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Sound Cultures in the Medieval North: Tuning in[1]

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The aim of this article is twofold: it reviews and collates recent discussions on sound in medieval and Old Norse studies, and in this way, it serves as a historiographical and thematic introduction to the articles of this special issue. The article is bipartite: first, it accounts for studies of intradiegetic sounds, including various categories of human and animal voices and sounds produced by things, animals, nature, and supernatural agencies, as discussed in scholarship focusing on medieval texts. Second, it reviews discussions of extradiegetic sounds, based on material sources, such as the manuscripts themselves, archaeology, architecture, and landscapes. These investigations testify that sound does matter when studying medieval textual and material culture and they legitimate the further investigations of the topic in this special issue, whose main contribution is its focus on sound cultures of the medieval North.

Like smell, sound is ephemeral and once faded is gone forever. Medieval sound is impossible to study directly, but there are still numerous and various sources that testify to or record past sound cultures. These include texts that describe and discuss sound; images that depict people being exposed to pleasant or terrifying sounds or people producing sound or being silent; objects that were used to produce sounds; still standing architecture that was built to enwrap the sound, to amplify it and transmit it; and even the landscapes of the past, that were actively and purposefully used as a frame for the transmission of sounds that needed to be heard across space.

Studies of medieval sound cultures, based on such varied sources have proliferated during the past several decades, and the main contribution of this special issue of *Collegium Medievale* is its explicit focus on the cultural context of medieval Scandinavia. This special issue is based on three interdisciplinary sessions presented at the Leeds Medieval Congress in 2023, and collects the papers that discussed sound based pri-

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marily on texts of various materialities (manuscripts and inscriptions), scripts (Latin and runic alphabet), languages (Old Norse and Latin) and literary genres (law texts, hagiography, Icelandic family sagas, Old Norse translations, among others).[2] Our main aim is to highlight the central role that sound had in medieval, and especially Old Norse, culture. The material remnants that we still have from that period, such as texts, manuscripts, inscriptions, art, things, buildings, were produced, used, and experienced within a multimodal and multivocal universe. This suggests that all the sensory aspects of this culture (its visuality, materiality, audibility, etc) constantly and continuously interplayed and conditioned the way humans participated in it. Our intention is not to present an all-inclusive coverage of sound, as discussed in textual cultures from medieval Scandinavia, but rather to unveil some new aspects of this ephemeral side of Old Norse culture and to investigate how it may have conditioned human existence.

This special issue builds upon a rich tradition of sound-studies based on material from medieval Europe and the North. The following review of these traditions will serve as a thematic and historiographical contextualization of the articles in this special issue. It will thus give the contours of the medieval North as an audible universe, as revealed in previous scholarship, which is to serve as a sonic background for the sounds that will be discussed in the following articles. The review of the existing scholarship will be structured according to the main categories of sounds that are discussed, and will be grouped in: (1) intradiegetic sounds, i.e., voices, discourses, and other sounds that are described in literary texts; and (2) extradiegetic sounds, i.e., sounds outside the world of the texts, which included the voiced readings/performances of the texts themselves as well as all other sounds that may have occurred at such reading/performance scenes. The sources to the former group of sound categories are medieval texts themselves, while the sources to the second group of sounds include, in addition to the texts, the material aspects of medieval manuscripts, as well as art, architecture, and other sound-producing objects. Even though these categories of sound are discussed separately for the sake of structural clarity, it is significant to highlight that the categories are interrelated – for example: the sound of a church bell that is accounted for in a text may also be studied as an extradiegetic sound by investigating church bells themselves. Such parallels will be pointed out when appropriate.

Before we start, two disclaimers must be noted: first, a main category of sound that is not discussed in this special issue is music, mainly because music-studies is

[2] The other papers from the sessions, focusing on material culture will be referred to in this introductory article, as a thematic contextualization for the discussion on sound as described by and embedded in texts.

such a major and independent field on its own.[3] Second, a new and important approach to sound-studies entails hi-tech scientific methods where sound transmission can be measured through three-dimensional scanning of buildings, virtual reality-technology or acoustic analyzes of landscapes.[4] As exciting and productive as these methods may be, we do not engage with them in this special issue, and they thus fall out of the scope of this introductory article.

Sound matters: main debates and concepts

A review on the topic of sound in medieval culture is bound to start with a reference to the essay cluster 'Sound Matters' published in *Speculum* (2016), which explains, enthusiastically and convincingly, why the study of sound matters for our understanding of medieval culture. Its authors, Susan Boynton, Sarah Kay, Alison Cornish, and Andrew Albin, focus on various aspects of the human (and animal) voice, but they all highlight their common starting point, namely that in the Middle Ages, sound was seen as the essential matter of words (Kay 2016: 1000). Medieval rhetoricians distinguish further between different types of sound: articulate and inarticulate, and those that can be presented in writing or not. These categories are used to differentiate qualitatively between the human voice (usually referred to as *vox*) and non-human sounds. Human utterance is, for example, seen as articulate: 'it is the voicing of a rational soul articulated by a body' (Kay 2016: 1001). Nonetheless, the four authors of 'Sound Matters' illustrate that these categories are not so clear cut. Kay shows how medieval writers use *vox* to refer to human words and music, as well as to the sounds made by some animals (birds in the troubadour tradition), angels and sometimes instruments (Kay 2016: 1006). Several of the authors also point out that the hierarchy of sound follows the hierarchy of creatures in medieval ontology. For example, even though humans share the ability to sing with angels, song is essentially angelic and beyond humanity.[5] The *Speculum*-issue discusses sound, voice, and music based on textual and literary sources, as well as manuscript illuminations. Despite its ephemeral nature, sound emerges as a central aspect of medieval culture that demands of us a different engagement with the available sources.

The necessity to turn to sound-studies in the cultural context of medieval Scandinavia is further highlighted by the fact that the theoretical discussion on sound, at the core of the *Speculum*-articles, existed also in the Old Norse cultural context. Two

[3] See for example: Dillon 2012; Jeffery 1992. On the Old Norse material, see Attinger 1998; Attinger & Haug 2004.

[4] See for example Till 2023; Foschi (online).

