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# Literacy and Trade in Late Medieval Norway

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**ABSTRACT** Only faint traces can be observed of literacy connected to domains other than the legal sphere in late medieval Norway. This may be the result of poor archival practices for keeping written material not strictly connected to legal matters, such as the activities carried out by merchants and tradesmen. The present article tries nonetheless to study whether or not it is possible to relate the notion of literacy to trade in this period of time. The lack of evidence written in Roman letters may, it seems, to some extent be remedied by runic inscriptions excavated in medieval Norwegian towns. We must assume that the use of runes within the domain of trade grew out of an increasingly more complex organisation of mercantile activities which we see especially in an important port such as Bergen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is, perhaps, not only due to chance that the discovered evidence seems to reflect the situation before the middle of the fourteenth century, when Bergen in particular was struck by the Great Plague. Whether the dramatic events caused by the Black Death did create a discontinuity in runic literacy connected to trade, we do not know.

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**KEYWORDS** Old Norse, medieval literacy, runes, trade

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As has been stated elsewhere, only faint traces can be observed of literacy connected to domains other than the legal sphere in late medieval Norway—that is to say in Norwegian society from the middle of the fourteenth century up to about 1500 (cf. Hagland 2005: 95 f.). This may, of course, to a certain degree at least, be the result of poor archival practices for keeping written material not strictly connected to legal matters, such as, for instance, material related to the activities carried out by merchants and tradesmen. In the following we shall nonetheless

try to investigate whether or not it is possible to relate the notion of literacy to a specific domain such as trade in this period of time. In so doing we shall have in mind the situation in England, summed up by Clanchy (1993: 237) as follows:

With lesser merchants, it is doubtful whether literacy in Latin was yet an essential skill, as they worked from memory and tally sticks. Book learning and book keeping became crucial to lesser merchants only when they ceased to travel with their wares and sat in offices instead. On the whole, that is a development of the fourteenth century rather than the twelfth, as far as England is concerned.

Any similar kind of development in Norway is difficult to trace. The preserved source material of records written on parchment or paper with Roman letters contains practically nothing that allows us to make estimates of the level of literacy connected to this important domain of social life in Norway in the period from about 1300 to 1500. There are, of course, in the preserved sources a large number of so-called *vitnebreiv* (notitia or affidavits, perhaps) that record in writing the purchase and sale of landed property and also receipts for the sale of land (cf. Hamre 2004: 62–68). We do not need to expand on this kind of document here. Suffice it to underscore that these still belong primarily in the legal sphere as evidence of specific transactions—transactions that in themselves differ from what we usually speak of as trade. DN II 333, issued 10 December 1356 in Bergen, might be a good example of the former type in which the transaction of land is stated as follows: ... *ek Peter Hakonar son viðr gænger þui meðr þesso minu brefue at ek hefuir sælt Petre Sigurðr syni jord mína er Husstad eitir er liggr j Jorunda fyrði aa Sunmære* [‘I Peter Hákonarson acknowledge by my letter to have sold to Peter Sigurðarson my estate (farm) called Husstad situated by the Hjörundfjord in Southern Møre (Sunmære)’] and so on according to established legal formulae. DN II 241, issued 4 February 1341 at Raumsaas<sup>1</sup> could serve as a good example of a receipt for payment involved in such a transaction stating that

...*þæir helldo hondom Vesete a Raumsase ok Haldor Gudbrandz son mæd þi skilyrði at Haldor væita þa viðr gongu at han hafde þa fyrste peningh ok efstæn ok allæ þær j millum firir þrigiæ aure bool j Raumsase er han hafde selt Kolbjorn þo sua at Vesete lauk honum i halft kyrlaghe en annæt Kolbjorn...*

[‘They shook hands, Vesete at Raumsási and Halldor Gudbrandsson, to the effect that Haldor acknowledged to have received the first and the last penny and all in between for three *eyris-ból* worth of land at Raumsás which he had sold to Kolbjorn, specifying, though, that Vesete had paid him half a cow’s worth and Kolbjorn the other half...’]

Also the preserved cadastres of property of the Church as well as of the secular upper classes may be seen as expressions of literacy relating to economic transactions (cf. Hagland 2005: 37–40). But again the making of cadastres cannot be seen as an activity relating to trade as such. However, what little we have preserved of written material that does relate to trade proper, some few notes from the 1490s (cf. Hagland 2005: 95 f.) for the keeping of accounts or for stock-taking, seem, formally, to be quite close to the corpus of cadastres from the period that occupies us here.

