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Reading Between Texts: *Codex Askabyensis* and Its Use

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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 gratiam*, 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):

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

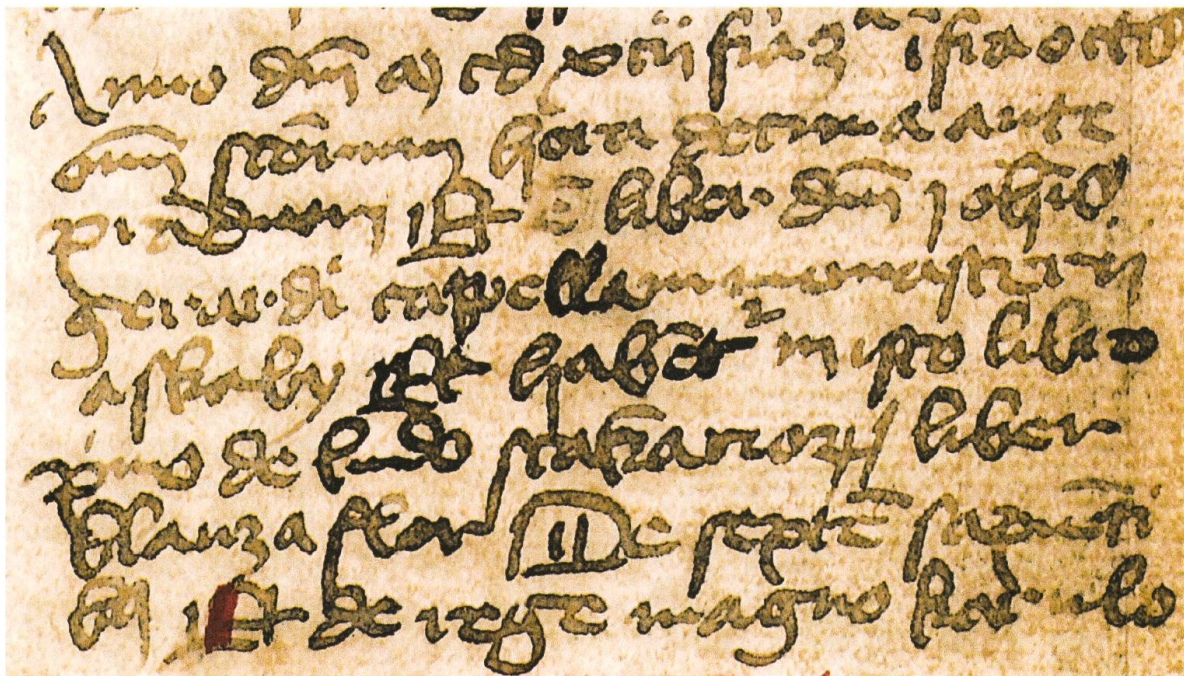


Image 2: Detail from Ms. AM 191 fol. (Codex Askabyensis), 49r
 (© Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, København)

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 Elin's bok* – after fru Elin Gustavsdotter (Sture) – and D 4a is named after Märta Ulfsdotter, fru Elin's mother (*fru Märta's bok*).

In both these two manuscripts and *Codex Askabyensis* one finds such courtly romances as the *Eufemiavisor*¹ (only *Flores och Blanzeflor* in AM 191), the Old Swedish translation of two of the branches (*Jórsalaferð* and *Af Rúnzivals bardaga*) making up the Old Norwegian *Karlamagnús saga* customarily known as *Karl Magnus*, two chronicles (*Prosaíska 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 Blanzeflor*, *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 Blanzeflor 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 Blanzeflor to a nunnery. It is furthermore noteworthy that in the chaplain's annotation, the work is referred to as *liber blanzaflor* (“book of Blanzeflor”), thus foregrounding the female role in the story. There is no doubt that the fate of Blanzeflor 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 Blanzeflor*) 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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