

Chapter 4

The King as Anti-Hero: Executing Enemies and Revising History in Fifteenth-Century Sweden¹

Introduction

»From Kalmar to Stockholm, there is no fish in the sea that has faced as many hooks as the ones that I have baited for you«, said Erik Puke (d. 1437) to Karl Knutsson Bonde (1408/09–1470) according to a fifteenth-century chronicle.² This open confession—admitting to treason and ambushes—is unlikely to have happened in reality. Instead, it is most likely part of the chronicler's intentional vilification of Erik Puke, with the purpose of contrasting him to the heroic, patient, and noble Karl Knutsson, later King Karl. This glorification of Karl is unsurprising. After all, it was »his« chronicle: Karl had ordered it and it would be posthumously named after him. *Karlskrönikan* (»Karl's chronicle«, ca 1452) clearly served the purpose of exalting King Karl Knutsson while justifying his path to the crown.

His time was a period of chaos in Sweden, which is demonstrated by the fact that Karl Knutsson would be elected king of Sweden three separate times. Sweden was since the end of the fourteenth century in Union with Denmark and Norway. The Union rulers early on attempted to centralize power around the monarch at the expense of the aristocracy. This was but one of the many factors that would lead to extended power struggles and warfare in this tumultuous era. The fifteenth century was also a time of profound changes as the freeholding peasants proved that they were a force to reckon with, the peasantry was thereafter both a threat and a potential weapon for

1 I would like to thank Christian Hohenthal for reading and commenting on drafts of this chapter and for many enlightening discussions about medieval chronicles and kingship.

2 »then gedde gar ey mellen calmarn oc thette/ ther flere kroke äre fore sette / än iac haf-fuer sat for tigh /thz kunde toch aldrig lykkis mik«, Gustaf Edvard Klemming; Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor D. 2 Nya eller Karls-krönikan: början av unionsstriderna samt Karl Knutssons regering, 1389–1452, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet. Serie 1, Svenska skrifter, 17:2, Stockholm 1866, verses 3156–3159. This is a rather free translation in order to increase the readability while maintaining the message; for example the word used is not »fish« but the more specific »pike.« I have throughout used Klemming's edition of *Karlskrönikan*. From now on it will be referred to as *Karlskrönikan* with a reference to the verses.

the power-hungry elite to summon and use. These transformations provide the framework for the events depicted in two late medieval chronicles. This chapter focuses on the first section of *Karlskrönikan* that aimed to turn Erik Puke from a hero to a villain, and elevate Karl Knutsson as the main heroic figure. Both of these leaders entered the scene after the death of Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, and his heroic shadow affected both of their portrayals. Their depictions were also affected by who their supporters were; while Karl Knutsson had the support of the aristocracy, Erik Puke had the backing of various peasant groups.

The chapter will attempt to establish how the chronicler understood heroism and how he attempted to create a hero by contrasting him with a villain. Which characteristics did he highlight as suiting a hero? As discussed below, the question remains, how can a chronicle that attempted to glorify King Karl have led to modern scholars describing him, largely based on this same text, as ruthless, harsh, and cruel? I argue that the chronicler attempted to use descriptions and adjectives to heroize Karl Knutsson but he still had to adhere to the framework of events. Furthermore, this chapter highlights that there was a variety of positive attributes that could be used to create a hero, however, these different qualities were at times in conflict with each other. The contrast between the positive attributes used and King Karl's actions created a morally ambiguous character. The chronicler ultimately left us with a confusing depiction of a noble, chivalrous, yet utterly cruel ruler.

Heroes and Chaos – Sweden in the Early Fifteenth Century

The fifteenth century was indeed a very tumultuous period in Swedish history. By the end of the fourteenth century, Sweden had entered the Kalmar Union, established in 1389 and formalised in 1397. Sweden would be part of the Union, with some interruptions, until 1523. The Union was created by Queen Margaret of Denmark (1353–1412) and ruled by Margaret and her foster son Erik (1381–1459). The latter was born as Bogislav of Pomerania-Stolp, but his name was soon changed to the Nordic-sounding Erik. He was chosen as king of Norway in 1389, elected king of Denmark and Sweden in 1396. The year after, in 1397, he was crowned king of the three realms in Kalmar, which gave the union its name. Nonetheless, the real power lay with Queen Margaret until her death in 1412. Margaret, and after her death Erik, aimed to centralise and increase their power, which could be done by controlling the castles and their fiefs by giving them to loyal people who functioned as royal bailiffs. In addition, it was in the monarch's interest to control the choice

of bishops, especially the archbishop in Uppsala. These attempts to increase royal power would, during Erik's reign, lead to conflicts between the crown and the Swedish aristocrats, the Church, and the peasantry, some of which joined forces in uprisings against the detested king. As is the case with several other unpopular Swedish kings, both writers and historians have emphasized Erik's foreignness by referring to him as Erik of Pomerania.

The fifteenth century is also the era of one of the few well-known Swedish medieval heroes: Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson (end of the 1300s–1436), who led the Engelbrekt uprising 1434–1436.³ He was the son of a low-level aristocrat and part of a mining family in central Sweden. From 1432 onwards, he represented peasant communities in their complaints against King Erik and in particular against the wrongdoings of the king's local bailiffs. In 1434, after the king had failed to respond to the troublesome situation, he led an uprising against the Union King. Engelbrekt has been interpreted in very different ways depending on the historical circumstances. During the nineteenth century, when nationalistic history-writing flourished, Engelbrekt was depicted as a popular peasant leader, representing Swedish nationalist interests against tyrannical foreign rulers.⁴ These historians turned Engelbrekt into the founder of Sweden as a national democracy.⁵ This was due to the fact that he was credited with founding the Swedish parliament in Arboga in 1435, in which all the estates were represented. The anniversary of the Swedish parliament was celebrated with festivities in 1935 and 1985, although historians, by the later date, had already demonstrated that the Arboga meeting cannot be seen as the first parliament.⁶

3 Peter Reinholdsson describes the main aspects of the uprising. Peter Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?: Samhällsorganisation och konflikt i senmedeltidens Sverige*, Uppsala 1998, pp. 30–32. Dick Harrison also provides a concise description of both the Engelbrekt uprising and the ensuing Puke-uprising. Dick Harrison: *Uppror och allianser: politiskt våld i 1400-talets svenska bondesamhälle*, Lund 1997, pp. 49–55.

4 Thomas Lindkvist/Maria Sjöberg: *Det svenska samhället 800–1720. Klerkernas och adelns tid*, Lund 2019, p. 206.

5 Lönnroth adds that this version of Engelbrekt is a literary product. Erik Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, Stockholm 1959, pp. 111–112.

