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Literary Networks and the Periphery of Niðaróss in the Fifteenth Century

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Background

With the union between the two kingdoms of Norway and Sweden in 1319, the dynasty established by Hákon Hákonarson came to an end. The king of the new union was the young boy Magnús Eiríksson, and his rule was to be dominated by the interests of a new centre, shifted away from Oslo to the eastern parts of the new kingdom. This move, a show of political power, also inevitably affected the cultural life of Magnús's realm; by the 1320s, the centre of literary production seems already to have moved away from the Norwegian realm, and the golden era of literary activities under the Norwegian dynasty was at an end. This change in the position of political and cultural life was further strengthened by the effects of the Black Death, which arrived in Bergen in 1348. The traditional view, that the arrival of the plague was the main, even the only sole, explanation for developments in the former Norwegian kingdom, should nevertheless be challenged: the impact of the plague stands as only part of a wider change in the Scandinavian cultural system, in which the centre moved eastward, thus marginalising the former realm of the Norwegian dynasty (see Johansson 2015). Even throughout this shift in centre, however, one institution remained well established and even further developed its infrastructures, namely the Church province of Niðaróss. After the plague, this organisation was relatively quick in rebuilding its structures, reestablishing schools for priests, and building new churches; furthermore, its administrative literacy soon returned to its former level and functioned well. Yet the literary production there seems not to have recovered to any larger degree.¹

1 For a recent reevaluation of the political and social decline in the Norwegian realm in the fourteenth century, see Laugerud (2018). Norwegian vernacular literacy has been discussed from a similar perspective by Hagland (2005).

Centre and periphery

After its establishment in the twelfth century, the Archdiocese of Niðaróss was the centre of Church organisation in the North Atlantic during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, and frequently interacted with, and to a significant degree geographically overlapped with, the royal power of the Hákon Hákonarson dynasty. When the royal realm was subsumed into the union between the two kingdoms of Sweden and Norway in 1319, the Church province of Niðaróss retained its administrative power in the former realm, including the North Atlantic region. The Church administration soon recovered from the plague of the 1350s, and in the fifteenth century the Church appears as the main administrator of the former Norwegian kingdom. In a sense, Niðaróss remains the centre even as the former Norwegian kingdom is marginalised and moved into the political and cultural periphery of Magnús Eiríksson's kingdom.

This gives us reason to re-examine our own ideas of centre and periphery, which are largely based on a rather static notion of hierarchical relations. Do these concepts provide a clear dichotomy between an absolute centre and an equally absolute periphery, or should they rather be seen as indications of movements and modifications within a complex system of diversity and variation, where many centres interact and compete for dominance?² We suggest that the adoption of an analytical perspective based on the assumption that any kind of relation, including that between centre and periphery, tends to be dynamic, and therefore changes over time, is key to our understanding of how cultural systems function. Since such systems are complex by nature, it is far more useful to view their development as resulting from a constantly evolving hierarchical interaction between various groups that correspond to either central or peripheral positions within the system. Such an approach, we believe, allows for a more nuanced, more accurate understanding of the nature of changes in the hierarchical structures of a culture. To this purpose, the application of polysystem theory proves fruitful in accounting for the interaction between the dynamics of the social and political system and those of the literary system (see Bampi 2019 a).

The manuscript E 8822 as an observation point

In the debate about centre and periphery, the focus is often on individuals and institutions (or even nations) in collaboration and competition, while polysystem theory primarily draws attention to how texts interact in a system and may be placed in the centre and periphery at different points in time in the overall system. It is, we suggest, also relevant to take into account how the manuscripts taking part in the dissemination of texts among individuals and institutions are involved in this interaction.

In order to highlight the role of manuscripts and show how a close study of individual manuscripts, as well as groups of manuscripts, can further our understanding of this literate culture, we take one manuscript as our focus. We use the manuscript E 8822 in the National

2 For a recent challenge of the concepts of centre and periphery with a focus rather on itineraries – that is, lines of direct or indirect interaction between centres of varying importance and functions, “places drawn together through links of travel, religious practice, language, and literary exchange” – see David Wallace's (2016, esp. xxvii) introduction to *Europe: A Literary History, 1348–1418*.

Archives of Sweden (*Riksarkivet*) as an observation point – that is, a hub for case studies – to discuss the literate activities of mid-fifteenth century Niðaróss.³ The concept of ‘observation point’ is invoked as a way of approaching the large amount of medieval material from Scandinavia by taking single texts, manuscripts, and institutions or individuals to be examples related to past, present, and future modifications in a wider system. This particular observation point provides a fragmentary view of a manuscript from this period, but can nevertheless open up new insights into the state of literacy, the forming of manuscripts, and the use of the vernacular in fifteenth-century Niðaróss. It also gives insights into the relationship of the Norwegian cultural polysystem with the neighbouring systems in medieval Scandinavia.

