CHAPTER 8

Thinking about Urbanity, Urban Settlements, Literacy, and Exclusion: The Case of Medieval Scandinavia

Marco Mostert

1 Introduction

The positive notions an urban society entertains of the 'citizenship' shared by its members is often twinned with negative notions concerning those who do not belong to that urban society. More often than not, those who are excluded from 'citizenship' and the concomitant ideals of civilisation (which in Europe from classical Antiquity onwards derive from forms of what was called *urbanitas*) are the inhabitants of the countryside. They could be defined by *rusticitas*, a generic term used for the (usually negative) qualities associated with peasants. *Urbanitas* was associated with uses of language, which could include the uses of language in its written form. This led to the association of peasants with illiteracy—a notion that is

M. Mostert (✉)
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: m.mostert@uu.nl

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still prevalent among many students of the Middle Ages.[1] However, the ability to use the written word actively was not restricted to urban centres, even if in cities and towns one was more likely to meet people who were capable of using the written word than in the countryside.

These observations give rise to several questions. Did the perceived absence of *urbanitas* in the countryside lead to forms of exclusion of those accused of *rusticitas* by urbanites? And, if so, did the alleged absence of literacy in the countryside exacerbate the disdain for peasants? Answers to these questions will be sought through a consideration of urban literacy in medieval Scandinavia.[2] This may lead to a re-evaluation of the associated notions of *urbanitas*, *rusticitas*, and literacy. But first we need to consider the question of what a medieval 'town' or 'city' could be, as not all towns—or even cities—could boast an 'urban' culture which might lead to the harbouring of negative notions about the inhabitants of the countryside.

2 What Makes a Medieval Settlement a Town or City?

If one thinks of a medieval city, one most likely conjures up city walls and a city charter in which the city's lord gives privileges to the community of burghers. However, medieval cities show a large variety according to their main functions (episcopal cities, residences, harbour cities, trade cities), their lords (royal cities, episcopal cities, and 'free cities'), their numbers of inhabitants, etc. Geographers have developed a 'central place theory', which aims to distinguish the various forms of human settlement according to their numbers of inhabitants and the functions they

[1] See: *Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside: Peasants, Clergy, and Noblemen*, ed. Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 45 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023).

[2] *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Kasper H. Andersen and Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 53 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), is the only volume dealing with the topic of medieval urban literacy in the Nordic world. In the literature about urban history, however, one can also find useful information. See: Hans Krongaard Kristensen and Bjørn Poulsen, *Danmarks byer i middelalderen* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlag, 2016), which deals with urban development generally, and gives excellent photographs of selected documents (notably at 111, 147, 149–151, 154, and 252).

fulfil in their region.[3] In this way they can distinguish hamlets, villages, towns, cities, and metropolises. The more functions a settlement fulfils within its region or supra-regionally, the more 'urban' it is. Some medieval archaeologists have embraced central place theory as well. In 1976 Martin Biddle, for instance, proposed twelve criteria for studying post-Roman towns: defences; a planned street-system; one or more markets; a mint; legal autonomy; a role as a 'central place', a relatively large and dense population; a diversified economic base; plots and houses of 'urban' type; social differentiation; a complex religious organisation; and a juridical centre.[4] This list of features was based on the perception of continuity between Roman and post-Roman towns. Other archaeologists hold with different models, which also allow for the growth of towns and cities where no continuity between Roman and post-Roman settlements can be observed.[5]

One can observe a caesura in the history of medieval towns around 1150: after that date, cities were founded because the older cities had proved themselves to be beneficial to their lords. This led to the founding of cities (or at least of settlements which obtained city charters from the

[3] This theory was first developed by Walter Christaller, *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1933). It was originally thought of as a contribution to economic geography; its influence in geography generally cannot be overestimated. For a survey of its use in archaeology, see: Athanasios K. Vionis and Giorgos Papantoniou, 'Central Place Theory Reloaded and Revised: Political Economy and Landscape Dynamics in the *Longue Durée*', *Land* 8, no. 2 (2019), retrieved via https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/8/2/36. For a general introduction to the theory, see: Leslie J. King, *Central Place Theory, Scientific Geography Series* 1 (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1984).

[4] Martin Biddle, 'Towns', in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D.M. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 99–150, here 100. See also: John Schofield and Heiko Steuer, 'Urban Settlement', in *The Archaeology of Medieval Europe*, 1, *Eighth to Twelfth Century AD*, ed. James Graham-Campbell and Magdalena Valor, *Acta Jutlandica* LXXXIII:1, *Humanities Series* 79 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), 111–153, at 111. See also: Hans Andersson, Barbara Scholkmann et al., 'Towns', in *The Archaeology of Medieval Europe*, 2, *Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Martin Carver and Jan Klápště, *Acta Jutlandica, Humanities Series* 2011/2009 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011), 370–407.

[5] See on this matter: e.g. Cristina La Rocca, 'La trasformazione del territorio in Occidente', in *Morfologie sociali e culturale in Europa fra Tarda Antiquità e Alto Medioevo*, *Settimane di studi del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 45, 2 vols. (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1998), vol. 1: 257–291.

start, in the hope that they might develop into veritable cities) in areas of Europe where previously urban life had been exiguous at best.[6]

In the Middle Ages, starting from post-Roman times and continuing well into early modern times, the settlements known as towns or cities could be asked to fulfil a selection of the following functions, either locally, regionally, or supra-regionally: the exercise of power; jurisdiction; defence; organisation of religious life; central roles in the economy; cultural and educational roles; roles in sociability. Not all towns or cities did fulfil all of these roles at all times, or at the same level. Considering their educational roles, they might have been restricted to parish schools, but might have extended to universities or the university-like *studia* of the mendicant orders as well. It is interesting to observe that many of these functions, even when they might be exercised without recourse to writing, could be helped by use of the written word.

