

Old Norse Hagiography and the Question of the Latin Sources

Interest in Old Norse translation literature from different foreign languages occurs relatively late compared to the amount of research devoted to the texts of the original sagas. One of the first comprehensive undertakings in this field was the edition of the *Strengleikar* by Keyser and Unger (1850). In the introduction to this collection of texts translated from Old French the editors stressed the importance of translation literature for the development of an indigenous Old Norse written culture and as the product of the cultural relations between medieval Scandinavia and continental Europe:

Man vinder end videre af dem (*disse Oversættelser*) et Indblik i det oldnorske Sprogs Udvikling, forsaavidt denne er bleven paavirket af literær Forbindelse med Udlandet, af den almindelige europæiske Culturretning, og man lærer endelig af dem at kjende denne literære Forbindelses hele Udstrækning og dens Indflydelse paa den nationale Character, Smag og Videnskabelighed. (Keyser & Unger 1850: III)

Of the literature which is translated from Latin into Old Icelandic, hagiography incontestably forms the dominant group. The hagiographic sagas are transmitted in thematic (i.e. 'genre-specific') manuscripts which constitute the basis of Unger's extensive editorial work from the second half of the 19th century. The choice of contents of these manuscripts may reflect the composition of pre-existing Latin anthologies or it may reflect the choice of an Icelandic author, but in either case it came to determine the conventional groupings in Unger's two major editions, *Postola sögur* (1874) and *Heilagra manna sögur* (1877).

Gabriel Turville-Petre was one of the first scholars to treat religious prose based on foreign models more extensively. In his *Origins of Icelandic Literature* he came to the famous conclusion that "the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it" (Turville-Petre 1953: 142). This dictum, which has been revised and reconsidered by later scholarship (Jónas Kristjánsson 1985, Foote 1994, Cormack 2000), paid an important tribute to translation literature in a way not dissimilar from what Keyser and Unger had expressed a century earlier in the already mentioned introduction to the *Strengleikar*.

A few years later, in an article about the sources of the vernacular homily in England, Joan Turville-Petre, referring to Vrátný's studies on the passages of patristic origins, points at the problem of the sources of translation literature. She writes that:

Vrátný was mainly interested in distinguishing those passages in the Stockholm Book which could be considered original composition rather than direct translation from Latin. He admitted that even these parts must derive ultimately from Latin works, but he regarded them as the product of reading and study, in contrast to versions of verifiable Latin originals. This question is still open. The search for the proximate sources of such commonplaces must be pushed much further before scholars can estimate the degree of originality and adaptation in the vernacular versions. (Turville-Petre 1960: 169)

As was hoped by Joan Turville-Petre, in the 60s interest in literature translated into Old Norse did indeed increase. Comprehensive research to identify the Latin sources for the hagiographic sagas was undertaken, *inter alia*, by Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Ole Widding in connection with their preliminary work for the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*. Ole Widding collected a lot of information about Latin sources in a series of hand-written notebooks which are still kept at the Dictionary in Copenhagen and which have largely been incorporated in the dictionary's volume of indices from 1989. The primary results of this extensive research were

published in *The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist* (1963)¹ as well as in several articles about single sagas. It is quite interesting to look at Ole Widding's notebooks, since they contain pieces of information which he chose not to include in the final publication and some brief commentary on the texts. As far as I can conclude from my experience with the Latin sources available for the work at the dictionary, Ole Widding's idea of what could be considered a reliable Latin source was necessarily influenced by the extent to which this source could be used for a profitable lexical analysis. Although this is a condition for the dictionary work, where a consistent lexical correspondence between the source and the target text is required, I think that a wider and looser concept of source can still be useful for other considerations about the cultural relations between Scandinavia and continental Europe in the middle ages.

