



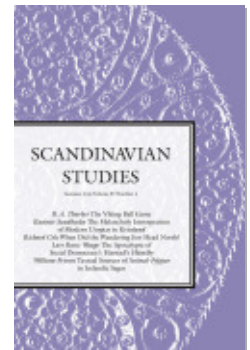
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When Did the Wandering Jew Head North?

Richard Cole

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The landscapes of the north are haunted by several wanderers whose existence is marked by a supernatural longevity.¹ The most widely described must be Starkaðr, condemned to live the lifetimes of three men, and to commit three evil deeds for each of them (Lindow 2001, 281–2). So, too, is there Norna-Gestr, who lived for three centuries after his mother defied a malevolent *norn* (Würth 1993, 435–6). In Iceland, with staff and walrus-skin belt, the hooded Bárðr Snæfellsáss traverses the glacier of Snæfellsjökull, returning whenever his people need him most.² Elsewhere, Óðinn himself stalks the sagas, an incognito Rambler testing those whose paths he crosses. This surplus of timeless *flâneurs* makes it hard to follow the northbound footprints of medieval Europe’s best-known pedestrian: the Wandering Jew. The story needs little introduction, but it may be useful to highlight briefly its most important elements: now known by many names (Ahasuerus,

1. An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the 48th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, 2013. The anonymous reviewers and Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson provided many thoughtful comments, and I owe them and Haukur Þorgeirsson a great debt of thanks. Any shortcomings are, of course, entirely my own.

2. “Ópt sveimaði Bárðr um landit ok kom víða fram. Var hann svá optast búinn, at hann var í grám kuffi ok svarðreip um sik, klafakerlingu í hendi ok í fjaðrbodd langan ok digran; neytti hann ok hans jafnan, er hann gekk um jökla” (Þorhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, 129) [Bárðr often wandered around the country, and traveled great distances. He was most often dressed as so: he was wearing a gray hood with a walrus hide rope around himself, a walking staff in his hand, and a long and sharp spearhead. He always used it when he walked upon the glaciers]. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Buttadeus, Cartaphilus³), the Wandering Jew once scorned Christ on the way to Golgotha, and was cursed to walk the earth without rest until the end of days.

Direct written references to the Cartaphilus legend prior to 1500 are attested in Czech, English, French, and Italian sources (Anderson 1965, 21–8). The most influential of these is arguably that of Matthew Paris in his *Chronica Majora*. His account of the Wandering Jew replicates an earlier record by Roger of Wendover in the *Flores Historiarum* for the year 1228, and Paris then tells his own story for the year 1252. However, we should note that the scattered records surviving to date seem to imply a much wider circulation of texts. For instance, the Czech *Svatovítský rúkopis* is based on the *Chronica Majora*, and it seems more plausible to imagine a number of lost intermediaries rather than direct transmission between England and Bohemia. Medieval Scandinavia, on the other hand, might be able to lay claim to such a direct connection; in 1248, Matthew Paris was sent to Munkholmen in Trondheim as a monastic visitor (Paris 1984, 158–61). But if Paris already knew the story of Cartaphilus—and there is no reason to suppose he should not have done—there is no record of any of the Norwegian monks with whom he might have shared it committing anything to vellum.

The first identifiable Ahasuerus tales in Scandinavia are all post-Reformation, and derive from the German chapbook *Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus*, published in 1602 (Overgaard 2007, 153–7; Schaffer 1920, 598). But if textual sources fail us, there is certainly a wealth of Cartaphilus material from Scandinavian folklore, some strains of which are clearly conversant with medieval antecedents. Particularly demonstrative of this tendency is the regional tradition of Jøden fra Uppsala—“The Jew from Uppsala.” It is a subset of the Klintekonge (Cliffking type), a folkloric motif in which the hollows of certain Danish cliff-faces are said to be the home of solitary supernatural beings, who may alternately protect or menace the local population (Olrík and Ellekilde 1915–1930, 133–4). Frederik Hammerich, on a pan-Nordic wandering of his own in 1834, recorded the following conversation with a fisherman from the Danish island of Møns:

Seer de Hulerne överst oppe, sagde vor Fiskemand; der boede i for-
dums Tid Jöden Opsal (Jetten fra Upsala, Odin), men det var ikke

3. These names are used interchangeably throughout this article.

god at besøge ham, kan jeg troe, for engang var der en forvovent Krop, der lod sig hidse ned til ham og gik ind i hans Slot. Hvad skete saa? Touget fik de vel tilbage, men der var ingen Mand med. Og det maa jeg medgive, den Opsal var en Pokkers Karl; tidt saae de ham kjøre over Søen med sine sorte Heste for, naar Havet var i Oprør, og Bønderne i min Barndom skulde aldrig forsømme at lade det sidste Neg staae paa Marken; det var tilgivens for hans Heste, kan jeg troe. Gamle Folk veed ogsaa at sige, at han med sine Grönjægere var trukken over Klipperne i sidste svenske Krig, for at forsvare Landet, og han har lovet, fortælle de, at gjøre det endnu engang. Ellers siger de, at han nu er dragen bort herfra og hen til Stevns. (Hammerich 1840, 21–2)

“See those caves up there at the top?” our fisherman said, “in the old days that’s where Opsal the Jew [The Giant from Upsal, Odin] lived, but it wasn’t a good idea to visit him, I should say, for once there was a headstrong chap who had himself hoisted down and went into his castle. What happened next? Well, they found the remains, but not the man himself. And I must say, that Opsal was one heck of a fellow; often they saw him riding over the sea with his black horses before him when the ocean was roaring, and during my childhood the farmers would never forget to leave the last ear of corn standing in the field; it was reserved for his horses, I should reckon. Old folk also used to say that he and his Green Hunters charged over the cliffs during the last war with the Swedish to defend this country, and, they say, he has promised to do so one more time. Otherwise they say that he left here and headed over to Stevns [Klint].”

