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Electronic editions of medieval Nordic texts

Notes for the MENOTA workgroup meeting
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1. Electronic vs. printed editions

Electronic editions of medieval Nordic texts are generally not intended as a replacement of printed editions. Rather, electronic editions should be regarded as a valuable addition to the long-standing tradition of printed editions.

In some ways electronic editions have a clear advantage over the traditional printed editions; two points in particular come to mind:

- **Searchability:** Combined with a search engine, a marked up electronic text can serve as a powerful tool for research in a way that even the best of printed editions, replete with various indices, will never be able to serve.
- **Durability:** An electronic text is easily reproduceable without any errors, that is, an indefinite number of copies can be made at any time without any loss of information. Also, an electronic text that is consistently marked up (in XML or any other comparable markup language) stands a good chance of surviving even major changes in computer technology, as it can under most circumstances be transformed and adapted to new standards. Printed texts, by contrast, can only be reproduced accurately by way of photographic means (and even then some details could be lost). The digitizing of a printed text by way of optical character recognition (OCR) cannot, at the present state of technology, be done without considerable loss of information. An electronic text is therefore arguably more durable than a text that is exclusively contained on a printed page.

At the same time, the reader may prefer a printed edition to an electronic one for the following reasons:

- **Versatility:** The electronic editions are confined to the computer screen, which poses certain restrictions on their use. In that regard, the printed book is much more versatile.
- **Elegance:** To date, few electronic editions have come anywhere close to the elegance of a carefully executed printed edition in terms of typeface and

layout. The HTML-based text rendition of most electronic editions still leaves much to be desired on that front.

Consequently, it seems sensible to try to combine the strengths of the different types of editions: the searchability and durability of the electronic editions and the versatility and elegance of the printed editions.

As every modern print edition is based on electronic word processing, it should be possible to create an electronic counterpart of almost any print edition without much extra cost.

While it can be argued that almost every print edition probably is well suited for the creation of a corresponding electronic edition, it is not a foregone conclusion that the opposite holds true:

- Short fragments of texts, perhaps consisting of only a single leaf, may be felt to be too short to deserve an independent book edition. As few journals would accept such publications, a fragment of a small size would therefore only be printed in a book as part of a larger collection of texts.
- Large manuscripts with a number of texts of varying textual quality may be felt to be too large to print in their entirety. Yet, even if the textual quality may vary considerably, the entire text may be of value for, e.g., linguistic research. It may therefore be desirable at some level to make the entire text available.
- The cost of book production.

Accepting electronic editions only as a (secondary) by-product contingent upon print editions (regarded as primary) would seriously reduce the flexibility and potential of electronic editions.

The successful combination of electronic and printed editions will, therefore, benefit from the full capabilities of electronic editions combined with the elegance and versatility of printed editions *without* the restrictions of large-scale book production.

The elegance and versatility of printed editions could perhaps be attained by making the text available in a PDF file with professional layout combined with a print-on-demand arrangement.

2. Academic recognition

The future of electronic publishing of medieval texts depends largely on the recognition of such work in academic circles. Most scholars in Nordic philology work in an environment where they are constantly being evaluated based on the scholarly work they produce. The scholarly work is measured in terms of “publications” which in turn are valued in terms of publication venue.

Papers published in peer-reviewed journals with international recognition (e.g. journals recognized by the *Institute for Scientific Information* (ISI) or *European Reference*

Index for the Humanities (ERIH)) are valued higher than journals without peer review. Books are subject to similar principles: books published by an internationally recognized publishing house with rigid editorial procedures are valued higher than other books.

An internationally recognized platform for the publication of scholarly editions of Nordic medieval texts in electronic form is needed. Historically, critical editions of medieval texts have appeared as books for which the editor has received credit depending on the publisher and editorial procedure. Making an electronic edition accessible from a website will currently not bring its editor comparable academic credit. It is therefore imperative that we create a venue for “high-quality” electronic editions of medieval texts.

