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Chapter 22

Enemies of Christ in the Far North: Tales of Saracens, Jews and the Saami in Norwegian Medieval Painting

Within the limited corpus of Norwegian medieval painting, a surprisingly large number of images portray Muslims and Jews in the context of Christian narratives of opposing faiths. In this chapter, I wish to shed light on these images and discuss them in their cultural and religious context. In recent years, a number of scholarly articles have addressed the question of different ethnic and religious groups and their representation in medieval Scandinavia. I will argue that the portrayal of Muslims and Jews in this corpus reflects the role of these minorities within the storyworld of the Jerusalem code, not in physical reality, and that as literary figures they emphasise the medieval Jerusalem as, among other things, a city of the mind. To demonstrate this, I contrast the depictions of Jews and Muslims with representations of the Saami people of Scandinavia, a minority that must have had a palpable presence in Nordic society, but that is largely invisible in medieval Norwegian storyworlds.

In the thirteenth century, Norway was a country on the edge of Christendom. The archdiocese of Nidaros was the northernmost in the world, and one of the geographically largest, spanning modern Norway and Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Isles. At its zenith, it even included the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. Norway's primary international contacts were, in addition to her Scandinavian neighbours, England, France, Scotland and North German principalities. There were no known Jewish communities in medieval Scandinavia,¹ and the region was, of course, far from the Christian-Muslim borders of Europe. Trade, warfare and pilgrimage may of course have brought some Scandinavians into contact with both Jews and Muslims. On the other hand, there were indigenous Saami and Inuit communities within the Norwegian realm. Moreover, from the twelfth century onwards, Danes, Swedes and Teutonic Knights launched several crusades to convert – and conquer – Finns, Wends and other Baltic peoples.

¹ Yvonne Friedman, *Reception of Medieval European Anti-Jewish Concepts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Norway*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Hess, *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

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When King Haakon IV Haakonsson (1204–1263) founded a royal chapel in what is today the city Tromsø in 1252, it was called *Sancta Maria juxta paganos*, thus claiming the territory for Christianity and defining it as a border against the pagans of the North. However, it would seem that this was a fluid and porous border, with trade, cultural and religious contact between Norse and Saami inhabitants.² It is probable that there were groups of Saami population in large parts of the country, from the Arctic to the mountain regions of central Norway. The sources are generally silent regarding encounters between the pagan and Christian populations in Norway, perhaps underplaying certain aspects of what must have been an ethnically and religiously diverse society. From written sources, the general impression is that of a country fully integrated into Western Christendom. As we shall see, visual sources largely support this impression.

The relationship between Christians and Muslims, Christians and Jews and Norse and Saami have large and complex historiographies. This chapter can merely scratch at the surface of these relationships, which also are fraught and where the scholarship often is politicised. In the following, I hope to shed light on the imagery that these relationships generated in a remote corner of Europe a long time ago. Hopefully, it will inspire further scholarship in an expanding field of research.³

Norwegian Medieval Painting

The corpus of Norwegian medieval painting is relatively small. In contrast to many other European countries, it consists mostly of panel painting and mural painting. Panel painting is the most common. Preserved mural paintings are less prevalent than in Sweden and Denmark, and the few examples that do exist are painted on both on plaster and on wood. There are almost no preserved manuscript illuminations. Practically all surviving paintings originate from relatively modest churches in rural parishes, and are datable to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Scholars generally agree that most art in Norway until the mid-fourteenth century was produced domestically. Although written sources are scanty, evidence suggests that there were workshops producing sculpture in stone and wood and panel painting in all episcopal centres (Nidaros, Bergen, Stavanger, Oslo and Hamar) (Fig. 22.1). From

² Bjørn Bandlien, "Trading with Muslims and the Sámi in Medieval Norway," in *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, ed. Cordelia Hess and Jonathan Adams (Berlin – Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 40.

³ See for instance Cordelia Hess and Jonathan Adams, eds., *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region* (Berlin – Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015); Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Hess, eds., *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (New York – London: Routledge, 2018) and Lars Ivar Hansen and Bjørnar Olsen, *Hunters in Transition: An Outline of Early Sámi History*, The Northern World (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

Fig. 22.1: Map of dioceses in medieval Norway, showing cathedral cities and the church sites mentioned in this chapter.

the mid-thirteenth century, there appears to have been considerable English stylistic and iconographic influence on Norwegian sculpture and painting. This influence has been observed by both English and Scandinavian scholars, including Aron Andersson, Martin Blindheim, Nigel Morgan and Paul Binski.⁴

The evidence for this influence has been found through traditional art historical scholarship or connoisseurship, with one significant exception. In 1248 the English

⁴ Aron Andersson, “English Influence in Norwegian and Swedish figuresculpture in wood 1220–1270” (Doctoral Thesis, University of Stockholm, 1949); Martin Blindheim, *Main Trends of the East-Norwegian Figure Sculpture in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1952); Nigel J. Morgan, “Iconography,” in *Painted Altar Frontals of Norway, 1250–1350*, ed. Erla B. Hohler, *et al.* (London: Archetype, 2004); Paul Binski and Marie Louise Sauerberg, “Matthew Paris in Norway: The Fåberg St Peter,” in *Medieval Painting in Northern Europe: Techniques, Analysis, Art History*, ed. Jilleen Nadolny (London: Archetype Books, 2006).

