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Audible children

The sounds of children in medieval miracles

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This article aims to unmute medieval children by drawing attention to how their audible presence and participation are reflected in Scandinavian hagiographic sources from the High and Late Middle Ages. The sound-making children discussed here are found in the Nordic hagiographic corpus in Latin, specifically in miracles associated with native Scandinavian saints. These were chiefly written down between the last quarter of the twelfth century and the end of the fifteenth century. This miracle-corpus holds hundreds of narratives featuring children, – child beneficiaries of miracles, the would-be saints as children, and children that feature as helpers, playmates, or siblings. The audible children considered in this article are, however, all children who themselves are said to experience miracles.

Children are great makers of sound, in their play, their small and large accidents, through their want and need for attention and response, and sometimes their lack of understanding of when to be silent. This notwithstanding, their audible presence in history has not garnered much attention. It is nevertheless abundantly clear, when reading hagiography from the Nordic Middle Ages, that children were present in many medieval settings –– not only visibly, but also in audible ways.[1] Miracle narratives are teeming with cursory mentions and more detailed portrayals of children making sound. The children we encounter in these texts both perceive and generate sound, they actively contribute to the soundscape of their environment, and they are shown to respond to the sounds made by others.

The audibility of medieval children is a little explored field in childhood history. The direct speech of historical children is only rarely recorded, and both direct and indirect speech is usually mediated through adults. Consequently, there are significant

[1] There are surviving miracle tales involving children associated with 20 native Scandinavian saints. Around 300 infants, children and adolescents are recipients of miraculous aid in the Scandinavian miracle narratives. Around half of these are found in late medieval Swedish miracle collections. Diesen 2023: 29–33.

methodological challenges inherent in accessing the marginalized, authentic voices of the historical children themselves.[2] In recent years, childhood historians of ancient and medieval childhood have nevertheless looked for the echoes of children's voices in areas and eras where hardly any sources that grant direct access to children exist. The fictional voices of children have been explored in studies of medieval literature (e.g. Raine 2022). In medieval disability studies children's speech and silence are also a theme, especially in conjunction with discussions about vocal and auditory disabilities (Kuuliala 2013: 119–121, 274–279; Finucane 1997: 78–83). The search for children's voices has often been focused on verbal content, that is, children's statements, opinions, accounts, and voiced experiences. However, some research concerning medieval children's voices as sound exists in relation to their role as singers, both as part of children's schooling in the Middle Ages (Zieman 2008), and as singing members of the choir in a church context (Long 2008).

If we focus on the sound of the children's voices rather than on their verbal content it might be possible to account for them as part of the medieval soundscape as presented in the Nordic hagiographical writings. It might also be envisaged to go beyond representations of children's voices and look at other expressions of audible children in the texts. My interpretation is guided by the following question: What may miracle narratives tell us about children's contribution to and perception of medieval soundscapes?

The soundscape perspective of this question is informed by the three aspects of soundscape ecology that were first described by Bernard L. Krause, i.e., *the anthrophony*, *the biophony*, and *the geophony*.[3] The first term covers the human-generated sounds (the anthrophony) that are, in the ecology of soundscapes, integrated with the sounds of biological, non-human organisms (the biophony), and the nonbiological sounds of the environment (the geophony). As signalled in the title of this article, the focus is on the man-made sound of audible children, that is, the anthropophony aspect of medieval soundscapes. However, attention to children's perception as well as production of sound ensures that also the non-human and environmental aspects of soundscapes evoked by the medieval sources are included in the textual interpretation whenever this is possible and relevant.

To uncover how children figure into aural and audible aspects of medieval soundscapes, the Nordic text sources are explored for traces of sounds that children are explicitly or implicitly reported to make, provoke, and hear. These sounds span from

[2] See for example: Musgrove, Leahy & Moruzi 2019; Zottl 2006.

[3] This term together with the terms biophony and geophony were coined by soundscape ecologist Bernard L. Krause 1987.

the dramatic and unnerving, sometimes outright painful sounds found in descriptions of children's illnesses and accidents, via the sounds that children are reported to make and hear in devotional settings, to everyday sounds of play. The sounds made by the children themselves are most frequently vocal, but the described vocality does not necessarily equate language or words. Vocal sounds may also be screams, gasps, sighs, gurgling, laughing, or coughing, and environmental sounds may be the partly human, partly non-biological sounds of play as well as the ambient sounds made for instance in conjunction with accidents.

A certain amount of conjecture is necessary and useful when attempting to uncover a wider range of sounds associated with children encountered in hagiography. To access insights that are similarly implied and therefore probable, but not explicitly stated in historical sources, research fields such as the history of childhood and women's history have applied the interpretative methodology of *empathic inference* (Gleason 2016: 458), or *disciplined imagination* (Garver 2011: 12), that is, an approach that is to some degree speculative as documented historical knowledge is combined with restrained, critical, and educated imagination. This type of approach can be extended to the area of sound, permitting the reader to consider sounds that would most likely have been heard in each situation, even when they are not explicitly reported or described.

