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Reading Between Texts: *Codex Askabyensis* and Its Use

MASSIMILIANO BAMPI (VENEZIA)

Most of the extant literature written in Old Swedish has been preserved in few large miscellanies compiled during the course of the 15th century, mostly at the behest of members of the aristocracy. The manuscript known as *Codex Askabyensis* (AM 191 fol., Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling) is one of such miscellanies. It contains a significant number of texts in the vernacular that cover a broad palette of genres, as the following overview shows:

- *Schacktavelslek*, fol. 1r-35r
- *Carolus filius Philippi*, fol. 36v
- *Karl Magnus*, fol. 37r-49r
- *Alexander Magnus*, fol. 37r-49r
- *Amicus och Amelius*, fol. 58v-66v
- *Flores och Blanzefflor*, fol. 67r-89r
- *De vno peccatore qvi promeruit graciam*, fol. 89r-93r
- *Historical and astronomical notes*, fol. 93v
- *Prosaiska krönikan*, fol. 94r-107r
- *Lilla rimkrönikan*, fol. 107v-112r
- Marginalia (including a brief song text), fol. 112v-114v
- *Om den heliga Birgitta och hennes släkt*, fol. 115r-123v (124r-125v are blank)
- *Sju vise mästare*, fol. 126r-137v

The manuscript is known to have been compiled by assembling material that had belonged to separate manuscripts (Kornhall, 1959: 66-80). The heterogeneous nature of the texts making up the collection makes it difficult to ascertain which kind of audience the manuscript was meant to address. However, an annotation on fol. 49r provides us with a relevant piece of information on the identity of the manuscript's owner and gives us a useful clue to the possible use of the manuscript (or at least of some texts preserved in it):

swerd off handen was / en tegh was ey
spurc for horen of for han ne matte
dathe **Da** hert horengeten sijn / **Da** wa
tac roekste at quar togete swelle gal
la a sin foort at hata tijf sijn ar ey
wan tegh herten for hem of for cron
Da mocht ha a ey mocht get wa
re hata swerd off woldde dwilom
Da sporec ha a **Da** quade dan matte
tijf sijn / **Da** nemmedt groge swerd
tijf tylden milc rad wigan at tu haet
a gind at han seide nle melen vun
steijen dyppe w adep tijfmaal /
aen tijf wachtijf gal at tijf se tijf
ey licht at ey hata jeyngete dyppe
hantia som aa galde / **Da** hantia
ha a **Da** tijf gud lange sind oec sijn
gal han al roland of roekste haed
de wade tangar licht ole swade tijf
Da nemmedt groge mueldech / **Da**
tijf gan houtlit app swou den se
gete donia slein som tijf / **Da** 20
den brandin fluynde han / han my
fur laest han laest tijf at han
wyst at enigen somde tijf hantia
wyst rolande ob da **Da** hantia
tijf tijf hantia ob slein til galde
slede / **Da** hantia som geter autes
ob al salamech / **Da** hantia wor
do pugde / **Da** hantia ha a pugde
Drede marke silpe den ha a se ha
also wate rolande horn full mi
bisameom **Da** hantia lot han fluyde
tijf myldit bissame melen slein
tijf tijf hantia tijf jeyngete somde
wante nocht tijf tijf tijf
mordet weel den slein **Da** hantia
ha a **Da** heemel pugde hantia pugde
app tijf rolande ob tijf tijf silpe
hantia **Da** lot han sana
hantia alda tijf jeyngete sana / **Da**
wane 1 rife han ob ind / **Da** han
wane 1 silpe app gleyne 1 lot han
rolde ob tijf tijf jeyngete gal
de far radit ob allom tijf tijf my
tijf wane at doina sijn slein slein
al tijf slein tijf tijf alom slein
om slein at nemmedt groge slein
tijf tijf slein **Da** gud han up ob
mordet at gleyne 1 slein ob mordet
tijf gleyne 1 slein ob mordet
slein / ob allom tijf tijf tijf wane 1 tijf

¶ De auctoritate sagittis potestis rega-
tum prout // Regi monachis sua hys-
ta latrati obsequiis ducibus
Anno dñi 1210 omnia p[ro]p[ri]etatis ipsorum
et scimus quoniam deinceps aucto-
ritate dñi regis ab aliis dñi regis
deinceps capellam regis regis
et fabry et faber in pro libro
de regis regis regis regis
et de regis regis regis regis
et de regis regis regis regis