[5] See especially Cornish 2016: 1015.

of the Old Norse grammatical treatises – *The Second Grammatical Treatise* (SGT) and *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, attributed to Ólafr Þórðarson (TGT)[6] – account explicitly for the nature of sound and its categories, and relate this discussion to the system of sounds of the Old Norse language, as well as its orthography, poetics and metrics.[7] The SGT states: *Allt er hljóð, þat er um kvikvendis eyru má skilja*[8]/ (Sound is everything which the ears of living creatures may comprehend.) This aural universe includes the sound produced by the natural elements (water, the sea, rocks, and the earth), which is inarticulate (*hljóð*). This category of sound also includes music. Then, there are the sounds made by living creatures, such as birds and animals, which is referred to as a voice (*rǫdd*), and they are unintelligible to most men. The third category of sound is men's speech, which is referred to as sound (*hljóð*), voice (*rǫdd*), and speech (*mál*). These are deeply embodied; they depend on breath and the placement of the tongue and the movement of the lips. Most significantly, they are related to reason and memory, and are intelligible. Ólafr's TGT also discusses the nature of *hljóð* (sound) in general and distinguishes between bodily and spiritual sounds related to the holy scripture, even though the text focuses mostly on the former category.[9] The bodily sounds may be made by lively and lifeless entities. The lifeless entities are further grouped into those that move (fire, wind, water), or not (stones, metals). Further, these sounds may be unintelligible (the sound of the wind, for example) and intelligible, such as music, which is referred to as celestial harmony (*cælestis armonia*) or heavenly sound (*himnesk hljóða-grein*) (Finnur Jónsson 1927: 21). The lively entities that are sound producing may lack consciousness (*vitlauss*) (grass, trees, etc), or they may be conscious. In that case, the sound may be referred to as a voice (*rǫdd*) or bodily sounds, such as stamping your feet or clapping your hands (Finnur Jónsson 1927: 21). Here it is also specified that voice is highly embodied, produced by the body, the lungs and the tongue and it is intelligible to the ears. It may be articulate, meaning possible to record in writing, or not, and the articulate sounds/voice can still be meaningful or not. The meaningful voices can be natural, such as children's cries or the sighs of a sick man, or they may be realized in the form of the speech of a conscious willful man (Finnur Jónsson 1927: 22). These categorizations of sounds in the SGT

[6] On the Old Norse grammatical tradition as a whole and the origin, provenance and manuscript transmission of all the four grammatical treatises, see Raschellà 1982.

[7] For *The Second Grammatical Treatise*, see Raschellà 1982. For *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, see Finnur Jónsson 1924.

[8] Raschellà 1982: 50.

[9] These passages accounting for various sound-categories may have been a later addition to Ólafr's grammatical treatise. For a more detailed discussion, see Finnur Jónsson 1927: 16–17.

and the TGT are deeply indebted to European learned culture, and they include direct references to Priscian's and Donatus' reflections on *vox*. The categorizations of sounds in the two grammatical treatises will be discussed more extensively in one of the articles in this special issue,[10] but here it suffices to emphasize that they incorporate the European theoretical discussions of sound in an utterly Norse context and debates, which in itself is an additional legitimation for the further study of sound cultures in medieval Scandinavia.

Before we indulge in how these and other topics have been discussed in medieval and Old Norse studies more specifically, some terms and concepts need to be briefly introduced as they will be used extensively in the following. *Vox* has been referred to already as a central concept in medieval culture, referring to language, spirituality, and textuality, as opposed to sound, which was regarded as inarticulate in theoretical treatises. Scholars have discussed numerous literary voices in texts (i.e., authors, narrators, translators, etc), by deploying the term *vocality*,[11] which signifies the cultural practice of interrelating written and vocally performed text. The latter concept has contributed to the upheaval of the *orality-literacy* dichotomy, which is adjacent, but not always directly related, to the discussions of voice and sound in philological and literary research. *Aurality* is another term that nuances the orality-literacy dichotomy, as it highlights the audible nature of medieval texts. The aurality of medieval texts may be seen as a complementary aspect to their *visuality* and *materiality*, i.e. the visual and material characteristics of texts and manuscripts, which would have impacted the reading process too. Reading today is most often private, i.e. it entails visual reception. The terms aurality and vocality of medieval texts serve to highlight exactly the fact that visual reception (i.e. private reading) was *not* the default mode of reading in medieval culture (even though we have references to that too),[12] but reading was most often vocal, aural, and thus embodied and performative, social and public. Thinking of medieval reading as *performance* brings to mind another term, namely *soundscapes*, which refers to the multiplicity of sounds that may be experienced at a given performance/reading setting. The voiced reading of a text would most often have been accompanied by many other voices and sounds, and the nature of the specific reading/performance-scene and its soundscape would have impacted the reception of the text. In the title of the special issue, we use the term *sound cultures*, in order to highlight that various soundscapes characterized various cultural settings and included

[10] See especially 'Sound, Voice, Speech – and Silence'.

[11] More detailed discussion and references will be provided in the section on 'Extradiegetic sound'.

[12] For a discussion, see Saenger 1982.

various sound cultures. The term *soundtrack* will be deployed too, in order to denote that sound cultures occur and develop not only in space, but also in time. We will return to all these concepts in greater detail below, but for now, they serve to underline not only that voice and sound mattered in medieval culture, but that they were the main medium through which texts were communicated, performed, and received. Learning more about medieval sound cultures is thus central for a renewed understanding of both medieval texts and human existence in the Middle Ages.

Intradiegetic sounds

The main focus of this special issue is on intradiegetic sounds, i.e. on sounds described in texts. These sounds comprise various literary voices, including these of creative agents as well as of created literary characters; silence, as a distinctive form of communication, and sounds perceived with the inner senses; as well as sounds of animal, natural and supernatural energies, and things. The existing scholarly discussions of these categories of sounds will be reviewed in the following.

Literary voices

The topic of literary voice and *vox* as represented in literature, mostly in Middle English but also some Old Norse texts, is discussed in a recent volume, *Medieval Literary Voices: Embodiment, Materiality and Performance*, edited by Louise D'Arcens and Sif Ríkharðsdóttir (2022). The book discusses voice on four levels: the narrative level, the authorial/ authoritative level, voice as revealed by various material aspects of medieval manuscripts, and voice from reception perspective. It includes articles on a great variety of topics related to literary voice, such as the link between voice and humanity, spirituality and textuality; the polyphony and multiplicity of voices available in literature; voice, gender and identity; voice and performativity, and thus authority; inner voices from the divine or the past; articulate and inarticulate voices; voice and music; silence and pauses as integral part of voice; externalized voices in the manuscripts; *vox* between orality and textuality. The book as a whole is a great example of the numerous aspects of medieval texts that are relevant for the study of literary voices.

