

## Snorri and the Jews

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For medieval Scandinavians, it was a dead religion, belonging to the distant past. Perhaps it had once offered spiritual truths, but that was before the coming of Christianity, a belief system which had swept it aside and utterly superseded the old ways. People had believed in it only because Christ had not yet come to them. That, in itself, was blameless, but once the Good News had been spread, only the most stubborn and malevolent mind would refuse to convert to the one true faith. Nonetheless, it had a left behind a precious trove of worthy narratives, tales of heroic deeds, and beautiful poetry. A good medieval Christian could certainly appreciate that, but he ought to feel nothing but disdain for any remaining adherents of this backwards creed. In the literature of the thirteenth century, its followers were frequently depicted as witches, troublemakers and ne'er-dowells; relics of a bygone age, waiting either for conversion or the righteous violence of the pious. I am speaking, of course, about Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

Hostility towards Jews was an unpleasant and undeniable feature of thirteenth century European life.<sup>2</sup> The continent's Jewish population, numbering perhaps some 450,000 souls,<sup>3</sup> were subjected to rhetorical attacks by Christian preachers, repressive laws, and occasional outbreaks of violence. To frame this chronology of persecution within the life and times of Snorri Sturluson, we might begin by noting that *Snorra Edda* was written just a few years after the ruling of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. This edict included the infamous proclamation that "Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress"<sup>4</sup> The ruling ultimately led to the enforced wearing of yellow badges or hats in many countries. Similarly, by the time that Snorri died in 1241, the Jews of London, York, Oxford, Bury St. Edmunds and Fulda had all been implicated in blood libels, Crusaders had massacred more than 2,500 Jews in northern France, and Pope Gregory IX had put the Talmud on trial in Paris.<sup>5</sup>

My aim in this paper, then, is to situate Snorri in what is arguably his most proximal comparative context: that of intellectual culture in the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I will focus on the meditations on Judaism, and often anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, which pervaded it. During this period, serious thinkers could hardly avoid engagement with the questions prompted by the ongoing interaction between Christianity and Judaism. Even if they only treated the topic tangentially, the place of the Jews as characters in the Gospels, popular accusations of Jewish perfidy, the pervasive typological associations of "the Jew" as an *exemplum*, meant that most of the important writers of the thirteenth century made use of the Jewish topos. We might cite any number of examples here:

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in a sense there is more Old Norse writing concerning these "worthy narratives" from the Bible than there are reproductions of pagan narratives. *Stjórn, Gyðinga saga*, and the Old Testament *exempla* from *Konungs Skuggsjá*, for example, dwarf *Snorra Edda* and the Eddic poems. For an argument connecting all three of the former to one author, Brandr Jónsson, see: Ian Kirby. *Bible Translation in Old Norse*. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1986) pp. 169-181.

<sup>2</sup> The initial description of medieval Europe as a "persecuting society" was provided by R.I. Moore. He pays particular attention to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his book: R.I. Moore. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society. Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250*. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006) pp. 144-171.

<sup>3</sup> Salo W. Baron. "Population" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. vol. 16. ed. by Michael Berenbaum & Fred Skolnik (Detroit: MacMillan Reference, 2007) p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob R. Marcus. *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791*. (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999) p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Gerd Mentgen. "Crusades" in *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*. vol. 1. ed. by Richard S. Levy. (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2005) p. 155. Although the focus is on Jewish responses rather than Christian antagonism, these persecutions are synthesized by: Israel Jacob Yuval. "Jewish Messianic Expectations towards 1240 and Christian Reactions" in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*. ed. by Peter Schäfer & Mark R. Cohen. (Leiden: Brill, 1998) pp. 113-116.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is not a novel proposal. See, for example: Bjarne Fidjestøl. "Snorri Sturluson – European Humanist and Rhetorician" in *Selected Papers*. ed. by Odd Einar Haugen & Else Mundal. trans. by Peter Foote. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997) pp. 343-350. Anthony Faulkes. "The Sources of Skáldskaparmál: Snorri's Intellectual Background" in *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. by Alois Wolf (Tübingen: Narr, 1993), pp. 59-76.

Albertus Magnus (fl. 1245),<sup>7</sup> William of Auvergne, (fl. 1228) or Robert Grosseteste (fl. 1220s) are all demonstrative of this trend.

*Snorra Edda* obviously does not feature any Jewish characters proper, but, to employ a distinction coined by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, there are several figures who are “Jew-ish”.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, they are not intended to be comments upon the Jews or their religion, but they do freely make use of the potent typological armoury of anti-Judaism. Indeed, we might well note as an aside, that when Snorri was constructing the fictional universe of his *Edda*, he was not averse to borrowing from the contemporary xenophobias of his age and projecting them into the past. Consider for example the following comparison between a moment from *Snorra Edda* and another from *Bartholomeus saga Postola*. When St. Bartholomew exorcises a pagan idol, the following comes running out:

ogorlegr blamaþr biki svartari, harðlundlegr oc hvassnefiaðr, siðskeggiaðr oc svart skeggit oc illilict, harit svart oc sitt, sva at toc a tær honum, augun sem elldr væri í at sia, oc flugu gneistar or sem af vellandi iarni. Or munninum oc nausunum for ut sva sem brennusteins logi...<sup>9</sup> -

a terrible *blámaðr*, blacker than pitch, proud and pointy-nosed, long-whiskered and with a black beard, ugly, with black hair that went down to his toes, and with eyes that were like looking into fire, and sparks flew from him as from molten iron. Flames of brimstone came from his mouth and nose ..."