3. A venue for on-line electronic editions

What is needed is essentially a publication forum that consists of all the elements customary to an international scholarly journal or academic publishing house:

- One or two editors.
- An editorial board.
- Anonymous (double-blind) peer-review process where every contribution is subject to a review from at least two qualified reviewers (in addition, of course, to a review by the editors and/or the editorial board).
- A clear editorial policy and guidelines for contributors.

This publication forum should preferably combine the strengths of both electronic and printed editions, as discussed above. It would therefore consist of an on-line electronic edition and a print-on-demand paper counterpart. The basic components would be:

- A permanent web site.
- A database capable of handling large text files.
- Web interface capable of displaying medieval Nordic texts in HTML.
- A search engine capable of displaying a KWIC concordance.
- Downloadable PDF files with professional layout of the edition:
 - title page
 - introduction
 - transcription

4. Requirements for a scholarly edition [with input from Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir]

A clear editorial policy is essential. The fundamental question is: What constitutes a scholarly edition? A transcription without any other scholarly contribution is not likely to be accepted as an academic work. The traditional scholarly contribution is an analysis of the manuscript, its state, origins, and date presented in an introduction.

Ideally such an introduction would consist of the following components:

A. An edition of a single text

Aa. A comprehensive edition of a single manuscript

1. Codicological description

A general description of the current state of the manuscript:

- material
- the number of leaves
- the state of the leaves
- the number of gatherings and their composition
- how much is believed to be missing (with reference to *Contents*)?
- layout: number of columns and lines
- illuminations
- initials
- marginalia
- binding

2. Contents and textual transmission

- table of contents
- are the texts intact or is there something missing (with reference to *Codicological description*)?
- are the texts preserved elsewhere?

3. Paleographical characteristics

- the number of hands
- has the same hand (same hands) been identified in other manuscripts?
- a description of those paleographical characteristics that can contribute to the dating of the manuscript (not an exhaustive description)

4. Linguistic and orthographic characteristics

- a description of those linguistic and orthographic characteristics that can contribute to the dating of the manuscript (not an exhaustive description)

5. Date

- what do other sources (Kålund, ONP, ...) say concerning the date of the manuscript?

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- what is the editor's conclusion concerning the date based on the paleographic, orthographic, and linguistic features discussed above?

6. Provenance

A description of the available information concerning the provenance of the manuscript.

7. Earlier editions

A description of earlier editions of the manuscript.

8. This edition

A description of the editorial principles of this edition.

9. Notes on the transcription

Notes on difficult readings, etc.

Ab. An edition of a single text in a single manuscript

1. Contents and textual transmission

- what is the text?
- what is the origin of the text and how has it been transmitted?

2. Codicological description [as above]

3. Paleographical characteristics [as above]

4. Linguistic and orthographic characteristics [as above]

5. Date [as above]

6. Provenance [as above]

7. Literary characteristics

- the historical and literary background of the text
- literary characteristics
- why is this text important?
- how does this text relate to the society where it was created and transmitted?
- how does this text relate to other texts?

8. Earlier editions

A description of earlier editions of the text.

9. This edition

A description of the editorial principles of this edition.

10. Notes on the text

Notes on difficult readings, etc., as well as notes on the text itself.

B. An edition of a single text based on more than one manuscript

1. Contents and textual transmission

- what is the text?
- what is the origin of the text and how has it been transmitted?
- are there more than one redaction of the text?

2. Stemmatic considerations and the selection of a principal manuscript

- how old are the manuscripts?
- how are they interrelated (if at all)?
- what are the criteria applied for selecting the principal manuscript?

3. A description of the principal manuscript

- Codicological description* [as above]
- Paleographical characteristics* [as above]
- Linguistic and orthographic characteristics* [as above]
- Date* [as above]
- Provenance* [as above]

4. A description of other manuscripts

- A brief codicological description
- Date
- Provenance

5. Literary characteristics [as above]

6. This edition [as above]

7. Notes on the text [as above]

This may seem like a long list of topics that would call for a discussion on several hundred pages. In most cases, however, the basic facts could be presented in no more than 50 pages.