The first individuals and institutions connected to the manuscript are mentioned on the first leaf (see E 8822: fol. 1r). The Franciscan brother Johannes is stated to be the commissioner of the manuscript, and it is said that his intention was to provide a manuscript of use and convenience for the Franciscans and his other friends in Bergen:⁴

Jstum librum Frater Johannes de nidrosia fecit colligere et conscribere ad vsum et commodum fratrum minorum custodie Bergensis et aliorum amicorum. qui eum alienauerit anathema sit (E 8822: fol. 1r).

Brother Johannes of Niðaróss had this book collected and written for the use and convenience in their duties for the little brothers [Minorites, i. e. Franciscans] and his other friends in Bergen. May the one who steals it be penalised with *anathema*.⁵

This note indicates that Johannes was not one of the scribes of the manuscript, but rather its patron who presumably had a number of scribes working on the collection for him. It is plausible that these scribes would have been part of the community of Franciscans in Niðaróss, but this hypothesis no doubt requires further investigation. It is also clear from the note that the manuscript was intended for an audience in Bergen, consisting primarily of Minorites, or Franciscan friars, but this information does not necessarily lead us closer to identifying that audience more specifically.

The composition of the manuscript is relevant to mention here. The main body of texts could be referred to as religious reading suitable for the Franciscan friars, but at least one text in the manuscript is more difficult for a modern reader to relate to the Franciscans, namely a version of the Old Swedish *Herr Ivan*. The Old Swedish story is derived from the Old French verse narrative *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, originally written by Chrétien de Troyes around 1178–1181, which was translated into the vernacular languages of medieval Scandinavia at various stages throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (see Lodén 2012). The oldest known of these translations is the Old Norse *Ívens saga*, the epilogue of which refers to King Hákon Hákonarson as the commissioner of the translation (see Glauser 2005: 375).

Recent scholarship has shown that the Old Swedish *Herr Ivan* was translated at the beginning of the fourteenth century from the Old French work; it is possible that the translation also made use of *Ívens saga* for some passages (see Lodén 2012). *Herr Ivan*

3 For a preliminary presentation of the concept of ‘observation point’, see Horn/Johansson (2021: 8–9).

4 The identity of the Franciscan friar Johannes has recently been treated by Bjørn Bandlien (2013).

5 All translations into English are the authors’ own.

belongs to a triad of translations of courtly texts customarily known as the *Eufemiavisor* after the name of their commissioner, Queen Eufemia of Norway. The text is preserved in a few manuscript miscellanies dating from the fifteenth century, where it appears alongside a variety of genres. Furthermore, the Old Swedish text formed the basis for an Old Danish translation, which survives in two manuscripts dating from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries (see Bampi/Richter 2021).

The vernacular language used by the scribes in E 8822 can advance our understanding of literate activities in the Norwegian realm in the fifteenth century. In particular, a number of manuscripts display a written language that has often been referred to as ‘Birgittine Norwegian’ (*Birgittinnorska*), discussed in more detail below, and the main scribe of E 8822 is one of the scribes regarded as being representative of this tendency to use what is considered Norwegian traits in texts composed in Old Swedish that were rewritten for a Norwegian audience.⁶

The first part of the manuscript contains what may be regarded as predominantly religious texts, and is written primarily in what appears to be two hands, henceforth referred to as Hand 2 and Hand 3, though some material in this section is in a third hand, referred to as Hand 1.⁷ The first text is an exegesis of the Ten Commandments (“Tio Guds bud utlagda”; see E 8822: fols. 3–4) in what has been attributed to Hand 2. This is followed by two texts relating to the Passion of Christ, the first being a contemplation on the pain of Our Lady Mary (“Vår frus pina”; see E 8822: fols. 5–9) and the second relating the Passion of Christ himself (“Christi pina”; see E 8822: fols. 10–16). These two texts have been penned by Hands 2 and 3 in what seems to be a collaboration. This part of the manuscript continues with a text that appears throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages, the so-called *Dispute between Body and Soul* (“Kroppens och själens träta”; see E 8822: fols. 16–21); the hand responsible for this part is considered to be Hand 3. The next two texts relate the merits of Christ (“Christi förtjänst”; see E 8822: fols. 21–24) and of Adam and Christ (“Adam och Kristus”; see E 8822: fols. 24–29) and are attributed to Hand 3. At this point in the manuscript, a third hand, referred to as Hand 1, contributes four prayers (see E 8822: fols. 29–30). It is uncertain whether this hand is contemporary and in collaboration with Hands 2 and 3, but it is relevant to note that the four prayers are inserted on fol. 29v and fol. 30r, that is, they interpose themselves into the sequence of texts written by Hand 3. On fol. 30v Hand 3 can be found commencing a text of the *Speculum missæ*, which comprises some explanations of the parts of the Holy Mass (see E 8822: fols. 30–32). The same hand continues with a sequence of three notes on spiritual subjects (see E 8822: fols. 32–33).