Benedictine monk and artist Matthew Paris (c.1200–1259) was sent to Norway to reform the Benedictine house at Holm (Nidarholm) on an island outside Nidaros. He also met King Haakon IV in Bergen, and there passed on an invitation to the Norwegian king from the Louis IX of France (1214–1270) to join in the Seventh Crusade. It is estimated that Matthew stayed in Norway for a year and a half, returning to England at the end of the sailing season of 1249. Several scholars have pointed out a strong resemblance between a painted tabernacle door from Fåberg (a rural parish in Hamar diocese) and Matthew Paris' fluid and crisp manuscript paintings.⁵ Some have claimed that the painting, which shows St Peter, must have been imported from England together with the rest of the tabernacle, while Paul Binski supports the idea that it was painted by Matthew while in Norway, probably at Nidarholm. Whether this was indeed the case or not we shall never know, but the case of the Benedictine's visit is a key piece of evidence for personal as well as artistic contacts over the North Sea in the thirteenth century.

It is probable that some craftsmen immigrated from England to major Norwegian towns, perhaps initially as hired craftsmen on Royal or Episcopal projects. Scholars agree that the paintings that have survived to our time are products of relatively small independent workshops. There are no indications that these panels were made in monastic workshops. The iconographical programme of each panel was probably decided in the workshop in a discussion between master craftsman and lay or ecclesiastical patron. Motifs were collected in booklets, which one must assume were copied, compiled and circulated between craftsmen around the North Sea region. One such book, the Icelandic drawing book, survives as a fifteenth century manuscript. The existence of such motif collections are an often overlooked factor in explaining why certain motifs gained popularity.

Images of Turks and Saracens

Two altar frontals from Nedstryn (c.1275–1300) and Dale II⁶ (c.1275–1300) depict Turks and Saracens as the antagonists of Christians. The Nedstryn panel has the Legend of the Exultation of the Cross as its subject matter, while the Dale panel shows two lesser-known Marian legends, one of which is the Legend of the Turk's Head. Although the texts on which these picture cycles are based in principle refer

⁵ See Binski and Sauerberg, "Matthew Paris in Norway".

⁶ The panel in question is Bergen Museum MA 9, known as the "Dale II" frontal, as it was believed that it was one of two altar frontals preserved from the parish church at Dale in Luster, Sogn og Fjordane. However, research has shown that the frontal almost certainly originates from Vanylven parish church, Møre og Romsdal (see Erla B. Hohler, Nigel J. Morgan, and Anne Wichstrøm, *Painted Altar Frontals of Norway*, vol. 1 (London: Archetype, 2004), 94–97). In order to avoid (further) confusion, I refer to the frontal in question as "Dale II."

to two different ethnic groups, there was much confusion regarding the definition of Saracens and Turks in contemporary sources. In our context, they may both be characterised with the more modern term Muslim.

The legend of the Turk's head is among the more obscure Marian legends, and tells the story of a knight who fell in love with a Turkish princess.⁷ The girl's father objected to the liaison and banished the knight from his kingdom, which in turn led to both the knight and princess dying from grief. They were buried together, and from their tomb a voice was heard saying: "Those who see me shall die, those who follow me shall conquer." When the grave was opened, a monstrous head was discovered. This head was used as a weapon by the Turks, killing anyone who laid eyes on it. When the Turk army reached Constantinople – or *Miklagard* in the Old Norse text – the Christians within its gates prayed for the Virgin Mary's protection and placed an image of her on the city walls. Confronted with a stronger image, the monstrous head lost its power and the Turkish army was defeated. This legend is apparently based on the historical siege of Constantinople in 717–718, albeit much embellished. The iconography of the Dale II altar frontal is extremely rare; medieval illustrations of this legend are practically unknown, and this is the only known example of this legend depicted on an altar (Fig. 22.2).

The Exultation of the Cross is on the other hand a relatively well known legend, although there are few existing iconographic parallels to the Nedstryn frontal.⁸ The quality and state of preservation of this panel are exceptionally high. In eight medallions, encircled by explanatory texts in Old Norse, the legend is told in great detail. The five first scenes deal with the battle between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–641) and the Persian king Chosroes (579–628), over the Cross, which Chosroes according to legend had plundered from Jerusalem. In our context, it is worth mentioning that in the Norse version, Heraclius is the King of Jerusalem, thus the link to the Holy City is emphasised and the connection to Byzantium is obfuscated. Likewise, Chosroes is Saracen, not Persian. The final three medallions are concerned with Heraclius' pride and humiliation before being allowed to re-enter Jerusalem with the Cross (Fig. 1.2).⁹

In both the Dale II and the Nedstryn panel, the Muslims have been given an appearance that distinguishes them from their Christian opponents. Their skin is noticeably darker than the Christians', in the Dale case the skin had a blue tinge, with cheeks modelled in red, while the Nedstryn Saracens have greyish skin. Their noses are often more prominent. This is particularly true of the men; the Nedstryn

⁷ *Maríu Saga. Legender om Jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn*, ed. Carl R. Unger, Kristiania, 1871.

⁸ The legend is known in the vernacular from the Old Norse Homily, dating from c.1200. *Acta et processus canonizationis b. Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, Ser. 2, Latinska skrifter, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell boktryckeri, 1924–1931.

⁹ See the analysis of the Nedstryn panel in the introductory chapter "Jerusalem as the Navel of the Storyworld of Medieval Scandinavia" (Chapter 1, Kristin B. Aavitsland), 25–28.

Fig. 22.2: Altar frontal from Dale II/Unknown church. Detail showing the monstrous Turk's head used as weapon. University Museum of Bergen.

panel also portrays women, and although their skin has the same greyish tinge as the men's, they are otherwise quite similar to those of their Christian counterparts.

Regarding dress, one must distinguish between armour and civilian clothing. Armour features heavily in both panels; in the Dale frontal all the Turks are shown in military garb. Their panels show both sides as military forces with men, horses and equipment of equal strength and quality; the enemy is strong.