While in the *Edda*, Snorri says the following of the *Dökkálfar* - "Dark Elves":

Hár segir: “Margir staðir eru þar gøfugligir. Sá er einn staðr er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru svartari en bik”<sup>10</sup>

Hár says: "There are many excellent places there. One is a place called Álfheimr. The people who are called the Light-Elves live there, but the Dark-Elves live down in the earth, and they are most unlike them in appearance, and much more different in behaviour. The Light-Elves are fairer than the sun, and the Dark-Elves blacker than pitch.

Incidentally, the phrase *svartari en bik* also recalls the *neirs cume peiz* - “blacker than pitch/ink” trope that describes Saracens or Ethiopians in the *chansons de geste*.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, Snorri's strategy of making *Dökkálfar* out of *Blámenn* does little to defend black people or Muslims against the common presuppositions of medieval Christianity, but neither does he seek to further the polemic. Snorri borrows from a given tradition where its imagery inspires or the typological allusion is particularly

<sup>7</sup> Hans Liebeschutz. “Albertus Magnus” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. vol. 1. (Detroit: MacMillan Reference, 2007) p. 591. By the same author, see: “William of Auvergne” in *ibid.* vol. 21. p. 64. On Grosseteste's postulated Hebraism, see: S. Harrison Thomson, *The Writings of Robert Grosseteste. Bishop of Lincoln 1235-1253*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) pp. 38-39. For a recent argument that Grosseteste fully understood Hebrew, see: James McEvoy. *Robert Grosseteste*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 120-121. For rather dated comment on his anti-Judaism, see: Lee M. Friedman. *Robert Grosseteste and the Jews* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1934). In fact, Grosseteste was quite anti-Jewish, condoning the expulsion of local Jews and sparing those who attacked them. See: Cecil Roth. *The Jews of Medieval Oxford*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) pp. 126-127, cf. p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> See: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Medieval Identity Machines*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) p. 185. Cf. By the same author: “Was Margery Kempe Jewish?”, *In the Middle*. 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2006.  
<http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2006/04/was-margery-kempe-jewish.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Bartholomeus saga Postola II* in *Postola sögur. Legendariske Fortællinger om Apostlernes Liv, deres Kamp for Kristendommens Udbredelse, samt deres Martyrdom*. ed. by C.R. Unger (Christiania: B.M. Bentzen, 1874) p. 763. Other associations of *blámenn* with fire can be found in Marian miracles. In “Brodir sa vorn hera ok hans modur i messu”: *Hann retti ut or sinum munnni elldlaga tungu, með huerri hann sagði sík skyldu sleikja brott allt kiot af hans beinum* - “He extended out of his mouth a fiery tongue, with which he said he wished to lick away all the meat from his bones”. In “Maria hialpadi systur”: *tuo blámenn logandi sem elldr* - “two *blámenn*, flaming as fire”. See: *Mariu Saga. Legender om Jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn, efter gamle haandskrifter*. ed. by C.R. Unger (Christiania: Brögger & Christie, 1871) p. 810, pp. 905-906.

<sup>10</sup> Snorri Sturluson. *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*. ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988) p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> On this phrase in the *chansons*, see: Cohen, 2003. p. 201.

striking, but it should be stressed that I do not believe he was dealing in allegory *per se*. This is just as true in the case of Snorri's use of the anti-Jewish tradition. Snorri did not intend to criticise the Jews, much as the more astute in his audience might have drawn that inference. Rather, amongst many other additional influences, he was inspired by contemporary ideas about Jews and Judaism, which he then deployed, liberated from their original frame of reference, in the fantasy world of the *Edda*.

Although, as stated, there are no Jewish personalities in the *Edda*, the Jews as a collective do make an explicit appearance in one particular recension, namely the *Codex Wormianus* from the middle of the fourteenth century. There, in the prologue, we find the following elaboration on the device of euhemerism:

Enn sem nofnín fiqlguðuz. þa tyndiz með þui sanleikrinn. Ok af fyrstu uillu þa blotaði huerr maðr epterkomandi sinn formeistara dyr eða fugla loptin ok himintunglín ok ymisliga dauðlega lutí þar til er þessi uilla gekk um allan heím ok sua uandlegha tyndu þeir sannleiknum at æingi uissi skapara sinn. utan þeir æinir menn sem toluðu ebreska tungu þa sem gekk firi stöpul smíðina ...<sup>12</sup>

And as the names [for God] multiplied, the true one was lost. And from the initial heresy, every man and his descendants worshipped as their master animals or birds, the sky and the heavenly bodies and various inanimate objects until this heresy went all around the word, and so they habitually lost the truth, so that no-one knew his Creator, except for those men who had spoken the Hebrew language preceding the construction of the tower [of Babel]