6 The evidence for the meeting in Arboga 1435 being the first four-estate parliament are a few verses in *Engelbrektskrönikan*. When scholars debated this issue, they turned to two different types of evidence or methods. To start with, scholars have shown that the reference in the chronicle to a meeting with all four estates is an obvious misreading. It does not actually say that the peasantry was present. Others have rather focused on other sources that would support that people from the peasantry were actually present at the meeting and found no evidence for this. Lars-Olof Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid: från drottning Margareta till Kristian II*, 2n ed., Stockholm 2003, p. 205. Erik Lönnroth refutes the 1435 date but instead

Some historians even claimed that Engelbrekt was venerated as a saint, for which there is very little evidence, if any.⁷ In a later era, writers stated that Engelbrekt was not a peasant leader; he was a member of the economic elite and his motives were economic, not nationalist. Marxist historians saw him as an early example of the industrial class reacting against feudalist overlords.⁸

The complexities of the Engelbrekt uprising were long downplayed in favour of a depiction of the events as a peasant rebellion and independence war against a disliked Kalmar Union ruled by an equally detested Danish king.⁹ Peter Reinholdsson, among others, has shown that both peasants and aristocrats participated in the Engelbrekt uprising, thus calling into question that it was a *peasant* rebellion.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the insurrection clearly demonstrated that the peasantry had become a military force to reckon with in the power struggles of the era, and subsequent rulers attempted to gain their support.¹¹

Scholars have debated the background to the uprising and some have underlined the Union King's periodic blockade of trade with the Hanseatic towns as a significant cause. This was because the trade embargoes made it difficult for the miners in central Sweden to export their goods.¹² But there were many reasons for the rebellion. More recently, historians have shown that rejection of the Kalmar Union as such was not the cause of the uprising. Rather, the local royal exercise of power in various Swedish regions was the main concern, especially the bailiffs appointed by King Erik.¹³ In fact, the Nordic aristocratic kin groups were divided, and some supported the Union while others did not. The king had sworn an oath to rule Sweden with

suggests that the first parliament was held in 1464. Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, p. 115, p. 119.

7 Andrey Scheglov: Was There a Cult of »Saint Engelbrekt«?, in: *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 185–192.

8 Lindkvist/Sjöberg: *Det svenska samhället 800–1720*, p. 206.

9 Kjell Kumlien states that Engelbrekt's movement was »democratic.« Kjell Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, Stockholm 1933, p. 98; For a concise description of the historiography see: Olle Ferm: *State-Formative Tendencies, Political Struggle and the Rise of Nationalism in Late Medieval Sweden*, *Runica et Mediævalia. Lectiones* 2, Stockholm 2002, pp. 2–4.

10 Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 109, p. 257. Dick Harrison states that, in late medieval Sweden, there was no clear boundary between a peasant uprisings, civil war or aristocratic feuding. Harrison: *Uppror och allianser*, p. 104.

11 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 240.

12 Larsson points out that the blockade was over by the time the uprising started. *ibid.*, pp. 186–188.

13 *ibid.*, p. 206.

Swedish men and give the castles and fiefs primarily to Swedish aristocrats, but this did not happen. While it may not have been the direct cause of the uprising, it did create resistance against the king and subsequently against the Kalmar Union. In addition, King Erik made an enemy of many churchmen when he objected to their autonomous appointment of a new archbishop. The Uppsala cathedral chapter had elected a new archbishop without consulting the king.¹⁴ This conflict had a wider European backdrop. In the Reform Councils during the first half of the fifteenth century, church men vocalised demands of the freedom of the Church and of independent and free elections of church officials.¹⁵

According to the late medieval chronicles, the major point of contention was the foreign, often Danish or German, bailiffs that King Erik had appointed to manage the Swedish castles and who were responsible for tax collection.¹⁶ The Engelbrekt uprising focused on capturing these castles and getting rid of the bailiffs. Engelbrekt led an army consisting of peasants, miners, and several aristocrats that largely achieved this goal. By his side was the aristocratic Erik Puke, but also other noblemen, among them Karl Knutsson. Negotiations with the Union King followed late in 1434; these talks were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving an end to the war. They did, however, lead to a truce.¹⁷

In January 1435 a meeting took place in Arboga. Although it was hardly the first parliament as previously claimed, the town burghers were formally represented. At this meeting, Engelbrekt became Captain of the Realm (*rikshövitsman*), a new position that resembled a non-crowned regent. At the same meeting, the Council of the Realm was increased in numbers and now included Engelbrekt and Erik Puke. This was clearly contrary to the

14 The cleric and historian Ericus Olai stated that the Engelbrekt uprising was an act of divine intervention after King Erik threatened the Uppsala church. Biörn Tjällén: *Church and Nation: The Discourse on Authority in Ericus Olai's Chronica Regni Gothorum* (c. 1471), Stockholm 2007, pp. 105–106; Bertil Nilsson states that this was one of many causes for the uprising and that several important bishops sided with Engelbrekt. However, most bishops were pro-Union although they were hostile toward the Union King. Martin Berntson/Bertil Nilsson/Cecilia Wejryd: *Kyrka i Sverige: Introduktion till svensk kyrkohistoria*, Skellefteå 2012, pp. 76–77. I would not consider it a »cause« for the uprising, but it clearly led to support from some bishops once it had started.

15 Beata Losman: *Norden och reformkonsilierna 1408–1449*, Göteborg 1970, pp. 272–273; Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, pp. 183–184.

16 Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 176; Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 180.

17 Dick Harrison: *Karl Knutsson: en biografi*, Lund 2004, pp. 65–67; Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, pp. 190–203.

king's right to appoint the councillors of the Realm. This expanded Council would not last. During negotiations with the King later in 1435, he removed the rebellious members of the Council and replaced them with more loyal councillors. During this time, King Erik appointed Karl Knutsson to High Constable (*marsk*), one of the two governing positions in Sweden—the other was High Justiciary (*drots*), to which he appointed Kristiern Nilsson (Vasa) (ca. 1365–1442).¹⁸

The next year a rift between Karl Knutsson and Engelbrekt began. At a second election meeting in Stockholm, Karl Knutsson replaced Engelbrekt as Captain of the Realm, which led to angry protests from Engelbrekt and Erik Puke. They gathered support from the commoners and, in order to calm the peasantry down, the meeting ultimately named Engelbrekt Co-Captain. The same year in 1436, Engelbrekt became gravely ill and was murdered by the nobleman Magnus Bengtsson during his difficult recovery. Karl Knutsson was thereby conveniently rid of his main competitor, Engelbrekt.¹⁹

Karl Knutsson and the High Justiciary Kristiern Nilsson were left to handle a complex situation. Engelbrekt had a wide reach and his death stirred up parts of the population. Both Karl and Erik Puke were born into the realm's highest aristocratic elite and had close ties to the Council of the Realm. Their interests aligned at times, in particular during the first rebellion, the Engelbrekt uprising.²⁰ However, they also collaborated in the later phases. During October 1436, renewed negotiations between King Erik of Pomerania and the Council of the Realm were meant to take place. However, King Erik was shipwrecked and rumours spread that he had been killed. Karl and Erik Puke gathered troops to regain the castles that were still managed by bailiffs loyal to the Union King.²¹ Subsequently, Karl Knutsson and the High Justiciary Kristiern Nilsson divided the castles with their fiefs among the Swedish aristocrats. Erik Puke likely expected to receive one of the more important castles, which did not happen.

Soon after this, a new rebellion started, led by Erik Puke. Karl Knutsson crushed this uprising and had Erik Puke and his right-hand man executed. Scholars have claimed that it was likely that Karl had promised Erik Puke safe passage to the meeting where he was arrested. This event could then be seen

18 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 203–213.

19 *ibid.*, pp. 221–231. Dick Harrison states that it is unlikely that Karl Knutsson was involved in the murder of Engelbrekt. Harrison: Karl Knutsson, pp. 79–80.

