

German and Dutch legends of the Middle Ages: a survey

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I have been asked by the organizers of this symposium to present a survey of medieval German and Dutch legends. This is quite an impossible task when one considers that, apart from the famous *Verspassional*, with 95 extant manuscripts, and the far less important versified *Märterbuch*, there are more than 50 different German and Dutch prose legends. I shall therefore restrict my paper to the legends in prose and, more specifically, to the *Legendae novae*, the comprehensive legends which are structured according to the church calendar, such as the *Legenda aurea*. They were undoubtedly the most popular in the late Middle Ages.

By considering Dutch legends in my paper I do not intend to provoke political controversy. It is simply an indisputable fact that in the Middle Ages there was a very active literary exchange between the Middle Franconian and the Low German speaking areas and the Netherlands. So it came to be that one of Germany's most widely-read legends was of Dutch origin. There are however some characteristic differences between German and Dutch legends for which as yet I have not been able to find an adequate explanation: the Dutch legends have a much stronger tendency to concentrate on the lives of locally venerated saints than do their German counterparts.

Before I begin my presentation, a few words on the present state of research: German and Dutch scholarship has paid too little attention to the prose legends and legends. In fact only *versified* saints' lives have been extensively studied. The major reason for this biased treatment is the persistent disdain of German and Dutch scholarship for medieval prose narrative, which simply doesn't match up to canonized aesthetic norms. When I began my research six years ago there was very little to which I could refer. Since then I have worked my way through approximately 1500 manuscripts containing saints' lives in the vernacular. But in order to find them all, and perhaps create a *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Germanica* as Konrad Kunze suggested a

This paper presents some of the results of an extensive study of German and Dutch legends, on which I am working at the present time. I have therefore left it in the form in which it was given at the Symposium, foregoing footnotes but adding a selective bibliography.

few years ago, one would need a lifetime or at least a very well-coordinated team.

Now to some of the results of this research. Until the beginning of the fourteenth century German legends are generally manuscripts containing a few legends in verse. That is the exclusive literary form of German hagiography up to this time. There was a radical change in this around 1300 when important thirteenth-century developments in Latin hagiography inspired the creation of vernacular legends of a broader scope. These developments in Latin legends of course culminate in the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, which became one of the most widely-read works of European literature. There are over 1000 extant manuscripts as well as more early prints than of the Bible. This vast circulation awaits analysis, but we do know for certain that the *Legenda aurea* was already well known in Germany before its author's death. Within a few years thereafter it was without serious competition in Germany and the Netherlands.

The *Legenda aurea* decisively influenced the structure and narrative style of vernacular legends. The first extensive collection of German saints' lives which reflects this influence is the *Verspassional*, which was written in Central Germany at the turn of the thirteenth century and uses the *Legenda aurea* as its main source. But the *Verspassional* was to have an interesting fate. Since it was written just before the preference for prose swept over Germany, its 'life span' was a mere 50 years, from about 1300 to 1350. After that it was an anachronism, only of use as a source for prose legends where its fluent narrative could be deprived of its rhymes and used as a base for the terse prose which had come into fashion.

The vast enterprise of translating the complete text of the *Legenda aurea* was undertaken at least eight times in Germany and twice in the Netherlands. In the first half of the fourteenth century a Strassburg clergyman – of whom we only know that he once visited Rome – translated the entire *Legenda aurea* along with an appendix of Latin saints' lives of German origin. There are 35 extant manuscripts of the so-called *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, a number of them with miniatures, the most exquisite of which are to be found in the Munich manuscript Cgm 6, completed in the year 1362. The *Elsässische Legenda aurea* circulated in the area to the west of the Black Forest, from Fribourg in Switzerland to Frankfurt am Main. Only two manuscripts were written to the east of the Black Forest, which was a natural dialect boundary.

