

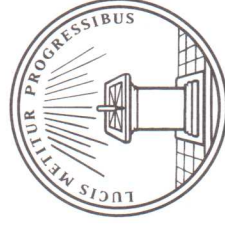
The *Eufemia*visor and Courtly Culture

TIME, TEXTS AND CULTURAL TRANSFER

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OCH ANTIKVVITETS AKADEMIEN

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The *Eufemiavisor* and *Konung Alexander*: Diverging Ideologies?

THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN the *Eufemiavisor* and *Konung Alexander* have been pointed out in previous scholarship, especially on the grounds that in the latter King Alexander is praised in the prologue against the model embodied by such chivalric heroes as *tidrik van berna ok percefal/herra gavian ok ektor*, i.e. some of the most popular characters of courtly literature.¹ Based on this evidence, *Alexander* has thus been generally interpreted as epitomizing values which are in contrast to those guiding the actions of the heroes in the *Eufemiavisor*, which represent the reception of such literature in medieval Sweden.

According to Stephen Mitchell, “gone from this work [i.e. *Konung Alexander*] are the chivalric ideals that had flowed into the country so prominently at the beginning of the century.”² The same kind of attitude towards the ideology of the text is found in Carl Ivar Ståhle’s illustration of the main features of *Konung Alexander* and, more recently, in Sven-Bertil Jansson’s analysis of our text.³

The present essay aims to reconsider the relationship between the *Eufemiavisor* and *Konung Alexander* on different premises, especially as regards the ideological level, and to propose some observations on it. The reason why I believe this subject demands further consideration is that some relevant textual clues point to an influence of the *Eufemiavisor* on *Konung Alexander* that goes beyond the metrical level, which has widely been acknowledged in previous studies.⁴ Indeed, a closer examination of

1 Ll. 11–12. The text is quoted throughout from Klemming 1862. The abbreviated forms ‘thz’ and ‘mz’ have been expanded here.

2 Mitchell 1996, p. 37.

3 Ståhle 1955, pp. 88–89; Jansson 2010.

4 See Ronge 1957 and Holm 1993. As Ronge (p. 14) points out, in 1915 Emil Olson claimed that *Konung Alexander* and the *Eufemiavisor* had one and the same author. However, this view was questioned by Noreen in 1930, and has since been rejected by scholars. Bengt R. Jansson points out that “*Konung Alexander* is tydligt influerad av *Eufemiavisorna* och *EK* [*Erikskrönikan*], vilket lätt låter sig förklaras med att romanens beställare Bo Jonsson förfogat över texter av

the narrative construction of the figure of Alexander and his army in the text, as well as of the way in which they are described, reveals remarkable points of convergence with the model employed in the *Eufemiavisor* to portray, amongst other things, the demeanour and actions of the heroes of courtly literature and the contexts in which their actions are set.

Before moving on to the analysis, some introductory words about the nature and history of the text as well as about its codicological context are in order. It has been demonstrated that *Konung Alexander* is a translation of the I² recension of the widely-spread *Historia de preliis*, which grew out of Archbishop Leo of Naples’s Latin translation of the so-called Pseudo-Callisthenes (*Nativitas et victoria Alexandri Magni*) around the middle of the tenth century.⁵ Not surprisingly, though, we do not know which one of the extant manuscript versions of the I² recension was used for the Old Swedish version. Still, some hypotheses have been put forth in previous scholarship. According to Ronge, the source text from which *Konung Alexander* was translated is in all likelihood a manuscript of French provenance, dated from the end of the tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century.⁶ Holm goes even further and claims that MS. 14169 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (i.e. MS. P^s in Ronge’s study) is “closely related to the lost MS used for *Konung Alexander*”.⁷

The closing lines of the poem indicate *riksdrots* Bo Jonsson Grip as the one who commissioned the translation.⁸ Furthermore, the text refers to him as still alive. This fact has made it possible to date *Konung Alexander* between 1375, when Grip is first mentioned as *riksdrots*, and 1386, the year of his death. *Konung Alexander*, however, is preserved in a single manuscript, Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, Cod. Holm. D 4, which was compiled later than the alleged date of the Swedish translation. Although there are diverging opinions about the exact dating of D 4, consensus holds that it was put together during the first half of the fifteenth century.⁹

In terms of contents, D 4 is a fairly heterogeneous collection of texts that can be roughly divided into three major groups: secular narrative texts, religious texts and texts for practical purposes (*Fachliteratur*). *Konung Alexander* ranks among the secular

desa verk” (clearly influenced by *Eufemiavisorna* and *EK*, which easily can be explained by the commissioner Bo Jonsson having access to these works’), Jansson 2010, p. 248.

