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Constructing Identity through the Cult of Saints in the Twelfth Century

by Steffen Hope

1000 Worte Forschung: *PhD project at the Centre for Medieval Literature, University of Southern Denmark (Odense)*

In my research I am investigating the textual production that emerged from three important institutions which served as centres in the cult of their respective patron saints in Northern Europe. These three institutions are Bury St Edmunds in East Anglia, Nidaros Cathedral in Norway, and Odense Cathedral in Denmark. Each of these institutions served as the heart of a cult and the guardian of the shrine belonging to a royal saint, and this shrine was in turn the hub of the pilgrimage and the liturgical celebrations that took place on the feasts of these saints.

At Bury, the patron saint was Edmund of East Anglia (d.869), at Nidaros the patron saint was Olaf Haraldsson of Norway (d.1030), and in Odense the patron saint was Knud IV of Denmark (d.1086). All these saints were subjects of a significant production of literature at their respective centres. This literature encompassed saint-biographies, liturgical chants and offices, chronicles, and non-liturgical poetry. In the case of all these cults, there can be seen a rise in the production of texts in the period 1050-1220.

The primary aim of my research is to investigate how the three saints were formulated in the texts that emerged at their respective cult centres in this period. My thesis is that in the transmission from saint-biographies to liturgical texts there is a distillation of iconographic representation. This distillation comes about because the liturgical office as a textual category is much more restrictive in its form than the saint-biography (which is often called hagiography). The biography serves as the foundation of the liturgical material, providing the office with its basic narrative and its iconography. But a biography is subject to significantly fewer restrictions in terms of length and the division and organization of the material. It should be added that the saint-biography as a textual category, or genre, also allows for biographies in verse or in a vernacular language, but such biographies rarely form the basis for the liturgical office. This is traditionally a task for the Latin prose biography.

In my research I examine how the distillation of material affects the formulation of the three saints in their liturgical offices. My starting point is the claim that since this distillation involves that some material is omitted or reformulated, the image of the saint as found in the liturgical office is the purest form of the saint as it was understood and formulated by those

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who were the overseers of the cult, either an abbot (Bury, Odense) or an archbishop (Nidaros).

Even though my main focal point is the transmission from biography to liturgy, I also compare the iconography of the saint in these two textual categories with the iconography found in other texts produced at these centres. The purpose is to show how the distilled image connects with the wider production of text and dissemination of iconography.

Another question for my thesis is also the matter of the institution's own place in the legend of the saint. I am interested to discuss whether we can detect any signs that the institutions that served as cult centres used the various texts concerning their respective patron saints to construct their own identity, either as cult centres and sites of pilgrimage, in relation to other ecclesiastical centres, or in relation to secular powers. In this discussion it becomes even more important to draw on the texts outside the liturgical material, such as various types of historiographical texts and also the saint-biography (which also serves as a historiographical document).

I have chosen to work with these three institutions because they provide a good ground for comparison between the various cults. In all the cases we see a rise in textual production within a period of roughly 170 years; in all the cases we are dealing with a king that became a saint, a type of saint that saw its most popular period in the twelfth century; in all the cases the saints have had a great significance to what we might call the national narrative of the respective kingdoms; in all the cases my investigation operates within a geographical area in which there was an extensive cultural contact and exchange between the kingdoms and the cultures involved.

Since I am primarily interested in the relationship between the different types of text, and also between the texts and the institutions that produced them, the main objective for my research is textual analysis and the construction of what we call textual images or textual iconography, i.e. the way in which the saint is formulated and presented in the works which I am working on. However, throughout my dissertation I am also interested in addressing common misconceptions about the nature of the medieval cult of saints and how the vocabulary of the saint-biographies should be understood. This is a minor point, but one that underlies an important section of my research.

My work draws on a significant amount of established research and a long list of academic books and articles in which the various themes of my dissertation are dealt with. In recent years, there have been written several important monographic studies of individual saints

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in which the relationship between the biography and the liturgy has been brought to the forefront. Of particular importance are the following two monographs: Kay Brainerd Slocum's *Liturgies in honour of Thomas Becket* from 2004, and Cecilia Gaposchkin's *The Making of Saint Louis* from 2008. The saints who form the core of my thesis have also received much attention in recent years. Of particular importance here is the monographic study by Lenka Jirousková on the biography of Olaf Haraldsson, *Der heilige Wikingerkönig Olav Haraldsson und sein hagiographisches Dossier*, from 2014.

However, no cohesive study with the scope of Slocum's and Gaposchkin's books has yet been undertaken for either of these saints, and they have not been brought into comparison until now. I hope that my research will pave the way for further investigations with regards to other saints and other cult centres, and that my work will inspire further works of a more ambitious comparative scope.