At this point, as mentioned above, an unexpected text appears, at least from the point of view of the modern reader: the hand referred to as Hand 3, which is responsible for a large part of the manuscript, transcribes a version of the secular poem *Herr Ivan*. This occurrence of what would generally be referred to as courtly literature in the context of the more spiritual texts discussed thus far has intrigued scholars, with collections of texts associated with monastic milieux often debated in recent scholarship. Maria Arvidsson (2017), for

6 For the most recent debate about this written form of Norwegian in the fifteenth century, see Adams (2016) and Johansson (2020), as well as their references to earlier scholarship.

7 A more thorough presentation of the texts than is provided here can be found in Johansson (2021: 124–127). The numbering of hands (e.g. Hand 2) follows previous scholarly convention.

example, treats the manuscript A 49 from the Birgittine monastery Vadstena in a full-length monograph, while E 8822 and a similar manuscript from Denmark, Cod. Holm. K 4, are discussed in several recent articles by Bullitta (2017), Bampi (2019b and 2021), and Johansson (2021) as representative of miscellanies of Christian and more secular texts. In this debate, the appearance of secular texts like *Herr Ivan* are bones of contention because of their not being explicitly religiously works.

Finally, it is relevant to note the four so-called *skálverser* (“toast poems”; see E8822: fol. 59v) that are incorporated in E 8822’s text of *Herr Ivan*, as they may reveal something about the intended audience and their use of the manuscript. The toasts are directed to St Anna (*Annas skál*, “Toast to Anna”), the groom (*Brudgummens skál*, “Toast to the groom”), the bride (*Brudens skál*, “Toast to the bride”), and to happiness (*Glädjens skál*, “Toast to happiness”). Johansson (2021: 127) has suggested that this may indicate a wedding where toasts were to be presented to St Anna – the mother of St Mary – the groom, the bride, and finally in a more abstract sense to happiness; however, this would point away from the monastic and secular church milieux to more of a lay, courtly milieu, a rather different direction than the rest of the texts in the manuscript. What use could a Minorite friar have of *Herr Ivan* and four toasts that may have been related to a wedding context?

Niðaróss – centre and periphery in the fifteenth century

In the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, Niðaróss was the centre of the archdiocese encompassing the Atlantic islands and parts of England and Scotland, more or less corresponding to the kingdom established by Hákon Hákonarson. When the dynasty of Hákon was assimilated through marriage by the Swedish royal pretenders, and the Norwegian realm became part of a kingdom ruled by the infant king Magnús Eiríksson, the archdiocese remained more or less geographically intact, with Niðaróss still being the religious centre. During the preceding centuries, text and book production had flourished in the Norwegian realm, both on the mainland and in Iceland. There was also a rich exchange of scribes and manuscripts in both directions (on this topic, see Stefán Karlsson 1978 and 1979; on liturgical literature in the vernacular and Latin, see Attinger 2017).

After the plague in the mid-fourteenth century, the Church seems to have become the most influential institution in the former Norwegian realm. Judging from extant evidence, literary production of original works at this point seems to have been more or less non-existent, but there are traces of some rewriting of earlier works and it appears that administrative literacy was soon re-established both in Latin and the vernacular (see Hagland 2005; Laugerud 2018). Close contacts between the parts of the archdiocese, however, seem to have been hampered by the new situation, and after the outbreak of plague yet again in Iceland at the turn of the century, Iceland seems to have become more isolated and peripheral in relation to Norway than it was earlier, and yet at the same time it was involved in fishing and trade with English ships throughout the fifteenth century. The flow of cultural impulses and the dissemination of texts and manuscripts in the fifteenth century seems thus to have moved in a new direction. Political life, as well as social and cultural life, was shaped predominantly by occurrences in the two secular powers of the Scandinavian realm, the kingdoms ruled by Swedish and Danish kings, and the overall

influence exerted by the Eastern regions may be reflected in the few examples of literary activities still on display in the scarce extant material.