Coming from an interpolation found solely in the *Codex Wormianus*, this episode is surely “Eddie” even if it probably isn't “Snorric”. Nonetheless, it is enlightening for our understanding of *Snorra Edda*'s connections to the Christian conception of the Jews. There is a reminder here of the antiquity of Judaism, and implicit therein a nod to St. Augustine's paradigm of “Jew as Witness”.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, this apparently casual remark stresses to the reader that the Jews had been the guardians of God's law even while Scandinavians and the other gentile nations had been off worshipping “inanimate objects”. There is almost a tone of mocking admonishment in the narrative voice. It is also significant that the Jews are not referred to by any of their usual names in Old Norse, e.g. *gyðingr* or *júði*. The somewhat oblique appellation of “men who had spoken the Hebrew language” seems to anticipate any negative connotations which might have accompanied the word “Jew”. The separation of the Jews from their language was a common psychological mechanism in medieval culture which accomodated anti-Judaism with reverence for one of the languages of scripture. For example, even the archetypal Christian scholar of Hebrew, St. Jerome, wrote attacking Jewish ritual clothing.<sup>14</sup> We can observe this “doublethink” elsewhere in Old Norse literature. For example in the *Messuskýringar* (commentaries on the symbolism of liturgy) we find the statement: *Því er á inu vinstra horni alltaris miðhlutr messu sunginn, at nú standa aðrar þjóðir undir trú. Enn þeir eru nú mjök utan brautar gyðingarnir*.<sup>15</sup> “This is why the the Mass is sung on the left side of the altar, so that other nations might submit to faith. But those Jews are now way off track”. This is not in any way at odds with the commentator's previous joyous assertion that: *ina aðztu tungu er ebreska* ...<sup>16</sup> “the highest language is Hebrew”. However, there is no reason to suppose that the author was attempting such intellectual gymnastics in the prologue of the *Codex Wormianus*. It might be an aside, but his intent is clear: “you may not like the Jews, but they were a great deal closer to God than we were, back when we were worshipping Óðinn, rocks, puddles or who-knows-what-other-

<sup>12</sup> Snorri Sturluson. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Codex Wormianus AM 242, fol.* ed. by Finnur Jónsson. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1924) p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Cohen. *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999) pp. 23-65.

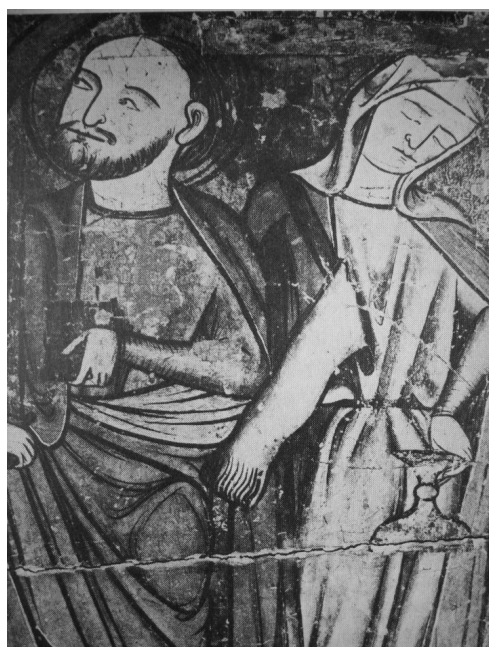
<sup>14</sup> See: Joel B. Itzkowitz. “Jews, Indians, Phylacteries: Jerome on Matthew 23.5”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 15, 4 (Winter, 2007) pp. 563-572. Cf. The concept of “cultural Hebraism” outlined by: Michael A. Signer. “Polemics and Exegesis: The Varieties of Twelfth Century Christian Hebraism” in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*. ed. by Allison Coudert. (Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) esp. p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Messuskýringar. Liturgisk Symbolik frå Den Norske-Islandske Kyrkje i Millomalderen*. vol. 1. ed. by Oluf Kolsrud. (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1952) pp. 47-48. [MY STANDARDISATION]

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. at pp. 45-46.

*daudligar-blutir*".

Snorri himself, however, tends to borrow from the more dramatic, and hostile perception of Jews. The example of this which has probably received the most attention is the role of anti-Jewish typology in Snorri's story of Baldr's death and abortive resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Baldr's Christ-like credentials are well known, which begs the question, which character in the narrative then represents the Jews? Noting the long standing characterisation of "Synagoga" as blind, Arthur Mosher proposed that Høðr must have been intended to refer to the Jews, with Loki, as the orchestrating power, acting as a cipher for Satan.<sup>18</sup> Mosher's overtly Christological interpretation of this episode has not been universally accepted. His hypothesis can perhaps be modified and enhanced with some concomitant examples of the tropes he discusses. To my knowledge, Jews are described as blind five times in Old Norse literature, including one reference in the *Old Icelandic Homily Book*.<sup>19</sup> In addition to these textual attestations, one pictorial depiction of the blind Synagoga survives from the Old Norse-speaking period in a church painting in Kinnsarvik, Norway [see fig. 1]. Moreover, the Gospel motif of the Jews as unwitting instruments for Satan's plan to kill Christ also features in *Niðrstigningar saga*, the Old Norse translation of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which Christopher Abram has argued may have inspired Snorri elsewhere in the Edda, specifically his account of Hermóðr's *Helreið*.<sup>20</sup> There the Devil *eggjat gyþing[a] hþ fiandscaþar víþ hann*<sup>21</sup> - "incited the Jewish nation to enmity against Him".