Alexandro rego
Høt war en Røming aff egypto land
Ghyng het anectydus qyan war en
mestad i swortte Romfæ ot lande vnu
holcom hænge Romfæ gryndede nu
samær ot wiðe mot qom præda
Gry gryde wæt gryfwa ot sec ut q
mæltægen i grymonney at qyan fyrmer
te tem eble bætæda / ofte regn i mæde
qyan grymælka bort of hæm til eng
that land tig? Gry war afæd i P

Image 1: Ms. AM 191 fol. (Codex Askabyensis), 48v-49r
(© Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, København)

*Anno dominj M cd x cij feria 3:a infra octauas
 omnium sanctorum hore decima ante
 prandivm Et est liber dominj johannis
 gerardi cappellani monasterij
 askaby Et habentur in isto libro
 primo de ludo scakariorum/ liber
 blanzaflor / De septem sapienti
 bus Et de rege magno karulo*

The 3rd of November in the year of Our Lord 1492, around ten o'clock in the morning. And this book belongs to Johan Gerdsson, chaplain of the Askeby monastery. And in this first book there are On the game of chess/ the book of Blanzaflor/ On the Seven Sages and On King Charlemagne

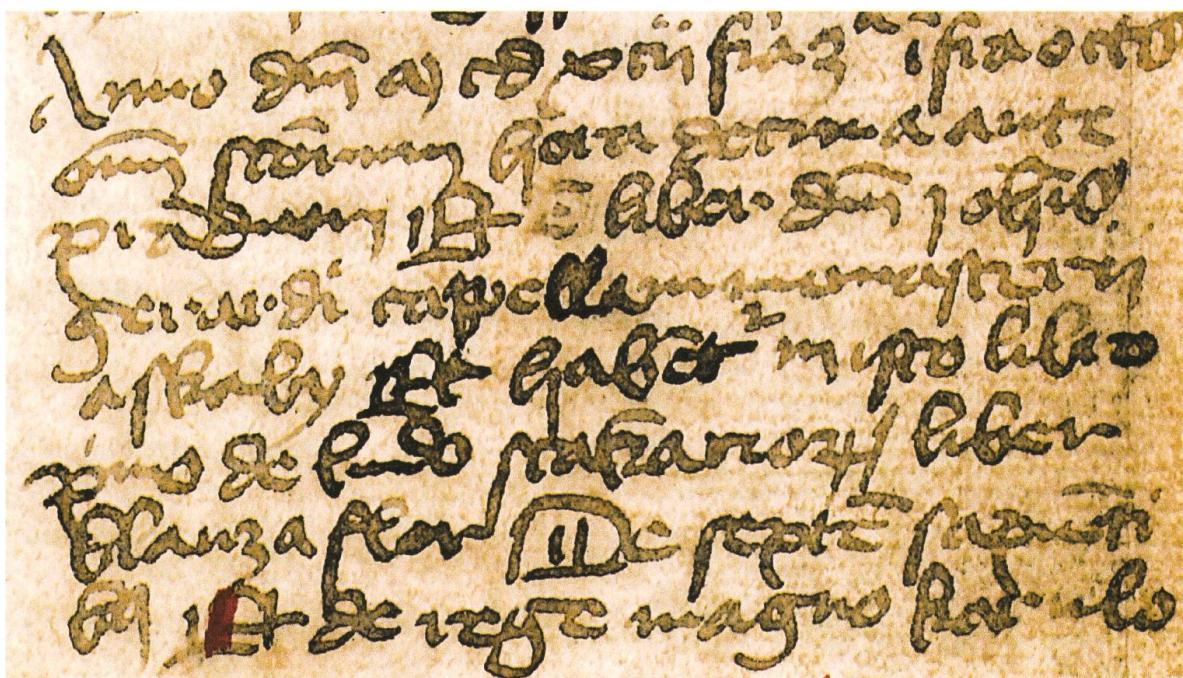


Image 2: Detail from Ms. AM 191 fol. (Codex Askabyensis), 49r

(© Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, København)

The owner of the manuscript around the year 1492 was thus Johannis Gerardi, chaplain of the Cistercian nunnery at Askeby, in Östergötland. It has been ascertained that the chaplain copied most of the texts preserved in AM 191 (Carlquist, 2002: 112).

According to Per-Axel Wiktorsson (2007, 14-15), the manuscript is probably a work commissioned by some member of the high aristocracy of Östergötland. The contents of AM 191 do indeed partly overlap with textual material that can be found in manuscripts owned by members of the Swedish nobility, especially women. This is the case of two major miscellanies from the 15th century: Cod. Holm. D 3 and Cod. Holm. D 4a. D 3 is called *fru Elins bok* – after fru Elin Gustavsdotter (Sture) – and D 4a is named after Märta Ulfsdotter, fru Elin's mother (*fru Märtas bok*).