20 Sven-Bertil Jansson: Engelbrektskrönikan, Stockholm 1994, pp. 109–111.

21 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 76–78.

as an act of treason by Karl.²² Kjell Kumlien writes, somewhat vaguely, that Karl Knutsson clearly had done something that required him to defend his actions towards Erik Puke; he needed to shield himself from grave allegations that circulated.²³ Nonetheless, the next year, in 1438, Karl Knutsson was elected regent of Sweden. He had to wait ten years for the crown—in 1448 he was elected king of Sweden for the first time. He was deposed and exiled in 1457. His other two reigns lasted from August 1464 to January 1465 and from November 1467 until his death in May 1470.²⁴

Creating Heroes and Villains – Two Chronicles

Two rhymed chronicles depict this time period, *Engelbrektskrönikan* («Engelbrekt's chronicle» from the late 1430s) and *Karlskrönikan* (around 1452). These two were later combined into one, nowadays referred to as *Karlskrönikan* after the scholarly edition by Gustaf Edvard Klemming.²⁵ It was long believed to have been written as one chronicle, although historians and linguists early on debated how the different parts were connected, since the rhyming structure and the perspective changes. Scholars have convincingly demonstrated that *Karlskrönikan* consists of at least two different texts, written by several different authors. Most notably, *Engelbrektskrönikan* was incorporated into the beginning of *Karlskrönikan* to depict the time from 1389 until Engelbrekt's death in 1436. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is about a third of the ca. 9600 verses in *Karlskrönikan*.²⁶ In the process, some sections were removed,

22 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 230–231; Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 81; Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 101.

23 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 95.

24 Kjell Kumlien: Karl Knutsson (Bonde), in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/12366 (8.1.2024)

25 When *Engelbrektskrönikan* later was added to *Karlskrönikan*, it was revised; these changes are clearly visible in manuscript D6 in the Royal Library in Stockholm. The revisions were made in order to enhance Karl Knutsson's position also in the time period before Engelbrekt's death. Sven-Bertil Jansson has recreated *Engelbrektskrönikan* by ignoring the modifications done during Karl Knutsson's time. Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, pp. 16–18. The D6 manuscript is seen as the original manuscript for *Karlskrönikan*; the chronicle is also preserved in six other medieval manuscripts. In these manuscripts *Karlskrönikan* has been combined with other chronicles, both older and younger; in some cases it has also been revised or shortened. In addition, it has been preserved in nine post-medieval manuscripts. Louise Faymonville: *Hövisk litteratur och förändringar i det fornsvenska textlandskapet*, Stockholm 2023, p. 83.

26 *ibid.*, p. 55.

others slightly rewritten, usually to highlight Karl Knutsson's importance at the expense of others. Herman Schück has posited that *Engelbrektskrönikan* was authored by Johan Fredebern (d. before 1449), who was the scribe for the Council of the Realm and thus worked for King Karl.²⁷

Karlskronikan is believed to have been commissioned by the king himself. Scholars have described it basically as a piece of propaganda.²⁸ It is not without problems to use the term propaganda for medieval chronicles, depending on what one means with the term. One issue is the limited diffusion of these texts: chronicles were simply not a very efficient means of reaching a larger audience compared to, for example, political songs or shorter poems.²⁹ In addition, the term propaganda is often associated with false information. Many medieval chronicles have a bad reputation with regard to their veracity and reliability, and many are undoubtedly strongly biased. However, this does not mean that chroniclers completely falsified the main historical events. In any event, this is a simplified view of the Swedish chronicles as the authors in general had a framework of events to which they needed to adhere. Information circulated in the Swedish realm in the form of letters, pamphlets, and political songs.³⁰ It would have undermined an author too much if they completely departed from what was known to have happened. Still, as Christian Hohenthal demonstrates, when describing these events there was a possibility to »spin« descriptions so that they could be used to justify a person's actions or influence the reader's (or listener's) views. Of course, occasionally authors moved some events chronologically or simply made them up.³¹ In some cases,

27 Herman Schück: *Engelbrektskrönikan: tillkomsten och författaren*, Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie- och antikvitetsakademiens handlingar, Stockholm 1994.

28 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 238; Harrison: *Karl Knutsson*, p. 59, p. 99; Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, p. 83, p. 95; Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, p. 78.

29 Justin Lake: *Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography*, in: *History Compass* 12 (2014), No. 4, p. 353; Fulvio Ferrari: *Karlskronikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet*, in: Jonathan Adams (ed.): *Østnordisk filologi – nu og i fremtiden*, Odense 2015, pp. 191–192.

30 Margaretha Nordquist: *A Struggle for the Realm: Late-Medieval Swedish Rhyme Chronicles as Ideological Expressions*, Stockholm 2015, pp. 50–51; Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 102.

31 The term »spin« comes from Richard Kagan, who describes chroniclers as »spin-doctors«. Richard L. Kagan: *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, Baltimore 2009, pp. 5–7. But my description is taken from Christian Hohenthal who in detail analyses the use of »spin« in Swedish late medieval history writing. Christian Hohenthal: *Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser. En undersökning av fyra svenska historieverk från 1400- och 1500-talen*, Uppsala 2025.

it is very difficult to assess whether the events actually took place, as we have limited sources remaining; we are for example very dependent on *Karlskrönikan* for the events that took place right after Engelbrekt's death in 1436. The introduction of this chapter might serve as an example of the possibility to spin situations. While it might have been possible to verify that Erik Puke did attend the banquet in question, it would be very hard to confirm whether Erik actually said these words to Karl Knutsson and his sister.³²

It is difficult to know definitively who actually read or listened to the chronicles. Lars-Olof Larsson states that *Engelbrektskrönikan* was written for a somewhat different audience than previous chronicles: it was meant to be read at »less elegant banquets or at market meetings« where people from the lower ranks of the population were also present.³³ Herman Schück claims that *Engelbrektskrönikan* is a compilation of various sources and that they then might have targeted different groups. But he also claims that, when compiled together, these texts aimed to reach a wide audience.³⁴ By contrast, Fulvio Ferraro convincingly argues that *Karlskrönikan* was likely consumed by a primarily aristocratic audience. He bases this partly on the length of the chronicle, as it has been preserved. Consisting of more than 9600 verses, it would have taken almost ten hours to read. His other argument stems from the negative depiction of ordinary people in *Karlskrönikan* which makes it hard to believe that they were part of the intended audience.³⁵ Indeed, the descriptions of the peasantry and the relationship between the main protagonists and the peasants differ quite significantly between the two chronicles which will be important in the following.

32 Duncan Robertson argues that the role of the medieval writer was not to record what characters had said but what they would have said, being who they were. Duncan Robertson: Epic Direct Discourse, in: Pacific Coast Philology 20 (1985), No. 1/2, pp. 70–74; Rasa Mažeika: Pagans, Saints, and War Criminals: Direct Speech as a Sign of Liminal Interchanges in Latin Chronicles of the Baltic Crusades, in: Viator 45 (2014), No. 2, pp. 272–274; Sophia Menache concludes that oral addresses in chronicles were a literary means to captivate audiences and impart authenticity. They served to manipulate existing feelings, such as hatred, fear, latent antagonism or unlimited support. Sophia Menache: Written and Oral Testimonies in Medieval Chronicles: Matthew Paris and Giovanni Villani, in: The Medieval Chronicle 6 (2009), p. 17. In my view, Erik Puke's speech indeed served to emphasize Puke's deception and increase the hatred towards him.

33 Larsson, Kalmarunionens tid, p. 198.

34 Schück: Engelbrektskrönikan, pp. 159–167.

35 Ferrari: Karlskrönikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet, pp. 192–193.

In general, *Engelbrektskrönikan* is thought of as more reliable, as it was written quite soon after the events took place.³⁶ It is obvious that the two chronicles differ in how they describe Erik Puke. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is quite positive to Puke, who is the main protagonist's foremost ally and friend.³⁷ In contrast, *Karlskrönikan* serves to justify why Karl Knutsson not only defeated Erik Puke, but also had him executed.³⁸ This chapter will make use of *Karlskrönikan's* biases to discuss how the author sought to create heroes and villains.