There are a few recognizably medieval motifs merging here. The horses Opsal drives through the air and his troop of Green Hunters echo the “Wild Hunt” tradition, itself often thought to have Odinic roots (Simek 1993, 372–3; Lassen 2011, 52–3). Despite his misanthropic tendencies, Opsal also returns to defend the country in times of need, much like Holger Danske or King Arthur. Finally, there is his identification as a Jew from a foreign place. Commentators have often taken it for granted that *jøden* (the Jew) is nothing more than a corruption of *jätten* (the giant), and is thus a reference to Óðinn’s mythic heritage. But this seems untenable on several counts. Firstly, one of the few things it seems one can safely say about Óðinn in pre-Christian thought, and indeed the Christian thought demonstrated by Snorri Sturluson, is that he was *not* a giant. Rather, he leads the Æsir against the *jötnar* (giants) (McKinnell 2005, 129, 173). There is also the problem that, while modern Danish *jøden* somewhat resembles Old Norse *jötunn* (giant), these two words can hardly have existed contemporaneously.

There is only one, rather tenuous, example of them swapping elsewhere, so a confusion between giants and Jews on purely linguistic grounds seems unlikely.⁴ A more convincing explanation is that something in the behavior of these cliff kings appealed to local preconceptions of Jews. Banished, solitary, timeless, at once malevolent and capable of providing service—there is much in the typology of the *klintekonge* (solitary supernatural beings) that would have resonated with knowledge of the Wandering Jew legend.

Naturally, the medieval pedigree of certain strands within Opsal the Jew's heritage does not mean that the Wandering Jew element is also medieval. One obviously modern ingredient lies close to the surface, that is, the reference to “the last Swedish war,” which must be the Dano-Swedish War of 1658–1660. There are also curious resonances here with purer iterations of the Ahasuerus legend from Jutland, versions that have a distinctly post-1500 flavor. Opsal drives black horses, while in another legend, “the shoemaker of Jerusalem” rides a “lille, hvid hest” (Thiele 1843, 311–3) [little white horse]. Opsal flies over water, while in a tale found both in Jutland and, strangely enough, Sicily (Anderson 1965, 102–3), he is able to walk through it:

En langskiæget, gammel Mand, med Stav i Haand og Pose over Ryggen, [kom] vandrende hen over Tranholm Mark ned til Hallesø. Og da han kom til Vandet, standsede han ikke og dreiede ei heller af tilside, men steg ned i Vandet, saa at Søen tilsidst skiulte ham. Dog kom han strax igjen vandrende op paa den anden Side ved Gaarden Halle. Da man havde seet dette, kiendte man, at det havde været Jerusalems Skomager. (Thiele 1843, 311–3)

4. The editors of the *Gammeldansk Ordbog* show that in the Old Danish version of the *Annales Ryenses* (Holm K 4 fól.), *iøðæ* (Jew) has been substituted for *iæte* (giant). The passage states: “Ffrothi hin freknæ. Vti hans timæ kom Starkathær, Storwerki søn, til Danmarck. Han drap en skyrmær hoss Ryskæland oc hoos Byzantium een iødæ, heth Canis” (Lorenzen 1887–1913, 146, cf. 139, 148) [Fróði the Bold. In his days came Starkaðr, son of Stórvirki, to Denmark. He killed an archer in Russia and in Byzantium a Jew, who was called Canis]. This spelling is unique to the annalist, however. Furthermore, in this case, there is no reason why Canis needs to be a giant and cannot have been intended to be, as the chronicler says, a Jew. The association of Jews with dogs is classic anti-Semitic invective, and Byzantium is the sort of oriental location that might have hosted a Jew just as easily as a giant in the medieval Scandinavian imagination. Otherwise, when height is part of the description or the setting is Sweden—which had no Jewish settlement—the annalist glosses *gygante* not as *iødæ* but *iøte* (see <http://gammeldanskordbog.dk/>, s.v. “Jätte”).

(A longbearded old man, with a staff in his hand and a bag over his back, came wandering over Tranholm Mark down to Hallesø. And when he came to the water, he didn't stop and neither did he turn away, but he climbed down into the water so that eventually the lake covered him. However, he came straight up again, wandering on the other side by Gaarden Halle. When you'd seen that, you knew that it had been the Shoemaker of Jerusalem.)