The *Legenda aurea* was also translated quite early into Dutch. The work on this translation was completed in 1358, and over 100 manuscripts and thirteen

prints clearly demonstrate its great popularity. The translator appears to have been a Carthusian in the Charterhouse Herne in Belgium, who is generally known as the 'Bible translator of 1360' (he actually translated many works, including the *Vitae patrum* and Gregory's *Dialogues*). As far as we know the *Southern Netherlandish Legenda aurea* was his first major project. Unlike all other German and Dutch prose legends, the Bible-translator begins his work with a prologue. There he deals extensively with the principle of *imitatio*: the name *gulden legende* is justified, he writes, since it contains many excellent examples of how the saints followed Christ. This translation of the *Legenda aurea* corpus without additions circulated in the entire Netherlandic area, with the *Devotio moderna* and the Windesheim congregation contributing to its immense popularity, as well as in the northwest of Germany, especially in the Cologne and Trier areas.

There is a second Dutch translation from around the year 1400 – the *Northern Netherlandish Legenda aurea* – but it did not match the older version in popularity. Its circulation was closely restricted to the approximate area of modern Holland.

In the fifteenth century the *Legenda aurea* was translated six more times into High German and once into Low German. Remarkably, these translations are each only transmitted in at most three manuscripts. On the one hand they document the enduring interest in the *Legenda aurea* as a source for vernacular hagiography; on the other hand the extremely modest number of manuscripts clearly demonstrates a restricted interest in legends which limited themselves to an assortment of legends numerically equivalent to the contents of the *Legenda aurea*. The competition was especially hard in the East Franconian and Bavarian dialect areas, which were the central areas of circulation of the most popular of all German legends, *Der Heiligen Leben*, a vast and original compilation, which is only partly indebted to the *Legenda aurea*.

Der Heiligen Leben was compiled in the last decade of the fourteenth century by an anonymous Dominican friar in Nürnberg. After its completion both verse legends, *Verspassional* and *Märterbuch*, virtually ceased to be copied. The compiler of *Der Heiligen Leben* knew the *Legenda aurea* well, he even used it as a source, but he seems to have found major weaknesses in its contents and structure. Most important, the *Legenda aurea* clearly had a dearth of Central European saints' lives – Jacobus, an Italian, had almost completely ignored them. And through his decision to include more than 100 lives of Central European – especially German – saints in his work the compiler of *Der Heiligen Leben* created a vernacular legendary that – as far as I can see – is

unparalleled in its overall popularity in the whole of Europe. It is transmitted in nearly 200 manuscripts and 33 High German and eight Low German prints. A number of Strassburg editions were edited by the well-known Renaissance writer Sebastian Brant. His edition of 1502 was printed in 1000 copies, a remarkably large edition for the times.

The sources for the 251 legends in *Der Heiligen Leben* are manifold. Next to Latin sources the compiler also converted a large number of verse legends into prose (Prosaauflösung): for instance almost the complete *Verspassional*, a large part of the *Märterbuch*, Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius auf dem Stein*, *St Oswald* and many more.

Der Heiligen Leben was clearly designed for the *lectio ad mensam* and the *collatio* in Dominican convents. Each text ends with a short communal prayer.

The 41 printed editions of *Der Heiligen Leben* achieved such enormous popularity that Martin Luther attacked it in a polemical pamphlet, citing *Der Heiligen Leben* as a prime example of the *papistische Lügenden*. Via Low German prints *Der Heiligen Leben* even reached Scandinavia: we know of translations both into Swedish and into Icelandic.

Saints' lives and miracles from *Der Heiligen Leben* found their way into a great number of German catechetical and devotional texts of the fifteenth century. Even Grimmelshausen has been identified as a reader of *Der Heiligen Leben*.

These three most popular prose legends were transmitted throughout the entire German- and Dutch-speaking area, each more or less confined to certain identifiable spheres of influence, corresponding to the major dialect areas. What was responsible for this veritable explosion in the production of hagiographic manuscripts in the vernacular? The major cause is undoubtedly the immense increase in book production which accompanied the reform movements in a number of important orders in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Through these orders books rapidly spread into the furthest reaches of the German- and Dutch-speaking parts of Europe.