Depictions of Karl Knutsson and Erik Puke

Historians have had a limited interest in Karl Knutsson and his rule. As Dick Harrison writes, he was neither a great winner nor a great loser.³⁹ Nineteenth-century historians depicted him as a glorious young noble, but an unsuccessful king. More recently, historians have seen his reign as a failed precursor to the rule of Gustav Vasa, who would turn Sweden into a nation-state. Harrison, who wrote the only biography of Karl Knutsson, defines his main characteristic as ambition which in turn led to ruthlessness. He furthermore argues that as a propagandist, he was a pioneer.⁴⁰

Indeed, scholars agree that *Karlskrönikan* served to produce a very positive image of Karl Knutsson. It is therefore interesting to note that Lars-Olof Larsson underlines that the events surrounding Erik Puke's feud are depicted in »a strikingly incongruous way«.⁴¹ Furthermore, based on the chronicle, Kjell Kumlien refers to Karl Knutsson as ruthless, brusque, and heavy-handed.⁴² Although *Karlskrönikan* is meant to portray the king as a hero, his behavior in the chronicle thus still leaves readers with the impression of a cruel and ruthless ruler.⁴³ While King Karl is indeed described as noble, patient, and kind, his actions definitely do not serve as proof of these characteristics. He

36 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 197–198.

37 But the chronicle is not without reservations to Erik Puke or Engelbrekt's behavior. See Hohenthal: Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser, pp. 167–175.

38 Dick Harrison writes that the chronicle's biases become more extreme in this section of the text. Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 88.

39 *ibid.*, pp. 421–422.

40 *ibid.*, pp. 422–425.

41 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 238.

42 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 80, pp. 95–96.

43 As noted below, there are other sources that describe Karl Knutsson. Ericus Olai is for example very negative in his descriptions and likens Karl to a tyrant. Tjällén: Church and Nation, pp. 109–113.

serves as a good example of the moral ambiguity of heroes and contradictions within the concept of the heroic itself.

Erik Puke has, for obvious reasons, garnered less scholarly attention than King Karl Knutsson. Gottfrid Carlsson referred to Puke as »the most tragic figure« in the story of Sweden's national independence fight in the 1430s.⁴⁴ Carlsson clearly viewed him as a patriotic hero whose life ended tragically. Herman Schück, on the contrary, states that this sentiment is not warranted, since Erik Puke acted out of self-interest and ambition. He argues that while his title as the »people's chieftain« or »peasant chieftain« can be disputed, he was a pioneer in the sense that he successfully appealed to the broader population's dissatisfaction with an aristocratic regime.⁴⁵ Dick Harrison describes the arrest and execution of Erik Puke as a form of treason and adds that Karl Knutsson never managed to completely wash away this stain of blood on his clothes.⁴⁶ Kjell Kumlien, furthermore, regards King Karl's failure to reconcile with Puke as his biggest political mistake.⁴⁷ It is very difficult, if not impossible, to accurately evaluate the events that took place during the conflict between Karl Knutsson and Erik Puke. Historians must rely almost exclusively on *Karlskrönikan*. The other source we have—a chronicle written (c. 1471) by Ericus Olai (1420s-1486)—is far more skeptical towards Karl Knutsson's behaviour (and the king in general) and describes the events as an act of treason. Indeed, Erik Neuman states that a historian's view of Karl Knutsson depends on whether they follow *Karlskrönikan* or Ericus Olai's later chronicle.⁴⁸ While Kumlien tries to find a middle ground by reconciling and balancing the positive *Karlskrönikan* with the negative Ericus Olai, Harrison argues that we need to choose whom to believe. Harrison clarifies his own perspective and states that this section of *Karlskrönikan* is highly unreliable.⁴⁹

More recent scholarship has studied *Karlskrönikan* from other perspectives. Margaretha Nordquist has turned to the history of emotions to analyse the use of anger in *Karlskrönikan*. She concludes that anger could function

44 Gottfrid Carlsson: Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/16127 (8.1.2025)

45 Herman Schück: Erik Puke, in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/7423 (8.1.2025)

46 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 101.

47 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 95.

48 Erik Neuman: Karlskrönikans proveniens och sanningsvärde: en undersökning och några slutsatser, Uppsala, 1927, p. 106.

49 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 100; Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 83–96.

in different ways; controlled anger could be an efficient political tool to influence others, while unrestrained rage was a negative trait that undermined a person's credibility.⁵⁰ In this sense, she tries to capture the emotional regimes (or communities) that underpinned the society in which the chronicle was recorded. Thomas Småberg has explored the importance of friendship in *Karlskrönikan*. He describes friendship as an ideal relationship, but argues that the author displays a pragmatic view, where friendship is linked to political alliances rather than to chivalrous values. Nonetheless, he argues that chivalrous ideals are present in *Karlskrönikan* and that they were used to link the text to an aristocratic tradition.⁵¹

The Heroic King

In media studies the term hero can be understood, in common usage, as a person admired for positive traits or achievements. In literary theory, it simply refers to a protagonist, with or without positive characteristics. When a person lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, honesty, courage, and decency, they can be referred to as an anti-hero. An anti-hero according to this definition is then not the same as an antagonist or a villain.⁵² While the term hero might have been understood in the Middle Ages, the expression anti-hero is a newer invention.⁵³ Neil Cartlidge maintains that the term anti-hero is useful for analysing characters in medieval romances. He argues that the polarization of heroes and villains in romances has discouraged recognition of how morally ambiguous, even downright sinister, the heroic protagonists can be. He further writes that medieval heroism is closely linked to values such as

50 Margaretha Nordquist: Sankt Eriks vrede: Oförrätter, minne och politiska känslor i den senmedeltida Karlskrönikan, in: Lychnos: Årsbok för idé- och lärdomshistoria. Tema: Känslor, Lund 2022, pp. 125–139.

51 Thomas Småberg: Ideal och identiteter: föreställningar kring vänskap i Erikskrönikan och Karlskrönikan, in: Vänner, patroner och klienter i Norden 900–1800: rapport till 26:e Nordiska historikermötet i Reykjavík den 8–12 augusti 2007, Reykjavík 2007, pp. 147–174.

52 Daniel Chandler/Rod Munday: Hero; Anti-hero, in: A Dictionary of Media and Communication, Oxford 2020.

53 The term hero does not seem to have been widely used in English until the sixteenth century. Morton W. Bloomfield: The Problem of the Hero in the Later Medieval Period, in: Norman T. Burns/Christopher J. Reagan (eds.): Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Albany (New York) 1975, p. 28; Merriam-Webster's Dictionary notes that the first use of anti-hero is from 1714. Merriam-Webster: America's Most Trusted Dictionary: Antihero, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antihero. (8.1.2025). The use of the Old Swedish word for hero, *håladh*, is well attested in the Middle Ages.

chivalry, aristocracy, and masculinity, etc. Anti-heroism can then be described as the ways in which heroes fail to live up to the paradigm of heroism and, importantly, can refer to the contradictions within heroism itself.⁵⁴

Ulrich Bröckling characterises the anti-hero as standing in opposition to the hero in terms of a code of behaviour; the anti-hero does what heroes do not. He contrasts this to the no-longer-heroes; they underline that processes of de-heroization can turn those who were once celebrated into insignificant or even ridiculed characters.⁵⁵ This highlights that the chronicler, and Karl Knutsson in reality, had several choices in his attempts to undermine Erik Puke. As Engelbrekt was dead, Erik Puke could have been turned into a no-longer-hero. Instead, the author tried to turn him into the qualitative opposite of Karl Knutsson, as Bröckling states: by emphasising the reversal of the heroic moral. This means that Erik Puke in a sense appears as a great adversary, but is portrayed as evil.⁵⁶ Though this was perhaps needed, it was also riskier, as it required a more exaggerated narrative.

