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## Book review

Stefan Drechsler: *Illuminated Manuscript Production in Medieval Iceland. Literary and Artistic Activities of the Monastery at Helgafell in the Fourteenth Century*. Manuscripta Publications in Manuscript Research. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. 275 pp. ISBN: 978-2-503-58902-2; e-ISBN: 978-2-503-58902-9.

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In 2021, the monograph *Illuminated manuscript production in medieval Iceland. Literary and artistic activities of the monastery at Helgafell in the fourteenth century* was published, written by Stefan Drechsler and published by Brepols Publishers. The book is a reworking of Drechsler's doctoral thesis, defended at The University of Aberdeen in 2017. As the title and subtitle indicate, the manuscript production at Helgafell is treated, and a particular focus is on the artwork in the manuscripts. The aim of the author is to analyze the Helgafell group of manuscripts from the perspective of content, production and artwork, in order to discern the characteristics of these manuscripts. An important task of the study is also to investigate the foreign influences on the artwork in the manuscripts. This is an important aspect, as many of the manuscripts in the group are richly illuminated.

This group of manuscripts, i.e., the one with provenance in Helgafell, has been in focus before, and one of the better known studies is that of Ólafur Halldórsson, *Helgafellsbækur fornar* (1966). Drechsler brings 16 manuscripts to this manuscript group. To a large extent, the content of the manuscripts consists of religious texts, e.g. biskupasögur, heilagra manna sögur and Bible translations, but also of legal texts. The element of classic saga literature is small. The manuscripts included in this group were produced during the 14th century. A main criterion for bringing these manuscripts together in a group has been that the same scribal hands have been active in them.

In chapter 1, the author outlines some general theoretical guidelines for the investigation. The basic starting points to which the author adheres fall within the field often referred to as new philology, material philology or the like. It is, of course, a completely legitimate position, but to some extent I object to the description given of the philological activity before the arrival of the new philology. Here, as in many other studies that have been carried out within the new philology, it is the field of textual criticism that is described in negative terms. Textual criticism is described as a search for a lost archetype, an idealized construction, to a large extent detached from the

preserved manuscripts. Regarding text-critical work carried out with skill, this is an unfair description. Admittedly, one of the goals of text-critical work is to arrive at an archetype, which as a rule lies further back than the preserved textual witnesses, but the archetype is (or at least should be) established on the basis of the preserved textual witnesses, not disconnected from these. For the investigation the author is doing, however, this description does not play a major role, since it does not touch the field of textual criticism, but focuses on the manuscripts themselves and their creation.

Apart from this, the author describes in this chapter the criteria by which the examined manuscripts have been brought together in a group. The manuscripts that have been produced by either of the two scribal hands that have been associated with Helgafell are counted in this group. Furthermore, the images in the manuscripts are studied from a comparative perspective, where the images in the manuscripts are compared with images from scriptoria in other countries, mainly northern France and England.

In chapter 2, Helgafell as a historical and cultural place is described. Its origin was a community in Flatey in Breiðafjörður in 1172, and a couple of years later it was moved to Helgafell. The personal connections between Helgafell and other religious institutions on Iceland are mapped. The size of the library at the monastery is also described – somewhere around 120 volumes at the time when the monastery was moved to Helgafell.

Chapter 3, called The Scriptorium, is the longest in the monograph. Here, the manuscripts belonging to the Helgafell group are examined. They are described regarding their content, their composition, their images and initials. Furthermore, their connections with other manuscripts and other scriptoria are discussed. Some of the more well-known manuscripts dealt with are AM 233 a fol. (e.g., *heilagra manna sögur*), AM 350 fol. (*Jónsbók*) and AM 226 4to (*Stjórn*). Special attention is of course given to the artwork, and it is here that the focus of the study lies. The author has put a large effort into analysing the artwork in the manuscripts, and for me, not being a specialized art historian, it was interesting and educational to read these sections. Sometimes, however, the line of reasoning was not altogether easy to follow, perhaps due to my insufficient competence in the analysis of artwork (see further below). An important part of the analysis is the creation of manuscript networks, i.e. maps over the manuscripts sharing features of different categories (orthographical, artistic, textual etc.).

One aspect that I would have desired, in order to make the investigation more directly accessible to non-specialists in the history of art, is a more comprehensive discussion of the process of attributing images to specific artists. What criteria are

valid in this attribution, and how much weight is to be given to each criterion? And what degree of similarity is to be demanded for an attribution to be considered valid? For researchers within art history, such aspects are probably well-known, but for people from other fields within manuscript studies, such as myself, a discussion of the criteria and the evaluation of these would have been very valuable.

