

Lars Boje Mortensen, abstract for medieval Latin panel, org. Ralph Hexter

The Latin Beginnings of Danish, Icelandic and Norwegian Literature

Even if traditional literary history tends to give the impression that the vernacular literature was strong from the beginnings in the Old Norse cultural sphere (Iceland and Norway) in contrast to a more dominant position of Latin in Denmark, it is possible to describe the first phase of local literary writing during the 12th century in basically the same terms for all three countries.

Latin book culture was of course known in a superficial way already around the 'official' conversion of Denmark in the late 10th century and in Iceland and Norway around 1000, but it was only with the firm episcopal structure emerging in the 1060s and 1070s that a local copying of Latin liturgical books seems to have emerged. This in turn gave rise to local adjustments and addition to the liturgy, the composition of prayers, songs and sermons with local reference, and ultimately to the writing of new legends and of local historiography. The first continuous texts of a purely local stamp are known from Denmark and Iceland around 1100 and from Norway probably some decades later – all in Latin, and all rising, as it were, 'in the margins' of the universally valid Latin texts.

In Denmark one can trace a subsequent spread of Latin literary (and administrative) writing in Latin during the 12th century, leading up to a considerable hagiographical, historiographical and didactic literature in the period between ca 1170 and 1220 – the peak of the 12th century Renaissance in Denmark.

In the Old Norse sphere the use of the vernacular in books began already around 1120 (in Iceland) and the great flowering of Old Norse literature emerged later, especially in the decades after 1200, but this does not mean that Latin writing had no place in this development. The use of the vernacular during the 12th century had been confined to a great degree to translations and adaptations from ancient as well as more recent Latin texts; moreover, in Norway as well as in Iceland a number of now (partly) lost Latin chronicles and legends were composed in the second half of the 12th century.

In this way Latin Literature was the major constitutive element in the development of the first phase of the literature of all three nations, even if Iceland and Norway gave birth to a rich vernacular literature in the 13th century which has tended to colour our understanding of 12th-century developments.

The paper will discuss the learned framework and the main interests lying behind the composition of the first wave of Latin texts. It will also explore the peripheral status of this literature by asking the question: in relation to which centres were the texts peripheral? There seems to be a variation between the impact of Anglo-Norman, German and Northern French learning – a variation that cannot be put down to a simple formula. In this way the spread of Latin learning and book culture to the Nordic countries indicates that we should be operating with several centres and peripheries while at the same time acknowledging a general mechanism of authorising a new local discourse by its 'being-in-the-margins' of one sanctified universal discourse – that of the Latin Bible, the fathers, and the later corpus of liturgical and exegetical texts that had accumulated around them.