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Mainstream Norwegian Medievalism in the Twenty-First Century:
Continuity and Change in Narrative and Form

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Mainstream Norwegian Medievalism in the Twenty-First Century: Continuity and Change in Narrative and Form

KARL C. ALVESTAD

Introduction

Andrew B.R. Elliott and Daniel Wollenberg, among others, have examined some aspects of twenty-first-century Norwegian medievalism, as represented by the thoughts and deeds of Anders Behring Breivik.¹ Breivik's medievalism that frames his terror attack in 2011 includes a nostalgic worldview of 'a white, Christian Europe struggling against a new Islamic invasion'², where he is a 'Christian knight' defending Christendom against cultural Marxism through a crusade where he was willing to become a martyr for the cause. He also drew extensively on medievalist references to both Old Norse and medieval materials.³ Breivik's role in Norwegian society, beyond causing the biggest attack in Norway since 1945, was largely on the fringes of society. His ideas and understanding of the medieval might be shared by some members of this society, but it might be argued to be far from mainstream, and beyond that, his medievalism is not representative of the wider use and exploitation of the medieval in contemporary Norwegian society. Thus, this study's aim is to broaden the scholarship on Norwegian medievalism by examining its relationship with previous trends. Hence, whether any core trends exist in mainstream contemporary Norwegian medievalism that might explain the medieval's role in this context is also explored. Notably, arguing whether the Norwegian experience of medievalism is unique or the specific examples and trends can add anything to our wider understanding of medievalism globally is not the study's aim. However, highlights of what happens to nationalist medievalism when overt nationalism fades away and how medievalism in this context can be found in some quite surprising places are explored.⁴

In 2006, Norwegian scholar Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland published an article exploring Norwegian medievalism in relationship with Norwegian identity.⁵ In her article, Bliksrud Aavitsland focused on two mainstream examples of Norwegian medievalism of the twentieth century: the

¹ Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*, Boydell and Brewer: Woodbridge 2017; Daniel Wollenberg, *Medieval Imagery in Today's Politics*, Arc Humanities Press: Leeds 2018.

² Elliott 2017, 138.

³ Elliott 2017, 140–41.

⁴ I am sincerely thankful for the guidance and feedback given by the reviewers of this piece, and for the support and excellent editorial guidance given by the editors of the journal. Without your suggestions aspects of this paper would not have been so clear as they are. Thank you! I should also add that all errors and omissions in this paper are my own, and does not reflect the efforts of the reviewers or the editors.

⁵ Kristin Bliksrud Aavitsland, 'Middelalder og norsk identitet. Litterære og visuelle eksempler på norsk medievalisme', *Konsthistorisk tidsskrift/Journal of Art History* 75 (2006), 38–49.

restoration of Trondheim Cathedral (1869–1969) and Sigrid Undset’s Nobel Prize of literature-winning trilogy *Kristin Lavransdaughter* (1920–22). Part of Bliksrud Aavitsland’s conclusion was that these two medievalisms were closely linked to aspects of Norwegian identity in the first half of the twentieth century. During that time, Norwegian society continued trends that began in the nineteenth century by actively exploring the medieval to construct a national identity for Norway. These developments, as I have argued elsewhere, have focused especially on constructing a sense of national community based on a set of shared historical experiences.⁶ The preferred area of focus for the men (it was mostly men who led this work, with the notable exception of the restoration of rose windows for the cathedral in Trondheim⁷) was the so-called ‘golden age’ between 860 and 1319, the time when Norway had its independent kings. Jan Eivind Myhre argued in 2010 that this was due to the national trauma of the Norwegian decline and collapse in 1319–1814.⁸ Due to the trauma of lost political independence, Norwegian medievalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries turned to the Viking age and high medieval period for its subject matter, as this was the time in which artists, scholars and politicians could find something they perceived as distinctively Norwegian. Consequently, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Norwegian medievalism features some monuments, anniversaries, events and artistic productions that remembered and promoted national heroes of the Viking and medieval kingdom of Norway, including but not limited to Eirik the Red, Leif Eiriksson, Erling Skjalgsson, and the Birkebeiners known as Torstein Skevla and Skervald Skrukka,⁹ and the ancient kings of the kingdom.

To give some context for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Norwegian medievalism, 1814 was pivotal in Norway’s history. Following the Kiel Treaty of 14 January 1814 between Denmark–Norway and Sweden, leading Norwegian men and the Danish Crown Prince Christian Fredrick called for a constitutional assembly that wrote and ratified a Norwegian constitution and elected Christian Fredrick as the King of an independent Norway. Although the ‘independence party’ won the political struggle at the assembly at Eidsvoll, the question of independence was contested by members of the assembly who believed Norway would be better off in a union with Sweden. Although the ‘union party’ favoured a union with Sweden, they still believed that Norway ought to have autonomy within the union. The election of Christian Fredrick and the signing of the

⁶ Karl C. Alvestad, ‘The “Accurate” Deeds of Our Fathers: The “Authentic” Narrative of Early Norway’, in Karl C. Alvestad & Robert Houghton eds., *The Middle Ages in Modern Culture: History and Authenticity in Contemporary Medievalism*, Bloomsbury Academic: London 2021, 23–41; Karl C. Alvestad, ‘Neither Dane, nor Swede, and Definitely not Finn. Transmission of Narratives of Otherness in 19th- and early 20th-century Norwegian Historiography’, *Revue d’Histoire Nordique* 23 (2016a), 105–120; Karl C. Alvestad, ‘Kings, Heroes and Ships: The Use of Historical Characters in Nineteenth – and Twentieth – Century Perceptions of the Early Medieval Scandinavian Past’, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Winchester 2016b; Karl C. Alvestad, ‘Seeing Him for What He Was: Reimagining King Olaf II Haraldsson in Post-War Popular Culture’, in Janice North, Karl C. Alvestad & Elena Woodacre eds., *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex, and Power in Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan: London 2018, 283–301.