So, too, does Opsal seem to have an inverted relationship with the local farmers. A tradition originally from Schleswig, subsequently common in Denmark and Sweden, is that the Wandering Jew can only rest for one night of the year, that being Christmas Eve, and can do so only if he finds a plough under which to sleep (Anderson 1965, 78). This leads to the custom of bringing the plough into the house, so that even this brief respite will be denied (Tang Kristensen 1893, 2:268–9). But in Opsal's case, the local farmers enact a quite different once-a-year ritual, one not of cruelty but of supplication: they offer him the last cut of the corn in the harvest season. These curious transpositions further reinforce the idea that Opsal has a bit of the Wandering Jew in his lineage. To stretch the genetic metaphor a little further, there seems to be a degree of typological hybridization going on in this child of Óðinn and Ahasuerus. The humility of the Wandering Jew is incompatible with Óðinn's menace and exuberance, and so a diminutive white steed becomes a team of black chargers, one who walks on the seabed glides above the waves, and the scorn of the people is transformed into fear. But even if the features are warped, Ahasuerus can hardly deny his paternity of this unlikely child.

Similar pieces of folklore, with a stronger smack of the Middle Ages, can be found in Sweden. Arvid August Afzelius, writing in 1841, recorded a number of etiological tales relating various species to their supposed role in the Crucifixion. For instance, the ash tree is supposed to tremble constantly in the wind as a punishment for being the wood from which the cross was made. It is from this genre that we find traces of a Wandering Jew^{ss}:

Sägner om . . . foglar, som skola farit fram öfver Golgatha och manat ondt öfver den oskyldige, saknas icke heller. Bland dem nämnes särdeles Wipán, som deraf blef förbannad til kärr och moras, att der hafva sin boning. Om henne säges ock, att hon warit en tjenstemö hos Jungfru Maria och stulit hennes silfwersax, hwilket hon förnekade, men skaptes då till en fogel, som städse får omkring på tufworna och ropar sin bekännelse: "tywit, tywit!" eller "stulit, stulit!" samt bär stjertfjädrar, klufna likasom en sax. (Afzelius 1841, 116–7)

(There is no lack of . . . birds who supposedly flew over Golgotha and meant harm to the innocent. Amongst them is named especially the Northern Lapwing [*Vanellus vanellus*] who was thus cursed to spend her life amongst the marshes and swamps. It is also said that she was a serving girl to the Virgin Mary and stole her silver scissors, which she denied, but was then turned into a bird, who constantly circles the shrubs and cries out her confession: “thief, thief!” or “stolen, stolen!” and also bears tail feathers that are cleaved like scissors.)

While a female Wandering Jew is not unique, there are some original elements to this variation on the theme, namely substituting Mary for Jesus and adding the motif of transformation into an animal.⁵ The themes of banishment, restlessness, fruitless repentance, and eternal suffering, all set in the time of Christ, betray this Swedish story’s dependence on the Cartaphilus legend. Afzelius apparently considered this a medieval tale, as he included it under the section title *Katholska Tiden från 1153 till 1200* (The Catholic Period from 1153 to 1200). Certainly the extensive meditations on the allegorical meanings of each part of Christ’s Passion, together with the focus on the Virgin Mary, are strongly evocative of pre-Reformation religious thinking. While this seems to be a likely candidate for a medieval survivor of the Wandering Jew tradition in Scandinavia, however, we should note that it is not conclusively so. The Reformation can hardly have saturated Swedish culture overnight, and the survival of such legends at all suggests that people continued to find aspects of Catholic thought engaging long after the introduction of a new theological regime.

Returning to textual sources, there do seem to be a few moments in Old Norse literature where Cartaphilus is anonymously merging with indigenous wanderer traditions, just as we saw in the Danish Opsal legend. Ármann Jakobsson has suggested that the restless Helga in *Bárðar saga* and Guðrún in *Völsunga saga*, to whom fate does not allow death before her time, are both influenced by the Wandering Jew, although if so, we have no further parallels to elucidate the transmission (Ármann Jakobsson 1998, 64). To my mind, the earliest possible footprint is that of Grímr Geitskór from *Íslendingabók*:

En þá es Ísland vas víða byggt orðit, þá hafði maðr austroenn fyrst lög út hingat ýr Norvegi, sá es Ulfljótr hét; svá sagði Teitr oss; ok váru þá Ulfljótslög kölluð. . . . En svá er sagt, at Grímr geitskór væri fóstbróðir hans, sá es kannaði Ísland allt at ráði hans, áðr alþingi væri

5. On the Wandering Jewess, see Anderson (1965, 414–6).

átt. En hónum fekk hverr maðr penning til á landi hér, en hann gaf fé þat síðan til hofa. (Ari Þorgilsson 1968, 6–7)

(And when Iceland began to be widely settled, it was an Eastern man [i.e., a Norwegian] who first brought the law from Norway. As Teitr told us, he was called Ulfljótr, and the law was called “Ulfljótr’s law.” . . . And it is said that Grímr Goat-shoe was his fosterbrother. He was the one who went all round Iceland at his command, before the Alþingi was held. And every man in the country gave him one penny, and he offered that money to the temples.)

Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson has recently drawn attention to Grímr’s credentials as an Odinic wanderer (2012). But as we saw with Opsal, there may well be something Cartaphilian at play too. By accident or design, Grímr appears to have a number of qualities that the medieval imagination often projected onto Jews in general, and the Wandering Jew in particular. Firstly, there is his association with the goat. Widely perceived as reticent, demonic, and unclean, it became the perfect cipher for anti-Semitic insults. Medieval art and literature depicted Jews as having goatlike beards, smelling like goats, riding goats, and having sex with goats (Trachtenberg 1966, 44–8; Resnick 2012, 237; Abramson 1996, 17). The “Jew-as-goat” motif is attested in medieval Scandinavia too: a Danish manuscript from the end of the fifteenth century equates *Ecclesia* with a burning torch that leads the way and *Synagoga* with a stubborn goatee-wearing ram (see fig. 1). Of more import to Old West Norse, the *Codex Upsaliensis* contains a Jewish caricature, complete with hooked nose and *Ziegenbart* “goatee” (see fig. 2).⁶ So, too, is there the association with coins. This is a trait that the Wandering Jew often exhibits, most likely owing to the usual anti-Semitic clichés about Jews and money. There are at least two examples where he owns a singular coin with remarkable properties (Anderson 1965, 78–9, 88–90). An Austrian legend maintains he has only one *Groschen* that always returns to him. A Silesian parallel holds that this *Groschen* magically regenerates, while a late medieval German tale records Ahasuerus appearing at a market stall and offering a trader a 1,400-year-old coin, and disappearing when the startled proprietor makes the sign of the cross. The notion of Ahasuerus as a kind of collector is known elsewhere: a German tale records that every seven years, he visits the city of Hannover, and for each day he is there, he

6. I set out my arguments for the identity of this caricature more fully in Cole (2015, 256–60).

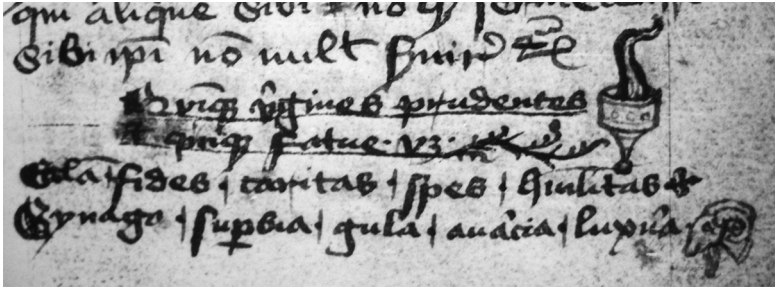


Fig. 1. AM 76 8vo. 25r. Image courtesy of Den Arnamagnæanske Samling. The text reads "Ecclesiastes: Caritas, spes, humilitas. Synagoga: Superbia, gula, auaricia, luxuria."



Fig. 2. *Codex Upsaliensis*. DG II 4to. 25r. Image courtesy of Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek.

receives eighteen *pfennige* (coins) in alms from the locals. An exotic Maltese legend (Anderson 1965, 89–90) features the detail that “the nails on his toes become like hooves” and that “the money which [he is] twirling in [his] hand will always find its way back to [him].” Anderson has pointed out that this relationship with currency forever renders the Wandering Jew a mysterious outsider, that is, one who may perform a function for society but will never be a truly integrated actor therein⁷—a description that could apply equally well to Grímr. Finally, the association between the Wandering Jew, the “Shoemaker of Jerusalem,” and shoes is well known, although somewhat difficult to date (Anderson 1965, 29–31, 98). It is unclear orthographically whether Grímr’s surname was Geitskǫr (Goat-hair), Geitskor (Goat-rift, goat-notch), or indeed Geitskór (Goat-shoe) (Benediktsson, notes to Ari Þorgilsson 1968, 7), but given the epic journey before him, the last seems most likely. That said, while it is tempting to identify Grímr at least in part with Cartaphilus, *Íslendingabók* predates the earliest known Western source for the Wandering Jew by over a century. We may in passing note that it is not impossible that the legend was known in Iceland at such an early date. Roger of Wendover claims that the story was introduced to England by a visiting Armenian bishop, and *Íslendingabók* is one of the sources that records the visit of three *ermiskir* (Armenian) bishops called Petrus, Abrahám, and Stephánus (Ari Þorgilsson 1968, 18). But here we are in the realm of pure conjecture: Grímr remains a striking analogue and nothing more.

The best-discussed literary descendant of Ahasuerus in Old Norse is surely Mágus in *Bragða-Mágus saga* (also known as *Mágus saga jarls*). There are two versions of the saga, a longer one from ca. 1300 and an abbreviation from ca. 1350 (Glauser 1993, 402). Here, we will focus on the former. The narrative is ostensibly based on the Old French *Les Quatre Fils Aymon*, with Mágus originally being Maugin. However, the saga is spliced with episodes from so many other *chansons de geste* and authorial innovations that it should properly be considered an original work. The titular hero, Mágus, appears three times at the court of King Karl, and each time does so in the guise of a different wizened wanderer. The first time, he calls himself Skeljakarl (The Man

7. See Anderson (1965, 90). A study of how, for Ahasuerus, the act of wandering is itself a metaphor for the ever-widening circulation of individual coins, is provided by Postoutenko (2010, esp. 49–50). Whether Grímr is a child of the Wandering Jew or not, it is an interesting aside to read Grímr not as a bearer of *penningar*—“monies” or “coins”—but an avatar thereof.

