

## Medieval Court Literature in Northern Europe

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Christianity reached the Northern countries at a time when interest in classical literature and learning was reviving in Western Europe, and written literature began to appear in Iceland and Norway at a time when the revival reached its peak in the "renaissance of the 12th century". For reasons which we need not go into here, homilies, Saints' Lives, and other devotional works were translated into the native language in both countries in the 12th century, possibly even earlier, whereas in Denmark and Sweden, which were closer to Germany, Latin remained the sole literary language until the 14th century. The Icelandic and Norwegian translations are mostly based on Latin originals, but there are a few translations from Old French and Old English.

When Hakon Hakonarson, King of Norway (1217-63) became interested in the fashionable heroic and romantic literature of 12th century France, it was quite natural that he should want to have it translated and thus make it available to those of his courtiers who did not know any foreign languages. There is nothing strange or particularly original in this, he did what other princes outside France had done before him. In the prefaces to some of the translations, the educational purpose of the translations is explicitly mentioned, the Norwegian court was to become thoroughly European in this respect also. In Iceland on the other hand, where historical works were translated from Latin, there was no court and no king, so in this case there is no question of imitating foreign institutions and habits, and consequently the Icelandic translations are far more likely to be the result of a genuine desire to acquire knowledge, to make useful works available to people who wanted to know about the history of foreign countries. Thus intellectual curiosity seems to have played a more important part in the work of translation carried out in Iceland than in Norway.

It is not always easy to distinguish between Norwegian and

Icelandic translations, the language was the same for all practical purposes, and most of the Norwegian translations were known in Iceland and are now only known to us in Icelandic manuscripts. Many of the translations from French are said to have been translated by order of King Hakon, and it was probably easier to find people with a sound knowledge of French in the Norwegian towns than in Iceland, but there was of course plenty of people in both countries who could translate from Latin.

The foreign works translated are: 8 chansons de geste, 4 romances of the *matière de Bretagne* type (the *Tristan* of Thomas and three romances by Chrétien de Troyes), 2 *romans d'aventure*, 21 *lais*, 1 fabliau, 2 Middle English romances, a collection of German tales about Dietrich of Ber, and at least 15 Latin historical or pseudo-historical works. It is quite an impressive list, a good selection of *chansons de geste*, among them the *Chanson de Roland*, Chrétien, Thomas, Geoffrey of Monmouth, one of the best medieval histories of Alexander the Great. What makes the translations from French particularly valuable is the fact that they are based on early, probably twelfth century versions, which have either been lost or are known to us from late 13th or early 14th century French manuscripts. The Norwegian versions are genuine translations, not adaptations, but they are frequently somewhat shortened, so they cannot be of much use for the detailed textual criticism of the French originals. The translation of the *Tristan* of Thomas is dated 1226, and since King Hakon was at that time a young man (he was born in 1204), it is likely to be one of the earlier, if not the earliest of the romantic sagas, – and one of the most important, since the romance of Thomas is lost save for a few fragments. Like so many of these sagas, it is preserved in late (17th century) Icelandic manuscripts.

We do not know how popular these romances were in 13th century Norway, but there obviously was some interest in them, since a Norwegian nobleman who was in Scotland in 1284-85 in connection with the negotiations concerning the succession of the Maid of Norway to the Scottish throne, caused an English

romance which he found there to be translated.

Only two Norwegian manuscripts and a few fragments containing translated romantic sagas have been preserved, none of them later than the 14th century. Apparently this literature was and always remained, in Norway, a court literature, and when the Norwegian court disappeared as a consequence of the union of Norway and Sweden in 1319, literary activity ceased.

The translations are prose versions, the translators never tried to adapt skaldic or Eddaic metres, probably because they had never been used for long narrative poems. But the translators were well aware of the fact that poetry was rated higher than prose, and rhetorical prose higher than plain narrative prose, and they tried to make up for the lack of refinement by creating a literary language very different from that of the classical Icelandic sagas, a style influenced by the rules of Latin rhetorical theories, in which epithets abound, or more synonyms or near-synonyms are frequently used to translate one word in the French source, and the native poetic device of alliteration is quite common.

In other countries where French literature was translated, the normal course of literary development started with translations, and continued with adaptations, imitations and finally, when the literary tradition was firmly established, original works of great literary merit appear, in the 12th century in Germany, in the 14th in England. In Norway, the development was cut short before any native literature could develop. In Iceland on the other hand, a great native literary tradition had been established during the 13th century, and the romantic sagas together with the more romantic translations of historical works became part of the popular literature of the 14th and subsequent centuries, and led to the creation of yet another literary *genre*, the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, which enjoyed great popularity right up to modern times.

The reason for the difference between Norway and Iceland in their response to foreign literature is, in my opinion, the

outcome of the very dissimilar historical and social situations in the two countries. Iceland was in many respects an anomaly in 12th century Europe, there was no king, and the Church was neither powerful nor rich enough to *impose* foreign models or a foreign religion, the “missionary situation” lasted longer, and the Church and the educated laymen had to make foreign customs and foreign literature acceptable to the people at large. A somewhat similar situation prevailed in England in the early Christian centuries, and even more in Ireland, and in both cases the rather surprising outcome is that these two countries, on the outskirts of the civilised world, could become for a couple of centuries leaders in the intellectual field. The challenge presented by the need to adapt European literature to the circumstances of Iceland led to literary activity and creativity, with the result that during the 13th century a strong and vigorous native literary tradition was established, and when the translations from French were imported from Norway, they were easily incorporated into the existing prose literature.

Norway on the other hand was a normal European Kingdom, rather remote from the centre of civilisation in the 13th century, but with a strong and centralized government and Church; European civilisation could be imposed from above, and this was what happened, there was no challenge, and consequently no need to respond actively. Since apparently the new literary traditions were dependent on the King and his circle, it did not survive the political and economic changes of the 14th century, of which the Black Death was probably even more important than the union with Sweden. Old manuscripts were preserved by the descendants of the few remaining Norwegian noble families, and some of the sagas were translated into Swedish and Danish from Norwegian manuscripts during the 14th and 15th centuries, but no new copies were made. A few ballads which are based on the translated sagas have been preserved, but we do not know when they were composed, although it seems likely that they belong to an age when the romantic sagas were still frequently read aloud at the court of the Kings of Norway.