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12 *Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt*: Proto-Racial Thinking and its Application to Jews in Old Norse Literature

It was at this time [after the fifteenth century] that Jews, without any outside interference, began to think “that the difference between Jewry and the nations was fundamentally not one of creed and faith, but one of inner nature” and that the ancient dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles was “more likely to be racial in origin than a matter of doctrinal dissension”. This shift in evaluating the alien character of the Jewish people, which *became common among non-Jews only much later in the Age of Enlightenment*, is clearly the condition sine qua non for the birth of antisemitism.

(Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*)¹

First published in 1951, in Arendt’s own words, “against a backdrop of both reckless optimism and reckless despair”,² *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was an avowed response to the horrors of the twentieth century. It was a book which intended to expose the innate flaws in modern thought, particularly the intellectual currents which led to, or were fuelled by, anti-Semitism. But for a work which was so open about its focus on modernity, it often resonates with a debate of key importance to our understanding of pre-modern thinking. Arendt, the modernist writing about twentieth-century totalitarianism, is frequently in agreement with scholars, such as Miri Rubin, Jeremy Cohen, or Amos Funkenstein, medievalists writing about twelfth- to fourteenth-century Jew-hatred. What these four voices have in common is that, in their view, consideration of the ‘inner nature’ of the Jew did not occur until after the Middle Ages. Rather, the medieval mind apprehended Jewish difference in purely religious terms. In the view of these scholars, until the Enlightenment – the sparks from which Arendt’s subject of modernity would ultimately emerge – there was no thought in which notions of race or genetics took precedence over religion. Ergo, one cannot speak of medieval anti-Semitism: During this period, there was only anti-Judaism.³ Medieval thinkers may have criticized the Jews, medie-

1 Arendt 1973, xi–xii.

2 Arendt 1973, vii.

3 Consider Rubin’s criticism of Gavin Langmuir: “All too often, narratives of abuse, particularly those about Christians and Jews, are taken as eternal, unchanging.” Rubin 2004, 1. Rubin eschews the word “anti-Semitism” in her oeuvre. Cohen speaks of “the harsher, demonic anti-Judaism that I and other historians have deemed characteristic of the later Middle Ages” and

val doers sometimes took up arms against them, but neither felt any enmity towards a ‘Jewish people’. In the line of thought neatly surmised by Arendt, the medieval Jew was despised for his beliefs, not his birth.⁴

Other scholars have had no such qualms about deploying the concept of anti-Semitism alongside anti-Judaism, or if they eschewed the word ‘anti-Semitism’ itself, considering factors beyond the religious. After all, when medieval sources depict Jews as hook-nosed, physically weak or effeminate, instinctively untrustworthy, or intellectually deficient, can we really expect the lay audiences who received such images to discern nuanced theological criticism of the Jewish faith? Consider, for example, the Jew of Tewkesbury from the *Polychronicon* (compiled c. 1327–1342). In this episode *quidam Judæus per diem Sabbati cecidit in latrinam, nec permisit se extrahi ob reverentiam sui Sabbati*⁵ – “a certain Jew fell into a latrine on the day of the Sabbath [Saturday], but did not allow himself to be taken out on account of reverence for his Sabbath”. As Anthony Bale has pointed out, this little *exemplum* “is grounded in the Old Testament stipulations concerning the observance of the Sabbath” and “responds to Jewish polemic and Talmudic material [... It] reverses Jewish invective and possibly stems from Christian anxieties about controversial, heretical Talmudic material”.⁶ Bale’s treatment is rigorous and convincing, and arguably situates the narrative in its anti-Jewish context. But there is also a much more immediate discourse at play; the scornful, inane image of a Jew wallowing in shit, a crude alignment of Jews with excrement – I use this vulgarity to highlight the vernacular quality of this reading. At this basic, surface level reception of the Jew of Tewkesbury, it is hard to avoid the feeling that we are in the realm of anti-Semitism.

Historians of Christian-Jewish relations who have been willing to accept the suggestion that the medieval mind could sometimes be as fixated on notions of heritage as it was on religious status include Bale, Salo Baron Cohen, and Joshua Trachtenberg.⁷ It should be stressed that to maintain such a position is not to deny the religious dimension of hostile sentiment towards Jews, i.e., anti-Judaism. Rather, it is to admit that a national, ethnic, or racial element

also avoids ‘anti-Semitism’ elsewhere”. Cohen 1999, 14–15. On Funkenstein, see Engel 1999, 111–129.

