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Arthur of the North:
Histories, Emotions, and Imaginations

Guest Editors: Bjørn Bandlien, Stefka G. Eriksen,
and Sif Rikhardsdottir

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Arthur of the North: Histories, Emotions, and Imaginations

Introduction

The articles in this special issue are based on papers presented at the First International Conference of the Nordic Branch of the International Arthurian Society, which took place at the University of Oslo in May 2013. The aim of the conference was to mark the establishment and thus inaugurate the newly formed branch. Its primary goals were (1) to map the state of the field of Arthurian studies in the North, and thus lay the groundwork for future activities and collaboration among the members of the network, and (2) to introduce the Nordic branch to the International Arthurian Society as a whole by inviting to the conference prominent scholars representing other linguistic and cultural communities of the society, such as Latin, French, German, English, Dutch, and Welsh. The objective of the conference was therefore to promote international collaboration and comparative research, and to foreground the nature and potential of the studies of the transmission of Arthurian literature in medieval Scandinavia.

The main goals of this special issue are closely related to the main objectives of the conference, that is, to present current innovative scholarly work on the Nordic Arthurian material and thereby emphasize the relevance of this material for Arthurian studies in general. The conference, as well as this publication, may certainly be seen as a part of a recent trend that promotes the value of cross-cultural research of Arthurian material and that seeks to highlight the significance of

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Nordic Arthurian literary material for gaining a better understanding of the development of indigenous literary traditions.¹

The papers presented at the conference covered a wide variety of topics, including literary transmission, cultural adaptations and social contexts, feelings and cognition, senses and the psyche, and identity and the self. The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion with invited scholars representing the various literary traditions. The roundtable discussions addressed the relevance of cross-cultural research for Arthurian studies. To paraphrase some of the scholars' ideas: Frank Brandasma emphasized the nature of texts as agents of cultural transmission, and the dynamics and continuity of this transmission process across the artificial borders created by modern languages and cultural and historical contexts. Keith Busby focused on the role of manuscripts when studying the transmission process, and touched upon some of the problematic issues related to varying editorial practices. Cora Dietl argued that by focusing on the process of *translatio*, our research contributes to an increased sense of European political, cultural, and didactic history. Siân Echarad emphasized the dual nature of all individual literary traditions, including Latin: that is, their centrality in certain contexts and simultaneous invisibility and peripheralty with regard to others. It is therefore crucial to combine detailed knowledge of the specific with comparative and collaborative endeavors in order to reach a better understanding of how the various traditions feed into each other.

While the conference papers reflected a wide array of topics, revealing a vibrant research community in Nordic Arthurian studies, the present issue focuses on three thematic strands that seemed to stand out as overarching themes. The editors furthermore consider these themes to represent fertile, new, and innovative approaches to Nordic Arthurian literature, which moreover have significant theoretical or critical relevance beyond the borders of Nordic studies. Unfortunately, many very promising papers and topics therefore had to be excluded to maintain thematic coherence of the special issue. The thematic strands are conveyed in the title of this special issue, and of this introduction, and focus on the making and transmission of histories, emotions, and imaginations. The concept of history here conveys the yet unexplored

territory of the reception history of medieval Nordic Arthurian literature, the representation of history in the extant stories, and finally the history of the manuscript variants and textual representation. Emotion and imagination are interlinked in their foci on the internal senses and cognition, while the approaches adopted here by the authors are very varied and range from linguistic analysis of emotive representation to landscape studies from a cognitive (or emotive) perspective.

In the first article, Marianne Kalinke, in her plenary address, directs her attention to a fact that, while known, seems to have remained in the shadows: namely that even though Norway has traditionally been credited with introducing Arthurian romance in the North through the translations undertaken during the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263), the first apparent translation of Arthurian material took place around the year 1200 in Iceland. *Breta sögur*, an Old Norse translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, as well as a separate rendering of the *Historia's* "Prophetae Merlini" in verse, known as *Merlinsspá*, are the first Arthurian texts known to have been translated in the North. In other words, King Arthur was already known in Iceland when the Norwegian translations of Arthurian romances were imported. The extant manuscript versions of *Breta sögur* reveal that the Latin source diverged significantly from the existing Latin versions of Geoffrey's *Historia*. Kalinke suggests that the source of *Breta sögur* was a version of the *Historia* that was in some respects also related to Wace's *Brun*, for it similarly shifted the Arthurian narrative generically from a chronicle to a romance narrative form. Thus, *Breta sögur* anticipated the motifs and themes associated with the Arthurian narratives that were subsequently translated in Norway. The translation is also characterized by the alliterative prose style that is generally considered to define the later Norwegian translations.