⁷ Karl C. Alvestad, ‘Middelalders helter og norsk nasjonalisme før andre verdenskrig’, *Slagmark* 79 (2019), 77–95.

⁸ Jan Eivind Myhre, ‘The “Decline of Norway”: Grief and Fascination in Norwegian Historiography on the Middle Ages’, in R. J. W. Evans & Guy P. Marchal eds., *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States: History, Nationhood and the Search for Origins* (Writing the Nation 8), Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke 2011, 18–30.

⁹ ‘Haakon Haakonssons saga’, in *Norges Kongesagaer IV*, Aleksander Bugge transl. and ed., Kristiania 1914.

constitution triggered a Swedish invasion and a short war that prompted the Conventions of Moss, whereby Christian Fredrick surrendered the Norwegian kingdom to the Swedish king in return for Norway keeping its constitution and parliament. Following 1814, the Norwegian state was described as having been a resurrection of the medieval kingdom of Norway, creating a narrative of national revival. This union with Sweden lasted until 1905, when after attempted reform of the union failed and Norway became independent and elected the Danish Prince Carl as Haakon VII to be the king of Norway.

As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ medievalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was both a catalyst for and manifestation of the Norwegian national consciousness, with the emergence of the ‘dragon style’ (1870–1930s), the national millennium and the erection of the Haraldshaugen monument (1872) and the 900-year anniversary of the conversion of Norway (1930), all being moments when the medieval past was used to promote social and political cohesion. These examples were part of medievalism that drew on the national ‘golden age’ (860–1319) for materials to demarcate the nation along historical, social and cultural lines, where the authentic national was those elements that embodied traces of the glories of the ‘golden age’. A striking fact from this period is that this medievalism transcended social and political borders, prompting nationalist medievalisms to be used and produced alongside the whole spectrum of movements from the communists/socialists on the left to the conservatives on the right. This widespread appreciation and the use of the medieval past was a product of a wider cultural programme of unifying Norway into one nation, and aspects of this programme can be seen through the extensive use of the medieval in Norwegian textbooks and literature in the decades leading up to 1940.¹¹ Yet this raises the questions: what happened to Norwegian medievalism in the second half of the twentieth century, and, overall, how has it transitioned into the new millennia? These questions reflect, in part, movements in the wider field of medievalism studies, where much of the recent scholarship has focused on contemporary political and entertainment-based medievalisms.¹² Some contemporary scholarship on political medievalism has focused on the abuse and misuse of medievalism in discrimination.¹³ Medievalism in Anglophone cultures has long dominated scholarship on medievalism, but recent initiatives, for example, have sought to examine medievalism produced in other cultures.¹⁴ This has helped to diversify the medievalism field by opening up other cultural contexts and questions besides those that have dominated from an Anglo–American perspective.

To examine the questions and themes outlined above, three examples of medievalism in Norwegian culture will be explored in this study. They are selected to represent cinematic medieval-

¹⁰ Alvestad 2019; Alvestad 2016b.

¹¹ Alvestad, 2016b.

¹² Gail Ashton & Dan Kline, *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2012; Elliott 2017; Wollenberg 2018.

¹³ See the volume edited by Karl Fugelso: *Studies in Medievalism* 28 (2019); J. Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms*, Arc Humanities Press: Amsterdam 2021.

¹⁴ Kathleen Davis & Nadia Altschul, *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of “the Middle Ages” outside Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2009.

ism represented here by *The Last King* (2016),¹⁵ participatory medievalism as represented by the long-distance cross-country skiing event between Rena and Lillehammer called *Birken* first held in 1932,¹⁶ and experiential medievalism in the shape of the re-opened pilgrimage routes to Trondheim *Pilgrimsleden* that opened in 1997.¹⁷ These three examples will be introduced more closely below, but two of these, *Birken* and the pilgrimage routes, have their roots in the twentieth century. They have been included here due to their popularity, expansion and continued relevance in the twenty-first century. I will first briefly present each case.

The Last King (2016)

Nils Gaup's 2016 film *Birkebeinerne* (with the English title *The Last King*) tells the story about Inga from Varteig and her baby son Haakon's flight from southern Norway to Trondheim in 1205–1206. Haakon (the later Haakon IV Haakonsson) was the Birkebeiner pretender to the Norwegian crown and was in need of protection at the height of the Norwegian civil war. Historically, the Birkebeiners were a political party first attested in 1174 that took part in the Norwegian civil war (1130–1240). The group supported the candidacy of King Sverre and his descendants, including Haakon Haakonsson, in the fight over the Norwegian crown. The film's narrative depicts the dramatic circumstances surrounding the death of Haakon III Sverresson and the efforts by Birkebeiners to protect his son and heir, Haakon, the aforementioned son of Inga from Varteig, from their enemy Baglerne, who controlled the area in which Inga and Haakon Haakonsson resided at the time of Haakon IV's birth. The film focuses on the actions of the historical Birkebeiners Torstein Skevla (Kristofer Hivju) and Skervald Skrukka (Jacob Oftebro)¹⁸ to smuggle the young Haakon across the mountains from Lillehammer in Gudbrandsdalen to Rena in Østerdalen during the winter of 1205–1206. Upon its release, the film was described in Norway's largest newspaper VG as a 'half-hit of a medieval ballad'.¹⁹ Other reviewers were similarly not impressed; the film received some comments highlighting its uneasy dialogue and extensive use of scenic shots. The film sold an estimated 271,000 tickets in Norway, well short of the 500,000 target set by the produc-

