

The Legends of Danish Saints as Sources to Daily Life

NANNA DAMSHOLT

INTRODUCTION

The saints cultivated in Denmark during the medieval centuries were the imported, international saints as well as local saints. About the latter, legends were written in Denmark and these texts will be presented in the following along with a discussion of their value as sources to daily life in medieval Denmark.

The cult of the saints had probably become an important aspect of christianity, brought to Denmark by missionaries from the South and the West. One of the first missionaries active in Denmark was the monk Ansgar from the abbey of Corvey whose mission took place during the ninth century and who was later canonized. Towards the end of the tenth century, king Harald Bluetooth mentioned on the famous rune stone in Jelling that among his accomplishments was the christianization of the Danes. During the following century Christianity and the Latin Church were established in Denmark, from 1103 as an independent province with its own archbishop.

During the first Christian centuries in Denmark we encounter the common international saints but in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries cults were formed around native persons and this might in turn lead to episcopal and in some cases to papal canonization.

The legends of these Danish saints were composed and written down in Latin during the same centuries.¹ Often their creation was furthered by the necessity of having a *vita* as well as a list of miracles available to obtain papal canonization. Indeed, from the late twelfth century, *vita* and *miracula* became obligatory for the process. The legends were used in the liturgy and became part of popular religion as well as of the oral tradition. In this regard the situation in medieval Denmark was similar to that of Western Europa in general.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that the cult of the saints and the connected stories and legends were part of daily religious life whether exercised in the Church, according to proper canonical rules, or expressed in a more personal, maybe even unorthodox, fashion elsewhere. Our texts are part of a

¹ The standard edition is *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, ed. by M. Cl. Gertz (Copenhagen, 1908-1912). Annotations in Latin.

historic daily life, at least the mental aspects of this life. They are testimonies of how people in various areas of the country gathered around the persons, they desired to see canonized and whose help they sought either in an emergency of some sort or another or in their quest for salvation. This apart, the legends and especially the miracles also contain information on other aspects of daily life, as they often reveal what the life and work of the people was like. It is this information which will be dealt with in the following.

I. MY OWN AND OTHER SCHOLARS' RESEARCH

The scholar of Danish legends par excellence is Tue Gad, who in his doctoral dissertation, *Legenden i dansk middelalder*, 1961² placed the Danish texts in an international context, that is, in the categories of the genre, while at the same time demonstrating where, when and how the international influence had taken place. Tue Gad, whose main interests are the literary perspectives, has since published *Helgenlegender fortalt i Norden*³ and is still active in research.

Placing sources to medieval Danish society in a European context is characteristic of modern research. Another characteristic feature is the renewed interest in medieval literary texts as sources to contemporary society, indeed to history in general. Danish historians have recovered from the chocks of the radical textual criticism, espoused during the early part of this century. Historians of this school "uncovered" the tendentiousness and harmonizing of these literary sources. The literary masterpiece of medieval Denmark, the voluminous *Gesta Danorum*,⁴ composed by the clerk, Saxo, around 1200, was analyzed by these sharp-eyed historians and discarded as source to early Danish history. Following generations of scholars have returned to the literary texts, as for example the legends, and utilized them by applying new theories and methods. The texts are seen as sources to the ideas and perceptions concerning life and social order, that governed the time and place in which the texts were created. The texts have also increasingly been used as sources to contemporary society in general, not the least daily life.

The historian, Niels Skyum-Nielsen, dared use the legends in his survey of Danish history from 1050 to 1250, *Kvinde og slave*, 1971.⁵ He used the information for political as well as social history. It was very much the accounts

² Tue Gad, *Legenden i dansk middelalder* (Copenhagen: Dansk Videnskabs Forlag, 1961). Résumé en français.

³ Tue Gad, *Helgenlegender fortalt i Norden* (Copenhagen, 1971).

⁴ The standard edition is *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder (Copenhagen, 1957). Annotations in Latin.

⁵ Niels Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde og slave* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971).

of poor, ill, and oppressed people, found in the legends, that made him paint the picture of medieval Danish society in far darker colors than his predecessors. Skyum-Nielsen himself talked about the pauperization of the social model. As the title hints, he made a strong point of depicting those, placed lowest in society, namely women and slaves, utilizing the legends in this connection as well. Through his survey of high-medieval Denmark one finds information picked from the legends but no discussion of these texts as sources to daily life. This, of course, could not be expected in this kind of work.