As the volume implies, the most studied categories of literary voices are, without doubt, those of the **authors**,[13] **poets**,[14] **narrators,**[15] **translators**,[16] or other creative

[13] On European material, see Minnis 1984. For a recent review of the discussion on authorship in the Old Norse field, see Introductory article in Gropper & Rosli 2021.

[14] On prosimetrum in *Kings' sagas*, see for example Wellendorf 2022. On the function of skaldic verse in the *Íslendingasögur,* see O'Donoghue 2005. For case studies, see Clunies Ross 2010; Guðrún Nordal 2008.

agents. The material turn has also highlighted the significance of the explicit or implicit voices of scribes and compilers.[17] These voices frame the narratives and impact their form and meaning, and they are thus central when discussing composition, meaning and reception. Their absence or presence, their clarity or vagueness, would have impacted any vocal performance of a medieval text and they are thus significant factors when discussing extradiegetic sound too.

Within the narratives, we also find the voices of the **literary characters**. The distribution of voices amongst the characters and the form of these vocal exchanges matter for how we understand the narrative. The importance of vocal exchange and communication in Old Norse literature may be confirmed by the popularity of dialogues, as exemplified by texts like *Elucidarius*, *Konungs skuggsjá*, *Barlaams saga*, *Gylfaginning*, just to mention a few. However, even regular prose texts include numerous dialogues set in various communicative contexts, which are significant factors when extrapolating meaning out of such discourse (Brian 2021). Discourse norms vary in various Old Norse genres, and sometimes the articulation of a discourse in one and the same saga may even change in the different manuscript versions of the same saga, altering not only verbal expressions, but also the description of the meaning-defining discourse context.[18] Even though many discourse-studies do not engage with the concept of voice directly, but rather lean on other theoretical tools, such as pragmatic linguistics and speech-act theory, they demonstrate how the vocal interaction between characters is a central literary and narrative tool that impacts the meaning of the narrative, as well as its possible performances.

On other occasions, audible and voiced utterances of the characters are presented in monologues. Sometimes, such monologues are rendered in poetic form, such as for example the famous grief-poem *Sonatorrek*, a monologue where Egil Skallagrimsson is mourning the death of his son,[19] while in other texts, such as in the translated *riddarasögur*, the monologues present psychological and emotional reflections in prose.[20] Inner monologues or comments are sometimes supposed to be heard by other

[15] On narratology and voice, see for example Genette 1972/1980.

[16] On European translations, see Copeland 1991. On Old Norse translations, see Sif Rikhardsdottir 2012; Eriksen 2024.

[17] The significance of the agency of scribes is promoted in many of the articles in Gropper & Rösli 2021. Other anthologies that discuss various 'authorial' agencies include Rancovic, Melve & Mundal 2010; Mundal & Wellendorf 2008; Rancovic et al. 2012; Mulligan & Mundal 2019.

[18] Brian 2021, but also for example Hanna S. Þorleifsdóttir (2007) on dialogues in *Ívens saga*.

[19] For a discussion, see Sif Rikhardsdottir 2022.

characters, while at other times they are addressed to God, which suggests that voice and sound is significant not only for the communication between people, but also between humans and the other-worldly. Nonetheless, monologues present clear literary voices, different from those in dialogues, that have various functions within the narrative.[21] They often present excellent examples of how voice, memory, and humanity are linked in Old Norse literature, thus bringing to mind the concept of *vox*.[22]

Another much-discussed feature of vocal utterances in literature, in addition to their form, is **the gender and social status** of the agents who get to have a voice. For example, often, especially in the *riddarasögur*, the inner monologues represent the voices of women and their inner psychological states. Thus, voices of various social groups and even of specific individuals may be represented differently in literature.[23] If we focus on the voices of women as a mini case-study, we have to acknowledge that even though women's monologues can be highly informative about their needs and desires, they do not always correspond to the actual voices and demands that were publicly stated, i.e. they are not always heard,[24] or they are 'heard' to a varying degree, depending on the social context in which they are pronounced, i.e. private or public/legal occasions.[25] Further, it has been pointed out that women could exert their power by using their voice as well as by choosing to keep silent (Wolf 2018). The voices given to women in Old Norse literature, and the way they are received by their surroundings, are thus highly significant for our understanding of the role and position of women in Old Norse society.[26] These debates reveal that the meaning and role of literary voices is contingent on the gender and social status of the agent with the voice, and not least on the social situation in which they are used. The voices of

[20] On psychological and emotional monologues in the *riddarasögur*, see Sif Rikhardsdottir 2015.

[21] On the function of self-reflective comments and monologues in *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, see Eriksen 2016.

[22] On the function of poetry in the *fornaldarsögur*, see Clunies Ross 2012; in *konungasögur*, see Wellendorf 2022; in *Íslendingasögur*, see Donoghue 2005; Clunies Ross 2010.

[23] For a discussion of speech and silence as an existential discourse, relating to the homogeneity of Icelandic culture, see Österberg 1991.

[24] In some instances, this is demonstrated by inverting the narrative: women who speak and demand the men to be quiet are not heard and deprived of their power through the very speech of men. This motive has recently been explored in a paper by Eriksen 2023. This is work in progress and for more information please contact the scholar: s.g.eriksen(at)iln.uio.no

[25] See for example Mundal 2018; Tromp 2018; Tveit et.al. 2022.

[26] For recent studies of Old Norse women, see for example Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 2021. On women as mediators, see Gos 2009.

other 'marginal' and unstudied agents – such as children – will be investigated further in this special issue.