In my research, which is primarily based on the works in *Postola sögur*, I have made use of existing source references, and tried to find others on my own, in order to have reliable texts for both interlinguistic and intralinguistic comparison. In fact, along with the import of the material from one language to another, which can result in different translations of the same source, there is an interest in revising the texts in the vernacular during the process of textual transmission which is typical of a manuscript culture. Moreover, in a manner not dissimilar from that experienced with the Old Norse texts, the Latin texts were transmitted in different versions with more or less diverging readings. When collating the hagiographic sagas with their sources there are therefore a variety of factors to be considered. The rise and development of a prose style and an original literature in Old Norse is usually seen as a chronological process, but there also exist different approaches to translation, which opened up the possibility of the production of new texts from existing ones. Varying degrees of fidelity to the source, ranging from word-for-word translation to a more critical attitude towards the Latin original, can have their origin in different translation methods reflecting different attitudes towards the act of translation and in different aims regarding the target text. On the other hand, divergences between the original and the target text can be due not only to the fact that the Icelandic translator perhaps made deliberate changes in the text, but also to the eventuality that the translator had a different Latin version at his disposal than the one which is available to us today. Instead of trying solely to identify an ultimate source containing all (or at least most) of the readings witnessed in the Old Norse text, useful results can be obtained by using more than one version of a Latin text. In this way some of the readings, which seem to be innovations on the part of the translator, prove in fact to correspond to variants when we compare different texts of the same Latin *passio*. For instance, some of the Sagas of the Apostles are based on the *Historia Apostolica* of the Abdias tradition, which has been edited by, amongst others, Fabricius, Mombritius and Lipsius and Bonnet. The texts in Fabricius and Mombritius are very similar in wording and content, but they can differ in small details that sometimes correspond better to the Old Norse version. A couple of examples from two versions of *Matheus saga*:

1 - qui fuerat a Philippo [+ Apostolo Diacono *Fb*] baptizatus (Mombritius 1910, II: 258⁷)

AM 645 4^o

AM.655 XII-XIII/630 4^o

þenna man hafði philippvs diacon scirþan (Larsson 1885: 108²⁶)

þenna mann hafði Philippus postoli skirðan (Unger 1874: 834³¹⁻³²)

¹ Kirby 1980 suggests additional source references for many of the texts listed in the *Handlist*, and an appendix with emendations and additions is found in Cormack 1994, where the author summarizes the most recent research about individual works.

I=hans nafni. oc crafti. sari ec pic *ohreins andi
(Larsson 1885: 111¹⁵⁻²⁰)

i hans nafni oc crapti sari *ec þec, andi (Unger
1874: 836²²)

In the first example, where AM 645 4^o has *diacn* instead of *postoli*, the *Codex Scardensis* has the same reading as the other manuscripts, which could testify that the change must have occurred in AM 645 4^o. On the other hand, since Fabricius' edition contains both titles, they could both have been rendered in the first translation, while the successive versions could have omitted one of them.

The adjective *ohreinn* in the second example corresponds to the Latin *maligne*, which is only found in Mombritius' edition. This detail, which can have been lost in the process of transmission, also raises a question as to the nature of the Latin original each translator had at his disposal. In both examples the different readings in the Old Norse texts could have arisen in the process of textual transmission as the result of a textual revision of the translation based on a slightly different Latin version.

While the older *postula sqgur* can be traced back to single sources which are followed quite faithfully, the later *postula sqgur* have a more compilatory character, and they bear witness to a wider choice of sources and a higher degree of restructuring. In these compilatory sagas the compiler uses the same method as is found in the contemporary Latin works of this genre: that is a critical procedure by which the different sources can be employed according to the nature of the subject matter. We find therefore both a shifting from one major source to another, and the interweaving into each main section of additional material taken from other sources, sometimes named by the compiler. It is often impossible to determine whether the task of compilation has been done by the Icelandic author, or whether he has translated an already existing – and now lost – compilatory Latin text. The quoted sources don't always correspond in every respect to the work that is specifically named as the source, and this is sometimes due to the fact that they are second-hand sources, of the kind found in the encyclopaedic works of medieval Europe.

A closer look at the textual history of *Jóns saga postola* can illustrate some of the problems involved in reconstructing what the sources were. The saga has been transmitted to us in 4 main redactions, plus two abridged versions of one leaf each (AM 238 IV fol and AM 655 XIV 4^o), which are not relevant for our purpose. The first three redactions (AM 630 4^o, AM 656 I 4^o and AM 623 4^o) are principally based on the same source material, while the fourth redaction (AM 649 a 4^o and AM 649 b 4^o) is a compilatory work which constitutes a revised recension of the first 3 with supplementary material from other sources. Finally there is a *Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jacobs*, which is preserved in the *Codex Scardensis* and some fragments and this is a compilatory work.

