

‘FATHER OF THE PEOPLE’: THE ANCIENT ROMAN
METAPHOR FOR THE RULER
IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC CONTEXTS¹

by

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to analyse the reception of the metaphor of ‘the ruler as father of the people’ and ‘the people as family’, a conceptual metaphor specific to the culture of ancient Rome, in both the vernacular and Latin literature within the medieval Nordic region, particularly as found in translations of classical literature into Old Icelandic. Its dissemination within the local Latin and vernacular literature can be used as a marker for Latinisation in Nordic Europe to help determine when, and to what extent, the local intellectual elites started thinking in Latin categories. For this purpose, I examine the resemantisation, namely the creation of new meaning in a changed context, of this metaphor in the Nordic region after Christianisation in order to determine the understanding of the concept of power relations between a ruler (state), the subjects (citizens), and the territory.

Iceland was settled between ca. AD 870 and AD 930 primarily by Norwegians. At the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Norsemen accepted Christianity and Church structures were gradually established in Nordic Europe, followed by educational institutions, libraries, and scriptoria, as well as cathedral and monastic schools providing a Latin-based education, the *trivium* of Latin grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the first bishoprics in Norway were erected at Niðaróss, Selje/Bergen, Oslo (1068), Stavanger, and Hamar (1152). In Iceland, the first episcopal sees were established at Skálholt (1056) and Hólar (1106). They were initially under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, later that of Lund in the Kingdom of Denmark (1103/4) and finally Niðaróss (1153), after it had been elevated to the status of an archbishopric. In the twelfth century, the first Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries were founded: in Norway, on the islands of Selja and Nidarholm, and at

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