3 *Urbanitas*

Already at the time of Plautus (c. 250–184 BCE) Roman city dwellers were expected to show good manners at all times. This means that there were already standards of *urbanitas* ('urbanity') in place, which could be contrasted with the rudeness, roughness, and boorishness of people in the countryside. By the time of Cicero (106–143 BCE) two kinds of existence, a city life and a country life, had crystallised.[7] By the eighth century CE, the Latin language could use the words *urbanitas* and *rusticitas* to signify a double norm in the use of that language itself.[8]

In the early Middle Ages, the term *rusticus* was used to denote peasants. It had acquired the pejorative connotation of stupidity and

[6] Heinz Stoob, 'Stadtformen und städtisches Leben im späten Mittelalter', in *Die Stadt. Gestalt und Wandel bis zum industriellen Zeitalter*, ed. Heinz Stoob (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1979), 156–193.

[7] Edwin S. Ramage, *Urbanitas. Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 29–30, 67–68.

[8] Gustav Inichen, 'Zwischen Latein und frühem Romanisch (Die Schwelle um 800 n. Chr.)', in *Text-Etymologie. Untersuchungen zu Textkörper und Textinhalt. Festschrift für Heinrich Lausberg zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Arnold Arens (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1987), 14–18, here 15. See also: Mary Alberi, 'The Patristic and Anglo-Latin Origins of Alcuin's Concept of Urbanity', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993), 95–112, on the development of the Christian concept of *urbanitas*, in which the linguistic and moral superiority of *urbanitas* is coming to the fore.

barbarism. Medieval peasants could be characterised as insufficiently Christian, as practitioners of superstitious rites. Already Augustine (354–430) had used *rusticus* with the meaning of 'ignorant' in contradistinction to *urbanus*, 'civilised'. This led to peasants being thought of as ignorant, materialistic, and negligent in religion.[9] Not only town dwellers might harbour such feelings. Other social groups could share in these sentiments, such as chivalrous knights, whose *curialitas* took over much of the depreciation that had already found a place in *urbanitas*. By the twelfth century *urbanus* had become a synonym for *eruditus* ('learned'), which presupposed that someone who was *urbanus* was also literate.[10]

Do we encounter the use of *urbanus* or *rusticus* with these meanings or connotations also with Scandinavian or Nordic town dwellers? The dictionary of Swedish Medieval Latin mentions only the meaning of 'farmer' for *rusticus*, and the pejorative connotations that we have encountered from Antiquity onwards are wholly absent.[11] There are two good reasons for this absence.

[9] The references to the sources using this terminology can be found, with translations, in: Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant. Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10, 137–138, referring to Gerhard Köbler, '"Bauer" (*agricola*, *colonus*, *rusticus*) im Frühmittelalter', in *Wort und Begriff 'Bauer'. Zusammenfassender Bericht über das Kolloquium der Kommission für die Altertumskunde Mittel- und Nordeuropas*, ed. Reinhard Wenskus et al., *Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, series 3*, *Abhandlungen* 89 (Göttingen: Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, 1975), 230–245. See also Rudi Künzel, *The Plow, the Pen and the Sword. Images and Self-Images of Medieval People in the Low Countries, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies* 12 (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 60–61.

[10] See for references to the sources: Thomas Zotz, '*Urbanitas*. Zur Bedeutung und Funktion einer antiken Wertvorstellung innerhalb der höfischen Kultur des hohen Mittelalters', in *Curialitas. Studien zu Grundfragen der höfisch-ritterlichen Kultur*, ed. Josef Fleckenstein, *Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte* 100 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 392–451.

[11] U. Westerbergh, *Glossarium Mediae Latinitatis Sueciae* (Stockholm, 1968–), II.5, s.v. The dictionary has not yet reached *urbanus*. B. Friis Johansen et al., *Lexicon Mediae Latinitatis Danicae. Ordbog over dansk middelalderlatin*, 1.1- (Aarhus, 1988–), has not reached *rusticus* yet.

4 Towns in the Nordic World

The forms of 'urban' literacy did not play a role in any 'urbanity' that might have been used to exclude certain groups of town dwellers. Mainland Scandinavia consists for the present purposes of present-day Denmark (including the historic duchy of Schleswig), Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Iceland is of no interest, as there were no towns there in the Middle Ages. When we look at the map of towns in the Nordic kingdoms (Fig. 1), we see that most of them were rather small. Bergen, the largest town in Norway, in the Middle Ages never exceeded 10,000 inhabitants. In the late fifteenth century, Stockholm had about 7,000 inhabitants, and Copenhagen probably even fewer. The towns generally had functions in the exercise of power, for the most part royal power, as secure trading conditions at specified sites were guaranteed by the representatives of the king. There were Christians in some of the early towns, and churches were built during the ninth century in Hedeby, Ribe, and Birka. Around 855 a plot of land was granted by a Danish king at Ribe for the building of a cathedral. A major wave of town foundations took place in the period 950–1250, at the same time as the general European urban boom. This is also the first clear marker of the Scandinavian realms being more deeply integrated into wide-ranging networks of trade and communication.[12]

However, urban populations were anything but numerically dominant in comparison with rural populations, nor indeed did they obtain absolute economic dominance in society. By the fifteenth century, the countryside and the peasantry were integrated into the system of urban literacy. Peasants possessed documents and could have their own seals. No sharp contrast between town and countryside should therefore be assumed in the matter of literacy skills.[13] Here, as can be observed elsewhere in medieval Europe as well, there is no clear distinction between 'urban literacy' and 'countryside literacy'; and forms and uses of writing that were to be found in the towns and the few cities could on occasion also be found in villages and hamlets.

[12] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Kasper H. Andersen, Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, Lisbeth Imer, Bjørn Paulsen, and Rikke Steenholt Olesen, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 53 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 12–15.

[13] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 14.

