

miracles of the Virgin are tales of wonders attributed to Mary's intercession. Nothing really definite is known about their origin except that they arose in the eastern Mediterranean region. In western Europe the first miracles were recorded in the 6th century. In the following centuries a few were occasionally written down. It was only in the 12th and 13th centuries that the genre really began to flourish. The substantial collections by Thomas Cantimpratanus and Caesarius Heisterbacensis, written in Latin, date from the 13th century. Many miracles were also recorded in the Speculum Historiale by Vincent de Beauvais and in Jacob de Voragine's Legenda aurea. There are many reasons for the fact that in these centuries so many of the wonders attributed to Mary were recorded, the most important being that the worship of the Virgin Mary was at its height and that several monastic orders were founded with Mary as patroness. To show that she was worth relying on, her good deeds were written down and the word was spread.

The Dominican and Cistercian orders have had an important part in the recording of the miracles of the Virgin. They settled in different places in Scandinavia during the 12th and 13th centuries, and brought with them religious literature. As Latin was not always understood by all monks in Scandinavia and certainly not by all laymen, it is understandable that there was a lot of translation work done. So the miracles were not only rendered in Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic but also in Old Danish and Old Swedish. Most of the miracles, however, were handed down in Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic with a common term referred to as *norrøn*.

The Norwegian king, Håkon Magnusson, who reigned from 1299 to 1319 was a source of inspiration for these translations. A manuscript containing the most extensive collection of *norrøne* miracles mentions at the end that this Norwegian monarch had taken the initiative for its translation. Many translations were accomplished in Norway. The manuscripts, however, which were practically all copies of older texts, nearly all come from Iceland.

In the 19th century, from 1868 to 1871 to be precise, the Norwegian G.R. Sæminger published the *norrøne* miracles of the Virgin. His book was called the Marfu saga and it is some 1200 pages long. A good hundred pages contain the actual saga of Mary, that is the account of her life, and the rest contains stories about miracles - the so-called *jærtegn*. So the title, The Saga of Mary, is really rather misleading and is more suitable for the part which

describes her life than for the part containing the tales of wonder, usually called the legends or miracles of Mary. A better title would have been "The Life and Miracles of Mary".

The miracles in Unger's publication vary in length from about half a page to over 20 pages. Many of them have been recorded in more than one manuscript, and where the differences were ~~only~~ slight, Unger included only one version. He mentioned variant readings in footnotes. Where the texts show substantial differences, he recorded them separately. So there are some texts which appear in 2, 3, or even 4 versions.

As a whole, the Maríu saga contains over 250 miracles. About a thousand have been handed down in Latin but for a vernacular, 250 is no mean number. We may take it that the genre was popular, particularly in Iceland. The many manuscripts recording the miracles are proof of that, as well as the fact that about 20 of these stories have come to us also in poetry form. These poems were all accomplished in Iceland and for the most part in the 15th century.

Let us look at the contents of the norrøne miracles of the Virgin. As far as the subject matter is concerned, we can divide them into some 10 main groups. I shall mention a few of them. Quite a large number is about people who, having made a deal with the devil to achieve a worldly goal, repent and are saved by Mary. The well-known miracle about Theophilus, which dates from the 6th century and which has been handed down in four versions, is a good example of this. Another group is about nuns who succumb to the secular love of men, or about monks who associate with women. Their sin is enormous but if they are faithful servants of Mary, they needn't be lost. An example in this case is the well-known Beatrice miracle. In the Norrøn, this miracle has come down to us in different versions. In a third group, which is comparatively large, feast-days and prayers in honour of Mary are promoted. There is one miracle, for example, which tells of an abbot who sails from Denmark to England. During a storm he prays to God and hears a voice telling him that the wind will die down if he promises to celebrate the Virgin's birthday and sees to it that others do too.

Apart from the subject matter, the Norrøne miracles of the Virgin can also be classified to the time and manner of their translation, and this is what Ole Widding did (Opuscula 1961). On the grounds of those criteria he classified 3 groups. Group one consists mainly of the oldest miracles; these are quite literally translated. In group two we find the miracles that have been freely translated. The original text has been embellished and adapted to such

an extent that it is hardly recognizable. Many Latinisms occur in the translations of the second group and that is not, as one might think, a result of the influence of the original text. Rather, it is the result of the fashion on Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries among writers, especially writers of religious literature, to embellish their work with Latinisms. The last group consists of miracles of a more recent date which were more or less literally translated as the first group were.

Now, it is not the case that all norrøne miracles of the Virgin go back to a Latin text. Three short stories are about miraculous recoveries on Iceland. They are at the back of a manuscript which contains translations of Latin texts, but they themselves do not have Latin equivalents. In a number of other miracles we read that they are not "i ritningum". So that means that the writer had no text to refer to. Finally, there are several other miracles which do not, to our knowledge, have a Latin equivalent.

