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Rural Literacy in Sixteenth Century Norway

ABSTRACT. This contribution discusses how the increased importance of literacy, in its widest meaning, in the beginning of the Early Modern era affected the Common Man in Norway. What relationship did farmers in remote areas have to the written word in the sixteenth century? The paper claims a “literacy of the illiterate.” Even people who could not themselves read were members of communities that relied on written testimonies and their use; they were used to hearing charters read out loud and knew how they were supposed to sound. The language that defines rural charters on land trade and similar matters will first be briefly compared to the general development in Norway during the sixteenth century. Then there follows a discussion of what kind of people were involved in the issuing and writing of charters, before these charters are evaluated as sources of our understanding of the literary or textual culture, if one may use such a word, of their time. The claim is made that the social function of these texts and their peculiar linguistic form (compared to other texts written in Norway at the same time) are connected.

KEYWORDS: Norwegian, sixteenth century, charters, literacy, textual community

1. Introduction

As is well known, Danish replaced Norwegian as the written language in Norway around the year 1500, a position it retained until the late nineteenth century. At the same time new text types were introduced, and in a broad sense a new literary culture emerged. This development came to be intrinsically connected with the Danish language. By the 1520s this language shift was more or less completed. (The term *language shift* is not uncontroversial, cf. below.)

However, contrary to the general development of the written language and writing culture in Norway, throughout the sixteenth century local officials in rural areas continued to issue charters according to traditional models, written in Norwegian or in Danish with strong Norwegian interference. These documents were labelled “farmer letters” (*bondebrev*) by the only scholar to discuss them thoroughly, Gustav Indrebø in his classic history of the Norwegian language. These charters largely consist of more or less fixed phrases or formulas, which closely follow older established patterns. The topics dealt with are mostly the most crucial issues for farmers, i.e. land trade, border quarrels, and testimonies about ownership, kinship, and inheritance.

The present study takes the charters mentioned by Indrebø as its starting point, to which are added a few more not yet published in his time. To give an impression of the number of texts, a thorough examination of the period 1550–1565 found 40–45 “non-Danish” charters.¹ The quoted sources are available in the edition *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, a collection of Norwegian and Norway-related documents dating from before c. 1580. So far 23 volumes have been published, of which vols. I–XXI are available online; many charters of the kind discussed here are printed in vol. XXI.

The objects of study here are first and foremost these charters as a cultural phenomenon, not literacy in the restricted sense of the ability to read and write, although that question will be addressed in Section 3. I follow the wide definition of *literacy* given by Briggs (2000:398):

Literacy is not simply the ability to read, though it is partly that. It is a complex cultural phenomenon [...] it is also a historically contextualized mentality. [...] And any discussion of literacy must take into account the oral mode of communication which it complemented, substituted for, and often competed with.

¹ It is impossible to give exact numbers, as the language of this time, before any standard was established, is so mixed that it is hard to decide where to draw the line between “Danish” and “Norwegian.” The notion “Non-Danish” includes charters with many Norwegian forms, albeit not necessarily completely “Norwegian.”

The main bulk of the article will thus discuss the significance of written documents for the rural population, and how they took part in a culture dependent on writing regardless of their own ability to read or write. In doing so, I argue for a “literacy of the illiterate.”

2. Language

Spoken Norwegian in the sixteenth century differed from Danish in a number of ways, and the written language of Norwegians displays a mixture of Norwegian tradition, Danish models, and Norwegian dialects. Although this study is based on selected charters written basically in Norwegian, most of these documents show some sign of Danish influence, albeit in varying degrees, and mainly in the phonological domain.² The usual examples are:

- Spellings with <e> reflecting the Danish monophthong (< Proto-Nordic /ei/) rather than the diphthong preserved in Norwegian. (There were other diphthongs as well, but /ei/ was—and is—by far the most frequent one in the language.)
- Spellings with <b, d, g> reflecting Danish lenition rather than Norwegian unvoiced plosives /p, t, k/.
- The vowel <e> in endings where both Old Norwegian and younger dialects had /a/ or /o/, because Danish reduced all unstressed vowels to schwa, written <e> (or <æ>).

Moving on to morphology, more of the old inflectional system was retained in Norwegian than in Danish, although the system was simplified in both languages. The texts in question have lots of dative forms, mostly conforming to the traditional language; nevertheless, there are also hypercorrect forms, where neither Old Norwegian nor later dialects would have the dative. Another frequent conservative form is the verbal ending *-om* in the first person plural.

We find Norwegian interference on the phonological level also in otherwise well-written Danish texts by Norwegians from this time. Especially diphthongs remained frequent throughout the century. However, in other texts I have studied from the 1520s and 1530s, written by professional scribes in service of the church, marked morphological forms are virtually non-existent (Berg 2013). The abundance of dative forms in these “farmer letters” is thus a very typical and, we must assume, also marked feature.