¹⁵ Bettina Bildhauer, 'Medievalism and Cinema', in Louise D'Arcens ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2016, 45–59; *Birkebeinerne*. Norway. S.l.: Paradox/Nordisk Film, 2016.

¹⁶ Daniel T. Kline, 'Participatory Medievalism, Role-Playing, and Digital Gaming', in Louise D'Arcens ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2016, 75–88; 'Birkenrennet', *Birkebeiner.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://birkebeiner.no/no/ski/birkebeinerrennet-54-km>.

¹⁷ Tison Pugh & Angela Jane Weisl, 'Experiential Medievalism', in Tison Pugh & Angela Jane Weisl eds., *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, Taylor & Francis Group: London 2012, 122–39; Paul Genoni, 'The Pilgrim's Progress across Time: Medievalism and Modernity on the Road to Santiago', *Studies in Travel Writing* 15 (2011): 157–75; I. L. Stranden & K. M. Skrede, 'Prinsessen prøver seg som pilegrim før konfirmasjonen', NRK.NO, last updated 30 June 2019. Accessed 1 November 2021. Available at: <https://www.nrk.no/trondelag/prinsessen-gikk-til-nidaros-for-a-forberede-seg-til-konfirmasjon-1.14608979>.

¹⁸ 'Haakon Haakonssons saga'.

¹⁹ Jon Selås, 'Filmanmeldelse: "Birkebeinerne"', VG.NO, published 6 February 2016. Accessed 15 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.vg.no/rampelys/film/i/72rk8/filmanmeldelse-birkebeinerne>.

tion company.²⁰ Although the film received such critiques, its narrative, marketing and the subsequent debate around the film contributed to raising awareness around the deeds of the Birkebeiners in the winter of 1205–1206.

Birken

Birken is the name of a group of sporting events drawing on the same historical narrative as the 2016 film, the journey of Torstein and Skervald across the mountains from Lillehammer to Østerdalen. The most famous of the events is possibly the 54-kilometre ski race across the mountains, starting in Rena and ending in Lillehammer – that is, going the opposite direction of Torstein’s and Skervald’s routes. The competition was first held in 1932 as a commemoration of the 1206 trip. Since then, it has been held almost annually (except for 1941–45, 1948, 2007, 2014 and 2020). In 2019, it had 8500 participants.²¹ To ensure an ‘authentic’ experience of the journey from Rena to Lillehammer, participants must carry 3500 grams of weight with them the whole race. This weight is, according to short notice on *Birken*’s website, meant to represent the young pretender Haakon.²²

Roads to Nidaros and St Olaf

Pilgrimsleden, the pilgrimage routes, to Trondheim and the site of the cult of St Olaf, were reopened in 1997 by Crown Prince Haakon of Norway. At the opening the routes consisted of a 650-kilometre path from Oslo to Trondheim along traditional paths in the landscape. The path from Oslo to Trondheim was intended as a re-creation and restauration of the medieval pilgrimage route across the mountain to the tomb of St Olaf (d. 1030). The route has since grown to be part of a network of paths that, in 2020, spanned an estimated 2500 km throughout the Nordic countries.²³ The Norwegian broadcaster reported in 2017 that the pilgrimage centre that year expected 1000 registered pilgrims to undertake the journey to Nidaros.²⁴ This number illustrates the route’s continued popularity in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, in the summer of 2019, Princess Ingrid Alexandra of Norway and her father, Crown Prince Haakon Magnus of Norway, walked the last leg of the pilgrimage route to Nidarosdomen, and the shrine of St Olaf, as part of the princess’ preparation for her confirmation later that summer. The act of undertaking this pilgrimage was intended, according to Bishop Helga Haugland Byfuglien, by the royal family to give the princess the experience of entering Nidaros and getting to know the church [Nidarosdomen] and the holy site as the pilgrims used to.²⁵ Although these paths cannot compete with the popularity and volume of the road to Santiago de Compostela, the route to Nidaros has created, like the road to Compostela, a sense

²⁰ Øystein T. Drabløs, ‘Mest sett på kino, men produksjonsselskapet gikk i minus’, *Dn.no*, published 22 February 2018. Accessed 27 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.dn.no/film/kino/kongens-nei/paradox/mest-sett-pa-kino-men-produksjonsselskapet-gikk-i-minus/2-1-279617>.

²¹ ‘En Flott Dag’, *Birkebeiner.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://birkebeiner.no/no/nyheter/en-flott-dag>.

²² ‘Birkenrennet’, *Birkebeiner.no*.

²³ Mattias Jansson, ‘Statistikk Gudbrandsdalsleden og St.Olavsleden 2019’, Nasjonalt pilegrimssenter on *Pilgrimsleden.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://pilegrimsleden.no/>.

