The Eufemiavior
and Courtly Culture

TIME, TEXTS AND CULTURAL TRANSFER

PAPERS FROM A SYMPOSIUM
IN STOCKHOLM 11–13 OCTOBER 2012

Editors:
Olle Ferm, Ingela Hedström, Sofia Lodén,
Jonatan Pettersson & Mia Åkestam

KONFERENSER 88
KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE
OCH ANTIKVITETS AKADEMIE
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 berns ok percefal/berra gawian ok ektor*, i.e. some of the most popular characters of courtly literature. 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." 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.

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. Indeed, a closer examination of

---

1 J.II. 11–12. The text is quoted throughout from Klemming 1862. The abbreviated forms 'thz' and 'mz' have been expanded here.
4 See Ronge 1957 and Holm 1991. 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. Jonsson points out that "*Konung Alexander* is tydligt influerad av *Eufemiavisorerna* och *EK* [Erikskrønikan], vilket låt later sig förklaras med att romanens bestållare Bo Jonson förgav över texten 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 1st recension of the widely-spread *Historia de prelis*, which grew out of Archpriest Leo of Naples's Latin translation of the so-called Pseudo-Callisthenes (*Nativitas et victoria Alexandri Magni*) around the middle of the tenth century. Not surprisingly, though, we do not know which one of the extant manuscript versions of the 1st 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. Holm goes even further and claims that MS. 14169 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (i.e. MS. P in Ronge's study) is "closely related to the lost MS used for Konung Alexander." The closing lines of the poem indicate *riksdrotts* Bo Jonsson Grip as the one who commissioned the translation. 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 *riksdrotts*, 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.

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
dessa verk" (clearly influenced by *Eufemiavisorerna* and *EK*, which easily can be explained by the commissioner Bo Jonsson having access to these works'), Jonsson 2010, p. 248.
5 Ronge 1957, p. 87; Jansson 2010, p. 248. See also Cary 1956, p. 38–44.
6 Ronge 1957, p. 117; Jonsson 2010, p. 249. Elsewhere (Bampi 2012, p. 44) I have suggested that German copies of the *Historia de prelis* should also be taken into consideration.
8 The term *riksdrotts* 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 Eufemivisor 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, riksrad och häradsägare 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 Märtas 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 elucidate some elements which are essential to the purpose of the analysis proposed in this essay. First, the fact that Konung Alexander and the Eufemivisor are all preserved in D 4 suggests an intertextual reading, also involving other texts such as Karl Magnus and, most probably, Sju vise mästare. 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 2003, p. 103.
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. 5–8.
14 I have discussed the connections between Karl Magnus and other texts in Cod. Holm. D 4 in Bampi 2008.

---

**THE Eufemivisor AND Konung Alexander**

Let us now turn to the influence of the Eufemivisor 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 Eufemivisor – 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 riddare, and the same reference to chivalric behaviour is made when it comes to describing their conduct in battle: medib idher riddarlikas at stridha (‘to fight with you as befits a knight’; l. 71); the stridda thu saa riddarlikas (‘then they fought as befitted knights’; l. 644). Here it should be added that whereas translating Latin milites 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 riddarlikas is used throughout the text is undoubtedly indicative of such an intent. 15

Courtly styles and the use of descriptions 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 lago ana stend ì j annas 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 avintir at sokia (‘in search of adventure’; l. 620), 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 Eufemivisor, 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 prelis.

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

15 See the entry riddare in Söderwall’s Old Swedish dictionary, Ordlist öfver Svenska Modellspråket (1884–1918). The following passage is from Flores och Blanceflor: En annan riddara skulle han fa, / ther nu Flores skullt ga / ok nu honom riddarlikas at ridha, / om beggis theran lifit 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’; II. 1891–1896). 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 gor som skalle ct riddarlik/ vel forradha thu berra eller mik (‘you scoundrel, do not behave as befits a knight / you want to betray your lord or me’; II. 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
hera gawian ok ektor ara ij thera tal
the fingo stor hug ok gingo at sofwa
litith wil iak tolhik sigher lofwa
medhan them folaidhe ok enkte got mera
swa ara farne marghe kampa flere
sma ok store badhe ietna ok risa
alexander war fore them som en litin qwisa
han war aff them then minste man
aff dygth ok skel prisadhis han
ok wan mera ar alle these (ll. 11–21)

What did Theoderic the Great and Perceval achieve?
Sir Gawain and Hector who were part of their number
They received heavy blows and went to sleep
Little I will praise such a victory
As it was followed by nothing good
And this was the fate of many other warriors
Small and big, giants of all sorts
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(dygdth ok skel). 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
hans egan myrk ok litith klar
thet ena swart thet andra gwlit
thet andra stort ok thet war fwlte
hwassa waro ok hans tenders
mykrit starka badha hans haander
som ens leons war hans syyn
saa al tidh op til skyyn (ll. 437–444)

His hair was like the lion’s
His eyes dark and not very clear
The one black and the other yellow
The latter big and it was ugly
Sharp were also his teeth
Very strong both his hands
He has the sight of a lion
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 wande han sina sidher om
han kandde sik wara mykith froom
han kandde sik springa ok kasta steen
diwst at ridha vran alt mecen
huru han skulle erlegh owa
medh arlikheet ok ække rofwa
han wandh then konaste iak hafwer aff hart
han gat war saili sango ror
til war at talu han sik hafde (ll. 451–458)

