

# Comparative Medieval Literature

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There was a time when medieval studies was primarily concerned with editing texts, translating them into modern languages, and rediscovering texts that had been largely overlooked. We still edit and translate medieval texts, but with less urgency than a century or even decades ago, and computerizing makes editing work much easier nowadays. On the other hand, if, for instance, one takes into account the obvious thickening of the *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* in recent years, we are entitled to deduce that monodisciplinary medieval studies are well defended. However, bibliographies dedicated to the literary connections among European countries in the Middle Ages are still difficult to find. As far as Arthurian studies are concerned, the Welsh series called ‘The Arthur of ...’ is an important counter-example: several volumes have already appeared (*The Arthur of the Welsh, The Arthur of the English, The Arthur of the Germans*; and I know of a soon-to-be-published *The Arthur of the Norse*).

Nevertheless, the low number of scholars who choose to study several vernacular languages and literatures at once is striking. I am aware that multidisciplinary raises many difficulties. Regarding an academic career, there is an implication that a multidisciplinary’s specialization will never be as good as a specialist’s in each one of the fields one is trying to explore. Nevertheless, I am convinced that multidisciplinary is worth the effort, because this approach is the only way to perform a real *Quellenforschung* and to establish the European environment in which a given text was written. For instance, only scholars who have a thorough knowledge of the literature(s) from which a text has been translated or borrowed into another language can hope to gain a thorough understanding of the nature of the text.

There is no field called ‘medieval comparative literature’ in France, but French medievalists should nonetheless consider it a priority to enquire, for example, into the way that the so-called *matière de France* and *matière de Bretagne* became widespread in Europe in the Middle Ages. I shall illustrate this argument by referring to the two cycles that I have been studying for several years, the Charlemagne cycle and the adaptations of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the purpose of this presentation being to demonstrate that collaboration with specialists in Celtic languages and literatures, and, especially, specialists in Middle Welsh literature, is highly relevant to this kind of research.

## *Literary cycles in European literature: Charlemagne and Brut*

It is a well-known fact among specialists of medieval literature that the tendency towards compiling extensive cycles increased perceptibly in Europe during the course of the thirteenth century. This tendency had a decisive effect on French epic poetry and historiography, as well as, for instance, on the European Grail literature. Since the practice of compiling in the Middle Ages often included translating, it consequently involved skilfulness in erasing the limits of the texts and smoothing out inconsistencies resulting from the process of sewing

different pieces of text together. We know of many such combinations made from medieval or Late Antique chronicles and vernacular narratives that do not go back to the same time of composition. A second difficulty is caused by the process of rewriting, which often removes any hope of finding a source corresponding to the first stage of the compilation. Besides, the circulation of the narrative material is, depending on the country, language, and background, a very different process. This problem is not, paradoxically, to be solved by focusing only on the manuscripts, since they very often diverge from one another and sometimes survive in much later copies.

Among the texts used by authors who arranged Charlemagne cycles in Europe in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some can be said to constitute a ‘nucleus’, around which other texts appeared to have been gathered afterwards or simultaneously: the original combination indeed very often consists of the Latin *Pseudo-Turpin*, the French *Song of Roland* and other *chansons*, among others the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, which can be associated with the Latin account of Charlemagne’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land (*Descriptio Qualiter Carolus Magnus Clavum et Coronam Domini a Constantinopoli Aquisgrani attulerit ...*).

There are at least three European compilations that display the same kind of combination: The *Chronique Rimée* written by Philippe Mouskés in the north of France in the thirteenth century (there is a unique manuscript of this chronicle dating from the thirteenth century), the Scandinavian *Karlamagnússaga*, found in manuscripts dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and later paper copies, and the Welsh *Ystoria de Carolo Magno*,<sup>1</sup> nowadays preserved in manuscripts from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Through a comparison of these three contemporaneous Charlemagne cycles – among others in Europe – we can shed light on the way that the legendary and literary sources started to be connected in Europe. The three cycles range from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, as far as manuscript conservation is concerned, but all presumably draw on a thirteenth-century original translation. Needless to say, my knowledge of the Welsh *Ystoria de Carolo Magno* is very limited at present (*docta cum libro!*), but the actual combination of these three related texts seems to have been studied very little, and I am convinced it will bring some interesting results.