²⁴ L. F. Vogt & T. G. Hong, ‘1000 pilegrimer til Nidaros i år’, *NRK.NO*, last updated 26 July 2017. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.nrk.no/inlandet/1000-pilegrimer-til-nidaros-i-ar-1.13616153>.

²⁵ Stranden & Skrede, ‘Prinsessen prøver seg som pilegrim før konfirmasjonen’.

of authenticity and experience through the journey.

Before examining these examples of medievalism in relationship to the wider trends in Norwegian medievalism, I would like to note a few things about the nature of the material on which this study is based and my position regarding this study's context. I am basing the analysis of the pilgrimage routes and *Birken* on the public websites of the organisations behind these two examples. For *Birken*, I will be exploring the website Birkebeiner.no, which is the site of the event organisers²⁶, where I will examine their perspective on the event based on their articles, alongside their news articles and news releases. Together, this gives, in my opinion, a fair insight into how the organisers of *Birken* interact with the medieval past and how they are presenting their event. I will similarly draw on the website Pilgrimsleden.no for examining pilgrimage routes.²⁷ Pilgrimsleden.no is a one-stop website for information on all the pilgrimage routes to Trondheim in Norway and Sweden, and it offers details on routes, accommodation, and so on, and is, therefore, a good starting point to understand how these routes are presented to the walkers. I should, in this instance, note that I have not walked any of the routes in the pilgrimage network in Norway and have not participated in *Birken*, so I cannot in this analysis say anything about the experience of participating in these activities, but I can through a textual analysis say something about what these two organisations show on the internet about themselves. The last example I am considering is, of course, the 2016 film *The Last King*. I will consistently refer to the film in its English title. To examine the film, I will explore the film itself and some of the digital promotional materials released at the time of the film's release. Notably, although all the examples selected for this study are results of a Norwegian context and have a significant Norwegian audience, they all have a sizeable international audience as well; for instance, *The Last King* was released in the US, Japan, Hungary, Spain and the Nordic countries, and the pilgrimage route is annually walked by a sizeable contingent of Germans. This is important to note when examining these examples, as their international audiences might impact the narratives told.

Continuity and Change in Mainstream Twenty-First-Century Medievalism

Although the three examples selected for this study differ greatly in format and, to some extent, in popularity and function in contemporary culture, one might argue that they share some common elements regarding how they engage with the medieval. As the title of this study reveals, this study's focus is on twenty-first-century medievalism in relationship with earlier trends, and I will therefore continue by examining the similarities and continuities between twenty-first-, twentieth- and nineteenth-century medievalisms before moving on to the discontinuity and change in this medievalism.

Continuity narrative

As previously noted, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, medievalism in Norway focused on national revival and community construction.²⁸ This was by no means exceptional for Norway;

²⁶ 'Om oss', *Birkebeiner.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://birkebeiner.no/no/om-oss>.

²⁷ *Pilgrimsleden.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://pilgrimsleden.no/>.

²⁸ Alvestad 2016a; Alvestad 2019; Bliksrud Aavitsland 2006.

in fact, using the medieval to promote a political and cultural identity was not unusual at all in Europe in this period. As Eric Hobsbawm and Patrick Geary have argued, the past and history constructed from the surviving fragments of the past have often played a crucial role in justifying and legitimating communal identities.²⁹ Hence, a national focus in early Norwegian medievalism should not be surprising, especially given that medievalism was developed and flourished while the Norwegian state and nation were on a journey to re-define themselves after 1814.³⁰ Yet, as I have argued elsewhere,³¹ following the Second World War, Norwegian medievalism of the twentieth century shifted slightly in its form and format. In the first years following 1945, medievalism almost vanished from the public sphere, before re-emerging in the 1950s and 60s, by then with a distinct local emphasis and focus. It should be added that this focus, like the earlier medievalisms, to some extent, was meant to unify communities through historical awareness based on remembering local events and heroes.³² Whether community identity was strengthened by highlighting a historical narrative or community projects or producing these medievalisms is unknown, but the increase in local medievalisms through projects of producing local historical plays known as *spel* is notable. This trend continues into the twenty-first century. However, what is common to these plays, the earlier national-focused medievalism and the three examples chosen for this paper, is that they mostly draw on historical events and narratives from the period before the Norwegian decline following 1319. The exception here is the medieval pilgrimage tradition to Nidaros (Trondheim), which emerged in the eleventh century but can be documented throughout the medieval period with a significant level of traffic in the late medieval period. Furthermore, most examples I have seen draw inspiration exclusively from materials found in the kings' sagas. Through this use of the sagas as an anchor in the medieval for their projects, artists and organisers authenticate their own medievalism in the events of the past. This grounding in medieval events is also a feature of *Birken*, *The Last King*, and the pilgrimage routes.

In a promotional article about *The Last King*, Norwegian historian and author Hans Olav Lahlum wrote an extensive overview of the Norwegian civil war and how the narrative of the film fits in this larger context.³³ In his article, Lahlum anchors the narrative of the film in Haakon Haakonssons saga by arguing: 'Haakon Haakonssons reign is, for the period, relatively well documented due to *Haakonssaga*, written in Iceland by Snorri Sturlason's nephew Sturla Tordsson.'³⁴ In this single sentence, Lahlum draws the reader's attention to documentary evidence for Haakon's reign and the relationship between the author of this saga and that of another major author of kings'

²⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today', *Anthropology Today* 8 (1992), 3–8 at 3; Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton University Press: Woodstock 2002.

