

## Political and Cultural Relations between Norway and England after the Conquest

Bjørn Bandlien  
(University of Oslo)

The connections between Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature and culture have received a lot of scholarly interest over the years. The Northumbrian influence on Eddic poetry in the tenth century and the skaldic poetry connected to Cnut the Great in the early eleventh century are examples of such studies of literary exchanges between the Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Among historians, the focus has been mainly on the political culture related to the Danelaw, English influence on the Scandinavian church, and the emergence of trade relations from the late twelfth century onwards. Cultural and political connections after 1066 have received less attention, even though great interest has lately been shown in the skalds connected to the Northumbrian earl Waltheof in the 1070's.

In an article on the skalds at King Cnut the Great's court, Matthew Townend argued that we should begin to see skaldic poetry as an integral part of Anglo-Saxon court literature (Townend, 2001). What I want to suggest here is that there were important connections between Anglo-Norman England and Scandinavian literature and culture as well, even though the Anglo-Norman kings and writers increasingly looked to the continent for modes of explaining their society.

There is much research that needs to be done on this field of study, and my own contribution is only a work in progress. Here, I will focus on two areas; partly the relationships between Norwegians and Englishmen in the decades after the conquest, concerning both individuals and institutions, and partly comparing some key texts in which previous scholarship has noted some kind of affinities between Norse sagas and Anglo-Norman literature. My main emphasis will be, as indicated in the title of this paper, on Norway, but I hope in the future also to include aspects related to Denmark, Iceland, and the Orkneys.

### Political relations

Political control over England was still an unsettled matter in the first years following the Norman Conquest. There was still some English resistance against the Normans, mainly in what had been the Danelaw. Additionally, the Danish King Sven Estridsson had an ambition to wrest the kingdom from the hands of William the Conqueror. The support of Óláfr kyri, the son of the slain King Haraldr harðráði, was probably seen as important to both Sven and William in this tense situation.

The kings' sagas inform us that King Sven of Denmark sought the support of the Norwegians for his campaigns to England in 1069-1070 and 1075, but King Óláfr is not known to have supported Sven on these occasions, and certainly did not participate himself. Cnut, son of King Sven and later regarded as a saint, is said to have offered Óláfr the leading position in his planned campaign in 1085, but received only a lesser force from Norway.

King William also sent some messengers to Norway, probably in 1069 (Symeon of Durham, 202). We do not know the outcome of this meeting (the kings' sagas are notoriously short on information on the reign of Óláfr kyrri), but it is possible that the Norwegian king made a kind of peace agreement with King William on this occasion. In reality, the Norwegians had probably become less of a threat - or support - after their defeat at Stamford Bridge. This must have meant a significant loss of men among the aristocracy. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tells us that only twenty out of several hundred ships returned to Norway in late 1066, and Orderic Vitalis says that he had himself seen piles of corpses at Stamford Bridge some fifty years after the battle.

However, after the Conquest several of the sons and nephews of the slain king Harold Godwinsson seem to have sought refuge in Norway. According to the kings' sagas, a certain Skúli followed Óláfr to Norway. The kings' sagas tell us that this was the son of Tostig, son of Earl Godwin and brother of King Harold Godwinsson. He became known as the *konungsföstri* of Óláfr, and also his most important advisor (Skúli was not, as often assumed, Óláfr's foster-father; he was only twelve or thirteen years old when he came to Norway).

According to *Morkinskinna* another son of Tostig, Ketill, also came to Norway, and William of Malmesbury informs us that Harold, son of King Harold Godwinsson, reappeared in England in the late 1090's in company with the son of King Óláfr kyrri, Magnús berfœttr. There are also indications that English aristocrats sought the support of the Norwegian king in the political struggles around 1100 (Gade, 2000), and there was apparently cooperation between King Magnús, his son Sigurðr Jorsalafari and minters and merchants in Lincoln at this time (Johnsen, 1984)

During the twelfth century, however, the political relations between the kings and aristocrats of England and Norway seem to have become less close. The trade between Grimsby and Norway, and not least the contact between the English and Norwegian churches, on the other hand, were both relations that remained more stable.

### Religious relations

When William sent messengers to King Óláfr kyrri in 1069 with a Norwegian ship, there was also an English refugee on board. Symeon of Durham wrote down a fascinating story about Turgot, an educated man probably belonging to a distinguished family in Lincolnshire, who escaped from Norman imprisonment, and was protected by the Norwegian merchants against King William's men. He received a warm welcome in Norway from King Óláfr, who made Turgot a chaplain in his *hird*, as well as his teacher, especially in the Psalms. The king himself is said to have assisted Turgot during mass. This truth of this story has been questioned, but we should remember that Symeon knew Turgot personally; Turgot became prior at the Benedictine congregation connected to the cathedral of Durham, while Symeon was *precentor* there, an office related to the singing during mass as well as the guardianship of the cathedral's books (Bandlien, 2004). Turgot later became bishop of St Andrews and is perhaps best known as the author of the Life of St Margaret of Scotland.

