

**Proverbia Septentrionalia:
Essays on Proverbs in Medieval Scandinavian
and English Literature**



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**Proverbia Septentrionalia:
Essays on Proverbs in Medieval Scandinavian
and English Literature**

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DOMESTIC ANIMALS IN LÅLE'S PROVERBS

JANKEN MYRDAL

Introduction

This study is primarily source critical and addresses the question of whether proverbs can be used as a source of information about daily life.¹ I will be looking at the Middle Ages, a period for which source materials are so sparse that proverbs may be significant to the study of material culture, provided they spring from regional roots. My starting point is the Nordic work known as Peder Låle's Collection, which comprises more than a thousand proverbs. For later periods, there is such extensive source material that proverbs are not as germane to describing the concrete reality of daily life.

Proverbs may express general rules of conduct meant to be literally understood, but they usually have a dual, metaphorical meaning: a physical observation used to illustrate a rule for living or a generally applicable conclusion. In this study, I have concentrated on the concrete basis for the proverbs.² Proverbs are, for instance, frequently used by agrarian historians occupied with non-European countries, where source materials related to everyday life are thin on the ground. Rolf Alfred Stein used a collection of Tibetan proverbs as a basis for exploring pastoral farming in relation to permanent crop-farming.³ David Ludden used

¹ A more detailed review has been published in a book about medieval livestock farming—Janken Myrdal, *Boskapskötsel under medeltiden: En källpluralistisk studie* (Stockholm: Nordiska Museets Förlag, 2012)—for which the work has been funded by a foundation, Stiftelsen Lagersberg. I am grateful for the comments and assistance of Lennart Elmevik, Bengt af Klintberg, Bjørn Poulsen, and the late Bo G. Nilsson.

² For an overview of international research on proverbs and especially modern proverbs and the question of typology, see Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004). Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), discusses how medieval proverbs were formed in a relationship between peasant sayings and the upper classes, for whom the proverbs were compiled.

³ Rolf Alfred Stein, *Tibetan Civilization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

proverbs to describe various agricultural systems in south India.⁴ In her studies of China, Francesca Bray has used proverbs to document the division between masculine and feminine labor.⁵ Inherent in my shift of focus from the metaphorical content of the proverb to its basis in the physical world is that the concrete part of the proverb is often a pregnant observation, something that is not only true but also remarkable—something like how the most striking metaphors of now-living authors are often those whose germ is an observation about everyday life that we might otherwise not have considered. This concrete observation may be generally applicable, but may also deal with something that is immediately understood but not particularly common.

Although the concrete observation is my main interest, I must, in order to understand it, examine the metaphorical meaning of the proverb. The two sides to a proverb have a relationship; each deepens the understanding of the other.

Two source-critical questions are especially important. First, proverbs may have been adopted by one region from another. I will return to this later. The other issue has to do with the fixed form of proverbs, which has resulted in— not least importantly in modern times—the concrete observations having to do with the past.

Peder Låle's fourteenth-century collection may serve as the starting point for a comparison with later collections. Rolf Pipping compared Finno-Swedish proverbs with Låle and found that more than thirty had close equivalents in Låle and more than twenty others were similar.⁶ Aage Hansen argues that about fifty of Peder Låle's proverbs still survive in modern Danish.⁷ It seems only about four percent of the medieval proverbs were in active use in the early twentieth century. A study of this kind could be done with several more time slices starting in the seventeenth century.⁸

⁴ David Ludden, "Archaic Formations of Agricultural Knowledge in South India," in *Meanings of Agriculture: Essays in South Asian History and Economics*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35–70.

⁵ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁶ Rolf Pipping, "Östnordiska ordspråk med anor från medeltiden," in *Kulturbistoria och folklivsforskning: Festskrift tillägnad Gabriel Nikander 21/5*, ed. Gabriel Nikander and Sven Andersson (Åbo: Institutet för Nordisk Etnologi vid Åbo Akademi, 1934), 79–80.

⁷ Aage Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1991), 163.

⁸ Another starting point could be the proverbs in the Icelandic sagas; see Richard Harris's concordance: <http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/>.

Medieval Proverb Collections

I will first present the position of Peder Låle's Collection in relation to other well-known European collections. Proverbs enjoyed high status in the Middle Ages, partly due to their prominence in the Bible but also because they were regarded as something like ready-made "thought modules" people could use to pithily say what they wanted to say. The main use for large collections was in teaching. Pupils at lower levels were made to learn Latin proverbs by heart. When the pupils scanned the proverbs in chorus, they would gain a vocabulary and sense of the structure of the language, but would also acquire life wisdom.

