The Manuscript Triangle France–England–Scandinavia 1100–1300
A workshop on medieval manuscripts and book fragments in Nordic collections.
Bergen 4–6 November 2009

The collections of manuscripts and fragments in the modern collections of the Nordic countries are results of international contact in the Middle Ages. Two areas which had a large impact on Scandinavian book culture are France and England, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. England is already known to be well represented in the Scandinavian fragment collections, and it is now time to also take closer look at the manuscript material believed to have a French origin, or be under French influence. Within the triangle France–England–Scandinavia and within the period of 1100-1300 the workshop will have its focus on two aspects of the manuscripts: Book-decoration and lay-out and groups of fragments/manuscripts which can be linked to one particular place or institution.

Some form of decoration is present on the pages of most manuscripts, especially coloured initials. Most of the initials we encounter in the Nordic material are modestly decorated, and only a few are of a kind that would interest art historians. The notion behind this workshop is that even the more modest initials can be important tools in grouping fragments and books as well as tracing impulses from European regions, either in the form of imported books, or stylistic similarities in locally produced books. For the best result the initials are not to be studied independently, but together with the rest of the page or the other remaining leaves, or, in a few lucky cases, the rest of the book.

A few important studies have been done on initials, like Patricia Stirneman’s article on the Parisian pen-flourished initials 1140-13141 and Jonathan J.G. Alexander’s chapter on the arabesque initial in English twelfth century manuscripts.2 That the initials, or so called minor decorations, can be used to connect manuscripts to each other, and link them to regions or places, has been shown by R.M. Thomson for twelfth century England,3 and by M. Gullick for eleventh and twelfth century Sweden and for Norway in the time around 1200.4 The workshop will be an opportunity to take a closer look at the initials in specific fragments or groups of fragments from the Nordic collections, and explore the possibilities for using initials as guides when working with fragments, and in the linking of fragments to books, and the books to a certain influence or origin.

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