5 Ronge 1957, p. 87; Jansson 2010, p. 248. See also Cary 1956, p. 38–44.

6 Ronge 1957, p. 117; Jansson 2010, p. 249. Elsewhere (Bampi 2012, p. 44) I have suggested that German copies of the *Historia de preliis* should also be taken into consideration.

7 Holm 1993, p. 361.

8 The term *riksdrots* refers to an office in the administration of the Swedish kingdom that is generally translated as ‘steward/chancellor of the realm’.

9 For an overview of the dating proposals see Bampi 2007, pp. 20–22. The most recent proposal that I am aware of is Sven-Bertil Jansson’s, according to which Cod. Holm. D 4 can be dated to c. 1430. See Jansson 2010, p. 249.

narrative texts, alongside all three *Eufemiavisor* and *Karl Magnus*. The question of the original ownership of the manuscript has been a much debated issue in previous scholarship. It has been argued by the majority of scholars that the contents of D 4 point to a layman rather than to a priest or a monk.¹⁰ This implies that, although the manuscript is likely to have been compiled within Vadstena abbey, it was probably commissioned by someone who did not belong to the monastic community.¹¹ The hypothesis of a member of the aristocracy as D 4's owner, originally put forth by Ronge, has been most recently refurbished by the late Bengt R. Jonsson, according to whom this miscellany was put together for Gustav Algotsson (Sture), "riddare, riksråd och häradsövding i Oppunda i Södermanland".¹² At some point Gustav Algotsson married Märta Ulfsdotter, who was, amongst other things, the owner of another important miscellany, Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, Cod. Holm. D 4a (also known as *Fru Märts bok*). Their daughter was Elin, after whom Cod. Holm. D 3 (*Fru Elin's bok*) is named.¹³

The convincing solution provided by Jonsson to the long-standing dilemma of D 4's original ownership helps us account for a number of features of the manuscript, and sheds light on *Konung Alexander's* meaning and role within the miscellany. Indeed, Jonsson's hypothesis lends support to previous proposals to look for the owner of D 4 among aristocratic circles in fifteenth-century Sweden, as discussed above.

This brief overview of the major issues surrounding the composition of the manuscript in which *Konung Alexander* is preserved enables us to enunciate some elements which are essential to the purpose of the analysis proposed in this essay. First, the fact that *Konung Alexander* and the *Eufemiavisor* are all preserved in D 4 suggests an intertextual reading, also involving other texts such as *Karl Magnus* and, most probably, *Sju vise mästarare*.¹⁴ Second, if we accept Jonsson's hypothesis of a noble male patron as the original owner of the manuscript, the texts making up the secular narrative section can be read against an ideological background representing the ideals and aspirations of the Swedish aristocracy.

10 Carlquist 2002, p. 103.

11 On Cod. Holm. D 4 as a product from Vadstena, see, amongst others, Noreen 1929, p. 270; Ronge 1957, p. 71 and Carlquist 2002, p. 97.

12 'Knight, head of the royal council and district judge in Oppunda in Södermanland'; Ronge 1957, p. 71; Jonsson 2010, p. 104.

13 On such genealogical connections and the production of manuscripts in medieval Sweden, see especially Wiktorsson 2007, pp. 6–8.

14 I have discussed the connections between *Karl Magnus* and other texts in Cod. Holm. D 4 in Bampi 2008.

THE *Eufemiavisor* AND *Konung Alexander*

Let us now turn to the influence of the *Eufemiavisor* on our text. In this context they are considered as a whole in their capacity as Swedish embodiments of the *roman breton* and the *roman d'aventure*, although their thematic complexity exceeds such a narrow definition.