This utmost scarcity of source material for the study of literacy connected to trade in late medieval Norway seems, in part at least, to improve somewhat if we take the digraphic situation of the High and Late Middle Ages into consideration. That is if we include runic inscriptions among the sources. The question has been asked, however, whether or not runic writing in general should be included in the notion of literacy. Spurkland (2004: 342) puts it as follows:

It is commonly assumed that literacy was developed in response to the need for extending and materializing the collective memory. But the texts preserved for posterity, such as laws, religious texts, legends, historical narratives, charters, and even literary texts, were written in order to be delivered aloud on special occasions. Books and letters were intended for many people and were commonly read aloud and listened to. Runic script had a different purpose. What was carved in runes was primarily intended for silent reading. The addressee of most of the medieval runic inscriptions was not the collective but the individual. The text should not be broadcast but mediated from eye to eye.

As a consequence of this, Spurkland maintains,

[t]he literate mentality and everything that follows in its wake was more or less absent in the rune-carver's surroundings, where he sat handling his knife and incising his runes on a piece of wood (Spurkland 2004: 342).

This is a very general position to take as far as the question of possible runic literate communities is concerned and it needs to be modified—as has in fact been done, to some extent at least, by Spurkland himself in a subsequent article (Spurkland 2005). It is, at any rate, a well established fact that a considerable number of the medieval runic inscriptions, for example from Bergen, have to do with trade, one way or the other, inscriptions that clearly belong in a literate community or in literate communities. Suffice it here to mention Ingrid Sanness Johnsen's well documented study "Die Runeninschriften über Handel und Verkehr aus Bergen" (Johnsen 1987) in evidence of this. The writing in runes related to trade in this particular urban con-

text includes a wide range of text types, from simple labelling to letters of considerable length and complexity as we shall see below (cf. Johnsen 1987: 739–744 for a survey of the letters unearthed in Bergen). It is true that some of the letters relating to trade seem to have one individual addressee, but even so, they clearly belong in a literate community. We shall return to this point below. The shorter messages, which, to a certain degree at least, seem to belong in older archaeological contexts than the letters, contain, in part, what appears to be simple forms of accounting and should, as it seems, be compared to the kind of literacy among lesser merchants referred to by Clanchy in the quote cited above. The shorter messages belong first and foremost in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Furthermore, one-word labels like *salt* [‘salt’] and *olea* [‘oil’] (B 34 and N613 from Bergen, cf. Johnsen 1987: 742–743) most certainly belong in a wider context than one individual recipient of the “message.”

Be this as it may. There is every reason to think that the runic inscriptions relating to trade, the runic letters in particular, did belong in a genuinely literate context—a context in which the choice of script appears to have been circumstantial rather than anything else.

We shall take a much quoted letter from Bryggen in Bergen as our main example of a runic inscription that displays distinct and characteristic features of a fairly advanced level of literacy connected to trade in particular in the period that occupies us here, the N-648 (NIyR). As has been pointed out by several scholars, this is obviously a business letter between well-established traders or merchants in Bergen at the very beginning of the fourteenth century (cf. NIyR VI: 97–106, Johnsen 1987: 718–721). The letter reads as follows in normalized Old Norse:

*Hafgrími féлага sínum, sendir Þórir fagr kveðju Guðs ok sína, sannan félagskap ok vináttu. Mart skortir mik, félagi! Ekki er munngátit, eingi fiskarnir. Vil ek at þú vitir, en eigi kref þú. Bið bóndann koma suðr till vár ok sjá hvað oss liðr. Eggja hann til; en kref þú einskis hluta mér; ok eigi lát þú Þorstein lang vita. Send mér hanzka nǫkkura. Ef Sigríðr þarf nǫkkurs, þá bjóð henni. Heit þú mér ekki vætta hýð válaði.*

[“To Hafgrim, his partner, Þórir Fagr sends God’s and his own greetings, true partnership and amity. I am in lack of many things, partner. There is no ale and no fish. I want you to know, but do not require anything from me. Ask the proprietor (bóndann) to come south to us to see how we are. Urge him to do so, but do not ask anything from me. And do not let Þorsteinn Lang know. Send me some gloves. If Sigríðr needs anything, then offer it to her. Promise me no reproach for my incapacity”].

