The French Connection, or Pórr versus the Golem

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Abstract

This article investigates the extent to which Jewish exegetical and magical traditions were known in medieval Scandinavia. Particular attention is paid to the mythological work, Snorra Edda (ca. 1220), and the prose narrative Þorleifs þátrjarlsskálds (ca. 1300). In Snorra Edda, we encounter the character of Mǫkkurkálfi, a clay giant who has been magically animated to defend the race of giants against the god Thor (Pórr). In Þorleifs þátrjarlsskálds, a similarly animated “trémaðr” (“wooden man”) is sent on an assassination mission to dispatch a troublesome poet. Both these figures are considered in light of various traditions pertaining to the golem. Possible routes of transmission between the Jewish and Scandinavian worlds are considered to explain these similarities, with a special focus on Norwegian students at the Abbey of St. Victor.

Keywords

Introduction

The stone giants made her want to write. They filled the world with alarming energy and power.

A.S. Byatt, Ragnarök. The End of the Gods

At a farmstead in Western Iceland, in the year 1220 or thereabouts, the chieftain and author Snorri Sturluson is composing a retelling of the mythical fight between the god Þórr and the giant Hrungnir. He has a wide range of sources to draw upon: ancient poetry from the age of paganism, rhetoric from his student days at Oddi, the tomes of European learning that regularly make their way across the Atlantic to his homeland, and the discussions he has had with learned men on his visits abroad to Norway and Sweden. The story, as Snorri tells it, begins with a brooding standoff. Þórr has come to exact vengeance on Hrungnir, who has become a threat to the gods. On the one side stand Þórr and his protégé, Þjálfi. On the other stands Hrungnir. He too has brought a companion. This strange creature is named Mǫkkurkálfi (“Mud-leg”), a magically animated giant, sculpted from clay. He has been created to serve as a defender to the giants but is poorly suited to the task. He is racked by fear, only just born to the world and yet soon to depart it. Þórr charges for Hrungnir, wielding his mighty hammer, Mjǫllnir. Þjálfi takes on the mud man. For a moment, Mǫkkurkálfi catches sight of Þórr on the warpath. He loses control of his bladder. Moments later, he is dead at Þjálfi’s feet. As shall be seen, Hrungnir was not Snorri’s own invention, but Mǫkkurkálfi appears only in Snorri’s Edda. The clay giant instantly recalls the Jewish golem. But how likely might it be that any Jewish traditions should have reached Iceland, a place where the nearest Jew would have been more than a thousand miles away, in England?

While Snorri never lived in a land that had a Jewish population, he did live in a time where violence against Jews was commonplace, and contemplation of their position as “Other” was a staple of European intellectual life.2 By the time of Snorri’s death in 1241, the Jews of London, York, Oxford, Bury St. Edmonds and Fulda had all been implicated in blood libels, Crusaders had massacred more than 2500 Jews in northern France, and Pope Gregory IX had put the Talmud on trial in Paris. But lest we should err into conceiving of

Jewish-Christian relations during Snorri’s lifetime relations entirely as a *historia lacrimosa*, it is also important to remember that the tendency towards anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism was never the universally accepted position. Indeed, while Crusaders battled Muslims in the East and mobs attacked Jewish communities at home, European intellectuals unapologetically devoured Islamic and Jewish learning. Many Christians were comfortable with the Jewish roots of their own faith, and sought out Jews who could elucidate exegetical points in the Old Testament. Some medieval Christians studied the Hebrew language. St. Jerome and St. Isidore are well known examples, but Hebraism in the Middle Ages was by no means limited to the Mediterranean. Pádraic Moran has highlighted how Irish clergymen had been “reverse engineering” an understanding of the Hebrew language from as early as the seventh century.\(^3\) Snorri’s age, namely the thirteenth century, saw the flourishing of Hebraism in England too. There, the monks of Ramsey Abbey were obtaining and studying Jewish manuscripts. William de Arundel (d. 1239) was even composing polemics in Hebrew. Although there is a debate over the extent of the great Robert Grosseteste’s (d. 1253), Hebrew knowledge, it is certain that he had at least some grasp of the language.\(^4\)

While Christian Hebraism budded in the British Isles, it truly flourished in France. One of the key locations of Jewish-Christian intellectual exchange was the abbey of St. Victor, just outside of Paris. The study of Hebrew had already begun there in the twelfth century with Hugh of St. Victor (fl. 1120s), who was the first master known to have some comprehension of the language.\(^5\) The growing population of French Jews would have provided ample opportunities for inter-religious learning, although the rabbis probably served more as “consultants” than permanent teachers at the abbey—the students may well have

\(^3\) Pádraic Moran, “Hebrew in Early Irish Glossaries,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 60 (Winter, 2010), passim.


learnt their Hebrew from fellow Christians. Particularly important amongst the Jews contributing to the intellectual milieu at St. Victor were direct successors of the renowned Rashi of Troyes (d. 1104). Rashi (Rabbi Shlomoh Yiṣḥaqi) was born into a rabbinic family, and studied at yeshivot in Worms and Mainz before establishing his own academy in Troyes. He would have lived through the anti-Jewish violence of the First Crusade in 1096. It is difficult to overstate the importance of Rashi’s position within Judaism. He wrote extensive commentaries on the Tanakh and the Talmud, drawing on an intimate knowledge of complex legal issues, opaque points of grammar, and the long tradition of commentary that preceded him. Rashi’s work forms the basis of Talmudic criticism even today. For scholars who are mainly familiar with medieval Christendom, it may be helpful to liken Rashi’s role within Judaism to that of St Augustine within Christianity.