The redaction of the *Jóns saga postola* contained in AM 630 4^o begins with genealogical and biographical information about John. The material is mainly drawn from the *Vulgata*, in particular the Gospels of Matthew and John and the First Letter of John, which are named directly as sources.

The central part of the saga is based on the *Vita* by Pseudo-Mellitus, which is available in different versions. I have compared the editions by Heine, Mombritius and Crescimbeni. Especially a long section about the events that occurred in Rome at the Porta Latina is not found in Heine's version, but only in the *recensio interpolata* edited by Mombritius and Crescimbeni. The latter seems to be the closest to the Old Norse translation.

For supplementary material the translator also relied on sources other than the Pseudo-Mellitus' *Vita*. It is directly stated in the text that chapter 9 is based on Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The episode is taken from chapter 23 in the 3rd book, and constitutes a kind of independent anecdote about a young man who is converted by the apostle. In the Old

Norse version it is retold with plenty of detail. Compared to the original text now available to us, the translator seems to have amplified, but it is also possible that he had an already elaborated Latin text at his disposal, or that he used a pre-existing Old Norse translation for this section of the text.

Sometimes additional material appears to be quoted from other sources which are known to the translator. This is very common with the biblical quotations. For instance in the following example the translation expands the text following the Gospel of Luke, of which the Latin original gives a shortened version:

Et nemo illi dabat [+ sed et canes veniebant et
lingeabant ulcera eius *Luc.* 16, 21] (*Crescimbeni*
1716: 13¹⁻²)

ok villdi engi gefa homum; en hundar komu til ok
slektu sar hans (*Unger 1874: 423¹⁵⁻¹⁶*)

The last part of the saga in the redaction found in AM 630 has a homiletic conclusion which is typical of this collection and which doesn't correspond to any of the known sources, nor is it found in the other redactions based on the *Vita* by Pseudo-Mellitus.

The second redaction (AM 656 I 4°) is based on the same sources, with the same insertion from Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* as in the first redaction (ch. 4). The text is the shortest of the three older versions. For instance the events that occurred before John's return to Ephesus are summarized in comparison to the source, and the content of the letter from Ephesus' proconsul to the emperor Domitianus is not included in the translation.

The third redaction of the saga (AM 623 4°) is incomplete, since a leaf of the codex is missing. This version doesn't contain the biographical information about John, but has additional details about Domitianus compared to the source, which here too is the *Vita* by Pseudo-Mellitus. After the story from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* there is an anecdote about John playing with a little bird, which can be traced back to Johannes Cassianus' *Collationes*, XXIV, chapter 21. The same story is found in a more detailed version both in the fourth redaction of the saga (AM 649 a 4°) and in the *Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jacobs*. In AM 623 4° this insertion from other sources is placed between the episode about Drusiana's resurrection and the story of Craton, while in the two other versions it is found before the events in the temple of Diana.

These three older redactions of the saga are not very different in style and content, but mostly in their selection of the source material and in the structuring of the texts. The Pseudo-Mellitus' *Vita* is also the main source for the fourth version of the saga, but here a lot of additional material – in part from unidentified sources – appears as well. The first chapter is based on the *Vulgata* with additions from Petrus Damianus and Pope Leo the Great, both mentioned by the compiler. In ch. 2 the story of Marcellinus, based on a text like the *Legenda Aurea*, is supplied with commentary from the *Homiliae in Ezechielem* by Gregory the Great, as stated in the text (Kirby 1980: 29, 45).

As for the specifically-named references in some shorter passages, among the amplifications in the fourth version there is a comparison between John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, for which the saga refers twice to the *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* by Guillaume Durand:

sem greinir su bok, er heitir Rationale Officiorum (*Unger 1874: 492¹⁷⁻³⁶*)

þat mæl, er stendr i nefndri bok Rationale Officiorum (*Unger 1874: 495²²*)

The relevant information indeed ultimately corresponds in content to what is found in the *Rationale officiorum* in the chapter about *De sanctis Stephano, Iohanne Evangelista et Innocentibus* (VII, 42, in particular § 8 ff.). The material is though quite elaborated: this could be the work of the Icelandic author, or he could have drawn the information from an intermediate text.