Another of my interests is the study of the Old Norse adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the so-called *Breta Sögur*, on which very little work has been done as far as the sources are concerned. This example shall be developed more thoroughly, given its Welsh background.

<sup>1</sup> See Annalee C. Rejhon, *Cân Rolant: The Medieval Welsh Version of the Song of Roland* (University of California Publication, 1984) and « La version galloise de la Chanson de Roland et sa relation avec les autres rédactions du poème », *VIII Congreso de la Société Rencesvals*: Pamplona-Santiago de Compostela, 15–25 de agosto 1978 (Pamplona, Institucion Principe de Viana, 1981), pp. 399–404.

<sup>2</sup> I tried to draw a comparison between the first two cycles in my article: « Die *Karlamagnússaga* und die *Chronique Rimée* von Philippe Mouskés: Auf der Suche nach der *Vie Romancée de Charlemagne* », in *Rittersagas, Übersetzung, Überlieferung, Transmission*, colloque international de Bâle, organized in May 2003 by Jürg Glauser et Susanne Kramarz-Bein, to be published (and until that time available in preprints).

It is difficult, when studying the vernacular adaptations of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (one of the most widely copied and translated historiographical works in Europe in the twelfth century) to delineate its sources: indeed, the European *Bruts* are often interpolated with texts from antiquity and late antiquity, tales from the Breton and Celtic tradition and romances belonging to Arthurian textual tradition.

In addition to a few paragraphs included as excerpts in an Icelandic manuscript dedicated to universal history,<sup>3</sup> two extant versions of an Old Norse *Brut* are preserved.<sup>4</sup> The version found in the codex called *Hauksbók* was written between 1302 and 1310. The text is rather short, compared to the second extant version; it contains a rewriting of the *Prophetia Merlini* in verse, which is said to have been translated into scaldic verse by the poet Gunnlaugr Leifsson in 1218. It is in places interpolated with historiographical materials, and ends with a dynastic account borrowed from another British chronicle (this corroborates the dynastic and political purpose). It might be useful to mention here that the entire compilation, *Hauksbók*, is not a random one, at least not entirely. Several parts of it shed a different light on the Trojan migration and the different peoples whose history is traced back to Trojan ancestors, Norway and Iceland being a part of this European scheme. As such, it resembles to a great degree French compilations of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The second version is, unfortunately, poorly preserved. There are only two witnesses to this second version, AM 573 4to (fourteenth century), and a paper copy of *Órmsbók* (the copy Stock. Papp. fol. N°58 was made in the seventeenth century). This version, or at least what is left of it, is longer. It is both much closer to Geoffrey and more often interpolated with motives that are obviously influenced by chivalric romances; were it not for its poor preservation, it would be relevant to include this text in a survey of the Old Norse sagas of chivalry. Unfortunately, the paper copy ends before the Arthurian times, and AM 573 4to is lacunary as well. In its present state, the death of Arthur as it is told in AM 573 is followed by the beginning of *Valvers Pátttr*, the narrative branch that corresponds to the ‘Gauvain’ part of the *Conte du Graal*.

Was there a common source to the two versions of the *Breta Sögur*? I have tried to bring in positive evidence of this in several studies, but am still working on the question more thoroughly. There is, indeed, a strong possibility that the Latin model was one and the same text, from the fall of Troy to the last kings of England, imported to Scandinavia to provide a general history of the British kings as a background to the history of the Norwegian kings. Looking more carefully at the Old French manifold *Brut* tradition allowed me to discover striking similarities between the *Breta Sögur* and a French prose *Brut* called ‘Estoire des Bretons’, dating to the fourteenth century; this text has been edited once, in a doctoral dissertation from 2005.<sup>5</sup> This ‘estoire’ was included in a historiographical cycle known by critics under the title ‘Histoire ancienne jusqu’à César’, which, like all compilations of this kind, included a version of the Trojan chronicle as well. A comparison between the three

<sup>3</sup> See Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, *Universal History in 14th-century Iceland. Studies in AM 764 4to* (Ph.D., University College London, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> For a general description of the manuscript conservation of the *Breta Sögur*, see Jonna Louis-Jensen, « Breta Sögur » in Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia, an Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 1993), pp. 57–8.