Research into medieval proverbs rarely deals with their situational meaning—when and how they were used. There is evidence for this in the sources. One familiar example has to do with Eric of Pomerania (king of the united kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, 1396–1439), who according to the Englebrect Chronicle warned newly appointed Lord High Constable of Sweden Karl Knutsson not to "stick his foot out past the end of his fur rug"⁹ (roughly, not to "bite off more than he could chew"). The meaning is that the King appointed him, but did not want him to acquire any real power. As such evidence, however, is rare and has not been compiled, research is oriented towards the collections.

The first larger European collections of medieval proverbs appeared in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when they still comprised perhaps only a few dozen proverbs. The collections proliferated and became more comprehensive in the thirteenth century. Collections that included several hundred proverbs appeared in the fourteenth century, along with the bilingual collections expressly intended for Latin instruction, with each proverb given in Latin and the vernacular. The collections of this kind found in northern Europe comprised as much as a thousand proverbs, while there were even larger collections in southern Europe. Very large collections of proverbs appeared, in the vernacular only, in the early sixteenth century when the custom of using proverbs in teaching began to fade. By the middle of the century, these collections included thousands of proverbs. The first large collections in the vernacular in seventeenth-century Denmark and Sweden were also on this level.¹⁰

⁹ This is mentioned not only in the chronicle from the 1430s but also in another late medieval source; see K. Kumlien, *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1933), 42.

¹⁰ There is a review in the entry "Sprichwörter" in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, although it does not mention Låle. See also the entry "Ordsprog" by Iver Kjær et al., in John Granlund et al., eds., *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, 21 vols. (Malmö: Allhem, 1956–78), 12: 671–684.

Peder Låle's Collection

The medieval collection on which this study is based is the only major collection from Scandinavia. It is named after the man who compiled it (more about him below). It is preserved in three Danish printed editions from the early sixteenth century (1506, 1508, 1515). The latest of these was published by the Danish Renaissance scholar Christiern Pederson, who also annotated all the proverbs. The Danish version includes about 1,200 proverbs. The oldest preserved text, however, is a Swedish manuscript from the first part of the fifteenth century, which includes about 1,100 proverbs. There is also a fragment in Danish from around 1450.¹¹

Låle's proverbs are mentioned in contemporary sources. The most copious evidence is found in the Latin-Swedish glossary preserved from the later fifteenth century. The modern edition claims that this manuscript is a copy of an earlier Latin-Swedish lexicon.¹²

How to date Peder Låle's collection of proverbs is an important question. Arguments have been made, based on the Swedish manuscript, that some time must have passed before the collection was translated to Swedish, and that it was therefore edited during the fourteenth century or possibly earlier. The compiler of the Latin-Swedish glossary seems to have quoted Låle from memory, probably from his school days, which brings us to at least one generation before the first manuscript: about or before the turn of the century in 1400.¹³ Aage Hansen performed a linguistic study of the Danish versions and found no signs of such archaic Danish that the collection could be taken back to the fourteenth

¹¹ There are several editions, of which the three foundational editions are: Axel Kock and Carl af Petersens, eds., *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk: Peder Låles ordspråk och en motsvarande svensk samling*, vol. 1, *Texter med inledning* (Copenhagen: Berling, 1889–94); John Kousgård Sørensen, Iver Kjær, and Erik Petersen, eds., *Danmarks gamle ordsprog*, vol. 1:2, *Peder Låles ordsprog: Christiern Pedersens udgave 1515 i oversættelse* (Copenhagen: Danske Sprog og litteraturselskab, 1979); Inger Lindell, *En medeltida ordspråksamling på fornsvenska* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur, 2011). For the first edition, there is also an accompanying commentary volume by Axel Kock, *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk: Peder Låles ordspråk och en motsvarande svensk samling*, vol. 2, *Kommentar* (Copenhagen: Berling, 1891–92). There is extensive literature related to these proverbs, notably Elis Wadstein, *Medeltidsordspråk* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1896), and Rolf Pipping, *Ordspråksstudier*, 2 vols. (Helsinki: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1938–63).

¹² Erik Neuman and Börje Tjäder, *Latinskt-svenskt glossarium: efter Cod.Ups. C 20. Inledning till utgåvan* (Uppsala: Berling, 1973), xxvi.