In *Kvindebilledet i dansk højmiddelalder* from 1985,⁶ I have described and analyzed the depiction of women in the literary texts, including the Danish saints' *vitae* and *miracula* from the high Middle Ages, 1150-1300. The purpose of my work, which earned me the Danish doctorate, is primarily to analyze and explain how and why women are described the way they are in the extant texts. In Chapter Five, the legends are closely analyzed to demonstrate their value not only as sources to the image of women, held by contemporary society, but also as sources to the life of contemporary women. One of the important discoveries was the great difference in the image of women in the *vitae* and the *miracula*. The former present the image of the female, held by the Church, of women either as chaste, defenseless creatures or as dangerous temptresses. In the latter, women appear surprisingly on almost equal footing with men as far as numbers and function are concerned. The accounts of miracles, caused by the saint in question, served to document the deeds of the saint, and women and men were equal in being objects of the saint's miracle working powers and witnesses to them. The, often extremely brief, reports on the miracles have a high value as sources because they were written down as part of the documentation needed for the canonization process. The curia had to be able to check the information given if control was desired. For this reason, the reports often give the name, occupation and home of the witnesses. Several of the Danish *miracula* were written for the purpose of canonization which makes the information highly reliable in some ways. The problem of using legends, including the list of miracles, as sources for daily life is, of course, the fixed, schematic character of the genre, to which they belong. The New Testament is clearly the model for many legends, and certain of the legends of the early Church also became very popular models.

In *Kvindebilledet*, the most important result concerning information on daily life is the demonstration of the equality of men and women as participants in the cult of their favorite saint. There are about the same number of men

⁶ Nanna Damsholt, *Kvindebilledet i dansk højmiddelalder*. (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1985). Summary in English.

and women and they act generally in the same fashion. There are, however, characteristic differences: Men are often identified by name and profession (merchant, peasant) while women usually appear with their name and gender only, occasionally with the marital status (wife, widow) noted. Men who break laws do so violently (as thieves, robbers, rapists) while women's crimes are more subdued (working on holy days). Women often travel quite far to seek the grave of a saint while men are often helped at the place they dwell.

The legends are, of course, filled with sick people who are cured and differences can be discerned although more research on this aspect is needed. Most conspicuous is the fact that, among those helped by the saints, one rarely finds homeless and freezing, children and old people, and victims of violence. This points to one of the problems of using the legends as sources: how representative are the people we encounter in the texts? To what extent has the New Testament, with its many sick but few destitute and victims, influenced the composition? To what extent have the authors been in the pay of those holding power and omitted stories of social misery and oppression?

Kvindebilledet contains a close analyses of three legends only and research into the texts ought to be continued. It will also be useful to compare the Danish texts to other European texts to determine the relative number of sick, paupers and victims of violence, for example. In the analyzed Danish texts, women in particular are cured of blindness. Is this a general feature?

Many Danish historians have studied the cult of the saints⁷ and the legends and used this material in depicting aspects of daily life. I might mention Thelma Jexlev,⁸ Brian McGuire,⁹ and Grethe Jacobsen.¹⁰ The medical historian Vilhelm Møller-Christensen has written on the abbey of Æbelholt and used the reports of the miracles to depict daily life of the monastery.¹¹ However, we still lack a complete description of daily life based on the legends.

⁷ The pioneer is Ellen Jørgensen's work *Helgendyrkelse i Danmark: Studier over Kirkekultur og Kirkeligt Liv fra det 11te Århundredes midte til Reformationen* (Copenhagen: Hagerup, 1909) Résumé en français.

⁸ Thelma Jexlev is working on dating, in particular the chronological and geographical distribution in the use of saints and their feast days to date documents etc. See her "Lokalhelgener og middelalderige nordiske brevdateringer" in *Middelalder, metode og medier: Festskrift til Niels Skyum-Nielsen på 60-årsdagen den 17. oktober 1981* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 1981) p. 223-260.

⁹ See his article in this issue.

¹⁰ Grethe Jacobsen, *Kvindeskikkelser og kvindeliv i Danmarks middelalder* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1986).