Throughout the text of *Konung Alexander* one finds phrases and elements that occur rather frequently in chivalric romances – including the *Eufemiavisor* – to describe both the adventures undertaken by knights and other activities related to courtly life. It is interesting to point out, for example, that soldiers in Alexander's army are mostly referred to as *riddara*, and the same reference to chivalric behaviour is made when it comes to describing their conduct in battle: *medh idher riddarlika at stridha* ('to fight with you as befits a knight'; l. 71); *the striddo tha swa riddarlika* ('then they fought as befitted knights'; l. 644). Here it should be added that whereas translating Latin *militēs* with *riddara* does not necessarily indicate the translator's intent to establish a connection with the world of knights, the way in which the adverb *riddarlika* is used throughout the text is undoubtedly indicative of such an intent.¹⁵

Courtly styles regarding the description of erotic encounters are also occasionally employed in the text. For example, when Nectanabus, in the shape of a dragon, lays with Queen Olimpiadis, the text reads: *The lagho ena stund ij annars fampn* ('they laid for a while in each other's arms'; l. 277).

Further evidence in support of the influence of courtly terminology is provided by phrases such as *ewintyr at sokia* ('in search of adventure'; l. 602), which is used throughout the text to describe the intent to fight against an enemy. However, the most important aspect of the text, which suggests a convergence with the *Eufemiavisor*, is the representation of Alexander as a model king.¹⁶ This kind of connection has thus far attracted little attention in studies on the Old Swedish version of *Historia de preliis*.

Given the thematic complexity of the text, primarily those aspects that regard the

15 See the entry *riddare* in Söderwall's Old Swedish dictionary, *Ordbok öfver Svenska Medeltids-språket* (1884–1918). The following passage is from *Flores och Blanzeflor: Een annan riddara skulle han få, / ther mot Flores skulle gå / ok mot bonum riddarlika at ridha, / om beggius thera lifff at stridha* ('Another knight he should get / who should go against Flores / and ride against him as is fitting for a knight / to fight at the cost of both their lives'; ll. 1893–1896). Of particular interest is the scene in which Alexander reproaches a man from Darius' retinue for trying to cheat him and his own king: *thu gör som skalk ey riddarlik / uil forradha thin heru aller mik* ('you scoundrel, do not behave as befits a knight / you want to betray your lord or me'; ll. 2083–2084).

16 Despite this, however, the course of Alexander's life as it is depicted in the text demonstrates that any conquest is doomed to last only until death, and that earthly fame vanishes.

characterization of the king and his army will be taken into account in the present essay. The starting point of the analysis must necessarily be what is told in the prologue:

hwath wan tidrik van berna ok percefal	What did Theoderic the Great and
hertra gawian ok ektor ara ij thera tal	Perceval achieve?
the fingo stor hug ok gingo at sofwā	Sir Gawain and Hektor who were part
litriþ wil iak tholik sighter lofwā	of their number
mædhan them følgdhe ok enkte got mera	They received heavy blows and went
swa ara farne marghe kampa flere	to sleep
sma ok store badhe iætna ok risa	Little I will praise such a victory
alexander war fore them som en litrin qwisa	As it was followed by nothing good
han war aff them then minste man	And this was the fate of many other warriors
aff dygdh ok skal prisadhis han	Small and big, giants of all sorts
ok wan mera æn alle thasse (ll. 11–21)	Compared to them, Alexander was
	a little blemish
	Of them he was the smallest man
	For virtue and wisdom he was praised
	And he achieved more than all these

The sharp contrast of Alexander and such heroes as Dietrich von Bern, Gawain and Parsifal that the prologue establishes is indeed the key to interpret the whole story. These words reverse the customary interpretation of the hero's physical appearance as a measure for his strength. Despite his stature, Alexander is superior to any other hero of chivalric traditions thanks to his virtue and wisdom (*dygdh ok skæl*). Rather than resorting to physical strength, he uses his intelligence and his remarkable cunning to get the better of his adversaries.