The text of this letter has the formal set-up of a standard charter as we know it in the comparatively large Norwegian corpus from the thirteenth century onwards (cf. Hamre 2004). In this particular case, then, the text has a *protocol* with an *inscriptio* (*Hafgrimi, félaga sinum*). It has an *intitulatio* (*Þórir fagr*), a *salutatio* with an *invocatio* (*sendir...kveðju Guðs ok sína, sannan félagskap ok vináttu*). Then there is a *publicatio* or a *promulgatio* (*vil ek at þú vitir*) after the initial part of the *narratio*, which begins with the words *Mart skortir mik, félagi!* and continues after the *publicatio*. It is, moreover, possible that the last sentence (*heit þú mér ekki vætta hýð válaði*) constitutes a conventional *eskathocol* of a business letter. Judging from the context of the letter as a whole, this seems feasible, but as the runic inscription N648 is the only text of its kind preserved in the corpus of charters, there is nothing with which we can compare this detail in the preserved Norwegian source material (cf. Hagland 1994: 87–88). This is the most complete of the runic letters from Bryggen in Bergen that have so far been published and the one that, seen from a formal point of view, is the most consistent. It is, however, not an isolated case. At least six more inscriptions from the same environment reveal formal features similar to N648, although sometimes quite fragmentarily so. They are all archaeologically dated within a century after N648, archaeologically dated to ca 1300, as we have seen (for details cf. Johnsen 1987: 739–42 and NIyR VI: 97–139). Even if lacking the formal set-up of N648, some of these inscriptions are, moreover, epistolary in wording and content, obviously related to wholesale business or retail trade in some way or the other. N650 is a good example of a fully preserved and well-formed text of this kind:

*Eindriði! Þetta átt þú mér at gjalda: Tvá mæla ok þrjú sáld, en \*annarstveggi sextán mæla. En þú skalt, Eindriði, taka þat korn sem Bergþórr á mér at lúka. Eigi minna en sextán mæla skalt þú taka eða elligar tak þú eigi. En fõður minn bið ek at hann gildi mér þrjú sáld.*

[Eindriði! You will have to pay me this: Two *mælar* and three *sáld*,<sup>2</sup> and in addition(?) sixteen *mælar*. And you shall, Eindriði, take the grain which Bergþórr is due to pay me. You shall not accept anything below sixteen *mælar*, if so you shall take nothing at all. And I ask my father to pay me three *sáld*].

Corresponding runic texts from elsewhere are not known, even if fragments of letters whose content and context can not be clearly identified may occur, a possible example of which is N834 from Trondheim, archaeologically dated to the period ca 1275–1325. The fragment may be read as follows: Side A: *Illt er mér nú, Ívarr, góða, Guð bõ(n)(?)*--- [‘I am in a difficult position

now, Ívarr when the yields (?) are concerned, may God’] ---“ Side B: *ek hugi at fyrir se komet opt bo*--- [‘I think that [???] has often been obstructive (?)’] ---. It is obviously a message of some sort, but it cannot, with any degree of certainty, be connected to trade.

The existence of the Bryggen epistolary runic material, such as the examples given above, means, at any rate, that literacy at a quite advanced level can provably be seen as part of the community of trade and tradesmanship in that particular urban setting. Literacy at a certain level, then, provably did exist among merchants at least as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century. The N648, carved on the four sides of a square (15 x 13 mm) wooden stick, 250 mm long (cf. NIyR VI: 97–98), may even be seen as an expression of the archetypal medieval runic inscription. It could in consequence possibly be the outcome of a typical situation in which a rune carver, if we are to believe Spurkland’s vivid description, void of anything like a literate mentality, was “handling his knife and incising his runes on a piece of wood” (see quote above).

There is, however, every reason to see texts like N648 and N650 as integral parts of a Scandinavian late medieval digraphic literacy, evidenced by texts written in runes as well as in Roman letters. That is to say that they should be considered the “end product” (cf. Clanchy 1993: 20) of the same literate mentality as evidenced by the relatively large corpus of records written on parchment or paper with Roman letters in the same period relating to the legal sphere of society in some way or other. In consequence there is no reason to exclude runic writing as such from the notion of literacy at large. The runic business letters from Bergen differ from congruent written sources only by the choice of script and material used for conveying these messages. As has frequently been pointed out, this choice was obviously circumstantial. Activities outside the scriptorium did not easily lend themselves to writing letters with pen and ink on parchment, whereas comparatively long and complex texts could without too much difficulty be incised by a competent and literate carver on a wooden stick prepared for such usage.

The N648 provides, moreover, evidence to the effect that merchants, even when travelling with their wares, depended to a degree on literacy rather than on memory and oral transmission. In situations like the one experienced by the trader at work south of Bergen, as it seems, the choice of script and medium was obvious in a digraphic community such as late medieval Bergen. The carver’s intimate knowledge of the structure of a formal letter in general displays a quite advanced level of literacy that can indeed be related to trade. It is not feasible to think that a well-formed letter like N648 did exist in complete isolation. There is, in consequence, no reason to

think that the scanty material that has been discovered in archaeological contexts rather than in archives, represent unique instances of individual literate skills related to this domain. They should rather be seen as the faint footprints of a Norwegian development parallel to what Clanchy suggests for England in the fourteenth century (cf. quote above) even if not of the same proportions.

