

## 10. Northern Identities and National History – Paul-Henri Mallet, Peter Frederik Suhm and Tyge Rothe

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A patriotic history of Denmark, Norway and Holstein emerged in Denmark in the 1770's. With the fall of the government of Johan Friedrich Struensee in 1772 a number of national and patriotic laws were passed in favour of the use of the Danish language in the government and in the army. It was decided to strengthen education in Danish language and history, and new textbooks appeared in 1776. In the same year the Law of Indigenous Rights secured the citizens of Denmark, Norway and Holstein exclusive rights to public offices.<sup>454</sup> Peter Frederik Suhm and Ove Malling wrote the new textbooks. Malling glorified the heroic citizens of Denmark, Norway and Holstein,<sup>455</sup> while Suhm wrote the general historical account, and he had the qualifications to do so. Together with Gerhard Schønning he had studied northern history in Trondhjem. In 1765 they went to Denmark, and in practise they divided the history of Norway and Denmark between them.<sup>456</sup>

Suhm took part in the public sphere during and after the reign of Struensee. He praised Struensee's law on the freedom of the press in 1771 and then shortly afterwards applauded Struensee's fall in an open letter *To the King*.<sup>457</sup> Suhm was not in favour of absolutism and had suggested that a limited form of monarchy be established after the demise of Struensee, but first of all Suhm praised the Danish language and urged the King and government to speak Danish. He published some preliminary studies to his history of Denmark,<sup>458</sup> and when he was asked to write the textbook, he was ready to synthesize his vision of the history of Denmark, Norway and Holstein.

Ove Malling's descriptions of heroic acts and civic virtues pleased the official supervisor more than the political patriotism of Suhm's history. But the slightly censored textbook of Suhm was published and for decades it remained standard reading in the grammar school.

## Peter Frederik Suhm: National history, patriotism and improvement

The basis of Suhm's 1776-textbook on the history of Denmark, Norway and Holstein was a theory of the peasantry's original freedom that had been quelled by the aristocracy and later neglected by the absolutist monarchy. Suhm had developed the discourse of the original freedom of the peasants for the first time in 1771, quoting the historian Hans Gram as his source.<sup>459</sup> In a study of the origins of the nobility, Gram had written that the word "bonde" or "peasant" originally had been a general name for every citizen who owned land.<sup>460</sup> Suhm used this notion of the peasant as a point of departure for a narrative about the state of liberty, the loss of liberty, liberty lost and how to regain it. The message was quite specific: Originally, the peasant had not been unappreciated and oppressed; the King had neither been constrained by the aristocracy nor autocratic, but had been elected as chieftain by popular assemblies which, according to Suhm, "could decide nothing without the consent of the commonalty." The innumerable peasants – the backbone of the nation – cultivated their plots, and the system was in a state of balance. Not until the advent of the abhorred feudal system had this happy balance been destroyed. "Instead of many thousand independent farmers one now had a few bishops, abbots and priors, and a few hundred lords, who had turned all the tillers of the fields into serfs", wrote Suhm in *The History of Denmark, Norway and Holstein* in 1776.<sup>461</sup> The balance of the nation had been disturbed, and it was now time to restore it. The theory thus involved a political perspective, namely the reinstatement of the peasantry in its rights and the restoration of its independence vis-à-vis the monarchy.

On the face of it, the major features of Suhm's history were not concerned with the form of government, but with specific issues in agricultural economy. The theory of original peasant freedom gained widespread support as an argument for an agricultural system consisting of relatively small, independent farming units. In fact, historical arguments about the lost liberty of the peasantry were widely used in the public debate concerning the agrarian reforms in the last decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>462</sup>

## Paul-Henri Mallet: Northern monarchism and republicanism

Suhm's history of the liberties of Danish citizens before Christianity and the Middle Ages had an interesting parallel in the *Introduction to the History of Denmark*, written by Paul-Henri Mallet twenty years before. But the context of Mallet's theory of the original political freedom of the citizens of the North was quite different from the Danish and Norwegian patriotism of Suhm and Schøningh.