Part of the source material of the *Jóns saga postola* is also found in the *Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jakobs*, a composite work in which the lives of the two brothers are interweaved. *Tveggja postola saga* is structured in four main parts: after a section about all of the apostles (chs. 1-20), emphasis is placed alternatively on John or James. The main body of the narrative is based respectively on the Pseudo-Mellitus' *Vita* and the *Passio Sancti Iacobi Apostoli*. Scholars disagree on to the extent to which a reference in the text to *sa er þessa saugu diktaði i latínu* (Unger 1874: 647¹⁵) should be interpreted as a proof of the fact that the whole work is based on a single pre-existent Latin compilation.² According to Peter Foote (1959: 9) the sentence in question seems to refer solely to the material about John, while it is not unlikely that the older sagas on the two apostles already available in Icelandic have been used along with the Latin sources for the compiling of this composite text. Besides the two main Latin sources, some of the material come from other works like Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais, which for some parts is based on Eusebius, Honorius Augustodunensis' *Speculum Ecclesiae* (in particular the sermon *De sancto Iacobo Apostolo*) and Augustinus' *Tractatus in Johannis Evangelium*.³ The third section of the saga contains the already-mentioned episode from Cassianus' *Collationes*, and a few chapters (50-56) about the Antichrist. According to Collings (1969: 129) this part may derive from a pamphlet such as Adso Dervensis' *Libellus de Antichristo* and a commentary on the Revelations. Further research by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (1996) has shown that the probable source is the *Compendium Theologicae Veritatis* by Hugo Ripelin.

The fourth and last main section of the *Tveggja postola saga*, concerning James, shares two main sources with a section in the *Karlamagnus saga*, that is the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle (*Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*) and the excerpts from it in the *Speculum Historiale*. Peter Foote (1959, 2000) has investigated the relation between the two Old Norse texts and the sources, showing how the material can be traced back alternatively to one of the two Latin texts. The concluding chapters of the saga turn again to John, and can only partially be related to precise sources, such as Augustinus' *Tractatus*. The closing prayer for intercession has the same content as in the fourth version of *Jón saga postola*, but is adapted and expanded to include also James.

The compiler of the saga is very concerned with chronology: the text is interspersed with historical inserts which have the purpose of placing the narration against the background of the contemporary events in the Roman Empire. These pieces of information are ultimately based on Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This concern for history is directly stated in more than one occasion, as in the following passage:

Þvi munum ver láta Jacobum gleðjaz ok fagna i sva ^agætum sigri salnanna, en hyggia at þessu næst, hvat fram ferr i ríki Rómveria eðr meðr höfðingjum Jorsalalandz (Unger 1874, 582²⁷⁻²⁹)

In spite of the digressions and shifts between sources, the unity of the text is achieved through the use of internal references and remarks on the structure of the saga, such as: *Munum ver litit skrifa ... síðarr i bokinni* (Unger 1874, 547⁵); *Endir her hinn fyrsta fiörþung af sögunni* (570¹¹⁻¹²); *sem síðarr mun getit verða* (595¹⁵⁻¹⁶); *Sem fyrr var skrifat i bokinni* (632²¹); *sem fyrr er skrifat* (707⁵).

² This theory has been supported by Unger (1874: xxiv) and Finnur Jónsson (1923: 871). Kirby (1980: 31) doesn't exclude the possibility that the Old Norse saga could be the translation of a contemporary, maybe somewhat shorter, Latin compilation, which would explain the considerable amount of Latin in the saga.

³ Kirby (1980: 31) provides a list of the occurrences of the Fathers and later writers in the saga: Gregory is mentioned ten times; Augustinus eight times; Josephus, Clement, Ambrose, Jerome and Bede are named twice; Irenaeus, Athanasius, Isidore and Pope Leo the Great once. Goffridus and the Elucidarius are also mentioned, the last one with a negative remark: *Hinn hygni Lucidarius segir* (Unger 1874: 664¹⁴).

