

The Law Codes that Shaped Norway

Magnus Lagabøter and the Codes of 1274 and 1276

Project background

The first Norwegian law code, written by the medieval king Magnus VI, celebrates its 750th anniversary in 2024. In preparation of this commemoration, the National Library of Norway, in cooperation with the University of Bergen, is managing a research project entitled *King Magnus the Law-mender's Codes of 1274 and 1276* (Magnus Lagabøters Lands- og Bylov). The project is part of a network of Norwegian research initiatives within the fields of philology and legal history currently preparing the 750th anniversary.

Aims and outcomes

The project aims to produce and disseminate new knowledge about the Code of the Norwegian Realm (1274) and the Code of the Norwegian Cities (1276). Plans for the project period at the National Library include:

- Publishing new research about the Codes of 1274 and 1276 in the National Library's scholarly series Nota Bene and NB Tema
- Publishing the Codes as e-books
- Creating a digital text corpus based on the Codes
- Publishing a translated and redacted edition of the Code of the Norwegian Realm (1274)
- Hosting workshops, conferences, seminars, exhibitions and other events of interest to the general public

Surviving manuscripts

Of the Code of the Norwegian Realm 39 complete medieval manuscripts and 49 unique manuscript fragments have been preserved. For the Code of the Norwegian Cities we know of 24 complete manuscripts and 8 unique manuscript fragments.

Text variation as clue

In the course of this project, all variations between the manuscripts have been registered. This gives us access to the legal discourse in the 13th and 14th centuries; the variations can be used to identify what was considered controversial in the legislation of King Magnus VI, and what the different views were as to how medieval Norwegian society should be governed.



Left: The manuscript Codex Hardenbergianus is exhibited at the National Library. Here we see an illumination depicting how King Magnus hands over the Code of 1274 to a judge.

Right: This illumination depicts how God gave king and bishop two swords to govern society by. This is the core of the Gelesian principle that made it possible for King Magnus to take on the role of legislator, shaping Norwegian society, law and identity.

King Magnus VI the Law-mender

Magnus VI Håkonsson (1238–1280) was a Norwegian medieval king (reign: 1263–1280). He received his epithet 'Lagabøte', meaning 'Law-mender', because of the extensive work he laid down in securing the Norwegian realm its first unified code of law.

The Codes

The idea that law-making could be an instrument to govern society by started emerging in Europe in the middle of the 12th century. The Codes of the Norwegian Realm and of the Norwegian Cities were the first successful legislative attempts in Europe. They were originally written in Old Norse and issued at each of the Norwegian provincial public assemblies, which also served as courts of law. Surviving manuscripts reveal many variations between the different copies, demonstrating that they were in frequent use. King Magnus the Law-mender's Codes were in force until the 17th century, and shaped Norwegian society, law and identity as we still know them today.

Editions at the National Library

The National Library of Norway owns two medieval manuscripts that includes, among other legal texts, King Magnus the Law mender's Code of the Norwegian Realm. One manuscript is based on the text version that was in use at the medieval court Eidsivating, the other on the text used at Gulating. Both manuscripts have been dated to the first half of the 14th century. Another beautifully illustrated version, the *Codex Hardenbergianus*, owned by the Royal Danish Library, is on display at the National Library during the project period.

Jørn Øyrehagen Sunde
University of Bergen
Professor of Law
National Library of Norway
Researcher
jorn.sunde@uib.no



Bente Granrud
Head of Rare Books and Manuscripts
The National Library of Norway
Administrative leader of Magnus Lagabøters Lands- og Bylov
bente.granrud@nb.no