³⁰ R. Glenthøj, *Skilsmissen: Dansk og norsk identitet før og efter 1814*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag: Odense 2012.

³¹ Alvestad 2021.

³² Alvestad 2021.

³³ Hans Olav Lahlum, 'Slik formet Birkebeinerne oss som nordmenn', Annonserinnhold. VG.NO. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.vg.no/annonsorinnhold/nordiskfilm/artikler/birkebeinerne/>

³⁴ 'Håkon Håkonssons kongetid er for tiden relativt godt belagt takket være Håkonssagaen, skrevet på Island av Snorre Sturlasons nevø Sturla Tordsson', see Lahlum. 'Slik formet Birkebeinerne oss som nordmenn'. Translation is my own.

sagas, namely Snorri. Snorri's kings' sagas, often referred to as *Heimskringla*, form the foundations for significant portions of our knowledge of early Norwegian political history. In addition, *Heimskringla* has a special status in Norwegian culture as 'the saga' and story of Norway. In linking the two, Lahlum raises the status and importance of Sturla's text. Furthermore, after the sentence quoted above, Lahlum highlights some of the issues with the source, among others, that Sturla's uncle Snorri was a political opponent of Haakon and that the text itself only gives one perspective on Haakon's life.

The history of Haakon Haakonsson's journey in the winter of 1205/06 also forms the foundation of the *Birken* sport events, and the background for Haakon's journey is briefly recounted on *Birken's* website under an article called 'Vår Historie' (our history). In this article, the author does not reference the sagas directly. In the Norwegian article, however, the author refers to a generic saga without specifying which one.³⁵ The English article differs slightly from the Norwegian one and does not refer to the sagas. Yet it still gives a brief account of Haakon's escape and the historical importance of these events. The key difference between the articles is that the English article also provides some details on the background of the race itself and creates a link between the 1206 journey and the modern race.³⁶ However, in both articles, the general geographic area in which the 1206 journey occurred is referenced, thus anchoring the modern race trail into a historical narrative.

The use of historical evidence to anchor promotional material for *The Last King* and on *Birken's* website is not unique. *Pilgrimsleden* does this as well. In an article titled 'History' at *Pilgrimsleden*.no, the author of the page quotes the late eleventh-century German author Adam of Bremen and says:

If you are sailing from Aalborg or Vendsyssel in Denmark, you will arrive in Viken (today's Oslo), a city in Norway. From there, you turn left and sail along the Norwegian coast, and on the fifth day, you reach the city of Trondheim. You could also go another way, coming from Dane's Skaane, across land to Trondheim. But this route across the mountains takes more time, and as it is dangerous, it is avoided by the travellers.³⁷

Following this quote, the author states that, although Adam preferred the journey along the sea, other evidence suggested that there was a significant number of pilgrims that took the inland route across Dovre, causing King Eystein Magnusson in the 1120s to build shelters for pilgrims across the mountain. In quoting Adam and the deeds of Eystein, the author gives historical precedence to both the coastal route of the pilgrimage network and the inland walking route. Both routes are official routes as part of the modern *pilgrimsleden* network. In the same 'history' article, the author also highlighted that the pilgrimage routes fell out of fashion after the Norwegian Reformation in 1536 and that it was only in the 1980s that the first pilgrims started to return.³⁸ Hence, the author highlights how the modern routes are partly based on medieval ones and that there is no continuous

³⁵ 'Vår Historie', *Birkebeiner.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://birkebeiner.no/no/om-oss/var-historie>.

³⁶ 'The Birkebeiner history', *Birkebeiner.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://birkebeiner.no/en/about-birken/the-birkebeiner-history>.

³⁷ 'Histroy', *Pilgrimsleden.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://pilegrimsleden.no/en/historie>.

³⁸ 'Histroy', *Pilgrimsleden.no*.

pilgrimage tradition from the medieval period. Instead, these new pilgrimage routes are presumably following traditional tracks through the landscape based on the scant literary evidence quoted from Adam of Bremen above and indicative references to pilgrimage routes in *Passio Olavi*,³⁹ and by incorporating medieval churches and farmsteads into the route to give a sense of temporal anchoring in the past.

In directly linking their events and products to the medieval past through textual references, Lahlum and the teams behind the *Birken* and *Pilgrimsleden* websites give anyone who reads their articles a chance to become familiar with their medieval inspiration. This inspiration and temporal grounding through textual references is something these medievalisms share with earlier medievalisms. This is perhaps unsurprising given that all the three extend medieval ideas that were previously explored. *The Last King* and Lahlum's article reference a nineteenth-century painting by Knut Bergslien [image 1], depicting the birkebeiner's journey from Lillehammer to Rena. *Birken* directly links its foundation to the ideas of a twentieth-century novelist in Norway, who argued in 1930 for a race to commemorate the 1206 journey. *Pilgrimsleden*, however, builds on the work by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnsson, Christopher Bruun and Ernst Sars to resurrect St Olaf (King Olaf II Haraldsson) as a significant figure in Norwegian culture.⁴⁰ Hence, there is significant continuity in the narratives used in these medievalisms.



Image 1: Knut Bergslien, 'Birkebeinerne på ski over Filefjell fører Håkon Håkonsson som barn til Trondheim', 1869. Oil on canvas, 95 × 126 cm. Private Ownership. License: Public Domain Mark 1.0.