⁴ For a good account of the debate over anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, see Chazan 1997, 126–129.

⁵ Higden 1882, 246.

⁶ Bale 2010, 30–31.

⁷ Baron Cohen 1976, 14–15; Trachtenberg 1961 largely avoids using the word ‘anti-Semitic’ in a medieval context, but is transparent on his association between the anti-Semitism of his own time, 1943, and the Middle Ages (Trachtenberg 1961, 1–44).



Fig. 4: Mosse-Mokke in the *Rolls of the Issues of the Exchequers*, Hilary Term 1233 (17 Henry III), National Archives E. 401/1565. (Photograph: National Archives)

sometimes also exerted its influence. In short, it is to accept that the medieval mind was capable of comprehending ‘faith and creed *and* inner nature’. Speaking in a medieval English context, Bale provides a lucid delineation of these two distinct tendencies:

To argue against the usury practised by the Jews of Norwich on the grounds of Judaism as opposed to Christianity might be called ‘anti-Judaism’. To represent Moshe [משה] as Mosse-Mokke in [a] fictive, grotesquely physical register, in which an imagined ‘Jewish’ body is the cynosure for a range of vices, is antisemitic. [See fig. 4.] ‘Antisemitic’ will be my preferred term throughout: There are few ‘real’ Jews in the narratives I consider, only deprecatory non-Jewish ideas about Jews.⁸

I will make only two observations regarding this ongoing debate over terminology: 1. while a subject as emotive as Jew-hatred obviously requires the commentator to exercise a special degree of precision, this question of religious or racial intent becomes meaningless once we consider *reception*. It is bold enough to claim we know the meanings texts would have had in the minds of their original authors. But how can we possibly claim certain knowledge of the way their audiences understood them – particularly in the case of material that was read aloud to large groups, as so much medieval Christian literature was? As previously suggested, a sermon on the Crucifixion may have been written as a subtle work of allegory, inspired by a rich tradition of Christian thinkers going all the way back to the Church Fathers. Doubtless, some of the faithful would have recognized that. But to the minds of some uneducated laymen, it

⁸ Bale 2010, 3.

may well have sounded like little more than an authoritative explication of the unique cruelty of the Jews. 2. the entire debate is to some degree an accident of language. Scholars writing in German can simply refer to an all-encompassing *Judenhass*. Similarly, the limited work on anti-Jewish sentiment in Old Norse literature by Bjarne Berulfsen used the Norwegian *jødefientlighet*.⁹

My purpose here is not to evaluate the appropriateness of the word anti-Judaism vs. anti-Semitism, but I will engage with the basic issue underpinning that discussion. The question at hand is this: Was there a tendency in medieval Norway and Iceland to perceive the Jews as a race, as well as a religion? To do this, I will examine certain pieces of Old Norse literature, particularly texts intended for mass consumption, such as Marian legends and homilies – *miracula* were used in Old Norse preaching since the *Old Icelandic Homily Book*.¹⁰ We will also consider some moments in visual culture, specifically church art and manuscript illustrations. Other than the aforementioned article by Berulfsen in 1958, which he followed with an encyclopaedia entry in 1963, the subject matter of Jews in Old Norse literature has gone largely uncommented upon by critics.¹¹ It is worth noting, however, that this brief treatment was extremely sceptical of there being any racial element in Old Norse treatments of the Jewish topos. Berulfsen asserted that “den første påviselige jødefientlighet altså utelukkende er av religiøs karakter [the first visible antagonism towards Jews is exclusively religious in character]”.¹²

While research on Jews in Old Norse may be rather shallow, the last twenty years has yielded some interesting scholarship on medieval notions of race more generally. A 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* dedicated to the topic is particularly worthy of note. There, Robert Bartlett elucidated a conception of medieval race rooted in a study of contemporary terminology. Thus, he identified the Latin words *gens* and *natio* as terms which often implied descent groups, while *populus* did not. Examining the medieval reception of Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Pliny, together with original medieval authors, such as Albertus Magnus and Bartholomeus Anglicus (both fl. 1240s), Bartlett observed a strong tradition of geographic determinism and in-

⁹ Berulfsen 1958, 123–144.