**Fig. 1.** Blind Synagoga with St. Paul. From Kinnsarvik Church, Norway. c. 1200.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that elsewhere scholars have also investigated parallels and perhaps even borrowings from medieval Jewish literature in *Snorra Edda*. Space does not allow for further discussion of this trend here. See: Sophus Bugge. *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og heltesagns Oprindelse* (Christiania: A. Cammermeyer, 1881-1898) p. 45. E.O.G Turville-Petre. *Myth and Religion of the North: the religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1964) p. 119. Heather O'Donoghue. "What has Baldr to do with Lamech? The Lethal Shot of a Blind Man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish Exegetical Traditions", *Medium Ævum* 72 (2005) pp. 90-91.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur D. Mosher. "The Story of Baldr's Death: the Inadequacy of Myth in the Light of Christian Faith", *Scandinavian Studies* 55, 4 (Autumn 1983) pp. 313-314.

<sup>19</sup> These are: "Mariu gratr" in *Mariu Saga*. pp. 890-893. "Vor fru hialpadi iuda" in *ibid.* pp. 963-965. *Homiliu-Bók. Isländska Homilier efter en Handskrift från Tolfte Århundradet*. ed. by Theodor Wisén. (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerups Förlag, 1872) pp. 57-58. "Inventio Crucis" in *Heilagra Manna Sögur, fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder*. vol. 1. ed. by C.R. Unger (Christiania: B.M. Bentzen, 1877) pp. 302-308. "Flagellatio Crucis" in *ibid.* pp. 308-311.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Abram. "Snorri's Invention of Hermóðr's *helreið*" in *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic, Sagas and the British Isles: Preprints of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference* (Durham: The Centre of Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2006) p. 13. See also, by the same author: *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen*. (London: Continuum, 2011) p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> "Niðrstigningar Saga II" in *Heilagra Manna Sögur*. vol. 2. p. 16. cf. pp 3-4, 19.

Thus, I agree that it is not unreasonable to adduce that Snorri would have been familiar with the trope. But Mosher's argument is open to criticism on two fronts: 1) it is perhaps too allegorical. It implies that *Snorra Edda* is a sort of *roman à clef*, where characters are façades for one discrete referent. As we have seen in the case of the *Dokkálfr*, that is not how Snorri's mind worked. Behind a single character may lie a genealogy including any number of influences, and a single influence may manifest itself in many different characters simultaneously. 2) Mosher does not draw on the most tangible and credible source of typology for Snorri's writing, namely the kind of preaching material now best exemplified by the *Old Icelandic Homily Book* I shall term the issue of influence from sermons and homilies on Snorri as "The Snomily Problem". Abram, who also argues for the presence of incognito Jews in Snorri's work, says this on the matter:

In his eighth homily on the Gospels ... Gregory the Great (590-604), specifies that not quite *everything* acknowledged Christ's divinity by their sorrow at his death. Gregory enumerates the ways in which the different elements of creation – including the rocks, sea and sun – perceived Christ as Lord ... But, continues Gregory, the Jews who turned away from Christ were harder hearted even than rocks, refusing 'to acknowledge him whom ... the elements proclaimed to be God either by their signs or by being broken' ... When combined with the relatively well-known idea that all creation wept at Christ's death, Gregory's homily may lead us to suspect that at some point in the transmission of the Baldr myth it has been susceptible to Christian influence. Gregory's homilies were known in Iceland and translated into Old Norse, and they provided an important source for the types of sermon that Snorri might have heard preached each Sunday in church.<sup>22</sup>

Abram's argument is fortified when we confirm that the relevant excerpt from the Gregorian homily he is describing is indeed attested in an Old Icelandic sermon on the Apparition of Christ:

En oss er þeckandi i ælloim tócnom þeim er sýnd ero báþe at bornom drótne oc deyianda. hve mikil illzca hever veret i hiortom neqverra gyþinga er hvártke kændosc þeir við gyl fyr spár ne fyr iarteiner. þuiat allar hofopskepnor vóttþo komet hafa scapera sín. J þui kendo himnarnar guþ. er þeir sendio stiornona. Hafet kende hann. þuiat þat spratt eige vndan fótom hans þa er hann geck yver þat. Jorþen kende hann. þuiat hon skalf at honom deyianda. Sólén kende hann. þuiat hon gerþe eigi skína. Steinar kendo hann. þuiat þeir sprungo a tíþ dauþa hans. Helvíte kende hann. þuiat þat varþ aftr at selia þa dauþa men es þat helt áþr. En þóat allar hofopskepnor váttape hann guþ vera. þa villdo öllvngis eige hiorto ótrúra gyþinga trúa hann guþ vera. oc harþare steinom villdo þau eige klíufasc til iþronar. oc vilia eige iáta þeim er allar skepnor skilia guþ vera.<sup>23</sup>

It is known to us in all wonders, those which were seen both at the Lord's birth and death, how much evil has been in the hearts of some Jews, who neither acknowledge God for prophecies nor for miracles. Because all the elements affirmed that their creator had come. The heavens acknowledged God, for they sent the stars. The sea acknowledged him, because it did not part under his feet when he walked over it. The earth acknowledged him, because it shook upon his death. The sun acknowledged him, because it did not shine. The stones acknowledged him, because they cracked at the time of his death. Hell acknowledged him, because it came again to deliver back those dead men, whom previously it held. But even though all of the elements attested that He was God, then the hearts of the faithless Jews would by no means believe Him to be God, and harder than stones they would not be cracked for [their] repentance, and would not yield to Him, whom all of creation understands to be God.

