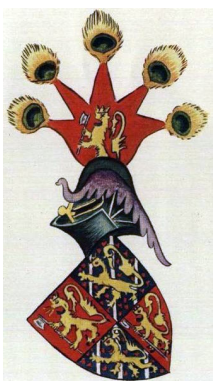




Many people know that when Norway celebrates their Constitution Day on the seventeenth of May (Syttende mai) they are also celebrating the dissolution of a union with Denmark. This union lasted for over 400 years, which was much longer than that of Norway's union with Sweden. The Norwegian/Danish union is a complicated story.

In 1319, King Haakon V Magnusson of Norway died without a son. However, his daughter Ingeborg, who was married to the Swedish Crown Prince Erik, had a 3-year-old son named Magnus. The lineage of his parents meant that Magnus was heir to both the Norwegian and Swedish thrones. This was the first of many personal unions between Norway, Sweden and Denmark.



Arms of king Håkon VI of Norway and Sweden

Norway's state of affairs changed dramatically from the 'Golden Age' of the 13th century to the spread of the horrifying Black Death in the 14th century. By 1350 Norway's population had been reduced by almost two-thirds. The country needed to rebuild. Meanwhile in Denmark, internal power struggles and pressure from neighboring countries tore the nation apart. In 1330 the country was being divided between Sweden and North-German noblemen. Duke Albrecht of Mecklenburg of Germany used Denmark's weakness to further his own ambitions by marrying into the Swedish royal family and marrying his son into the Danish royal family. Danish King Valdemar Atterdag ruled from 1340 to 1375. During that time he fought to restore Danish power over Sweden, Norway and Germany.

Norway and Sweden were now ruled by the grown up King Magnus II Eriksson and his two sons. Because most of King Magnus's time was spent in Sweden, Norwegian nobles arranged for his younger son Haakon to become king of Norway upon the king's abdication in 1355. At the same time the Swedes were beginning to oppose King Magnus's rule. Rising up with the opposition was his son, Erik. Magnus was forced to cede half of the Swedish kingdom to his son and make peace with Valdemar of Denmark.

In 1359 King Valdemar's daughter Margrete (age 6) and King Magnus's son Haakon (age 18) were to be married, paving the way for the future union of Sweden, Denmark and Norway in the Kalmar Union. In the same year King Erik of Sweden and his wife, Beatrix of Bavaria died from the infectious bubonic plague. Sweden needed a king but they did not want King Haakon of Norway who was married to Margrete of Denmark. Denmark and Sweden were arch enemies. So instead, the Swedes turned to Duke Albrecht's son, also called Albrecht. Albrecht defeated Magnus's forces and was appointed king of Sweden in 1364.





*Effigy of Queen Margaret from 1423 on her tomb in Roskilde Cathedral.*

All seemed well in Scandinavia as Norway, Denmark and Sweden were ruled by separate kings. However when King Valdemar Atterdag of Denmark died, a great struggle for power broke out. Olav, son of Margrete and King Håkon, was elected king of Denmark. When his father died, Olav also became king of Norway. When Olav died in 1387 at age 17 he ended the old Swedish-Norwegian royal family lineage. His mother, Margrete, took over as Regent of Denmark and Norway. She was a brilliant politician who strongly believed in a united North: Norway, Sweden and Denmark, ruled by one monarch.

Margrete's actions shaped the future of the North for centuries. Now she turned east to chase Albrecht out of Sweden. To give the North a king, she brought her sister's son, Erik, from Pomerania, Germany. In 1397 he was crowned king of the three Nordic countries at a historic meeting in Kalmar. When Erik died in 1412, his nephew, Kristoffer, took over. During his reign, there were several serious rebellions against the three-country union, especially in Sweden. When Kristoffer died in 1448, the Swedes elected their own king, Karl Knutson Bonde (King Charles). Denmark did not want Karl, but chose to support Kristian of Oldenburg. Margrete's dreams about a united North were destroyed and Norway was left without a ruler.

Norway was exhausted by a hundred years of disasters, starting with the Black Death in 1349 and ending with the struggle between supporters and opponents of King Kristian of Denmark in 1450. Norway's power was broken. Kristian became king of Norway and the Norwegian state became a settlement of Denmark. It took her over 400 years to regain her strength and again become a sovereign nation.