Mallet was a citizen of Geneva, and he wrote the history of Denmark in French at the request of the Court marshal, or Lord Chamberlain, Andreas Gottlob Moltke. Mallet had been called to Copenhagen in 1752 as a professor, and he edited the journal *Mercure Danois* under the protection of the Foreign Minister Count J.H.E. Bernstorff. Late in 1753 Mallet began to write the history of Denmark under the protection of Moltke, and eighteen months later he could publish the first volume, the *Introduction to the History of Denmark*.<sup>463</sup> Mallet was exhausted because Moltke demanded that the book be finished in time for the cel-



Paul-Henri Mallet (1730-1807). Engraving by Aubert from a painting by Henriette Rath.

celebration of the birthday of king Fredrik 5 in 1755.<sup>464</sup> But apart from the deadline, he felt free to study, as he wrote to his friend Jacob Vernes: “J’étudie librement et avec un but fixe devant les yeux, qui m’anime, me sert de boussole, et, en prevenant les écarts, prevenient là meme les dégouts. Mon histoire s’avance.”<sup>465</sup> And without any doubt he was fascinated by what he learned. As mentioned in the preface, the *Introduction* contained mostly a compilation from the works of Thomas Bartholin, Ole Worm, Stephan Stephanius, Arngrimur Jonsson, Tormod Torfæus, and Simon Pelloutier’s history of the Celts, supplemented with the first volume of Olof Dalin’s history of Sweden from 1747. But it was done with great skill and the result was impressive.

The *Introduction* should demonstrate to the European public that Scandinavia and Denmark played an important part in European history: “In fact, History has not recorded the annals of a people who have occasioned greater, more sudden, or more numerous revolutions in Europe than the Scandinavians, or whose antiquities, at the same time, are so little known.”<sup>466</sup> However, Mallet would not write a traditional history of political events:

to see people, princes, conquerors, and legislators succeed one another rapidly upon a stage, without knowing any thing of their real character, manner of thinking, or of the spirit which animated them; this is to have only a skeleton of history; this is merely to behold a parcel of dark and obscure shadows, instead of living and and conversing with real men. For this reason, I have all along resolved not to meddle with the body of the Danish history, till I have presented my readers with a sketch of the manners and genius of the first inhabitants of Denmark.<sup>467</sup>

Mallet attempted to recreate the fundamental religious and political manners of the North. On the title-page of the book, the kingdom of Denmark defined the geographical limits, but focus changed in the text from Denmark to Scandinavia and to the North in general, and sometimes it is difficult to separate the Nordic, German, Gothic and Celtic traditions as well. Mallet used the word Celtic as the most universal term describing the North: “As I here all along consider it in a general light, I use the word CELTIC as the most universal term, without entering into disputes to which this word has given rise, and which proceed, in my opinion, from men’s not understanding one another.”<sup>468</sup>

His main point of view was clear: The principal historical conflict arose between the North and the South, between liberty and slavery.

The northern nation arrived on the stage of history from the forests of Scythia, carrying with them “a religion simple and martial as themselves, a form of government dictated by good sense and liberty,”<sup>469</sup> Rome, in the mean time, arose, and at length carried all before her. Rome “destroyed, among the nations whom she overpowered, the original spirit with which they were animated. But this spirit continued unaltered in the colder countries of Europe, and maintained itself there like the independency of the inhabitants.” The northern countries then attacked and conquered the ill defended Roman Empire. “We then see the conquerors introducing, among the nations they vanquished, viz, into the very bosom of slavery and sloth, that spirit of independence and equality,”<sup>470</sup> The revolutions from the North, as Mallet called them, consisted of the invasions of the northern nations into the Roman empire and their impact on the South: “Is it not well known that the most flourishing and celebrated states of Europe owe originally to the northern nations, whatever liberty they now enjoy, either in their constitution, or in the spirit of their government? For although the Gothic form of government has been almost every where altered or abolished, have we not retained, in most things, the opinions, the customs, the manners which that government had a tendency to produce? Is not this, in fact, the principal source of that courage, of that aversion to slavery, of that empire of honor which characterize in general the European nations; and of that moderation, of that easiness of access, and peculiar attention to the rights of humanity, which so happily distinguish our sovereigns from the inaccessible and superb tyrants of Asia?”<sup>471</sup>