The idea that Norwegian or Icelandic writers also wrote miracles themselves, first occurred to me on studying, in the *Norrøn*, the renderings of the well-known Beatrice miracle I mentioned before. I discovered that the norrøne rendering of this miracle, titled "Af tveimr kumpanum" goes back, directly or indirectly, to the text by Caesarius Heisterbacensis, but takes many liberties with it. Later, I found a miracle in the *norrøn* which has much in common with the story "Af tveimr kumpanum". There is no Latin text of this second miracle and I have the impression that this miracle is written after the example of the miracle of the two "kumpanum". Later I discovered that this is not the only miracle in the *Maríu saga* that seems familiar as it reminds one of another miracle, but for which no Latin text has been found. I can conclude from this, that Norwegian or Icelandic writers construed variations on familiar themes.

These themes needn't necessarily be taken from existing miracles. The miracle called, "Vor fru frelsti brodur fra iotni" makes this evident. This story tells of two priests who go walking and then lose their way in a country on the Baltic. They are captured by a one-eyed giant who takes them to his cave and kills one of them. The other manages to escape death for the time being by thrusting a beam into the giant's eye and blinding him. While the giant is sleeping, the man kills one of his goats. He drapes the skin with horns and all over his shoulders. Although the giant frisks all the animals the next morning before he lets them leave the cave between his legs, he doesn't discover the man, who, as soon as he is at a safe distance, curses the giant loudly and disappears.

You have all undoubtedly recognized the familiar tale of Odysseus and the Cyclop Polyfemus. The writer has transformed the story into a miracle of the Virgin by having the main character, that is the priest who escapes, pray to Mary and by attributing his rescue to her help as well. I haven't been able to find a Latin example of this story and I wonder therefore if it isn't an original Icelandic story. Original, in the sense that it is a free variation on a story set down by Homer.

The question if this is a translation or an original text is not the only one, I would like to put to you in this lecture. Another question is for whom these stories were meant. We know that many Latin miracles, usually told concisely, were often used as an example in a sermon: they illustrated the importance of worshipping and trusting Mary. Probably some of the norrøne miracles were used in sermons too, but others definitely not. They were not what you would call edifying, or their length was so that they were probably not even read aloud in one session, let alone being included in a sermon.

Besides serving as moral examples (paradigms) in a sermon, miracles were often used as entertaining literature for monks and nuns. Usually the stories were read aloud after a meal. It is quite possible that the norrøne miracles served the same purpose. However, there was a relatively small number of monasteries on Iceland and it is from this island that almost all the manuscripts come. That's why I think we have to consider another public besides churchgoers, monks and nuns, namely the common people. These stories were considered so fascinating that laymen read them and copied them out. And they are indeed anything but tedious. Several of them, especially stories about the devil, illicit love, adultery and incest must have been read with embarrassed delight.

A third question concerns the influence, if any, of this prose on Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic literature in general. Hans Bekker Nielsen poses in his article "Legender-Helgensagaer (Norrøn Fortællekunst, 1965) that the oldest hagiographic literature can have served as an example for the writers of sagas. This theory is correct in my opinion. The translation and adaptations of texts originally written in Latin - including the miracles - often show a sophisticated style of writing. The writers of sagas were able to take it up from there. As far as the miracles are concerned, in my opinion we can also establish that they not only affected secular literature, but religious literature as well. Take visionary poetry, for instance. There are several miracles in which the hereafter is described in a way similar to that in the well-known medieval Norwegian poem, Draumkvedet.

Finally, one last question. Did the miracles affect the outlook and beliefs of those who read them or heard them read? My answer is, yes, indeed, they did. Here are some examples to illustrate.

Take, for example, the views held on Jews. I'm not talking about changing views on purpose here, as there weren't many Jews in Scandinavia, so one could hardly have ideas about them. But a lot was written about them in the miracles of the saints and especially in the miracles of the Virgin so that an idea began to form about the Jews and their doctrine in Scandinavia too. It was not a positive picture. One cannot speak of outright antisemitism in the miracles but nothing very positive was written about them either. Their great sin was, at least according to the Christians, that they continued to live by the Old Testament and denied the advent of the Messiah. There are several instances in the miracles where Jews are converted and subsequently accepted. However, there are many more examples of Jews who persisted in denying that Mary was a Virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, or who besmirched images of the Virgin and attacked hosts (consecrated wafers) with knives. They are always horribly punished if they are caught, so the idea that their sin weighed heavily must have reached even Scandinavia as well.

The negative picture painted of the Jews did not only refer to their beliefs. In the norrøn there are a few miracles in which Jews are accused of usury and dishonest trading. The fact that at the end of the Middle Ages negative things were being heard about the Jews, even in Scandinavia, proves how influential literary sources are. Then it was not only in translation that these things were read.

Another example concerns the attitude to suicide. In several instances in the miracles, suicide is referred to as a sin. In Scandinavia in pre-Christian times it was permissible and even considered as a good deed. But this attitude changed with the advent of Christianity. The miracles certainly contributed to this change by stating more than once that suicide was a sin prompted by the devil.

And so I could give more examples. Many miracles speak of the importance of fasting and sexual continence. Many more point out the necessity of celebrating the Virgin's festive days. They are customs to which the Bible pays little or no attention. Sometimes they were customs that were introduced after the Bible came into being. These customs came to the north in the wake of the church. We can be sure that the stories that point out their usefulness, had more effect than learned discourses.