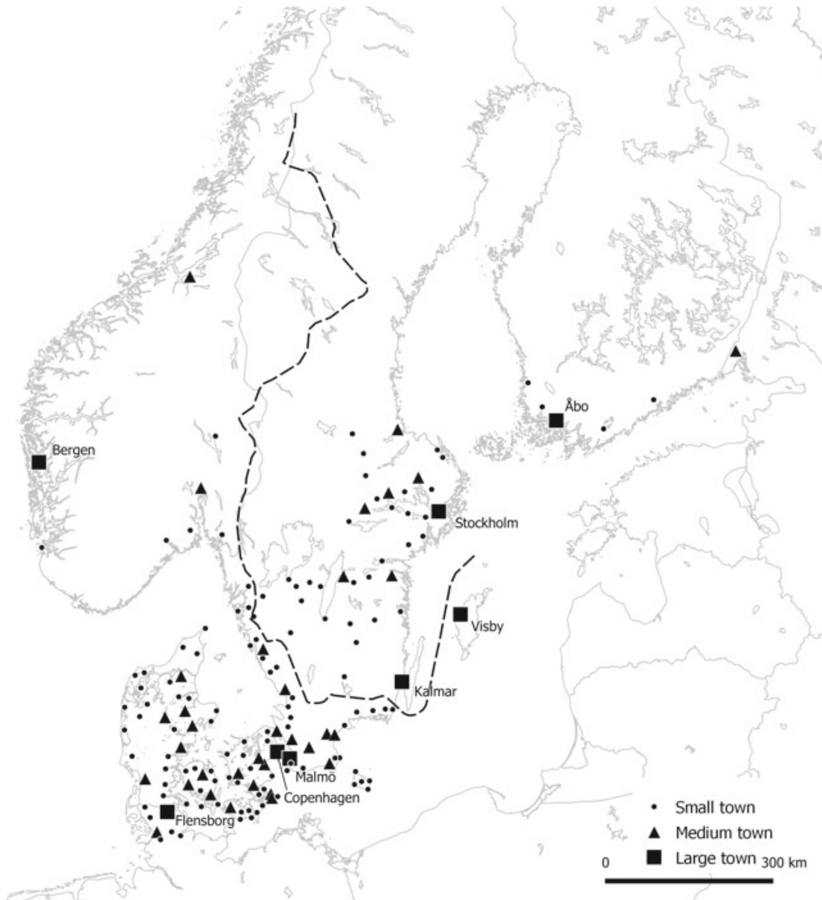

Fig. 1 Map of the towns in the Nordic kingdoms. Casper Andersen, Archaeological IT, Aarhus University and Moesgaard Museum (Source Anders Andrén, *Den urbana scenen. Städer och samhälle i det medeltida Danmark*, *Acta archaeologica Lundensia. Series in octavo* 13 [Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag, and Malmö: CWK Gleerup, 1985], appendix)

In Scandinavia as elsewhere, a clear distinction existed between those who did not belong to the elites of those whose name was mentioned in the town register, the burgesses, and the rest, including those in the margins of urban society.[14] And even if 'urban' literate behaviour and its products may not have contributed to looking down upon less literate townspeople, general forms of literate behaviour that were not specific to towns may have done so nevertheless. We will come back to this later. First, we need to touch upon a particularity of the Nordic World: the existence of a vernacular literacy using runes.

5 Vernacular Languages in the Nordic World

A perceived lack of literate accomplishments in the vernacular may have been a second reason for the different 'urbanity' of the elites of Scandinavian towns. Six vernaculars were spoken in the Nordic World in the Middle Ages: Danish, Swedish, Old Norse, Low German, Finnish and Sami. With the exception of the last two, Finnish and Sami, they were also written. To these six vernaculars, Latin was added as well.[15] Manuscripts in Latin dominate the texts that have come down to us from the earlier medieval period (c. 1050–1200), especially in Denmark, even if the vernacular does also appear early on in the mainly Latin manuscripts. As a literate religion, Christianity stood in a position of decisive contrast to the pre-Christian forms of religion which it replaced in Scandinavia. As a result, the introduction of Medieval Latin written culture was integral to the process of conversion that had begun in the ninth century. Christianity

[14] On the margins of society, including urban society, see: Marco Mostert, 'Studying Communication in the Margins of Medieval Society', in *Strangers at the Gate! Multidisciplinary Explorations of Communities, Borders, and Othering in Medieval Western Europe*, ed. S.C. Thomson, *Explorations in Medieval Culture* 21 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 23–40.

[15] Marco Mostert, 'Linguistics of Contact in the Northern Seas', in *Empires of the Sea. Maritime Power Networks in World History*, *Cultural Interactions in the Mediterranean* 4, ed. Rolf Strootman, Floris van den Eijnde, and Roy van Wijk (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), 179–193, put the six vernaculars in a wider linguistic context. For Latin, see: Paul Lehmann, 'Skandinaviens Anteil an der lateinischen Literatur und Wissenschaft des Mittelalters', in Id., *Erforschung des Mittelalters. Ausgewählte Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1941–1962), vol. 5, 275–429; Alf Önnerfors, 'Geistige Ausbildung und lateinische Ausdrucksfähigkeit der skandinavischen Gelehrten im Mittelalter', in Id., *Mediaevalia. Abhandlungen und Aufsätze, Lateinische Sprache und Literatur des Mittelalters* 6 (Frankfurt am Main/Berne/Las Vegas: Lang, 1977), 202–220.

and the Church were closely linked to urbanism from the outset. Towns became the centres of the Scandinavian episcopal sees. All Scandinavian sees (with the exception of Børglum in Denmark) were either integrated in pre-existant urban communities or virtually constituted them. From the thirteenth century onwards, the mendicant orders joined the secular clergy in the episcopal towns. The metropolitan sees knew practically the same level of scholarship as comparable diocesan centres elsewhere in Europe. Schooling was often an urban phenomenon. Citizens increasingly sent their children to the ecclesiastical schools to get an education.[16]

Maybe this development in Latin-script literacy led to the demise of runic script in Scandinavia? But runic writing did survive the advent of Christianity, royal administration, and the introduction of Latin literacy, simply because the introduction of Latin and Latin script did not compete with the kind of writing that runes were used for.[17] Runes were mainly used for texts in the vernacular but could also be used for Latin texts. In the towns, many people used them for short messages. This urban use has been shown to be more prevalent than had been thought before the development of urban archaeology. Runes have developed to write on hard surfaces; the contents of runic messages were not necessarily different from those written in other available scripts, and neither was the choice of their language. They were easily learned, it seems, by 'trying your knife'. No formal schooling was needed for carving runes in wood, just some experience. Once you had learned runes, you could, if you had learned also to write on parchment, use them for writing the vernacular in manuscripts as well.[18] There are religious texts in the vernacular carved in runes, but also in Latin (the *Ave Maria* was an important

[16] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 15, 25, 26.