³⁹ Neither Adam of Bremen nor the author of the *Passio Olavi* give a detailed account of the pilgrimage route.

⁴⁰ Alvestad 2016a, 67; Karl C. Alvestad, 'The Protestant Saint: the Use of King Olaf and the Anniversary of the Battle at Stiklestad in the Creation and Celebration of a Norwegian Identity', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Winchester 2012, 35.

Change in form and audience

While the narrative continuity of medievalism links them to earlier trends in Norwegian medievalism, the participatory and experiential formats of these examples represent a break with the past. These examples, unlike nineteenth-century nation building and late-twentieth-century local community development, are individually focused – they can only happen and be experienced through the participation and experience of the individuals, not the masses.

A series of news articles from 2011, 2015 and 2018 identifies who the participants in *Birken* are.⁴¹ The articles all agree that most of the participants are men with higher education who exercise regularly.⁴² The 2011 article argues that, among some of the participants, completing the race is a status symbol among this highly educated, wealthy group of men. However, for all the participants, participation in the race is an embodied experience. They ski from Rena to Lillehammer with 3500 grams in their backpack, replicating the journey of Torvald and Skervald, although in the opposite direction. Thus, their journey across the mountains is both an individual act of participating, consciously or unconsciously, in the commemoration of the deeds of the Birkebeiner men in 1206, and a communal act in their mass participation in the race – and through that commemoration of the 1206 events. The Birkebeiner.no website does not explain why the *Birken* route takes the participants in the opposite direction of the original journey. However, there might be a perfectly ordinary explanation for this racing design without diminishing the embodied experiences of the participants.

Participatory medievalism is described by Daniel T. Kline as ‘a spectrum of active embodied encounters that carry participants into creating medieval worlds with differing degrees of immersion, yielding the sense of participating in, and even inhabiting, a neomedieval [--] world.’⁴³ Kline’s participatory medievalism depends on role-playing and immersion alongside active embodied encounters and interactions with a temporal other. This temporal convergence of the medieval and modern is, in my mind, very present in *Birken*, in that participants are instructed through the race rules to carry the weight of baby Haakon on their back for the whole race,⁴⁴ the spatial placement of the race and its conscious remembering of the deeds in 1206, and by the race logo, which depicts a man carrying a child behind his shield. In their participation in the race, the skiers embody the experiences of Torvald and Skervald, and in their race gear, the past and present converge to make them participate individually in the remembrance of the two men and the child they carried to safety. It might be asked, based on the 2011 article, who participates in the *Birken* race if this participation in the commemoration is performative masculinity in an organised fashion. Moreover, for those well-educated and well-off men who participated, the race is an act of proving that they

⁴¹ Lina Leth-Olsen, ‘Er du en ekte birkebeiner?’, *Adressa.no*, published 15 March 2011. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/sortrondelag/article1603951.ece>; Erik Haugen Aspaas, ‘Dette er den typiske birkebeineren’, *E24.no*, published 9. March 2015. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://e24.no/privatoekonomi/i/b54WEe/dette-er-den-typiske-birkebeineren>; Georg Mathisen, ‘Birken for de rike og velutdannede’, *Forskning.no*, published 17. March 2018. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://forskning.no/trening-sport/birken-for-de-rike-og-velutdannede/281804>.

⁴² It must be noted that a significant number of participants are women, and that there are participants from all social groups participating in *Birken*.

⁴³ Klein 2016, 76.

⁴⁴ ‘Birkebeinerrennet’, *Birkebeiner.no*.

can undertake the same feat as the two supposedly best skiers did in 1206, thus demonstrating their continued masculinity.⁴⁵

The temporal convergence found in participating in *Birken* is also among the experiences of undertaking the journey of the pilgrimage routes. The similarity between the two experiences lies in the sense of redoing something that has been done before and by undertaking the same journey as medieval individuals. In an article about what *Pilgrimsleden* is, the author states that, for some individuals who walk the path to Trondheim, the purpose is to experience communion with those who have walked the path before them and that, in this communion, some walkers seek a mental journey and growth. To the author, the modern pilgrimage is both an external journey through a historic landscape in the footsteps of medieval walkers and an internal journey seeking peace. This kind of internal journey is what Paul Genoni, in his study of the road to Santiago, calls a Camino, which to him is a spiritual journey that the pilgrim undertakes on the route to the pilgrimage destination.⁴⁶ Such a Camino is by the *Pilgrimsleden* author only one of the many motivations for modern and some medieval wanderers. Furthermore, Genoni describes the very act of walking the pilgrimage route as an act of interacting with a temporal ‘other’. For him and his sources, the pilgrim is undertaking a ‘journey through Time and forward through Space’, thus transcending their temporal ‘home’ in the act of walking.⁴⁷ Genoni found in his study that the ‘authenticity’ of the pilgrimage is linked to the experience of a medieval ideal. This authenticity becomes most apparent when the ‘in-authentic’ is encountered, for example, by people using cars or bikes to support and undertake their journey on the road to Santiago. To some of the authors Genoni examined, the authentic medieval experience of the pilgrimage was marked by their walking, and to these authors, this became the hallmark of the ‘(re)constructed [--] medieval pilgrim experience’.