We will return to Rashi and the Victorines later, but for now it will suffice to underline the illustrative irony here; that a man who in his own lifetime witnessed rhetorical and physical attacks on his faith, also had an arterial entry into the premier institution of learning in Christendom after his death. This dichotomy exemplifies the two opposed, but not exclusive, tendencies to which we have alluded earlier: (1) the impulse to denounce and denigrate Jews; (2) the utility of knowledge inherited or acquired from Judaism. The general aim of this paper, then, is to illustrate the extent to which the Christian learned tradition transmitted knowledge ultimately derived from Judaism into medieval Scandinavia. In particular, I am interested in how certain Jewish exegetical and magical practices may have exerted an influence on Snorra Edda. As shall be seen, any such influences would have been coloured by the two aforementioned attitudes towards Jews exhibited by medieval Christian intellectuals.

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7 For recent comment on the debate over whether Rashi’s writing alludes to this unrest, see Devorah Schoenfeld, Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 18–19.

We will begin by sketching out the amount of Jewish learning that had reached Scandinavia by the time Snorri was writing.

**Attitudes towards the Hebrew Language and Jewish Magic**

The most visible Jewish import in medieval Scandinavia is arguably the use of Hebrew in magical runic inscriptions. Space does not allow for discussion of the faux Hebrew etymologies in *The First Grammatical Treatise* (ca. 1150) and *The Third Grammatical Treatise* (ca. 1250), or the Hebrew alphabet preserved in Arnamagnæan Collection manuscript AM 685d 4to (ca. 1450–1499), although scholars have generally been wary of attributing any real knowledge of Hebrew to these sources (the question of Hebraism in Scandinavia is a complex one, which warrants a separate study). There are seven inscriptions that address God with Hebrew “agla” [׳אגלא] acronym as a magical formula. The Hebrew found in runes is generally formulaic, limited to occurrences also known in the standard Christian liturgy, and is thus not indicative of Hebraism in the true sense of the word. That said, rare inscriptions such as N 348, a wooden amulet from Norway carved during the High Middle Ages, suggest a more nuanced understanding of the language, if not on the part of the carver than at least on the part of their informant:

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\begin{align*}
\text{§A} & \text{ emanuel sabao ad.ʾonai usion agios oḥannaḥos aēlæison alfa æþ o} \\
\text{§B} & \text{ messias sōper} \\
\text{§C} & \text{ filæhs artifæhas deus iesus saluator agios oḥonnaḥos aēlæison aæl} \\
& \text{(g)aaelai ag(e=)la10}
\end{align*}
\]

עמנואל צבאות אדני וציון. ‘Αγιος Ἄθανατος ἐλεησον Ἀλφα et Ὠμεγα μεσσιας σωτηρ. Felix Artifex Deus Jesus Salvator ‘Αγιος Ἄθανατος ἐλεησον, AGLA [׳אגלא]

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10 Transcription taken from Rundata 2.5. Available online at: [http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm](http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm).
God is with us, the Lord of Hosts and Zion. Holy One, Immortal One, have mercy. Alpha and Omega. Messiah, Saviour. Blessed Creator, Lord Jesus the Saviour. Holy One, Immortal One. Have mercy. AGLA.

On its own, an invocation like “לאבה אדני”—“Lord of Hosts”—is fairly unremarkable. However, the addition of usion, apparently a rendering of “וציון”—“and Zion”—can be interpreted as an attempt to innovate a little on the usual Tetragrammaton. We might view this as a humble attempt to produce an original phrase in Hebrew. Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees, following Magnus Olsen, prefer to view this element as an erroneous contraction of the word ὁμοουσιος from the Nicene Creed.11 There are two arguments militating against this reading: firstly, the carver has otherwise demonstrated a good knowledge of formulae. He reproduces complex foreign sounds in a surprisingly consistent and intelligible manner. Secondly, for usion to denote ὁμοουσιος would disturb the symmetry of his inscription. Ἀγιος Ἀθανατος ἐλεησον is a discrete excerpt from the Tersanctus. To append an isolated ὁμοουσιον would seem like an uncharacteristically clumsy pretense. Rather than reading this as embarrassing Greek, we can read it as impressive Hebrew. It exhibits an understanding of the Vav-conjunctive and an element of grammar known as the “construct chain” that denotes genitives. The proper form ought to be pronounced ve-sion, but using a <u> to denote <ו> is both an acceptable transliteration from Hebrew to Runic and an easy mistake for a novice (The vav is pronounced as /u:/ or /ve/ depending on the following word). Whether the carver of N 348 could really read Hebrew is very much in doubt, but he knew a little vocabulary and had a limited familiarity with some of the mechanics of the language. We might call such a level of competency “technical Hebraism”; a smattering of Hebrew was acquired only to be deployed in certain circumstances, in this case for the inscription for a protective amulet.12 It is marginally more rarefied than the dumb parroting of phrases lifted from the liturgy, but still a long way from the proper ability to read original texts in Hebrew that could be attained at institutions such as St. Victor.