The lexis, in legal terminology and diplomatic formulas, is just as important as phonological and morphological features to mark these texts

² We are dealing with written texts and strictly speaking graphemes, not phonological features. However, these orthographic practices reflect phonological differences between the involved languages or dialects.

as Norwegian. The law in use was still in Old Norwegian, and its juridical terms were retained. Traditional charters from the High and late Middle Ages are highly stereotypical with many fixed phrases. To give but two examples: A traditional inscriptio³ like *ollom monnom theim sem thetta bref see eller hōra* ‘to all men who see or hear this letter’ may also be found in texts otherwise written in Danish, especially the initial dative phrase *ollom monnom* ‘to all men.’ Similarly, a formula used to underline that a farm is sold with everything belonging to it is common: *med ollom lutum ok lunnendum* ‘with all parts and perquisites’ (the phrase is often more elaborate).

Such fixed phrases in young charters could easily be copied from older ones. Sometimes the formulas are corrupted and have strange word forms revealing that their meanings were obscure to many scribes. Therefore it has often been claimed that such formulas were merely copied and no sign of living language, and this does indeed often seem to be the case.

However, there are also signs of linguistic creativity in these charters, which show that the scribes understood the language and what they were writing, and did not rely only on older models. A nice example is the use of the Roman numeral for a half (*j*), a *j* with a stroke through it, for its sound value rather than its numerical one, i.e. as a logographic symbol. This is fairly rare in older charters—examples do exist, e.g. DN I 534–536⁴ from 1391—, yet there are several examples from the 1550s. Sometimes an ending is added as well, for instance the definite article in a charter from 1554, *jen*, to be read *helften*, ‘the half’ (DN XXI no. 999). I shall not spend more time on language, just point out that such examples of linguistic creativity contradict the idea that the language of these texts is merely copied from or based on older models.

3. People

It is usually assumed that the local priest, who was surely the only one in a rural community with formal schooling, put agreements between farmers to writing. Vannebo (1994) surveys older studies in order to assess the number of literate people in medieval Norway, but must conclude that it is all very much in the vague, especially the degree of literacy outside the clergy. Nevertheless, there are some charters, in content similar to many others, which reveal very basic schooling, for instance highly unorthodox orthography, at times completely unintelligible words, and in general bad handwriting. This is sometimes mentioned by the editors, e.g. in DN XXI

³ Cf. any introduction to diplomatics for an explanation of the terminology, e.g. Hamre (2004) or Vogtherr (2008).

⁴ DN = *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, with volume in Roman numerals and text number in Arabic numerals.

nos. 951, 974 (“dårlig hånd” ‘bad hand(writing)’), and 1067. Such charters, we will assume, were not written by an educated priest, but rather by some local farmer with a basic grasp of writing. We would also expect the priest, with his high status in the local community, to be among the witnesses; when this is not the case, it indicates that no priest was present, and thus that someone else acted as scribe.

There are thus good reasons to believe that some farmers were indeed able to write, and even more people probably knew how to read. That reading and writing skills are independent of each other is one important finding of the research into early modern literacy by Egil Johansson. And such knowledge does not necessarily, as was previously often taken for granted, depend on formal schooling, but might have been maintained privately. At the heart of Johansson’s argumentation lies the fact that “an early reading tradition in a pre-industrial, agrarian, developing country” is possible (Johansson 2009:56). Fet (1995:24 f.) likewise shows that there were people in the Norwegian countryside able to read long before the school reform connected with compulsory confirmation was enforced around 1740.

These postulated literate farmers, then, would probably belong to the group of *lagrettemenn*—prominent farmers who were appointed local officials. They acted as a jury on local court assemblies together with the regional judges called *lagmenn*, and were also responsible for solving simple border quarrels below the judicial level of the *lagmann* and for witnessing charters. As witnesses, the same names can be found in several charters from a time period, even though we assume that only a fraction of the charters actually issued are preserved, so these men must have been used to dealing with documents. Centred around the priests and these *lagrettemenn*, we see small milieus on the Norwegian countryside acquainted with the use of written documents; a couple of such examples are discussed in detail under the notion *skriftspråksmiljø* ‘writing milieus’ by Hagland (2012).

Lorenzen-Schmidt (2002) has pointed to the existence of literate farmers in Schleswig-Holstein in the early sixteenth century, as attested in books on land transactions written by *Kirchspielvögte*, government representatives at the lowest level, who were of peasant origin. This bears a close resemblance to the situation in the Norwegian countryside described above. He concludes that “the village communities in late Medieval and early Modern times were familiar with and used written forms of communication” (Lorenzen-Schmidt 2002:44). His point that remoteness from the sovereign gave the peasants better opportunities to act independently may indeed be an important one, and is supported by the fact that examples of peasant literacy are absent in regions with a manorial system and serfs rather than free farmers (Lorenzen-Schmidt 2002:45). These combined factors may explain

why the farmer letters discussed in the present paper are mainly found in remote areas of Norway.