[17] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 29.

[18] Kristel Zilmer, '"*Fann ek bein* …"—"I Found a Bone". Runic Artefacts as Material Evidence of Writing in medieval Norwegian Towns', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 135–171, here 135.

text, apparently).[19] And there were also epigraphic texts carved in Latin script.[20]

Because no schooling was needed for it, runic literacy in the vernacular might be attained also by writers and readers who would not have been able to become literate in Latin, as learning the meaning of words written in Latin did require schooling. This may have influenced, as suggested above, the urban elites' views on vernacular literacy.

6 Nordic Urban (Administrative) Literacy

The term 'urban literacy' quite often is meant to refer to all uses of script that take place in towns.[21] This includes all forms of written culture that could be found within the bounds of the towns and excludes all forms that took place outside the towns.[22] This would mean that the study of urban literacy would needs include the study of alphabets and languages whenever towns can be shown to be multi-ethnic or multilingual; book production and urban historiography; instances of individuals resorting to writing (in memorial practices and business matters); and the place of writing in the system of urban communication as a whole. And it

[19] Cf. Zilmer, '"*Fann ek bein …*"', 136, 147, 166; Rikke Steenholt Olesen, 'Medieval Runic Latin in an Urban Perspective', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages,* 69–103, here 74, 79–80, 88–89; Elise Kleivane, 'Roman-Script Epigraphy in Norwegian Towns', ibid., 105–134, here 120, 122, 126–127; Janne Harjula, Visa Immonen, and Kirsi Salonen, 'Medieval Literacy in Turku: Material and Linguistic Remains', ibid., 197–227, here 213, 215–216, 221, 223, 226.

[20] Steenholt Olesen, 'Medieval Runic Latin', 80.

[21] On the notion of 'urban literacy', see: Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska, 'Introduction', in *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns. Medieval Urban Literacy I*, ed. Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 1–10; Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska, 'Introduction', in *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns. Medieval Urban Literacy II*, ed. Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 28 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 1–16; and Marco Mostert and Anna Adamska, 'Whither the Study of Medieval Urban Literacy?' in *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, 427–431. Looking beyond the confines of those areas of Europe that had become part of *Latinitas* by the eleventh century proves useful. See, apart from *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*: Agnieszka Bartoszewicz, *Urban Literacy in Late Medieval Poland*, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 39 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); Katalin Szende, *Trust, Authority, and the Written Word in the Royal Towns of Medieval Hungary*, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 41 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

[22] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 8.

would also have to include the kinds of writing associated with urban parish priests and, in episcopal cities, the bishops and their clergy. Such a broad understanding of urban literacy has indeed produced valuable research that has led to important new insights.[23] This use of the term 'urban literacy', however, is problematic in the Scandinavian context, and not only there. As we have already remarked, there are hardly any forms of writing which took place in towns that did not have their pendant in literate behaviour in the countryside.[24] It makes sense, therefore, to distinguish the study of the various uses of writing in towns (for which German has the term *Schriftwesen*) from urban literacy (*Schriftlichkeit*). I would define 'literacy' as: the abilities of a person or group to use the various skills that have to do with reading and writing, either actively or passively. Many studies concentrate on what is called 'pragmatic literacy', which may be defined as 'all forms of literacy which either directly serve functional actions or which were meant to teach human action and behaviour by making available knowledge'.[25] These studies privilege the study of the uses of writing in urban administrations, dealing with the documents that were produced, the people who produced, kept, and used

[23] In Norway, for instance, a beginning has been made with the study of preserved dedicatory inscriptions. These inscriptions document the consecration of a church or an altar, and this ritual was meant to be performed by a bishop (Elise Kleivane, 'Roman-Script Epigraphy', 134). Of course, having a stone monument made in your honour and for the benefit of your soul was not for everyone, and all of these people probably did belong to some level of elite in their respective communities (ibid., 119). Inscriptions on portable objects, however, were made for protection, and had a durable and continuous function, using revered names and religious phrases; they were not meant for communication with human beings (ibid., 123). To mention only one more example: archaeological research has been able to use finds of wax writing tablets, styli, parchment prickers, book mounts, seal matrices and more, allowing a re-evaluation of literate behaviour in the town of Ribe (Morten Søvsø, 'Searching for Urban Literacy in the Archaeological Record', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 229–252, here 246, 249).

[24] As the Münster medieval historian Peter Johanek once quipped during a session of the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2007, the only forms of writing that were restricted to medieval towns were those that could be found exclusively in the medieval universities, as universities could only be found in medieval towns.

[25] Hagen Keller, 'Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter. Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen. Einführung zum Kolloquium in Münster, 17.-19. Mai 1989', in *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter. Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen (Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums 17.-19. Mai 1989)*, ed. Hagen Keller, Klaus Grubmüller, and Nikolaus Staubach, *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 65 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1992), 1–7, here 1.

these documents, and the ways town dwellers may have had access to them. This was and remains a sensible restriction, as the study of the documents of urban administrations is not only a prerequisite for any understanding of urban literacy, but also for evaluating the roles played by groups of town dwellers in the organisation of their communities. Those groups that were represented in the towns' institutions would have been more likely to be able, on the basis of their power and influence, to exclude members of other urban groups. If they did in fact do so on occasion, it may be asked if forms of (urban) literacy played a role in this.

Let us see whether a short survey of what is known about Scandinavian urban literacy may help us to answer this question.[26] It may be helpful to summarise this knowledge in the form of a flowchart (Fig. 2), which indicates both the players involved in the organisation of medieval Scandinavian towns and the main documents that informed their organisation.

