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Reviews/Comptes rendus/Besprechungen

David Brégaint, *Vox regis. Royal Communication in High Medieval Norway* (The Northern World 74), Leiden: Brill 2016, ISBN 978-9-0043-0508-3, 420 pp.

Vox regis. Royal Communication in High Medieval Norway is a revised edition of the author's doctoral dissertation from 2014, defended at the Department for Historical Studies at NTNU. The book is structured in three main chapters, prefaced by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. These three chapters discuss the role of communication as a systematic and intentionally used tool in the state formation strategies of King Magnus Erlingsson (1163–1184), Chapter 1; King Sverrir Sigurðarson (1177–1202), Chapter 2; and the kings in power during the long thirteenth century: Hákon Hákonarson (1217–1263), Magnús Hákonarson, or Magnús the Lawmender (1263–1280), Eirik Magnússon (1268–1299) and Hákon V Magnússon (1270–1319), Chapter 3. The book covers the period from the foundation of the church province in Nidaros to the end of King Sverrir's dynasty. This is traditionally seen as the main state formation period, discussed by many scholars such as Knut Helle, Sverre Bagge and Hans Jacob Orning. The main contribution of the book to the existing state formation debates is that it introduces and investigates the hypothesis that Norwegian kings increasingly used various forms of communication intentionally as an instrument of government and political legitimization. This was done by combining oral, written and ritualistic communication and by taking over the control of the means and loci of communication that earlier had been monopolized by the Church.

Brégaint contextualizes his own analysis within the academic debates about state-making and communication. The author takes us elegantly from Weber's and Tilly's focus on the institutionalization of the means of domination and coercion during the development of European states, to the cultural turn that regards culture as constitutive and determining for the same process. He discusses the concepts of consent and rational choice, and comments on the gaps in Norwegian scholarship with regard to these discussions. For example, Sverre Bagge promotes the idea that the development of the state was "functional," as royal justice was highly beneficial for the people, but Bagge does not acknowledge the significance of coercion and adhesion. Orning discusses obedience and submission and argues that royal power is based on the physical presence and unpredictability of the king's decision. He also acknowledges ideo-

logy, but claims that there is a huge gap between ideology and reality. On the other hand, Brégaint foregrounds the role of culture and ideology and argues that mutual understanding of the utility of the state was central for its development.

Further on, Brégaint describes how culturalists themselves regard communication in different ways. For André Holestein, communication, as an interaction, is the source of power. For Bourdieu, concentration of informational and symbolic capital is the genesis of the state, as information structures thoughts and social relationships. For Jacques Ellul, communication and propaganda are instruments of government. Further, inspired by the discussions on communication by medievalists such as Jacques Le Goff, Sophia Menache and Jean-Philippe Genet, Brégaint defines communication as a combination of the processes of empowerment and appropriation.

Methodologically, Brégaint is inspired by traditional communication theory which structures the communication process into the elements sender, message and receiver. He organizes his study by focusing on 1) the actors of communication (sender and receiver) and their motivations and intentions with communication; and 2) the vectors of communication, that is, the content, media and loci of communication.

The sources Brégaint focuses on are texts written in direct or indirect connection with the Norwegian court, such as kings' sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, *Speech Against the Bishops*, *Konungs Skuggsjá*, *Hirðskrá*; translated chivalric romances; and charters and diplomas, including royal seals. Even though the choice of sources is understandable and certainly enough for a substantial and comprehensive analysis, the division between sources produced in Norway and Iceland is somewhat artificial. Some Icelandic sources could certainly have been regarded as related to the cultural sphere of the Norwegian kingship and may have illustrated other communication strategies. One good example is the manuscript *Hauksbók*, which was owned and partly written by the lawman Haukr Erlingsson, who was closely related to Norwegian political structures. Brégaint does mention Haukr and his manuscript, as well as other Icelanders involved with the production of literature in the thirteenth century, but the texts remain out of the scope of his analysis.

The main focus of Chapter 1 is the kingship of Magnus Erlingsson (1163–1184). The period of the second half of the twelfth century was characterized by the establishment of an independent ecclesiastical institution in Nidaros in 1152/1153, which went hand in hand with the development of the royal institution. However, the balance between the two institutions was skewed, as the Church functioned as a mediator

of culture and knowledge between Europe and Norway and had full control over ritual and written communication. On the other hand, the king had to adapt his communication strategy to fall in line with that prescribed by the Church.

