

## Abstract

Thomas Småberg, *Det stängda frälset. Makt och eliter i det medeltida lokalsamhället: Marks och Kinds härader i Västergötland ca 1390–1520*. (Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg 42, Göteborg 2004.) 307 pages. Written in Swedish with an English summary. [*The Closed Nobility. Power and Elites in a Local Community: The Districts of Mark and Kind in Västergötland c. 1390–1520*]

The thesis examines the social networks of the nobility during the Middle Ages. The networks explain why two noble families, one in Kind and the other in Mark, managed to hold the office of *häradsbövding* (district judge) through several generations and clients, despite the absence of hereditary offices in medieval Sweden.

The thesis investigates the creation of the Swedish nobility and its development. It does this by applying a theory called social closure. My thesis shows that the group tried to close its ranks to newcomers who aspired to become members. It therefore became increasingly more difficult to become a noble. Social closure worked within the group as well, stratifying it and creating differences within the nobility. These developments made the social networks of the utmost importance. To become a noble, or to aspire to a higher status within the nobility, an individual had to have powerful patrons. The concept of nobility changed through this process. It went from being tied to service to becoming hereditary, lineage became important.

The social networks of the nobility consisted of marriages and kinship, patron-client relationships, and friendships. The relationships were multifaceted and overlapping. It was through these relationships the power base of the two families were created, maintained, and passed on to their heirs. The powerbase consisted of their estates, offices and fiefs, as well as the social relationships.

They married their male heirs to daughters belonging to higher noble families. Noble families used their daughters' marriages to tie local lower nobles to them, thus creating important bonds with the local community while also securing clients. The patron-client relationships thus worked together with marriages to form social networks. Noble families also used patron-client relationships to dominate the local community, primarily through the *ting* (the local court). The benefits to the clients were protection, and affiliation with the local elite, but also access to the offices and therefore the income of the offices. Finally, horizontal and hierarchical friendship also complemented the social networks.

The networks help explain why the official power associated with the office became a private power tied to the noble families.

*Key words:* nobility, social networks, social closure, power, elites, patron-client relationships, friendships, marriages, kinship, offices, district judge.