In Bergen the Birgittines established a convent in 1426, but the clearly Birgittine material preserved from there does not provide much information concerning their activities. As mentioned above, it has long been claimed that the Birgittines were involved in the penning of texts in ‘Birgittine Norwegian’ (*Birgittinnorska*) (see Sandvei 1938; Jørgensen 1997, the latter especially in relation to Aslak Bolt, the Archbishop of Niðaróss). This written language is characterised by its mix of Swedish and Norwegian forms, the combination of which has generally been interpreted as the result of Swedish influence on Norwegian scribes. This claim has been questioned and to some extent rejected, however, and there have been suggestions that the scribes were in fact striving to write what could be seen as representing the spoken language of their contemporaries in Norway (see Adams 2016; Johansson 2020).

In the first half of the fifteenth century there was obviously a frequent exchange between the Archdiocese of Niðaróss and the centres of political and cultural power and activities in the eastern parts of the Swedish–Norwegian kingdom. This exchange is arguably reflected in the few preserved examples of literary activities in the western parts of the realm. Jonathan Adams (2016) has recently analysed thoroughly a manuscript of Birgitta’s *Revelations*, coming to the conclusion about the two scribes penning the text that they were trying to write in a modified Norwegian vernacular based on a Swedish exemplar; it is clearly also relevant here to take into account that this is an example of real Birgittine influence in the literary system of the Norwegian realm. Another example of Birgitta’s text being actively in use in Norway at this time is found on the first folio of the law manuscript Codex Hardenbergianus, GKS 1154 fol, where a short passage from Birgitta’s *Revelations* is penned by a scribe in a Norwegian vernacular reminiscent of the ‘Birgittine Norwegian’ of the previously mentioned texts (see Adams 2008). A similar tendency may be at play in the manuscript T 180 – originally from Telemark in Norway, now kept in Linköping in Sweden – which contains, among other texts, a fragment of a medieval ballad and displaying ‘Birgittine Norwegian’ traits (on this topic, see Johansson 2020). Taken together, these fragmentary witnesses to a literate interest in fifteenth-century Norway that shows inspiration and influence from the East and the South, rather than from Iceland as in previous centuries, corroborate the general change in direction of cultural and political interactions in Scandinavia that can be observed elsewhere in this period.

While the Archdiocese of Niðaróss remained a cultural centre within the Norwegian realm in the fifteenth century, the Church province became more marginal and peripheral within a wider Scandinavian context. An interest in literate culture remains apparent, with the region still taking part in literate activities, but without the dominance displayed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. While texts were mainly rewritten and reformed in the vernacular form that we refer to as ‘Birgittine Norwegian’, the production of new literary texts is difficult to find in the extant material; indeed, the centre of literate innovation seems to have moved by this time to the eastern region of the Mälaren valley and the southern regions of Lund and Copenhagen (see Johansson 2015).

Set against this background, E 8822 forms an interesting observation point from which we can see changes in the hierarchy of the centres of cultural and political power in relation to late-medieval Norway. Although further investigation is no doubt required in order to

draw broader conclusions, it can at least be said that this manuscript's collection of religious texts along with the courtly work *Herr Ivan* seem further to evidence the strong tendency seen in the material mentioned above for late-medieval Norwegian literary production principally to draw on works coming from the eastern regions of medieval Scandinavia. The text of *Herr Ivan* in E 8822 may also be seen as part of the dissemination of courtly literature from the elite milieu in the Swedish centre to both Danish and Norwegian recipients. In this case, the manuscript could be seen as a parallel to contemporary Danish adaptations of *Herr Ivan*, the literary centre of the Scandinavian polysystem at the time being the Mälars valley and the peripheries for this courtly literature being the Norwegian region in the west and the Danish in the south (for a similar reasoning concerning the importance of a Scandinavian perspective, see Johansson 2021).

Conclusion

The observations presented in this article suggest that approaching the development of lines of cultural dissemination from a dynamic perspective may enable us to discover movements within a cultural polysystem, both in terms of processes and the production of texts, that would otherwise be overlooked if the issue were to be approached on the basis of a static understanding of the relationship between centre and periphery. Furthermore, taking an individual manuscript or a group of manuscripts as an observation point allows us to contribute towards measuring the validity of general statements about textual production at a certain time in a certain area – that is, the type of statements generally found in literary histories – as well as to draw attention to routes by which textual materials came into a cultural polysystem from a portion of another cultural polysystem. If we aim to reach a better understanding of intercultural relations, only the adoption of a descriptive model based on the assumption that such relations are hierarchical yet tend to change over time will enable us to come to terms with the functioning of such complex systems as cultural polysystems, of which textual production is a powerful manifestation.

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