

Stefka Georgieva Eriksen (ed.): *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Scandinavia, c. 1100–1350*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. XII+442 pp.

REVIEWED BY MIA MÜNSTER-SWENDSEN
Roskilde University

The book contains thirteen essays mainly by Nordic scholars covering an eclectic array of topics, such as grammatical treatises, visual arts, liturgy, vernacular as well as Latin texts, the sagas, poetry, and manuscript fragments. The individual, often highly specialized contributions are divided into three sub-sections, following the two introductory essays “Intellectual Culture and Medieval Scandinavia” by Stefka Georgieva Eriksen (the editor) and Gunnar Harðason’s survey of Old Norse intellectual culture. The first sub-section contains essays dealing with various processes of identity formation, introduced by a survey of aspects of the thirteenth-century intellectual milieu in Paris by Ian P. Wei. Like the former, the second section, “Thinking in figures” is headed by a broad essay by a leading scholar in the field, Rita Copeland. The third and final section deals with the juxtaposition of earthly existence and heavenly salvation.

As the editor states in her introduction, the focus is on Iceland and Norway, “but where relevant, attention will also be paid to textual and material culture produced in Denmark and Norway” (p. 2). One might well ask when and where, in a book purportedly about Scandinavian culture, these are not relevant. This distinctly curious – one might say disingenuous – omission puzzled this reader throughout. For example: the chapter entitled *Medieval Scandinavia 1100–1350* in the editor’s main introduction gives an overview of the institutionalization of the Church, and lists the founding of the houses of the various monastic orders, but limited to that of Norway and Iceland. Hence in this book “Scandinavian” must be taken to mean Old Norse, and the geographical term excludes both Denmark and Sweden. This limitation is also reflected in Harðason’s survey essay on Norse intellectual culture, which focuses exclusively on the textual evidence from Norway and Iceland.

Despite the attempt to create a framework with the three sub-sections there is a seeming lack of cohesion between the majority of the contributions. Indeed, the sections seem to have been imposed rather arbitrarily on a collection of articles stemming from conference papers, as it often is with anthologies like this one, as every editor of such volumes will concede. Such criticism aside, the quality of the individual

essays is generally high and read on their own, the essays offer much both for the specialist and, occasionally, for readers who are looking for general introductions to important aspects of literary/intellectual culture in the period – particularly in the essays by Wei, Copeland and, for Iceland and Norway, Harðason.

Wei's article contains parts already published elsewhere, in *Speculum* and *Medievalia*, presenting a brief survey of the intellectual culture of the thirteenth-century University of Paris, with focus on particular subjects of debate, such as money/usury and marriage among the contemporary philosophers and theologians there. The essay could have fitted into any anthology on thirteenth-century learning and the content is not specifically linked to "Scandinavian intellectual culture". From Paris we somewhat abruptly move back to late eleventh-century Norway in Hauglid's essay on the early Romanesque architecture, particularly the distinct "sunken star" motif, which is otherwise only found in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England. The incorporation of this particular stylistic feature is seen as an example of cultural adaptation representing a departure from the usual Old Norse style or ornamentation. We are then led further north in Bandlien's essay, which focuses on identity formation of Icelandic intellectuals of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The author demonstrates clearly, that the core curriculum of the schools of continental Europe was also available to the Icelanders, and that they incorporated it into their vernacular works. Vadum's essay has a similar focus, though here we are presented with the incorporation of canonistic texts and doctrines in the Icelandic context, with particular focus on *Jóns saga baptista* – a didactic, encyclopaedic work intended for priests who had no Latin. The "Saga of John the Baptist" it is aptly demonstrated, became a vehicle for the transmission of the canonistic doctrine of Raymond of Peñafort's *Summa da casibus*. On its own, the essay is an excellent study on the transmission of canon law in this particular and rather startling context, but it is not entirely clear why it is placed in the section on identity formation. Like Wei's contribution did in the former section, Rita Copeland's article serves as a form of keynote to the next, which probably reflects the roles of the two scholars in the conference from which the essays in this volume supposedly come. The essay is an excellent short survey of learned theoretical grammar and rhetoric with particular focus on the twelfth-century innovations, thus providing the reader with the necessary tools to understand and appreciate a highly technical learned literary culture. It is followed by two articles on the incorporation of *grammatica* in Old Norse vernacular literature and culture. The first, by Åslaug Ommundsen, traces elements of Latin learning and education in Old Norse world – again, this means Iceland and Norway. It too shows that classroom teaching of Latin there was centred around the same core curriculum as in the rest of