There is a more marked attempt at differentiation when it comes to civilian clothes. On the Nedstryn panel, three medallions show scenes from Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian kingdom. When Chosroes returns with his loot, he is greeted at the gates of the city by two men wearing long, unbelted gowns and pointed, conical hats that strongly resemble Jews' hats. As mentioned above, their skin tone is dark and their features are orientalist, with heavy brows, hooked noses and thick, red lips. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that one of them has blond hair and beard. Behind the city walls, a crowd has gathered. We primarily see women wearing wimples, the rest of their bodies are hidden.

In the following scene, Chosroes with the Holy Cross is being worshipped by four of his subjects, two men and two women. The men appear to be identical to the two who greeted their king at the city gates in the previous scene. The women are dressed in long gowns and elaborately draped cloaks. These clothes seem to resemble the formal garments worn by female saints, rather than contemporary women's clothing. Like the men's flowing gowns, the clothes set them apart, but without any apparent negative connotations. Their headdresses reflect contemporary fashion, one woman wearing a wimple under her veil, the others respectively a fillet, barrette and snood. All four throw their hands up in adoration, the men simultaneously tearing the pointed hats from their heads. Above them, Chosroes sits in his palace with its "glass dome," pretending he can control the sun and moon and letting it "rain" from the gargoyles depicted. The four Saracens are the image of gullible idolatry as they worship their apparently miracle-working king (Fig. 22.3).

In both panels the non-Christians carry distinctive insignia. On the Dale panel, the Saracens carry a black arrowhead as their symbol, while the Nedstryn Saracens carry a black toad. In the fourth scene, the Battle of Niniveh, we see Heraclius slaying Chosroes' son Rhahzadh by thrusting his sword through the latter's shield; the shield is decorated with a black toad, and Rhahzadh's blood can be seen gushing from the toad's belly. The use of the toad here can hardly be coincidental; in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries toads were considered demonic animals.¹⁰

In both panels, these black, negative insignia are contrasted with the Christians' cross-inscribed shields and banners. The red cross on white background identifies those who carry them as crusaders. This is not surprising in the Nedstryn panel, where the

¹⁰ Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1994), 134–135.

Fig. 22.3: Altar frontal from Nedstryn. Detail showing scene 3: Saraens worshipping Chosroes and 4: the battle of Niniveh. University Museum of Bergen.

Holy Cross itself is at the centre of the narrative. The crusader theme is less apparent in the Dale panel, particularly as the legend in question has been complicated by the love story between the princess and the knight. Nevertheless, the focus of the visual story is on the conflict between Saracens and Christians. The four scenes show a compressed narrative which boils down to a battle between the demonic Turk's head and the holy image of the Virgin.

The Turk's head itself is worth closer examination. It is a monstrous apparition, an enormous humanoid head placed on a pair of pig's feet. Its skin is dark brown, it is completely bald and its facial features are horribly caricatured with large ears, protruding eyes, a bulbous nose and thick lips. The Turkish soldiers move it on a wheelbarrow-like contraption, and the Christian soldiers fall like skittles at the mere sight of it. It is interesting to note that in addition to the more generalised catalogue of foreign and evil features, the monster has pig's feet. They are open to several interpretations. On one hand they refer simply to the fact that the monster is not just a deformed human, but a combination of beast and human and thus in the problematic category of hybrids, creatures that transgress god-given borders.¹¹ While the pig historically had been a treasured animal in Germanic countries, by the later Middle Ages its place in the hierarchy of domestic animals was near the bottom.¹² In Muslim and Jewish

¹¹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 140.

¹² Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 27.

culture, the pig was an unclean animal, surrounded by taboos. Perhaps the employment of pig's feet on the monstrous Turk's head is a more or less conscious attempt to associate the enemies of Christ with an animal that was abhorrent to that group, a parallel to the widespread phenomena of the *Judensau*.¹³ Because there apparently are no preserved visual parallels to the Dale II frontal, we do not know if the monster we see on it was an established mode of depiction or a unique flight of fancy. The monstrous head on pig's feet is therefore a solitary phenomenon in the depressingly large catalogue of imagery of religious defamation.

Historian Bjørn Bandlien has discussed how Saracens are portrayed in the Norse sagas, observing that they are often shown to be noble and valiant. However, *blámenn*, or black-skinned men (literally “blue men”), were recognised as a subcategory of Saracens and they were shown to be very fierce warriors, sometimes even monstrous or demonic.¹⁴ As we have seen from the few, but very interesting painted examples, this observation fits well with the visual portrayals of Saracens. The Nedstryn frontal portrays the Saracens army as strong and the soldiers as valiant, although the citizens of Ctesiphon are shown to be gullible and somewhat ridiculous. This differentiation mirrors the function of non-Christians in this storyworld. The brave Muslim soldiers serve to emphasise the skill and bravery of the triumphant Christian army. On the other hand, the civilian Muslims' gullibility functions as a contrast to the implicitly true faith of the Christians – the faith of Heraclius and his men, the citizens of Jerusalem and also the men and women worshipping at the altar of Nedstryn Church.

Muslims as brave opponents also feature in the example from Dale. There are no civilian Turks in the images, but the grotesque head is effectively contrasted with the beautiful and even more powerful Marian statue in the final showdown at the city gates of Constantinople. The dark skin colour and exaggerated facial features of the monstrous head could be an allusion to the more vicious *blámadr* aspect of the Saracen. However, just like in the Nedstryn case, the main function of the Saracen idol is as a stark contrast to the true Christian faith.

Images of Jews: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Images of Jews are everywhere in Christian iconography. Christ, his family and his disciples were Jewish, as were many of their adversaries. What is interesting in our

¹³ The motif of the *Judensau* shows a sow suckling one or several Jews. It originated in German-speaking regions in the thirteenth century, primarily in architectural sculpture. For a thorough exploration of the motif and its history, see Isaiah Shachar, *The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and Its History*, Warburg Institute surveys (London: The Warburg Institute, 1974). A rare example of a sculpted *Judensau* outside German-speaking regions can be found in the chancel of Uppsala Cathedral.