of Shells), the second time, *Víðförlur* (Wide Traveler), the third, *inn Hálfhlíti maðr* (The Two-tone Man). It is *Víðförlur* who has received the most attention as a Cartaphilian figure, as just like the Wandering Jew of Matthew Paris, he is centuries old but periodically regenerates as a young man. Benedikt Benediktz (1973, 18) accepted Mágus as Ahasuerus without question, as did Sabine Baring-Gould a century earlier (1877, 637–40). George Anderson was skeptical, noting that “in Roger of Wendover’s narrative the protagonist changed from the age of one hundred to the age he had been at the time of the Crucifixion. *Víðförlur* has no such periodicity. . . . Not all immortals, even when they are rejuvenated, are the Wandering Jew” (Anderson 1965, 33). Margaret Schlauch, while noting the similarities, preferred to see Mágus as a descendant of the kind of pseudo-autobiographical poetry exemplified by the Old English *Widsið*, a title itself cognate to the name *Víðförlur* (Schlauch 1931, 974–6). Certainly, one of Mágus’s assumed identities is the Wandering Jew. *Víðförlur* in particular has an Odinic air. In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri describes Óðinn as “hermaðr mikill ok mjök víðförlur” (Snorri Sturluson 1961, 1:11) [a great warrior and very well traveled]. Annette Lassen very plausibly suggests that he is “et sjældent eksempel på en Odin formet efter riddersagaernes krav” (2011, 134) [a rare example of an Óðinn formed according to the demands of the *ridðarasögur*]. But as we have seen previously, it is very possible that Cartaphilus is responsible for at least a little of the DNA in Mágus’s aliases.

When Mágus goes incognito, he does so by donning a droopy, fleshy cowl, which he calls a *flegsa*. It is my contention that with each of these different *flegsur*, he does not assume the shape of one particular archetypal wanderer to the exclusion of all other possible identities, that is, “*Víðförlur* is purely Óðinn, but the *Skeljakarl* is purely someone else.” Rather, each identity is a different configuration from the mass of wanderer types known to the author, so that, for instance, *Víðförlur* may draw his name from Odinic traditions, but his regenerative ability from the Wandering Jew. Here, I will focus on the persona that I believe exhibits the strongest Cartaphilian influence: the *Skeljakarl*.

Jarl gengr til . . . ok dregr þar út úr mikla flegsu; þat skrapaði allt utan af skeljum ok kufungum . . . gríman hattarins var gjör ásjóna. Hún var mjök ellið, með löngu ok síðu skeggi; þat var hvítt af hærnum sem dúfa; þessi ásjóna var sköllótt, ok hafði hrukkur margar á enni. . . . Síðan vaðði hann sína arma allt á hendr fram meðr fornum ok óvendingum rakningum . . . þá er önnur rögg féll ofan yfir aðra, en

þessar röggvar voru af skeljum, önnurhver rögg af kúskeljum, en önnurhver af hörpuskeljum, svo þykkt sett, at hver tók aðra, en um hettuna var gjör rögg af kufungum, en önnur af krákuskeljum; framan um andlitit á hettuni voru skillingar og olbogaskeljar, en á strútnum var hlaðit humarklóm, ok skrapaði þat einna mest, er hann veik sèr nokkur; höfuðbúnaðr hans var svo þungr, at trautt mundu óstyrkir menn ganga með. Ok er jarl var kominn í þetta klæði, var hann allókenniligr, því at hann var áðr hinn tiguligasti í viðbragði, en nú leizt hann hinn förumannligasti. Eptir þat tekr hann tvo stafi í hendr sèr. Karl var heldr rauðeygr til at sjá. (Gunnlaugr Þórðarson 1858, 62–3)

(The earl walks over . . . and pulls out a huge *flegsa*. It was jangling all over with shells and winkles. . . . The front of the hood was in the likeness of a face. It was very old, with a long and hanging beard. The hair was white as a dove. This face was bald, and had many wrinkles on the forehead. . . . Then he wrapped his arms all the way up to the hand with old and wretched bindings. . . . Each strip [of his cloak] fell upon another, and these strips were made of shells. One strip would be made of thick mussel shells, another strip of scallop shells, so densely packed in that each overlapped, and on the hood there was one strip of sea snails and another of mussels. All around the face there were little shells and limpets, and on the peak there was a pile of lobster claws, and they clattered most of all whenever he moved. His headgear was so heavy that walking around with it would exhaust a weaker man. And when the earl had put on these clothes he was totally unrecognizable, for before he was the noblest of all in appearance, but now he looked like the most beggarly. Thereafter he picked up two staves. This man was rather red-eyed in appearance.)

At once, we can sense that we are not in the presence of any of the classic Norse wanderers. The likes of Starkaðr or Norna-Gestr may be centuries old, but they are still physically fit, proud warriors. Similarly, in Scandinavian sources, Óðinn may show some signs of his age, but he is never pathetic (cf. Harris 1969, 24–38). If anything, his appearance usually prompts a sense of drama. Skeljakarl, on the other hand, is utterly wretched. Balding, with rheumy eyes and unkempt white hair, and needing crutches to walk, he is unequivocally in a state of physical decline. The decrepit, long-lived wanderer instantly recalls Ahasuerus, but his unusual attire is neither Odinic nor Cartaphilian. It is not a reference to a pagan or a Jewish traveler, but to a Christian one. The shell is well known as the symbol of Saint James the Greater, and those who completed a pilgrimage took the scallop shell as sign of their achievement. The shell might be worn by a pilgrim as a talisman,

and pilgrims were also permitted to put the shell on their gravestone, that their accomplishment be remembered for posterity. Although the pilgrim's shell is best known as being (1) a scallop and (2) a solitary token, medieval iconography frequently depicted the patron saint of pilgrims bedecked with many shells, as seen in the Icelandic *Teiknibók* (see fig. 3). Moreover, the shell was not limited to the scallop. For example, a popular kind of statuette manufactured in England and often exported to the rest of Europe showed Saint James with a single scallop on his cap, but with various whelks on his cloak and/or bag (see fig. 4). Naturally, Skeljakarl is not Saint James in person, but is rather a parody of the proud pilgrim: one who has walked the world for so long, and has undertaken so many de facto pilgrimages, that he



Fig. 3. *Teiknibók*. AM 673a III 4to. 10v. Image courtesy of Stofnun Árna Magnússonar. Note two shells on cap and two on bag.