¹⁰ Consider the inclusion of several ‘bite-sized’ *miracula* (one featuring a Jew) in *Homiliu-bók*, 205–207; one Marian miracle also contains the rubric that it was used in preaching by Bishop Páll Jónsson (fl. 1195–1211) – “Þessa iartegnn var Pall byskup vannr at segia, þar sem hann var stadr Maariv messv hina fyrri [Bishop Páll had the habit of telling this miracle, when he was presiding over the lesser Marian mass]”. See “Af presti einvm i Danmork.” *MaS*, 153.

¹¹ Berulfsen 1963, 77.

¹² Berulfsen 1958, 126.

terest in skin colour in medieval racial thought. But more than race being a matter of breeding, he also saw a focus on cultural delineation: Language and law were just as important as inheritable features, such as skin tone, when the medieval mind was organizing the world into races. Here, he cited examples by William of Malmesbury, John Fordun, and Emperor Charles IV, among others.¹³

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, whose publication in the same volume as Bartlett was later revised in his *Medieval Identity Machines*, stresses the primacy of the body as a site of difference in medieval race theory, rather at the expense of Bartlett's additional consideration of incorporeal alterity. Drawing on diverse sources, including the *chansons de geste*, the *Etymologiae*, the *Cursor Mundi*, and medieval receptions of the Galenic corpus, he presents a pre-modern conception of race as being an affiliation of bodies. In Cohen's view, when a group all display the same bodily trait, we are witnessing a partition of peoples not religions. True, dark skinned images of Saracens and 'Ethiopians' imply symbolic criticism of their Islamic beliefs, as hook-nosed Jews do for Judaism, but the implication of the body in these polemic efforts has shifted the discourse.¹⁴ To apply Cohen's approach to the example provided by Bale earlier, it hardly seems that in the medieval mind, if Mosse-Mokke would only relinquish his beliefs, then his nose would straighten itself, he would be welcomed into Christendom, and all would be well with the world. In Cohen's formulation, race is the somatic manifestation of difference. The body introduces a way of thinking about Otherness that is no longer entirely spiritual: People look different because they were somehow born different.¹⁵

In the same 2001 volume, William Chester Jordan pointed out the expediency of reducing racial thinking to its essence. Whether we call it 'racial', 'national', or 'ethnic', we are describing the same phenomenon: The explanation of a person's characteristics by recourse to the values projected on to the collective(s) to which they belong. Jordan suggests that "[w]e should not substitute ethnic identity for race [...] They mean the same thing in [this] formulation, but it would [...] be a kind of cowardice to hide behind six syllables when we could speak the language of truth with one."¹⁶ In a sense, what Bartlett, Jordan, and Cohen suggest is fundamentally in agreement with Arendt's defini-

¹³ Bartlett 2001, 39–56.

¹⁴ Cohen 2003, 190–221.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this essay, "Otherness" is simply the potentiated recognition of alterity. It could be understood by any number of theoretical frameworks and retain the same meaning. A reader seeking orientation on the specific notion of Aristotelian-Deleuzian Otherness which informs the present author may turn to Deleuze 2004, 38–43.

¹⁶ Jordan 2001, 168.

tion of racial thought, even if it is at odds with her chronology: Race is the business of using outer signs – language, skin colour, law – to reveal ‘inner nature’. This will be the definition of ‘race’ and ‘racial’ employed in this paper.

Written sources from Iceland and Norway almost entirely avoid descriptions of Jewish physicality of the kind which Cohen and others would find racial. There are two rather marginal exceptions: A skaldic verse describes Jarl Sigvaldi, who betrayed Óláfr Tryggvason at the Battle of Svolder, as having a *niðrbjúgt nef* (crooked [lit. down turned] nose). This has been interpreted by Theodore Andersson as an allusion to the archetypal traitor, Judas, and would suggest that the ‘hook-nosed Jew’ motif had popular currency either at the time the verse was composed (1000) or the saga was written (c. 1190).¹⁷ The only other attestation of the phrase *niðrbjúgt nef* occurs in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*, which tells of how the pagan god, Rígr, slept with three women and so fathered the three classes of man: *þræll* (slave), *jarl* (earl), and *konungr* (king). Attendant to the theme of racial thought, we might note that in this poem, each class is described as an *ætt*, a term implying a lineage or descent group.¹⁸ This resonates with Bartlett’s connection of feudalism with racism, where he describes the Middle Ages as “a world in which blood and descent were seen as fundamental. A noble was *generosus* or *gentle* or *gentil* – ‘well born.’ A serf was *nativus* – ‘born unfree’”.¹⁹ In stanza 10 of *Rígsþula*, Þír, the mother of the *ætt* of slaves, is introduced as so:

Þar kom at garði gengilbeina;
aurr var á iliom, armr sólbrunninn,
niðrbiúgt er nef, nefndiz Þír.²⁰

She came towards the farm, bow-legged;
muddy footed, with sunburnt arms,
The nose was crooked, she was named Þír.

There are some interesting echoes of both racial and religious invective here. Aside from the hooked nose, Þír is depicted as dark-skinned, as Jews frequently were in both visual and textual culture.²¹ She is also unclean, a prejudice levelled against Jews in various tropes: the *foetor judaicus* (Jewish stench), the contagious well-poisoner, the *Judensau* (pig-suckler), etc.²² More striking than

¹⁷ Andersson 2003, 22.

¹⁸ According to Cleasby and Vigfússon (1874, 760): “what is inborn, native, one’s own, lat. proprium; one’s family, extraction, kindred, pedigree”.

¹⁹ Bartlett 2001, 44.

²⁰ *Poetic Edda*, 281–282.

²¹ Resnick 2012, 301–304; Strickland 2003, 110–111.

²² On poisoning and the *foetor judaicus* see especially Trachtenberg 1961, 47–50, 97–108; all these motifs are integrated into a discussion of the antiquity of anti-Semitism, germane to the earlier discussion on terminology, by Rancour-Laferriere 2011, 218.

both these resonances, however, is the fact that she is a servant. From Augustine describing the Jews as book-carrying servants for Christian students, to Emperor Frederick II's designation of Jews as *servi camere nostre* (servants of our chamber), to the possessive servitude exhibited in the Anglo-Norman *Judei Nostrri*, the doctrine of the 'Jew in Christian Service' permeated medieval thinking about Jews.²³ Þír might be compelling evidence of a widespread apprehension of Jews in both physical and racial terms, but the dating of *Rigsþula* is unresolved. As Thomas D. Hill notes, it "might be much older than the MS in which it was preserved [1270s], and a product of the pre-Christian period, or it might be the work of eleventh or twelfth century Icelandic or Norwegian poets of a somewhat antiquarian disposition".²⁴ The younger dating would support the theory that the poet is drawing from popular thinking about Jews, the elder would rule it out: Why would a pagan Scandinavian be anti-Jewish, let alone anti-Semitic? At any rate, neither of these two instances of a *niðrbjúgt nef* is applied directly to Jews. Their allusive nature hints at a widespread racial apprehension of Jews – note, following Bale, the 'grotesquely physical register' – but they are not definitive proof thereof.

When Old Norse authors discussed Jews explicitly, they tended to engineer difference through descriptions of their behaviour rather than their bodies *per se*. Consider one of the Norse versions of the *Erubescat* miracle. In this tale, widely known in many medieval literatures, Jews plot to abduct and murder a cleric who torments them by singing a hymn which decries their rejection of Christ. A Jew dresses as a monk in order to kidnap the cleric, and the captive is accordingly executed. The conspirators almost get away with it, until a miraculous intervention by the Virgin Mary reveals their crime. The Christians respond as so:

kallar konvnggrinn saman mikinn lyð oc stefnir fiølment þing, þviat hann var þar i borginni þann tima, er þvillikir lvtir gerðuz. Er a þvi þingi þetta mal vpp borit af kirkivnnar halfv ok konvngsins, hversu gyðingar hafa prettvissliga gabbat savðaher guðs. Þar eptir dœmir konvnggrinn með beztu manna raði, at fyrir þa grein at gyðingrinn hafði klerkinn gripit vt af kirkivnni vndir siðlætis bunaðe, skulo allir gyðingar taka þa pinv, ef þeir uilia eigi snvaz til rettrar trvar, at þeir skulo engi kløði bera nema gvl, ok þo vánd ok felitil at øllvm kosti, at þeir se avðkendir með sinni otrv ok fraskilianligir guðligri hiørð, sem iafnan meinmøla hinn krossfesta Jesum ok hans dyrðliga moðvr blezaða mey Mariam drotningv

[the king calls together a great crowd and arranges a large assembly, because he happened to be in town at the time when these things happened. At this assembly the matter

²³ Rowe 2004, 167; Krummel 2011, 28–36; Sapir Abulafia 2011.