Considered alongside Snorri's own words, the influence from this scene on the *Edda* becomes quite transparent:

Því næst sendu Æsir um allan heim orindreka at biðja at Baldr væri grátinn ór Helju. En allir gerðu þat menninir ok kykvendin ok jörðin ok steinarnir ok tré ok allr málmr, svá sem þú munt sét hafa at þessir

<sup>22</sup> Abram, 2011. pp. 219-220.

<sup>23</sup> *Homilíu-Bók*. p. 58.

hlutir gráta þá er þeir koma ór frosti ok í hita. Þá er sendimenn fóru heim ok hófðu vel rekit sín eyrindi, finna þeir í helli nokkvorum hvar gýgr sat. Hon nefndisk Þökk. Þeir biðja hana gráta Baldr ór Helju. Hon segir:

“Þökk mun gráta / þurru tárur / Baldrs bálfarar. / Kyks né dauðs / nautka ek karls sonar: / haldi Hel því er hefir.”

En þess geta menn at þar hafi verið Loki Laufeyjarson er flest hefir illt gert með Ásum.<sup>24</sup>

The next thing that happened, the Æsir sent word around the whole world, asking for Baldr to be wept out of Hel. And everyone did so, humans and animals and the earth and the stones and trees and every kind of metalwork, as you will have seen that these things weep when they are brought out of the cold and into the warm. Then when the messengers came home and had almost completed their task, they find in a certain cave a giantess sitting in a cave. She was called Þökk. They ask her to weep for Baldr, to get him out of Hel. She says:

“Þökk will cry / dry tears / at Baldr's funeral. / Living nor dead, / I did not delight in the old man's son [Baldr] / May Hel keep what she has.

But most people think this was really Loki, son of Laufey, who committed the most evil against the Æsir.

Besides the allusion to Gregory's homily, there are other factors contributing to Loki's Jew-ishness. There appears to be a subtle irony in the choice of Loki's *alter ego*. Þökk means “thanks” or “gratefulness”. Cleasby and Vigfússon assert that this is a co-incidence, and that Þökk's name must originally have a different root.<sup>25</sup> But for typological purposes, this double meaning is quite appropriate. After all, from a medieval Christian perspective, it was gratefulness that was sorely lacking when Christ revealed himself to the Jews. They were given a great gift, but they rejected it. In the end, it was the gentiles who would show appreciation, and so form the Church. As the *Old Icelandic Homily Book* says: *iorsala lýpr oc gýþingar georþesc vinstre handar meN. þat ero reccingar fyr ótrú sína. en hann valþc epter pásł sóma heógre handar meN sér af heipnom monnom ór norþre.*<sup>26</sup> - “the people of Jerusalem and the Jews were made left hand men [i.e. enemies], that is a sign of their faithlessness, and after his crucifixion he chose for the honour of his right hand men heathen peoples from the north”. Furthermore, there is something very Jew-ish in Loki's function amongst the Æsir. Loki in Ásgarðr, and the Jew in Western Christendom are both relationships predicated on the notion of “being in service”. From Augustine describing the Jews as book-carrying servants for Christian students, to Emperor Frederick II's designation of Jews as *servi camere nostre* - “servants of our chamber”, to the possessive servitude exhibited in the Anglo-Norman “*Judei Nostrī*”, the doctrine of the “Jew in Christian Service” permeated medieval thinking about Jews.<sup>27</sup> But in both cases, the servant is held in contempt, perceived as anti-social and disloyal. Like the Jew amongst Christians, Loki is an ethnic Other, because his father Fárbauti belongs to the race of the *jǫtnar* (“giants”)<sup>28</sup>. And in both cases, the cunning, magic-wielding outsider is tolerated only because of his unique qualities. The parallel also extends perfectly to the way they are treated. Both are righteously abused for the profit of their masters. Robert Grosseteste, a contemporary of Snorri, succinctly articulated the consensus regarding the status of the Jew within Christendom: “it is the infliction of a just punishment that this people labour hard at tilling ground that, although it produces abundantly from their efforts, nevertheless bears its fruits not for them, but for the princes under whom they are held captive.”<sup>29</sup>; a metaphor which could just as well be applied to Loki under the Æsir.

<sup>24</sup> *Gylfaginning*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Cleasby & Guðbrandur Vigfússon. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1874) p. 756.

<sup>26</sup> *Homiliu-Bók*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Nina Rowe. *The Jew, the Cathedral and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 167; Miriamne Ara Krummel. *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England. Legally Absent, Virtually Present*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp. 28-36; Anna Sapir Abulafia. *Christian-Jewish Relations, 1000-1300. Jews in the service of medieval Christendom*. (London: Pearson Education, 2011) passim.

<sup>28</sup> The relationship could even be conceived of in postcolonial terms. Krummel reads the “Red Jews” motif in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* as an anxiety that the Christian oppression of the Jews will be inverted during the apocalypse. Ragnarøkkr will also see the Æsir fall prey to the giants they have oppressed for so long, led by Loki, a half-giant in their midst. See: Krummel, 2011. pp. 80-87.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Grosseteste. *The Letters of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln*. trans. by F.A.C Mantello & Joseph Goering. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) pp. 67-68.