The medieval heroic paradigm was linked to chivalry, at the core of which we find virtues of generosity, bravery, and loyalty, in addition to physical beauty. Moreover, during the late Middle Ages, there was an ever-sharper emphasis on family and lineage for aristocrats and heroes. Chivalry was ultimately a web of associations linking the knight's social accomplishments, his courage, generosity, his courtliness (especially in regards to women), his skills in horsemanship, hunting, and swordplay.⁵⁷ In Sweden the rhymed historical chronicles from the early fourteenth century were strongly influenced by translated chivalrous romances.⁵⁸ But in the fifteenth century, when *Karlskrönikan* was written, the chivalrous elements had become more stereotypical and clichéd. Louise Faymonville stresses, however, that we should not see the chivalrous elements merely as a stereotypical manifestation, but rather as proof that the production of texts was now even more politically motivated than before, and that they centered on legitimizing royal power rather than furthering aristocratic ideology. This also entailed a focus on the production of rhymed chronicles rather than romances. However, chivalric phrases re-occur, in particular among appreciative terms and descriptions of actors, also

54 Neil Cartlidge: *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. Studies in Medieval Romance, Suffolk 2012, pp. 1–2.

55 Ulrich Bröckling: *Negations of the heroic – a typological essay*, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen* 5 (2019), p. 39.

56 *ibid.*, p. 40.

57 Maurice Hugh Keen: *Chivalry*, New Haven 2005, p. 43, p. 52, p. 145, p. 219.

58 Faymonville: *Hövisk litteratur och förändringar i det fornsvenska textlandskapet*, p. 108.

in the later chronicles.⁵⁹ Thomas Småberg posits that the chivalrous values were still relevant at the time. He argues that it would not have been possible to write a propagandistic work, aiming to influence people's views, if the linguistic expressions were not gripping and something to which the audience could relate.⁶⁰

In *Karlskrönikan*, the hero is not simply a knight in a medieval romance, but a king or at least a king-to-be. While some heroic aspects were mutually applicable to chivalric heroes and kings, some added characteristics defined the ideal ruler. A good king acted wisely, showed self-restraint, and was fair. He had a genuine faith in God and always had his subjects' wellbeing in mind. The Swedish Mirror for Princes, *Konungastyrelsen* (1330-1350), specifies that the king's virtues were not of a particular kind, but that he should possess cardinal virtues to a greater extent than others. The essential virtues, according to the anonymous author, were hope, faith, and love. In addition, the king needed wisdom, strength, moderation, and justice. Absence of prudence made him unsuitable for government. The author added a fifth virtue: mercy. *Konungastyrelsen* advocated for monarchy, preferably hereditary monarchy. Interestingly, this was actually in conflict with the contemporary Swedish system of elective monarchy, but the author claimed that a hereditary monarchy would ensure that the king came from a respectable family. It was a system in which son appropriately succeeded father. In turn, the author believed, this would lead to the ruler having appropriate personal traits that could be further developed through education.⁶¹ Since the rhymed chronicles were influenced by chivalric values, we can expect that the texts combined these ideal characteristics.

To further complicate matters, however, we can expect different ideals or traits within any heroic paradigm. The authors of medieval texts were generally educated in clerical settings or, indeed, were themselves clerics. While they certainly recognized the value of military prowess and chivalric heroism, it was equally natural for them to insist on the superiority of Christian virtues.⁶²

59 *ibid.*, pp. 269–270.

60 Småberg: *Ideal och identiteter*, p. 171.

61 Tania Preste: *The King's Virtues in Swedish Mirrors for Princes c. 1300– c. 1600*, in: Stefano Fogelberg Rota/Andreas Hellerstedt (eds.): *Shaping Heroic Virtue: Studies in the Art and Politics of Supereminence in Europe and Scandinavia*, Leiden 2015, pp. 137–138.

62 R. R. Bolgar: *Hero or Anti-Hero? The Genesis and Development of the Miles Christianus*, in: Norman T. Burns/Christopher J. Reagan (eds.): *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Albany 1975, p. 121.

In line with this, we can expect a tension between, for example, mercy and strength, forgiveness and revenge, or, as we shall see, trust and astuteness.

As noted above, *Karlskrönikan* contains chivalric elements. These are, in general, used as phrases to describe Karl Knutsson's well-mannered behaviour. He can thus be described as answering questions with chivalry and wisdom, or chivalry and honour.⁶³ He celebrates Christmas with great joy and chivalrous conversations.⁶⁴ In addition, Karl Knutsson is surrounded by state-ly warriors and heroes.⁶⁵ His knights are distinguished and brave heroes.⁶⁶ Several of Karl's meetings and banquets are described as chivalric events, with honourable receptions, generous food and musicians.⁶⁷ Karl explicitly treats people, including Erik Puke, kindly and with honour.⁶⁸ Karl himself is described as being mild, chivalrous, and wise.⁶⁹ All the expressions used can be found in the chivalric romances and the *Erikskrönikan* (Chronicle of Duke Erik) from the fourteenth century. They thus situate *Karlskrönikan* in this context.



Figure 4: Karl Knutsson's grave monument, Riddarholmskyrkan, Stockholm.

Chivalrous values are used as attributes in the chronicle; they are meant to establish Karl Knutsson as a noble hero. As I argue, these chivalrous

63 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2826, 3218, 4650.

64 *ibid.*, verses 4148–4149.

65 *ibid.*, verse 4195.

66 *ibid.*, verse 3688.

67 *ibid.*, verses 3340–3346.

68 *ibid.*, verse 3132.

69 *ibid.*, verse 3066.

attributes appear as a thin varnish, void of deeper meaning when applied to Karl Knutsson. Nonetheless, they do succeed in linking the chronicle to an aristocratic tradition, as Småberg points out. The text thus clearly targeted the aristocracy as its main audience. *Engelbrektskrönikan* has been described somewhat differently. As noted above, it is seen as a more reliable source, less biased and compiled closer to the events by an author who was likely present himself at many of the happenings that he describes.

The Traitor and the Merciful Hero

Neither *Engelbrektskrönikan* nor *Karlskrönikan* contain longer descriptions of people, their emotions, or their intentions. Both texts focus on events that are described in a chronological sequence. We shall therefore turn from the chivalrous attributes to the actions of the two main characters to see what they say about their characters. Both Erik Puke and Karl Knutsson are introduced to us in the older *Engelbrektskrönikan*. Karl Knutsson is a minor character during the events described, while Erik Puke takes a more central role. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is even more focused on the succession of events than *Karlskrönikan*; in fact, large parts of the text are descriptions of various sieges and attacks on castles. The chronicle is structured around a main conflict, that between King Erik of Pomerania and his Swedish adversaries, led by Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson.

Erik Puke can be seen as a hero in this earlier narrative, not because of descriptive attributes but because of his actions and because he is consistently described as Engelbrekt's main ally. They are described as the best of friends.⁷⁰ Lars-Olof Larsson notes that after a certain point they appear as »conjoint actors«. ⁷¹ *Engelbrektskrönikan* was not entirely positive to Erik Puke and Engelbrekt. Especially one event, the election of Karl Knutsson as Captain of the Realm, can be interpreted as putting the two friends in a more negative light. They both refuse to accept the outcome of the election and manage to get the Council of the Realm to accept Engelbrekt as Co-Captain.⁷² While this indeed indicates a burgeoning rift between the Council of the Realm and

70 Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, p. 115.

71 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 215.

72 Christian Hohenthal describes that Engelbrekt and Erik Puke interrupts the proper order of the ritual by refusing to accept the outcome. Hohenthal: *Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser*, pp. 170–178.

Engelbrekt, it is still a fairly mild criticism compared to the almost parodically exaggerated description of Erik Puke after Engelbrekt's death.