The first three sections of this article cover the sound-related evolvement of many miracle narratives, that is, the sounds of warning that may signal an initiating accident or misfortune; the voiceless, or silent, child who may be dumb, deaf, or temporarily muted by illness or accident; and the sounds of proof from a healing or healed child who enters or re-enters the soundscape. The following section zooms in on descriptions of children's voices, including their described voice quality, and children's speech, that is what they are reported to have said. The concluding section discusses the integral presence of children in medieval soundscapes, which is, in sum, suggested by the main findings reported in this article.

Sound as warning

The dramatic events that are found in miracle tales were not silent. A child falling from a high ledge,[4] a child injured by a heavy object falling on it,[5] or the numerous children falling into streams, lakes, or fjords would make sounds. Such event descriptions contain information that may bring discomforting screams of pain or panic to

[4] Vita sancti Brynolphi episcopi Scarensis cum processu eius canonizacionis, p. 180.

[5] E.g: One boy is crushed by a tree being felled in *Miracula defixionis Domini*, 1950: 42. Another boy is injured by a falling door or door-beam in Uppsala MS C631, fol. 241r.

mind, and, at times, the sounds that are evoked or explicitly described in conjunction with accidents and illnesses may be at least as unsettling as the visual descriptions we can find in miracle stories featuring the grotesque and disfigured (e.g. Constantinou 2010).

Medieval hagiographers did not spare their audiences; at times they included rather gruesome details in their descriptions of horrific things that happened to children. However, when considering this aspect of the stories, it is important to bear the narrative structure of miracles in mind. The dramatic event forms a contrast to the eventual healing of the miracle beneficiary, reminding the reader, or perhaps more often the listener, of the Saint's power to triumph over evil and adversity. As a rule, miracle tales do, after all, have happy endings.

In a miracle dated to 1308 and attributed to St. Erik of Sweden, we hear about a blacksmith named Torsten who is alarmed by a scream from his 3-year-old son:

> He heard a single cry from the boy over whom two running wheels passed and miserably crushed him. At the single sound of the little one, as the first wheel passed over him, the father was bewildered, and not knowing what it was that he had heard, he immediately brought the horses pulling the cart to a halt. Looking back at the hay wagon, he then saw the broken body, in which no sign of life appeared, he placed it in his arms and carried it to his own house.[6]

In this story, the single cry or scream of the little boy who is crushed underneath the wheels of his father's horse-drawn carriage is crucial. The father has not seen his son running towards him, but the sound of the child's cry warns him and makes him stop his cart to find his son severely injured and seemingly dead. The human scream that announces the initiating tragedy of this tale, is twice spelled out in the text. Other sounds related to the event are not explicitly mentioned, such as the physical sound of the boy's body as it is crushed under the wheels, the mechanical sound of the cart as it runs over the child, or the animal sound of the horses as they are halted. The accident and its discovery are, however, followed by a description of the father´s reactions and his attempts to bring the little boy back to life through an invocation of St. Erik. His reactions, and especially his invocation, would also have entailed audible

[6] Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris, pp. 308–310: *Audivit unicum eiulatum pueri, super quem duæ rotæ cursus transierunt, et eum miserabiliter contriverunt. Pater ad unicum sonum parvuli, dum prima rota super eum transivit, obstupuit, et quidnam esset, quod audierat, ignorans, subito equos trahentes currum subsistere fecit, respiciens retro plaustratum fæni, contritum corpusculum vidit, et in quo nullum signum vitæ apparuit, in gremium suum posuit, et in domum suam propriam deportavit.*. All translations into English are mine.

responses that add another implicit element of the human voice to the soundscape of this story.

Similar warnings of disaster are found in several tales where the sound of a child in peril produces audible reactions in those present, such as praying, invoking a saint, lamenting, mourning, and crying. In the below excerpt from a fifteenth-century Katarinian miracle, the sudden sound of a screaming young boy evokes feelings of terror and fear in his parents as well as bystanders:

> The tree fell and one branch fatally hit the head of his son. And three branches from the tree´s summit entered through the crown of his head, descended, and exited through the neck. The parents, hearing the cry and wailing of the child, ran with haste, and when they came to him, they found that he had given up the spirit.[7]

Accidents such as the one represented in this text, that is children being crushed or harmed by falling objects, are especially well represented in the miracles of Katarina of Vadstena. In the collections of miracles attributed to her, we hear of children who are crushed under a load of wood,[8] a pile of hay,[9] a cart,[10] a decrepit old barn,[11] and falling trees and branches.[12] In many cases, explicit mentions of the child crying out as the accident happens add to the implicit sounds evoked in the mind of the reader as these accidents are described. In one of these tales, it is not the sound made by the child that is commented on, but what the child hears before the accident occurs.[13] The father warns him about the danger presented by the falling tree, but the boy does not heed the warning. That he hears the father's warning is unequivocally stated in the text, and consequently not listening appears to be the child´s own choice. This act

[7] Skokloster E 8913, fol. 115v: *[…]lignum cadens tetigit uno ramo letaliter caput filii ipsius, et tres rami a summitate verticem capitis intrando descendebant per collum exeuntes. Parentes vero audientes ploratum et ullulatum pueri accurrebant cum festinacione, ad quem cum venerunt, invenerunt ipsum spiritum emisisse […].*

[8] Öberg 2015: 36–37.

