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Reviews/Comptes rendus/Besprechungen

Alessia Bauer, *Laienastronomie im nachreformatorischen Island. Studien zu Gelehrsamkeit und Aberglauben* (Münchner Nordistische Studien 21), Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag 2015, ISBN 978-3-8316-4480-3 [5], 644 pp.

The volume under review is a *Habilitationsschrift* for Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. It is an edition of texts from Icelandic manuscripts to which little attention has been paid, preceded by a scholarly introduction. As the title implies, the book is about learned writings and folk beliefs after the Reformation. The emphasis of Icelandic literary studies has for the most part been on the preceding period. However, although these texts were written after the Reformation, manuscripts dating from the sixteenth century and later often contain older texts, preserving them from destruction. The conservatism of the Icelandic language means that such texts could still be understood. Research such as the present study increases our knowledge of literary production of earlier ages, especially in areas that have been ignored in the past.

The subject-matter of the book is astronomy in the old, wide and popular meaning of the word: “astronomy” today refers to scientific study, “astrology” is generally considered superstition or entertainment. In the seventeenth century no such distinction between the two was made; Bauer uses the term *Laienastronomie*, ‘lay-astrology,’ to refer to this subject.

The introduction discusses the situation in Iceland after the Reformation, which was somewhat different than elsewhere in Scandinavia and mainland Europe. For example, the ability to read and write was more common in Iceland than elsewhere. On the other hand, there were no universities, and therefore there was no influential learned class. The population was scattered, there were no towns. There was little class difference between priests and farmers, and that made its mark on the life of the people. The author is well aware of the special position of literacy in Iceland.

The study is based on about 200 Icelandic manuscripts in the National Library of Iceland, very few of which have been published before. It is the first step in research on this topic, introducing it to the scholarly world. In this it resembles *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, published in five volumes by the Arnarnagænske Institut in Copenhagen in the 1960s (Loth [ed.] 1962–1965). There, young *riddarasögur* were

printed from the oldest manuscripts to make the texts more accessible for research, but detailed research on the manuscripts themselves was not undertaken. The texts edited here are of various age, having been passed down in copies from the Reformation until the nineteenth century; for this reason, no attempt was made to identify sources or scribes. The edition is intended to be a basis for further research.

The first chapter, “Die Frühneuzeit auf Island,” discusses the situation in Iceland after the Reformation until c. 1800, but also makes reference to earlier times. First comes a general introduction to humanism and the beginnings of the Reformation, which marked changes in Iceland. Shortly after the arrival of Lutheranism came the Danish trade monopoly. The authorities were not interested in teaching the Icelanders anything other than Christianity. Printing was used almost exclusively in the service of the church, while other works were transmitted in hand-written manuscripts, which were produced even though there was no formal schooling. It was even said that it was inappropriate to print ancient sagas in the same style of print as religious writings. On the other hand, texts could be widely distributed in manuscripts. As one example out of a great many, the present author published “Um sögur af Álfa-Árna,” which appeared revised in the collection of essays *Hulin pláss* (Einar G. Pétursson 2011). The large number of preserved manuscripts show how well-known the story was.

The Reformation had a great influence on political, as well as religious, life in Iceland, as it had elsewhere. In 1536, Lutheranism became the official religion in Denmark, but Iceland stood out against it until 1550. Changes in government are described. The king decided who would be appointed bishops. From 1579 on, Icelandic students received financial grants for study at the University of Copenhagen, and this continued to be the case until the twentieth century. Foreign influences from Germany reached Iceland through Denmark. However, the Danes did not attempt to force the Icelanders to learn Danish. The reason may have been that Icelandic had long been the written language, and knowledge of reading and writing was widespread, as noted above. The language may also have enjoyed more respect than it would otherwise have had, as sources about the history of the Northern countries were written in it. A single printing press in Iceland had its effect in normalizing the language—though there was little dialectical difference in Iceland compared with other places.