The (runic) literacy evidenced by the epistolary texts from fourteenth century Bergen seems to build, in part at least, on an earlier and less developed level of literacy related to trade, such as labelling and short notices having to do with simple book-keeping or accounting. The relatively large corpus of marks of ownership unearthed in Bergen and Trondheim constitutes a major and important part of labelling practices (cf. Hagland 1988, Johnsen 1994). These marks may contain a personal name only, such as *Þormóðr* (N754, Bergen) and *Torfi auk Þorkr* (N798, Trondheim). In most cases there is a personal name together with the present tense singular of the verb *eiga*, 'to own'—*á*, such as *Óláfr á*, 'Ólafur owns' (N716, Bergen), *Árni á*, 'Arni owns' (N782, Trondheim). In some cases there is even a grammatical object, usually the pronoun *mik*, 'me,' or the noun *sekk*, 'sack,' such as *Nikulás á mik*, 'Niculus owns me' (N715, Bergen), *Ormr á sekk*, 'Ormr owns the sack' (N796, Trondheim). Some of these marks are incised with tallies, obviously used for counting, which associates these runically inscribed objects to a large corpus of tally sticks, some 600 of which have been recorded in the excavated material from Bergen and univocally interpreted as evidence for commercial activities of some sort (cf. Hagland 1994: 86).<sup>3</sup> The marks of ownership seem to have served mainly to identify owners of wares during transport into the ports of Bergen and Trondheim (cf. Hagland 1994: 84–86), the implication of which is that the emerging medieval runic literacy connected to trade should not be confined to urban settings such as the two ports from which this particular kind of archaeological evidence is known. The phenomenon of marking may, as such, have been much more widespread.

Moreover, an inscription like N654 may serve to represent one of several expressions of runic literacy from the twelfth century, related to rudimentary accounting at a slightly more advanced level than the tally sticks mentioned by Clanchy (see above): *Pétr lét tvær merkr, Óláfr þrettán pund // Sverðolf r-- engu lokit*, ['Peter delivered two marks, Ólafur thirteen pounds // Sverðolfur [has]-- paid nothing.']

Chance, then, provides us with material that unveils a fairly well developed runic literacy connected to trade already in fourteenth century Norway. The representativity of this material cannot be established with any degree of certainty. There are reasons to believe, however, that the elaborate runic texts that constitute the culminating point in terms of literacy con-

nected to trade represent only a fraction of what was actually produced. A corpus of wax tablets—*diptycae*—has been unearthed in Trondheim and elsewhere, Bergen included. At least part of this material belongs in archaeological contexts from the late twelfth century onwards (cf. Hagland 2002: N875). The tablets may have been used for messages written in either of the two available scripts and may well have been used in connection with trade. We do not know. Nonetheless these objects are there as tangible evidence of a kind of literacy that implicitly extends, by far we must think, the evidence represented by the relatively restricted amount of inscriptions carved on wood, bone and so on.

We must assume that the use of runic inscriptions within the domain of trade grew out of an expanding and increasingly more complex organisation of mercantile activities which we see especially in an important port such as Bergen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is, perhaps, not only due to chance that the discovered evidence seems, by and large, to reflect the situation before the middle of the fourteenth century, when Bergen in particular was struck by the Great Plague (cf. also Helle 1982: 686–693). Whether the dramatic events caused by the Black Death did create a discontinuity in runic literacy connected to trade, we do not know. What we can clearly see in the material from the first part of the fourteenth century, though, is what should be called a literate mentality connected to trade expressed in runic writing. Once established, we must think, this mentality continued to produce texts in ways that cannot be properly traced in the sources till early modern times. Texts related to the domain of trade do not seem to have been meant to last in the period of Norwegian history that concerns us here. Archival routines and practices for taking care of written material produced for running businesses of various kinds no doubt belong in societies more strictly regulated than late medieval Norway.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Today: Romsås, municipality of Ringebu in Gudbrandsdalen.
  - <sup>2</sup> A measure of capacity. A *sáld* contained six *mælar*. There was no standard cubic content, but in most cases a *sáld* would equal 97.2 litres.
  - <sup>3</sup> Nine of the 114 published marks of ownership from Bergen and one of 24 from Trondheim have tallies carved into them: N660, 676, 677, 689, 706, 757, 766, 767, 772 (Bergen) and 797 (Trondheim).



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