[9] *Processus seu negocium canonizacionis B. Katerine de Vadstenis*, p. 79.

[10] Miracula a commissarijs episcopalibus iuridice excepta, p. 522; *Processus seu negocium canonizacionis B. Katerine de Vadstenis*, p. 96.

[11] *Processus seu negocium canonizacionis B. Katerine de Vadstenis*, pp. 114–115.

[12] Öberg 2010: 13-14, Öberg 2015: 42–43.

[13] *Qui vocem patris audiens sed non imperio parens cucurrit directe sub arbore, que conquassavit tam caput quam utraque brachia eius*. Öberg 2015: 42.

of defiance temporarily costs him his life – perhaps underscoring the didactic point of children listening to their parents as failing to do so comes at a great cost. However, this is a rare example of a text commenting on what children hear, exposing some of the child´s soundscape in the narrative.

Disconcerting sounds can also be caused by children´s seizures, persistent pain or what might be mental disorders, which are often explained in terms of tormenting demons. In such cases, sounds are not warnings of serious accidents that occur suddenly, but of repeated or persistent conditions that require holy intervention. In one miracle, dated to 1408 and attributed to Nils Hermansson, an epileptic episode is described in a way that includes several allusions to sound made by the 4-year-old son of Conrad Nipritz, and by others present. During a fit that lasts for over an hour, the child is said to be shouting and crying, biting his tongue and lips.[14] In desperation the parents appeal to St. Nils for aid, and their son is miraculously healed within an hour of the invocation.

In a tale from the early fifteenth-century collection of miracles collected by Gregor of Stockholm, the disturbing and disconcerting sounds we are faced with are of a very different quality:

> Lars and his wife Inga had a small girl by the name of Ingrid who for almost two years was deluded by a frantic spirit. She was never able to rest at night, but immediately after her parents had fallen asleep, she was playing and laughing loudly in the darkness, in the manner of many children playing together, but she ran around on the floor, alone and naked.[15]

This story about the healing of the girl Ingrid is replete with references to sound. Unable to rest, the naked girl´s nightly sounds of play are «in the manner of many children playing together». The parents are said to have unsuccessfully attempted to cure her of her condition by means of both words and beatings.[16] This information adds new layers of sound to the tale, but what most strongly conveys the girl's unhappy state and her parents' desperate situation is the description of sounds made by

[14] De miraculis S. Nicolai, p. 274: *[…] cum in lecto dormiret, cepit anxiari, clamare et flere et oeulos uelut mortui euertere ac linguam et labia dentibus prescindere ac despumare pre nimia morbi inualescencia*.

[15] *Miracula defixionis Domini,* 1950: 16: *Laurencius nomine cum coniuge sua Inga habens filiam paruulam Ingridem nomine, que per duos fere annos spiritu phanatico illusa numquam nocturne tempore quiescere valuit, quin statim soporatis parentibus in tenebris hinc inde per pauiementum ludens ac cachinnans ut moris est plurimorum infantum simul ludencium, ipsa sola et nuda discurrebat*.

[16] Ibid.: *Nec compesci ab hac consuetudine potuit verbis aut verberibus quibuscumque*.

her nightly activities. There is a haunting quality to the portrayal of the little girl running around, playing, and laughing throughout the nights. References to darkness further emphasise the importance of these sounds. Her parents are said to hear rather than see the condition of the disturbed and agitated girl, and the description of her misfortunate state and behaviour evoke an audible image of her great turmoil in the attentive reader.

Soundless children

Questions of sound are often addressed in miracle tales involving children who are persistently or temporarily afflicted by speech and hearing disorders. The initial silence and miraculous unmuting of these children play central roles in many narratives and provide ample references to sound, speaking and hearing. Some children are explicitly described as silent, such as a boy for whom "the chains of long silence are broken" as he is healed.[17] It should however be stressed that children with speech impediments are not necessarily completely silent before they are healed. They can be speechless, but not unvocal, as seen in tales where references are made to mute children making different vocal sounds. Kolbein, an adolescent who has had his tongue cut out, is, in several versions of a miracle attributed to St. Olav, presented as staying at the shrine for some time, crying, groaning, and praying.[18] In some instances, children are also described as mute with no indication given of them being deaf. Potentially, some of these children had the ability to aurally perceive the sounds around them, but they are not presented as vocally participating.