Dror Segev, the only scholar to pay this topic much attention, is highly sceptical of the prospect that Norse-speaking magicians were aware of any Hebrew origins in their magical formulae. He states that “the Heb[rew] in our runic corpus cannot be seen as used consciously, for the Heb[rew] that was used was seen, with much justification, as just another form of Church Latin.”¹³ This view is also held by Michael Barnes, who treats the subject in passing.¹⁴ Doubtless, some magicians were ignorant of the origins of the traditions they utilised. It is unthinkable that every AGLA inscription was inspired by the knowledge that it is an acronym for אתה גבורה לעולם אדני. But there are many reasons to suspect that at least in certain circles, Scandinavians did recognise and value “Jewishness.” Firstly, Segev’s assumption that Latin and Hebrew would have been indistinguishable to rune carvers does not take into account the fact that “runacy” in the Middle Ages was not a pursuit limited to the laity. Rather, many clerics and learned people were responsible for runic inscriptions—indeed, often magical ones.¹⁵ These are people who would have a solid command of Latin, and therefore be quite capable of telling it apart from Hebrew. The carver of N 348, for example, would appear to have been conscious that he was using three different languages, even if his proficiency therein was extremely limited, and he was relying on common formulae.

Secondly, the common European association of Jews with magic, and of Jewish magic as being especially potent, was certainly known in Scandinavia.¹⁶ The Messuskýringar demonstrate the common Christian reverence for the Hebrew language which made it such an attractive prospect for use in magic: Alleluia er sungit er á ina æðztu tungu er ebreska er (“Alleluia is sung in the highest language, which is Hebrew”).¹⁷ The Theophilus Legend, where an ambi-

¹⁴ “Many of these names [for God] are of course, of Greek or Hebrew origin, but they have become part of ‘Church Latin,’ just as the Hebrew charm acronym agla or the Greek prayer Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison.” Michael Barnes, Runes: A Handbook (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 123; see also 112.
tious priest makes a Satanic pact through a Jewish sorcerer, is preserved twice in Old Norse. There, the demoniac intermediary is described variously as: *einn ebreskr madr miok fjölkunnigr, sa sem marga menn hafði adr sukit dreckiandi ða i grøf eilifr tapanar med sinum göldrum* (“A very magically skilled Hebrew, who had drowned many men before in the grave of eternal perdition with his witchcraft”)\(^\text{18}\) and *ebreus . . . fullr af eitri illzkunnar sua sem hinn uesti uillumadr* (“a Hebrew, full of the poison of wickedness like the most wretched heretic”).\(^\text{19}\)

Marian miracle stories such as these, although often preserved in thirteenth or fourteenth century manuscripts, had been circulating in Iceland since at least the days of Jón Qg mundar son, who was bishop of Hólar from 1106–1121 (his saga even depicts him reading a particularly anti-Jewish example of the genre).\(^\text{20}\) Furthermore, if we take *The Old Icelandic Homily Book* as the earliest work in the canon, then the perception of “the Jew” as somehow occult was present at the very inception of Old Norse literature. One of the sermons on St. Stephen and Gamaliel includes a potted version of St. Augustine’s miracle of Petronia (predating its incorporation into Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*).\(^\text{21}\) Here, St. Stephen intercedes to heal a sick woman, who in her desperation has turned to a Jewish sorcerer:

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\(^\text{19}\) “De Theophilio,” in *Mariu saga*. 409.
[A certain noblewoman was sick, to the extent that doctors could not treat her. But a certain Jew told her that she should tie to her hairband a ring, in which was concealed a stone which had been found in the kidney of an ox, and then enchanted with magic. And she did as the Jew said, and then went to visit the Cathedral of St. Stephen. But as she went on her way, she saw before her lying in the street the ring which she had attached to her hairband. Then she was amazed, and examined the hairband, and she discovered that it was in one piece, complete with all its knots, then she suspected that the ring must have broken and slipped off the hairband. But as it was intact, she attributed this miracle as proof that her recovery was given to her by St. Stephen, and she threw the ring into the river, and accepted the healing which she received from the Holy Stephen, and then made an excellent marriage match in that city which is called Carthage.]

The Jew’s magical abilities here coalesce with several Christian presuppositions surrounding Jews and the supernatural in the Middle Ages. Firstly, there is the troubling gender dynamic: Júðakona seems to be the preferred Old Norse term for female Jewish characters, but it is not the word used here. Rather, the homilist prefers the masculine gyðingr. Thus, the premise of the tale is that a Jewish man is attempting to bewitch a gentile woman. Although the homilist never makes the purpose of the Jew’s ring explicit, the general setting resonates with the trope that the Jewish male desires to seduce or otherwise sexually corrupt the Christian female. However, he is so physically decrepit that he can only do so by resorting to dark arts known exclusively to the Jews. Secondly, there is the typological juxtaposition of the material against the spiritual. A common motif in medieval anti-Judaism was to align the Jews with unthink-
ing literalism and gross corporeality. Jewish power, such as it was imagined by Christians, lay in the material world. The Jew’s realm was that of unreasoned dogma, matter, and (disgusting) bodies. Christianity, on the other hand, was aligned with ineffability and transcendence. Its power resided in the soul and the unseen. As Steven Kruger writes:

The idea of Jewish and queer bodily degeneracy and danger is linked also to a claim about ideas, a belief that... Jews were not just physically but intellectually perverted, and in particular unable to read and interpret texts properly. Jews, of course, were thought willfully to misunderstand the truth of Christ’s life, and of Scripture both “Old” and “New”: just as they possess debased bodies, their readings debase texts by focusing only on the material, never the spiritual.25

This theme is perfectly exemplified by the homilist’s tale. The miraculous means of St. Stephen are unknowable: matter has passed through matter without breaking, and how it was done can never be comprehended by the mortal mind. Thus, the purity of Christian supernatural power is highlighted by its absolute withdrawal from the material world. The contrast with the crude magic of the Jewish sorcerer is so extreme that it verges on bathos. St. Stephen can offer a fantastic circumvention of the normal laws of existence. The Jew can offer the rather unappealing prospect of an ox’s kidney stones. Of course, while Jewish magic might be denigrated as filthy, it is still considered sufficiently potent that saintly intervention is required in order to counter it.