In many cases the town's lord, usually the king, took the initiative of issuing a town law, but in other cases the initiative came from the population of a settlement that wished to be granted a written law and so to become legally recognised as a town.[27] A community that wished to become a town had to gain this status from its lord in the form of a town charter. From the eleventh century onwards, kings issued such royal privileges. The oldest extant one dates from 1085; it was given by Saint Knud of Denmark to the cathedral at Lund. Written privileges were in all probability the result of negotiations between the king and the would-be town in question. Communities wishing to receive a royal privilege understood the role of charters very well. These written texts testify to the fact that Scandinavian urban communities were in fact becoming literate communities. Special legal regulations were necessary for every town from the very beginning. The oldest of these was the Birka Law, an adaptation of the Norwegian provincial laws to circumstances pertaining in Nidaros, the oldest layer of which predates 1160. In 1522, Christian II of Denmark

[26] The size of this article precludes going into any detail. I have taken care to give full references to the articles in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, the main source for my knowledge on this area. Readers may want to consult the full indices in that collection at 441–462.

[27] Kasper H. Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 289–317, here 298.

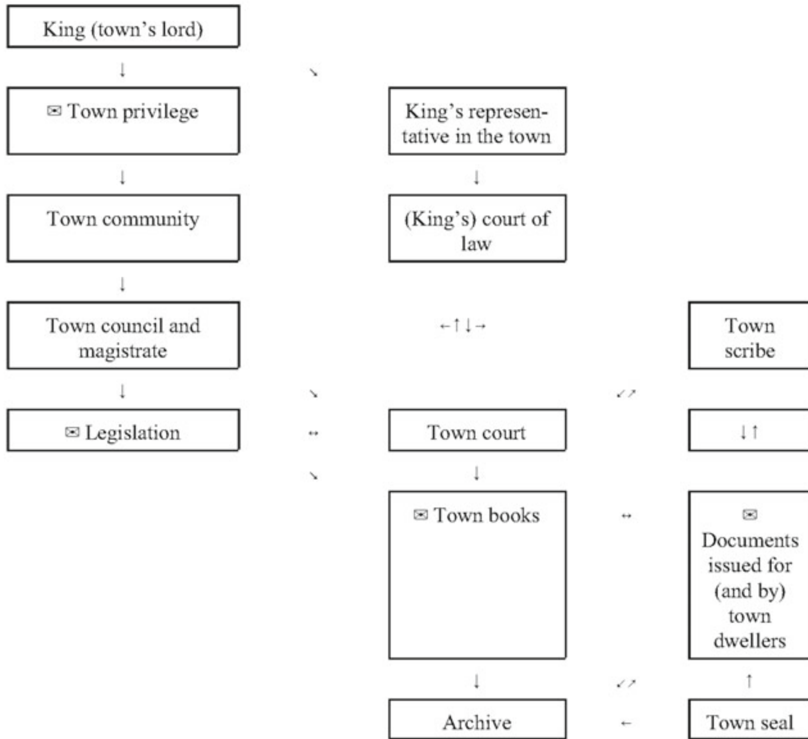

Fig. 2 Flowchart of medieval urban administrative literacy in the Nordic kingdoms

tried to impose a common town law on Denmark. Norway had already done this in the 1270s and Sweden around 1350.[28]

Town seals were among the most potent visual symbols of urban communities. They became common in Scandinavia around the middle of the thirteenth century. They were followed by individual burgesses' seals, which appear from the last quarter of the thirteenth century, and were subsequently diffused gradually throughout much of the urban population. But there were some who continued to be without seals. Mayors

[28] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 17–18.

had to seal for those who did not have seals of their own.[29] Both in word and image, the town seals of medieval Denmark, like those of towns in other parts of Europe, represented a town as a collective whole rather than as an amalgamation of individuals or specific social groups within a town. The town seal was an essential symbol of the town as a legal agent and contributed to the town's independent status and to the sense of a common identity among the town dwellers.[30] Illegitimate use of the town seal was more than just a crime. In 1379, in Ribe, the following statement was made by the town's councillor:

> Jakob Jensen, previously our co-councillor, has broken into our seal compartment, or the place where we hide our town's seal, and taken the seal out, with which he has issued his own open letters against our will and to the detriment of all the citizens of our town.[31]

The 'citizen's tower' in Ribe's cathedral held the town archives: this conflict over the use of the town seal was in fact a battle over the control of the town's archives,[32] and thereby over the rights that derived from the archival documents. Let us consider just one example of Ribe's documents: the town charter of Ribe that had been issued between 1202 and 1214. In it, the community received exemption from all royal customs and fees in the king's realms.

At about the same time in the early thirteenth century, the burgher collective of Ribe started to issue letters in its own name. And they proved able to ascertain the authenticity of diplomas and reveal forgeries.[33] Royal privileges and town laws have been preserved because they continued to be valid for centuries after the time at which they were composed.[34]

After having received its town charter, the town community had the privilege of organising itself by a town council and a magistrate. The town council is mentioned from the middle of the thirteenth century

[29] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 23.

[30] Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', 306.

[31] Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, 'Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Ribe', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 253–287, here 268.

[32] Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', 306.

[33] Netterstrøm, 'Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Ribe', 266.

[34] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 24.

onwards.[35] These representatives of the community henceforth legislated on matters that concerned town life, insofar as their legislation did not obstruct the king's superior powers as lord of the town. The king maintained a representative in the town, his bailiff (*fogeden*), as well as a court of law that operated next to the town's own court; the latter was meant to deal with conflicts arising from the matters for which the town council had become competent on the basis of the town charter. The urban elites which populated the town councils were strengthened by their control of the administration through the use of the written word. They could also be helped by legally trained ecclesiastics. The town council's power was a clear manifestation of civic literacy. The intention clearly was to strengthen the hold over the local population. Over the fourteenth century, the town council's power was growing to the detriment of that of the royal representative over the fourteenth century.

The town court was led by the town's lord's representative, the bailiff (*fogeden*), but also included members of the town council and other representatives of the citizenry.[36] From 1252, the Ribe council could legislate locally, and, together with the royal steward, the councillors wrote the town law of 1269.[37]

As soon as there are sources on social standing, it is clear that the members of the town council came from the (merchant) elite.[38] Their writing down of town laws was part of a gradual but significant development from orality to literacy. Decrees and privileges issued by the town council, letters of conveyance, contracts, wills, documentation from criminal court cases, etc., were kept because they could be used in inheritance cases and disputes long after they had been issued. This type of source tells us most about members of social or administrative elites; archaeological finds often provide better evidence for daily life among the mass of the population.[39] But it would be wrong to see the town court only

[35] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 30.