¹¹ Vilhelm Møller Christensen, *Bogen om Æbelholt Kloster* (Copenhagen, 1958). Postscript and summary in English.

II. THE DANISH SOURCE MATERIAL: THE LEGENDS OF DANISH SAINTS

Not all of the the nine saints, mentioned here, were born in Denmark but they lived in Denmark and are therefore counted as Danish. Among them is only one female saint, Margrethe of Roskilde. The king or the Church backed the canonization of most of the saints. The texts originate in various parts of Denmark which is an important point when utilizing the material as sources for daily life. The social background of the individuals, who appear in the stories, is very much the same in all legends of Danish saints: we find first and foremost ordinary people, villagers. The royal saints appealed not only or primarily to members of the elite. At least, they are not noted in the texts.

My impression is that the accounts of the miracles worked by the Danish saints are very much alike with certain differences. The material is not extensive which is a good reason for presenting it in its entirety here. The saints are listed in chronological order:

Saint Thøger (Theodgar). Second half of the 11th century. Confessor. Missionary from Thuringia. Probably canonized by the pope. He was active in Northern Jutland and buried in Vestervig Church, later abbey church and cathedral. The brief account of his life and miracles probably dates to the twelfth century but the extant version is a copy from around 1700.

Saint Knud konge (Canutus Rex). 10??-July 10, 1086. Martyr. King of Denmark 1080-86. Was killed in the Church of St. Alban in Odense by rebellious subjects. Buried in the Church of St. Knud. The benedictine monks of the abbey composed his *vitae* probably before the canonization and translation of his bones in 1100. The most distinguished text about Knud is the legend, composed by the Anglo-Saxon monk, Ælnoth, between 1120 and 1124. The text survives in mss. from the thirteenth century. Another version contains accounts of miracles worked by Knud along with a poem on omens. The text is difficult to date as it was not written down until the fifteenth century.

Saint Knud Lavard (Canutus Lavard or Dux). 1096?-Jan. 7, 1131. Martyr. Of royal blood, Knud was killed by his cousin and rival to the throne, Magnus. Canonized by the pope in 1169 and buried in the Abbey Church of St. Bendt in Ringsted. The earliest legend is composed by an English clerk, Robert of Ely, shortly after 1131 and probably at the monastery of Ringsted. Only fragments have survived and in manuscripts from a later period. The central text, the *Ordinale Sancti Kanuti Ducis*, was composed during the twelfth century and survives in a ms. from the thirteenth. Excerpts from a list of miracles, noted down at Ringsted monastery from the early thirteenth century, have survived in a ms. from around 1700.

Saint Keld. Died 1150. Confessor. Canonized by the pope in 1188. Keld was deacon at the Cathedral of Viborg in Jutland, center of his cult. The brief

account about his life and miracles was probably composed during the period before 1188 but only a late version has survived.

Saint Margrethe. Died October 1177. Born into a prominent aristocratic family on Sealand, she was murdered by her husband. Canonized by the bishop in 1177 but attempts to obtain papal canonization during the 1250s failed. Two different texts about Margrethe and her life are extant, both probably composed shortly after her murder, hardly in connection with the process of the 1250s. One account may have originated in a clerical institution in Roskilde, center of her cult. The other was composed at Clairvaux and survives in a ms. from the early thirteenth century.

Saint Nils (Nicholas). Died 1180. He was of royal blood and his cult centered at Aarhus in Jutland. Attempts to obtain papal canonization during the 1250s failed. The brief legend of Niels contains primarily accounts of miracles, probably composed by clerks at Aarhus. Very likely, it was included in a ms. during the fourteenth century but the extant version is of a much later date.

Saint Vilhelm (William). 1140?-1203. Confessor. Born and educated in France, he travelled to Denmark to become abbot of an Augustinian monastery, from 1175 situated at Æbelholt in Northern Sealand. William was also active as emissary of the Danish King on missions of foreign policy. Papal canonization in 1224 with the center of his cult at Æbelholt. An extensive *vita* and *miracula* were composed, probably in connection with the canonization process. Both have survived in a Parisian ms. from the thirteenth century.

Anders. Died 1205. Priest at the Church of St. Peter in Slagelse, where masses were sung in his honor. A brief account of his life and miracles was probably composed during the thirteenth century but survives only in a copy from around 1700.