¹⁴ Bandlien, “Trading with Muslims and the Sámi in Medieval Norway,” 37.

Fig. 22.4: Painted chancel vault from Ål church. King Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents. Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

context are the instances when this Jewishness is emphasised in some way, either good or bad. When these different modes of depiction have been identified, we may examine what function this emphasis on difference, on Jewishness, does. I will also explore depictions of the personified Synagogue, *Synagoga*, in Norwegian painting.

In Nativity cycles, three Jewish men have important roles: Joseph, Simeon and Herod. In the Norwegian material, it is particularly Joseph and Simeon who occasionally are singled out as Jewish, Joseph with a *pileum cornutum* or pointed Jew's hat and Simeon, in the Presentation in the Temple, with a tallit or prayer shawl over his head. Although the foreign headgear gives the two men a slightly exotic appearance, it is hard to interpret this otherness as negative. There is only one example of the Massacre of the Innocents in our material, and this is the ceiling paintings from Ål church. There, Herod is portrayed wearing the same belted tunic, cloak and crown as any Christian ruler, including Norway's patron saint King Olav. His skin colour is the same pink shade as his young victims, and his features are neutrally painted; he might even be characterised as handsome (Fig. 22.4).

The apparent neutrality of these images contrast vividly with the way Jews are depicted in Passion cycles. In about half of the preserved examples, Christ's tormentors and killers are identified as specifically Jewish. The ways in which this alterity is shown are many, such as exaggerated physiognomy, darkened skin and exotic headgear.

Many of the paintings give Christ's tormentors exaggerated physiognomy, such as bulging eyes, hooked or bulbous noses, thick lips and protruding teeth. An interesting example is the altar frontal from Hauge, where four medallions showing Passion scenes flank a large octofoil showing the Crucifixion. The two medallions to the left show respectively the Flagellation and the Carrying of the Cross (Fig. 22.5). While the two men accompanying Christ in the former scene are shown with disproportionately large heads, furrowed brows and hooked noses, in the latter scene their heads are of a normal size and their facial expressions are neutral.

In some images, there is a distinct difference in skin tone between the good and the evil. The paintings on the wooden vault from Ål church, two men accompanying Christ at the Carrying of the Cross are shown with grotesque, almost simian features, such as flattened, hooked noses, cruelly twisted mouths and a greyish skin tone. In addition to this, they are both wearing pointed Jew's hats. Their skin contrasts effectively with Christ's rosy flesh. However, the distinctive, dark skin tone is not used on the torturer in the Flagellation, nor Synagoga in the Crucifixion scene. Interestingly, in a Crucifixion scene from Eid (c.1275–1300) all the torturers have been given darker skin except Longinus.¹⁵ This is probably due to Longinus' more redemptory role later in the

Fig. 22.5: Altar frontal from Hauge. Detail showing the Flagellation and the Carrying of the Cross. University Museum of Bergen. Photo: Svein Skare©Universitetsmuseet i Bergen.

¹⁵ Unn Plahter et al., *Painted altar frontals of Norway 1250–1350: An Art-historical and Technical Study of the 31 Painted Panels Preserved*, 3 vols. (London: Archetype Publishers, 2004): vol. 2, 121.

Fig. 22.6: Altar frontal from Røldal, detail showing Christ's tormentors with "African" physiognomy and a winged helmet. University Museum of Bergen.

Passion narrative as subject to a healing miracle. As mentioned above, neither is King Herod in the Massacre of the Innocents from the same suite of images.

The Røldal frontal is unique in that it shows one of Christ's tormentors with what may be characterised as African physiognomy (Fig. 22.6). The two men are depicted with very dark skin, short, tightly curled hair, bulbous noses and thick lips. This is an example of the more general association of dark skin with evil merging with a more specific identification of Christ's tormentors as exotic and foreign-looking. Perhaps this is an instance of iconographic contamination, where the idea of the *blåmadr* as a particularly aggressive Saracen is transposed to Jewishness.

The presence of winged headgear in many of the paintings is interesting. It is a relatively rare occurrence in contemporary European iconography, found primarily in English and French manuscript illuminations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with some isolated instances in German art. This relatively marginal iconography crops up in four of nine preserved Passion frontals from Norway.¹⁶ Their quality and style are completely different, and there is no suggestion of a direct connection between the four artefacts.

Ruth Mellinkoff points out that the symbolism of winged headgear is unclear, and became part of a catalogue of attributes of foreignness and evil.¹⁷ It is used to signify paganism, Saracens or Jews (also hunters and foresters), and she mentions a Parisian example where one of St Stephen's

¹⁶ Kinsarvik, Nes, Røldal, Tingelstad.

¹⁷ Ruth Mellinkoff, "Demonic Winged Headgear," *Viator* 16 (1985): 370.

executioners is depicted as an African wearing a winged helmet.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in the Norwegian material it is used exclusively for the torturers of Christ, either at the Crucifixion or the scenes directly preceding the Crucifixion (the Flagellation and Carrying of the Cross. It does not occur in other torture scenes (i.e. saints' martyrdoms), or in legends where Jews or Saracens are shown as enemies of Christ. The winged hat or helmet seems thus to have taken on a more specific meaning in the Norwegian context. The preserved material suggests that in Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the winged hat was an exclusive identifier of Christ's torturers and executioners.