[36] Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', 302.

[37] Netterstrøm, 'Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Ribe', 258.

[38] Netterstrøm, 'Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Ribe', 256.

[39] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 18, 24, 31.

as a legal institution. The court was also a forum for public announcements and a generator for various urban identities, and it must therefore be considered a key institution in urban communities.[40]

On occasion larger proportions of the population of the town took part in assemblies, which were intended to reach agreements about new general regulations which were set down in writing. In this way, a broader circle of the citizenry was incorporated into a 'textual community' that otherwise was associated with the members of the council.[41]

Both the town council and the town court depended on the services of the town scribe. In a cultural sense, town scribes were keepers of memory, and it may be argued that they had a role in the identity formation of the inhabitants of their towns. The town scribe Aage Jensen Degn started the first town book in Malmö in 1420. He and his successors showed a clear historical interest with their records of Malmö's traditions and events. In several ways, Aage and the late medieval Danish town scribes were the creators of new forms of urban literacy.[42] However, the town books they kept did not only contain historiographical matter: far from it.

They were records on parchment, and later predominantly on paper, and formed a heterogeneous category of documents. In the late Middle Ages, town books became commonly used for the registration of decisions; they were also used to inscribe new citizens (burgesses).[43] Books of citizens were a pan-European phenomenon. Urban administrations registered who had been given citizenship as part of a formalised process by which the person obtaining citizenship had to take a citizen's oath before representatives of the town, and the town scribe then registered the tax the new citizens had to pay to become a citizen. This basic information was often supplemented with personal information about the new citizen, for instance his place of birth.[44] In Stockholm, in the 1350s, the town law required that property transactions as well as the acquisition of citizenship be written down in Swedish in the town book by the town scribe, who

[40] Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', 302.

[41] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 32.

[42] Bjørn Poulsen, 'Putting Town Life in Writing: Medieval Danish Town Scribes', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 319–342, here 342.

[43] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 18.

[44] Andersen, 'Markers of Civic Literacy in Medieval Danish Towns', 309.

must also be Swedish, never foreign.[45] In 1629, the Stockholm council was to go even further in stipulating:

> … [It] was therefore unanimously decided by the Council that even if one does not want to prohibit foreign persons from putting their cases or acting in their mother tongue, nevertheless, such person should never be allowed to be represented by a procurator who is unable to present or act in the case in our Swedish tongue, as it has been in the old custom, that all cases must only be presented to the court written in our Swedish mother tongue and not in any other language.[46]

With this early modern example of language politics, we have come to the end of our short survey of urban literate behaviour in Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that most of the forms urban literacy seem to have taken are not all that different from what can be observed elsewhere in Europe. Granted, sometimes Scandinavia seems to be lagging somewhat behind, and sometimes decisions were taken that were slightly different from those arrived at elsewhere in Europe, but no outsider from towns elsewhere in Europe would have been baffled by the ways writing was put to use in Scandinavian urban communities. Whether urban literacy was also used in 'othering' certain groups, remains to be seen.

7 Exclusion by Urban Literacy?

Letters on parchment or paper relating to urban life survive in many different forms from the medieval Scandinavian towns. The Nordic urban societies produce the same kind of documents as other, more urbanised parts of Europe, such as England or the Low Countries.

In the later Middle Ages, it was necessary for practically everybody, and not only for the members of the councils, to be able to make use of and to defend oneself by means of written evidence. At the same time, as we have mentioned before, literacy became widespread among ordinary folk in the countryside in the late Middle Ages. But common townspeople could not, by using script, participate in the urban administration and control

[45] Theresia Petterson, 'Variance and Change in Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Stockholm: The *Liber Memorialis*', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 343–374, here 351.

[46] Petterson, 'Variance and Change in Civic Literacy in Late Medieval Stockholm', 354.

the council. There were elements of secrecy to counter, and the records had to be scrutinised by committees. Administrative uses of writing, and gradually the town archives as well, became means of exercising control by the town's government over their own urban community.[47]

We have seen something of the interaction between the main players in towns: the king, the king's representative, the urban community, the town council and the magistrate, and the town scribe. We have noted that written texts, the town charters with their seals, the town laws, and the town books, played a considerable role in developing the towns as textual communities, and even more so as communities that increasingly relied on writing for their organisation and, obviously, their administration. We have also seen, finally, how access to the main documents may have led to forms of exclusion. And how linguistic restrictions may have been even more conducive towards 'othering' in Sweden, even if this was to the detriment of some of the vernaculars that had been accepted as equals until the 1350s in their written form, and until 1629 in their oral forms as well. We have not found evidence of a depreciating attitude towards inhabitants of the countryside based on 'urban' literacy, most probably due to the fact that 'countryside' literacy used the same forms of pragmatic literacy.

8 Literate Mentalities

We might finish here. So far, however, we have mainly considered what was urban about urban literacy. We have as yet not paid any attention to the ways in which the development of literacy as such might have led to differences in mentality. We have to consider this in the remainder of this short survey.[48]

In all periods of the history of our civilisation since the invention of alphabetic writing, the use of the written word was known, and the

[47] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 16, 19, 31, 32, 36.

[48] This section is based on Marco Mostert, 'Forgery and Trust', in *Strategies of Writing. Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages*, ed. Pettra Schulte, Marco Mostert, and Irene van Renswoude, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 37–59; Marco Mostert, 'Schrift als Ausdruck von Mentalität und die Gründe ihres Wandels', in *Wandlungsprozesse der Mentalitätsgeschichte*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher and Friedrich Harrer (Baden-Baden: Deutsche Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2015), 93–120.

written word was known by all to some extent. This holds true for Scandinavia as well. In all periods we encounter men and women whom we are inclined nowadays to qualify either as 'literate' or as 'illiterate'. But this distinction is imprecise. It would be better to distinguish between illiterate, semi-illiterate, semi-literate and literate people.[49] Illiterates have no idea what writing is. They don't know, for example, that writing represents speech in visual form. They do not understand that the content of a written text is transmitted by the eyes and not by the ears. With the term 'semi-illiterate' are meant those who, although they themselves cannot read and write (and who for this reason are functionally illiterate) nevertheless know what writing is and how it differs from speech. The semi-literate are those who, although they can read and write, are not (or not yet) aware of all the intricacies of the written language. Their mentality resembles in some respects that of the semi-illiterate. Those who are fully literate are able to manipulate the culture of writing. Since they have thoroughly mastered the techniques of writing, they are able to decide for themselves which possibilities of the culture of writing they will use. These distinctions are not absolute. It is possible to be fully literate in some areas of written culture and only semi-literate in others. The four levels of literacy should be considered as 'registers of the culture of writing'. A change of register can explain apparent inconsistencies between different cases of the use of writing by the same person.