The characterisation of Hqðr may yet have been coloured by the trope of Jewish blindness, but I hope I have shown that, if so, he does not have a monopoly on Snorri's use of the anti-Jewish tradition. Indeed, Loki's Jew-ish credentials are further enhanced when we consider his fate. When the Æsir suspect his role in Baldr's death, their vengeance is grisly in the extreme. There is a brief allusion to the fact that Loki has been bound in stanza 14 of Baldrs draumr (*er lauss Loki liðr ór bǫndom*<sup>30</sup> - "when Loki gets free from his bonds") and some details are given in the prose epilogue to *Lokasenna* in the *Codex Regius*, which corresponds quite closely to the description provided by Snorri. The *Edda*, however, is our chief source for the details of the scene. As Hár explains to Gangleri:

"Nú var Loki tekinn griðalauss ok farit með hann í helli nokkvorn. Þá tóku þeir þrjár hellur ok settu á egg ok lustu rauf á hellunni hverri. Þá váru teknir synir Loka Váli ok Nari eða Narfi. Brugðu Æsir Vála í vargs líki ok reif hann í sundr Narfa bróður sinn. Þá tóku Æsir þarma hans ok bundu Loka með yfir þá þrjá steina – einn undir herðum annarr undir lendum, þriði undir knésfótum – ok urðu þau bǫnd at járn. Þá tók Skaði eitroarm ok festi upp yfir hann svá at eitrit skyldi drjúpa ór orminum í andlit honum. En Sigyn kona hans stendr hjá honum ok heldr mundlaugu undir eitrdropa. En þá er full er mundlaugin þá gengr hon ok slær út eitrinu, en meðan drýpr eitrit í andlit honum. Þá kippisk hann svá hart við at jörð ǫll skelfr. Þat kallið þér landskjálpta. Þar liggr hann í bǫndum til ragnarókr." <sup>31</sup>

"Now, without mercy, Loki was taken and brought to a certain cave. Then they took three slabs and turned them on their edegs and drilled a hole in each. Then the sons of Loki were taken, Váli and Nari or Narfi. The Æsir transformed Vála into the shape of a wolf and he tore his brother Narfi to shreds. Then the Æsir took his entrals and bound Loki with them over the three stones – one under his shoulders, the second under his hips, the third under his knees, and they turned those bonds into iron. Then Skaði took a poisonous serpent and seured it above him so that the poison would drip out of its mouth onto his face. And Sigyn, his wife, stands by him and holds a cup under the dripping poison. But when the cup is full then she goes and throws the poison away, and in the meantime the poison drips onto his face. Then he thrashes so hard that the whole earth shakes. That's what you call an earthquake. He lies there in his bonds until Ragnarokr."

And when Ragnarokr comes, this is what happens:

Í þessum gný klofnar himinninn ok ríða þaðan Muspells synir. Surtr ríðr fyrst ok fyrir honum ok eptir bæði eldr brennandi. Sverð hans er gott mjök. Af því skínn bjartara en af sólu. En er þeir ríða Bifröst þá brotnar hon sem fyrr er sagt. Muspells megir sækja fram á þann vǫll er Vígríðr heitir. Þar kemr ok þá Fenrisúlfr ok Miðgarðsormr. Þar er ok þá Loki kominn ok Hrymr ok með honum allir hrímpursar, en Loka fylgja allir Heljar sinnar. En Muspells synir hafa einir sér fylking; er sú björt mjök. <sup>32</sup>

In this clamour, the sky splits in two and the sons of Muspell ride forth. Surtr rides out first, before and after him there is burning fire. His sword is very great. The shine from it is brighter than the sun. And as they ride on Bifröst, then it breaks as previously said. The troops of Muspell head forth to the field which is called Vígríðr. Fenrisúlfr and Miðgarðsormr also arrive. Loki has also arrived, and Hrymr, and with him all the Ice Giants, and all the champions of Hell follow Loki. And the sons of Muspell take up one complete formation. It shines a great deal.

Snorri quotes stanza 51 of *Vǫluspá* as his source here: *Kjóll ferr austan / koma munu Muspells / og lög ljóðir, / en Loki stýrir. / Þar ró fjflmegir / með freka allir / Þeim er bróðir / Býleists í fǫr*<sup>33</sup> - "A ship journeys from the east / the sons of Muspell are coming / across the waves / There are the monstrous brood / with all the wolves / Those are the brothers / of Býleist, on their way". But Snorri's description of the

<sup>30</sup> *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*. vol. 1. ed. by Gustav Neckel & Hans Kuhn. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1983) p. 279

<sup>31</sup> *Gylfaginning*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* at p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* at p. 51. The verse accords with that found in the *Codex Regius* and *Hauksbók*. Cf.: *Edda*, p. 12.

imprisonment and counter-attack of the Muspellssynir also has much in common with another popular medieval narrative. “The Red Jews” is a motif, seemingly emanating from German-speaking Europe in the twelfth century, where a nation of Jews are imprisoned in a remote area, often in a mountain tomb somewhere around the Caucasus. Upon their release, the Red Jews will attack Christendom, resulting in an apocalyptic bloodshed that will bring on the End of Days. There are many variants to the legend – sometimes the Red Jews are identified with Gog and Magog, sometimes the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Sometimes they are directly answerable to the Anti-Christ or they ride with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Elsewhere, they are in league with the forces of Islam.<sup>34</sup> The first textual witness to the tale is from *Der Jüngere Titurel* (c. 1272) but it is undoubtedly dependent on much earlier material from Alexander romances.<sup>35</sup>