The more conventional Jewish headgear, the pointed, funnel-shaped hat or *pileum cornutum*, also turns up in several images, some of which have been mentioned already. On an altar frontal from Bø, the *pileum cornutum* is worn both by Christ's tormentors and by the High priest. As pointed out previously, Joseph is sometimes shown wearing a variant of the *pileum cornutum* in Nativity scenes. Interestingly, the *pileum cornutum* occurs on approximately the same number of artefacts as the winged helmet, but there is a significant difference: while the winged helmet is only worn by one of Christ's torturers, there can be several bearers of the pointed Jew's hat. Although the material is limited, this points to a possible interpretation of the winged hat as a mark of distinction, albeit a negative distinction.

The personified Synagoga occurs on three Crucifixion scenes in the Norwegian material. Two of these are mural paintings placed directly above an altar in neighbouring mountain parish churches, Torpo and Ål, while the third is found on an altar frontal from a church from Kinsarvik, a busy coastal village in Western Norway.¹⁹

The history of the iconography of Ecclesia and Synagoga may be traced back to the fifth century, but gained popularity in the thirteenth century. In this tradition, Church and Synagogue are represented by an opposing pair of young women, where Ecclesia is shown to be triumphing over Synagoga. The women carry attributes such as a Eucharistic chalice or the tablets of the Law, and Synagoga is often portrayed blindfolded or with a broken banner to underline her submissive status. Although stylistically very different, the Synagogas of Torpo and Kinsarvik share several iconographical similarities. In both versions the woman is shown wearing a long dress and cloak that is identical in shape (but different in colour) to the one worn by the opposite Ecclesia figure. Synagoga carries a broken banner, an inverted chalice and her crown is slipping from her head. The major difference between the two is that while the Torpo version is blindfolded and dramatically weeping, the Kinsarvik Synagoga is shown with closed eyes, but no blindfold. The Ål Synagoga differs, not only from the

¹⁸ Mellinkoff, "Demonic Winged Headgear," 370.

¹⁹ The mural from Torpo church is still in situ, while Ål church was demolished in the 1880s and the chancel vault with decorations preserved in the Museum of Cultural Heritage, Oslo.

Fig. 22.7: Painted chancel vault from Ål church: The Crucifixion with Synagoga personified. Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

Norwegian parallels, but also from most European versions, in that she is not dressed similarly to the opposing Ecclesia, but is shown wearing a sarong-like drapery on her lower body, hiding one breast but exposing the other provocatively (Fig. 22.7). While Ecclesia in the Ål painting is shown with a chalice in her hand, ready to catch the blood of Christ, Synagoga is holding a severed goat's head in her hand. This attribute of Synagoga is relatively rare, but not unknown; for instance, it may be seen on the north porch of Erfurt cathedral. The goat may plausibly be interpreted as a symbol of animal sacrifice, the Jewish equivalent of the Eucharist.²⁰ Seen in context with the semi-nude body and wantonly flowing hair of Synagoga, the animal's lascivious connotations are also relevant. Synagoga's state of undress is very rare in the comparative material, but a close parallel could be found in the now lost mural paintings in Vang church, another neighbouring parish.

Voluptuous or sensual depictions of Synagoga are not unusual in Gothic art. As art historian Sara Lipton has pointed out, "On the rare occasions when high medieval artists attempted to express the more obdurate and dynamic carnality of Jewish law

²⁰ Kristin B. Aavitsland, "The Church and Synagogue in Ecclesiastical Art. A Case from Medieval Norway," *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 5 (4) (2016): 334.

in gendered terms, they did so by means not of the Jewish female but the female personification of Judaism, Synagoga.”²¹ The obvious vulgarity of the Ål depiction is however very unusual, and begs the question of whether the craftsman may have incorporated elements from the iconography or the mortal sin of Luxuria into his composition. The asymmetrically draped garment may be associated with draperies of classical statues of Venus, perhaps a sign of a conflation or contamination of non-Christian imagery.

Legends of the Virgin were extremely popular throughout medieval Europe, and Norway was no exception. They were translated into the vernacular and distributed widely; many copies still survive. Some of these legends have survived as visual expressions. The Miracle of the Jewish Boy of Bourges appears to have been particularly popular and has survived in two fragmentary paintings (the altar frontals from Arnafjord and Årdal II). The legend tells of a Jewish boy who, while playing with his Christian friends, enters a church and there happens to see an image of the Virgin. When the boy’s father, who is usually identified as a baker, hears that his son has been to church he is enraged and throws the boy into his baker’s oven. In the oven, the boy is miraculously saved by the Virgin, who wraps her cloak around him. Later, the boy and his mother are converted to Christianity. The father’s fate is more uncertain; in three of four Norse versions he is outlawed from the community, while in the fourth he himself is thrown into the oven and burnt alive, with no divine intervention.²² In one of the Norwegian fragments, we see the boy in a brick oven, embraced by the Virgin in a blue mantle. The boy is shown in profile, with an exaggerated nose, but otherwise his features and skin tone are neutral. In the other fragment, we only see part of the curved top of the oven and a glimpse of the boy’s mother as she horrified watches the drama. The legend was popular throughout Europe and scenes from it may for instance be found on a mural painting in the parish church of Chalfont St Giles in Buckinghamshire (c.1330) and in the monumental stained glass rose window (the “Dean’s Eye”) of Lincoln Cathedral (c.1225).²³

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, we know of no Jewish minorities in Norway or in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. But in contrast to the exotic Saracens and Turks, there lived Jews in countries bordering on Scandinavia, both along the Baltic and the North Sea coast. In our context, the Jews of eastern England are of particular interest. By 1189, there were at least 24 Jewish communities in towns and cities from Exeter to York, in addition to London.²⁴ Many of the largest and most

²¹ Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror. The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 220.

²² *Mariu Saga*, 71–2, 987–8, 89–90.

²³ Morgan, “Iconography,” 56.