Several scholars have noted that the death of Engelbrekt allowed Karl Knutsson to take center stage in the political arena. But Erik Puke was still alive and he still had the trust and confidence of Engelbrekt's men as well as the support of the peasantry.⁷³ Moreover, Erik Puke had fought by Karl Knutsson's side in several battles, which made turning him into a villain a delicate matter. From the time of Engelbrekt's death, which marks the end of *Engelbrektskrönikan* and the beginning of *Karlskrönikan*, Erik Puke is painted as traitorous and devious. In the process of vilifying Erik, the author also had to deal with the fact that he had the support of the peasants, which forced the chronicler to reassess the peasantry and describe them as naïve, foolish, and incompetent.

Almost immediately, and with very little context to prepare the reader for the shift in viewpoint, we are introduced to the idea that Erik Puke is stubbornly set on defeating and killing Karl Knutsson. The conflict is first described as a fight over resources, more specifically over supporters.⁷⁴ As Margaretha Nordquist has pointed out, the chronicler at times manages to construct a contrast between the calm Karl and the unrestrained, angry Erik Puke.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Erik is described as a coward when he refuses to face Karl in an one-on-one battle. This narrative is quite effective; one of Erik's own men get to tell him that »while you threaten, others strike«.⁷⁶

The negative descriptions of Erik Puke escalate quickly in the chronicle. He is time and again described as false and evil.⁷⁷ He is repeatedly called a traitor and betrays Karl Knutsson's trust over and over again.⁷⁸ He seeks to have him killed at any point possible, which seems like very risky behaviour. Karl is often portrayed as ignorant of these events and seems surprised by the attempts on his life, but it is hard not to interpret him as rather naïve. He repeatedly refuses to listen to his advisors, who tell him to watch out for Erik. When incidents are brought to his attention, he either chooses to interpret them as misunderstandings or simply forgives Erik Puke immediately.⁷⁹ The purpose

73 Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, pp. 115–117.

74 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2776–2795.

75 Nordquist: Sankt Eriks vrede.

76 »*tha swarade swennin som han wil / meden tu höther hugger annar til*«. *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2844–2845. The episode is recounted in *ibid.*, verses 2818–2846.

77 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2899, 2971, 3008, 3075, 3101.

78 *ibid.*, verses 3102, 3111, 3483, 3499.

79 *ibid.*, verses 3008, 3110–3115, 3136–3169, 3476–3503, 3522–3535, 3570–3571, 3584–3586.

of this part of the account must have been to highlight that Karl Knutsson was mild and forgiving. He gives Erik chance after chance. This depiction serves to link Karl to Christian virtues, such as mercy, forgiveness, and a strong faith in his fellow men. According to the chronicle, Karl Knutsson wholeheartedly trusts that Erik Puke is his friend and provides him with continuous opportunities to do better and become a better man.⁸⁰ The chronicler underlines many instances in which God is on Karl's side; it is thanks to God's grace that he survives the attempts on his life. It is also God's will that Karl eventually becomes king.⁸¹

Karl is, in his mercy and forgiveness, contrasted with the Council of the Realm. According to the author, the entire Council thought very poorly of Erik Puke. This is revealed during a meeting that took place after King Erik's shipwreck, when the recently captured castles were being redistributed and given to aristocrats who were not loyal to the Union King. As mentioned, Erik Puke—who was on the same side as Karl Knutsson—likely expected to receive a more significant castle and fief, but the larger ones went to Karl Knutsson's closest allies.⁸² The author personally reassures readers that if Karl had not been present at the meeting, the councillors would have had him executed. He would have »lost his head for robbery and other major things« that he had done to others.⁸³ The author states that Karl always thought well of Erik, something that he rewarded very badly.⁸⁴ It was, of course, in Karl's interest that the entire Council wanted Erik Puke dead long before he actually had him decapitated. As Kjell Kumlien notes, Karl Knutsson was in fact the least likely to interfere on behalf of Erik Puke.⁸⁵

This description is, as many others, quite unlikely. The conflict, this time, concerned property. As Dick Harrison describes, it was hardly just Erik Puke who was discontented with these events.⁸⁶ Kumlien furthermore points out that the description underlines the great power that Karl Knutsson now possessed, as he could go against the wishes of the High Justiciary.⁸⁷ But

80 *ibid.*, verses 3130–3135, 3498–3499.

81 *ibid.*, verses 3009, 7435. See Hohenthal: Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser, pp. 103–109, 129–123, for a discussion of how God's active presence is manifested at several times in the chronicle.

82 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 81–82.

83 »*hade ther hoffuwdit mist / for roff oc andre store sake*«. *Karlskronikan*, verses 3453–3454.

84 *Ibid.*, verses 3445–3459.

85 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 82, footnote 56.

86 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, pp. 82–83.

87 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 80–81.

according to the chronicler, Karl Knutsson is Erik Puke's defender in this situation and Erik is ungrateful.

All of these events take place after the dramatic altercation that introduced this chapter, where Erik openly confessed to repeatedly trying to ambush Karl with no result. Notwithstanding, Karl continues to believe in Erik's good-will and friendship. When his own men warn him that Erik once again will try to assassinate him, he answers that it is strange that they try to create a rift between himself and Erik. Karl continues: »Erik has promised me good-will, he will never do me such an injustice«. ⁸⁸ It is difficult to understand such naivety. The interpretation must be that the chronicler attempted to exaggerate Karl's Christian mercy and forgiveness at the expense of his strategic wisdom. Nonetheless, the narrative quickly changes as does Karl's view of his »friend«. Erik Puke writes an open feud letter to Karl Knutsson and his reaction is suddenly no longer surprise or sadness. Instead, »he tells his men happily: now, you can all see the dishonor Erik has done me. Now I have proof of that which many have told me, that Erik wants to betray me«. ⁸⁹ He assures them that this is their lucky day, that they can gain honour and glory and defeat their worst enemy. ⁹⁰ The joy in this turn of events appears strikingly odd against the background described above.

It is hard to accept the depiction of the traitorous and murderous Erik Puke, but it is even more difficult to accept the image of Karl Knutsson. It is possible that different virtues and different moral systems are at play here; the author has perhaps chosen to downplay Karl's strength and intelligence because the virtue that he needed to emphasize was mercy and forgiveness, providing his evil adversary a chance to repent and do better. In order to highlight his great leniency, the result is that the chronicler depicts his adversary as a caricature of a villain. Like a Bond-villain, he openly—and utterly illogically—admits to all his evildoings. As we shall see in the next section, there was a reason for the exaggeration of Karl's mercy: it seems, in fact, to be a trait that he completely lacked.

88 »erik haffuer mik sa got jät / han gör mik aldrigh slik oret« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3534–3534. The entire episode is found in *ibid.*, verses 3524–3535.

89 »gladelige til sit folk han sade / nw mogen i alle see / then oäre erik mik thee / nw finder iac rön pa / som monge haffue sakt mik fra / at erik wille mik forradha« *ibid.*, verses 3581–3586.

90 *ibid.*, verses 3580–3595.

The King and the Peasants

As noted, the main conflict in *Engelbrektskrönikan* was between the popular leader Engelbrekt, his aristocratic and peasant warriors, and the Union King Erik of Pomerania. Historians have evaluated the role of the peasantry in varying ways and the interpretation has also shifted over time. Traditionally, historians tended to neglect the role of the peasants and focus on the aristocracy. They often portrayed peasants as having been controlled and used by the nobles in their private feuds. More modern scholarship has emphasized that late medieval peasants had agency and wielded both political and military power.⁹¹ In *Engelbrektskrönikan* the peasantry is usually described in two ways: either as innocent victims of ruthless, greedy bailiffs or as fairly competent soldiers.⁹² When they are portrayed as combatants, they are often referred to by the province from which they came—the Upplanders or the Dalecarlians, for example. This highlights that provincial and regional identities were still very important and, furthermore, that it was local communities who acted in the conflicts.⁹³ By contrast, in *Karlskrönikan* the description of the peasants is more ambivalent and, at times, much more negative.