¹³ Kock and Petersens, *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk*, 1:107; Iver Kjær, "Efterskrift til Peder Låle," in Sørensen, Kousgård, and Petersen, *Danmarks gamle ordsprog* 1:2, 721–64.

century.¹⁴ This instead shows that the collection has been continually revised. Inger Lindell shows that the language in the Swedish manuscript suggests the period before 1350.¹⁵ Medieval sources tell us nothing certain about Peder Låle the person, other than that he was Danish. He probably came from Lolland ("Låle" means Lolland, or from Lolland). One can discern from the proverbs that his Latin was influenced by French and that he had been in France. Iver Kjær has examined the fragmentary evidence relating to persons with the name "Peder Låle," and he posits that the only possible candidate is a man who was in Avignon in the 1330s. A Peder Låle who was an abbot in Sorø in 1443 was rejected as too late.¹⁶ According to traditions known at the earliest in the 1600s, Låle was dean in Roskilde.¹⁷

If Låle's collection dates from the early fourteenth century or even earlier, it was uniquely comprehensive for its time in northern Europe. The majority of the proverbs must have been found in the collection early on, even though later additions may have been made, considering that the Swedish manuscript includes 1,089 (of which only six are unique to this manuscript) of the 1,204 proverbs found in the Danish versions from the early sixteenth century.

Comparisons between Låle and the European Collections

One question that has been discussed a great deal is the connection between Låle's collection and other collections. Scholars have searched for the source, the text Låle might have used as his model. Both Aage Hansen and Ivar Kjær have made statistical comparisons,¹⁸ whose most important parts can be summarized in a table:

	Total	Thereof in Låle
English collection, late thirteenth century	53	10
French collection, thirteenth century	259	10
Basel manuscript, fourteenth/fifteenth century	~ 1,900	59
Netherlands/Germany, fifteenth century	783	20

¹⁴ Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 6–7.

¹⁵ Lindell, *En medeltida ordspråkssamling*, 26, 30.

¹⁶ Kjær, "Efterskrift," 732–35.

¹⁷ Kock and Petersens, *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk*, 1:92–95, 108.

¹⁸ Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 171–85; Ivar Kjær, "Peder Låle og Cod. Basil: A.XI.67 bidrag til Peder Låle-samlingens kilder og tilblivelsesform," *Arv: Tidskrift för nordisk folkminnesforskning* 18/19 (1962–63): 93–113.

Ivar Kjær has identified the Basel manuscript as the most similar and prefers to date it to the fourteenth century, rather than the early fifteenth century, which is where the publishers place it.¹⁹ Since Låle's collection dates from the mid-fourteenth century, it cannot have been modeled on this Basel manuscript, and so there must have been another collection that influenced both. The Basel manuscript is in Latin only, and Aage Hansen argues that these particular proverbs showed signs of having been translated from Danish to Latin, while Danish was the original language for most of the other proverbs.²⁰

Arguments based on realia have rarely been used to determine the genesis of the collection, although Hansen points out that in the Låle proverbs, the bear is mentioned only as a tame animal, not a predator, which is evidence of the southern Scandinavian context. In northern Scandinavia, the bear would doubtless have figured as a predator. That proverbs about whales belong to the north Atlantic region is another regional characteristic.²¹ Inger Lindell points out that proverbs taken from the laws are more consistent with the Code of Jutland than with the provincial codes of Sweden.²²

Comparison of Låle and Singer

My comparison is based largely on the new research position created through the publication of *Thesaurus proverbium medii aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*. After many decades, Samuel Singer's successor published this work over the years of 1995–2002 in fourteen volumes containing about 90,000 medieval proverbs (with one volume of source references). Samuel Singer was born in 1860 and began planning his magnum opus in 1944 at the age of eighty-four, after a lifetime of collecting. He had by that time collected 80,000 proverbs from the period of 500–1500. It took about twenty scholars from the University of Bern to complete the work. The following vernaculars are covered: Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Provençal, French, Italian, Scandinavian, English, Dutch, and German (the Slavic languages are not included). The collection is arranged according to German headwords, but each proverb is found only once. Thus, despite cross-references, one must browse through everything to find the parallels. All proverbs are given in the vernacular and have been translated to modern German.

I have selected a group of proverbs from Låle for comparison with Singer. The selection is made up of the proverbs that describe livestock farming.