²⁴ Joe Hillaby, “Jewish Colonisation in the Twelfth Century,” in *The Jews in Medieval Britain. Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Skinner (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 15.

prosperous of these were located on the east coast, with easy access to Continental ports. It is therefore no coincidence that the persecution of English Jews also chiefly happened in these towns. These areas were also the locus of Blood Libel charges that sparked saint's cults: William of Norwich (1144), Harold of Gloucester (1168), Robert of Bury St Edmunds (1181), and Hugh of Lincoln (1255). In March 1191, around the entire community of 150 Jews was massacred in Clifford's Tower in York. Blood Libel charges involved accusations that Jews sacrificed Christians (especially Christian boys) as part of their religious rituals. The Blood Libel myth spread throughout Europe in the course of the medieval and post-medieval period.²⁵

Many of these towns were important sources of artistic and cultural influence to Norway; scholars agree that the cathedrals of Lincoln and York have close stylistic parallels to the cathedral in Nidaros, and that is probable that masons from these cities emigrated to Norway.²⁶ The highly influential Archbishop Eystein of Nidaros (c.1120–88) fled the country in 1180 and spent the next three years in exile in England, staying in Lincoln and Bury St Edmunds. Three generations later, Matthew Paris travelled from Bury to Norway to reform Nidarholm monastery, as mentioned previously. In other words, there is ample evidence for considerable social and cultural contact between the eastern coast of England and the western coast of Norway in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and it is highly unlikely that the persecution of English Jews would have passed unnoticed. Archbishop Eystein's stay at Bury coincided with the alleged murder of Robert of Bury, although it is probable that the cult was established a few years later. Matthew Paris included a multitude of anti-Jewish myths, from money clipping, usury, desecration of the Crucifix and Blood Libel to the myth of the Wandering Jew in his *Chronica Majora* shortly after returning from Norway.²⁷

Bearing this in mind, it is tempting to see Matthew Paris' visit to Norway as a smoking gun. It could theoretically explain the relatively high occurrence of negative portrayals of Jews and Judaism in the corpus of artworks from a region with no Jewish population.²⁸ However, this would be to over-emphasise the role of an

²⁵ For a recent and insightful study of the English cases and their origin, see E.M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁶ See Chapter 14 (Øystein Ekroll), 290–3.

²⁷ Stephen D. Benin, "Matthew Paris and the Jews," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, division B: The History of the Jewish People*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 67; Anthony Bale, "Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290," in *Jews in Medieval Britain Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. P. Skinner (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 137; Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich*, 87.

²⁸ I have myself suggested this previously, without mentioning Matthew specifically. Margrethe C. Stang, "De fremmende i norsk middelaldermaleri. Jøder og muselmaner blant fjord og fjell," in *Transformasjoner i vikingtid og norrøn middelalder. Møteplass middelalder*, ed. Gro Steinsland (Oslo: Unipub, 2004).

individual. The relationship between Christianity and Jews, real or imagined, in medieval Europe has received much scholarly attention over the past decade. This research shows how antagonism towards Jews and Judaism to a large extent was an integral part of medieval Christianity.²⁹ The cruel and evil Jew played a vital role in the minds of parishioners in village churches all over medieval Europe, and it seems to have been of little importance whether the commissioners and viewers of these images had seen a Jew or not.

The fictional quality of these allegations has not passed unnoticed by scholars. Historian Anthony Bale characterises the alleged ritual murder of Christian boys as “a textually generated event [. . .], rather than as a historical ‘crime’ with victims, criminals and a body of evidence (although if we are looking for victims, it was the Jews who were usually punished for crimes they almost certainly did not commit).”³⁰ In other words, the narratives of Blood Libel are not tales of the meeting of two competing religions or worldviews, but stories firmly rooted in one religious culture – Christianity. “In short, the allegation of ritual murder, and the ensuing devotion to the martyr’s body, was primarily a way of crafting a devotional Christian polity rather than a way of persecuting England’s Jews.”³¹ In this perspective, it is not surprising if these stories were retold and transmitted on the other side of the North Sea, along with other stories of desecrations of the Host, Jewish money lenders and boys being thrown in baker’s ovens.

Many legends and exempla using Jews as antagonists of Christianity were translated into Norse, and written sources show that “Jew” was used as a derogatory term in the late Middle Ages. The Norwegian philologist Bjarne Berulfsen discussed the many translated anti-Jewish texts in a pioneering article in 1958, where he characterised their content as “imported goods.”³² Thus, he implied that because there were no Jewish minorities in Norway or Scandinavia, the antagonism expressed in these translated legends cannot be interpreted as “real” and was not understood by readers in medieval Norway. A similar point of view was recently expressed in a discussion of the *Judensau* sculpture in Uppsala Cathedral. Because there were no Jews in thirteenth century Sweden, the imagery could not have been understood by or offended anyone.³³

²⁹ See for instance David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2013).

³⁰ Bale, “Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290,” 131.

³¹ Bale, “Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290,” 132–3.

³² Bjarne Berulfsen, “Antisemittisme som litterær importvare,” *Edda* LVIII (1958).

³³ Anna Nilsén, *The Gothic Sculpture of Uppsala Cathedral. On Spiritual Guidance and Creative Joy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 23. See also Margrethe C. Stang, “Anna Nilsén, *The Gothic Sculpture of Uppsala Cathedral. On Spiritual Guidance and Creative Joy*: Book review,” *Journal of Northern Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016).

Fig. 22.8: Detail of the Trondheim altar frontal, showing Thorir Hund slaying St Olav at the Battle of Stiklestad. Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim.