One might be tempted to dismiss these episodes as accidental foreign imports, translated into the vernacular but never internalised by native audiences. Bjarne Berulfsen, for instance, described anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic miracle tales as an importvare.26 I would take strong exception to such an approach. It supposes that the modern, scholarly artifices of “native” versus “translated” literature were equally valued by medieval Icelanders; indeed, that they were always able to know the original sources of the texts they read—or had read to them aloud at church. It also implies that the expensive scribal business of composition, copying, and transmission frequently had no audience appreciative of the labour involved. However, even if these methodological criticisms were to be considered insufficient, there is some evidence of the aforementioned views on Jewish magic being incorporated

into the vernacular saga form. This redaction of *Dínus saga drambláta* probably dates from the 1600s.\(^{27}\) The earlier, fourteenth-century redaction does not contain the reference to Hebrew, but it is not unthinkable that this detail was added during an intermediate version created during the remainder of the medieval period:

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\ldots \text{geingur k(ongz) dotter med sijnum meyium aptur j syna hóll og getur ad lyta vid nordurætt aa murnum eitt lytid tabulum edur spialld, þad var skriffad med gullstoffum æ ebresku, sem hun getur þetta ad lyta bregdur henne nockud vndarliga vid þessa syn, fjirst fleyer hun hóffudgullenu aff sier þar med huorju plagge þui sem a henne var fer til og dansar alnakenn fyrer þessare tabula edur spiallde, þetta sama góíra allar hennar meyiar þegar þær lyta þetta litla letur dansa þær og nactar . . . þetta tabulum leykur alla eins smä og störa ryka og fataeka tigna ok otigna þa þeir þad lijta affklædast þeir hlaiande suo j dansenn slykt hender kongenn og drottninguna sem alla adra þegar þau lyta spialldid fleyia þau aff sier sinum tignar klædum og hlaupa suo nakken j dansenn, ed sama góíra aller þeir hóffdingiar frwr og jomfrur sem med þeim geingu suo aunguer dansa meer enn þesser.}^{28}\]

[. . . the king’s daughter goes with her ladies-in-waiting back to their hall, and can see that on the north-facing wall there is a little tablet or placard. It was inscribed with golden letters in Hebrew. As she sees it, she is rather strangely affected by the sight. First she discards her tiara, and with it the rest of the effects she had on, and dances entirely naked before these tablets or placard. All her ladies-in-waiting do the same when they see this little thing. They disrobe and dance . . . that tablet deludes everyone, short and tall, rich and poor, noble and common, so that when they look at they take off their clothes, leaping into the dance. That is what happens to the king and queen, just like all the others. When they look at the mirror they discard their noble clothes and then leap naked into the dance. All their barons, ladies, and maidens do the same, so that none dance more than them.]

The Hebrew-inscribed tablet similarly affects the local bishop, abbots, monks and abbesses. We can observe all the same tropes about Jewish magic that we


_Cf._, 37–41.
saw earlier. There is the desire to corrupt gentile sexuality. Moreover, the tabulum clearly belongs to—and operates within—a very physical sphere. Its effect is upon bodies, its power is materially derived from the golden letters. Above all these finer discourses, there is the general perception that Jewish magic is a strange and particularly fearsome force. To return, then, to the position of Barnes and Segev that Hebrew words in runic inscriptions were considered efficacious purely because they were understood as “Church Latin,” it seems as though, to the contrary, an understanding of distinctly Jewish magic had indeed permeated the popular consciousness. This is a trend that should be born in mind when we consider Snorri's work. Would an intellectual as eclectic in his tastes as Snorri have found at least some inspiration in the vivid connotations of Jewishness that were circulating in medieval Scandinavia? It is worth noting that the Codex Wormianus manuscript of Snorra Edda seems to mirror the description of Hebrew as the language closest to God we saw earlier. In the prologue, where a euhemerism is used to explain how people lapsed into paganism, it is written that æingi uissi skapara sinn. utan þeir æíner menn sem toluðu ebreska tungu (“Nobody knew his Creator, except those men who spoke the Hebrew language”).

Snorri and Jewish Traditions

The extent to which Snorri might have been influenced by Christian thinking about Jews, and/or Jewish learning, are not novel questions. Sophus Bugge, Gabriel Turville-Petre, and Heather O'Donoghue all pointed out some arresting similarities between Jewish material and certain aspects of Snorri's Baldr tale. For readers who are not closely acquainted with Old Norse, it may be worth briefly recapitulating its key features. According to Snorri, the god Baldr was the most beloved, most radiant and most beautiful of the gods. After a premonition of his own death, his mother Frigg makes everything in creation swear not to harm her son. The only exception, she says is Sá er mistilteînna kallaðr. Sá þótti mér ungr at krefftia eiðsins. (“The one which is called Mistletoe. The one which is called Mistletoe.”)

I thought it too young to demand an oath from.”)\(^{31}\) The troublesome Loki, whom scholars have compared to Satan, wishes to kill Baldr, who has been compared to Christ.\(^{32}\) He fashions a dart from mistletoe, and hands it to Baldr’s blind brother to throw (a detail which has been compared to the story of Lamech).