¹⁹ Kjær, "Peder Låle og Cod. Basil," 96–98; Jakob Werner, *Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sinnsprüche des Mittelalters*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1966), 11.

²⁰ Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 182–83.

²¹ Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 114–15.

²² Lindell, *En medeltida ordspråkssamling*, 37.

Proverbs that only mentioned a domestic animal but spoke nothing about its use and management were not included. A total of sixty-three proverbs were selected. Singer did not use any exact definition of what a proverb is, but nor did Låle, so this did not present any particular problem for the comparison.

I differentiate among proverbs that “match,” those that are “parallels,” and those that are “unique.” I have chosen not to talk about direct translations, for they occur rarely. With regard to the proverbs that match, there is agreement between both the meaning of the proverb and its concrete basis. The meanings are the same for the parallel proverbs, but the concrete basis has changed.

For example, the proverb which instructs that “a horse should be controlled with a bridle, but a woman with a stick” is found in Låle. There are parallels from antiquity and beyond for which there is medieval evidence in France and Germany, but those proverbs decree that the horse should be controlled with spurs and thus do not match. The explanation is that the horses in Låle’s collection are ordinary farm and cart horses used by the common people, and spurs were never used on these horses.

The study proceeds from the quantitative to the qualitative. A catalogue containing meticulous descriptions of every proverb has been published separately in the book on medieval livestock farming where I describe in detail the borderline cases that are naturally found between the categories.²³ I have also chosen to differentiate two proverbs for which there is matching evidence in Nordic collections, one in Saxo, the other in a thirteenth-century Icelandic text.

The result of the study is as follows:

Total Number	Matches	Parallels	Unique	Nordic matches
63	15	9	37	2

While one could previously have shown matches of only about five percent with a single collection, I can show matches of twenty-five percent with all the collections in Singer. I have also found about sixteen percent that are parallels but whose concrete basis differs, which thus very clearly illustrate the regional distinction (I discuss a few examples below). Finally, almost sixty percent of the proverbs are unique. Nor was it possible in this study to find any single primary source for Låle. The matching proverbs may be found in German or Dutch collections, as well as in the French or even Spanish or Italian. They are also often younger than Låle.

As the number of proverbs in circulation was much larger than those that were written down, these can be considered only rough calculations. On the one hand, these figures underestimate the number of unique proverbs if one

²³ Myrdal, *Boskapsskötelsen under medeltiden*, 278–86.

considers the much larger number actually in use in southern Scandinavia; and, on the other hand, they overestimate the number if one looks at how many were current in all of Europe, which was doubtless much greater. Proverbs in the compilations were just a minor part of the proverbs in use.

In order to verify the results, one should also study several categories. The distribution between matching proverbs and unique proverbs differs slightly in terms of the types of animals involved. For instance, most of the proverbs about horses are unique to Låle, while three of the five about sheep and goats have direct equivalents in European collections.

Nevertheless, one can conclude from this study, which covers about one twentieth of all proverbs in Låle, that far less than half of the proverbs are borrowed—borrowings that could of course have corresponded to local conditions and were accepted for precisely that reason.

The foreword to *Thesaurus proverbium* emphasizes the diversity that emerges in the collection, evidence, according to the publishers, of an “originale Traditionen einzelner Regionen,” noting that this is the expression of the experience of an age.²⁴

The conclusion is that a small percentage of the proverbs were held in common, and these have created the norm for how proverbs should be constructed. A rich flora of regional proverbs was created around the framework of the common proverbs.

A Few Individual Proverbs

The next step is a contextual study of the proverbs. I will concentrate on the proverbs that are unique or have parallels. This does not mean that proverbs that have direct equivalents in Europe would lack relevance for a study of Nordic daily life in the Middle Ages. They may have been adopted because they pithily expressed a known situation, but I have chosen to avoid them because this is a source-critical study. I will begin with dairy management. Several proverbs show that this was important in Scandinavia.²⁵

One of the parallel proverbs talks about profligate behaviour. In Låle, the proverb reads: “He with plenty of butter puts some in the cabbage” (207). The concrete content is that butter was not normally added to cabbage soup. The European parallels instead talk about putting pepper or honey in some humble

²⁴ Ricarda Liver, “Vorwort,” in *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*, ed. Samuel Singer and Kuratorium Singer des Schweizerischen Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 1:v–xv.