As noted above, *Karlskrönikan* has been described as a chronicle that was meant to be read at markets for common people. But as Fulvio Ferrari demonstrates, not only the length of the chronicle but also the content makes this highly unlikely. As Ferrari points out, *Karlskrönikan* is not very positive towards the peasantry. The narrator displays open contempt for the peasants. It is therefore highly unlikely that the chronicle was meant to appeal to the peasantry.⁹⁴ It is evident that the text's transition from the older *Engelbrektskrönikan* to *Karlskrönikan* reveal an actual shift in how the elite perceived the peasants. The peasant armies led by Engelbrekt were not only a positive force in the fight against the Union King, but also became a very tangible threat to the aristocracy that needed to be handled. Ferrari suggests that the audience of *Karlskrönikan* were aristocrats who could be convinced that a

91 Harrison: Uppror och allianser, p. 101.

92 This is in line with the depiction of peasants in a later chronicle, where they appear either as defenders of the realm or victims of aggression. Margaretha Nordquist: Envisioning a Political Community: Peasants and Swedish Men in Vernacular Rhyme Chronicles, Late Fifteenth Century, in: Wojtek Jezierski/Lars Hermanson (eds.): Imagined Communities on the Baltic Rim: From the Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries, Amsterdam 2016, p. 115.

93 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 141.

94 Ferrari: *Karlskrönikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet*, pp. 185–193.

ruthless Karl Knutsson was their best option.⁹⁵ Indeed, some time after Erik Puke was executed in 1437, the Council of the Realm introduced restrictions on the peasants. These concerned, among other things, limitations on their right to carry arms: an attempt to prevent new uprisings.⁹⁶ These provisions can also be seen as a more general effort to limit the peasantry's power and, subsequently, to limit the ability of aristocrats to summon peasant armies for support, something that Erik Puke quite successfully achieved.

In *Karlskrönikan* the peasants are a threat in the background, but also described as gullible and incompetent soldiers.⁹⁷ In several episodes, we meet crowds of peasants that have been »misled« by Erik Puke.⁹⁸ According to the author, he lies to them and they are incapable of detecting his lies. One of these lies is more striking than others. He—again according to the chronicle—tells them that he will not be their king, and instead wants to elect a peasant as a king.⁹⁹ This very improbable scenario highlights the ignorance and naivety of the masses. Of course, what was at stake was the support of the peasantry. Although the chronicler wants to depict Erik Puke as a scheming manipulator, he also clearly demonstrates that Erik and not Karl had the support of the population.

In the ensuing battles, Karl's knightly troops defeat the peasant soldiers; they flee under miserable conditions while forgetting both weapons and provisions.¹⁰⁰ Karl's own defeat at the hands of one of these peasant armies is explained by the fact that his men failed to follow his strategies.¹⁰¹ Nordquist has described Karl Knutsson's anger as restrained and controlled; in the episodes that she analyses this is indeed true. But there are also several episodes where Karl's anger seems quite unmoderated and menacing. In one incidence, the burghers of Västerås refuse to provide him with provisions, as they are afraid that Erik Puke and his peasants will burn the town to the ground. Karl then threatens to do exactly the same to them. The burghers ask him »to show them mercy and to calm his anger«.¹⁰² Threats and intimidations are

95 *ibid.*, pp. 185–193.

96 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 239.

97 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2864–2881, 3508, 3515–3521, 4026–4033.

98 »at erik hade them forwent« *ibid.* verse 3508; »huru erik sik redhe giorde / ok hade forwent rekbona alle / at the mz honom halle«, *ibid.* verses 3517–3519.

99 *Ibid.*, verses 3780–3782.

100 *Ibid.*, verses 3920–2933, 3985–3990.

101 *Ibid.*, verses 4194–4207.

102 »oc bade honom sik nade ware / oc stille sine wrede« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3659–3660. The entire episode is retold in: *ibid.*, verses 3630–60.

common-place in Karl's feud against Erik Puke; these are directed at his adversaries, but also at townspeople or commoners who are afraid or simply want to keep their own possessions.

Erik Puke, on the other hand, riles up the peasantry by depicting Karl Knutsson as a tormentor of the common people. Erik states in one speech that Karl has ordered peasants to be broken on the wheel, burned, and hanged. The chronicler then writes that Erik spread these rumours all over the realm: »Therefore, people in all the places, believed the lies that Puke said«. ¹⁰³ One wonders whether he was actually spreading lies. When Karl travels north to defeat Erik, he first encounters the peasants of Uppland who had supported Erik's uprising. Karl organises a trial, »according to the law«, and »he called the four worst ones from the huddle, the ones that the people said were the most culpable. He asked them to confess their sins and had them burnt at the stake«. ¹⁰⁴ According to Kjell Kumlien, he acts according to the law when he sentences them to death for treason. ¹⁰⁵ The punishment for treason was undeniably death, according to Magnus Eriksson's Law of the Realm. It is perhaps possible to interpret this as an act of treason against the elected Captain of the Realm. But since the Captain himself was in an armed conflict with the elected king, the situation was quite complicated. As Peter Reinholdsson puts it, there were more than one political centre: the Union King, the Captain of the Realm, the Church leaders, and the various aristocratic factions all represented different political entities. ¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, what is not indicated in the lawbook is the method of execution for treason. Karl Knutsson chose to burn the four at the stake. This is a qualified capital punishment; burning at the stake was mostly used for highly-charged crimes such as bestiality and witchcraft. It is rarely attested to as having been used in practice. Lars-Olof Larsson writes that burning at the stake was a novelty in Swedish criminal law. ¹⁰⁷ It is hard to know what he means by this. Perhaps he means that it had not been used in practice. However, it existed as a punish-

103 »*Thy trode folkit alle stade / a the lygn som puken sade*« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3818–3819. The entire episode: *ibid.*, verses 3789–3805.

104 »*thy han ville laghin göma*« *ibid.*, verse 4079. »*iiij the värsta aff them alla / loth han vtaff hopen kalla / effter thy som folkit sagde / the som största scullena haffde / them badh han göra sin scriptamal / oc lot them brenna ther j baal*« *ibid.*, verses 4086–4091. The entire episode in *ibid.*, verses 4060–4103.

105 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 86.

106 Reinholdsson: Uppror eller resningar?, pp. 144–145.

107 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 238.

ment in the medieval law codes from the fourteenth century.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, it is clear that Larsson expresses surprise at the choice of execution method and it was undoubtedly a very harsh and even shocking response.

This was then a very noticeable demonstration of Karl's power and in no way a merciful act. Furthermore, according to the chronicler, the explicit purpose was to create a deterrent, »so all the peasantry, around the realm, in all places, would hear it, and beware of doing such damage again«.¹⁰⁹ Despite this, the author assures us that Karl showed them great mercy by only executing the leaders, and that no one would have reacted if he had killed them all. In the end, the peasants submissively thank him for his grace and honour »and promise that they will never do such foolish things again«.¹¹⁰ Karl celebrates Christmas in Arboga, »with much joy and chivalrous conversations«.¹¹¹ When he then rides into the province Närke, the chronicler states that »he had no one else put to death« instead they had to pay an extra tax.¹¹²

The uprisings continued after the decapitation of Erik Puke in Stockholm and the peasants killed Karl Knutsson's bailiff and squires in two separate provinces.¹¹³ At that point, Karl wants revenge and wants to go first to Hedemora in the province of Dalarna »and speak to them there, that each of them will lose their hand and foot« so he will get justice. He then says that he would continue to Mora and then to the province of Värmland and do the same to the rebellious peasants there.¹¹⁴ He ends his angry speech by stating that »if the peasantry is not chastised, they will never obey us in our life time«.¹¹⁵ At this point the High Justiciary Kristiern prevents him from this violent revenge and notes that he is not well liked.¹¹⁶ Kristiern Nilsson

108 Göran Inger: *Svensk rättshistoria*, Malmö 1997, p. 59. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to say if it had been used in practice before since we have few court records from the period before 1450.