While Marianne Kalinke focuses on the introduction of Arthurian material to Iceland, Joseph Sullivan discusses modifications in the function and representation of the figure of King Arthur and Arthurian material during its transmission from France to Norway and Sweden. His article details how *Herr Ivarn* fundamentally modifies the figure of King Arthur inherited from the main exemplar text, Chrétien's *Train*, by taking a comparative look at several key sequences in which King Arthur's character manifests itself clearly. Thus, this northeastern Arthur is a markedly less flawed figure than Chrétien's more problematic king. By making the king—the prime representative of the courtly world in

1. See Kalinke (2011); Sif Rikhardsdóttir (2012); Bandlien (2012); Wolf and Busby (2012); Johansson and Flåten (2012); Glauser and Kranarz-Bain (2014); Johansson and Mundal (2014).

the tale—a more exemplary figure, the Swedish poet contributes to his overall strategy of idealizing the court in *Herr Ivan*.

Sofia Loden's article recounts the continuation of the incursion of King Arthur in Sweden by discussing the legacy not only of the Yvain material, but also of the Arthurian tradition as a whole in a Swedish context. She compares some passages from the *Emfeminiator* with passages from other Old Swedish texts that are connected to the Arthurian tradition: the famous Swedish chronicle *Erikskrönikan*, from the first part of the fourteenth century; the religious tract *Sjörens tröst*, written in the fifteenth century; the Swedish translation *Konung Alexander, från the late fourteenth century*; the prose romance *Nannils och Valentin*, from the middle of the fifteenth century; and *Riddar Paris och jungfru Vienna*, extant only in a fragment from the sixteenth century. By comparing these texts, Loden highlights the significance of the Arthurian legacy in Swedish literature and emphasizes changing attitudes to the material over time: from being perceived as a normative description of courtly and aristocratic ideals to eventually being used as an example of a moral anti-norm.

In the following section, the focus shifts from studies of textual *translatio* to studies of the language and narrative techniques used by the creative agents (translators and/or scribes) to convey characters' emotions. As Carolyn Larrington notes in her essay, work on emotions in Old Norse has so far mainly concentrated on the Icelandic family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), and, more particularly, on specific emotional manifestations, such as weeping or laughter. The main goal of Larrington's article is to map the Old Norse emotional lexicon and discuss its cultural uniqueness. While the *Íslendingasögur* are frequently reluctant to speak directly about feelings, the translated Arthurian romances depict a range of emotional situations that are often intensely experienced by their protagonists. Larrington focuses on some key emotional situations in *Parrenals saga* to investigate how emotions are expressed in Old Norse, and seeks to uncover some of the ways in which performativity, cognition, and behavior are verbalized in the Old Norse Arthurian tradition. Larrington's case study can be said to lay the foundation for the establishment of Old Norse lexicons and taxonomies of emotion in specific generic contexts.

In his article, Frank Brandsma compares emotional passages in two of Chrétien's romances, *Erre et Enide* and *Conte du Graal*, to their counterparts in Old Norse, as well as to Hartmann von Aue's *Erre* and to the Middle Dutch *Percheval* fragments. Brandsma focuses on how emotion is conveyed by means of tears in these works, and his

analysis suggests that while emotions are downplayed in the translations, they are far from absent. He utilizes the scientific concept of "mirrored emotions," which originates in neurology, and suggests that readers can be said to *experience* to a certain extent the same emotions as the characters about whom they are reading, by virtue of neural mirroring processes occurring in the brain during reading. Using this concept, Brandsma argues that the treatment of emotions in the Old Norse translations, which are more obscure or less pronounced than in the other texts, reveals the uniqueness of the narrative strategies of Old Norse Arthurian texts. Whether or not this may be explained by the stylistic peculiarities of the saga tradition is addressed in Carolyn Larrington's and Molly Jacobs's contributions to this special issue.

Not unrelated to the discussion of emotions, the final three essays in this collection address various aspects of the theme of imagination. Molly Jacobs's article is concerned with the representation and function of sensory perception in the translated *viðbarnasögur* as opposed to in native Icelandic literature, while Heidi Stea's and Erin Goeres's articles investigate the link between physical space and the notion of physical *translatio* on the one hand, and cognitive processes such as remembering, interpreting, and glossing on the other. As stated by the authors, cognition and the study of the various cognitive faculties is a relatively new field in Old Norse studies.