The initiation of Magnus Erlingsson into kingship introduced a break in tradition, according to Brégaint. While previously the traditional, and only, ceremony for acclaiming kings in Norway was the *konungstekja* ceremony, King Magnus was the first to be crowned by the Church in 1163. The *konungstekja* ceremony was inspired by Germanic principles of kingship. This was a legal procedure, typical of oral societies organized by a *þing*; it allowed for shared kingship and had few requirements regarding the age or the lineage of the new king. With the introduction of a royal coronation, conducted by the Church, kingship was legitimated in a new way and through a new communicative setting. The Church played the role as intermediary between God and king; it gave the king legitimacy directly from God, and thus the Church had power over royal succession. The arrangement was favourable to the king as well, as he was now king by the grace of God, which brought him political advantage and personal inviolability. The *konungstekja* ceremony did not disappear, but it changed status from being an elective institution to becoming a popular confirmation. The Church gradually gained control over its protocol as well, by introducing the use of catholic liturgy into it and through the use of relics; by defining the locus of the ceremony and thus turning the *þing* into an ecclesiastical space; and by assigning the clergy an important role in the ceremony.

Charters and diplomas increased gradually during this period, but royal diplomas were mainly written by bishops and monks. The period saw the emergence of a literary culture in Norway. This included royal historiographies, such as *Historia Norwegie*, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, and *Ágrip af Nóregis konungasögum*, which were largely produced by the Church. They render Norwegian royal history into biblical history, by making St. Olav, a king and a martyr, the ultimate model for later kings. King Magnus is otherwise described as a great military leader who gave inspiring speeches, but who did not engage in non-political activities, such as the commissioning of literary or art production. Royal communication strategy was thus completely controlled by the Church, the institution that defined the basis for communication, including the main agents, the settings and loci, and the ceremonies and rituals.

In Chapter 2, Brégaint discusses how this somewhat imbalanced, but nonetheless symbiotic, relationship between the Church and the king changed during the kingship of Sverrir Sigurðarson (1184–1202).

The premise for his communication strategy was based on the on-going civil war and Sverrir's conflict with the Church. This situation demanded a much more independent communicative strategy on behalf of the king. He had to develop ideas and arguments to fight the very institution that had defined the basis for developing ideas and arguments.

King Sverrir used oral communication extensively to stress his political legitimacy to power. He is known as a great orator, who inspired and encouraged his troops through his speeches on various occasions. Many of the speeches serve to explicitly legitimate his political position and power. Both the content and the theatrical performance of the speeches reveal a conscious use of the medium to claim political privilege.

The main novelty of King Sverrir's communication politics is his own involvement in the production of literary culture. He commissioned the political pamphlet *Speech Against the Bishops* and contributed to the writing of his autobiography. His own education as a priest may explain such initiatives, but it seems also that Sverrir was surrounded by an emergent royal court and intellectual environment, which probably contributed to the intensified use of the written word as political propaganda. He had his own chancellery, where English administrators wrote charters, sealed by the king's own seal. The conceptual and physical development of the court and a professional circle around the king illustrate the royal emancipation from the political and cultural grasp of the Church.

The only interaction with the Church that King Sverrir sought, but never received, was his coronation. He was acclaimed king in the traditional way in 1177. Sverrir was refused a coronation by the Church, since he had killed Magnus Erlingsson, who was crowned by the archbishop of Nidaros. Nonetheless, he achieved his goal by threatening the bishop of Bergen to crown him in Christ Church in 1194, without the permission or knowledge of the archbishop or the pope. A short while after that, Sverrir was ex-communicated and so were the clergy who assisted him in his "coronation."

After the end of the civil war, the conflict between the Church and the king also calmed down. In Chapter 3, Brégaint discusses how such internal peace influenced the development of royal communication during the long thirteenth century. As a result of the domestic peaceful situation, this was a great period for expansive foreign politics and communication, through the appropriation of new lands, the arrangement of strategic marriages, and the development of new alliances.

During the thirteenth century, the court developed as an important sphere of communication for the king. It gave privileges to a new royal

aristocracy, which, however, was consciously used by the king for his own positioning and power legitimation. The *hirð* and magnates were thus both the receivers of a new courtly culture, imported from Europe, but also contributors to and agents of its implementation in Norway.

Many of the kings and queens of the thirteenth century are known to have been involved in the production and/or translation of literature. A number of the king's men were also owners, commissioners, and even writers of manuscripts. The royal administration also became much more well-established. There are a greater number of royal charters in Latin and Old Norse from the thirteenth century. These became more and more formal and institutionalized, by making more expansive use of formal titles and references to the royal dynasty as an institution. Royal seals were also used more regularly as a means of authentication and legitimation of royal power.