In the Scandinavian miracles, there are three times as many children described as permanently or temporarily speechless than children explicitly described as not hearing. However, according to Irina Metzler deafness (*surditas*) on its own usually only referred to those who had become deaf through illness or accident but retained the ability to speak (Metzler 2009: 80–81). This use of the word entails that congenitally mute children also could be deaf, even when this is not mentioned.

This higher representation of children who are not speaking can also be explained by speechlessness in children due to a range of ailments and circumstances. The state of muteness or speechlessness may occur as one of several listed symptoms of a severely ill or injured child's condition. The child teetering on the edge of death usually does not speak. Consequently, the lack of sound and voice may be emphasised

[17] Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris, p. 315: *Moxque ruptum est vinculum longi silentii […].*

[18] *Passio Olavi*, pp. 37–38: *[…]sanctum multis afflagitat lachrimis, altis exorat gemitibus. Breuiaria ad vsum ritumque sacrosancte Nidrosiensis Ecclesie: […]ad sepulcrum martiris in oratione et lacrimis aliquanto perseuerasset tempore…*

in stories where the silent state of a child is a sign of death or near-death. This is the case with the 8-year-old Paul: "[...] because there was neither speech nor sense in him, but he lay without the breath of life so that all said that he was dead."[19] A severely ill adolescent girl "neither opened her eyes, nor uttered a word," and her silence presents a further complication that brings anguish to both her servants and relatives: "[...] all who were present despaired not only of the life of the infirm, but also because it seemed like she would depart her body without neither receiving the sacraments, nor make her testament."[20] What is feared by the adults present is not only that the girl will die, but also that her quiet state will prevent her from receiving last rites before dying. Sound is thus connected to her salvation.

The sounds that are engendered by the children of these stories are predominantly the sounds of others, that is, the sounds of praying, crying, screaming, or shouting adults who are reacting to events or desperately pleading for their children's life and health, or recovery. The severely ill or injured children themselves are often quiet, and the absence of sound accentuates their status of seemingly dead or lost to the world.

Voice-hearing,[21] visions, and dreams of encounters and conversations with saints are seen in miracles involving children.[22] There are outwardly silent, speechless and soundless children who are portrayed with a capacity for vocal and auditory interactions even when they are otherwise rendered voiceless or deaf due to impairments, illnesses or accidents. This introduces another layer of interior sound into these tales where children engage in communication that crosses between this world and another. One missing and drowned boy, not yet three years old, emerges from one such visionary engagement with a language that is markedly improved from meeting the saint in a vision.[23] The boy has no other previous language deficiency than age-related

[19] Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula, pp. 367–368: *[...] quia non erat in eo uox nec sensus, sed iacebat absque flatu uitali, ita ut dicerent omnes, quia mortuus est*.

[20] Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris, pp. 312–314: *[...]nec oculos aperuit, nec verbum ullum protulit. omnes ergo qui aderant, non solum de vita infirmantis desperabant, sed etiam quod nec sacramentis et testamento videretur migratura de corpore*.

[21] See Eriksen's introduction to this special issue on voice-hearing in visions.

[22] *Passio Olavi*, p. 75; De miraculis Sancti Erici regis Danorum, p. 163.

[23] Miracula a Commissarijs Episcopalibus iuridice excepta, p. 518: *[...]Interrogant pater & mater infantem, ab antea informe loquentem, quomodo palo illi adhæsisset. Respondit puer iam formate loquens: quando de ponte cecidi in torrentem, quædam Domina, albis vestibus induta, suscepit me adhærentem palo sub pallio suo, quod aquæ mihi non nocuerunt, & dixit se vocari Catharinam de Watzsteno: adhortataque est me venire ad Watzstenum*.

unformed language, but after being spoken to by Katarina of Vadstena in a vision while lost under water, his speech is fully formed.

In narratives about children who are persistently speechless, mute, or deaf, their state is of course not signalled by warning sounds; being speechless is from the outset the very reason for seeking holy intervention. However, a reversal of the child's state is needed to bring both the temporarily speechless child who is severely injured, sick, or seemingly dead, and the persistently mute or deaf child, back into sound. Only when healed and recovered they are again –– or for the first time –– able to contribute fully to the soundscape that is perceivable through the narrative.

Re-entering the soundscape

Sounds activated in audiences to miraculous healings of children are often framing the miraculous event. Typically, the initial despair, fear and lament, and the prayer and invocation provoked or stimulated by an accident- or illness-stricken child is replaced with the surprise, joy, and rejoicing caused by the child's survival and healing. Such emotional expressions and activities have clear sound connotations that form an audible backdrop of human sound for the focused miracle.

Miracle narratives may also present more detailed information about the specific sounds experienced by children as hearing is restored to them, either as they cease being deaf, are revived from apparent death, or otherwise (re-)introduced to the audible. The first auditory experiences of these children are included in narratives about children who are being brought into the world of sound as they hear the gospel,[24] prayers, rejoicing and singing.[25] In addition, we hear of children who are interrogated about their names and experiences immediately after their healing.