²⁵ I use the numbering in the Danish version from 1515, the edition annotated by Christiern Pedersen.

dish: honey in the porridge in France in the 1200s and Germany in the early 1500s; honey in the cabbage in Spain in the 1500s; pepper in the vegetables in Greece and the 1400s and German in the 1500s; and pepper in the porridge in Flanders in the 1000s, Italy around 1300, and the Netherlands and Germany in the 1400s.²⁶ The proverb is widespread, but its content has been adapted according to what were locally the costliest ingredients and the humblest dishes.

Another proverb with parallels demonstrates the same kind of change. In Låle, it instructs, “It is proper to have clean vessels for the milk” (934), which is an accurate observation: cleanliness is crucial in all dairy management. The many equivalent proverbs in France, the Netherlands, and Germany instead emphasize the importance of clean vessels for wine, while one German proverb talks about beer. The proverb about having clean vessels—for otherwise the contents will be spoiled—has roots in antiquity.²⁷ One proverb in Låle that has been the subject of considerable discussion says that “you should not keep a wood vessel (a tall and narrow vessel for a plunge churn) under the beams” (689). It is clear even in the Danish annotations from the early sixteenth century that the subject of the proverb is milk theft through enchantment. The discussion, which I will not go into in detail here, has to do with whether this is a warning against using magic to steal other people’s milk or a warning against putting the butter churn where the milk would be vulnerable to magical theft. Based on folkloric parallels, I believe the latter is the more correct.²⁸ The point, however, is that this unique proverb in Låle is the only proverb in Singer where milk theft by witchcraft is mentioned. The belief in magical milk theft was found throughout northwestern and northern Europe, where livestock farming was oriented toward dairy management, but it was particularly strong and is well documented in Denmark and Sweden.

The account of proverbs about the major importance of milk and butter in Scandinavian livestock farming could go on with, for example, “Even a black cow gives white milk” in Låle (820). This proverb has only one direct match in a German proverb from the sixteenth century, but several parallels from Italy and France talk about how black hens give white eggs.²⁹

Låle’s proverbs originated and reflect a context in which dairy management enjoyed a dominant position—something we also know from several other sources. However, dairy production and especially cheese production was important in southern Europe, as is reflected in the proverbs. Of the proverbs under the heading “Cheese” in Singer, twenty-two are from southern Europe (Italy, France, Spain) and seven from northern Europe (the Netherlands, Germany,

²⁶ Singer, *Thesaurus*, vol. 7, KOHL 3; Wadstein, *Medeltidsordspråk*, 20; Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 185; Pipping, *Ordspråksstudier* 2:2, 81–96.

²⁷ Singer, *Thesaurus*, vol. 4, GEFÄSS 5.3, 13.1.

²⁸ In addition to Kock’s commentary, there is a detailed account of the arguments in Pipping, *Ordspråksstudier* 2:3, 24–41.

²⁹ Singer, *Thesaurus*, vol. 10, SCHWARZ.

England, the Nordic countries), while all ten proverbs under the heading “Butter” are from northern Europe.³⁰

The next group I will bring up for examination are the horse proverbs. Several in Låle’s collection have to do with weak or small horses. One of them matches other European proverbs: “A small/poor horse makes for a short day’s travel” (287).³¹

There are in Låle, however, several unique proverbs about small or poor horses: “Better a skinny horse than an empty halter” (347, 853, two similar proverbs—there are a number of duplicates in Låle); “He must settle for a skinny horse who hasn’t a fat one” (745); and one with a somewhat different meaning: “It is a poor horse that cannot manage a ride to Mass” (1189). Horse proverbs were common in the rest of Europe, but they do not deal with problems related to poor and skinny horses.

This concentration on the small or poor horses culminates in Låle with one of the most fascinating proverbs: “A small horse is in water most” (624), which Aage Hansen has interpreted, most certainly correctly, as “A small horse sinks deepest at the ford,” or recast in modern language, “You know you have a small horse when you come to the deep ford.” This gives us not only a picture of small horses, which were common, but also a picture of travel across a landscape dotted and crisscrossed with lakes, streams, and rivers, but devoid of bridges and ferries. Kock also cites a present-day Icelandic proverb with the same wording.³² One of the unique proverbs in the collection is particularly fascinating. It reads: “A poor woman should shear the sheep under the belly and not at the shoulder” (75). Christiern Pedersen did not understand this proverb in the early 1500s, which shows that the custom described had fallen by the wayside. By means of an elegant analysis, linguistic scholars have shown that it should be interpreted as “A poor woman (who is given alms) should shear the sheep under the belly and not at the shoulder (where the wool is thickest).”³³ This agrees with another proverb about sharing the meat after the slaughter, and without these proverbs we could not have known anything about this gift economy in the small things. Even though Pedersen misunderstands, his erroneous interpretation says something about his time and context. In his commentary, he states that the proverb is about harlots, referring to how harlots in the Middle Ages were marked by cutting