In addition to literary and administrative activities, the king claimed a more central role in religious ceremonies and rituals, which were earlier controlled by the Church, such as royal crownings, burials, public processions and *konungstekja* rituals. Not only did the king play a central role in these ceremonies, but he also set the framework for the settings and defined the other participants and agents. Bergen, and specifically Christ Church, evolved to be the main setting for royal coronations and burials, despite the fact that the Church had attempted to make Nidaros the main site for such ceremonies for centuries. The *konungstekja* ceremony continued to function as a public confirmation, but the sites changed from occasion to occasion, depending on the king's strategy. The king was still dependent on the Church for his political legitimacy and power, namely, his kingship by the grace of God, but the Church shifted gradually from an agent to a participant in this process, where the bases for communication and power were controlled by the king.

The narrative presented by Brégaint is convincing, and even though it is concerned with a much-discussed period of political state formation in Norwegian history, it foregrounds a different aspect of this process. Royal communication is here seen as a conscious political strategy, and tracing its history thus provides a new insight to our understanding of high medieval Norway.

Some of the topics discussed in the book are also of great interest for medievalists specializing in other fields, such as philology, literary and translation studies, and theology and cultural history. As a historian, Brégaint touches upon these fields on a few occasions, but he does not always exploit the potential for interdisciplinarity to the full. In the following, I wish to give some examples where inspiration from other

fields might have led to a different discussion, and even a different narrative.

Orality, Literacy, and New Philology

The author presents the narrative of a society that changed from being based on oral and exclusively elitist written communication to a proto-literate one, with new audiences and greater access to texts. He refers to the scholarship of Jack Goody, Brian Stock and Michael Clanchy, whose work on orality-literacy in medieval Europe is seminal, and Leidulf Melve and Arned Nedkvitne, who have discussed similar topics based on Old Norse material.

A great advantage of Brégaint's study is that he discusses the combination of various types of communication: oral, written, ritual. He studies the tools of transmission of the ideas, more than the ideas themselves. He thus addresses a gap in historical scholarship. The combination of tools of transmission of ideas has, however, been addressed by other scholars. For example, Ruth Finnegan (1988) and Joyce Coleman (1996) have illustrated that orality and literacy are two cultural aspects that complement each other; that the development from one to the other is not straightforward and evolutionary; and that the constant factor in the relationship between orality and literacy is coexistence, albeit in different forms and to different degrees. Concepts like "vocality," which signifies the sound of a written text when it is vocalized, and "aurality," which is the intention for a written text to be listened to, elucidate some of the various modes of coexistence between orality and literacy.

This debate has been conducted in the field of Old Norse studies as well, in relation to the importance of seals for the communication of letters (Spurkland 2000), and in relation to the use and mode of reception of medieval manuscripts (Eriksen 2014). Both of these studies foreground the importance of the materiality of medieval texts for our understanding of their function and meaning. This is easily relatable to the main principles of the so-called *new philology*, which emphasizes that all textual, material and social aspects of a medieval text need to be taken in consideration in its interpretation.

This is a perspective that is only partially taken on by Brégaint. He is certainly aware that many of the texts he discusses are only preserved in younger manuscripts and that this is an important methodological obstacle in a study that attempts to say something about the period when the texts were originally written. The latter is not impossible, as we have some manuscripts that are more or less contemporaneous with the dating of the texts they include, such as AM 243 b a fol., c. 1275, written

in Bergen, now in the Arnamagnæen collection in Copenhagen and which includes *Konungs skuggsjá*, and De la Gardie 4–7 fol., c. 1270, written in Bergen, now in Uppsala University Library. Other relevant contemporaneous manuscripts were Holm Perg 6 fol., c. 1250–1300, eastern Norway, and Holm Perg 4 fol., c. 1275–1300, from Bergen, both of which are now in the Royal Library in Sweden. Many of the main sources that Brégaint bases his study on are preserved in younger manuscripts: for example, the oldest manuscript of *Ágrip* is from c. 1225 (ONP *Ágrip*: 22); the oldest manuscript of *Sverris saga* is from c. 1300 (ONP *Sverris saga*: 400); *Tristrams saga*'s oldest manuscript is from the seventeenth century (ONP *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*: 404); etc. The preserved material tells us something about periods and cultural contexts different than the ones discussed by Brégaint. This does not imply that the texts Brégaint discusses are irrelevant—the fact that they were appreciated and copied again and again, not only in Norway, but also in Iceland, tells something about a continuation of interest in texts that were originally commissioned by or for the Norwegian king. If the dating of the manuscripts was taken into consideration, Brégaint could have told us a story of the communication strategies of the intellectual elite at the beginning of the fourteenth century, or the communication strategies of Icelandic aristocrats, who were interested in the translated *riddarasögur*. Some of these topics are discussed by Norwegian historians like Hans Jacob Orning (2012: 91–108) and Bjørn Bandlien (2013: 6–37), but a comprehensive study of royal communication strategy, as defined by Brégaint but based on the manuscript evidence we have, is still a topic for future study.