Various settings described in these accounts carry distinct sounds. In addition to the human sounds that are framing many miracles, other sounds can be added by examining the text through a spatial lens that unveils yet other auditory dimensions. Ecclesiastical spaces, notably saint´s shrines, hold particular significance, with it being a common setting where help is sought and gratitude offered, and where many miracles occur.

The moment when children themselves, many of them previously silenced, are healed, recovered, or revived, is a part of the narrative that is particularly rich in direct or indirect references to the first sounds that previously silent children hear and make

[24] De miraculis sancti Erici regis Danorum, pp. 443–444.

[25] E.g. in one miracle of St. Knud, King of Denmark a congregation reacts seemingly spontaneously to the healing of a child by singing a part of the saint´s office, Excerpta quaedam ex Arnfasti monachi poemate De miraculis sancti Kanuti regis et martyris, p. 163: *[...] et conuentus hec videns cantauit responsorium: 'Iustum deduxit Dominus'*.

themselves as they reintegrate the soundscape. There are for instance the sounds of a child´s running feet on the church floor,[26] the first gasp, yawn, gulp, or intake of breath of reviving children,[27] and the voice and speech of the previously silent.

References to play that may function as evidence of healing are also found in connection with this part of the miracle narrative. The previously mentioned son of Conrad Nilpritz is for instance said to be drinking and playing on the same day as he had his seizure.[28] Obviously, play can be both silent and loud, and like this tale, miracle stories do not necessarily spell out the sounds made. In cases where play is mentioned in contrast to the previously silent or seemingly dead child, or as proof of healing, we should still be safe in assuming some noise, especially when groups of children are playing together.[29]

In other cases, the social function of children's first acts as vocal and aural beings is more clearly in focus. Zumthor and Ebgelhart draw attention to the emerging voice as a social event that links the utterer of vocal sound to the one(s) hearing it (Zumthor and Engelhardt 1984: 74). In miracle narratives, vocal events are sometimes clearly seen to forge such connections between children and their community when children use their voices to integrate into the devotional life of their communities. Considering the genre-related emphasis on devotional acts it is not surprising that these are events centred around devotional actions and often transpiring in church settings. Nonetheless, in such narratives, the making and perceiving of sound, and the interpersonal connections forged through voice, emerge as central points of societal inclusion.

The simultaneous transition to perceiving and making sound is often accentuated in miracle tales about children who are cured of muteness and deafness. In the thirteenth-century miracles of Vilhelm, abbot of Æbelholt, two texts link the actions of perceiving the audible and being audible, i.e., hearing and speaking, in similar ways as simultaneous acts of entering the soundscape inside the church where the relics of St. Vilhelm were kept. In both miracles, the medicinal use of consecrated water that had been in contact with the saint's tooth, known as bone water, plays a central role.

[26] Vita sancti Brynolphi episcopi Scarensis cum processu eius canonizacionis, pp. 144, 169–170.

[27] E.g.: De miraculis Sancti Erici regis Danorum, p. 439: *puer reuixit oscitans septies […]*; Miracula a Commissarijs Episcopalibus Iuridice Excepta, p. 527: *Voto vix facto, contemplabantur ex facie mortuæ animam respirare, oculos aperire, atque oscitare […]*.

[28] Schück, De miraculis S. Nicolai, p. 274: *[…] eodem die adhuc bibens et ludens sanitati pristine omnino restitutus, vnde omnes gaudio sunt repleti de sanitate predicti pueri*.

[29] E.g. Gallén, Les causes de Sainte Ingrid, p. 35: *[…] et puer subito reuixit et perfecte conualuit, et eadem die cum aliis coeuis suis ludere cepit*.

This remedy, described as effective medicine, medicinal water, and healing liquid,[30] is administered by the keepers of Vilhelm's relics. It is used to cure two boys who are both deaf and mute, one lost his hearing and speech while sleeping when he should have been watching livestock, and the other has been mute and deaf since birth.

In the first miracle, a canon brother pours bone water into the temporarily deaf and mute boy's ears and mouth as he says: "I charge you in the name of the Lord, and through the virtue of Saint Vilhelm, to tell us by what name you are called." As he invokes the saint and the Lord, the boy, who is now hearing his voice, answers that his name is Peter.[31] The second child is a young boy of seven. He arrives at the church in Æbelholt, Denmark, where the saint's relics were kept, and he also regains his hearing and speech after a similar treatment with bone water. After the medicine is administered to him, the text proceeds to tell the reader about his first experience of the two senses denied him since birth.[32] The child, who is instructed to repeat the words of the Augustinian brother, clearly articulates himself as he immediately recites the Lord's prayer –– word by word.