4. Literacy

We shall now move on to the broader concept of *literacy*. For Indrebø (2001) these charters represented the last remnants of a Norwegian language and literary tradition dating back to the High Middle Ages, a tradition that was being replaced by Danish language and literary models. As was customary in his time—the book was written in the 1930s—, he viewed the late Middle Ages as a period of decline and decay, where Norway was suppressed by Denmark and the Norwegian language withered away. He lamented the fact that no prose was written in Norway after c. 1400, writing being restricted to administrative and legal matters.

Recently, Hagland (2005) has questioned this view of the late Middle Ages as a period of decline, and through careful examination of selected charters claimed that literacy indeed became more widespread and generally more important in society, despite the lack of literature in the traditional sense of narrative prose. He finds that even though the number of preserved documents decreases, they display a qualitative development where the written word gradually became more important than the spoken one, and more people depended on and trusted documents and were accustomed to written statements of legal rights. This is paralleled elsewhere. Based on her own studies of documents from early modern Sweden and other studies from Germany, Sundberg (2002:21) concludes that “peasants were aware of the dignity of written material” and “did articulate and defend their interests.”

This increase in the importance of literacy continued unaffected by the language shift around 1500. The institutional *lagrettemenn* seem to have become more important during the sixteenth century, and they linked the rural communities with a culture where the last word was written, so to speak. The oral word remained important, though. Charters were traditionally addressed to “all men who see or hear this letter.” The “hear” part means that the charters were supposed to be read out loud, at the assembly or at church. This is underlined in a charter from 1564 (DN IX no. 789), addressed “to all men who see or *hear read* this letter” (my emphasis).

That reading knowledge was not essential is also made very clear in a charter from 1560 (DN XXI no. 1091). Three *lagrettemenn* testify about the ownership of a farm, and state that it is known to them and that they “from old charters have heard it read for us” who owns the farm. In older charters, the expression used in similar cases is usually *rannsaka* ‘examine,’ yet in this case the fact that the older charters had to be read for them is explicitly

stated. This was no obstacle, however, to their testifying about the contents of the charter; hearing something read aloud was juridically equivalent to reading it for oneself (cf. Clanchy 1993:253–293, “Hearing and Seeing”).

Even though most farmers could not read, they were expected to interact in writing. Many kept legal titles to their land in their chests, and in legal disputes brought their proof to court in person. They were used to presenting older charters or testimonies of ownership on such occasions, and even those who never did so themselves must have known about the usual proceedings from neighbours, relatives, or participation in assembly proceedings. Villstrand (2011) draws a distinction between possessive and accessive literacy. There were two different strategies to master the increased importance of literacy: To be literate oneself (*possessive literacy*), or to have access to literacy through mediators (*accessive literacy*). As the quotations above demonstrate, the farmers depended to a large extent on having someone to mediate between the oral and written modes of communication, yet they were still active participants in a written culture.

Many farmers, at least those who took office as *lagrettemenn* and regularly witnessed charters, had their own seals. In his seminal study of the rise of what we may call “administrative literacy” in medieval England, Michael Clanchy discusses the ownership of seals: “The possession of any type of seal implied that its owner considered himself to be of sufficient status to use and understand documents, even if this were an aspiration rather than a reality” (Clanchy 1993:51). It showed that the seal-holder was “familiar with documents and entitled to participate in their use” (loc. cit.).

The act of witnessing charters and attesting that they were made according to law and custom was an important task for the *lagrettemenn*, a part of their social as well as juridical function in society. To perform this act and exercise their function they needed access to and understanding of the written tradition and how to issue charters, including the formulas that defined them as legally valid official documents. This social function of literacy is an important point stressed by Bäuml (1980). His focus is narrative prose, but his general point that access to a literary tradition is not necessarily linked to reading competence is nonetheless valid. In the present discussion, this would mean that for the practical function of the documents, it is irrelevant whether the farmers had access to the content and actual wording of charters through their *own* ability to read or through that of someone else. This is an example of Villstrand’s (2011) difference between possessive and accessive literacy, and was demonstrated in practice by the quote from DN XXI no. 1091 above.

The combination of witnessing and testifying *in vivo*, yet relying on and trusting written evidence is something in between the oral and the

textual. Brian Stock (1983) tried to grasp such an intermediate stage by his tripartite division among *orality*, *literacy*, and *textuality*. Here literacy is the interpretive field where elements of oral and written traditions meet and merge. Stock claims that “ways of thinking associated with orality often survived in a textual environment; writing them down did not always eliminate their links with oral exchange” (Stock 1983:12).