There are also other scattered evidences of contact between the Norwegian and English churches, especially in the parts of England formerly belonging to the Danelaw. Aside from the well-known contacts, like English influence on the early Norwegian stone churches (such as the cathedral in Stavanger in the 1120's, the early church of St Óláfr in Trondheim in the 1080's, and the Cistercian abbeys of Lyse and Hovedøya in the 1140's), the introduction of the reformed liturgy, the *Regularis Concordia*, probably took place as early as the 1080's (Gjerløw, 1961; Andersen, 1995). It is tempting to connect this to the presence of Turgot, the English cleric, but there were also most probably other influential Englishmen in the early Norwegian church (Bandlien, 2004). Reinald, who became the first bishop of Stavanger, was an Englishman, as was a certain priest who according to several Norse sources was mutilated by Norwegian aristocrats in the 1140's. Geoffrey of Durham, in his *Life of Bartholomew*, the hermit of Farne, tells how St Bartholomew came to Norway and was ordained as a priest, and after three years returned to England to become an anchorite in Northumbria (*Vita Bartholomæi Farnensis*, 298).

Norwegians were also present in English monasteries. The *Life and Miracles of St Ivo* mentions a monk at Ramsey with an adoptive son; both came from Norway in the eleventh century (*Miracula S. Ivonis*, lxvi). Reginald of Durham tells of a young Norwegian monk in the 1170's who had been punished with a serious disease for his immorality, and only got cured at the shrine of St Cuthbert in Durham (Reginald of Durham, ch. 112). There can also be mentioned the enigmatic Bishop Osmund, who was probably a relative of Bishop Grimkell in Norway and became bishop of Skara, before ending his life as a respected member of the abbey of Ely in the 1070's (*Liber Eliensis*, II, ch. 99). Furthermore, there is the presence of many Scandinavian names in the *Liber Vitae* at both Thorney and Durham, suggesting the presence of Norwegians, and perhaps especially Danes, at these abbeys in this period (Insley, 2004). This is even more likely as names in Anglo-Norman England rapidly became 'Normanised' in this period (Bartlett, 2000, 538-541).

### Literary relations

These fluent contacts between learned men between Norway and England may, I will suggest, also have some bearing on our understanding of some pieces of literature produced in England in the twelfth and early thirteenth century which are curiously related to Norse sagas.

These literary works include the *Life of Waldef* [Earl Waltheof], produced in the early thirteenth century by William of Ramsey, who also included a story of Waltheof's father, Earl Siward; the *Gesta Herewardi*, compiled at Ely in the middle of the twelfth century; the anonymous work *De Obsessione Dunelmi*, written at the end of the twelfth century in Durham; and *Vita Haroldi*, an unreliable, but still very interesting source for the life of Harold Godwinsson which was written in the early thirteenth century, partly in order to prove that Harold survived the Battle of Hastings.

I will not discuss these texts in detail here, but their affinities with stories preserved in Norse literature are striking. Earl Waltheof was a saint not much venerated in England outside Crowland (Watkins, 1996), and the strong memory of him in Norway and the kings' sagas (Haki Antonsson, 2001), although fraught with

historical mistakes, can best be explained by the transmission of this story orally from this abbey in East Anglia to Norway. The story of his forefathers, who were supposedly descended from a union of a bear and a woman, is close to the accounts of half-bears in Norse sagas, such as that in *Hrólfs saga kraki*.

*De Obsessione Dunelmi* relates the feud between the rivalling parties related to the Earldom of Northumbria in the wake of the murder of Earl Uhtred in 1016. This feud lasted for nearly half a century, involving the sons of Earl Godwin and the above mentioned Earl Siward, father of Waltheof (Fletcher, 2003). Here it is the social context and the literary feuding pattern that resemble the saga literature in many ways.

An important theme in the *Gesta Herewardi* is how the hero and outlaw Hereward, through facing monsters, acquires the qualities of these monsters. He both saves the civilised community through defeating the monsters, but remains on the margins of this very same community when refusing to marry. In this way, the story of the outlaw is how he is an uncivilised and monstrous hero while being an outlaw, but ultimately he returns to society through reconciliation with William the Conqueror, and moves from wilderness to civilization again. In his outlaw days, however, the young Hereward moves between categories of proper domestic masculinity and the threatening forces of society (Jones, 2002). This is quite similar to the negotiating of masculinity and the monstrous in Norse sources (Bandlien, 2005), and indicates an understanding of the fantastic in parts of England with affinities to the Norse understanding of humanity, gender and the world.