<sup>5</sup> Géraldine Veysseyre, Translator, Geoffroy de Monmouth: *Trois traductions en prose française de l’Historia Regum Britanniae (XIII–VX)*, thèse soutenue en Sorbonne le 30 novembre 2002.

texts, the French *Estoire de Brutus*, the Old Norse short version found in the *Hauksbók* and the Old Norse longer version, brought to light a few common items which are not – so far – to be found elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the differences between the two Old Norse versions are important, and it would do justice to the AM 573 4to manuscript to call it a chivalric version, while the *Hauksbók* text could be designated a ‘historiographical’ version. This characteristic, as far as I know, is shared by the manifold Welsh tradition of the *Bruts*: some versions are interpolated with the tale of *Lludd a Llefelys*, and some are not. This is exactly what happens in the Norse tradition (with other tales). There are several episodes in the chivalric version of the *Breta Sögur* on which one could focus in order to illustrate this argument: Arthur at war, Mordred’s betrayal (which involves a long (original) dialogue between Mordred and Guenevere), etc. Nevertheless, the most symptomatic episode is probably the story of Arthur’s begetting.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the other versions of the *Bruts*, AM 573 4to tells us that Uther, after the death of Gorlois, was unable to seduce the widow and had to ask Merlin for assistance: Merlin made a love-potion, and Uther married the duchess. Nowhere in the European Arthurian literature did I find another trace of this rewriting. Since the amplified episode is only to be found in the AM 573 copy, because there is one common model for the two versions of the *Breta Sögur*, we have to conclude that this episode is a ‘romance’ that was invented by the Norse redactor, a romance that may have been inspired by Arthurian and Tristanian motifs.

Another forthcoming paper of mine discusses another peculiarity of the Old Norse text: the story of the war of Arthur against the two giants – the giant of Mont Saint Michel and the giant called ‘Ritho’ in the Latin model. I tried to uncover connections or similarities to the other European versions that I knew of, and extended the comparison to some later prose rewritings, the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles of the Arthurian Romances and Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, which was inspired by the Post-Vulgate cycle. As it happens, neither of the *Bruts* I know showed the same arrangement as the one that can be read in the two Old Norse versions.<sup>7</sup> This most probably means that the Old Norse version is specific (or is a specific rewriting). But precisely what we lack here is a thorough survey of all the *Bruts* that were written between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries; however, this falls far beyond the scope of a single research enquiry.

During the course of this study it became clear that its findings should be shared among specialists of different vernacular literatures. The Welsh tradition of *Brut y Brenhinedd* has been investigated by Welsh scholars in their own discipline (Brynley F. Roberts among others). Layamon’s *Brut* is familiar to Old English specialists, and the French *Bruts* nowadays seem to benefit from a renewed scientific interest. Nevertheless, collaborative projects on an extensive scale are still needed, in this field as in others. And I believe that this is where

<sup>6</sup> I tried to illustrate these arguments in « *La Saga des Bretons: naissance et exploitation du mythe arthurien dans les compilations pseudo-historiques de Scandinavie* », 2<sup>nd</sup> colloque arthurien de Rennes, mars 2003, published by Christine Ferlampin-Acher et Denis Hüe in 2006 under the title *Enfances Arthuriennes* (Orléans, Paradigme), pp. 299–311, and in a presentation held at the XXI<sup>st</sup> *International Arthurian Conference* in Utrecht in 2005: « L’*Historia Regum Britanniae* en Scandinavie médiévale: notes sur la rédaction AM 573 4to de la Saga des Bretons ».

<sup>7</sup> « Arthur et le géant aux barbes: genèse et circulation d’un épisode fondateur dans l’adaptation norroise de l’*Historia Regum Britanniae* », forthcoming.

'Comparative Medieval Studies' would be the most likely to reach their target, though these studies do not – yet – exist.