Extrapolating from this, one could understand *Pilgrimsleden*’s focus on walking tours as an ‘authentic’ recreation and interaction with the medieval. Without looking too far on the *Pilgrimsleden* website, the page is littered with references to walking, wandering and moving through the landscape on foot. Furthermore, the walks themselves follow ancient pathways in the landscape, which is meant to expose the walker to clean air, pure nature and historic landscapes and buildings, all of which are meant to frame the walkers’ Camino, or to make the walk enjoyable to secular walkers who are not seeking to encounter the spiritual. The *Pilgrimsleden.no* website is meticulous in both the Norwegian and English editions of its page, not to specify who the ‘normal’ pilgrim is. Thus, it is difficult to say for certain what or who these walkers are and how large a percentage of them are seeking the Camino and how many are just walking the paths for the views. Nevertheless, in the FAQ section of the *Pilgrimsleden.no* page for ‘Gudbrandsdalsleden’, the 643-kilometre long path from Oslo to Trondheim opened in 1997, the author states that ‘About 20% of pilgrims walking the Gudbrandsdalsleden actually prefer to walk alone’.⁴⁸ Thus, the FAQs indicate that most pilgrims undertake the journey in groups of two or more. This might also imply that those 20% walking

⁴⁵ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis; London 2009, 79–119; J. J. Bola, *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*, Pluto Press: London 2019.

⁴⁶ Genoni 2011, 159.

⁴⁷ Genoni 2011, 161.

⁴⁸ ‘Gudbrandsdalsleden’, *Pilgrimsleden.no*. Accessed 11 June 2020. Available at: <https://pilegrimsleden.no/en/trails/gudbrandsdalsleden>.

alone are making a conscious decision to seek a solitary journey, possibly to undertake a Camino.

Undertaking and experiencing the Camino and walking in communion with past pilgrims are both individual and experiential interactions with the medievalism – *Pilgrimsleden*. For both experiences of the path, the spiritual and the trans-temporal community are something the walker experiences internally in their reliving of the medieval pilgrimage in its modern re-invention.⁴⁹ Thus, pilgrimage paths are portrayed as immersive experiential medievalism, in which the modern ‘pilgrim,’ whether seeking stunning nature or a Camino, has individual-level experiences and participates in reliving medieval history. This is comparable to Pugh and Weisl’s depiction of the experiential medievalism of visiting and participating in medieval and Renaissance fairs.⁵⁰ Pugh and Weisl argue that experiential medievalisms allow the individual the ‘opportunity [--] to escape the chronological coincidence of their lives [--] to live anew in a past deemed intrinsically more satisfying than the present’. That is, they argue that experiential medievalism is escapism in which the individual can be who they want and relive the past.⁵¹ Although the modern pilgrim walking *Pilgrimsleden* is not seeking knights and dragons, they are seeking an individual wandering through the landscape on a personal escape from the modern world into the ‘authentic’ experience of the landscape and the self through walking on the path. This individual Camino, which *Pilgrimsleden* then becomes, stands in stark contrast to accounts of medieval pilgrimages, which are often depicted as partially communal experiences, where the individual was part of the pilgrim community while undertaking the journey.

Unlike the individual and personal participatory nature of participating in *Birken* and the experiential nature of walking *Pilgrimsleden*, viewing *The Last King* (2016) falls within a different kind of medievalism. One might argue that the viewing, interpreting and processing of the medieval in the film is a subjective experience through the meaning-making of the film, but, simultaneously, *The Last King* is a medieval film that directly references and contributes to a communal, popular understanding of the events of 1206 and their importance. *The Last King* is by no means a historically correct film, but it gives the viewer a feel of the medieval by bringing together knights on horseback, palisades, cathedrals and bishops, Latin prayers, an amulet depicting Thor’s hammer, a pre-Christian animal sacrifice known as a *blot*, furs and rustic-looking buildings into one ‘medieval’ film. This mixing of real and perceived medieval elements in this film shapes, according to Bettina Bildhauer, the audiences’ ideas of understanding of 1206,⁵² and as such, the film has a community role similar to earlier Norwegian medievalisms and dissimilar to *Birken* and *Pilgrimsleden*.

The Last King’s role in the community is in its communication about the Norwegian civil war and its ramifications. The film and Lahlum’s promotional article reflect a national sensibility that in many ways reflects the earlier trends in Norwegian medievalism, but, concurrently, *The Last King* is also addressing a broader audience outside the national community through its play with medieval stereotypes. This is a distinct break from the past. Although the film in a Norwegian cultural context can be seen as having a particular political reading of the past, the international promotions and

⁴⁹ Pugh & Weisl 2012, 122.

⁵⁰ Pugh & Weisl 2012, 122.

⁵¹ Pugh & Weisl 2012, 9.