Bone water is administered as medicine in several of Vilhelm of Æbelholt´s miracles. In most cases it is ingested; in the case of these two children, it is also poured into their ears, and as a result speech as well as hearing is restored.[33] A clear connection between the perceiving and the performing of sound is thus forged. In the Nordic text corpus, there are several other narratives where children who are said to be mute and deaf from birth are healed and immediately able to understand and use spoken language. This immediate ability is also underscored in a miracle found in the miracle collection of the Danish saint Erik Plovpenning. A boy who is explicitly said to have been deaf and mute from birth is asked what his name is and answers that he has no knowledge of his own name because he has never heard it.[34] He has in other words

[30] E.g. *Rogatur custos sepulcri, ut exhibeat illi paralitico salutarem liquorem, scilicet aquam, in qua dens sancti Willelmi intinctus erat. Qui, satisfaciens precibus rogantium, dedit aquam medicinalem*. Ibid 352.

[31] Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula, pp. 354–355: *Precipio tibi in nomine domini et per uirtutem sancti Willelmi, ut dicas nobis, quo uoceris nomine«. Ad hanc uocem adiurantis ilico apertum est os pueri, auditu simul restituto, et respondit: "Petrus"*.

[32] Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula, p. 355.

[33] Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula, pp. 354–355: *Ad hanc uocem adiurantis ilico apertum est os pueri, auditu simul restituto*; p. 355: *Adiuratus in uirtute sancti confessoris mox duos sensus sibi a primordio sui ortus denegatos capescit, scilicet auditum et loquelam*.

[34] De miraculis Sancti Erici regis Danorum, pp. 442–443: *Puer de Horsnes, natus apud Randros, mutus et surdus a natiuitate, ad sepulcrum Erici curatus est. Requiritur nomen suum; dixit se nescire, quia nunquam prius audivit*.

had very limited means of communicating, and still he is said to gain language immediately together with speech and hearing.[35]

The existence of a societal expectation that people should learn central prayers can be seen in medieval Norwegian homilies where parents are said to be responsible for teaching their children Pater Noster and Ave Maria.[36] The act engaged in by the boy who recites the Lord's prayer, clearly resonates with these expectations, as do other texts where children are portrayed as engaging with devotional practices after being healed. However, few are as explicit as the abovementioned example in their description of the aural and audible aspects of these devotional acts. The 7-year-old boy is said to immediately put his newfound abilities to good use as he performs the recitation of Pater Noster in front of a crowd in church, and even if he stutters a little to begin with, the clearness of his voice is said to amaze the audience.[37] For a child who has allegedly been deaf and mute from his mother's womb and therefore has no previous language experience, this is in itself an extraordinary feat. On the one hand, it functions as a validation of the performed miracle. On the other hand, the sonic quality of medieval dissemination of knowledge and stories is reflected in the way this child is instructed to repeat the prayer after the canon brother. It is through hearing and repeating that he learns. The episode therefore appears as a kind of spontaneous teaching moment where the child is shown how to use his newly acquired faculties –– speech and hearing –– in the service of God. Consequently, the child's entry or re-entry into the world of sound underscores and strengthens its belonging to the Christian community.

The sound of children's voices and speech

In a fifteenth-century Swedish miracle, an apparently dead young boy regains his voice by being administered what appears to be a folk remedy.[38] Adults present pour warm beer down his throat, and he gradually regains his faculties. The description of this recovery conjures both visual images and sounds. First, the boy moves, then

[35] In the same miracle collection, another boy is questioned immediately after healing and does not know his own name. Nothing is said about his condition being congenial or not, pp. 443–444: *Requiritur de nomine et dicit "Nescio, ut surdus; et vocatuas est Ericus".*

[36] *Gamal norsk homiliebok,* pp. 35–36.

[37] Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula, p. 355: *[…] voce articulata & intelligibili, licet in verbis formandis & exprimendis balbutiret: qui autem adduxerant eum, stabant stupefacti, mirantes de his quæ, procedebant de ore ejus*.

[38] Gregorius, *Miracula defixionis Domini,* p. 6: *Et cum ceruisiam calidam in guttur eius infuderunt, iam prope mediam noctem apparuerunt in eo colores varij, quos paulatim motus et oscitacio ac vox succedebant […].*

he gasps or yawns, and finally, the voice follows. The text does not mention what the boy might say. His use of voice is therefore not mentioned as a precursor to a statement. What is emphasised and evoked is rather the very sound of a child's voice.

"Boys can be distinguished from adults by their voices and faces", writes Bartholomeus Anglicus in the thirteenth-century work *De proprietatibus rerum*.[39] The sound of boys before the cracking of voice is thus highlighted as something that sets them apart. Bartholomeus continues by describing many of the ways children use their voices, by speaking, laughing and crying and he comments on how they speak of all they hear and see, and how they are only silent when they sleep.[40] Bartholomeus thus seems acutely aware of the sound of children, with a particular focus on vocal sounds.

In the sources examined here, all statements and vocal acts attributed to children have been written by adult authors, and the encountered children are all part of narratives written with a clear hagiographic intent. Finding children's authentic voices in these adult-authored texts is a methodologically challenging and theoretically complex endeavour. Yet, like Bartholomeus, the authors of the texts often convey the quality of children's vocal sounds in a convincing and engaging manner. Vocal sounds, and especially speech acts, are the child-generated sounds that are most frequently encountered in miracle narratives. The explicit reference to children's vocal actions can in many cases be combined with the details given about the age and gender of the child, evoking a more detailed idea of how the individual child might have sounded.