International Comparison. Translation Studies

In his study, Brégaint compares state development in Norway to parallel state formation processes in other European states, such as France, England and Spain. Brégaint concludes that, by the end of the thirteenth century, the Norwegian communication system matched that of France and England. Nonetheless, he emphasizes that when the European state model was implemented in Norway, it was confronted with pre-existing rituals of kingship, social ideals and norms, and written communication which was specific to the Nordic target culture. This statement—that the transposed European model was confronted with a local model—could have been discussed in much greater detail. What were the implications of such a confrontation? Did the Norwegian state nonetheless have some specific traits, due to the pre-existent model? Brégaint clarifies that there was one specific element in the establishment of the Nordic state, namely, that the process occurred very quickly. This was

due to the fact that the development of the Church and the state happened simultaneously and is reminiscent of state development in other peripheral European states (p. 372).

The meeting of a pre-existing and a new model may be discussed from the perspective of translation studies. For example, according to Gideon Toury (1995), foreign, translated cultural expressions are introduced to target cultures in order to fill a gap, they respond to a social or cultural need, and they are adapted to the understanding horizon of the target audience. The meeting between the pre-existing Nordic model of royal communication and the new European state model would most probably have resulted in an interaction between the two models. Brégaint comments that the communication system that developed in Norway was less top-down compared with Europe and more a system of interaction (p. 364), but he does not discuss whether this might have been a consequence of the interaction between the two models.

Vox Dei, Vox Regis and the Mind

Brégaint explains that his study responds to Sophia Menache's argument that medieval communication was religiously founded (*Vox Dei*). He, on the other hand, studies communication from a secular perspective, without neglecting the significance of ecclesiastical structures and means of communication. There was no frontier between state and Church, but a focus on the monarchy gives us a specific agent in a different way than focusing on the Church. This is an interesting and innovative approach, not only because it studies communication from a new perspective, but also because it focuses on the role of the individual agent during the processes of clericalization, sacralization and royalization (p. 370).

Keeping this focus on the individual, the king or a member of the *hirð*, I wonder whether the combination between secular and religious concerns could have been discussed in a more nuanced way. Recent studies demonstrate that some of the texts and manuscripts discussed in the study could respond to secular-social as well as inner-religious needs of the commissioner, that is, the king or one of his learned aristocrats. For example, the manuscript Hauksbók includes a dialogue between Body and Soul, a translation of Hugh of St. Victor's *Soliloquium de arrha animae*, many other theological texts and also a map of Jerusalem. Recent analysis of Hauksbók emphasizes the importance of theological texts for the work of a lawman, both personally and professionally, in addition to his concern with Icelandic and world history (Eriksen 2016). The manuscript as a whole thus promotes inner reflection and meditation and shows a different side of the royalization process, namely, one of spiritual

growth and religious awareness. These were intimately related in the medieval mindset, and they may have coloured royal communication to a greater extent than acknowledged in this study. This suggests that Brégaïnt's study of the tools of communication could certainly benefit from studies of the actual ideas that were communicated, and vice versa.

Medieval Newness. Rupture or Continuity

In conclusion, I would like to comment on Brégaïnt's statement that the study's focus is on rupture, rather than continuity. The introduction of new liturgy, rituals and literary cultures provided a new arena for communication that was decisive for power legitimation (p. 6). However, in her recent book on the medieval concept of "newness," Patricia Clare Ingham suggests that the medieval new was mostly based on continuity, and not on rupture. The metaphor of "dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants" appears as a main premise for cultural development in the Middle Ages. Accepting this premise of cultural innovation allows for a less rigid compartmentalization of cultural processes. The advance of secular royal communication did not entail a rupture-filled development from oral to literate culture, from a Nordic to a European model of communication, or of a secular model as opposed to a religious model. All of these categories existed simultaneously and are more useful as categories that organize and describe cultural spaces, rather than as dichotomies. Brégaïnt acknowledges this to a certain extent, when he comments that "communication means were a syncretic combination of traditional and novel strategies," that the processes of clericalization, sacralization and royalization were parallel, and face-to-face communication continued to be important after the advancement of written communication. But his narrative remains, nonetheless, focused on rupture, and it is less sensitive to the premise of continuity and mutual-existence. If continuity had been accepted as a premise, this study of royal communication in high medieval Norway could have illustrated that the development of Norwegian royal communication was a response to strong dynamics between *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii* (Copeland 1991), as in the rest of Europe, and to the general process of Europeanization all over Europe (Bartlett 1993).

The latter comments inspired by orality and literacy theories, manuscript- and translation studies, and histories of ideas aim to elucidate how medievalists belonging to various disciplines and academic paradigms have different starting points of discussion. All of us would certainly benefit from more collaboration across the limits of our traditional fields in order to gain further insight into medieval culture.

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