109 »at alldher almoghen sculle thz höra / kringom rikit alla stadhe / och vakta sich fra tolkom vadha« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 4093–4095.

110 »Och sworo thz sculle aldrey ske / honom tolken darscap mere thee« *ibid.*, verses 4102–4103. Erik Neuman accurately states that the chronicler's description of Karl Knutsson as a mild martyr requires a considerable amnesia regarding his cruel treatment of the peasants. Neuman: *Karlskrönikans proveniens och sanningsvärde*, p. 112.

111 »medh myken glädhi och höffuelich snach« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 4148–4149.

112 »engin loth han mere aff liffua« *ibid.*, verses 4152–4153.

113 *ibid.*, verses 4540–4550.

114 »tha menar jach ther medh them rwna / at hwar thera mister hand oc foth« *ibid.*, verses 4627–4628; *ibid.*, verses 4625–4633.

115 *Ibid.*: »thy wtan almoghen faar naghan agha / the lydha oss aldrey j wara dagha *Karlskrönikan*«, verses 4608–4635, the quoted verses are 4634–4635.

116 *ibid.*, verses 4636–4661.

is the next to be vilified and ultimately humiliated by Karl Knutsson.¹¹⁷ The chronicler may have intended to suggest that the High Justiciary was lying, but against the backdrop of the resistance that Karl faced, this authorial strategy is not very successful. Indeed, Kjell Kumlien correctly states that the chronicle's description of the Puke-feud clearly points to Karl Knutsson's unpopularity.¹¹⁸ Thus, it seems evident that Karl Knutsson's reputation was hardly as a merciful ruler. The chronicler has left us with a portrait of a cruel and vengeful person, but it is unlikely that this was his intent; rather, he tried to downplay his harshness.

However, the chronicler had to perform a balancing act, because at the same time we can assume that the author did want to represent Karl Knutsson as a forceful person who could handle and control the peasantry. In line with Fulvio Ferrari's reasoning, the chronicle targeted the high aristocracy and not the general population. Kjell Kumlien writes that Erik Puke's uprising had an anarchistic tendency that distinguished it from Engelbrekt's rebellion.¹¹⁹ He relies on *Karlskrönikan* for this conclusion. However, if we consider that this section of the chronicle is thoroughly biased and untrustworthy, we should interpret this as part of the author's intent. *Karlskrönikan* explicitly lets Erik Puke divulge that he has no control over the peasants.¹²⁰ By underlining the anarchistic character of the uprising, the chronicler could appeal to the aristocracy's fears. Domestic strife was at this point in time seen as a potential threat to the realm's independence.¹²¹ To control the peasants by any means possible might, in fact, have been an effective way to appeal to the aristocrats for support.¹²² Unfortunately for Karl, this strategy would not be successful in the long run. As Kjell Kumlien points out, he would end up having the most volatile career of any Swedish king in history.¹²³

117 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 108, pp. 119–121.

118 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 83.

119 He believes that the chronicle therefore is trustworthy, but as I argue, this is unlikely. Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 93.

120 *Karlskrönikan*, verse 4275.

121 Tjällén: Church and Nation, p. 67.

122 In fact, in his actions he resembles the earlier rulers of the contemporary sagas who could transform from a *rex iustus*, whose punishments were predictable, to a furious avenger. The unpredictability and harshness might have been an effective royal practice in the Norwegian High Middle Ages, but it was not as suitable for the late Middle Ages. Karl Knutsson would have fit very well into the power play of the kings' sagas. Hans Jacob Orning: Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages, Leiden 2008, pp. 272–274.

123 Kjell Kumlien: Historieskrivning och kungadöme i svensk medeltid, Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie- och antikvitetsakademiens handlingar, Stockholm 1979, p. 163.

Conclusion

King Karl was elected king three times and deposed twice, which clearly demonstrates that he faced problems gaining stable support. The writing of *Karlskrönikan* was a way for him to legitimize his power and his path to the throne. However, despite this purpose and the fact that the chronicle has been described as propaganda, the author has left us with a portrayal of Karl as a morally ambiguous character. This has multiple explanations.

To start with, in the section of the text that is analysed in this chapter, the chronicler attempted to make Karl into a hero and Erik into a villain. If we accept Karl as the hero in our story, then he obviously had considerable flaws. Even if the author attempted to label him as a chivalrous hero, brave but mild and polite, his own actions told a different story. Dick Harrison is therefore not wrong when he calls Karl Knutsson »our anti-hero«.¹²⁴ While medieval historians most likely saw their mission differently than modern ones, it is unlikely that they could disregard or completely misrepresent the events they described. Instead, the chronicler had to work with what he had, which was a ruler who was brutal in his response to opposition, be it aristocrats or peasants. What the writer could do was use attributes and adjectives to give Karl a chivalrous framework, while downplaying events and explaining that his actions were reasonable. It was most likely unintentional that the tension between the attributes and Karl's actions would make the narrative even less credible. This interpretation then explains why so many modern historians, at the same time, see the description as paradoxical or incongruous, while referring to *Karlskrönikan* as a piece of propaganda.

Furthermore, this chapter highlights that there was a range of heroic attributes that could be used and, just like today, different traits were at times in conflict with each other. But it was possible to employ this variety of ideals to one's advantage. Naivety could be turned into trust, a lack of strategy and preparation could be spun into a belief in people's ability to better themselves. Cruelty could be rewritten as forcefulness and strength. In this way, burning peasants at the stake could be rephrased as something necessary. What makes the narrative so unbelievable is the author's effort to balance Karl's negative traits by reimagining and enhancing the positive ones. In this sense it is likely that the author had multiple goals. He wanted to paint a picture of Karl as forceful and in control, while also highlighting that he acted out of necessity when he executed Erik Puke and that he therefore was completely innocent

124 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 93.

regarding any accusations of wrongdoings. In fact, we are meant to believe that Karl was the real victim.

Finally, the peasantry appeared as a political force during this period that could be summoned for uprisings against an unwanted king or Captain of the Realm, and the aristocracy was clearly threatened by them. Peter Reinholdsson states that the late medieval uprisings were not peasant revolts. He argues that they were seen as legitimate ways to protest and protect rights and tradition. In this regard he contrasts them to the revolts during the early modern era.¹²⁵ This may be true in general, but in the first half of *Karlskrönikan* we can already observe the view that the peasantry was a substantial threat to the established elites.¹²⁶ Karl's anti-heroic actions can be explained by the chronicler attempting to present him as a ruler who would keep the commoners under control and the realm intact. Karl Knutsson might not have been the king they wanted, but the author, and likely Karl himself, tried to persuade them that he was the leader they needed.

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125 Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 109, p. 119.

126 Also Margaretha Nordquist notices that the later *Sturekrönikan* (the »Sture chronicle«) vacillate between regarding the peasantry as Swedish men, part of what she calls the regnal community, and the threatening vision of peasants acting without a noble proxy. Nordquist: *A Struggle for the Realm*, p. 276.

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