As previously stated, some studies exist that discuss children as singers elsewhere in Europe in the Middle Ages. While there is no explicit mention of children as singers in liturgical settings in the Nordic hagiographic corpus, there are references made to liturgical hours or mass being sung. Such mentions function as temporal signposts and provide environmental background information to the main events of some narratives involving children. It is also highly likely that the voices of prepubescent boys were part of the choirs mentioned in these texts.[41] However, the only overt mention of a singing child is found in a 15th-century miracle about a boy who had fallen sick and appeared dead due to a devastating plague that hit his community.[42]

[39] Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, Book 6, chapter 5 (*De Puero*): *Per vocem et vultum pueri ab adultis dinoscuntur*.

[40] Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, Book 6, chapter 5 (*De Puero*).

[41] For a discussion on how the participation of children in liturgical song is attested, see Caldwell 2023: 59–65; Orme, 2021: 76–79.

[42] Gregorius, *Miracula defixionis Domini*, pp. 54–56: *[..]vastante populum graui pestilencia in Dalom Arosiensis diocesis [...]*.

In this case, a vow was made on the boy's behalf to the image of the deposition of Christ in Stockholm, and over the next day, he recovered gradually. "On the following night, however, the said boy sang most joyfully, as a sign of complete health."[43] Here, the act of singing, and thereby the sound of the singing child, explicitly acts as the proof of complete healing.

The quality, and not only the use of the newfound voices of formerly speech impaired children, is also commented on. This was seen in the previously discussed miracle with the boy who initially stuttered, but then recited Pater Noster with amazing clarity. Another tale, about a small boy who was mute for a long time before he regained his voice inside the church in Nidaros on the feast of St. Olav, underscores the beauty and perfect expression of his recovered voice as proof of his miraculous healing.[44] Such narratives sometimes accentuate the articulation, clarity, and extraordinary language proficiency of healed children who speak for the first time. In addition, the voice and speech of children are acknowledged as having specific qualities when developmental traits are commented on. The speech of a 3-year-old boy is for instance described as going from immature to fully formed after he has a vision of St. Katarina,[45] and a formerly mute 6-year-old is said to have reached the normal language proficiency of a child his age within a quarter of a year after he was healed.[46]

In a Birgittine miracle, there is a detailed description of a child's vocal actions in a time of duress, and of how this child sounded to those present. The 10-year-old Holmstein is trapped on an ice flake and unable to get to the shore where several people can see and hear the boy. The text says that he is terrified, and in a loud voice he unceasingly shouts his plea to Birgitta, "O saint Birgitta, help me".[47] This description conveys the desperation of the child's plea and gives an impression of the helplessness of the onlookers on the shore who were unable to aid the child, but who could hear him invoking the saint and begging for help.

Some children are reported to make prosaic statements asking for food or drink as they recover or revive. Concerning a boy from an early fifteenth-century miracle we are told that "As soon as the boy opened his eyes he demanded drink, to the delight

[43] Gregorius, *Miracula defixionis Domini*, pp. 54–56: *Sequenti vero nocte dictus puer letissime cantabat in signum integre sanitatis*.

[44] *Passio Olavi*, p. 75: *[…] pulcra vocis expressione perfecte*.

[45] Vita auctore Vlphone supparis aeui, p. 518.

[46] Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris, p. 315: *[…]et puer infra quariale anni perfectum usym loquendi iuxta sue etatis possibilitatem recepit*.

[47] *Acta et processus canonizacionis beate Birgitte*, pp. 131–132: *[…] vnde puer perterritus alta voce incessanter clamare cepit: "O sancta Brigida, adiuua me*".

of all who were present at the spectacle and praising God for his favours."[48] There are also children who ask to visit the shrine of a certain saint that they saw in a vision while dead, lost, or unconscious. One such example is found in a miracle from the collection of Vilhelm the Abbot of Æbelholt in Denmark where the speech act performed when a little boy called Paul is brought back to life is to ask when they are going to see a saint that he, according to the testimony given by his mother, never had heard of before.[49] In other cases, the sources portray children as speaking in the service of, or to the glorification of the Lord or a saint as they gain the ability to speak. An example of this is seen in a Katarinian miracle dated to 1470, where a girl uses her regained faculty of speech and her own voice to proclaim and praise the merits of St Katerina and the mercy of the Lord to all who will listen at Vadstena.[50] Using her voice to promote the cult and God, she becomes a spokesperson for the saint. Tales like this one demonstrate how children's own voices are described as taking up auditory space in these locations, and as heard by authorities and congregated crowds at the shrines.