Now he changed his customs
He learned to be very courageous
He learned to jump and cast stones
To joust without any harm,
He learned how to conduct a battle
In a honourable way and not to plunder
He was the most courtly person I’ve heard of
He knew how to move his tongue
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. 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 Eufemiavisor. 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. Given the matter treated, 17

17 Alexander lär sig riddareliga färdigheter, att rida dart och jorda krig och att göra det med ära, han blir tapper och därtill vällyckat. Så kunde gärna en hövst bjudas också framtåt (Alexander lærer knightly skills, jousting and making war and to do it with honour, he becomes brave and eloquent as well. So 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 Roxonx, Darius’ daughter: the fingo ther rat alla nadha / til dryk ok sus til etan badhe / man satte hvar a til sit sate / te a to drukko medh godit kate / teb ryllip stud togbu dagha / at buvriam manne teb behaga / teb ghvdais ok medh torom priss / teb lofweadh badhe fol ok wiss / brus teb wille venna doist (‘There they received hospitality / 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. 585–586).
of royal behaviour (or, in general, of the conduct of noble people) is found in Konung Alexander, as the following examples demonstrate:

Herra i jr kräckin ey idhra xera / mik at hangia xer ängin tyktr\(\textsuperscript{23}\)
(Konung Alexander, II. 1258–1259).

Taln the quinnco ey illa op a / for idher eggin konungstilk xerat\(\textsuperscript{24}\)
(Floros och Blanzeflor, II. 1671–1672).

Another feature which points to a convergence with the Efsumiavisor 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 Floros och Blanzeflor, where the garden of the Babylonian king is described in quite the same fashion as Porus’ garden in Konung Alexander.\(\textsuperscript{25}\)

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 Herig 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.”\(\textsuperscript{26}\) 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.\(\textsuperscript{27}\)

---

\(\textsuperscript{19}\) 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.

\(\textsuperscript{20}\) II. 1170–1172.

\(\textsuperscript{21}\) II. 1864–1869.

\(\textsuperscript{22}\) See, for example, II. 2135–2136 (tholik herra or gutt at thierna / ther tholka gafidor thor at lena; ‘It’s good to be in the service of such a man / who will grant such gifts’), and II. 3015–3016 (han lot them rikelka begifra / off gull meidan them lyfte bafus; ‘he had them endowed with rich gifts / of gold as much as they wanted to have’).

\(\textsuperscript{23}\) ‘Sir, do not offend your honour / to hang me does not suit a man of courtly manners.’

\(\textsuperscript{24}\) ‘Do not speak so badly of this woman / on your royal honour.’

\(\textsuperscript{25}\) See II. 455–456 (Konung Alexander) and II. 1103–1172 (Floros och Blanzeflor).

\(\textsuperscript{26}\) Wollock 2011, p. 241.

\(\textsuperscript{27}\) Bumke 1991, p. 280.
Indeed, a comparison with other European traditions regarding Alexander’s literature reveals that a connection between his story and courtly milieu 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:  

Comparison myghte neve yet been maked  
Betwixte hym and another conquerour;  
For al this world for drede of hym hat quaked.  
He was of knyghthood and of fredom flour.

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”. 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 Namnlös och Valentin, both translated in the fifteenth century, demonstrate this clearly. 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-

11 The importance of loyalty and righteousness (ratfärhaget hon ar best / hwa bona elkar han ar nest / godtom mannom ok godhi first, ‘righteousness is the best thing / whoever loves it is closest / to good men and to God first’; II. 2755–2757) receives special attention in II. 2655–2762. Ronge (1947) includes this section among the probable innovations introduced by the Swedish translator. On loyalty, the text reads as follows: ‘thet ar lof heller ok era / isom heins heller ok tro era / bekommen hans heller och hans namna / ok wita hans beesta ok hans gagn’ (‘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’; II. 2755–2758).
14 See especially Sullivan 2009. On the nature of Herrig Fredrik, Lars Lönnroth (1987, p. 101) writes: “Delvis kan man tolka Herrig Fredrik som ett slags furstespel, 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 Herrig 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.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BAMPI, MASSIMILIANO (2007), The Reception of the Septem Sapientes in Medieval Sweden between Translation and Rewriting Göppingen Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 744 (Göppingen).


BENSON, LARRY D. (1987), The Riverside Chaucer (Boston).

BUMKE, JOACHIM (1991), Courtly Culture. Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages, transl. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley).


NOREN, ERIK (1910), 'Undersökningar rörande det inbördes förhållandet mellan de s. k. Eufemiavisorna', Samlaren, 11, pp. 35–68.


OLSON, EMIL (ed.) (1921), Flores och Blanzeftor: Kritisk upplaga, SFSS, ser. 1, vol. 46 (Lund).


SFSS = Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskrifssällskapet.


STÅHLE, CARL IVAR (1953), 'Medeltidens profana litteratur', in E. N. Tigerstedt (ed.), Ny illustrerad svensk litteraturhistoria. 1, Forntiden, medeltiden, vasa- tiden, pp. 35–121 (Stockholm).


WOLLOCK, JENNIFER G. (2011), Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love (Santa Barbara).