³⁰ Massimo Montanari, *Cheese, Pears, and History in a Proverb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), describes, based on a French-Italian proverb, the change in cheese consumption in the Middle Ages from rustic food to luxury.

³¹ Singer, *Thesaurus*, vol. 9, PFERD 8.5.

³² In addition to Kock’s commentary, see Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 103.

³³ Kock and Petersens, *Östnordiska och latinska medeltidsordspråk*, 2:44–45; Pipping, *Ordspåksstudier* 2:3b, 184–85.

(or more often burning off) their pubic hair.³⁴ Pedersen was unaware of the older custom but instead believed that the proverb was about something within his own empirical horizon.

The Nordic climate features in some of the unique proverbs. That pigs had difficulties with the ground frost in winter is mentioned in a proverb that occurs twice: “For lazy pigs, the earth is frozen” (186, 722). We do not find anything similar in other collections.

One telling proverb is “Woe betide him who sells his hay when the peewit comes” (370, not found in the Swedish manuscript). In his commentary, Kock provides the correct interpretation, that one should be careful not to sell the hay too early, that is, when the peewit comes. The peewit arrives as soon as the snow melts, as early as March in Denmark, and is one of the earliest returning migratory birds. It is also a “weather migrant” that does not arrive at a specific time but rather with the first sign of warmth—and as everyone knows, the cold weather can snap back with a vengeance. If that happens, one should ideally still have one’s hay and not have sold it.³⁵

Summary

The study has confirmed that the proverbs, at least to a certain extent, reflect daily life in the Middle Ages. These concrete observations give us—after source-critical assessment—an understanding of periods for which we otherwise lack detailed sources about everyday life.

As a final example, I will use a proverb that seems puzzling at first but once clarified becomes imbued with meaning: “It is difficult to herd a black pig over dark ground / burnt heath / burnt meadows” (1054). In Pedersen’s early sixteenth-century annotations, this is interpreted as nighttime, but this must be a corruption. From the realia perspective, herding pigs at night is a doubtful proposition: this almost never occurred. If, however, you focus on what the Danish proverb says, “burnt heath,” and the Swedish “burnt meadows,” which must refer to land cleared by slashing and burning—since a main purpose of this practice (*swidden*) was to create meadowland—the concrete meaning becomes precisely the kind of observation that must have been striking. Large swathes of land—the heather-covered heaths of Denmark, the slash and burn fields in

³⁴ Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages: Discovering the Real Medieval World* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), 250, 356.

³⁵ Wadstein, *Medeltidsordspråk*, 32, offers a less likely interpretation about the rare hoopoe bird. Hansen, *Om Peder Laales danske ordsprog*, 123, agrees with Kock. On the peewit as a harbinger of spring, see also John Bernström, *Bernströms bestiarium: en djurens nordiska kulturhistoria* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2008), 564—from the entry “Vipa” in Andersson and Granlund, *Kulturbistoriskt lexikon*.

southern Sweden—were burnt black every year. Herding a pig is difficult at the best of times, but if one of the cunning little beggars found its way onto burnt land of this kind and the pig was also black, it must have been especially difficult to catch the animal. An event of this kind was not common, but it is evidence that an unusual but nevertheless known phenomenon could form the concrete basis for a metaphor.

Proverbs in the Middle Ages were living material, something like the literature of our day, and proverbs were only partially fixed and fossilized as we perceive most of them today. A general conclusion is thus that proverbs can be a reliable source for information about material culture and everyday life. Certainly we have to take into consideration source-critical aspects, as people reproducing what they had been taught, but there was a tendency for inventing and adaptation of proverbs. A large number of proverbs would—generally—reflect the surrounding regional culture.

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Abbreviations

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CWE	Collected Works of Erasmus
EETS	Early English Text Society (ES: Extra Series; OS: Original Series; SS: Supplementary Series)
ERGA	Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde
MRTS	Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies
SKALD	Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages

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