Fig. 4. Saint James statuette (1400s) from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. A.89-1946.

is not rewarded by one or two shells, but has over time accumulated so many that all that remains of his attire is a jangling mass of shells. In fact, *De Astronomia Tractatus* by Guido Bonatti contains the startling assertion that the Wandering Jew himself undertook the pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostella in 1267 (Anderson 1965, 22). The inclusion of the *humarklóm*, “lobster claw,” making the Skeljakarl into a walking seafood buffet, is one of the many dashes of parodic humor that the author of the saga has liberally added to his work.

Further traces of the Wandering Jew are not only to be found in Skeljakarl’s appearance, but also in his behavior:

Hann kom svo í borgina, sem konungr ok hirð var til kirkju gengin. . . . Nú sem at aptansöng var verit, heyrðu þeir mikla hundgá, svo at hverr geystist fram fyrir annan hundanna. Hirðmönnum var mikil forvitni á, at hverju hundarnir mundu geyja, en engi vildi brjóta boð konungs, en hvern sat um annan, ef út gengi. En þegar er sunginn var aptansöngur, hljóp hverr út, er við komst, ok þóttust þó allir of seinir. En er þeir komu ut, sáu þeir í miðri hundaprönginno sem væri ein skeljahrúga mikil. Er aptansólin skein á þetta, þóttu þeim undarligt, ok fóru svo nær, at þeir sáu, at þat var karl einn gamall, með allmiklu skeggi. Karl studdi bakinu við strätinu, en hann hafði á lopti stafina, ok barði til hundanna; en þegar hann vildi upp standa, ok hann hrærdi sik nokkur, þá hlóðust hundarnir svo þykkt á hann, at hann gat með öngu móti upp staðit. Hirðmönnum þótti þetta mjök mikit gaman, ok siguðu fast hundunum. Konungr kom í því út á strätit. Hann sèr karl, hvar hann húkir, ok gerir ýmist, at hann berr með stöfunum, stundum grípr hann upp hundana, ok kastar svo á brutt, at víst fjarri komu niðr. Meidda hann suma, en suma deyddi hann með öllu. Konungi þótti gaman at karli, ok hló at sem aðrir. Ok er karl var í þessi umvèsun, getr hann at líta, hvar konungr var. Hann mælti þá: þat er þó satt, sem mælt er, at “fár er vamma varr.” (Gunnlaugr Þórðarson 1858, 63–64)

(He arrived in the city just as the king and his retinue were going to church. . . . Now, while evensong was going on they heard a great barking of dogs, as though each dog were jumping in front of the other. The courtiers were very curious as to why the dogs were barking, but no one wanted to break up the king’s orders so everyone sat watching each other, seeing if he would be the first to go out. And when evensong had been sung everyone who could dashed out, and it seemed to them they couldn’t have done that soon enough. And as they got out, they saw in the midst of the thronging hounds what appeared to be a huge pile of shells. As the evening sun shone upon it, there seemed to be something strange about it, and indeed when they approached they saw that it was an old man with a massive beard.

The man lay on his back in the street with his staff in the air, fighting the dogs. But whenever he tried to stand up or move a bit the dogs piled on top of him so heavily that there was no way he could stand up. The courtiers thought this was very funny and eagerly spurred the dogs on. At that moment the king came out into the street. He saw the man squatting, sometimes lashing out with the staff, sometimes seizing up the dogs and throwing them away so they land a good way off. Some he wounded, others he killed outright. The king found the man amusing and laughed at him like the others. The man could see where the king was from his position in amidst the chaos. Then he said: "It's true what they say—'nobody's perfect.'")

Once more, this is not conduct we would expect from any other Nordic wanderers, but it does correspond to the character of Ahasuerus. Sometimes he is malevolent, sometimes proud and silent, sometimes a kindly proselyte, but self-pity is also an oft-attested trait in folkloric meditations on the Wandering Jew, and Skeljakarl is not lacking in this regard. Another commonly expressed trope is that Cartaphilus's long time spent on earth has led him to become extremely erudite, immediately demonstrated here by Skeljakarl's quotation from the Old Norse translation of the *Disticha Catonis*, namely *Hugsvinnsmál*, stz. 21: "fár er vamma varr": literally, "few are free of blemishes," but translated here, in accordance with the saga author's otherwise jovial style, as "nobody's perfect." We might also observe that a variant of this proverb is uttered by Óðinn in *Hávamál*, stz. 22, although this hardly makes Skeljakarl Odinic (Wills and Würth 2007, 373).