The story of the survival of Harold Godwinsson in *Vita Haroldi* (which is also alluded to in other English sources, such as the *Waltham Chronicle*), also shows close resemblance to Norse texts, especially the *þáttur* about Heming Ásláksson. Heming was an Icelander who had joined the following of Harold Godwinsson after a dispute with Haraldr harðráði. Later he witnessed how Harold survived the Battle of Hastings and became a monk (Ashdown, 1959). The story pattern resembles that of the stories of Óláfr Tryggvason after the battle of Svolder in 1000, and again suggests, although without conclusive evidence, a lively literary exchange between England and Norway as well as Iceland. The main meeting points seem to have been mainly connections between religious institutions, although the contribution of increasing trade can not be ruled out. But the contact seems fairly independent of the political relations between kings and aristocrats in the twelfth century.

### The view of Norway from the learned culture in England

Contrary to these sources, there are other English sources that depict Norway as a strange, cold and barbarous country, in a manner not too far from the interpretation of heathen Scandinavia as an area of monstrous and demonic forces in Carolingian times (Bandlien, 2005, 152-164).

Among these are Reginald of Durham, who in the 1170's condemned the raid on England by the Norwegian King Eysteinn in 1151 (*Libellus de admirandis*, ch. 29), and later, in connection to the papal legate Stephanus's journey to Norway labels the people there *gentis barbariem* who even needed to be 'converted' (*Libellus de admirandis*, ch. 52). This is quite different in tone from Symeon of Durham's

description of the court of Óláfr kyrrí some fifty years earlier, when he, telling about Turgot's stay in Norway, claimed that this court was so civilised that it threatened the moral state of the English cleric.

A similar negative view of Norway can probably be traced in the poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*. This work, authored by the otherwise unknown cleric Nicholas, mentions the visit of a 'good man from Rome' to a barbarous and cold land to the North (ll. 999-1018). It has been suggested that this may refer to the visit of either Nicholas Breakspear or Stephanus, both papal legates to Norway, in 1152/3 and 1163/4 respectively (Huganir, 1935, 100-115; Tupper, 1934; Chapman, 1946; *The Owl and the Nightingale*, notes on pp. 73-74). The Nightingale in the poem describes the land in the North as 'just wilderness and wasteland – all they are used to is crags and rocks towering up to heaven, snow and hail. Wherever the land is grim and unattractive the inhabitants will be wild and wretched. They know neither peace nor friendship. They're heedless of how they live. They eat both fish and meat raw, just as if wolves had torn it apart. They drink the whey as well as the milk. They don't know what else they do. They don't have either wine or beer, but live instead like wild animals. They go around clad in rough pelts looking as if they've just come out of hell.' (ll. 1000-1014) The date of this poem is disputed; most scholars support a date around 1200 while some suggest it was written as late as the 1270's (*The Owl and the Nightingale*, xiv-xxi).

William of Malmesbury, a Norman monk, was maybe even harsher when he wrote about the response to Pope Urban II's preaching of the first crusade: 'it [Urban's speech] affected all who in the remotest islands or among barbarian tribes had heard the call of Christ. The time had come for the Welshman to give up hunting in his forests, the Scotsman forsook his familiar fleas, the Dane broke off his long drawn-out potatoes, the Norwegian left his diet of raw fish.' William even said that St Óláfr himself had been ruled by his passions, and regarded the Norwegians (along with the Danes) as 'unbelievably barbaric', but the Norwegians were more greedily rapacious and more violently lustful (*Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, V, ch. 259).

According to John Gillingham, William of Malmesbury was a key figure in the development of the distinctions between the English as civilised and their neighbours as barbarians (Gillingham, 2000: 3-18; Thomas, 2003). This was thus a learned discourse that increasingly was shaping identities in Anglo-Norman England, and probably does not reflect the common view of Norway in the cities and abbeys which had closer contact with Norwegians. Interestingly enough, however, it was a view that was also shared by clerics in Norway. In the *Passio Olavi* from the 1150's and 1170's, we find a similar view of Norway. This text has a complex history, but it seems as if an important phase in the development happened in England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. According to this learned view, Norway was the land of cold and evil, and had to be held in check by the cult of the saint (Skånland, 1965; Kraggerud, 2002). Thus, this view of the barbarous land in the north also seems to have become part of the self-conception of learned Norwegians.

Paradoxically, this negative view of Norway indicates how influential learned conceptions of the world were in Norway. The Latin literature of Anglo-Norman England, especially of the old Danelaw region, also shares some common traits both in stories told and in the description of society and politics with the Norse saga literature,

especially with stories connected to the Norwegian kings. This suggests that there were closer relations between the English and the Norse cultures from the late eleventh to early thirteenth centuries than has often been assumed. The evidence shows at least that the contact points in politics and the church were many, even though the relations between the Norwegian and Anglo-Norman kings were not particularly close. Perhaps, then, it is time to see (at least parts of) English history writing from this time as an integral part of Norse literature and culture.

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