Silent characters and narrative gaps

Silence, as mentioned already, is an important category of sound, and is described as a chosen mode of communication by various agents and in many Old Norse texts. *Lárentíus saga biskups* and *Jóns saga helga* mention for example the importance of adherence to silence in the Benedictine community.[27] Writing on wax tablets is described as an alternative form of communication in *Augustinus saga*, *Lárentíus saga biskups* and *Sturlunga saga*, and may be seen as reminiscent of the sign language used in many monastic institutions in Europe (Tirosh 2020: 316). Other sagas, such as *Tristrams saga* or *Geitarlauf* from the collection of short stories *Strengleikar*, mention people communicating secretly and silently by sending written messaged carved on wooden sticks. All of these highlight the importance of tuning into the silence articulated in medieval texts, as an essential and meaningful category of sound, as well as paying attention to what other forms of communication appear in conjunction to silence.

The concept of silence may entail not only what various characters do not say in a text, but also topics and themes that are omitted in a text.[28] Richard Cole (2016) offers an interesting contribution to this discourse on silence. Building upon Patrick Fuery's *The Theory of Absence*, he shows that absence materializes itself in numerous ways and forms, and plays various roles in Old Norse tradition. He demonstrates that absence is not the dichotomic opposite of presence, but it is relative depending on space and time and mental distance. Cole proposes a typology of absences: from perfect absence to perfect presence, which Cole explains with the help of Gumbrecht's definition of Christianity as a presence-culture, i.e. God is not a product of faith, but a fact of life (Cole 2016: 154). Cole's typology of absence (and presence) invites us to think of the relationship between what is explicitly mentioned and articulated in a text and what is hinted at through various literary techniques, or what

[27] Tirosh 2020: 318. Silence was important also for the Cluniacs and Franciscans (see Bruce 2007; Bonde & Maines 2015), but it was the Cistercians who utilized the concept to its full by developing complex sign-language consisting of roughly 250 keywords (Ziolkowski 2010: 132)

[28] On silence in Christian textual history, see MacCulloch 2014. He discusses the mentioning of silence (as opposed to the references to words, noise, vocalization) in Jewish and Christian texts, including the Old Testament (the Tanakh), the New Testament, the Gospels, letters, documents, monastic and mystical writings and a great variety of other sources, as well as the big topics that remain unarticulated and enwrapped in silence in this same material. MacCulloch's discussion includes various types of silences today – silence around the Holocaust, slavery, abuse, various voices, etc. These are all very significant discussions, illustrating excellently that cultures of sound and silence have a long and complex history.

is always present but does not need to be mentioned. The relationship between articulation/non-articulation and sound/silence thus appears to be dynamic and shifting, and as conditioned by mental, temporal, and spatial distances. This demands further fine-tuning of the readers and listeners who are interested in understanding the meaning of sound and silence in Old Norse literature.

The inner senses: Voice-hearing (and visions)

This leads directly to our next category of sounds, namely sounds produced and heard not in regular direct human interactions, but sounds heard with the inner senses, or the inner ear. Voice-hearing is a common motif in many medieval texts and genres, and especially in hagiographical and visionary texts (Saunders 2022). Such experiences are not pathologized but form part of the possible sensory experiences in Christian culture – voices perceived with the inner ear could be coming from God, the devil, or spirits. The hearing of such voices may often be triggered by a trauma, and they are deeply embodied, often causing further bodily reactions. Voice-hearing is often a part of a multi-modal, multi-sensory experience, including visions. They have strong affective and relational qualities as they may inspire conversations, through which the voice hearing is made sense of. Ultimately medieval voice-hearing is strongly connected with and explained by faith, even when it seems unreasonable. Voice-hearing is thematized generously in mystical writing, as well as in medieval romances of Chrétien de Troyes, and texts by Chaucer, Gower, and Malory, where they also intersect the human and the supernatural world and address the complex relationship between agency and providence/destiny (Saunders 2018).

Voice-hearing (and vision-seeing and dreaming) is a common motif in the Old Norse literary corpus too, attested in many translated and indigenous texts, including visions, religious texts, and kings' sagas. For example, both Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson are known for 'seeing and hearing' (in their dreams) respectively God and Óláfr Tryggvason, who convince them to return to Norway, take back their land and baptize their people.[29] Voice-hearing is, in these texts, part of the multisensory experience of the vision. Old Norse visions and hagiographical texts have garnered more interest in recent years,[30] but the complexity of their soundscape has not yet been extensively studied.[31]

[29] These episodes and voices in other sagas, such as *Alexanders saga*, are discussed in Eriksen 2024, ch. 10.

[30] See Wellendorf 2007 for a comprehensive account. Heide 2016.

[31] The article 'Audible Children' in this special issue addresses the sound cultures represented in hagiography.

Ecological/animal studies

In addition to the voices and sound exchanged between humans and deitic and angelic energies, medieval texts describe vocal communication also between humans and other natural energies. Susan Boynton indeed points out that sound is mainly 'a form of connection – between human and nonhuman, body and soul, or natural and supernatural.' (Kay 2016: 1002) Sarah Kay also highlights that sound studies enable scholars to make connections to new ecological/ animal studies, since they also challenge the dominant anthropocentric view in medieval studies.[32]

The Old Norse field is also experiencing increased interest in the sounds produced by various animals, such as birds, dogs, or wild animals.[33] The Old Norse literary corpus abounds in sounds made by many other natural and supernatural creatures, such as ghosts or *draugr* (i.e. a reanimated corpse of the deceased, often associated with burial mounds, see Kanerva 2023), as well as the sounds of the natural world itself, including winds and storms.[34] Scholars, inspired by posthumanism and ecocritical paradigms, are devoting attention to the agency of both natural and supernatural energies, and their sounds and communicative strategies are increasingly acknowledged as a meaningful element in Old Norse narratives, a topic which will be further explored in this special issue (see Eriksen 2025 (in print)).

The sounds of things

Another tendency inspired by posthumanism and object orientated ontology is an increased interest in the sounds and agency of things (see for example Harman 2002), which is discussed not only by literary scholars, but also by archaeologists, and art- and church-historians (see references below). Old Norse literature, as expected, contains numerous and varied descriptions of sounds produced by things, such as horns, musical instruments, church bells, swords, ships, and even books, to mention some of the main and most noisy or vocal objects. Such sounds have been shown to be highly significant for human existence, on an individual cognitive level, on a communicative social level, on a judicial and on a religious level (see Eriksen 2025 (in print)).