Mallet’s Introduction to the history of Denmark became a cosmopolitan history of the sources of European liberties. He traced the origins of the Scandinavian nations in the first book with help from Saxo, Thormod Torfæus and Snorro. In the second book – “A general idea of the ancient religion of the northern nations” – he summarised the mythology of the North. Odin appeared as a key figure in political as well as religious matters, and he described the other gods while giving a comparative analysis of the mythological notions of the creation and the end of the world: “Let the strokes we have here produced be compared with the beginning of Hesiod’s Theogony, with the mythology of some Asiatic nations, and with the book of Genesis, and we shall in-

stantly be convinced, that the conformity which is found between many circumstances of their recitals, cannot be mere work of chance.”<sup>472</sup>

Likewise he judged the context of the mythology and the glorification of violence and war in a comparative perspective: “There was a time when the whole face of Europe presented the same spectacle as the forests of America; viz. a thousand little wandering nations, without cities or towns, or agriculture, or arts; having nothing to subsist on but a few herds, wild fruits and pillage, harassing themselves incessantly by inroads and attacks, sometimes conquering, sometimes conquered, often totally overthrown and destroyed. The same causes every where produce the same effects:”<sup>473</sup>

The form of government dictated by good sense and liberty, that Mallet had introduced in the preface, was subject to further investigation in the third book: “Of the form of government which formerly prevailed in the north.” In the first place Mallet consulted Tacitus’ history of ancient Germany. Among the Germans he found that, “The chiefs, or princes, determine some affairs of less importance; all the rest are reserved for the general assembly:”<sup>474</sup> But Tacitus’ account of the German assemblies could not be the only major source for the election of the kings in the northern nations. As evidence of the existence of an original elective kingship he used the descriptions of the stone monuments in Denmark and Sweden where the general assemblies took place according to Saxo, Ole Worm and Olof Dalin.

The Danes were not long before they recovered their right of electing their kings, and consequently all the other rights less essential to liberty. It is true, the people seem always to have made it a law to chuse the nearest relation of the deceased king, or at least some one of the royal family, which they respected as issued from the gods. They still shew the places where these elections were made: And as Denmark was for a long time divided into three kingdoms, we find accordingly three principal monuments of this custom; the one near Lunden in Scania, the other at Leyra, or Lethra, in Zealand, and the third near Viburg in Jutland.<sup>475</sup>

In spite of all his efforts Mallet had to conclude that certain knowledge of the laws of Scandinavia could only be obtained after the adoption of Christianity. But then he made a last attempt to solve the issue: He

used the comparative method: "We have a remarkable fact, relative to this matter, which it will be of much greater consequence to know, as well on account of its own striking singularity."<sup>476</sup> Iceland provided the remarkable fact that shed light on the issue of gothic government. Mallet considered Iceland as a historical laboratory that made a political experiment in the ninth century, namely a republic.

According to Mallet, a colony of Norwegians driven from their own country by the tyranny of one of their kings, established itself in Iceland towards the end of the ninth century. Apparently the new Icelanders proceeded to elect magistrates, to enact laws, and to give their government a regular form:

Uninterrupted and unrestrained by any outward force, we have here a nation delivered up to its own direction, and establishing itself in a country separated by vast seas from all the rest of the world: We see therefore, in all their institutions, nothing but the pure dictates of their own inclinations and sentiments, and these were so natural and so suited to their situation and character, that we do not find any general deliberation, any irresolution, any trial of different modes of government ever preceded that form of civil polity which they first adopted, and under which they lived afterwards so many years. The whole settled into form as it were of itself, and fell into order without any effort. In like manner, as bees form their hives, the new Icelanders, guided by a happy instinct, immediately on their landing in a desert island, established that fine constitution wherein liberty is fixed on its proper basis, viz. a wise distribution of the different powers of government.<sup>477</sup>