Berulfsen's interpretation is perhaps typical of the 1950s, both in the sense that "anti-Jewish ideas and the cultures that produced them were static and unchanging"³⁴ and that Anti-Semitism, medieval and modern, was a Continental phenomenon. As Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Hess have pointed out, the high frequency of anti-Jewish imagery in preserved Norse texts could be interpreted to show that certain concepts about Jews and Jewishness had "saturated the public's consciousness."³⁵ One might argue that one did not need to see a Jew in order to believe in one. After all, medieval Christianity wholeheartedly embraced phenomena such as fire breathing dragons and angels with burning swords, which one must assume

³⁴ Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Hess, "Encounters and Fantasies: Muslims, Jews and Christians in the North," in *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, ed. Cordelia Hess and Jonathan Adams (Berlin – Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 13.

³⁵ Adams and Hess 2015, "Encounters and Fantasies:" 12.

were very real to most believers. Just as with the Turks and Saracens, the Jews of Norse writing and imagery remain products of the imagination and of the large corpus of Christian texts: they are true inhabitants of the Christian storyworld with a particular role to play in the drama of salvation.

Juxta paganos: The Saami and the Norse

While most medieval Norwegians had never met a Muslim or Jew, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there must have been a marked Saami element in many areas of medieval Scandinavia. However, this group of more or less nomadic people have left few traces in written sources; these tend to associate Saami with magical practices and beliefs. There are even fewer visual sources. There is only one surviving medieval painting that may be interpreted to show a reference to Saami culture. The panel in question is the Trondheim frontal, perhaps the most iconic of Norwegian medieval images (Fig. 14.5). It shows the martyrdom of St Olav, patron saint of Norway, at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. In the climactic battle scene, we see Olav in the middle of a tumultuous fight, with his Christian army to the left and the pagan army to the right. It is a tightly knit composition, with a knot of clashing swords at its centre (Fig. 22.8). To the right, we see a man dressed differently from the rest of the pagan army. He is wearing a shaggy, grey coat instead of chain mail, and is stabbing the dying King Olav with his lance. This is Thorir Hundr.³⁶

Thorir Hundr (born c.990) plays a crucial role in the narrative of St Olav's martyrdom. He was a powerful landowner from Northern Norway, and one of three chieftains that, together with the Danish King Knud (995–1035), lead the revolt against King Olav. In one of the earliest sources to Olav's martyrdom, the skaldic verse *Erfindrárpa* (c.1040), we learn that he was given a coat of reindeer skin by the Saami ("the Finns"). The coat apparently had magical properties, and gave Thorir the courage to strike blows at a king. In later texts, the role of Thorir was much embellished, so that Snorri in the early thirteenth century could cast him as a Nordic Longinus. According to Snorri, Olav was killed by three men and three weapons, Thorstein Knarresmed with an axe, Kalf Arnesson with a sword and Thorir Hundr with a lance. It is worth noting that the Trondheim altar frontal follows Snorri's version very closely in this scene, including the placing of the wounds on the saint's body. The blows of the king's men's swords glanced off Thorir's magical coat, but his hand was unprotected and was wounded. Just as Longinus' blindness was healed by the water and blood flowing from the wound in Jesus' side, Thorir's hand was healed when he touched Olav's body after the battle. According to the saga, he was the first to be convinced of Olav's sanctity. Nothing is known of the fate of the historical Thorir, but

³⁶ See also Chapters 12 (Stefka G. Eriksen), 223, and 14 (Øystein Ekroll), 275.

remarkably, Snorri lets Thorir travel to Jerusalem after 1030. He states that the chief-tain was never heard of again. Another saga, *The Legendary Saga of St Olav*, lets Thorir witness an angel carry the saint's soul to heaven.

In the saga, Thorir is not Sami. Nevertheless, the story of the reindeer coat implies a political alliance with the Saami or something darker: an alliance with the black magic of the Saami pagans. Philologist Else Mundal has examined the perception of Saami in Norse literature, and tentatively concludes that medieval authors believed that the contemporary Saami religion was the same as that of their Norse ancestors, i.e. the cult of Thor and Odin.³⁷ In other words, the Saami and the pagan army that opposed St Olav at Stiklestad shared the same religion. In light of this, it is interesting to note that on the Trondheim frontal, the pagan army has been given darker skin than the Christian army, and all the pagans have coarse features and bulbous noses.³⁸ However, Thorir Hundr's skin is lighter than his companions'. This should surely be interpreted as a parallel to how Longinus in some versions has lighter skin than the rest of Christ's tormentors.

Snorri's claim that Thorir travelled to Jerusalem and presumably died there is also interesting in this context. In placing Thorir in the Holy Land, the converted pagan becomes a physical link between Northern Norway, the periphery of the known world, and its very centre. In this narrative, the former enemy of St Olav and Christianity becomes a proto-crusader and a powerful symbol of redemption.

In 1241, King Haakon IV received papal dispensation from an earlier crusade pledge; in return he was to fight pagan neighbours in his own kingdom.³⁹ In the following decades, one may detect an acceleration of Christian expansion in the North, with churches being built as far north as Vardø in 1307.⁴⁰ However, due to lack of written sources and ambiguous archaeological evidence, it is difficult to assess the character of this expansion. It is probable that there was considerable cultural contact between Norse and Saami populations and that some Saami converted to Christianity, but there are few signs of missionary activity or even "crusading."

In the 1380s, a priest translated a miracle story from Latin to his native Icelandic. The miracle had allegedly occurred a generation previously in the borderlands of

³⁷ Else Mundal, "The Perception of the Saamis and Their Religion in Old Norse Sources," in *The Perception of the Saamis and Their Religion in Old Norse Sources*, ed. Juha Pentikäinen, Religion and Society (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 113.

