June 2016, it listed only 72 occurrences; the extra 20 instances in 2018 originate from the 2017 volume *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*. Even today, not all listed occurrence have made it into the printed editions. Furthermore, though the headword search returned 93 results for the lexeme *þegn* and two for its compounds, certain allowances concerning various dubious readings had to be made for the sake of the chart's clarity (plus the search did not yield the *lausavísa* by Óláfr *bjarnylr* Hávarðarson, though the *lausavísa* itself is indexed in the database). Therefore, it is correct to speak of 89 confirmed occurrences (88 for *þegn* and one for *þegnskapr*) and six that remain dubious.

17. As disclaimed by the editors, the database is still being constructed, therefore its "material is incomplete and is for reference only" (Skaldic Project). The search was executed throughout the headwords of the dictionary relevant to the editions.

18. For Old Danish, the material from the *Gammeldansk Ordbog* ['Old Danish Dictionary'], developed by Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab ['The Danish Language and Literature Society'], has been used.

19. The figures for Old Swedish should still be considered preliminary and may be subject to revision. They have been extracted from both the accurate word register of Carl Schlyter (1877: *s.v.* 'þægn'), first editor of the Swedish *Landskapslagar* ['Provincial Laws'], and a potentially less complete list of examples in Knut Söderwall's *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltidsspråket* ['Dictionary of Swedish Medieval Language'] (Söderwall 1884–1918: *s.v.* 'þäghn'). In case of Old High German and Old Saxon, Thesaurus Indogermanischer Text- und Sprachmaterialien (TITUS), a joint project of the Goethe University Frankfurt, Charles University, Prague, Copenhagen University, and University of Oviedo, was used. Note that Kuhn (1944: 109–110) provides lower figures, though he probably did not seek to produce an extensive list. However, some compounds with *degan* listed in the dictionaries (such as *heridegan*) are for some reason absent from TITUS. This is probably due to the ongoing nature of the electronic project (although I cannot be certain here), which is why the figures for these languages must for now be considered preliminary. At any rate, it is believed that the acquired statistics might already be sufficient and, more importantly, illustrative of the suggested methodology.

20. "Sö 237, 349, U 34, 131, 201, 353, 363, 372, 456, 935, 937, 991, 990, 999, and a stone found in 1978 at Ösby, Lunda parish, as yet unnumbered" (Strid 1986: 314).

21. Similarly to the method used by Shchavelev, such 'brute-force' context analysis has also been inspired by Petr Stefanovich (2012). However, two major obstacles hinder its complete adoption when dealing with *thegn*s: for one thing, the number of individual cases Stefanovich meticulously went through amounts to merely hundreds, and, for the other, even that many instances turned his research into a 656-page monograph.
22. In the Anglo-Saxon studies, Lavelle (2010: 64) suggests that this may be at least partly due to the "result of the Germanist scholarship of the nineteenth century, in which J.M. Kemble argued that Continental Latin terminology should not be used in the study of Anglo-Saxon England and that 'we use no words but such as the Saxons themselves used'."
23. In the 1970s through the 1990s, heated polemics unfolded between Elsa Sjöholm, who challenged the hitherto prevailing *germanischen Urrecht* theory and maintained the Swedish provincial laws' medieval continental origin (and, hence, their inapplicability for studying Viking-Age social structures), and her academic adversaries (Sverre Bagge, Thomas Lindqvist, and Ole Fenger), who saw Sjöholm's methodology as too rigid (for a current but not entirely impartial overview, see Brink 2014).
24. This chart is based on Sukhino-Khomenko 2014.
25. A masterpiece of an overview and assessment of these problems is Wormald 2001.
26. See e.g. a thorough contextualisation of Wulfstan's writings in Ponz-Sans 2007.
27. Unlike *Tegneby*, place names with the element **rink-* can be found not only in modern-day Sweden (18 instances, predominantly in the Mällaren region) but also in present-day Denamark (8 instances) (Hald 1933).
28. 'Feudal mutation', also termed 'transformation' – a controversial theory in francophone historiography, first formulated by Georges Duby in 1953 and later much debated in the journal *Past & Present* (Abels 2009: 1018–1020).
29. Note that, as cultural objects, charters fulfilled far more diverse functions (see e.g. Keynes 2005 [1980]; Snook 2015).

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DR 129 = Rune stone located in Durup, Durup sn., Gislum hd, North Jutland, Denmark. In Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 602.

DR 143 = Rune stone located in Gunderup, Gunderup sn., Fleskum hd, North Jutland, Denmark. In Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 602–603.

DR 150 = Rune stone located in Hurup, Hurup sn., Refs hd, North Jutland, Denmark. In Jacobsen & Moltke 1942: 603.

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