In the Icelandic laboratory Mallet had a glimpse of the original northern form of government: a republican form. Through the histories of Snorro Sturleson and Arngrimur Jonsson he saw a republic ruled by "the States General of the whole island (*Alting*), which answered to the *Als-heriar-ting* of the other Scandinavian nations, to the *Wittena-Gemot* or Parliament of the Anglo-Saxons." Mallet compared the Icelandic *Alting* according to Snorro with the assemblies among the Germans according to Tacitus. The *Alting* assembled every year, and each citizen of Iceland thought it his honour and his duty to be present at it. "The president of this great assembly was Sovereign Judge of the island. He possessed

this office for life, but it was conferred upon him by the States. His principal business was to convoke the General Assembly, and to see to the observance of the laws; hence the name of *Lagman*, or Man of the Laws, was given to this magistrate.<sup>478</sup> The *Lagman* filled in Iceland the position the king would take among the Scandinavians, and he ruled by the consent of the general assembly. "Such was the constitution of a republic, which is at present quite forgotten in the North, and utterly unknown through the rest of Europe even to men of much reading, notwithstanding the great number of poets and historians, which that republic produced."<sup>479</sup>

The conclusion of Mallet was clear:

It is easy to discover here the genius of all the 'Gothic' [ Mallet writes 'Celtic' ] tribes, and their notions of government. That distribution of the people into different communities subordinate to one another, that right of being judged every one by the members of his own community, that care of watching over each citizen committed to the community of which he was a member, those general assemblies of the whole nation, with whom alone the legislative power was deposited, &c.<sup>480</sup>

In the original version from 1755 Mallet went further, seeing the constitution of Iceland as the mould that through centuries had formed the representative governments of Europe.

It was a republican view of the liberty of the original monarchy in Denmark Mallet presented to the absolute monarch on his birthday, but Mallet's protectors were pleased with the work. A.P. Bernstorff wrote to J.H.E. Bernstorff in a letter from Geneva, dated 18 September 1755: "Je viens de lire l'introduction de Mr. Mallet à l'Histoire de Dannemarck. Cela m'a paru bien écrit en montrer un esprit net et judicieux dans l'auteur." And again he wrote from Paris, 5 May 1757, that J.H.E. Bernstorff should send more copies of Mallet's new book.<sup>481</sup>

Mallet did not invent the free peasantry of the North, and the discourse of original Scandinavian liberty was not peculiar to Denmark. As mentioned, Hans Gram had defined "peasant" (*bonde*) as the original land-owning citizen.<sup>482</sup> First of all, Mallet acknowledged a considerable debt to Olof Dalin's *History of Sweden* (1747-62): "[Dalin] has given a new





The title page of Olof Dalin *Svea Rikes Historia* (Stockholm 1747).

History of Sweden, which discovers extensive reading and genius. In three or four chapters, where the Author treats of the religion, the laws and manners of the ancient Swedes, we find these subjects discussed with unusual perspicuity and elegance.”<sup>483</sup>

In his first volume from 1747 Dalin covered the heathen age, and from the beginning freedom was found in the rule of the household.<sup>484</sup> Every pater familias who was a peasant (*Odalsman*), having possession of some land, ruled according to natural law.<sup>485</sup> In this theory, the household became the backbone of the monarchy in Sweden, and in Dalin’s chapter seven about *The old Laws of Sweden*, we learn how any new law had to be accepted by the general assembly.<sup>486</sup> Mallet shared also Dalin’s description of the election of the kings. Although the kings of Sweden held sovereign power, it was not unlimited and they were subject to the laws. First and foremost, the king had to be chosen by the assembly and to commit himself to rule by law: “Thus in the days of old, before a Swedish king could be said to be in possession of the full government he had to commit himself three times before the people to keep the law sacred and to protect the safety of the people.”<sup>487</sup>

Furthermore Dalin referred to a Celto-Scythian mythology and to Celto-Scythian words and language: "It was a principle in the old Celto-Scythian Mythology, that housefathers were kings in their own houses and held absolute power over wives, children and servants."<sup>488</sup> The Swedes were descendants of Gothic tribes with Scythian origins, and Dalin did not distinguish between Celto-Scythian and Gothic traditions: "But the people reserved for itself the right to a free election, though it stuck to the old royal lineage. This manner of succession had followed the Swedes and Goths from the old Scythian settlements."<sup>489</sup>

Olof Dalin published his book only a year before Montesquieu made the notion of the liberty of the North famous in *LEsprit des Loix*. This work changed the state of historiography in Europe and Mallet was able to benefit from that. He combined his sources with Montesquieu's general account "Of Laws in Relation to the Nature of the Climate". He applied the third book of *The Spirit of the Laws* to the history of Denmark and Scandinavia and particularly adapted the theme from book 17, chapter five, introducing the words of Montesquieu:

The great prerogative of Scandinavia (says the admirable author of the Spirit of Laws), and what ought to recommend its inhabitants beyond every people upon earth, is, that they afforded the great resource to the liberty of Europe, that is, to almost all the liberty that is among men. The Goth *Jornandes* (adds he) calls the north of Europe *the Forge of Mankind*. I should rather call it the forge of those instruments which broke the fetters manufactured in the south. It was there those valiant nations were bred, who left their native climes to destroy tyrants and slaves, and to teach men that nature having made them equal, no reason could be assigned for their becoming dependent, but their mutual happiness.<sup>490</sup>

The novelty of Mallet's history was not the historical detail but his historical synthesis combined with his French translation of the Mythology, the *Edda*. This combination and the fact that Mallet's work in 1763 was distributed in a new edition from Geneva made his *Histoire de Dannemarc* widely read in Europe outside Scandinavia.

Edward Gibbon read Mallet during his stay in Florence in 1764<sup>491</sup> as part of his preliminary studies to the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Em-*



Montesquieu *L'Esprit des loix* was translated to Danish by Jens Hvas and published in Copenhagen in three volumes 1770-71. Title page to the second volume: [Montesquieu] *Om Lovenes Natur og Aarsag*.

*pire*. Gibbon kept a diary on his reading, and in July 1764 he wrote about Mallet: "His great principle, that the religion of Odin formed that character of the northern nations, whose effects are still perceptible among ourselves, is judicious, in many respects well founded, and perfectly well illustrated." The Edda supplied Mallet with materials on the subject of religion, customs and morals, but concerning the question about the original northern form of government Gibbon observed that he did not have equally authentic evidence, "and is obliged to have recourse to Tacitus and analogy. These guides are not always to be trusted."<sup>492</sup>

Gibbon was especially interested in the northern invasions of the Roman Empire and the question of the conversion of Scandinavia and the downfall of the Odin-religion: "An important question occurs, why the inhabitants of the North should have so obstinately rejected Christianity, while their countrymen established in the empire embraced it

with the utmost readiness.” Gibbon’s reflections on Mallet led him to consider the relationship of barbarism and religion in the South: “All religions depend in some degree on local circumstances.” A barbarian, who saw all the temples, altars and tombs of the South would first wonder and then believe. “His understanding would be improved, and his heart softened, in perpetual incourse [sic] with the vanquished, and every cause would concur to make him quit a mode of worship founded on ignorance and barbarism, and to substitute in its stead a religion connected with science which he began to relish, and inculcating the virtues of humanity which he began to value.”<sup>493</sup> It was the international, European perspective of the *History of Denmark* that caught the attention of Gibbon, but Mallet’s work had the strongest impact on the national histories of the North.

### Thomas Percy and Anglo Saxon northern identity

Thomas Percy secured Mallet’s Introduction and Mythology a long afterlife with his translation, *Northern Antiquities: or, a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the ancient Danes, and other Northern Nations; including those of our own Saxon Ancestors*, London 1770.<sup>494</sup> The last part of the English title discloses the context and the agenda of Percy’s work: The foundation of an Anglo-Saxon or English northern identity. In fact Percy’s translation turned Mallet upside down, because almost every time Mallet used the words “Celt” or “Celtic” Percy substituted them with “Goth” or “Gothic”. That was not a trifling matter. In his long “Translator’s Preface” Percy explained that the Gothic and Celtic nations were from the beginning two distinct people: “They differed no less in their Institutions and Laws. The Celtic nations do not appear to have had that equal plan of liberty, which was the peculiar honour of all the Gothic tribes, and which they carried with them, and planted wherever they formed settlements: On the contrary, in Gaul, all the freedom and power chiefly centered among the Druids and the chief men.”<sup>495</sup>

The literate culture of the Goths differed from the Celtic culture, that inhibited the development of literacy because of the secrecy and mystery with which they concealed their doctrines from the laity, “forbidding that they should ever be committed to writing, and upon that account, not having so much as an alphabet of their own. In this, the institutions of Odin and the Gothic Scalds was the very reverse. No barbarous

people were so addicted to writing, as appears from the innumerable quantity of Runic inscriptions scattered all over the north.”<sup>496</sup> As Margaret Clunies Ross has shown, Percy was persuaded to “correct” Mallet by his Welsh correspondent Evan Evans, an expert in Celtic culture. And Percy was easy to convince. He translated Mallet from 1763 onwards and used him in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* from 1765.<sup>497</sup> Percy’s Saxon ancestors shared the Gothic culture, and the English nation could claim to share the Northern Antiquities. So in Britain as in Sweden and Denmark-Norway, identical ideas of an original liberty of the North could nourish local northern identities in national histories. As a cosmopolitan Swiss, Mallet could occupy the position as mediator of the local traditions and the European perspective.