Another common theme is that God spites the Wandering Jew by turning the natural world against him. A French legend features God placing fir forests and freezing weather in his path (Anderson 1965, 83, 85). A tale from Switzerland details how, when a city once provided him with kindness and a place to rest, God turned the city into a giant mountain so that he would have to keep moving. The idea that dogs would be compelled to attack him repeatedly en masse when he attempts to seek respite from King Karl is thus hardly a stretch. The image of the Skeljakarl entering the city in the evening to the sound of a "mikla hundgá, svo at hverr geystist fram fyrir annan hundanna" [great barking of dogs, as though each dog were jumping in front of the other] also has Cartaphilian implications. One German legend records that "in Nosbach hat man früher den ewigen Juden des Nachts gehört. Deutliches Hundegekläff war zu vernehmen" (Schell 1905, 80) [in Nosbach one has previously heard the Wandering Jew at night. A pronounced barking of dogs was heard]—a detail that later scholars

interpreted as a conflation with the Wild Huntsman (Neubaur 1912, 46; Anderson 1965, 79).

At one point in the saga, the narrator seems to be prompting—or toying with—the audience’s speculation over which wanderer Skeljakarl really is. When he is asked to prophesy for King Karl, another trope common to Óðinn and Ahasuerus, he performs a monologue faintly reminiscent of the Old English *Widsið*, and otherwise very similar to a speech delivered by Víðfǫrull later in the saga (Gunnlaugr Þórðarson 1858, 89–93; cf. Schlauch 1931, 976–7):

Ek hafi nálíga kannat öll Norðrlönd hingat ok norðrálfu heimsins, ok prófat hirð ok kempur margar. Ek fann Hrólfr konung kraka áðr hann fór til Svíþjóðar, ok þar hafði hann ei fleiri menn með sér til Uppsala, er hann sótti heim Aðils mág sinn, enn berserki sína, at ek sagði honum, at annat lið hans mundi illt í raun at fœra. Ek prófaða ok lið Haralds hilditannar, áðr hann barðist á Brávelli, ok fór þar sem mik varði, at hann hafði fáeina fullhuga með sér, enda var þar við illan at eiga, því at Óðinn slóst í lið með Hringi konungi. Ek kom í herbúðir Agúlandus konungs ok Jámunds sonar hans, ok sagða ek þeim báðum, at þeir mundu báðir falla. . . . Ek kom ok síðan í höll Karlamagnús keisara, ok leit ek hans hirð alla, ok mætti mēr af slíku gjöra miklar frásagnir, því at hann hafði valdari kempur með sér, enn aðrir menn, en sjálfir styrkr af guði. (Gunnlaugr Þórðarson 1858, 69–70)

(I have explored nearly all of Scandinavia and the northern half of the world, and tested many courts and champions. I met King Hrólfr Kraki before he went to Sweden, when he had no more men than his berserkers with him on the way to Uppsala when he visited the home of King Aðils, his brother-in-law, and I told him that others of his troops would not fare well in that test of arms. I also tested the troops of Haraldr Hilditönn before he went to battle at Brávellir, and things went there as I thought, that he had only a few heroes with him, and what’s more there was evil to be reckoned with, because Óðinn joined the troops of King Hringr. I visited the war tents of King Agúlandus and his son, Jámundr, and I told them both that they would both die. . . . Later, I also came to the hall of Emperor Charlemagne, and I examined his whole retinue, and I could tell many stories about that, for he had a greater choice of champions in his company than other men, and he was himself strengthened by God.)

Skeljakarl teases the audience of the saga, the court around him, and the modern researcher with the prospect of his true identity. All that has to be done is to match up each wanderer from each narrative! But, of course, the riddle is a trick—each wanderer represents a different

archetype. The meeting with Hrólfr Kraki must refer to Óðinn in his alias as Hrani in *Hrólfs saga kraka*: “þetta mun Óðinn gamli verit hafa, ok at vísu var maðrinn einsýnn” (Valdímarr Ásmundarson 1891, 72) [that must have been Old Óðinn, certainly the man had one eye]. Two long-lived Norse wanderers are implicated in the Battle of Brávellir, Óðinn and Norna-Gestr. As Skeljakarl makes it explicit that he and Óðinn were separate actors on that occasion, it seems that the reference must be to Norna-Gestr. The next two hints are more challenging. *Karlamagnús saga* features one character who warns Agulandus and Jámundr that they will die if they go into battle: a Saracen king called Balam, “maðr drenglundaðr, vitr ok einarðr, djarfmæltr ok snjallr í framburði” (Unger 1860, 141) [a noble-minded man, wise and trustworthy, forthcoming and eloquent in his delivery]. He also visits Charlemagne/Karlamagnús in order to deliver a message and assess his military strength. But there is nothing to indicate that he was elsewhere considered to be a wanderer. It seems unlikely that Balam, in the form that we know him from *Karlamagnús saga*, is the intended referent. *Karlamagnús saga* also features Holger Danske/Oddgeir danski, but the saga does not mention the story that he will return when his native Denmark is threatened. He was not yet fit for hybridizing with Ahasuerus. Saint James looms large as Charlemagne’s patron in the saga, but he can hardly be said to perform the roles described by Skeljakarl.