This theme is taken up again later in the text. There, a description of Alexander is provided in which the difference with customary descriptions of chivalric heroes is clearly marked:

som aff et leon was hans haar	His hair was like the lion's
hans øgorn myrk ok litriþ klaar	His eyes dark and not very clear
thet ena swart thet andra gwlft	The one black and the other yellow
thet andra stort ok thet war fwlt	The latter big and it was ugly
hwassa waro ok hans tænder	Sharp were also his teeth
mykitt starka badha hans hænder	Very strong both his hands
som ens leons war hans syyn	He has the sight of a lion
saa al tiidh op til skynn (ll. 437–444)	He always looked up to the sky

A few lines after the physical description of Alexander, however, we are told about what he learns to accomplish at the age of twelve:

nw wende han sina sidher om	Now he changed his customs
han kærnde sik wara mykith froom	He learned to be very courageous
han kærnde sik springa ok kasta steen	He learned to jump and cast stones
dhwst at ridha vran alt meen	To joust without any harm,
huru han skulle orlogh øwa	He learned how to conduct a battle
medh ærlikhæet ok ække røfwā	In a honourable way and not to plunder
han wardh then konaste iak hafwer aff hørt	He was the most courtly person I've heard of
han gat wæl sina tungo tørt	He knew how to move his tongue
til wæl at tala han sik hafðhe (ll. 451–458)	He was able to speak well

The two passages quoted above are best interpreted against the background provided in the prologue, which revolves around what one might call the *Sein und Schein* dichotomy. Accordingly, it is clear that it does not matter how King Philip's son looks, what is of real importance for a ruler is how he behaves and what he is able to accomplish in order to safeguard his reign. Furthermore, the skills and virtues that Alexander is said to acquire, as seen in the passage above, are very much the same as the ones one would expect of any hero of chivalric romance.¹⁷ In this and other respects, then, Alexander is a courtly character. Hence, his exemplarity is not completely of a different kind from the narrative universe of (mostly Arthurian) chivalric romances, as previous scholarship seems to have been inclined to conclude (see above).

This is not to deny, though, that there are some relevant differences with heroes of the kind depicted in the *Enfemiavisor*. Such differences can be partly traced back to the different contexts in which the characters move. Indeed, the world within which Alexander's deeds are placed is not the customary setting of courtly romance (i.e. the court, the world(s) outside the court). As a consequence, it does not surprise us that the focus is not on chivalric manners and courtly customs.¹⁸ Given the matter treated,

¹⁷ *Alexander lær sig ridderrhiga færdigheter, att rida dust och föra krig och att göra det med ära, han blir tapper och därtill värtalig. Så kunde gärna en hövisk bjälte också framstå* (Alexander learns knightly skills, jousting and making war and to do it with honour, he becomes brave and eloquent as well. So could a courtly hero gladly appear'; Jansson 2010, p. 251).

¹⁸ However, descriptions of courtly life are not completely absent from the text. One of the most interesting examples is provided by the description of Alexander's marriage with Roxonen, Darius' daughter: *the fingo thet net alla nadha / til dryk ok swa til ætan badhe / man sette buar æ til sit sæte / the ato ok drukko medh godh kæte / thet bryllöp stod tiughu dagha / at hwarior manne thet behaga / thet ghiordis ok medh storum priis / thet lofwadhe badhe føle ok wiis / hwa thet wille rerma diost* ('There they received hospitalities / both to drink and to eat / all went to their seats / they ate and drank with joy / the marriage lasted for twenty days / to everyone's delight / it was done also with great praise / both fool and wise praised it / all who wanted to joust; ll. 3857–3865).

the text gives priority to the qualities of Alexander as a king, as a political and military leader who is driven by the desire to set his kingdom free from the need to pay taxes to other kings, by his thirst for knowledge and by his will to conquer the world. Accordingly, what is brought to the fore in the narrative are Alexander's royal virtues – or those virtues which a good ruler should possess – against the background of his long military campaign that leads him and his troops to the fringes of the world.¹⁹

The king is indeed praised for his leadership qualities: he is always at the head of his army and encourages his soldiers when they lose heart and are overwhelmed by tiredness, as the following example shows:

han styrkte them medh sinne trøst he strengthened them with his voice
gaff them allom godha trøst²⁰ and gave them all good trust

The praise is most effectively expressed in the words uttered by Otiakar, the brother of King Darius, Alexander's main adversary:

han ær sialfwer redho först he is always the first to be ready
han wil ey annan fore sik senda he does not want to send others before himself
han gøt thet sialfwer medh siin handa he does it himself with his hand
ær som et leon fore annar diwr he is like the lion compared to other animals
læter sik ey læsa ij nakor mwr he does not let himself be locked in
swa som ij herra plaeghin gora²¹ as You, Sir, are used to doing

Alexander is also celebrated for his munificence,²² and this is indeed a quality that makes his name known throughout the centuries.