### Tyge Rothe: European civilization, property and liberty

Mallet’s notion of an original limited monarchy in Denmark re-emerged in the historiography of Denmark in the 1770s as if it was a quite new theory. The revival owed more to the reception in Copenhagen of the northern renaissance of Thomas Percy and James Macpherson than to Mallet’s *History of Denmark*.<sup>498</sup> Mallet’s translation of the Edda was more important than his own contribution. Inspired by Ossian Bertel Christian Sandvig studied the ancient Danish ballads, Percy and Herder in the library of P.F. Suhm.<sup>499</sup> In the same manner, Suhm did not confine himself to the writing of history but wrote tragic stories about old heroes of the North.<sup>500</sup>

Suhm was not the only historian who recreated the discourse of the lost liberty of the North in late eighteenth century Denmark. Tyge Rothe, his contemporary, shared his notion of original civil liberty in Denmark, but the context of Rothe’s history was European. He wrote the history of European Christian civilization, but the discourse of universal history inevitably led him back to the North.

Rothe (1731-1795) was an estate-owner from the middle classes with an educational background ranging from the Academy at Sorø to Göttingen and other modern European universities. In 1759 he had written a patriotic essay on *Love of Country* or public spirit in the systematic style of Montesquieu.<sup>501</sup> Beginning in the 1770s he wrote about the history of civilisation. Between these two periods Rothe had a political career during the regime of Struensee. The coup of 1772 put an end

to Rothe's role in the central administration, and his declaration of loyalty to the King after the fall of Struensee does not seem to have been sufficiently convincing for the new men in power. Rothe retired to his estate and wrote a large and ambitious work on *The Effect of Christianity on the State of the People of Europe*, in which he linked Christian ideals of the rights of man with the history of civil society.<sup>502</sup>

During the 1770s Rothe published the first four parts of the work – including the *Fall of Rome*, 1775 – and thus reached the diffusion and impact of Christianity in the regions of Europe that had not been Roman provinces. The study of Tacitus's *Germania* and Snorri's account of Scandinavia fascinated him so much that the results upset his whole publication plan; for Rothe found that the effects of Christianity were profoundly integrated with another, dominant historical process – the rise of *feudalism*, or the origins of what Montesquieu aptly had called “the feudal laws.” The fifth part of the work on the effect of Christianity was not published until 1783 under the title *Europas Lehnsvaesen (The Feudal System in Europe)*, and this constituted Rothe's attempt, from a Scandinavian perspective, to revolutionize the understanding of the history of the feudal system and the feudal aristocracy – for which scholars otherwise relied on Books XXX and XXXI of *L'Esprit des Lois*.

The point of departure was the fall of the Roman Empire and the conquest of the Germanic area by the Franks, where the feudal dispensation of the Romanized peoples dissolved the communal Germanic ownership of the land which Rothe found described in Tacitus, according to whom the plot of land of the Germanic tribesman was “not his private property, freehold or *allodium*, but belonged to the community.”<sup>503</sup>

In his treatment of the customs and habits that matched the communal ownership of land, Rothe made particular use of Scottish conjectural history. He found his opinion about Tacitus confirmed in the introductory volume of William Robertson's *History of Charles V.*<sup>504</sup> He further investigated the issue in the chapter “Consequences of communal ownership of Land” building on Gilbert Stuart.<sup>505</sup> In the final chapter on the subject “Other Nations with communal ownership of Land” he made use of Robertson's, Russell's, and Adair's books from the end of the 1770s about the North American Indians, and Adam Ferguson's history of civil society, for comparative examples of the practical pos-

sibility of communal ownership of land, and as arguments for the static nature of communal ownership.<sup>506</sup>