Erik Plovpenning. Died 1250. King of Denmark, 1241-1250. Murdered by his brother and successor, Abel. His body was transferred to the Abbey Church in Ringsted, center of his cult. Attempt to obtain papal canonization failed. A proper *vita* is not extant but a list of miracles from 1258 to 1274, kept at Ringsted monastery has survived in a copy from around 1700.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, we still lack an exhaustive analysis of the value of these texts as sources to daily life, but I should like to conclude by mentioning those topics that could be illuminated by such a study: food, meals, the social life of the village, work, division of labor, travels, dress, illness, and accidents, including those occurring during work. It is not possible to see if the Danish saints had specific abilities and functions, as had, for example, Saint George, patron saint of lepers.

The Danish material is not large and in many cases survives in incomplete and late versions only. Still, it is an exciting and important source to medieval Denmark. The possibilities for utilizing it can only be enhanced through international, comparative studies, making the possible schematic features even clearer.

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Edited by

GRETHE JACOBSEN

and

JENS CHR. V. JOHANSEN

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Inhaltsverzeichnis/Contents

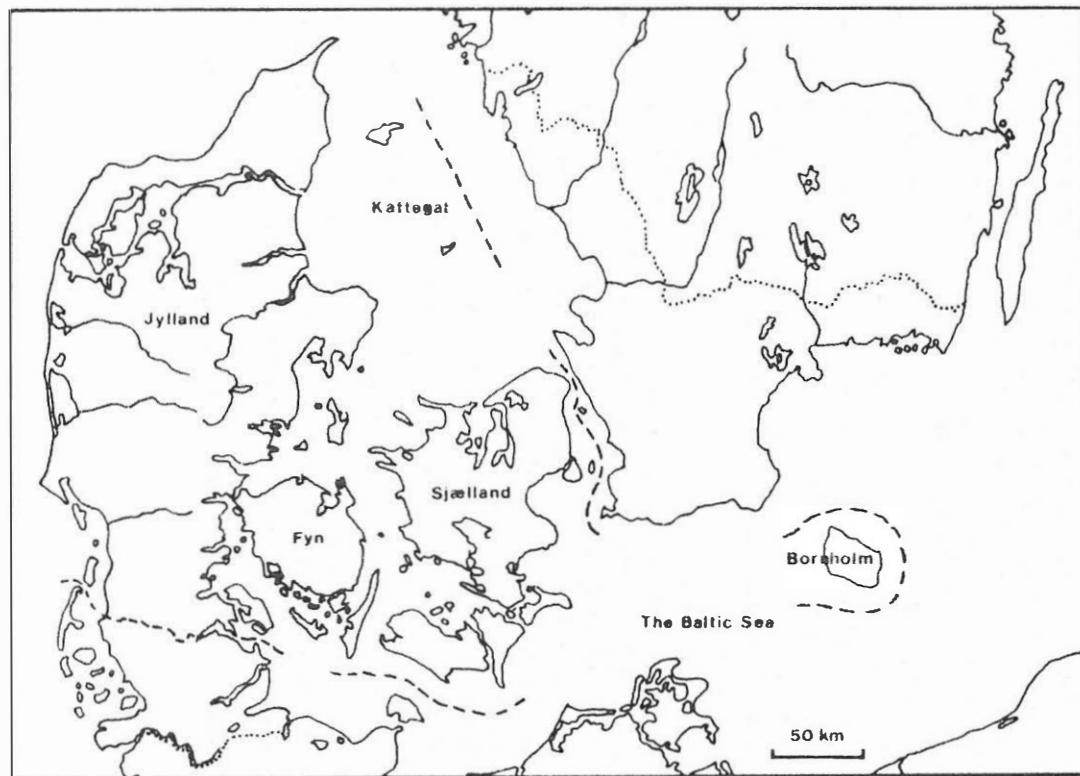
Introduction	4
Nanna Damsholt: The Legends of Danish Saints as Sources to Daily Life	7
Brian Patrick McGuire: Daily Life in Danish Medieval Monasteries	14
Ebbe Nyborg: Kirchliche Kunst und mittelalterliche Wirklichkeit	23
Marianne Johansen – Ingrid Nielsen: The Danish Medieval Town	36
Jens E. Olesen: In der Kanzlei des Königs. Die Kanzlei im mittelalterlichen Dänemark	43
Jens E. Olesen: Tolls and Toll Collectors in Medieval Denmark	60
Bjørn Poulsen: Possibilités et limitations du paysan danois dans le bas moyen âge	74
Helle Reinholdt – Bodil Møller Knudsen: “Women’s Rosegarden” and “Women’s Herbgarden”: Two Symposia on the Sexuality of Medieval Women	84
Biographies of the authors	87
Berichte – Besprechungen – Mitteilungen	92