⁵² Bildhauer 2016, 50.

releases of the film suggest that the production company and the director assumed the film to have a universal international appeal. It is perhaps through this international market, and the audience it comprises, that the historical anachronisms of the film can be understood. The Norwegian medieval experience and aesthetics are fairly unknown outside Norway, while the Viking Age is both widely familiar and a fairly frequent setting for cinematic productions. Thus, Thor's hammer, the blot, and the preface and epilogues of the film, which set the film's historic frames, may be a nod to this audience. A nod intended to make the film and its narrative accessible to an audience not familiar with the historical narrative depicted. In a Norwegian setting, the film can utilise the audience's familiarity with the Birkebeiner narrative, as demonstrated by the promotional article by Lahlum. Seen in a Norwegian context, the identification of the film's 'bad guys' as Danish, played by Danish actors, taps into a longer historiographic and cultural tradition where it is perceived that Danish or non-Norwegian influences undermined and destroyed the Norwegian nation and brought about the fall of the Norwegian kingdom.⁵³ For this international audience, the medievalism of *The Last King* is not a collective memorialisation of a heroic deed that 'saved' the nation; it is instead an entertaining 'generic' medieval film with beautiful scenic shots and a heroic quest that allows the audience to experience the medieval from the comforts of the cinema or their homes. This duality of the nature of the audience of *The Last King* is, as previously argued, a shift from the previous trend of a national – or at a stretch, a diaspora – audience. The format of *The Last King* is by no means a shift in the Norwegian medievalism tradition; in fact, the production of medieval film and quest narratives has declined in the first two decades of the twenty-first century compared to the two last decades of the twentieth century, even though films such as *Gåten Ragnarokk* (2013), *Olav* (2011), *Flukt* (2012), *Askeladden – i Dovregubbens hall* (2017), *Askeladden – i Soria Moria slott* (2019) and *Reisen til julestjernen* (2021) demonstrate a continued interest in the 'medieval' in Norwegian film production.

Continuity and Change in Norwegian Twenty-First-Century Medievalism

It is perhaps unsurprising that Norwegian medievalism in the twenty-first century, as represented by *The Last King*, *Birken* and *Pilgrimsleden*, has continued to focus on narratives from the Norwegian 'golden age'.⁵⁴ This historic foundation for medievalism is in these three examples both a manifestation of their place in a longer medievalist tradition, where Norwegian medievalism interacts with aspects of Norwegian identity, and an explicit acknowledgement of the need for audience recognition to ensure social and cultural relevance to assure audience and participant appeal for these medievalisms. Simultaneously, these medievalisms rely on historical textual references to the kings' sagas and the works of Adam of Bremen to authenticate their cultural relevance historically and contemporarily, a contemporary relevance that, in the Norwegian context, is closely linked to ideas of community and nationhood. The use of the 'golden age' focus and the historical sources

⁵³ I am indebted to the peer-reviewers for bringing this and other perspectives to my attention. They also highlighted that the characters in this film have no nuance or character development, and that all the 'good guys' are Norwegian, while all the 'bad guys' are non-Norwegian. Thus, the film presents a dualistic perspective on who is good and bad in the Norwegian history and narratives.

⁵⁴ Myhre 2011.

represents, in many ways, a continuation of earlier medievalism in Norway, among which historical authenticity and textual authentication were important. Hence, Bliksrud Aavitsland's conclusions about the relationship between medievalism and identity in Norway still hold.⁵⁵

It is also clear that these examples of medievalism and the cultural landscape they are a part of differ distinctly from Breivik's ideas of the medieval and his use of the medieval for cultural war. This difference from Breivik's use of the medieval helps to demonstrate how there is a continuation of non-extremist medievalism in mainstream culture in Norway. Concurrently, the materiality of these medievalisms has evolved and changed compared to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century medievalisms in Norway. Unlike these earlier medievalisms, two of the three twenty-first-century examples discussed above are based on an individual and internalised interaction with the medieval in the form of participatory, embodied and experiential re-creation of the medieval through one's actions. This differs significantly from earlier monumental medievalism of the restoration of medieval monuments, national commemorations of medieval kings, and the state-promoted implementation of medievalism in public symbols and official narratives. *Birken* and *Pilgrimsleden* demonstrate well how contemporary medievalism in Norway is very individualistic. In these two examples, the individualistic is manifested in that it is the individual that is the target audience for medievalism, and in that it is the individual's embodied interaction with medievalism that creates meaning out of these stories.

The third example, *The Last King*, can, to some extent, be seen as the prime example of twenty-first-century Norwegian medievalism in that it somewhat attempts to create medievalism that targets the individual and not the nation–state needs. Simultaneously, the film consciously caters to a national audience by extensively exploring national myths and narratives such as earlier Norwegian medieval films, thus continuing to underpin aspects of the national narrative and through that the national community. Unlike earlier films, *The Last King* attempts to address a wider audience through its anachronisms and narrative explanations.

However, a common change in all the three examples of Norwegian medievalism examined is a partial but developing separation between the state and national politics on the one hand, and contemporary Norwegian medievalism on the other hand. This separation and shift clearly emerges when comparing the twenty-first-century medievalisms with earlier nineteenth- and twentieth-century medievalisms, where both form and purpose are distinctive and closely linked to contemporary concerns related to national identity and community development. Unlike the earlier examples, the twenty-first-century medievalisms are intended to be consumed, experienced and participated in by the individual's initiative. However, all the three examples discussed above tap into existing national narratives and socialise their audience and consumers into a belief that these are things true Norwegians do; thus, they are part of a longer medievalist tradition in Norway. Twenty-first-century medievalism in Norway no longer focuses on the imagined community of the nation, but instead enables individuals to join an inter-temporal communion with medieval humans, in whose footsteps they are following and experiencing the world. Consequently, Norwegian medievalism in the first two decades of the twenty-first century has continued to evolve, and it is no longer seeking to meet the needs of the nation, region or local community but is, instead, facilitating

⁵⁵ Cf. Bliksrud Aavitsland 2006.

a spiritual journey, a Camino, allowing the modern pilgrims and Birkebeiners to become their authentic themselves.