Taking into consideration all the aspects of voiced communication and sound as described in Old Norse literature, it has recently been pointed out that what we have portrayed in literature is not a soundscape, but a soundtrack that progresses through time and space.[35] This soundtrack comprises human voices of various genders and

[32] Kay 2016: 1003. On animal soundscapes in Anglo-Norman texts, see Lewis 2022.

[33] See article 'The Animal Heard' in this special issue for further references.

[34] For a general study of winds and storms in Old Norse literature, see MacCreesh 2018.

[35] The term soundscape was first used by Schafer 1993 and refers to sonic environments

social classes, performing monologues or engaging in dialogues, the sounds of otherworldly angelic or devilish creatures, the words of God, and the sounds made by animals, natural phenomena, and things. Medieval human experience, as described in literature, is highly multivocal and multimodal, which means that the soundtrack also includes breaks and silences, which may only be understood when interpreted in combination with body language and other enacted interactions. The articles in this special issue discuss all these different categories of sound, as described in various Old Norse texts, and reveal new nuances about specific voices, sounds, and communicative contexts. Our studies on the communication between human, nonhuman and material cultures thus aim to provide new insight into medieval sound cultures and soundtracks as described in literature, but also to bridge the gap between studies of literary and narrative discourse, on the one hand, and studies of agency of things and animal/plant studies, on the other, that most often are still procured separately and independently from each other.

Extradiegetic sound

Even though the primary focus of this special issue is on intradiegetic sounds, some of the articles engage in discussions of sound on an extradiegetic level, i.e. the sounds that occur outside the text. The most relevant type of extradiegetic sounds for us in this special issue are those produced when a text is read aloud or performed, but any other sounds that may occur at a potential reading/performance scene are relevant too. The sources for such extradiegetic sounds include the texts and manuscripts themselves, but also the buildings and landscapes that formed and enhanced the sounds, as well as physical things that produced sounds.[36]

The Sound of the Text: Textuality, vocality, aurality and performance

The voiced reading of written texts is a debate that takes us straight to the core of orality-literacy discussions in medieval studies. The oral-formulaic theories proposed by Albert Bates Lord (1960) and Milman Parry (1971) argued that even though a text

comprising of ambient noise of all kinds, including human and non-human sounds and also sounds that humans cannot perceive. For a further discussion of the idea of medieval soundtrack, see Eriksen 2025 (in print).

[36] For a study of soundscapes during Shakespearean times from such an interdisciplinary perspective (based on information about sounds in text, buildings, landscape, and climate, as well as social and political structures), which promotes the actual physical 'findableness' of medieval sound, see Smith 1999. Art-historical sources fall outside the scope of this special issue, but central contributions to the debates include Debias 2019, Boynton & Reilly 2015. On the correspondence between textual and visual focus on sound/silence in medieval Scandinavia, especially in connection to the rite of baptism, see Andås 2023. This is work in progress and interested readers are invited to contact the scholar at margrete.syrstad.andas(at)ntnu.no..

is preserved in writing, its formulaic nature may indicate an oral origin, i.e. oral, vocal, and audible composition and transmission. Advocates of the consecutive scholarly paradigm, the so-called Great Divide Theory, such as Walter J. Ong (1988), Erik A. Havelock (1986) and Jack Goody (1987) positioned themselves on the other end of the continuum and argued that the main characteristic of a written text was indeed its literate and written nature, which could testify to a completely different process of creation and transmission, cognitively, practically, and technologically. Voice and sound are not central categories in Ong & co.'s discussions and only with the so-called 'secondary orality' (cultures of radio, tv and other mass-media), does sound and voice emerge as an important cultural aspect again. The contention within orality-literacy debates today is positioned along the continuum between these two dichotomic stands. Social anthropologists such as Ruth Finnegan (1977; 1988) have pointed out that orality and literacy co-exist in most cultures, a statement that is also valid with regard to our own highly literate culture, in which orality and aurality still take center-stage (think of podcast, audiobooks, in addition to the more traditional mediums of theatre and other performances).

Medieval studies have pretty much followed these paradigms of orality-literacy scholarship, and many have emphasized the inherently mixed modality of medieval oral and textual culture.[37] The current contention in the Old Norse field also leans towards promoting a multifaceted and complex relationship between orality and literacy.[38] Written texts recount of the oral retelling and performance of stories, as seen, for example, in the famous example from the wedding described in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*.[39] Direct invitations to the audience to listen, or narrator's comments such as 'as you have heard' or 'as it has been told', etc. proliferate in Old Norse texts, suggesting that they were intended to be listened to.[40] Stylistic features that would have been audible, and thus may reflect the intention for the text's aural reception, are nu-

[37] On literary *vox* and vocality of Old French literature, see Zumthor 1984, 1988; Doane and Pasternack 1991. On the aurality of French and English literature, see Coleman 1996. On administrative literacy in medieval England, see Clanchy 2013. On medieval French literature, see Viz 1999. On medieval German literature, see Green 1994.

[38] See Rancovic, Melve & Mundal 2010; Mundal & Wellendorf 2008, Rancovic et al. 2012, Mulligan & Mundal 2019, Gropper & Rösli 2022, where various textual elements (references to public reading, style and aesthetics, and the graphical features) are discussed by various authors.

[39] For a recent discussion, see Mitchell 2022.

[40] For a study of such invitations, seen in conjunction to the graphic design of the manuscript page, see Eriksen 2014. For a discussion of the rhetorical and political function of Old Norse texts produced by or around the Norwegian royal office, see Brégaint 2016.

merous too, such as alliterations, various meters, or end-rhyme (even in prose texts).[41] The intended aurality and vocality of poetic or prosimetrum texts, as opposed to prose, have been much discussed in Old Norse studies too, as their form and aesthetics indicates the opportunity for different transmission and reception processes.[42] Last but not least, various visual and material aspects of the manuscripts have also been interpreted as indicating an intention for the text to be publicly read aloud, as they would have facilitated a public reader to find a specific place in the text and emphasize the passage vocally. Such visual or material elements could include aspects of the *mise en livre* (structure and content), the *mise en texte* (titles, rubrics, illuminations, initials, majuscules, marginalia), and the *mise en page* (punctuation, abbreviations) of the manuscript.[43] For example, marginal notations have been interpreted as visual clues to change in voices during vocal performance (Gunnell 1995). Other studies have demonstrated that changes in the visuality of various versions of one and the same text could indicate changes in the intended reception mode of one and the same text (public reading and visual reception vs private reading) (Eriksen 2014).