However, unlike in chivalric romance, where the knight is mostly travelling and fighting on his own, here the military deed is the result of a collective effort which is made effective by the relationship between Alexander and his army, which itself is based on mutual respect and loyalty.

By contrast, the same attention which is paid in the *Eufemiavisor* to the description

19 As will be discussed below, the text also shows how Alexander's outburst of rage (i.e. a reaction that does not suit a king) is mitigated by the intervention of other characters, who appeal to his royal honour to avoid disastrous consequences.

20 Ll. 3271–3272.

21 Ll. 1864–1869.

22 See, for example, ll. 2315–2316 (*thollik herra ær gott at thiena / ther tholka gafuor thor at lena; 'It's good to be in the service of such a man / who will grant such gifts'*), and ll. 3035–3036 (*han lot them rikelika beggfuva / aff gull medhan them byste bafuwa; 'he had them endowed with rich gifts / of gold as much as they wanted to have'*).

of royal behaviour (or, in general, of the conduct of noble people) is found in *Konung Alexander*, as the following examples demonstrate:

Herra ij krenkin ey idhra ara / mik at hangia ær ængin tykt²³
(*Konung Alexander*, ll. 1258–1259).

Talin the quinno ey illa op a / for idher eghin konungxlík æra.²⁴
(*Flores och Blanzeflor*, ll. 1671–1672).

Another feature which points to a convergence with the *Eufemiavisor* is given by the detailed descriptions of all the Oriental marvels seen by Alexander, from the treasures in Darius' palace in Persepolis to the overwhelming abundance of precious objects in India. The same kind of interest in such beauties is to be found, for example, in *Flores och Blanzeflor*, where the garden of the Babylonian king is described in quite the same fashion as Porus' garden in *Konung Alexander*.²⁵

Moving along the same lines, it should be added that *Konung Alexander* is replete with a number of adventures in territories whose beauties and wonders attract the attention of the audience as much as the description of encounters with monstrous creatures, all belonging to the outermost regions explored by the Macedonian army in its long campaign eastwards. The catalogue of monsters ranges from snakes and dragons to women with star-shaped noses, six hands and a beard. In chivalric romances, most notably in *Herr Ivan* and *Hertig Fredrik*, encounters and fights with characters belonging to other worlds are quite common and even play a structural role. Alexander's encounters, however, are said to take place in real, geographically determined places, although the further east the army arrives, the more blurred the contours of such worlds become.

The very fact that Alexander is a known historical figure enhances the degree of exemplarity and appeal, and makes him an authoritative model, first and foremost to the same kind of audience which was used to such stories as Gawain's and Parzival's. According to Wollock, "Alexander the Great's conquests and his fame as a leader of men were admired by medieval chivalric audiences."²⁶ Furthermore, Joachim Bumke points out that

though he [i.e. Alexander] was tainted with the stain of sinful "pride" (superbia) [...] for advancing to the gates of paradise, he exerted a strong influence on the courtly ruler-image with his legendary magnanimity and generosity.²⁷

23 'Sir, do not offend your honour / to hang me does not suit a man of courtly manners.'

24 'Do not speak so badly of this woman / on your royal honour.'

25 See ll. 4555–4654 (*Konung Alexander*) and ll. 1103–1172 (*Flores och Blanzeflor*).

26 Wollock 2011, p. 21.

27 Bumke 1991, p. 280.

Indeed, a comparison with other European traditions regarding Alexander's literature reveals that a connection between his story and courtly milieus is well attested. In "The Monk's Tale" of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, Alexander is praised as "the acme of knighthood and generosity", as the following lines make clear:²⁸

Comparisoun myghte nevere yet been made
Betwixe hym and another conquerour;
For al this world for drede of hym hat quaked.
He was of knyghthod and of fredom flour.²⁹

Among German Alexander romances, Rudolf von Ems' *Alexander*, written after 1230, is particularly interesting in that it "serves to demonstrate courtly qualities and to instruct in leadership."³⁰ These are, of course, only some examples as the list could be considerably longer. I think it is safe to assert that the same exemplarity of Alexander for the courtly ruler-image holds true for the Swedish case. It must be mentioned in this respect that both the period in which the text was translated, the late fourteenth century, and the first half of the fifteenth century, when the manuscript was copied, were times of fierce political struggles involving various kings and the aristocracy, times in which a powerful and authoritative model of leadership to follow was certainly important.