Miracle stories are often viewed as a creation of collaborative and communal storytelling as they are the products of people sharing their experiences and stories. Michael Goodich characterises this as a discourse where the miracle beneficiary, the hagiographer, and the cultic community were engaged together (Goodich 2004: 306). As we have seen in several of the previously discussed examples, the child recipients of miracles are many, and their actions, experiences and circumstances are presented to the audience in some detail. Moreover, and most significantly with regards to their vocal roles, by telling and retelling their own stories, and testifying to their own experiences, children appear as members of the cultic community who contribute to the communal discourse. The active and audible presence of these medieval children in devotional life in the region is highlighted by the many examples found in miracle texts of their religious agency, participation, and active involvement in religious practices at local churches, cathedrals, and centres of religious cults.

[48] Gregorius, *Miracula defixionis Domini*, pp. 54–56: *Mox puer aperiens oculos bibere postulabat, letantibus cunctis qui spectaculo aderant et deum in suis beneficiis collaudantibus*.

[49] *Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula*, pp. 367–368: *[…]reuixit spiritus eius, et cepit mouere se; sed loquelam usque ad diem non recuperauit. Mane illucescente die dicebat matri: "Quando ibimus ad sanctum Willelmum?"*.

[50] *Sancti Willelmi abbatis Vita et miracula*, p. 522: *[…] cœpit infans se mouere, deinde loqui, & post paullulum perfecte conualuit, & cum oblatione sua venit ad sepulcrum Domine Catharine, misericordiam Dei prædicans omnibus, precibus & meritis eius secum factam*.

Children's integral presence in the medieval soundscape

Audible children would have featured in medieval soundscapes that were defined by a mix of human-generated sounds, sounds originating from biological non-human organisms, and environmental non-biological sounds. Hagiographic texts, such as the miracles explored in this article, richly recount the activities of children, both indirectly referencing and explicitly describing the vocal and non-vocal sounds children produced. The expressions of sound made by children may also be combined with indirect or direct descriptions that supply contextual details of non-human and environmental sounds. Together this information generates a vivid picture of how children may have figured in medieval soundscapes.

As a distinct part of the anthropophony of medieval soundscapes, the sounds made by children emerge in ways that differ from those made by adult contributors. Together, some of the specific activities that children typically engaged in, and the quality of children's voices, set the sounds made by them apart, and this is repeatedly acknowledged in medieval texts. Thus, the sources reflect a conception held by their authors of sound-making, and sound-perceiving children interacting with the audible in particular childlike ways.

The narrative structure of miracle tales shapes what sounds are present throughout the story. Sometimes descriptions of play or other activities children engage in evoke sounds at the story's outset.[51] However, the sound of children often emerges dramatically, signalling events that later necessitate saintly intervention, such as screams of pain and fear resulting from accidents. These sounds may blend with environmental noises, as seen in the accident caused by the horse-drawn carriage. The need for saintly aid can also be indicated by the distressing sounds made by children who are physically or mentally ill. Other tales begin with the absence of child-generated sound, especially those featuring persistently silent children who are mute, deaf, or both. Alternatively, silence may follow the occurrence of illness or accident, with severely injured, ill or temporarily dead children explicitly or implicitly described as silent.

Despite their own silence, these children may elicit emotional sounds of lament and despair from parents and others, along with prayers and invocations of saints. After saintly intervention, the bodily and vocal sounds produced and heard by recently silent or silenced children as they re-enter the soundscape often serve as evidence of

[51] E.g. Gregorius, *Miracula defixionis Domini*, p. 24: *Pueri in quodam flumine ludentes nauiculam forte repertam intrabant, que silenter aquarum fluentia ad quandam uoraginem deducta est, ubi de rupe horrendo precipitio flumen labitur*; and and *Passio Olavi*, pp. 60–61: *Molendinarius quidam Olauus [...] filiam habuit paruulam etate quatuor annorum, que ludens in procliuis montis super torrentem*.

healing. Children are shown using their voices to fulfil basic needs as well as integrate into devotional practices. Unlike the initial sounds of warning, these child-generated sounds during this phase of the narrative typically evoke joyous reactions, contrasting with the lamentation and despair associated with the soundless children earlier in the narrative.

The narratives that highlight the sounds made by children who were once silenced by illness or accident, showcase how their newfound ability to hear and speak marks a miraculous and transformative healing that (re)introduces them to the world of sound, often in a church or shrine setting.

Beth Williamson stresses that by bearing in mind the effect of sound, we may achieve a broader understanding of medieval faith, devotional practice, and religious experience (Williamson 2013). Such awareness of sound should be extended to the sounds made by children in exactly these settings. The narratives discussed here, which illustrate children adding their voices and sounds to devotional settings, illuminate the role of children and their contributions within religious contexts. Such stories enhance our comprehension of medieval auditory environments, particularly by showcasing interactions between clergy and the youngest lay members of the congregation. Hagiographic sources from Scandinavia provide compelling evidence of children as integral contributors to the medieval soundscape, in turn enriching our understanding of medieval soundscapes through the diverse and significant examples of the audible presence of medieval children.

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