In both these two manuscripts and *Codex Askabyensis* one finds such courtly romances as the *Eufemiavisor*¹ (only *Flores och Blanzefflor* in AM 191), the Old Swedish translation of two of the branches (*Jórsalaferð* and *Af Rúnzivals bardaga*) making up the Old Norwegian *Karlagnús saga* customarily known as *Karl Magnus*, two chronicles (*Prosaiska krönikan*, *Lilla rimkrönikan*) and *Schacktavelslek* (in D 3 and AM 191 fol), an allegorical representation of society based on the game of chess.

The comparison with D 3 and D 4a in terms of contents lends support to the hypothesis that the probable audience of at least some of the texts in AM 191 was made up of people with an aristocratic background. However, the chaplain's note begets the question of whether it is possible to find a connection between the selection of texts that he refers to and the social and cultural environment of a female convent.

The Swedish Cistercian nunneries "were largely the preserve of the nobility and even royalty [...]. Whereas boys were not allowed in Cistercian abbeys, young girls of a certain class were frequently raised in convents" (France, 1992: 71). This contributes towards explaining why *Codex Askabyensis* has some texts in common with D 3 and D 4a.

Johannis Gerardi mentions four works: *Schacktavelslek*, *Flores och Blanzefflor*, *Sju vise mästare*, and *Karl Magnus*. What binds these texts together is the edifying purpose that they were probably meant to serve in a female aristocratic environment.

Schacktavelslek contains a description of all classes of society and of the virtues that each of them should possess. The description begins with the king, the queen and the knight, and proceeds down the social scale. The section on the queen has been described as a *kvinnospegel* (Blomqvist, 1941: 72), i.e. a work containing moral instructions for noblewomen. The work's position in the manuscript may indicate that it was intended to provide the general background to other narrative works in the collection (Bampi, 2015), thus suggesting that such works were read intertextually.

Flores och Blanzefflor is the troubled love story of a Christian princess and a heathen prince. It is certainly relevant to the purpose of identifying the intended audience of the text that after getting married, Flores retires to a monastery and Blanzefflor to a nunnery. It is furthermore noteworthy that in the chaplain's annotation, the work is referred to as *liber blanzaflor* ("book of Blanzefflor"), thus foregrounding the female role in the story. There is no doubt that the fate of Blanzefflor was one the nuns at Askeby could relate to, and the story was thus probably meant to provide the audience with an edifying message. Broadly speaking, I think it is indeed safe to assert that chivalric literature also served didactic purposes in the form of entertaining stories (Småberg, 2011).

¹ *Eufemiavisor* is the collective name used to describe the Old Swedish translation of three chivalric romances (*Herr Ivan lejonriddaren*, *Hertig Fredrik av Normandie*, *Flores och Blanzefflor*) that were made at the instigation of the Norwegian Queen Eufemia in the early 14th century. For an introduction see Andersson, 2014.

In *Sju vise mästare* – the Old Swedish translation of a collection of stories of Oriental origins known as *The Seven Sages of Rome* – the contrast between wise counsellors and wicked women is the general theme that shines through all of the stories. The edifying purpose of the work is overtly stated in the prologue, where one reads that the stories must be interpreted in a spiritual way as a *caveat* to stay away from sin (Bampi, 2007: 38).

In *Karl Magnus*, it is noteworthy that a female character plays a significant role in the first branch. At the very beginning of the story, it is indeed Charlemagne's wife who reproaches the king for thinking that there is no king that is superior to him. For that reason, she is harshly addressed by Charlemagne. In the first branch, the conceit of the king and his retinue is brought to the fore, while the second branch is built on the contrast between loyalty and treachery against the background of the fight against the Saracens.

Other works in the manuscript (especially *Alexander Magnus* and *Amicus et Amelius*, both taken from a collection of *exempla* known as *Själens tröst*, "The Consolation of the Soul") were most probably meant to provide other material for moral instruction.

It is obvious, though, that not all of the texts making up such a diverse collection of texts underwent one and the same kind of interpretation. Still, Johannis Gerardi's words on the early stage of the composition process of a hitherto understudied manuscript blaze a trail for us to follow in order to seek to understand how at least part of the textual material that is preserved in it might have been used.

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