To give a few more specific examples, Kate Heslop's recent study of the mediology of skaldic poetry positions this unique form on the continuum, and not the dichotomy, between orality and literacy, by defining the genre both as a media practice (comparable to landscapes, visual art and music) and a vocal discourse. Even though most often, the skaldic verses are linked to named scalds/ authors, this study innovatively highlights that the variance that exists in the manuscript transmission of skaldic poetry is indicative of the significance of the practices of performance, reception, and re-writing also of this genre (Heslop 2022). In this way, skaldic studies are opened up not only for the discussions of *vox* and authorial intention, but also for discussions of various medieval media (runestones, manuscripts, compilations, art and other visual expressions) and multimodal reception through various senses.

The performativity embedded in Old Norse eddic poetry has also been much discussed under the inspiration of the performative or so-called 'play'-turn.[44] It has been argued that even though preserved in writing, eddic poetry should be regarded as an

[41] For a discussion and numerous examples of alliterations and other rhythmical features of Old Norse literature, especially the translations, see Eriksen 2014: 133–136, 185.

[42] For a recent book on sound and voice in skaldic poetry, see Heslop 2022. On skaldic poetry in the sagas, as evidence of speech and oral performance, see Leslie-Jacobsen 2022.

[43] See for example Cazelle 2005; Cruse 2013. Further, evidence of hands-on physical use of medieval manuscripts (touching, kissing, etc.) reveals how they were used in oath-swearing ceremonies, or as relics. Such physical interaction with the books would have included aural performances in specific communicative contexts. See Ruby 2024; 2023-25.

[44] Gunnell 2022:1. See also other of his work such as Gunnell 1995.

aural, visual, and momentary experience, i.e. poetry needs to be thought of in terms of performance. In many such discussions, the focus is on the 'spaces' and 'places' in which performances and story-telling events happened, as these were significant factors that conditioned and contributed to the performance and reception (Gunnell 2022: 3). This had led to the study of dialogues and monologues in the eddic poems, as 'scripts' for performance, based on marginal notations; of Viking halls as 'stages' for such performances and of the aural aspects of archaeological spaces etc.; of instruments from the Bronze and Viking Age (Gunnell 2022: 3–5). Even if such approaches to Old Norse culture that are inspired by performance studies may involve a degree of surmise and speculation, as Terry Gunnell, one of its main advocates, states himself (Gunnell 2022: 6), they certainly promote the multi-sensory nature of the Old Norse experience that involved people, their senses and social communities, and the material and cultural spaces in which they existed.

Without aiming to reconstruct either performances or performative spaces, as some of Gunnell's colleagues do, in this special issue we lean on the same understanding of sound as embedded in medieval texts and as being inseparable from its social, physical, and natural surroundings. This may indeed be further legitimized by the definition of communication in the Latin rhetorical discourse,[45] as entailing *pronuntiatio*, i.e. the realization of a speech by vocalization (*figura vocis*, which covers breath and rhythm),[46] as well as *actio*, i.e. gestures and facial expressions. Besides, *actio* and *pronunciatio* included at their core the idea of silence, i.e. breaks that made the discourse more convincing and successful. These rhetorical principles were important for many different types of performances, including the aural reading of texts,[47] thus emphasizing the embodied, aural, social, and situated nature of medieval texts.

[45] For a survey of the Greek background, see Ziolkowski 2010. Many of the essays in Carruthers (ed.) 2010 explore the relationship between sound and silence as part of rhetoric. Other essays focus on *vultus*, facial expression, and *gestus* (gestures, including clothing) as an important aspect of persuasion, in addition to *vox*. They emphasize that tones and rhythms of voice, gestures and facial expressions were all collectively significance in medieval performance, Carruthers 2010: 10

[46] The other major divisions of rhetoric are *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio* and *memoria*. See Ziolkowski 2010: 126.

[47] Ziolkowski 2010: 135. The significance of silence in secular contexts may be testified by the existence of a highly intriguing French romance *Le roman de Silence*, about a heroine with the name Silence, see Roche-Mahdi 2007; Dahmen 2009.

Rhetoric beyond words: architecture and acoustics

The physical context within which the sound occurs is a central aspect of extradiegetic sound. In medieval culture, there were many interconnections between rhetoric, poetry, theology, music, art and architecture (to mention a few), and each of these disciplines had its own implicit rhetoric and modes to relate to its audience during performances (see Carruthers (ed.) 2010). Many scholars have discussed the intricate and complex relationships between rhetoric, music, and architecture (Binski 2010; Bent 2010), and it has been demonstrated that 'voiceless artefacts' in medieval cathedrals, such as altars, passages, sculptures and stained glass, played significant roles in the visitors' experience of the religious rituals and performances they participated in.[48] Engaging with the religious art in medieval cathedrals, including images and objects that were visually inaccessible, was an integrated part of the experience of the cathedral/church space. They would have activated the inner eye, 'the mind's eye' of the audience. In a similar way, silence had a crucial role, especially in specific types of chants that were common in monastic and ecclesiastical cultures, as it allowed music to 'shift register' from an aural realm to an experience of the inner senses. Activating the inner senses would have triggered the audience's imagination, which was central with regard to devotion, prayers, meditation (Williamson 2013: 3). The experience of extradiegetic sound was thus much more than just the aural reception of a sound, since it also included listening to the silent breaks; it also entailed the visual perception of body-language and movement, of imagery and architectural elements (including those that were difficult to see); it demanded physical presence and movement within a given architectural space, at specific times.

Recently, it has been shown that secular architecture, such as the grand halls of medieval castles, where literature and music were performed regularly, had an impact on the actual form and tempo of the texts performed there, i.e. the troubadours' songs of the 1100s, their words and music (see Brown 2025 (in print)). For us, this emphasizes the fact that sound cannot be studied on its own, instead it has to be studied in connection to the performer and the audience, and in connection to the physical space and social context within which it occurs. Sound is always part of a persuasion-exercise or practice, and it becomes meaningful together with numerous other physical and social aspects.[49] Once again, this promotes the importance of all the senses for

[48] Crossley 2010; on ductus, see Carruthers 2010a.