Of greatest importance for the High German area was the reform of the Dominican order, which began at Colmar in 1389. The initiators of this reform were the general of the order, Raymond of Capua, and Conrad of Prussia. With the aid of Pope Boniface IX they soon succeeded in reforming the important Nürnberg monastery in 1396. In a very short time this monastery itself developed into a major center of the reform movement in the province of Teutonia. A large number of monasteries were directly or indirectly brought back to strict observance through the exceedingly devout and learned Nürn-

berg friars. In the eyes of these men the women's convents were also in great need of reform. But it would not suffice merely to convince the sisters that they should return to a strict observance of order rules. Unless ideal circumstances for such observance were created, the effects of the reform could hardly be expected to be long-lasting. Literature in the vernacular had to be available in order to fulfill the regulations for daily communal readings. The Nürnberg friars began to translate suitable Latin texts as well as to copy manuscripts for just this purpose. One of these men seems to have been responsible for *Der Heiligen Leben* with its 251 legends – one for almost every day of the year, if Sundays and the main feasts are subtracted. A detailed plan for daily readings from the Dominican convent of St Catharine in Nürnberg provides us with valuable documentation of the context in which *Der Heiligen Leben* was initially intended to be used. The stages of the reform within the women's branch of the order can be clearly traced through the circulation of *Der Heiligen Leben* manuscripts.

Basically the same can be said of the Dominican reform movement in the Alemannic area. Here it is the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* which is taken along for copying in the newly-reformed convents. It is interesting to observe how the preference for a certain legendary is almost totally determined by the contacts the newly-reformed convent had with other reformed houses. The city of St Gallen in eastern Switzerland is an excellent example. It definitely belonged to the 'territory' of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, six of the 35 manuscripts were probably written here. However, the Dominican convent of St Catharine in St Gallen had excellent contacts with St Catharine's in Nürnberg. So it is hardly surprising that the St Gallen convent possessed the only complete High Alemannic version of *Der Heiligen Leben* now known to us.

It can also be said – as the circulation of legendary manuscripts clearly demonstrates – that reformed convents of different orders were in closer contact with each other than reformed and non-reformed convents of the same order. This of course holds true for a large number of other texts as well.

Similar observations can be made in the case of the Benedictine, Cistercian and Augustinian reformed monasteries. The Benedictines not only copy manuscripts for the women's convents but also for the libraries of the lay brothers, who had been given greater status and new responsibilities, such as partaking in daily communal readings, through the three main reform movements in the order.

German and Dutch legendaries were to a surprisingly large extent owned and read by non-clerics. Since the price of these voluminous books must have

been quite high, the manuscript owners are of course on the whole rich merchants or artisans, such as goldsmiths, especially in wealthy cities such as Nürnberg and Augsburg, and also members of the nobility. Legendaries were among the works most commonly sold by commercial scriptoria, such as Diebold Lauber's in Hagenau in the Alsace, who produced a considerable number of illustrated copies of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, or the Utrecht Atelier, which manufactured one of the most impressive copies of the *Southern Netherlandish Legenda aurea*. It can therefore be justifiably said that the actual boom in book production did not begin (at least not in Germany and the Netherlands) with Gutenberg's invention but actually in the late fourteenth century in manuscript form. The printing of books merely created more efficient means of production.

How were legendaries copied? What types of alteration can be undertaken in this process? The answers to these questions can be summed up as follows:

- (1) the addition of further legends;
- (2) the elimination of legends of unimportant or unknown saints;
- (3) the replacement of individual legends by other versions.

Thorough textual redactions of an entire legendary are rare. In other words legendaries are on the whole transmitted extremely conservatively on the *textual* level but not on the *corpus* level. Let us look at some of the most radical developments in German and Dutch prose legendaries.

An interesting development in the fifteenth century is the combination of Usuard's martyrology with the more traditional collections to create a new type of legendary which can be viewed as a logical development of the 'historical martyrology'. Needless to say, these new martyro-legendaries are tremendous in size, since they contain not only the daily martyrology text but also at least one lengthy legend for every day of the year. Generally they are divided into three separate books: January till April, May till August, September till December.