From the Germanic tribes and the Indians Rothe turned to the case of Scandinavia. Here the feudal system had not been the result of conquest causing a transition from barbarism to the tyranny of a feudal aristocracy. The background to the development of the feudal system in Scandinavia was the absence of a static communal ownership of land, and the existence instead of private landed property, the allodium, and the existence of independent farmers. Here was a state of affairs of which Montesquieu, Robertson, and Stuart knew nothing, and of which they *could* know nothing, because they had not read the Scandinavian source material from the Middle Ages: "Like many other illustrious writers both from Britain and from other enlightened European countries, Stuart failed of knowing Snorro and, through him, the old peasants and Odalmen from the North."<sup>507</sup>

Rothe wrote about the North, or Scandinavia, as a whole. He referred to Olof Dalin and Sven Lagerbring and he quoted Hans Gram and Gerhard Schöning.<sup>508</sup> Like Mallet, he saw Iceland as a model of republican liberty, and he described Snorro as "a man with a free soul, living in a free republic, thus nothing forced him to pretend or lie."<sup>509</sup> The allotment of property among the peasants was the original prerequisite for liberty: "That was the condition in the North, and foremost in Norway and Sweden."<sup>510</sup>

It was thus clear to Rothe that the Germani with their tribal community had been barbarians, or the "Indians of Europe," while in glorious Scandinavia *private property, the state, and civil society* could be traced back beyond the mists of antiquity; and "whosoever would philosophise over the progress of civil society in Europe must know the North; if he does not, then he understands amiss the fairest and best of the history of our European humanity."<sup>511</sup>

The great discovery of allodialism that he used in the book on European feudalism was an idea he had developed in the treatise *Nordens Statsforfatning* (*The Scandinavian Constitution*), one of the most remarkable eighteenth-century works on the history of Denmark and Scandinavia.<sup>512</sup> The aim was crystal-clear from the very first page, where Montesquieu was quoted concerning his discovery of *les lois feodales*, which



Tyge Rothe (1731-1795). Painting by Jens Juel.



he considered to be “une magnifique matière,” and Justus Möser was pressed into service with a statement from the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* that history should be of direct political benefit to the literate peasantry.

The central treatises of the work discuss how “our oldest forefathers had no inherited nobility” and “the Government of our forefathers was monarchy mixed with democracy.” The main problem faced in the work was the difficulty of “comprehending the transition from one constitution to another of quite opposite nature,”<sup>513</sup> that is, the reasons for the autonomous development of the feudal system that led to the decline of civil liberty. According to Rothe, the reasons were to be sought in social history, i.e. in the ownership of property and the “modification of customs.” In the latter category of causal factors he included Christianity, which modified original slavery to serfdom. This was in itself part of a civilising process, but did not function as such, because another factor had a more radical effect – the centralisation of land ownership.

The king had more land than any other man, and he controlled the common and the waste land, so he could reward his warriors with land, and this gave rise to a class of great landowners. Tenants worked on the land of the Crown and the great landowners got tenants too. In this way the nobility was born at the time when the new Christian clergy began to demand land and power. The developments did not deprive the landowning peasants of their liberty but many peasants did not appear at the general assembly any more. They worked the land to pay tax to the king, and they placed themselves under the protection of the nobility. The great landowners assumed control of the election of the king, and in fact an aristocracy had emerged. The nobility patronized the peasants although the rights and liberties of the latter formally were unchanged.<sup>514</sup> “Fundamentally, the principle was maintained that whosoever might be considered a landowner shared in governing with the King.”<sup>515</sup> But the great landowners tied political power to the land, not to the individual landowner. Matters became still worse when the aristocracy broke down the power of the monarchy and crippled private property and thereby progress.

The immediate political consequence of Rothe’s history of origins was the demand for the abolition of all existing relics of political feudal-

ism, the liberalization of property rights and the instatement of the individual in his civic rights. But what about the centralized ownership of the land?