Europe at the time. The second is Mikael Males' study of the Icelandic poets' creation of a vernacular, technical grammatical culture, and together, these three articles fit neatly together. The sub-section is concluded by Mats Malm's study of visualization and the uses of imagery in Nordic literature – here for once – Swedish textual material is engaged with, namely that of Magister Mathias of Linköping and St Birgitta of Vadstena. Malm claims that Vadstena developed a highly specific literary and intellectual culture which incorporated both “native” and “imported” elements. The third section is opened with Sigurd Hareide's essay on the Old Norse (i.e. Norwegian and Icelandic) liturgical commentaries. Like most of the articles in the volume, the focal point seems to be translation processes and the complex relationship between Latin and vernacular textual culture. Here, vernacularization of the central – and in principle untranslatable – ritual forms a particularly interesting case. Kristin B. Aavitsland's essay interprets the allegorical depiction of the virtues on the Lisbjerg altar, Denmark, as an example of the import of a didactic moral programme into a Danish context. Another instance of cultural *translatio*. The book concludes with an essay by the editor, Stefka G. Eriksen, on the Old Norse translations of two imported dialogues between the body and the soul; the Old French poem *Un samedi par nuit* and Hugh of St. Victor's treatise *Soliloquium de arrha animae*, here too, the essay is an example of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of “European” cultural products, more precisely didactic literature, into a Norse (i.e. Icelandic/Norwegian) context.

The main objections of this reviewer concern the conceptual framework – particularly the odd limitation of the geographical scope. This book, namely, is not about “Scandinavian intellectual culture”, but has a much narrower focus on predominantly Icelandic and Norwegian materials – i.e. in certain ways the book mainly covers the traditional field of “Old Norse” studies with a focus on vernacular literatures. The book thus, without any explanation, leaves out the entire (and really rather massive) corpus of Danish Latin learned texts, including the influential works of internationally famous thirteenth-century intellectuals such as Boethius de Dacia and Martin de Dacia, and equally, high points in Scandinavian learned Latinity, such as Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and the encyclopaedic *Hexaameron* by Anders Suneson, are never mentioned. For Sweden, a single article deals with the late-medieval Vadstena literary production, but apart from that, there is nothing else from that part of Scandinavia. Equally one might ask: What does “intellectual culture” comprise? Every type of cultural product, material, intellectual, spiritual, it seems. Thus here, the scope is suddenly very broad, perhaps too broad. It also seems as if the book operates with several, overlapping definitions. Thus on p. 2 the editor defines it as “modes of thinking, or intellectual, creative and cognitive processes”, and later, on p. 8. it seems to

encompass all practices and processes that involve “thinking” and on p. 10 it is defined as “cognition, distributed and embedded”. This vagueness is further enhanced by the volume’s apparent lack of focus. It is not the quality of the individual contributions but the lack of a clearly stated explanation as to what binds these together that is the object of criticism. It took this reader quite a while to find out what this binding element might be. It is the processes of translation and adaptation of didactic material that seem to be the real, overarching topic that connects (most of) the essays, rather than a vaguely defined and essentially problematic “Scandinavian intellectual culture”. The title is simply just misleading in several ways. From it, the reader might expect to gain an overview of the learned world of medieval Scandinavia, instead what is presented is a collection of quite specialised essays mainly treating individual texts, artefacts, or cases. And though the express aim of the book was to challenge the traditional narratives and approaches, such as the idea of a specific Nordic *Sonderweg*, the distinction between Latin and vernacular culture, the search for origins of unspoiled, authentic “native” elements, it is a shame to discover that the volume seems to reconfirm old dichotomies and uphold a traditional “national” focus. Medieval European intellectual culture was transnational and transregional at heart, and “Scandinavia” however we define it geographically and culturally, belonged to this common culture in the period that the volume covers.