Introduction

The articles in this issue all deal with current research on life in medieval Denmark. Though comprehensive within their respective fields, they represent only a part of the multi-faceted research currently being undertaken in Denmark, in spite of the adverse work and job situation of many younger scholars. Due to a very short deadline for articles, many scholars were unable to comply with our request for a contribution but expressed interest in participating in international communication of current research. We hope to bring more articles on research on medieval Danish life at a later date.

In Denmark, no particular stress is laid on the topic: medieval daily life. Yet, the by now established social and economic history as well as the renewed interest in political history, has made historians focus on daily life and on its material as well as mental aspects. The articles by Nanna Damsholt and Brian Patrick McGuire concern the religion and the Church of medieval Denmark and their fusion with secular life.

With the development of the discipline of medieval archaeology, our understanding of the material aspects as well as the physical frames for medieval life has been greatly expanded. In contrast to the finite number of written documents, the quantity of archaeological sources keeps increasing, adding valuable information to our knowledge of medieval society. The challenge to historians and archaeologists has been to combine and interpret written, artistic and material sources as Ebbe Nyborg discusses in his article while Marianne Johansen and Ingrid Nielsen present a project combining archaeology and written sources. All three authors are historians as well as archaeologists. In this connection, one might mention the periodical *hikuin* (published by Forlaget Hikuin, Moesgård, DK-8270 Højbjerg, Denmark) which began in 1974 and appears at irregular intervals, the latest volume being number 14 (1988). The periodical brings articles on medieval archaeology primarily in Danish but also in Swedish and Norwegian with resumes in English. Special issues have been devoted to church archaeology, urban archaeology, coins and pottery. We should also like to mention the research tool *Nordic Archaeological Abstract* (NAA) which indexes all articles on medieval archaeology (see p. 95).



The Jutland peninsular and the Danish islands. The borders of the core of the Medieval kingdom are marked with dotted lines and the modern boundaries with broken lines. The areas in present-day Sweden were the medieval province of Skåne (Scania), Halland and Blekinge.

Ingrid Nielsen has also produced the map, accompanying the introduction, which shows the medieval as well as the present boundaries of Denmark. As she and Marianne Johansen point out in their article, the latter boundary also determines the boundaries of much archaeological and historical research. In part to make up for this, meetings have been held between Danish and Swedish historians and archaeologists (the latter primarily from Skåne) dealing with aspects of the town-country relationship. The publications of these meetings are mentioned in the article by Bjørn Poulsen.

The article by Jens E. Olesen on tolls and toll collection deals with a topic, hitherto seen as part of political or financial history; but this was, in fact, of great importance to the common people, especially the many men and women engaged in trade or commerce whether on international, inter-regional or local level. Similarly, his other article, describing the development of the royal chancellery, reminds us that bureaucracy and bureaucrats, whether viewed negatively or positively by contemporaries, are neither modern phenomena nor ones, appearing during Absolutism.

Bjørn Poulsen's article makes us aware that medieval people did not live and produce in isolation but were integrated into the European economy, though the extent of involvement and the awareness of international connections would vary according to time and place. Poulsen also stresses that town and country, so often seen as mutually exclusive, were both part of the daily life of many medieval women and men.

The contribution by Helle Reinholdt and Bodil Møller Knudsen points to the gender aspect, so often overlooked in traditional history which has concerned itself mainly with the action of men. We have chosen not to have an article on "Women and Daily Life" which would make women merely one ingredient in the daily life of men but have urged the authors to include the gender aspects, making the reader aware that history, whether of daily life or of extraordinary events, is made by women as well as men.

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Grethe Jacobsen, Jens Christian V. Johansen