As could happen in Scandinavia just as easily as it could happen elsewhere in medieval Europe, whenever a literate register clashes with the writing culture of the semi-literate, the mentalities of writing can have a strong impact on mentalities in general. However, such mental changes are no irreversible processes. At other times, semi-literate registers may attract large circles of illiterates to the detriment of literate registers. We often see similarities in concepts such as 'word', 'writing', 'law', 'fraud', or 'falsification' as used by ancient jurists and philosophers—who first defined these concepts—their medieval successors (for as far as the writings of their older colleagues have survived) and modern jurists.

If we subscribe to the idea that the intensive use of the written word can lead to changes in the very concept of 'writing' among the literate—and as I have shown elsewhere, the content of concepts such as confidence

[49] There are other classifications that distinguish between different skill levels, e.g., Franz H. Bäuml, 'Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Speculum* 55 (1980): 237–265, here 246–247 (on 'quasi-literates').

in 'writing', 'word', 'text', and 'truth' is subordinate to the written word—we come to the conclusion that fully literates, whether they lived in Antiquity, the Middle Ages or the early modern period, shared certain aspects of these concepts.[50] In order for medieval and modern scholars to be able to take up classical concepts, these concepts had to overlap somewhat, so that mutual understanding was possible. At the same time, the literates had to share at least some mental dispositions and some ideas with their less literate contemporaries. As soon as concepts concerning the written word were set aside, the mentalities of the literate and the illiterate could intersect in order to make communication possible. These shared mentalities of the past have often become foreign to us. In terms of reading comprehension, and therefore of literate mentalities, we probably have more in common with the literate people of the past than with our own illiterate, semi-literate or semi-literate contemporaries.

In the 1960s, research on the culture of writing benefited significantly from developments in the media. The publication in 1963 of the essay 'The consequences of literacy' by anthropologist Jack Goody and literary historian Ian Watt proved to be a turning point.[51] Goody and Watt argued that the alphabet made Greek democracy possible, and that 'rationality' is impossible without (alphabetic) writing. Since then, these claims have been endlessly discussed in the humanities. Today, the idea of a causal link between writing and democracy no longer finds support, given that between the two World Wars Germany and Russia, which could hardly be considered as model democracies, were among the most literate societies. The idea of a link between the written word and rationality (in the sense of logic and dialectics elaborated in ancient Greece) cannot be maintained either. In some societies several writing systems coexist, but only students educated in schools that follow the model of the modern western school system possess this type of rationality.[52] Goody and Watt's technological point of view was influenced by enlightened ideas dating from the eighteenth century. Their technologism has since been nuanced. We have ended up with the idea that the development of the culture of

[50] Mostert, 'Forgery and Trust', 44–49.

[51] Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 302–325, reprinted in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 27–68.

[52] Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA/ London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

writing was an important factor in the history of civilisation, but only one factor among many others. A preliminary synthesis of the results of this stream of research was published in 1982 by Walter J. Ong in his *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*.[53] Ong first deals with societies in which the oral ('orality') is dominant, then with the restructuring of consciousness through the use of writing, printing, space and 'closure' (with some considerations on the consequences of electronic communication), and controversial theoretical issues (for instance the meaning of reading and writing for human beings). Anthropologists expressed reservations about certain ideas of the technological current. Ruth Finnegan, for example, titled her book on the theme *Literacy and Orality. Studies in the Technology of Communication*, a title which rejected Ong's thesis that the presence or absence of the written word is fundamental and decisive in and by itself.[54] The idea of a clear opposition between the culture of the written word and orality always finds echoes, even if we are today more aware of its inscription in the history of the European West and in one of these great stories that only date back to the eighteenth century.

Despite these discussions, one of the key effects of the history of writing lies in the changes wrought in the mentality of those who learn to read and write. In his chapter on 'The psychodynamics of orality', Walter Ong summarises the essential traits of orality under nine headings.[55] People never exposed to education according to the western model, with its asking of the questions of logic, will remain in an oral frame of mind for as long as they live.[56] If, however, they come into contact with western-style education, even if it is only for a few years, they will start to become literates.

Things really begin to change whenever someone learns to read and write in a school environment. A few examples will make this clear. For us, fully educated scholars, the term 'word' is a concept of grammar, which was developed in late Antiquity. The development of grammar

[53] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

[54] Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality. Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[55] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31–77.

[56] See: A.R. Luria, *Cognitive Development. Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, trans. Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff, ed. Michael Cole (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1976).

(whose name derives not without reason from the Greek word for 'letter') has to do with developments in the design of writing such as the separation of words, which made it possible to identify groups of letters with meaningful sounds. For us, the words of speech largely agree with those of writing. For the semi-literate, the term 'word' means 'everything that can be said'. This goes for English *word*, Dutch *woord*, and German *Wort*. But it also applies to the Berbers of North Africa, who named this concept *anwar*.[57] And everything one says must be 'true' in the sense that one should trust what has been said. 'A man a man, a word a word'. This expression does not only apply to promises or other performative remarks, but also to the mediation of information, to oral texts recognised as fictions, and even to poems. In the Middle Ages the 'word'—as far as we can deduce this from texts written by scholars with their different mentality of writing—had a similar meaning for the illiterate, the semi-illiterate, and the semi-literate.