From this quick survey of the textual history of the *Jóns saga postola* vis-à-vis the many Latin works involved in its composition, I hope to have shown that the more articulated the text becomes, the more difficult it is to trace its content back to identified sources. Although many pieces of the puzzle have been put together, we still lack the Latin original for passages which are undoubtedly based on foreign sources. Even in the case of identified Latin sources, the problem of isolating or reconstructing the recension that was the model cannot be totally solved by collating all the Old Norse texts with the different Latin editions. As we have seen, a common source for all the redactions of the Old Norse story of John the Apostle is the Pseudo-Mellitus' *Vita* in a version closest to the one edited by Crescimbeni. Besides reporting the events at the Porta Latina (also found in Mombritius), this is the only edition containing John's words to the congregation during the last mass. Still, there are other readings which better correspond to Heine's or Mombritius' editions. None of the editions contains all the pieces of information reported in the saga, which makes it necessary to follow all the available editions synoptically.

A composite work like the fourth version of *Jóns saga postola* and to a higher extent *Tveggja postola saga* can be described as an accumulative text, resulting from a process of compilation which is a characteristic of medieval culture. We can distinguish different layers in such a work: primary individual sources, like the Pseudo-Mellitus's *Vita*, are followed closely, although with divergences and insertions; excerpts from encyclopaedic works, like those of Vincent of Beauvais and Honorius Augustodunensis, are interweaved in the text; a less distinguishable bulk of material comes from the author's own cultural baggage, which allows him to insert additional information into the main body of narrative, which may simply derive from the compiler's own memory of works he has digested, drawing, for example, directly from the *Vulgata* or from works like Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Some of the comments which cannot be traced back to specific sources are commonplace in the John tradition like those found in the Roman Breviary for the apostle's feast day. Finally, part of the source material must have been available already in Old Norse, that is to say in an elaborated form compared to the Latin original. For instance reference is made in the *Tveggja postola saga* to the information *sem fulliga stendr skrifat i lifssögu sæls Petri* (589³⁻⁴). In connection with this working method, the specific references to *auctores* or works, when they occur, can sometimes prove to be derivatives of the quoted authors rather than direct quotes. This could for example be the case for the material in the fourth version of *Jóns saga postola* drawn from the *Rationale Officiorum*. In the *Tveggja postola saga* a reference to a commentary by Beda on the evangelical sentence *Sequere me* (543²⁶, 665¹⁷) doesn't correspond to any of the edited texts of Beda available today.

To sum up, the problem of getting as close as possible to the original involves defining what we mean by a 'source', depending of course on the kind of analysis we want to undertake. Where should we draw a line between what is relevant and what is not? In the preliminary remarks to her analysis of the *Tveggja postola saga* Jóns and Jakobs Collings seems to make a distinction between sources, parallels and analogues:

In the following discussion, direct sources will be indicated where possible, otherwise parallels will be given, bearing in mind that the compiler's very free treatment of those sources which are demonstrably direct, may occasionally obscure the distinction between source or analogue. (Collings 1969: 113)

In my opinion, the idea of source should be intended in a wide sense, to include texts which cannot be regarded as direct sources, but may derive from the same works as the material found in the Icelandic translation and can, at the very least, give us important clues as to how the content is related to contemporary European culture. This is especially important for the compilatory works, where it is often only possible to identify the sources of parts of them since the Icelandic author apparently uses the same working methods as those witnessed in

contemporary Latin works of the same genre, that is to say that a great deal of redactional elaboration and combination of source material has been undertaken.

In his study of the Old Norse version of the *Vitae Patrum* Mattias Tveitane concludes (1968, 130):

Språket i den norrøne *Vitae patrum* er i høy grad latinsk påvirket. Delvis ytrer denne påvirkningen seg som avhengighet av den latinske originalen – f. eks. slik at latinsk syntaks (relativpronomen, sideordnede partisipp, dobbelte ablativer) overføres til det norrøne språket. Men den viktigste latinpåvirkningen er indirekte, fra oversetterens (skriverens) skolelærdom, hans retorisk-stilistiske mønstre og de europeiske lærde stilidealer i hans tid (rimeligvis: slutten av det 13. århundre).

Sources which may be of little significance for lexical and stylistic considerations still can elucidate the ultimate provenance of the material, and can help to determine the degree of participation of medieval Scandinavian scholars in contemporary European culture, and the kind of more or less direct influence on Old Norse literature which both Turville-Petre and Tveitane tried to elucidate.

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