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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:

- Schacktavelsleik, fol. 1r-35r
- Carolus filius Philippippi, fol. 36v
- Karl Magnus, fol. 37r-49r
- Alexander Magnus, fol. 37r-49r
- Amicus och Amelius, fol. 58v-66v
- Flores och Blanze oflor, fol. 67r-89r
- De vno pecatore qvi prmeruit graciam, fol. 89r-93r
- Historical and astronomical notes, fol. 93v
- Prosaiska kronikan, 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 måstare, 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):
Reading Between Texts: Codex Askabyensis and Its Use

Anno domini M cd x cij feria 3:a infra octauas
omnia sanctorum hore decima ante
prandium Et est liber dominii 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 Gerdsøn, 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
In both these two manuscripts and Codex Askabyensis one finds such courtly romances as the Eufemiaviisor (only Flores och Blanzeflor in AM 191), the Old Swedish translation of two of the branches (Jörsalverd and Aftänsvilla bardaga) making up the Old Norwegian Karlamagnus saga customarily known as Karl Magnus, two chronicles (Proviska kronikan, Lilla rimkrönikan) and Schacktavleslek (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: Schacktavleslek, 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. Schacktavleslek 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 blanzeflor (“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).

References
Bampi, Massimiliano. 2007. The Reception of the Septem Sapientes in Medieval Sweden between Translation and Rewriting (Göppingen: Kümmerle).

Footnote 1: Eufemiaviisor is the collective name used to describe the Old Swedish translation of three chivalric romances (Herr Ivan lejoviddaren, 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.