And what does 'written' mean? As educated scholars we have learned that writing does not fix the contents of communicative acts forever. Even if writing is capable of fixing meanings for more or less long periods, the evolution of language takes us away from the intentions of their authors. Written texts need explanation, exegesis. Errors need correction, and scholars know that a written text is interpreted differently over time—and that it must be commented on, for otherwise it loses its meaning.[58] On the other hand, for semi-literates, the oral must be identical to the written, and for them the topos of the lability of memory expresses an important truth. Writing should have an eternal value.[59]

Semi-literates, just as fully literates, could read a written text—provided they knew enough of the language in which it was written. Semi-illiterates could only read written texts, their aesthetics and decoration

[57] Jeanne Kurvers, *Met ongeletterde ogen. Kennis van taal en schrift van analfabeten* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2002), 82, 189–191.

[58] Marco Mostert, 'Reflections on Canonization and Authority of the Word in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. By Way of Comment', in *Medieval Transformations. Texts, Power and Gifts in Context*, ed. Esther Cohen and Mayke B. de Jong (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 13–24; J.F.A. Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999).

[59] Heinrich Fichtenau, *Arenga. Spätantike und Mittelalter im Spiegel von Urkundenformeln*, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung. Ergänzungsband* 8 (Graz and Cologne: Böhlau, 1957), 131 ff., on the *arenga* of the *memoria-oblivio* type.

as a picture.[60] They were sensitive to the splendour of liturgical books, to the richness that the possession of such a book meant, and they could take pleasure in the images and the letters, even if they were not sure of their meaning. And the same goes for charters, which could also be understood as images due to their visual rhetoric, as representatives of the power of those who were responsible for their production. Charters were powerful symbols of authority, power, and validity irrespective of whether you could read them.[61]

9 Urban Schools and Exclusion

Let us end with a hypothesis for further research, both on medieval literacy generally and on its manifestations in the Nordic world. In the light of what can be said on literate mentalities, we should not look for literacy as such, but rather look at the literacy acquired through attending schools, in our case medieval urban schools, if we want to find out what the links between literacy and exclusion may have been. It may have been in the classrooms that pupils and students acquired the self-assurance that led them to think themselves better than their educationally less fortunate contemporaries. This group included those that had mastered runic literacy, as we have seen that that did not require formal schooling. In medieval Scandinavia, schools appeared in many towns. To attend university, one went to Paris, and later also to Prague, until the foundation of the universities of Rostock (1419) and Greifswald (1436), and of the Scandinavian universities of Uppsala (1477), and Copenhagen (1479). The Dominican *studia* also provided a curriculum which catered for schoolboys from town as well as for students of Theology.[62] The reasons why obtaining an education that went beyond the basics of reading and writing was attractive must have been the same as elsewhere in medieval Europe: to gain access to the literacy-driven careers that developed from

[60] Laura Kendrick, *Animating the Letter. The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1999).

[61] Peter Rück, 'Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik', in *Graphische Symbole in mittelalterlichen Urkunden: Beiträge zur diplomatischen Semiotik*, ed. Peter Rück, *Historische Hilfswissenschaften* 3 (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke Verlag), 13–47, here 13.

[62] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 28–29; Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen, 'The Dominican Order and Urban Literacy in Medieval Scandinavia', in *Urban Literacy in the Nordic Middle Ages*, 375–410, here 309–402.

the thirteenth century onwards in towns and at the courts of the mighty, to make a living out of the knowledge one had acquired.[63] To attend a renowned town school or university required money. Money that was available among the families making up the town's elites. Members of the urban elites, who may have looked down upon town dwellers who did not have their power and influence anyway, may have acquired through their attending institutions of higher education the levels of literacy that gave them literate mentalities, and additional reasons for looking down upon other inhabitants of the towns, of Scandinavia as elsewhere. This can be seen in the ordinances of the town councils. In Schleswig, in 1336, the council intended to 'do away with worthless practices' and to restrict festivities associated with marriage and childbirth.[64] That suggests the town's elite to have had another mentality than the rest of the inhabitants. A difference in mentality that may well have been influenced also by the different kinds of literacy with which town dwellers came into contact.

10 What Happened through Literacy in Medieval Scandinavia?

We can draw some tentative conclusions from what has been dealt with above. We have seen what makes a settlement into a town. At the same time, we have seen that in Scandinavia there were only small differences between town and countryside. We have seen that this very probably had influence on the way town dwellers did not have the same disdain for country dwellers that was visible in other European regions, as expressed by the use there of a perceived opposition between *urbanitas* and *rusticitas*. We have also seen that the possession of literate skills was different in Scandinavia, in that runes formed a writing system that was primarily associated with the indigenous vernaculars, and that could be learned without having to attend formal school education. This was different from the Latin-based literacy in continental Europe and on the British isles and

[63] Marco Mostert, 'Some Thoughts on Urban Schools, Urban Literacy, and the Development of Western Civilisation', in *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, 337–348; Marco Mostert, 'Reading, Writing and Literacy. Communication and the History of Medieval Societies', in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann, *The Viking Collection. Studies in Northern Civilization* 16, ed. Pernille Hermann (University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), 261–285.

[64] Andersen et al., 'Introduction', 32.

in Ireland. There, Latin was required if one wanted to participate to the full in literate forms of communication, and acquiring these skills was usually done in schools that went beyond the teaching of reading, writing, and reckoning. As a consequence, we may assume that, with the exception of Scandinavia, elsewhere differences may have come to be perceived between the ways those who had been through advanced Latin education and those that had not benefited from such an education. The literacy of vernacular education which could be acquired at home did not encompass knowledge of logic that was part of the literacy available in Latin schools. The literate mentalities that went with these two types of literacy, that could be acquired in different educational environments, might have repercussions in the ways that those who had benefited from a school education saw themselves as somehow different from the 'others' among whom they lived. Irrespective of whether those 'others' were literate in that they might be able to use the (mainly vernacular) runes or were in fact illiterate. Exclusionary tendencies might therefore come about based on literate behaviour and thought after all. Even if these tendencies may not have had much to do with just any form of literacy as such, including the kinds of literate behaviour that went with the running of urban communities, but with the kind of literacy that was acquired in the Latin schools of Europe.

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