The medieval witness charter, so important in the Norwegian tradition, is a prime example of such a combination of the oral and the textual. The constitutive event was still the witnessing of an act, yet it became mandatory to write it down for posterity.⁵ The juridical importance of witness charters may have made the act of issuing the charter seen as the legally binding action. In diplomatic terms, the charters turned from *notitiae* to *chartae*, i.e. from documents that witness an already achieved state of affairs to documents that themselves constitute a new legal situation (cf. Hamre 2004:62 or Vogtherr 2008:19). The difference between the two traditional ways of formulating the text thus became less important, albeit still discernible in their formulaic composition (Hamre 2004:65).

Through their involvement in the issuing and continuous use of charters as proof of ownership and inheritance, the farmers of rural Norway were part of a *textual community*: Their literacy “was not predicated on being able to read, but in their willingness to assign authority to texts” as Briggs (2000:405) put it when describing a similar situation; they were perhaps illiterate, but they nevertheless depended on the written word and could gain access to it by having it read for them, and they shared a positive attitude towards the use of documents (cf. Briggs 2000:418). Instead of textual community, one may use terms such as *community of practice* or *discursive community*; the important thing here is that they were part of a group for which the use of writing was instrumental.

What then, we may ask, does the Norwegian language in these texts *mean*, what social significance does it carry? First, using Norwegian instead of Danish was a conservative choice in the first place; and second, the language is archaising, resulting in some hypercorrect forms. In many cases the old formulas had lost their concrete significance and were used more for their *con*-notations than for their *de*-notations. The ending *-om*, which marked dative plural of nouns (and dative singular masculine of adjectives and pronouns), was very popular, and overused to achieve the expected “charter-look” or “charter-sound.” The personal ending *-om* for first person plural was also frequently used, even though it is generally assumed that the

⁵ Indeed, the “wish not to forget economic transactions” (Lorenzen-Schmidt 2002:44) was instrumental in the development of literacy among commoners.

different plural endings had merged by this time; this ending is known to have been used for archaizing effect in Swedish as well (Wessén 1968:251).

We should be very cautious to read into this ideas of linguistic independence and resistance to Danish, as Indrebø (2001) does when he claims that the retention of Norwegian words, forms, and phrasing shows a conscious will to preserve the language (“medviten målvilje”, Indrebø 2001:277). He is probably closer to the truth when describing it as a belief in the old formulas and customs (“Bøndene *trudde* best på det gamle”, loc. cit.). Other examples of conservative and, as the case was, more Norwegian as opposed to Danish language in the late Middle Ages may also be explained as a consequence of this belief in the authority of old customs—among them language (Berg 2013:241). It was good because it was like it used to be, not because it was “Norwegian” rather than “Danish.”

This is a kind of cultural conservatism one would rather expect from the non-educated farmers than from the educated clergy. As argued above, even if they were illiterate, the farmers had an idea of how a charter was supposed to sound in order to be valid and according to law and custom. And they knew the traditional models, because older charters were often read in court during trials (cf. also Lorenzen-Schmidt 2002:41). These expectations included formulas and, importantly, they included the traditional language. I think it is a fair assumption that such opinions among the involved farmers were an important factor in the linguistic choices finally taken by the scribe, and that the involvement of local farmers was the main reason why the medieval phrasing of these charters was retained into the early modern period.

As we have seen above, it is possible that some of the farmers were able to write themselves. However, not being able to write was no obstacle to taking active part in the use of written documentation to maintain one's rights, as they could also do so by accessive literacy, in Villstrand's (2011) terms. Sundberg (2002:25), discussing a Swedish peasant supplication from 1697, finds that even though “the peasants did not themselves write [...] one could suppose that they were active in formulating the letter.” Such parallels support my claim that the farmers were active participants in the process of writing charters, regardless of whose hand actually held the feather.

5. Summary

It thus seems that the farmers in rural Norway were active members of a society where literacy was becoming increasingly important. To briefly sum up my line of reasoning:

Firstly, farmers, at least the *lagrettemenn*, and priests formed small, local textual communities in the Norwegian countryside. Their main function was to issue charters concerning land trade, ownership and inheritance.

Secondly, most of the farmers were perhaps illiterate in the narrow sense of being able to read and write. They were nevertheless included in these communities, and their shared attitudes towards documents as evidence included these farmers in a broader notion of literate mentality.

Thirdly, part of this was also a cultural conservatism: Even if they may have had the charters read out loud for them, they had fixed ideas of how the charters were supposed to sound; they had expectations that charters should follow older models in their form, i.e. diplomatic formulas and phrases; and not least: These phrases were intrinsically connected with the traditional Norwegian language. This use of Norwegian, long gone in the writings of higher officials, can thus indeed be seen as a kind of “vernacular literacy.”

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