



Fig. 1—mineral, plant and animal materials used to extract pigments for the illumination of manuscripts at the time of King Magnus Law-Mender in Norway, featuring in copies of the Land-law (1274). Frequently, the ornamental logic and depictions from Mediaeval times are contingent to the matters at hand. They are often non-illustrative.

The exhibition [Upholding the Law](#)—February 1st to September 14th 2024 at the National Library of Norway (NLN)—is a display of King Magnus Lagabøte’s life and work. His honorific name (Lagabøte) means Law-Mender: the year 1274 is the year of the Landlaw. The amendment of Norwegian legal customs/bylaws into a single legal body, under the King. Though King Magnus was a Christian, and the laws written in Latin characters (and not *Futhark*, the runic alphabet in use till the 14th century) the language is Norse, the laws are mainly secular: the Church-law is a separate section.

But it was influenced by Christianity on one major point: *everyone is equal before the law*. The King’s references—matrimonial and bibliographical—are continental (Castile and France). This legal body was one of four early examples of inventive integration of customary and roman law: the so-called [Jus Commune](#). As the major books from this time, Magnus Law-Mender’s Land-law was made out of parchment. The number of animals (usually sheep) that needed to make a the volume, and the minerals used in its illumination not only made it precious, but also contingently sacrificial.

The land and livestock are embodied in the book, that regulates the life of people—on Norwegian territories—in its most varied aspects: on the legal institute, Christian faith, general laws (taxation and conscription), life and property, inheritance, allodial right, land-rental, acquisition, theft, fines/sanctions. In the background of the exhibit one can hear Gregorian chant, and the fledgling musical notation of [neumes](#), with the explications of the notation by monk and music theorist [Guido of](#)

[Arezzo](#). The same music could be heard everywhere, the exhibit explains, and thereby tied the country—and the realms of Christianity—together. The exhibition features the post-Viking Norway as part of that Commons.

A similar attempt was made to present Norway as a part of the European Community, in June 1972. The issue N°42 of the Brussels based revue *Terre d’Europe* included the life and work of King Magnus Law-Mender, along with a number of other elements of Norwegian history, apt to present the country as an historical part of the community: ranging from the Stave Churches and the Law-Mender, up to modern times—featuring the beginning of the offshore oil-industry alongside the life and work of the Norwegian painter Jean Heiberg (with references to his career in France). The issue came out between Prime Minister Trygve Bratteli’s signature of the EC agreement and the national referendum in



Fig. 2—A skin stretched for scraping and smoothed with pumice stone, in the making process of a parchment. It would take approximately 200 sheep skins to make a Bible. Before Gutenberg (paper and press) a bible took toll of a considerable livestock of sheep.

September 1972, based on a ballot in which 53,5% of the population voted *against* Norwegian membership. Which raises a question without answer and poses a problem without solution.

The question is: can we deduce that the elements make up Norway as part of the European *oecumene* are made up? The issue N° 42 of *Terre d'Europe* certainly is a spectacular example of political aesthetic *fiction*. But what of the exhibition on King Magnus Law-Mender? It is not so clear: the law was binding and ruled from 1274 till the Danish annexation of Norway in 1537. Which means that there is jurisprudence, following in the wake of verdicts from that period, and therefore a chapter of Norwegian legal history, and also the work of time: the Law as the seat of Monarchy.

This inheritance was extended by the Norwegian Constitution of 1814: notwithstanding the abolition of aristocracy in 1821, the King embodies the *rule of law* amongst the majority of the population (republicanism did never get a solid foothold in Norway to this day). As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben [stated](#): *the King rules but the Throne is empty*. The King does not rule *from* the Throne, but rules *through* the Law. The rule of law and the body of the Monarch are intrinsically connected. Which might be one ultimate heritage from the Law-Mender in Norway.

To proceed onwards from this point—which, after all, might also be made up—we need to create a tolerance for some metaphysical speculation. Which largely is about its notorious absence from Norwegian culture: it is a subject matter of experts (it is a subject matter of explanatory attempts but remains culturally unreadable). The background for this culturally based dismissal might lie precisely here: that the King represents every wo/man in their equality before the law. That the law applies to the King—symbolised by e.g. the use of [public transportation](#)—features this warranty.

The metaphysical counterpoint is readily available: when European Citizenship was promulgated in the wake of the European Union (1992), it was not a matter of complication. It simply stated that the laws of European Union, apply to the European citizens (that is, not only to its member states). When the Norwegian population voted no to membership in the Union in 1994, it was clear that this level of connection did not compute in Norway. There is no sovereign symbol to warrant the equality of every wo/man before the law. There is no autonomous realm of political thought.

In many other European traditions, the existence of such an autonomous realm is precisely the key to citizenship. It introduces the right and duty to think and act as a citizen. Polemically one might say that if this tradition exists at all—in Norwegian cultural history—it is among the members of the educated bourgeoisie (and the lesser aristocracy it absorbed) whose sentimental education was vouchsafed by the 19th Grand Tour in Europe. Moreover, this *citizenship of the pen*, articulated more readily in poetry, literature and essays than in philosophy.



Fig. 3—the ingredients of ink in colourful display: gallnut, iron(II) sulphate, gum arabic.

*If the NLN exhibition on the Law-Mender obliquely festoons the myth of the Norwegian law-abiding citizen, then a critique of that myth may be needed to bring balance to our case. Colourful and entertaining as it is, invites a hindsight on contingency in the cradle of metaphysics: contingency means alongside and touching... featuring in the exhibit's invitation to touch the parchment. In the etymology of contingency, the Latin word *tingere*, means to colour, dye or paint. Colouring, dyeing, painting alongside.*

On the one hand, the depictions of politics in cultural history will always be contingent. On the other hand, the point of writing might well be to let even colourful fictions be marked by the real: as long as it is *not* a world unto itself that contains its own reality—which is illusion not fiction. So, which one will it be?