Vera Johanterwage: *Buddha in Bergen. Die altnordische Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*. Heidelberg, 2018.

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In the Travels of Marco Polo is found a tale from Ceylon of a young prince who is confronted with the evils of this world and decides to live his life in search of eternal life and of his maker. The narrative states that he would have been a saint if he had been baptized as a Christian. The Christianized form of this legend of Barlaam and Josaphat had already in Marco Polo's days travelled all over Europe in Latin versions as well as in many of the vernacular languages. From a tenth century version in Georgian over a Greek translation it had been translated into Latin already in the twelfth century, and by the mid-thirteenth century it found its way into Old Norse in a translation made in Norway. It would be no great exaggeration to mention this narrative as one of the most widely spread in thirteenth century Europe.

In her book Vera Johanterwage focuses on the Old Norse version of the legend, the *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, dated to the mid-thirteenth century. The first chapter of the book, however, provides a thorough and updated introduction to

the background of the legend and its transfer into the European and Christian tradition.

In the following chapter the Norwegian translation is at the centre of interest, and its context, presumably in the Norwegian court of King Hákon Hákonarson in Bergen, is discussed in some detail. The view of this court as the main literary milieu in Norway, responsible for more or less all the literary output of the thirteenth century, is not new, and from Johanterwage's presentation it appears to be relatively un-problematic. There are reasons, however, to be a bit sceptical to an all to absolute attribution of the Norwegian literary output to one single milieu, something I will return to below. Another question that is given much attention here, the attribution of the translation to the son of Hákon Hákonarson, Hákon ungi, is related to the identification of this literary milieu. The chapter provides a thorough discussion of earlier scholarship and finally descriptions of the manuscripts and the transmission of the text in later manuscripts. The concluding part of this chapter provides a discussion of the structure of the saga narrative.

Chapter 4 of the book is central in Johanterwage's work with a focus on the literary presentation and style of the saga narrative. The material used for comparison here consists of the translated *riddarasögur* and the original work *Konungs skuggsjá*, and the assumption is that these texts together reflect stylistic and literary features of the Norwegian court in Bergen. Among the features of the texts discussed in this chapter are binominal pairs with alliteration and the use of present participle as representative of the so called *learned style* or *court style*. Special attention is also paid to the vocabulary of the translation in relation to other Norwegian literature in the presentation of court culture. Johanterwage presents these aspects of the translated text thoroughly and relate them to the courtly culture of Hákon Hákonarson in the mid-thirteenth century. At one instance she points out that the examples she uses are not always found in the source text, the *Vulgata* text in Latin, and not in the oldest manuscripts, but only in an Icelandic manuscript from the second half of the fourteenth century. The implications of this could perhaps have been discussed further as they rather seem to represent the *mouvance* of the text in the manuscript tradition than the earliest transfer from Latin. With this perspective the text witness would primarily represent the expectations of scribe and audience at the time of writing and not necessarily that of the thirteenth century court in Norway.

In the fifth chapter of the book Johanterwage turns to the transmission and reception of *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* in a rather limited way. The concern of the chapter is the variation found in the manuscripts of the translation, that is, how the individual scribes (and perhaps patrons) have changed the text, here represented in changes in the use of binominals with alliteration and present participles. This chapter could perhaps have been given more space, and it could also

have deserved to be placed earlier in the discussion of the general conditions of translation and transmission in the period. It would, if introduced at an earlier stage, have lead the general discussion away from the court in Bergen and into the wider field of distribution of literate erudition in the Norse realm. And this has an impact on the above mentioned treatment of the vocabulary as it may have been changed throughout the dissemination of the text in the manuscript tradition.

A final chapter takes us into the sixteenth century and introduces a new translation of the Barlaam and Josaphat tradition. The Icelandic translation of the narrative found in the manuscript known as Reykjahólabók is not based on the *Vulgata* text but rather on the *Passionals* and a Low German adaptation of *Der Heiligen Leben* (in itself based on *Legenda Aurea*). This chapter appears as a new thread rather than as a continuation of the previous discussion, and it feels more like an appendix than part of the study of *Buddha in Bergen*. This does not mean that it does not contribute to the overall overview of the distribution of the narrative of Barlaam and Josaphat in the western parts of Scandinavia. It opens the question, however, about the exclusion of the distribution of the narrative in the eastern parts of Scandinavia. One could ask why the sixteenth century, Icelandic text gets this attention while the Swedish texts are treated more stepmotherly. The narrative of Barlaam and Josaphat in the Swedish manuscript Cod Holm A 49 is after all based to some extent on the Norwegian text (see e. g. Arvidsson 2009).