As the continental material concerning the Red Jews is so diverse, I have opted to compare the Muspellssynir with the tradition as it appears in Old Swedish.<sup>36</sup> Doubtless, there can be no question of transmission between the two, as the Swedish *Konung Alexander* is over a century younger than *Snorra Edda*. However, the particular Latin text of which it is a translation, the *Historia de Preliis Alexandri Magni*, dates from the tenth century. As the Alexander tradition is so heterodox, choosing a particular model for the kind of text that Snorri might have seen is a more or less arbitrary decision.<sup>37</sup> If nothing else, the Old Swedish can give us a hint at what an explicit Old Norse rendering of the Red Jews tale might have looked like (not that there necessarily was a written version. The tale could well have been told by foreign guests or cosmopolitan scholars at King Hákon's court, for example). The Old Icelandic *Alexanders saga* would be a more obvious analogue, but intriguingly Brandr Jónsson seems to have excised the Red Jews from his source text, quite probably on account of his philo-Semitic leanings.

[OLD SWEDISH]

han foor thådhan ower sitiam  
 öster borter ij wårlina fram  
 enkte land laa thiit wt mere  
 ther man wiste aff sighia flere  
 han fan ther folk wårre ån trull  
 thz hafdhe tho råt månniskio hull  
 rådhelikith ok mykith oreent  
 them gat ångin opa seet  
 the hafdho syyn å swa grym  
 at ånghin thordhe se a them  
 thz lifdhe alt widh trulla sidh  
 ångin månniskia fik ther fridh  
 thz aat folk m3 huld ok krop  
 inbyrdhis hwart annath op  
 ok alla handa creatwr  
 håst ok wargh foghil ok diwr  
 hwath som fòdhis a iordh åller wådher  
 thz åta the alt saman mådher  
 ...

the plågha enkte thera iordha  
 the åtar them op a thera bordhe  
 hwath man kan hålzt lifwande nåmpna  
 ...  
 orena gerninga margha handa  
 sa alexander aff them ganga  
 ther lofflika åra skriffwa  
 thz år alt ont thz the drifwa  
 Ròdhe iudha mon thz heta  
 swa finder han ån hwa them wil leta  
 tha alexander hafdhe thetta seet  
 badhe hòrt ok widha leet  
 at thetta folk dreff tholik last  
 han thånkte ij sinom hoghe rast  
 vtan thetta folk forgaar  
 al wårlin åpter dòme faar  
 ok smittas ij tholik gerning snòdh  
 all wårlin hafwer thås stora nòdh  
 om thz skal ganga sin fram gang  
 åpter thera sidh tha smittas mang  
 ok lifwa ij thera åpter dòme

<sup>34</sup> The definitive study, from which the following information is taken, is by: Andrew Colin Gow. *The Red Jews. Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age 1200-1600*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. at pp. 70-76.

<sup>36</sup> An overview on this tradition in East Norse more broadly is provided by: Jonathan Adams. *Lessons in Contempt. Poul Ræff's Translation and Publication in 1516 of Johannes Pfefferkorn's The Confession of the Jews*. (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2013) pp. 75-77.

<sup>37</sup> For a concise treatment of the sources behind the Old Swedish Alexander romance, see: Stephen A. Mitchell. “The Middle Ages” in *A History of Swedish Literature*. ed. by Lars G. Warme. (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) pp. 37-38. On the *Historia* itself, see: Oswald Zingerlie. *Die Quellen zum Alexander des Rudolf von Ems*. (New York: G. Olms, 1977). See also: Gow, 1995. p. 77.



th3 ware b4tra at man them g4me  
 Alexander fan et ful got raadh  
 th3 folkith han saman drifwa badh  
 ij en flok badhe m4n ok qwinna  
 swa then mera som then minnda  
 swa at enkte ater bleff  
 nor ij w4rlina alla them dreff  
 swa langan w4gh r4t ij nor  
 at thiit 4ngin fara th4r  
 Th3 war alexanders idhelik b4n  
 til gudh som allom gifwer l4n  
 at w4rlin skulle ekki smittas  
 aff tholikt lifwerne ekki hittas  
 ...  
 han badh swa l4nge gudh h4rdhe han  
 gudh giordhe vnder the 4ra san  
 ey stort fore alexanders saka  
 vtan m4nniskio helso til maka  
 han b4dh tvem berghom the standa 4n  
 ganga til saman badhin ij s4n  
 the waro h4gh ok mykith lang  
 gingo saman vtan alt bang  
 ...  
 ther 4r stort rwm innan til  
 som et gan3t land iak th3 sighia wil  
 ...  
 b4rghin 4ra alt kringom brant  
 som annar mwr th3 4r s4nt  
 the 4ra som andre mwrw4ggia h4ghia  
 ther kan 4ngin op fore 4ghia  
 the r4dha iudha 4ra ther inne  
 badhe flere ok swa minne<sup>38</sup>

[ENGLISH]