Even though the artwork is the focus of the investigation, attention is also given to other features, such as orthography and textual content. The textual content furthermore plays a part in the analysis of the artwork, as influence from the texts on the artwork is discussed. Thus, a rather large number of text transcriptions from the manuscripts are rendered in the chapter. In some cases, the transcriptions seem to be less correct. I will exemplify this with a transcription on p. 142 from AM 347 fol. (60vb): ‘skal’ (to be read ‘skál’); ‘fol.a’ (to be read ‘fola’); ‘hreppser’ (to be read ‘hrepp sem’); ‘fora’ (to be read ‘fóra’); ‘vmboðs manni’ (to be read ‘vmboðs maðr’; 2nd example<sup>1</sup>); ‘nok | koru þann stað’ (to be read ‘nok | korn þann stað’; ‘mannum’ (to be read ‘mann’). I have of course not checked all the transcriptions, but there are similar examples are found elsewhere. These errors do not affect the author’s analysis, but they can certainly disturb at least the philologically inclined reader.

In chapter 4, called European Artworks, the influences from France, England and Norway on the art in the Helgafell manuscripts are examined. For the non-expert in the history of art, like myself, the comparison between illuminations from the different scriptoria is very interesting. Firstly, the author addresses the aspect of influence from France on the artwork in the Helgafell manuscripts. He stresses that there were cultural influences in other areas during especially the 13th century at the court of Hákon Hákonarson, with the translation of courtly literature. It is pointed out that certain types of artwork present in some Icelandic manuscripts, e.g. in AM 226 fol., belonged to a type that at the time was largely outdated on the Continent. Some of the ornamentation in this manuscript displays influence from French artwork from the 12th century. The author points to influences from East Anglia (Norwich) on e.g. AM 233 a, AM 350 fol. (*Skarðsbók*) and GKS 1005 fol. (*Flateyjarbók*). Furthermore, the author stresses the contacts between Bergen and Helgafell, and that this was a route for cultural influence e.g. within the field of illuminations.

In chapter 5, Back at Western Icelandic Scribal Desks, a concluding discussion is carried out regarding the aspects investigated in the previous chapters. The author emphasizes the connection between a time of economic growth in Helgafell and an increase in the production of manuscripts in the period 1350–1400. It is also pointed

<sup>1</sup> Earlier on the same line in the transcript, the form ‘vmboðs manni’ (60vb:27), with a clear superscript ‘r’. In the second occurrence of the same lemma later on the line in the transcript (60vb:28), the superscript letter is clearly ‘r’, giving the form ‘vmboðs maðr’.

out that there were three manuscript workshops in western Iceland, one of which was the one in Helgafell. The other two were situated in the surroundings of Helgafell, and it appears that there were contacts between the latter two and Helgafell. The investigation ends with a concluding chapter, where the most important findings are summed up.

For me as a mainly philologically and linguistically inclined researcher, it was very educational to take part of the art historical investigations in this monograph. It is interesting to see the routes through which influences in the artwork in the manuscripts moved through Europe and into the Icelandic manuscripts. The aim regarding influences on the artwork in the manuscripts is thus thoroughly covered. The investigation also gives the reader a good picture of the textual content of the manuscripts produced at Helgafell, showing what kind of texts that were central to this place. Thus, both the form and the content of the manuscripts belonging to this group are treated in the monograph. Furthermore, I would like to praise the large number of illustrations in the book, making it a delight to the eye. Thus, the analysis of the artwork in the Helgafell manuscripts, the main aim of the monograph, appears to be well carried out. My critical point regarding the study concern aspects that are not crucial to the study itself, but that nevertheless can be disturbing. These critical points include the somewhat simplified and misleading description of the field of textual criticism (of which the present author is certainly not alone) and the sometimes erroneous transcriptions in chapter 3.

As mentioned above, it would have been a great educational effort towards non-specialists in the history of art to have had a discussion in which the methodological aspects of attributing illuminations to certain artists were thoroughly addressed. As I stated above, this is probably a well-known complex of problems for art historians, but for general philologists I think such a discussion would be useful. Such a discussion is a desired task for future research. The task of analyzing groups of manuscripts according to different criteria, such as codicology, palaeography, textual content, artwork etc., is a fruitful way forward for the field of manuscript studies. Thus, the general approach of the author is very interesting, and it deserves followers in order to shed further light on the manuscript production of medieval Iceland.

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