In 1784 Rothe published a large work with a long title on the civic rights of the Danish farmers, usually referred to by the subtitle, *Vort Landvæsens System som det var i 1783 politisk betragtet*, or *Our Agricultural System as it was in 1783, politically considered*.<sup>516</sup> The agenda for action that Rothe threw into the debate on practical economic reforms was not a return to an agricultural system where small peasant freeholders each tilled their own plot with a paltry crew of farmhands. If the farmer himself was to spin and weave, as Rothe expressed it, then “away with all thoughts of peasant integrity! But if these thoughts are banished, so too is the hope of having English *Farmers*, and an old Norse aristocracy of farming men and women.”<sup>517</sup> Rothe did not share the ideal – or slogan – *Liberty and Property*; liberty was not predicated on the parcelling-out of land – quite the contrary. From the point of view of the history of private property, parcelling out the land would be a step back for civilization, as it would weaken trade between the countryside and the towns, something that had not existed in the ancient era of civic integrity. If, on the other hand, free tenants cultivated units of land of about 100 *tønder* (i.e. about 136 acres), then all the tillers of the soil could share in the commercial goods and benefits, while the landlords (including Rothe) could “sit at their ease with a *Birmingham* nearby, surrounded by free Tenants.”

Rothe’s broad historical and politico-economic vision of reform was a political union of modern landowners with the “men of the middle estates” of the towns – a commercial association of landed property and capital: “The agricultural system must be combined with industry and commerce if there is to be progress, and national wealth is to be created. What benefit or advantage if the produce of the land increase, unless those consuming it also increase? Without the use of capital, agriculture will not be improved.”<sup>518</sup>

Beyond any doubt, Rothe got inspiration from Adam Smith.<sup>519</sup> In the argument just outlined, he follows Book III of the *Wealth of Nations* almost word for word, and in 1786 he also tried to win over the “men of the middle estates” in Copenhagen to his liberal views. In the newly-founded *Selskabet for Borgerdyd* (‘Society for Civic Virtue’) he made a

determined attempt to create a civic platform for the spread of “civic integrity” with the manifesto: “We will be the drudges of no monopoly or monopolist ... On the contrary, we will act well and usefully if we can see to it that goods produced by workers in free mutual competition are in demand instead of those imposed on the people by the despotism of monopolies.”<sup>520</sup> But here Rothe suffered defeat, as the Copenhagen bourgeois class, which was massively represented in the Society for Civic Virtue, associated such virtue exclusively with puritan thrift. Similarly, there was no positive response to Rothe’s theory of an agrarian capitalist agricultural system.

Rothe’s work on the history of civil society took him straight to the heart of the contemporary economic debate: the discussion of the ideal agrarian system. This involved, for example, discussion of freehold versus tenancy; largescale agriculture versus small farms; limited term leases versus lifetime tenancy. Similar subjects were central for both the Physiocrats and early Liberals. In Denmark these discussions were played out against the background of a blanket glorification of the excellence of a free peasantry, and the arguments for this were of a historical nature.

Rothe’s agrarian capitalist vision of 1784 remains one of the earliest liberal social theories in Denmark. But in legislation and in actual historical developments it was the political and economic perspective in P.F. Suhm’s version of history – the family-based freehold farm – that triumphed in the 1780s and 1790s.

### Rasmus Nyerup: History, culture and national identity

The librarian and professor Rasmus Nyerup took care of Suhm’s posthumous work. As editor he published the last volumes (9-14) of Suhm’s *History of Denmark* in the years 1808-1828. In his own *Historical and Statistical Account of Denmark and Norway* (1803-1806) he used the work of Suhm as well as Rothe. He compiled their work and the histories were merged in a purely national perspective. The first volume carried the title “The Progress of Culture and the Condition of the Peasant and the Burgess.”<sup>521</sup> Nyerup focused on the concept of culture as a national phenomenon: The culture of the people. In a chapter entitled “View of the progress of the culture of the people” we find a part on “The honourable condition of the yeoman or the free peasant.”<sup>522</sup> He based his

description on quotations from Suhm and Rothe. In the last volume of *Historical and Statistical Account of Denmark and Norway*, Nyerup suggested the foundation of a National Museum.<sup>523</sup> From hall to hall the beholder should be able to feel a living interest in the gradual progress of the culture, ideas, manners and customs of the nation.

In the hands of Rasmus Nyerup the legacy of the cosmopolitan republicanism of Mallet, the cosmopolitan northern patriotism of Rothe and the national patriotism of Suhm became national history, and the northern identity served an emerging national identity.