Let us now view the relationship between *Konung Alexander* and the *Eufemiavisor* from a broader perspective, i.e. that of the vernacular literary system of medieval Sweden. From the point of view of the polysystem theory, which helps to account for the influence exerted by translated texts on either original or other translated works, the fact that the model of the *Eufemiavisor*, both in stylistic and in ideological terms, is employed to portray Alexander and his legendary deeds proves that the three translated romances continued to retain a central position in the literary system of medieval Swedish literature in the vernacular. Traces of this influence on texts as *Sju vise mästare* and *Namlös och Valentin*, both translated in the fifteenth century, demonstrate this clearly.³¹ This is made possible by the fact that secular literature in medieval Sweden was patronized by members of the aristocracy, which represents, in polysystemic terms, one of the major canonizing agencies.

If one looks at the dynamics operating within the literary polysystem in the vernacular, the *Eufemiavisor* can be viewed as representing the first stage in the reception process of courtly values in medieval Sweden. They lay the foundations for the recep-

²⁸ Ashurst 2012, p. 29.

²⁹ 'Comparisoun might never yet be made, between him and another conqueror, for all this world shook for fear of him, he was the flower of knighthood and freedom'; ll. 2.639–2.642. Quoted from Benson 1987.

³⁰ Gibbs & Johnson 2000, p. 340.

³¹ Even-Zohar 1990. On the notion of polysystem, see Shurtleworth 1998; Bampi 2014.

tion of both the ideological and the aesthetic set of values which characterizes courtly literature on the continent. Indeed, the aim of courtly rules is, as Sverre Bagge points out, "to express respect and obedience to the king and to show the exclusive character of the aristocracy in the king's service."³² The second stage can be said to be represented by *Erikskrönikan*, in which such new values are embodied by Swedish knights. *Konung Alexander* would thus be the third stage, one at which the aristocratic worldview is firmly established. At the same time, however, this text clearly aims at overcoming the traditional (mostly Arthurian) model of the chivalric world in order to propose a different and more authoritative one, where the efforts of all knights are directed towards fighting for their own king's glory. Indeed, in *Konung Alexander* the question of royal power and that of loyalty becomes central, as discussed above.³³ Both are, to be sure, major themes of courtly literature and are treated in the *Eufemiavisor* too, albeit within different fictional worlds from the one which characterizes the narration of Alexander's deeds.³⁴

The recipient(s) of the secular texts preserved in D 4 had thus a broad palette of knightly and royal behaviours at their disposal, which were probably most profitably read as embodying various aspects of the same aristocratic ideology, built around the centrality and exemplarity of noble characters as representatives of a social and political élite.

³² Bagge 2005, p. 473.

³³ The importance of loyalty and righteousness (*retferdughet hon er best / hua hona elskar han er nest / godhom mannom ok gudbi först*, 'righteousness is the best thing / whoever loves it is closest / to good men and to God first'; ll. 2725–2727) receives special attention in ll. 2655–2762. Ronge (1957) includes this section among the probable innovations introduced by the Swedish translator. On loyalty, the text reads as follows: *thet er loff bedber ok æra / sinom herra bulder ok tro uera / beskirma hans bedber och hans namn / ok vita hans bæsta ok hans gaghn* ('it is honourable and praiseworthy / to be devoted and loyal to one's lord / to protect his honour and his name / and to know what is best and advantageous for him'; ll. 2755–2758).

³⁴ See especially Sullivan 2009. On the nature of *Hertig Fredrik*, Lars Lönnroth (1987, p. 101) writes: "Delvis kan man tolka Hertig Fredrik som ett slags furstespegel, särskilt i början och slutet, där texten gång på gång demonstrerar hur den gode härskaren bör (respektive inte bör) uppträda." ('In part, one can interpret *Hertig Fredrik* as a kind of mirror for princes, especially at the beginning and the end, where the text repeatedly demonstrates how the good ruler should (or should not) occur.') This remark invites comparison with the exemplary reading of *Konung Alexander* discussed above, especially as regards the virtues of a ruler.

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