In the Middle Ages, Icelanders had kept up with European learning, such as the adoption of Arabic numerals; after the Reformation there was a delay of about two centuries until the new world-view (see be-

low) established itself. The last section of the chapter deals with the language, Icelandic, which at this time was significantly influenced by Low German and Danish. In the nineteenth century, a concerted effort was made to purify the language of Danish influence. The language of the material on chronology and astronomy/astrology edited here has been virtually unchanged since the Middle Ages. It is an excellent example of the conservatism of the Icelandic language.

The second chapter of the book is about *Laienaströlogie*. There is a survey of this topic ranging from the Babylonians to the Romans. In the Middle Ages, western Europeans obtained a great deal of knowledge from the Arabs about Greek astronomy.

It was long believed that eclipses and comets presaged evil, and were signs of the wrath of God. In the seventeenth century, the understanding of these phenomena began to change, and astronomy and astrology became separate fields—though not in Iceland. Around the time of the Reformation, Copernicus taught that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe. After much argument, his beliefs had been accepted in Northern Europe by the mid-eighteenth century.

The third chapter deals with the theoretical basis of *Laienaströlogie*. According to these teachings, the micro-cosmos is a miniature version of the universe. The idea appears in the prologue of Snorri's Edda and elsewhere, in old translated writings which had their influence on Icelandic literature. The same can be said of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. A chart (p. 82) shows the basic elements and humours, their qualities and their influence on people's moods, and finally what seasons of the year they represent. Finally, *Rimbegla* is discussed, a medieval Icelandic chronological treatise which may have made use of Arabic sources.

There is no fourth chapter, but the fifth, "Das isländische Fachskrifttum," is the longest and most important one in the book. It describes the world view of medieval Icelanders and its development. The terminology and ideas of the old astronomy/astrology change little; this vocabulary and terminology would in itself be a fruitful subject of research.

There follows a description of the editorial principles. The text has been printed letter for letter, with abbreviations expanded in italics. Punctuation has not been changed. This is a good idea, but it is difficult for those whose native language is not Icelandic to read such spelling. The few errors of transcription are more than balanced by the importance of making this material available.

The first texts are "Planetenkinder-traktate," according to which the position of the planets at birth influenced the nature of a child. Lbs 1709 8vo, from the end of the seventeenth century, is used as a basis, and

much is printed from it and in different versions from five other manuscripts. Parallel to “Planetenmenschen” are “zodiac people” which were supposed to illustrate characteristics and influences on health according to the twelve signs of the zodiac. These texts are printed from seven manuscripts. Then there is a section on months and the names of the months; it was thought important for doctors to know in what month people were born. There are texts in four manuscripts, one of which describes the Sami (“Lapps”) in northern Scandinavia.

The last two sections are “Texte zu den Komplexionen,” translated (on p. 359) as ‘About the four kinds of nature that rule the human being.’ This is not a long text and it is printed from three manuscripts. The section describes how the four humours (choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic) influence a person’s mood. Immediately afterwards is a section about the four basic elements, and the connection between them and the above-mentioned four *Náttúrutegundir* that influence a person. This concludes what may be called *Laienaströlogie*.

Next is material from manuscripts in the National Library on more modern astronomy, which educated Icelanders appear to have used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of these manuscripts are school copies of lecture notes in Danish. The chapter then discusses what was taught in schools about these sciences, in particular by Björn Gunnlaugsson (1788–1876), who taught mathematics and astronomy at the Latin School.

Following the fifth chapter is a summary in German and one in English. There is a long bibliography and a list of the 116 manuscripts that were used in the book. Appendix I is a detailed description of the manuscripts and their contexts, which however does not mention the scribes, not even when they are known. Appendix II is a German translation of the Icelandic texts in the fifth chapter, which concludes the work. There is a detailed table of contents, but no index. As a whole, the volume publishes and makes available many hitherto unknown texts which will increase scientific knowledge.

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