He goes from there over Scythia.  
 Away, far to the east of the world.  
 There was no land out there any more  
 that anyone knew of. Many say  
 there he found a people worse than trolls  
 Although they had human skin  
 angry and most unclean  
 No-one could bear to look upon them  
 They had such an ugly appearance  
 that no-one dared to look upon them  
 they all lived in the manner of trolls.  
 No human there could find any peace.  
 They ate people with skin and body  
 including each other  
 and all kinds of creatures,  
 horses and wolves, birds and beasts,  
 whatever lives on earth or sea,

they ate it all in the same way  
 ...  
 they do not tend to their land.  
 On their tables, they eat up  
 whatever living thing you can name.  
 The committing of many impure deeds [spells?]  
 Alexander saw them do  
 There, it is written in law  
 that everything they do is evil.  
 They are called "Red Jews"  
 so he seeks them, and wants to see them.  
 When Alexander had seen that,  
 both heard it and clearly observed,  
 that this people behaved in such a way  
 he thinks in his booming voice  
 all the world will be judged  
 unless this people are destroyed  
 and will be smote by such sordid actions.  
 The whole world is in great need.  
 If things were to go their own way  
 according to their custom many would be smote  
 and live ever after in their power  
 it would be better if one could hide them away  
 Alexander had a great idea.  
 He had that people rounded up  
 in one group, both men and women  
 the short and the tall  
 so that not one was left behind at all  
 he had them driven north in the world  
 such a long way north  
 that no-one would dare to go there.  
 It was Alexander's pious prayer  
 to God who rewards all  
 that the world would not be smote  
 and never encounter such a way of life  
 ...  
 he prayed so long that God heard him.  
 God did it, it's true  
 not for Alexander's sake alone  
 but for the good of all humankind.  
 He commanded two mountains – they still stand -  
 to come together as one  
 they were tall and very long  
 they went together without any noise  
 ...  
 Inside there is a lot of space  
 like a huge country, I should say  
 ...  
 the mountains are steep all around  
 like another wall, it's true  
 they are like other tall walls  
 no one can climb it  
 the Red Jews are in there  
 both short and tall.

<sup>38</sup> *Konung Alexander. En Medeltids Dikt från Latinet Vänd i Svenska Rim.* ed. by G.E. Klemming. (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söner, 1862) pp. 130-133.

There are several striking affinities between the coming of the Muspellssynir according to Snorri, and the Red Jews according to the Alexander romances. Both are entombed: Loki in a cave, the Red Jews in the mountains. Both engage in cannibalism. The Red Jews *aat folke m3 huld ok krop / inbyrdbis hwar annath op* - “eat people and their flesh and blood / they'll even munch each other up”. Similarly, according to Snorri, Loki's son Váli eats his brother, Narfi. The release of either the Red Jews or the Muspellssynir will lead to the apocalypse. Alexander, as a Christianised king, can pray to the one true God and prevent it from happening. Snorri's tragically flawed pagan deities, on the other hand, must vainly await their doom. Indeed, on one detail, *Snorra Edda* is closer to the Red Jews motif than he is to *Völuspá*. In the Eddic poem, the Muspellssynir approach over water with a ship, a *keþoll*. But in *Snorra Edda*, despite the citation of the poem, the accompanying prose clearly states that they ride on horseback into Ásgarðr. This suggests that the image of the Muspellssynir conjured by Snorri's mind's eye probably resembled something like the example provided in fig. 2, rather than a nautical setting drawn purely from *Völuspá*.



Fig. 2. “*riða þaðan Muspells synir*”? Actually a depiction of the Red Jews from: *Der Antichrist*, fol. 14b.

As ever with Snorri's work, the sons of Muspell are not drawn exclusively from any one tradition. *Völuspá* clearly provided the basic structure upon which Snorri could tell his own narrative of Ragnarøkkr. But Snorri does seem to be conceiving of his tenth or eleventh century material in a very thirteenth century manner. He is not insulated from the intellectual climate to which he is contributing, and cannot avoid being influenced by the powerful typologies of anti-Judaism. The emphasis on the “sons of Muspell” as a descent group based on lineage makes them feel more like a contemporary ethnic group than a cosmological construct.<sup>39</sup> It is only Snorri who employs the name “Muspellssynir”. In *Völuspá*, they are elliptically named *Muspells* – “lit. “Of Muspell”. Indeed, the very phrase *Muspells synir* is a half-rhyme with *Israels synir*, the term frequently used in thirteenth century works such as *Stjórn* to refer to the Jews.<sup>40</sup> Admittedly, the proposition that there are resonances of anti-Jewish imagery in *Snorra Edda* may be unpalatable, but it is a crucial to considering Snorri in his comparative context. Much as scholars may employ the *Edda* to recover details of the pagan past, we need to acknowledge Snorri's Christian present. Thinking about the Jews was an inalienable aspect of that experience.

<sup>39</sup> On the notion of descent and race in the Middle Ages, see: Robert Bartlett. “Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, 1 (Winter 2001) pp. 39-56.

<sup>40</sup> See: Brandr Jónsson. *Stjórn. Gammelnorske Bibelhistorie fra Verdens Skabelse til Det Babyloniske Fangenskab*. ed. By C.R. Unger (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmarks Forlag, 1862) p. 221, 238, 258, 265, 282, 284, 285, 286, 294, 314, 322, 331, 339, 397.

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