They seem to have been created for use in monastic hours and are only transmitted in manuscripts of monastic origin. The sources for these new legendaries are *Der Heiligen Leben*, which is totally integrated into one such collection, and the *Southern Netherlandish Legenda aurea* in an independent Dutch version, which also saw two printed editions.

I would like to emphasize that this development, whereby legendaries conti-

nually expand in size, originates in the practical needs of the monastic community. The martyro-legendaries are of course only one example. The translations of the *Legenda aurea* were particularly affected by these practical interests. The *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, whilst never integrated into a martyro-legendary, was nevertheless frequently dissolved. In the case of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea*, the context in which the individual manuscripts were used divides the manuscript tradition into two distinct groups:

- (1) Manuscripts written for the laity, mostly by commercial scribes, with either the complete original corpus, or with only a few legends missing. The appendices are generally no more than 3-4 legends. These commissioned manuscripts are on the whole uncritically but carefully copied and were produced for clients who had no clear concept of the exact contents of their new book. Diebold Lauber, who even sent advertisements to potential customers, offers the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* simply as *der heiligen leben winter und sumerteyl*.
- (2) Manuscripts of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* which were written in monasteries have generally been totally rearranged. It is particularly clear from the Dominican manuscripts of this text just how hopelessly inadequate for their needs the mere 190 legends of the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* had become. Their solution was to spread their reservoir of saints' lives over a number of books, using the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* as a major source but never hesitating to reject a version from this legendary in favour of one that was *lenger und hüpscher*. In other words the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* then ceased to exist as a discrete text. Generally *Der Heiligen Leben* was consulted for supplementary miracles to complement the *Elsässische Legenda aurea* version, or then to replace the Alsatian version completely.

This clear principle of selection naturally raises the question, why did they simply not copy *Der Heiligen Leben* as a whole? I believe the answer is actually quite simple. To translate an East Franconian or Bavarian manuscript into Alsatian was definitely more difficult than simply to copy the Alemannic version of a saint's life, if it was of equal length and completeness.

At the end of my paper I would like to attempt an analysis of legendary transmission from another point of view. I mentioned at the beginning that the *Legenda aurea* was of the greatest importance for the development of German and Dutch legendaries. But it should not be forgotten that the *Legenda aurea*, as the prototype of the *legenda nova*, was also clearly a novelty in Latin hagiography: since it was not merely just another collection of abbreviated saints'

lives but also contained a number of other text-types, such as those for the moveable feasts, feasts of the Virgin, etc. Jacobus integrates the lives of the saints totally into the church year, which is of course divided up by the great church feasts, and in that way goes beyond the usual mere ordering of the saints' lives according to the calendar. He explains this unique structure in a prologue and accentuates this concept in part through four short chapters *de festivitatis*.

This new concept is however soon neglected by scribes for whom the alleviation of the practical shortcomings of the *Legenda aurea* weighed more than the retention of Jacobus' disposition. This attitude is already demonstrated through the appendices, which neglect the strict adherence of the *Legenda aurea* to the church calendar. The two earliest known German copies of the Latin *Legenda aurea* from the years 1282 and 1288 have already such an appendix attached to them. The manuscript tradition of the fourteenth and especially of the fifteenth century reflects amazingly little interest in the original design of Jacobus' legendary.

Especially the vernacular versions pass over the prologue, the etymologies and the *de tempore* texts. We find a radical renunciation of Jacobus' concept in *Der Heiligen Leben*, which still uses the *Legenda aurea* as a partial source. As a pure collection of saints' lives it becomes the most influential model for most of the vernacular legends of the fifteenth century. The key to the unparalleled success of this legendary may also be seen to lie in the compiler's willingness to depart from Latin models and to concentrate entirely on creating a truly 'popular' legendary. For example he ignores etymologies, which are almost completely incomprehensible in the vernacular anyway. He also passes over the learned elements of the *Legenda aurea* (for example, critical commentary on the reliability of certain sources or the citation of sources) which he considered unsuitable for an uneducated audience. This is all to a certain extent revolutionary in the area of German hagiography, and it was undoubtedly a major reason for the very broad reading of his work both among laymen and clergy.

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