Assuming that there were two separate connotations, as seems likely given the preceding pair, we can not say now with absolute certainty what lost literary or folkloric references were meant to be inferred. Interestingly, a well known “cousin” of Cartaphilus was associated with Charlemagne’s court. A Near Eastern tradition that Saint John the Apostle never died but remained an immortal vicar of Christ is widely considered to be the reason that Buttadeus sometimes has the first name “Johannes” or, as in Matthew Paris’s account, “Josephus” (Anderson 1965, 14, 22). It also lies behind the story of Charlemagne’s long-lived armorer, Jean des Temps, who was said to have lived for three centuries. In some cases, he merges with Cartaphilus entirely. The *Liber terre sancte Jerusalem*, a French pilgrim’s guide roughly contemporaneous with the younger *Bragða-Mágus saga*, contains the assertion that:

Christum Dominum quando ibat ligatus ad mortem, insultando dicens Domino: Vade ultra, vade ad mortem! Cui respondit Dominus: Ego vado ad mortem, sed tu usque ad diem iudicii non. Et, ut quidam dicunt simplices, visus est aliquando multis; sed hoc asseritur a sapien-

tibus quia dictus Johannes, qui corrupto nomine dicitur Johannes Buttadeus, sano vocabulo appellatur Johannes Devotus Deo, qui fuit scutifer Karoli Magni et vixit CCL annis. (Paris 1903, 198–9)

(When the Lord Christ was walking bound to his death, he said insultingly to the Lord: “Go on, go to your death!” To which the Lord responded: “I am going to my death, but you will not do so until the Day of Judgment.” And even if those who say it are somewhat simple, he has been seen very many times. But it is asserted by those who are wise that what is said here is Johannes, which is corrupted from saying Johannes Buttadeus, which in correct language is called Johannes Faithful to God, who was a shield bearer for Charlemagne and lived for 250 years.)

Neither was this a unique innovation. In folklore, the Italian *Giovanni Servo di Dio*, the Portuguese *João Espera em Dios*, and the Spanish *Juan Espera en Dios*—each of whose names instantly recall *Johannes Devotus Deo*—are all syntheses of Cartaphilus and Jean des Temps. Although he does not feature in *Karlamagnús saga*, someone widely read in the *chansons de geste*, as the author of *Bragða-Mágus saga* manifestly was, could well be expected to know the story, and quite possibly to have made the connection with the Wandering Jew. Certainly, Skeljakarl is not purely Jean—Jean was never decrepit, bathetic, nor a soothsayer. With this little riddle, the saga writer makes his authorial strategy clear: Skeljakarl is not Óðinn or Starkaðr or the Wandering Jew or any other wanderer you’ve seen before—he is all of them at once, merged within the sagging fleshy folds of the *flegsa*.

As previously alluded to, the first incontrovertible attestation of the Wandering Jew legend in Scandinavia dates from 1631, when a Danish translation of the *Kurze Beschreibung* was published in Copenhagen.⁸ The chapbook proved hugely influential, and, to date, there is almost no Scandinavian Cartaphilus folklore that remains untouched by it. By the end of the seventeenth century, this Danish text had made it to Iceland, where it entered the process of manually written transmission, which had remained unchanged since the Middle Ages. Paradoxically, this text that so obscures any attempt to uncover the medieval traces of the legend also leaves us with one final tantalizing hint that the tale of Ahasuerus existed in the Icelandic imagination before it came to the Icelandic page. There is an interesting divide

8. For a legible facsimile edition, see *Danske Folkeboøger* (Jacobsen and Paulli 1915, 1:179–91).

in the way that European languages describe the wanderer. Romance languages highlight his peripatetic qualities. Thus in French, he is *Le Juif Errant*, Spanish *El Judío Errante*, Italian *L'Ebreo errante*. Doubtless owing to England's history of Norman rule, English has picked up the same idiom. The other Germanic languages, however, tend to focus on the Jew's immortality, for example, German *Der Ewige Jude*, Danish *Den Evige Jøde*. When the chapbooks came to Iceland, written in Danish and transmitting an originally German text, we might therefore expect the Icelanders to have adopted a similar form. But in every Icelandic adaptation of the *Kurze Beschreibung*, Ahasuerus is referred to as *Gyðingurinn Gangandi*—that is, the “Walking” or “Wandering Jew.” One version even adds that “á Íslandi hefir hann einnig sæzt, en mjög er það sjaldan. Af þessu ferðalagi er hann kallaður ‘Gyðingurinn gángandi’; því ávalt er hann gángandi, og er hann nú geinginn upp að knjám” (Jón Árnason 1864, 47–52) [he has also been seen in Iceland, although very rarely. Because of this traveling he is called “The Wandering Jew,” thus he is always walking, and now he has walked to the point that he is worn down to his knees]. The fact that Icelandic translators of the seventeenth century universally had a name for Cartaphilus already, and that some even thought he'd been

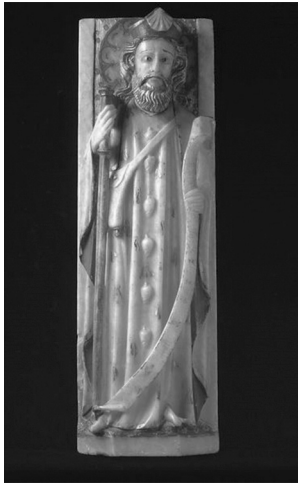


Fig. 5. Saint James statuette (1400s). Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. A.150–1922.



Fig. 6. Saint James statuette (1400s). Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. A.156–1946.

seen in their own country, shows that the Wanderer had certainly gotten there before the printed word. Perhaps the reason that Old Norse authors never name the Wandering Jew outright but prefer to explore the image through allusion and analogue was that he was already utterly pedestrian.

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