In the *Sefer Toledot Yeshu* (“Book of the Generations of Jesus”), a text with a number of variants which can be no older than the tenth century, there is a curious detail that all trees have agreed not to harm Jesus.\(^{33}\) Excepted was the cabbage, or sometimes the carob (the words are very similar in Hebrew, being זכרון and כרוב respectively). One version reads: “And that wicked one [Jesus] made it so that he had agreements with the trees because of his cunning that they would not receive him, and so all the trees they were to hang him on would break. Then they led him to the tree made of cabbage and hung him on that, but the cabbage had not agreed to break”).\(^{34}\) In some versions, the reason for the exception of the cabbage is said to be that it is not considered a tree, but a plant. Thus, it is either the cabbage stalk or the carob that must be used either to shape Jesus’s cross, or from which to hang him. O’Donoghue sums up the analogue between mistletoe and the cabbage/carob thus:

> It is striking that the carob might thus have been overlooked not only because of its manifest inherent unsuitability for the job, being physically—one might almost say botanically—unsuitable for such a role, but also because of a “category error”: like the mistletoe, a parasitic plant with no independent stem, belonging midway between heaven and earth, it fell between the usual anthropological categories. Nevertheless, in both cases the overlooked item becomes the instrument of death without explanation of how it proves, after all, effective in its lethal role.\(^{35}\)

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34 *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*, ed. Samuel Krauss (Berlin: S. Calvary & Co., 1902), 120.

35 O’Donoghue, “What has Baldr to do with Lamech?” 91. The article also points to a further analogue with the Aramaic *Targum Sheni*, (“Second Targum”) where no tree will allow itself to be used as the gallows upon which Haman is hung.
Of course, none of the scholars who have appreciated this parallel suggest a direct borrowing on behalf of Snorri, who obviously could never have read the Sefer Toledot Yeshu for himself. As O’Donoghue puts it “we can do little more than wonder, Casaubon-like, at these ancient correspondences, which also include . . . the overarching similarity between the circumstances of the deaths of both Baldr and Christ.”36 Snorri almost certainly never spoke to a Jew, but it is quite plausible that he spoke to people who had. O’Donoghue goes on to note the connection between the Norwegian clerical elite and the Abbey of St. Victor. Norwegian students began attending St. Victor in the mid-twelfth century, a tradition that seems to have been established following the marriage of the abbot’s sister to a Norwegian nobleman, and they continued to do so until the middle of the fourteenth century.37 The Victorines had a tremendous impact on ecclesiastical culture in Norway. A number of high-ranking Norwegian clergy were alumni, including Archbishop Eysteinn Erlandsson (d. 1181). During the thirteenth century, some forty Norwegians are recorded with the title magister/meistari, presumably a great deal of them having qualified in Paris.38 (The University of Paris, which emerged during the late twelfth century, had been founded by a consortium including the abbey of St. Victor, and the two institutions were largely contiguous throughout the Middle Ages).39 All five of the country’s Augustinian monasteries were daughter establishments. There are no records of Icelanders attending, although it has been suggested that the abbey was where St. Þorlákr studied while he was in Paris.40 The flow of traders, ecclesiastical personnel, and manuscripts between Iceland and Norway make it easy to imagine Norwegian Victorines being active in Iceland and perhaps Icelanders being inspired to study at St. Victor as a result. Even if only very few Icelanders visited the abbey in person, Victorine learning came to exert a great deal of influence on Old Norse literature. Adam of St. Victor (d. 1192), Godfrey of St. Victor (d. 1194), Hugh of St. Victor, and particularly in the case of Brandr Jónsson,41 Peter Comestor

36 O’Donoghue, “What has Baldr to do with Lamech?” 91.
37 Arne Odd Johnsen, “Studieresor. Norge,” in KLM, vol. 17 (1972), 332. All the following concerning Norwegian connections with St. Victor are from 332–336.
40 Fredrik Paasche, Norges og Islands litteratur inntil utgangen av middelalderen, ed. Anne Holtmark (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1957), 281.
41 Brandr Jónsson (d. 1264) was consecrated as Bishop of Hólar, the northern diocese of Iceland, in 1263. His Gyðinga saga (c. 1257) is an Old Norse history of the Jews, based
(d. ca. 1179), were all known to Old Norse authors. When Snorri arrived at King Hákon’s court in 1218, St. Victor had been the preferred destination of foreign study for Norwegians for almost a century. It would have been practically impossible for Norwegians to have avoided its Norwegian alumni. It also seems unlikely that Norwegians studying abroad at such a prestigious institution would have turned their noses at the unique opportunity to study Hebrew and Jewish traditions. Indeed, even if Norwegian Victorines had not wished to avail themselves of St. Victor’s considerable Hebrew resources, the environment of Jewish-Christian exchange at the abbey would have made it difficult to remain completely insulated from Jewish learning.

With this context in mind, the prospect that Jewish traditions might have exerted an influence on Snorra Edda becomes increasingly plausible. Let us turn now to the vignette with which we began: the confrontation where Þórr meets Hrungnir and Mǫkkurkálfi at Grjótúnagarðar.

[Then, at Grjótúnagarðar, the giants made a man of clay, and he was nine leagues tall and three wide across the chest, but they could not find a heart that would fit him until they took one from a certain mare, and it primarily on Maccabees and the Historia Scholastica. Brandr has also often been associated in part with Stjórn, a compilation of three annotated translations of the Pentateuch, although this association has largely been dismissed by Kirsten Wolf, “Brandr Jónsson and Stjórn,” Scandinavian Studies 62 (1990), 163–188. Brandr’s interest in Jewish history, seemingly quite untainted by anti-Judaism, is the matter for a separate study.]