³⁸ There are two parallels to this scene in contemporary Norwegian material, the frontals from Kaupanger and Årdal I. In the former, there is no difference in skin tone or facial features between the opposing armies. In the latter version, Olav's martyrdom is depicted in a highly stylized manner. The two executioners have darker skin and coarse, heavily caricatured features, but there is nothing to distinguish them ethnically or religiously from the Christians. See Margrethe C. Stang, "Paintings, Patronage and Popular Piety: Medieval Altar Frontals and Society, c.1250–1350" (PhD Thesis, 2009).

³⁹ Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters in Transition*, 158.

⁴⁰ Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters in Transition*, 158.

Northern Norway, the region called Finnmark, the marsh between Norway and the Saami lands. A priest sailed north to this region.⁴¹ The story emphasises that the Saami of this region were “completely pagan,” thus implying that other regions were Christianised. While the priest celebrated Mass in a tent, a Saami shaman watched by the entrance, and when the host was elevated, the shaman suddenly ran from the tent. When the priest later came to look for the man, he found him lying on the ground, unconscious. When he awoke, he told that he had seen a child in the hands of the priest, “bright and shining”. The sight had filled him with immense fear and he had lost consciousness. The text tells us that the miracle was celebrated with much bell-ringing and the singing of *Te Deums* in the churches of Nidaros.

The miracle of the Saami shaman is probably not an accurate historical account of Norwegian mission to the North. The story itself bears close resemblance to a number of similar stories, dispersed throughout Western Europe.⁴² The Child in the Host is a leitmotif in Eucharistic miracles, where the observer of the Child initially is a doubter that, because of his sceptical or even heretical position, becomes a powerful witness to the dogma of transubstantiation. Miri Rubin has shown how this doubting spectator often is cast as a Jew, a woman or another group that may be identified as Other.⁴³ The exemplum from Finnmark should be read in light of this.

Mundal has shown how the Norse may have believed that the Saami worshipped the Old Norse gods, and points out that this, however erroneous, gives the Saami a special role and status within the Norse world view:

By identifying the religion of the Saamis’ – more or less – with their own old heathen religion, the Norwegians and the Icelanders came to identify the religion of the Saamis with a part of their own glorious past, towards which they, as Christians, naturally had an ambiguous attitude, not entirely negative, creating an exception to the official view of the church.⁴⁴

Perhaps some of this ambivalence is reflected in the two examples mentioned: that of Thorir Hundr as Longinus and of the shaman as witness. They may be read as attempts to write the North into the Christian storyworld by applying a similar storyline to the conversion of the North. Incidentally, the use of Judaism as a vehicle for coming to terms with the alterity of Saami religion did not end with the Middle Ages. In the early eighteenth century Norwegian missionary Thomas von

⁴¹ *Alfraeði Ízlensk: Íslandsk encyclopædisk litteratur*, 4 vols, ed. Kristian Kålund, I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo, Copenhagen: S.L. Møllers bogtrykkeri, 1908–1918.

⁴² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 135.

⁴³ Miri Rubin, “The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities,” in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 57.

⁴⁴ Mundal, “The Perception of the Saamis,” 113.

Westen (1682–1727) referred to the coast of Northern Norway where “every cottage and sod house [is] a Synagogue for Satan.”⁴⁵

Concluding Remarks

Within the quite limited material under scrutiny in this chapter, there has been found a multitude of images depicting non-Christians. Some of these images are benign, such as the depictions that show Joseph with a distinct Jewish identity. Some emphasise the valour of foreign warriors; as we have seen, this is typical of depictions of Muslims. Muslims are also depicted as explicitly idolatrous. The most virulent imagery is however found in Passion cycles, where the torturers and executioners of Christ invariably are shown as evil, and often as explicitly Jewish. It is worth noting that there often is an element of arbitrariness in the placement of negative attributes and features. The painted vault from Ål is a good example of this, where some scenes within the same cycle show Jews as heavily caricatured, while other scenes depict Jewish characters in a neutral manner (Figs 22.5 and 22.7).

I believe some of this arbitrariness can be explained by the fact that most craftsmen were heavily dependent on models; there is little reason to believe that the iconography found in rural parish churches was particularly innovative. If one assumes that the craftsmen had a limited number of models to hand, this also helps explain why some rather obscure motifs such as the winged helmet crop up disproportionately often. The semi-nude Synagoga with the goat's head in hand must have been found in a motif collection in use by an itinerant craftsman operating in the Hallingdal/Valdres region, leading to the chancel decorations in both Ål and Vang.

It is highly probable that these motifs had travelled to Norway from the south and west, most plausibly from workshops in the cities of eastern England such as Norwich, Lincoln and York. Perhaps this origin contributed to the harshness of some of the imagery, but this point should not be overstated. Imagery that demonises Judaism and casts certain Jews as torturers, executioners, traitors and harlots was deeply interwoven in the European mindset of this period. The images merely reflect the worldview of commissioners and beholders in rural parishes throughout western Europe, the presence or absence of actual Jews within their communities seems to be of little consequence.

In this perspective, it has been intriguing to observe the lack of images showing the Saami population in medieval Norwegian painting. The relationship between

⁴⁵ “Det finnes Finne-Fjorder, hvor ikke een eeneste mand var frie fra at offre til Dievele; alle Fielde vare Guder, hver Huus og Gamme var Satans synagoge.” Thomas von Westen 1723, cited from Hans Hammond, *Den Nordiske Missions-Historie i Nordlandene, Finmarken og Thrundheims amt til Lappers og Finners Omvendelse* (Copenhagen: Gyldendals Forlag, 1787), 443.

Norwegians and Saami was something that had to be incorporated into the story-world, a process that apparently was slow and complicated. The two stories mentioned in this chapter, where a Saami magician was witness to the Child in the Host and Thorir Hundr's involvement in Saami magic are examples of how the Saami presence was gradually inscribed in a Christian storyworld.