[49] See also Pentcheva 2021. Another major publication that emphasizes and investigates the interplay between the aural, the architectural, as well as the visual in medieval experience is Boynton & Reilly (eds) 2015. The book discusses different types of physical contexts (churches, synagogues and Topkapi palaces) and different types of social and religious communities (Cistercians, Dominicans, among many others). Some articles focus on the interplay between

the true multimodal medieval experience, which demands a different understanding of what looking and listening was in the Middle Ages, but also it necessitates awareness of how we today look at and 'listen' to the remnants of medieval culture that we still have.

Some similar discussions exist based on the Nordic architectural and the art-historical material too, but they are most often only implicitly related to the topic of sound. In one anthology on the medieval cathedral of Trondheim, the cathedral is understood as 'a unit of physical construction and a number of functions: ritual, liturgical, representational, and symbolic, in other words as a part of the general cultural history of its epoch.'[50] The cultural history, as discussed in the study in question, does not explicitly include the aural elements of the culture, but its ritual and liturgical aspects certainly include sound. This and other similar studies certainly form part of the performance- or play-turn in medieval studies, even if they do not debate the role of sound explicitly.

There are some specific studies of the acoustics of Romanesque churches and halls in Norway, such as Gamle Aker Kirke and the King's palace in Bergen, known as Håkonshallen, king Hákon's (Hákonarsson) hall, constructed in the thirteenth century (see Snekkestad 2010; Fett 1968). Such studies emphasize that stone churches' surfaces changed the way in which sound got transmitted. In stone churches, sound would have been reflected to a much greater extent in the space, compared to the local wooden churches where the sound would have been absorbed in the material. Several other aspects of the architectural design of the churches would also have conditioned the transmission of sound, such as the floor plan, interior, and decorative elements. The acoustic qualities of a building are thus highlighted as equally central and closely interrelated to the architectural qualities, and thus essential for the performance of the liturgy, involving singing, reciting, preaching, and praying.[51]

illuminated manuscripts and liturgical practices; between embroidered textiles, wall paintings, or sculpture; between architectural space and sound, and the way the 'congregation' was to participate and move within this space; or between silence and sound. Some essays explicitly discuss the iconography of sound, such as sculptures on the façade of Orvieto Cathedral or the plainchant capitals at Cluny.

[50] Andås et.al. 2007. For a study on Danish churches from a similar ritualistic perspective, without explicit focus on sound, but rather on liturgy, see Bonde 2020.

[51] This work may be seen as parallel and closely affiliated to archaeologists' interest in sound and acoustics, see for example Scarre 2006. The soundscapes in medieval churches, based on prayer inscriptions on the church walls, will be discussed in the article 'Carving Sound' in this special issue.

More recently, even the architecture of stave churches has been included in the debate. While previous scholars have argued that vaulted ceilings and choirs of stave churches have purely architectural, and if painted, aesthetic function, Kjartan Hauglid has postulated that they had also a significant acoustic role.[52] If untreated, the wooden surface would simply absorb the sound, but such vaults would have been covered with gesso (a type of plaster on which one could paint). This would have turned the wooden vaults into just as good a transmitter of sound as the interior of a stone church. Such architectural details that previously have remained unseen and uncommented suddenly become highly relevant when 'new' research questions (such as sound and acoustics) are taken on. Further, they demonstrate excellently how much sound mattered in medieval culture, and how its significance was utterly embedded in medieval art-historical and architectural culture.

Places and communities, urban and rural

The embeddedness of sound in material culture has also been discussed, based on studies of various urban and rural areas and places. For example, in his book, *The History of Rhythm in the Middle Ages*, Jean-Claude Schmitt discusses rhythm from a social perspective and claims that prior to the invention of clocks as tools for measuring time, human experience was mainly structured by the rhythm of God (Schmitt 2016). This was done by creating repetitive patterns through sounds, but also colors, visual representations, acts and gestures, which were meant to primarily reflect the rhythm established by God in his Creation, which took seven days, including a rest-day. This major temporal structure was further elaborated on by the rhythmical repetition of the liturgical calendar. Schmitt argues that this rhythm is embedded in most of the sources of various modalities that we have preserved from the Middle Ages, but it also includes the sound of church-bells, singing, preaching, and praying that are irretrievably lost.

Researchers have also taken up this line of thought for the Nordic material. New research on medieval urban culture in Norway, for example medieval Oslo and Bergen, proposes that urban religiosity was different from rural religiosity and that the aural dimension was one of the main differences (Andås & Aavitsland 2024; see also Hommedal 2023). In a medieval town people would have had to relate to a much more complex religious situation compared to that of rural contexts. In the towns, there would have been several churches, various monastic orders and institutions, as well as possibly a bishop's (or archbishop's) seat, while in rural areas, people would

[52] Hauglid 2023. This is work in progress and interested readers are invited to contact the scholar at Kjartan.Hauglid(at)niku.no.

have mostly related to their one parish church and its priest on all occasions – everyday prayer, baptism, marriage, death, etc.[53] Not only that, but in towns, the aural soundscape would have been much more complicated and would have demanded specific competence to be navigated appropriately. In Oslo, and other towns, the church bells would ring at the start of the rest-day; they would ring three times before Mass, and the monastic churches and cathedral would ring at prayer-times. St. Mary's Church in Oslo, a royal chapel, would also ring in the morning and the evening, and invite the town's people to stop and 'repeat the angel's greetings to the virgin Mary and remember that God became a human through her.' The complex soundscape in the towns would have thus reminded people of their potential salvation in the next life.[54]

Another source-group that is directly relevant for the study of sound are the church bells themselves, which contribute important additional information about the significance and meaning of their sound.[55] Musical instruments found in medieval towns as well as horns that would have been used to announce various events of social and judicial significance are essential sources too.[56] The urban soundscape would have included the sound of animals which are difficult to discuss based on anything else than textual descriptions, but in rural communities animal soundscapes have been discussed based on archaeological studies of the architecture and the organization of the farm houses. Such investigations have revealed that the architectural space was also an auditory space that was a nexus between culture and nature.[57]

Roadmap

This special issue contains five articles that primarily focus on intradiegetic sounds, but the discussions comment also on extradiegetic soundscapes.