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was not dependable for him when Þórr arrived. Hrungnir had a heart that is well known, of hard stone and pointed with three corners, made just as the runic character which is called “Hrungnir’s heart.” His head was also made of stone. His shield was also stone, wide and thick, and he held his shield in front of him as he stood at Grjótuginagarðar and summoned Þórr. He had a whetstone as a weapon which he swung about his shoulders, and it wasn’t pretty. On the other cliff over from him stood the clay giant, whose name is Mǫkkurkálfi [Mud-leg], and he was terrified. It is said that he pissed himself when he saw Þórr.

As previously stated, the concept of a leirjǫtunn, “clay giant” instantly evokes one of the well-known figures of Jewish mysticism, namely the golem: an artificial anthropoid, sculpted from an earthy element such as dust or clay, and rendered animate through occult means. Although nowadays probably most famous from tales of the Prague based Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1609), the golem is in fact an extremely ancient figure, which was widely known and discussed across the Jewish Diaspora. It possibly originates as a Pan-Semitic tradition: it has been observed that Egyptian ushabti figurines from the second millennium B.C., being small clay anthropoids enchanted to obey the commands of their owner, constitute the earliest known analogue.44 Although widely assimilated into the realms of folklore and magic, the golem was originally intended to be a metaphor for the divine act of creation. The perfection of God’s work would be highlighted by the imperfect nature of the rabbi’s hulking, misshapen anthropoid. Indeed, the world golem [גolem] literally means “a wrapped (and unformed mass, i.e. as the embryo):—substance yet being unperfect.”45 The golem is primarily treated in the Talmud (200–500 A.D.) and the Kabbalah, chiefly in meditations on the Sefer Yeṣirah (Book of Creation). However, the golem also appears in sources which were later incorporated into the Christian tradition. Psalm 139:15–16, for example: “My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect [Heb.: גולמי, Vulgate: informem . . . me], and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.” In the apocryphal Acts of Peter and Paul, Simon Magus conjures a

golem in order to demonstrate the extent of his powers. Interestingly, this moment is preserved in Old Norse. In Tveggja Póstola Saga Péetr ok Páls, it is said that: Hann gerði orm or eiri, þann er skreið, oc hunda or steini, þa er go, oc likneski or malmi, þau er hlogu oc hræ(r)ðuz. (“He made a serpent out of brass, which crawled, and dogs out of stone, which barked, and statues out of metal, which laughed and moved.”)47 While Clemens saga, apparently drawing on the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitiones, features Simon Magus boasting that: “At bøþorþi mínu hlæia likneski þau es ger eru ór tré eþa ór málmi ok hrœrask þau ok mæla ef ek býþ þat.” (“At my command, statues that are made of wood or metal will laugh and move. They will speak, if I command it.”)48

How far the idea of the golem penetrated Christian thought during the High Middle Ages has not been widely examined by scholars. It seems unlikely that, as the Early Church diverted from its once Jewish identity, an understanding of the references to the golem per se in the aforementioned episodes would have been retained. Nonetheless, these descriptions of magically animated homunculi would have brought the substance of the golem into Christianity, even if the name and the concomitant traditions were lost. Moreover, we must also consider the very probable eventuality that the golem was occasionally retransmitted into Christianity via contacts with Judaism. We know that the golem and the Sefer Yeṣirah were being openly discussed by Jews and Christians in Germany and Italy by the late fifteenth century.49 However, it is not unthinkable that this process had begun much earlier. The thirteenth century saw a crescendo of interest in the golem amongst the Ashkenazim, the Northern European Jewish culture to which any Jews working with Victorines would have belonged. Joshua Trachtenburg cites an excerpt from De Universo by William of Auvergne (fl. 1228), as a Christian analogue to the golem, but the relationship may even stem from transmission rather than convergence.50

46 Idel, Golem, 5–7.
49 Idel, Golem, 175–180.
(d. ca. 1058), although he mistakenly believed him to be an Arabic Christian. William’s work also often drew on Maimonides (d. 1204), although he never acknowledged him by name, probably owing to William’s paradoxical anti-Jewish streak.51

Thus, when William writes the following, it is not impossible that he is attacking Jewish sources which he customarily refuses to name: “Sicut in libris experimentorum poteris invenire, similes etiam ludificationes mulierum eis, quas agunt incubi daemones, quidam malefici et attentaverunt, et scripsi-runt, posterisque reliquerunt, si tamen eis de talibus creditur.” (“In books of experiments one can find mockeries of women resembling those which derive from the demons incubi. Some magicians also seduce them, and write about them, and then abandon them, if they are to be believed in this regard.”)52 The vague term libros experimentorum would certainly be an appropriate appellation for the Sefer Yeṣirah and some other Kabbalistic texts, particularly as they would have been perceived by Christian outsiders. Moreover, as a student of Maimonides, William could well be expected to know the golem. Maimonides did discuss the golem, and in later folklore he was even rumoured to have created one himself.53 Naturally, the curious detail of sexual relations with the conjured being is not authentic to Judaism, but it does resonate with the Judæophobic perception of Jewish magic as especially corporeal and sordid which we examined earlier. Indeed, even if this excerpt from William’s writing is not demonstrative of a Christian discovering the golem through Hebraism, it seems hard to believe that it did not happen quite often during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Other Talmudic authorities, including Rashi, and the later Ashkenazi pietist Eleazar of Worms (d. 1238), treated the golem extensively.54 When a Victorine consulted a Jewish master on the meaning of Psalm 139, it seems hard to believe that the subject could have been avoided—particularly when Rashi’s teachings were so predominant in the intellectual world of thirteenth century French Jews.

