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Crusading historiography in the Scandinavian periphery

(Abstract for the MLSG panel Center and Periphery in Medieval Latin Studies, Montreal, January 2006).

The Third Crusade – following the papal call to come to the rescue of Jerusalem after the Christian defeat in 1187 – gave rise to substantial literary activity in Western Europe. One of the most fascinating narratives of the Third Crusade belongs to the Scandinavian periphery. The *Historia de profectione Danorum in Hierosolymam*, as the anonymous Latin narrative is entitled, was written by a Premonstratensian canon of Norwegian origin, probably in the late 1190s. It tells of a Danish-Norwegian expedition that set out in 1191 to join in the liberation of Jerusalem. After violent hardships on their way to Jerusalem (in particular in a storm on the North Sea) they finally reached their goal, but only to discover that they came too late to join in the fighting since peace had been struck in September 1192.

The text is deeply marked by contemporary crusading rhetoric as it is known in particular from papal bulls. The Danish-Norwegian enterprise is placed in a theological frame of history. The travellers are seen as new disciples obeying Jesus' exhortation to leave everything behind and follow him. Their survival in the North Sea is likened to the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea etc. Throughout the biblical quotations and allusions that had become standard elements in twelfth century crusading discourse, are employed.

In terms of rhetoric, then, a 'discourse of the center' – papal crusading discourse – is employed in a peripheral, Danish-Norwegian, environment. Like other Danish and Norwegian Latin historiographical texts around 1200, the *Historia de profectione Danorum* bears witness to close cultural relations between Scandinavia and central Europe. But 'center' is also, on another level, a concept that is very much present in this text, being the goal of the expedition, the Promised Land. It is made clear that the expedition reached their goal, some literally and others, viz. those died on the way, in the spiritual sense that they gave their life to Christ. Scandinavia may be geographically far removed from Jerusalem, but taken as a spiritual concept Jerusalem is a goal to be reached by Scandinavians as well as by anybody else who are ready to die for Christ.

Submitted by

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