In the first article, Miriam Tveit studies the function of sound in the **legal procedures** of the Norwegian town laws, seen in juxtaposition to the *National Law* by

[53] There were of course occasions when bishops would have visited and thus brought the center to the periphery.

[54] For a further discussion of the complexity of urban soundscapes in medieval Norway, see Andås & Aavistland 2024.

[55] The sound of church bells entails both human agency (the striking of the bells) and the resonance of the object itself, which 'speaks', see Arnold & Goodson 2012. On the Old Norse material, see Hommedal 2020; de Grott 2023.

[56] On a recent discovery of a flute in medieval Oslo, see https://www.niku.no/2017/10/middelaldersk-floyte-funnet-oslo/. On previous archeological finds and discussion, see Kollveit 1997.

[57] This is further discussed in 'The Animal Heard' in this special issue.

Magnus the Lawmender.[58] The focus is on the procedural legal role of sound, i.e. when sound was seen as a part of a procedure at the assembly, and not so much on voice and audible communication and oath-taking mentioned in the laws.[59] In order to better understand what the legal implications of different sounds were, as they are described in the legal text, the analysis is structured according to different sound-producing media. These include the human voice, noisemaking, the sound made by bells and by the town-horn. The article demonstrates that legal texts are not only full of sounds, but they also use audible/aural evidence as one of the main legal categories, in addition to visual and material evidence.

In the second article, Rakel Diesen focuses on another Nordic genre, written in another language, namely **Nordic hagiography in Latin** (the miracle corpus associated with Scandinavian saints written from the end of the twelfth till the end of the fifteenth century), and not least on the sounds made by a social group which is seemingly silent and even absent in many debates of medieval culture. The aim of the article is to 'unmute medieval children' by investigating their audible participation in their soundscape ecology. Diesen presents convincing evidence that children had a significant and integral presence in the medieval soundscape, as numerous examples testify to how sound is explicitly described to warn the surroundings about accidents and misfortunes happening to children; how illness and accidents may lead to the temporarily muting or the voicelessness of children; and how children re-enter their soundscapes, by either regaining their hearing or by being heard. The author discusses how the genre of miracle-stories may be seen as conditioning the way children's participation in the medieval soundscape is described. Also, she demonstrates how audible children were in the medieval soundscape, as described in hagiography, and how sound was a main means of communication between this and the other world, and especially between children and the saints who heal them.

The third article attends to other sounds that were potentially audible in medieval churches, namely **prayers**. This study is based on runic inscriptions with religious content from Norwegian medieval churches. These account for about a third of the total of 400 inscriptions preserved from Norwegian medieval churches, the richest of which are the stave churches Borgund, Hopperstad, Urnes near Sognefjorden (Western Norway), and Lom (Gudbrandsdalen, Eastern Norway), as well as the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim. Karen L. Holmqvist discusses how prayer inscriptions would have formed and related to the soundscape of medieval churches: some

[58] The title of this text in its most recent English translation is *Laws of the Land*, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2024, but it may also be referred to as *Law of the Realm*.

[59] This is discussed in other studies of legal texts, such as Rønning Nordby 2020.

would have evoked sound, while others may have reflected sound. The potentially aural significance of inscriptions is further discussed in juxtaposition to the degree of literacy in medieval culture, even among carvers. This, as the previous article, highlights the significance of sound for the communication between humans and God and the Virgin Mary. The author demonstrates how sound is embedded in the architectural remains: 'medieval church walls, though silent to the ear, do talk'.

The fourth article invites us to engage with and listen to another category of sounds, namely those produced by **animals**. The main sources studied here are the *Íslendingasögur*, and these are conceptualized as written texts based on oral narratives about past human–animal relationships. They are analyzed in the context of archaeological evidence from Viking Age Icelandic farms and interpreted with the help of knowledge from modern studies of animal behavior and human-animal relations. The author Harriet J. Evans-Tang argues that these narratives may have been developed as tools to pass on knowledge about working with and relating to animals. The study promotes the significance of sound for human-animal relationships and thus the symbiotic relation between various elements of past ecologies.

The fifth and last article touches upon many of the sound-categories mentioned already as it discusses the relationship between **human silence**, or lack of *vox*, and communication and sounds produced by other media, such as the body, natural and supernatural energies, animals, and things. The sources used include indigenous and translated Old Norse texts of various genres and the analysis reveals not only what silence sounds like in these sources, but also how silence, as opposed to sound, voice and speech, is valued in Old Norse culture. In this way, a well-known feature of Old Norse translations, i.e. their comparative brevity and preference for shorter verbal accounts compared to their European source texts, appears to reflect an original and independent feature of Old Norse culture: it is not only actions that speak louder than words, but also enacted reactions, the use of tools and weapons, as well as the embedded existence in the natural and supernatural world. The author Stefka G. Eriksen deploys the framework of 4E cognition and communication to structure the analysis and in this way demonstrates the fruitfulness of moving towards a more relational and symbiotic (and not dichotomic) understanding of medieval culture, where humans, the natural and supernatural, and things are relational elements in the same soundscape and ecology.

To recapitulate: the aim of this special issue is to unmute and reveal new nuances of the sound cultures of the medieval North. Collectively, we study sounds and aural communication on judicial and social level, on religious and on ecological level. We study how sound and silence are valued in the North (Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and

Denmark), compared to Europe. We study intra- and extradiegetic sounds based on texts of various materialities (manuscripts and inscriptions), scripts (Latin and runic alphabet), languages (Old Norse and Latin) and literary genres (law texts, hagiography, Icelandic family sagas, Old Norse translations). The sounds discussed encompass verbal, embodied and extended communication between humans of various social standing, and between humans and natural and supernatural energies, animals, and things. We discuss urban and rural soundscapes, as well as the soundscapes of churches and farmhouses. We thus move beyond established dichotomies and hopefully demonstrate how sound appears as the nexus between body/mind, textual/material/immaterial culture, visual/aural culture, culture/nature, human/non-human. Even though we engage with and study mostly textual cultures, we point out to some of the ways the texts can be linked to their cultural/built environment and natural surroundings, thus highlighting the huge potential of interdisciplinary approaches to sound, to which we hope to return in the future.

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