53 For Maimonides own words, see Hilkhot Yesode Ha-Torah 3:10. See also: Idel, Golem, 301–305. For the later folklore, see Howard Schwartz, Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 284–285.
So what might the relationship be between Mǫkkurkálfi and the golem? Certainly, Mǫkkurkálfi is a magically animated anthropoid intended for an (un)life of service. Hrungnir, himself a giant made of stone, appears to be performing some kind of magical rite when he cuts the heart from a mare and uses it to animate Mǫkkurkálfi, who will then be expected to defend the giants against the ever irate Þórr. As in more didactically orientated tales of the golem, there is also the theme of the imperfection of creation when it is not undertaken by God. Mǫkkurkálfi is indeed “unformed”; although intended to be a fearsome weapon, he quivers with fear and loses control of his bladder when confronted with the sight of Þórr on the warpath. Moreover, the manner of his creation by Hrungnir brings to mind the kind of magic practiced in the Old Norse version of the miracle of Petronia cited earlier. Just like the warm urine trickling down Mǫkkurkálfi’s thigh, or the naked lust in Dínus saga drambláta, Snorri makes the conception of the leirjǫtunn into something grossly physical. Where the Jewish sorcerer from the Icelandic Homily Book used the kidney stone of an ox, Hrungnir and the giants use the heart of a mare.

Indeed, on closer inspection Hrungnir is surprisingly reminiscent of the archetypal Jewish magician in another way. Unlike Mǫkkurkálfi, who is attested only in Snorra Edda, he was certainly not imagined by Snorri. There are references to him in the Eddic poems Háðarðsljóð (stz 14), Hymiskviða (stz 16), Lokasenna (stz 61, 63), Sigdrífumál (stz 15), and Grottasǫngr (stz 9), which is the only other source which indicates that he was made of stone: Harðr var Hrungnir oc hans faðir (“Hard was Hrungnir and his father”).55 Hrungnir also appears in the skaldic verses Ragnarsdrápa and Haustlǫng. The implications of his stone heart have not gone unnoted by scholars. John Lindow has explored the binary opposition between the organic, normative “natural” Þórr and the stony, “unnatural” Hrungnir, while Bernard Martin suggests the heart is intended to invoke an air of “invulnerability” and “inhumanity.”56 But there is one specific inference of “stony heartedness” in medieval culture which has gone uncommented upon. While Snorri did not invent Hrungnir, he may well have recognised and accentuated the anti-Jewish typological connotations of


his body. When he writes: \textit{Hrungnir átti hjarta þat er friegt er, af hǫrðum steini} ("Hrungnir had a heart which is famous, made from hard stone"), he recalls the traditional appellation of the Jews as a "stony hearted people"—a polemical attack which Snorri would almost certainly have heard preached in church.\textsuperscript{57}

As the \textit{Old Icelandic Homily Book} itself states:

\begin{quote}
En þóat allar hofoþskepnor váttæpe hann guþ vera. þa villdo öllvngis eige hiorto òtrúra gyþinga trúa hann guþ vera. oc harþpare steinom villdo þau eige kliúfasc til ìpronar. oc vilia eige iáta þeim er allar skepnor skilia guþ vera.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

But even though all of the elements attested that He [Jesus] 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.

Obviously, Hrungnir is not Jewish. But, to use a term coined by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Hrungnir is “Jew-ish.”\textsuperscript{59} That is to say, he evokes the typological associations of the anti-Jewish symbolic vocabulary, without being intended as an explicit caricature of a Jew. It is appropriate that a “Jew-ish” magician should conjure a noticeably golem-ish anthropoid. Snorri would have needed only a passing or third-hand familiarity with the golem figure to make such an association. After all, the Jew-ishness of Hrungnir and the golem-ishness of Mökkurkálfi are dependent on just two “facts” which would not have been accessible to Snorri through his affiliation with contemporary Christianity: (1) that Jews fashion clay anthropoids; (2) that such anthropoids are commonly imperfect. As seen, the Victorine connection to Norway would have been a convenient channel for the transmission of such knowledge. If Snorri did not necessarily know a great deal about the golem—he does not even have to have known that it was called “the golem”—it is also likely that his narrative sensibilities were not overpowered by its Jewish origins. For Snorri, the


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Homiliu-Bók}, 58.

\textsuperscript{59} Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, \textit{Medieval Identity Machines} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 185. Cf., by the same author: “Was Margery Kempe Jewish?” \textit{In the Middle} (21 April 2006), available online at http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2006/04/was-margery-kempe-jewish.html.
golem was probably little more than an intriguing image, idly heard at the
court of King Hákon, and adapted to service no purpose other than adding a
little further colour to the story of Þórr and Hrungnir. I would not propose that
Snorri borrowed the image of the golem per se. Rather, I would speculate that
he responded to it in a manner very similar to the response quoted in the epi-
graph to this essay. This was a case of inspiration, not appropriation.