In her article, Molly Jacobs examines the depictions of three of the main senses: sound, sight, and smell. She considers how the senses are evoked and what their function is in the Old Norse Arthurian romances when juxtaposed with various Icelandic texts and genres. She argues that in comparison to the Icelandic family sagas, the translated Old Norse romances are generous in description and detail, even though these descriptions are much subtler if compared to the French source texts. While smell, sight, and hearing are defined in moral and ethical terms in the indigenous Icelandic literature, these three senses most often evoke pleasure and enjoyment both in the French romances and their Old Norse translations. The courtly world of King Arthur and his knights is luxurious and vibrant and can be experienced through various senses. Reading about or listening to spoken texts about this world, Jacobs argues, creates a mental space that is separate from everyday experience and provokes emotional reactions and deep reader or listener engagement. According to Jacobs, this effect is triggered to a much lesser degree by the Icelandic family sagas, with their "historical" aspirations and different intentionality. The imaginative space inspired by the translated romances may be seen as another reason, in addition

to their instructive or entertaining character, for their popularity at the Norwegian court in the thirteenth century.

In the following article, Heidi Støa discusses the link between the physical world, which is perceivable through the senses, and the interiority and emotionality of the literary characters. Støa discusses the Hall of Starnes passage from *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, where the protagonist constructs a hall filled with lifelike statues of his lady, Ísönd, as well as other characters from the romance. Støa argues that the enclosed place of the hall is a striking externalization of Tristram's lovesick psyche and that the hall is the product of an enclosed, covetous imagination. She interprets this episode as an example of the interest of the Old Norse audience in the interiority of the characters, a view that opposes the traditional contention that emphasizes a lack of interest in emotions and aesthetics in both translated and indigenous Old Norse literature. Støa nuances this traditional view by arguing that the interest in emotions and aesthetics is there, but that it is conveyed differently, often through the description of external actions. The episode in *Tristrams saga* may be seen in this light, as it depicts interest in the effects of love, but nevertheless accommodates the discussion for the presumed tastes of the Nordic audience. The Old Norse saga is the only full version of this episode in the literary tradition about Tristram, but Støa shows that the interest in the enclosed space as emblem of the lover's mind is continued in later Nordic Tristram narratives, such as the *Saga af Tristram ok Ísönd*.

Erin Goeres also investigates the link between movement in physical space and mental and cognitive processes of both protagonists and readers. The article analyzes the depiction of the British landscape in the Old Norse *Srengrleikar*. Examining how such descriptions differ from their French source texts, Goeres suggests that a series of detailed explanations of the location of Britain and of the island's proximity to the European continent have been added to the Old Norse variant in an effort to provide a mental map of the romance world to a Norse audience relatively unfamiliar with the romance genre. In contrast to this, descriptions of Britain itself are vague and even hallucinatory. According to Goeres, the successful negotiation of the deceptive British landscape is linked with the development of the protagonists, whose physical journeys mirror their emotional and intellectual development. In the Old Norse translation, the ability to decode the confusing landscape of Britain may be further seen as a model for readers learning to "gloss" the romance text, a model that would have had particular

resonance at a time when the Arthurian and wider romance traditions were being introduced to Scandinavian audiences.

The articles included in this issue of *Scandinavian Studies* accentuate the core characteristic of the Arthurian material, both in the North and beyond: that is, that Arthurian literature is a pan-European tradition that extends across both cultural communities and historical periods, while it simultaneously testifies to the multitude of linguistic, cultural, and emotional communities in medieval Europe. These articles reflect the growing recognition of and appreciation for the Nordic translations of Arthurian material as cultural evidence of the communities that created and preserved them. Furthermore, they highlight the fertile avenues and yet unexplored territories of Nordic Arthurian research into emotions, cognition, and landscape studies, while revealing also the relevance of historical acuity and continuity with respect to the Arthurian legacy in the North and its potential impact on Nordic literary traditions. These topics—the transmission and function of histories, emotions, and imaginations—are garnering increasing interest in medieval literary studies in general. Thus this special issue showcases some of the unique aspects of the Northern Arthurian literary heritage, while simultaneously addressing its place within the larger context of the transmission of Arthurian narrative in Europe.

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