The question of defining the scope and material for the present study has been touched on a couple of times in the above presentation. From the title of the book, *Buddha in Bergen* we are led to expect a study focusing on the *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* and its presentation of the Christianized Buddha in Bergen, but this expectation is soon abandoned in various ways, and, it should be clear, not necessarily to the disadvantage for the study. Apart from the thorough introduction of the background for the narrative and also some expansions on both the general Scandinavian and the German traditions, the centerpiece of the study (Chapters 3 and 4) focuses on the Norwegian translation and its relation to the Norwegian court. But the two last chapters take another direction and focus more on the Icelandic transmission of the Norwegian translation and the later and independent Icelandic translation. The overall impression, therefore, can sometimes appear as a collection of loosely connected sub-studies rather than a coherent approach to the narrative in Bergen.

There are two central issues of the present study I would like to spend some more words on. My concern here is of a general nature and should be regarded rather as raised by Johanterwage's presentation than as a critique of her work. Sometimes the most interesting thing about scholarly work is not the result *per se*, but rather the new questions or re-opening of old questions it causes.

The first aspect of Johanterwage's presentation that I find intriguing has to do with the courtly milieu. The focus on the court milieu could be questioned. It has always been an hypothesis rather than a fact, and many of the earlier scholars who have addressed the question have been cautious to use modal expressions when discussing it. A good example of this can actually be found in Johanterwage's book (p. 216), where she quotes the Norwegian scholar Ludvig Holm-Olsen referring to *Konungs skuggsjá*:

sannsynligvis er det skrevet til bruk for kongssønnene, Håkon unge, født i 1232 og Magnus, født i 1238, den senere Lagabøter (konge 1263–1280). *Kanskje* har det ikke foreligget før etter Håkon unges død i 1257. Magnus har sikkert nok studert det, som innslagene fra Kongespeilet i hans lovgivning viser. (Holm-Olsen 1975: 169; my italics)

Holm-Olsen twice uses modal forms to indicate that this attribution of *Konungs skuggsjá* should not be taken as a fact, but rather as based on vague indications. Today it would perhaps even be seen as based on wishful thinking, that the court was of such significance for the emerging literary culture rather than a result of the more developed Latin book culture of church and monasteries. Johanterwage's acceptance of this association of literary ambition to the court is representative of contemporary stand-points of scholarship in the field. It could be, however, that our views of the medieval literary culture need to be re-addressed with a new focus on the roles of ambitious literate networks of clerics and monks, often educated on the Continent or in England, and consequently fluent not only in their own language but also well educated in Latin and Latin books. At least some of these learned clerics would obviously also have taken part in court life and in literary activities involving the secular elite. The court was clearly an important venue for literary ambition, but perhaps not as solitary as we may be led to believe by earlier scholarship.

And this leads me to the second question that is raised from Johanterwage's presentation. In chapter 3.1, under the heading "Håkon ungi (1232–1257) – ein Prinz als Verfasser der *Barlaams saga*?" (pp. 71–88), Johanterwage treats the earlier discussion of the possible translator or milieu of translation of *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*. The suggestion of Håkon ungi as the translator is based on a mention of a king, "Håkon ungi", as the one who translated the saga of Barlaam and Josaphat found in *Guðmundar saga biskups Arasonar* referring to Håkon Sverrisson in the early thirteenth century. This attribution has been much debated in earlier scholarship, however, and most scholars have landed on Håkon ungi Håkonarson as the most probable candidate. But the attribution is not at all certain, even if we agree on which Håkon is meant, and it may just as well be seen as part of the later rhetorical strategy to attribute written works to authorities as

kings and archbishops. Johanterwage displays a sound scepticism to the attribution, but as far as I can see she never reaches a definite standpoint on the matter (perhaps also a sound position). After her discussion of Håkon ungi as a possible translator, Johanterwage goes on to other alternatives. She first treats the possibility of the Cistercian order as a milieu close to the court in Bergen where the text could have been translated, and points to the frequent contacts between the Norwegian Cistercians and their English counterparts as a possible way for the Latin text to have arrived in Norway. It would have been relevant here, I think, to perhaps also follow other avenues of investigation to widen the search for a possible milieu. Here it suffices to give just one example that might have proved profitable. In the 1230s the Dominican friars were established in Norway, and they were definitely both learned and well versed in Latin book culture. A discussion of this possible milieu for the translation of the narrative about Barlaam and Josaphat, perhaps as a part of introducing *exempla* for the Norwegian elite in general in the vernacular, could possibly have shed some new light on the text and its subsequent transmission.

Vera Johanterwage presents a thorough and highly useful study of the narrative of Barlaam and Josaphat in Scandinavia with a focus on the Norwegian *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*. Her presentation not only provides a survey of the state of art of the research on this tradition, but also a number of studies that shed new light on first of all the Norwegian text and its dissemination. In the above I have made some suggestions as to questions raised by the book. Some of these could possibly have deserved to be treated in the book as it is now published, but it could also be the case that these suggestions are the result of the present study and may lead to further studies; good scholarship should always open up for new questions.

References

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