A further possible footprint of the golem heading northwards, which
would render Snorri’s encounter less exceptional, can be found in Porleif’s
Páttr jarlsskálds (in Flateyjarbók, of c. 1390, although the tale is most likely
from around 1300).60 There, when the troublesome kraftaskáld Þorleifr
Rauðfeldarson composes a verse that magically molests the pagan Earl Hákon
(d. 995), Hákon is eager for revenge. A devotee of the pagan deities Þorgerðr
Hǫrgabrúðr and Irpa, he turns to the occult in order to kill Þorleifr:

En nú er þar til at taka, er Hákon jarl er, at honum batnaði hins mesta
meinlætis, en þat segja sumir menn, at hann yrði aldri samr maðr ok áðr,
ok vildi jarl nú gjarna hefna Þorleif þessar smánar, ef hann gæti, heitir nú
á fulltrúða sína, Þorgerði Hǫrgabrúði ok Irpu, systur hennar, at reka þann
galdur út til Íslands, at Þorleifi ynni af fulltrúa sína, at Þorleif þessar smánar, ef
hann kló til að ná þetta, lað því þeim mikl fórmir ok ekki til fréttar.

[And now Earl Hákon began to recover from the massive pain, and some
people say that he was never quite the same man as he was before, and
the Earl now wanted to avenge Þorleifr for this embarrassment if he could,
calling on his patron deities, Þorgerðr Hǫrgabrúðr and her sister, Irpa,
to project their magic out to towards Iceland so that Þorleifr would be
utterly vanquished, and he offered them great sacrifices and requested
news. And when he received news which was to his liking, he had a piece
of driftwood taken and made from it a wooden man, and by the magic
and incantation of the earl and the magic and the ecstatic witchcraft of

60 Jónas Kristjánsson, Introduction to Porleif’s Páttr jarlsskálds in Eyfirdinga Sögur, ed. Jónas
Kristjánsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1956), xciv.
61 Porleif’s Páttr jarlsskálds, 225–226.
those sisters he had a man killed, took from him his heart, had it put into
the wooden man and then had it set on its feet and gave it a name. It was
called Þorgarðr, and he bewitched it so much by the power of the devil
that it walked around and spoke to people. Then he put him on a ship
and sent him out to Iceland on a mission to kill Þorleifr “The Earl’s Poet.”
Hákon armed him with a halberd which he had taken out of the shrine of
the sisters and which once had been owned by Hǫrgi.

The similarity between Þorgarðr and the golem has been briefly alluded to
several times in secondary criticism, although no commentator has explored
the similarities in full.62 Firstly, reminiscent of the mare’s heart given to
Mǫkkurkálfi, there is the inserted heart. The concept of a murdered vic-
tim being part of the ritual was present in early configurations of the golem
legend.63 Secondly, although golems were usually thought to be made of dust
or clay, wooden golems were not unknown. We have already seem this in an
Old Norse context from Pétris saga Postola, where Simon Magus’s walking, talk-
ing golem has remarkable affinities with the trémaðr. Indeed, Solomon ibn
Gabirol, of whom William of Auvergne was so fond, was said to have assem-
bled a golem out of wood.64 We should note too, that the tré (“wood”) of which
this trémaðr consisted was apparently construed as a particularly earthy ele-
ment. When Þorgarðr’s work is done, he does not fall down as a pile of sticks,
but, in a manner which to me seems more reminscent of the golem returning
to dust: hann steyptist í jǫrðina niðr, svá at í iljarnar var at sjá (“he plunged down
into the earth so that only the footprints could be seen.”)65 Thirdly, like the ani-
mation of a golem, the creation of Þorgarðr seems to have not only a magical
but a religious significance. It is figured as a kind of worship towards Þorgerðr
Hǫrgabrúðr and Irpa; a reaffirmation of deference to a deity.

62 See Kate Heslop, “Þorleifr jarlsskald Rauðfeldarson’ [biography],” in Skaldic Poetry of the
Scandinavian Middle Ages v: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. Diana Whaley (Turnhout:
para o Português,” Mirabilia 17 (2013), 567; Leszek Pawel Słupecki, “The Scandinavian God
Thor and His Ancient Roots,” Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae 9 (2004), 238. Richard North,
Introduction to The Haustlöng of Þjóðolfr of Hvínir (Enfield: Hisarlik Press, 1997), lxii–lxiii.
63 Idel, Golem, 7–8.
64 Schwartz, Tree of Souls, 280–281.
65 Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds, 226.
Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we can recapitulate how much knowledge of Jewish magical and exegetical practices would have been current in Scandinavia by the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century. Much as in other regions of Europe, amongst lay people there seems to have existed a popular perception that Jews were particularly gifted with supernatural abilities. Common anti-Jewish tropes regarding corporeality and hostile intent were intrinsic to this preconception. Doubtless encouraged by the stereotype of the Jewish sorcerer, garbled Hebrew words were commonly used in runic inscriptions intended for magical purposes. Through the inter-religious learning of the Victorines, some tangible transmissions from the medieval Jewish world became available to Scandinavians. As seen in the case of N348, some Scandinavians probably attempted to grasp the rudiments of Hebrew. Also owing to the Victorine connection with Norway, Snorri Sturluson may well have enjoyed second- or third-hand familiarity with the *Sefer Toledot Yeshu*. Although at an unusually northern latitude for such cultural osmosis to have taken place, both Snorri and the anonymous author of *Porleifs saga jarlsskálds* appear to have been influenced by the potent image of the golem: neither Þorgarðr nor Mǫkkurkálfi are themselves the golem proper, but they may yet be the shadows cast by his lumbering frame.

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