²⁴ Hill 1993, 535. As Hill notes, a mid-thirteenth-century dating has also been proposed: Von See 1957, 1–12.

was raised on behalf of the Church and the king, how the Jews had cunningly mocked God's flock. Thereafter the king, with counsel of the greatest men, deems that as the Jew had seized the cleric from the Church by wearing the clothing of the righteous all Jews should have the punishment, that if they will not be turned to the correct faith, they will wear no clothes but yellow, and indeed poor and miserable ones in every way, so that they might be recognized for their faithlessness and their separation from the godly herd, as they always abuse Jesus the Crucified and His glorious mother, the Blessed Virgin, Queen Mary]²⁵

Clearly, this episode is couched primarily in religious terms. What the Jews have done is a product of *ótrú* (faithlessness). Moreover, the Jews do not exhibit any corporeal difference from the Christians: The Jew can successfully disguise himself as a monk because there is otherwise no outwardly visible difference between himself and a Christian. On these grounds, the message would rightly be described as anti-Jewish, rather than anti-Semitic. But it also contains the very faint beginnings of a deliberation on 'the inner nature' of the Jew. The text leaves some important questions unanswered. If to be a Jew is simply to believe erroneous things, why do the Jews not convert when they witness the Marian miracle?²⁶ What must be wrong with them, to make them so irrational and stubborn? And if Judaism is only a religion, how does it make its adherents so *préttviss* (cunning)? Elsewhere, Old Norse literature tends to depict personal qualities, particularly moral and intellectual ones, as innate rather than learned. As Paul Bibire remarks succinctly: "Personality traits were [...] believed to be inherited; genealogical narrative was therefore a guide to how subsequent descendent would behave in specific narrative situations".²⁷ I see no reason for this one miracle to be an exception to this tradition. Its audience would have heard through homilies that the Jews were recalcitrant and crazed back in the time of Christ; thus, through the principle of genetic inheritance the contemporary Jews would be the same.²⁸ It was their lineage, not their religion, that made them so. In the king's own words, the yellow clothes he enjoins upon the Jews are a way to recognize the fact they are *fráskili* (separated, isolated, astray; as defined by Cleasby and Vigfússon).²⁹ I do not deny the religious connotations of the word, but what the king also seems to be motioning towards is 'difference, Otherness'. Doubtless, the yellow clothes signify reli-

25 "Af klerk ok gyðingvm." *MaS*, 206–207.

26 Cf. the discussion on 'being a Jew' provided by Krummel 2011, 23–26.

27 Bibire 2003, 236.

28 I am thinking here in particular of the Christmas Day homily, the homily on the Passion, and two untitled homilies on St. Stephen: *Homiliu-bók*, 45–49, 66–70, 175–180.

29 Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 171.

gious alterity, but they can also be understood as an outer articulation of an unchangeable ‘inner nature’. Indeed, a similarly ambiguous mixture of racial and religious thinking stood behind the decision by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 which led to Jews being forced to wear coloured badges in many European polities:

In some provinces a difference in dress distinguishes the Jews or Saracens from the Christians, but in certain others such a confusion has grown up that they cannot be distinguished by any difference. Thus it happens at times that through error Christians have relations with the women of Jews or Saracens, and Jews and Saracens with Christian women. Therefore, that they may not, under pretext of error of this sort, excuse themselves in the future for the excesses of such prohibited intercourse, we decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress.³⁰

Again, the tone is ostensibly religious. Here, Jews are not perceived to have any substantial physical differences from Christians that would otherwise reveal their identity. But the clerics behind this edict do not even consider the possibility that ‘relations’ between Jews and Christians might lead to conversion. They appear to be more concerned that some sort of contamination might occur. Even if Jews do not exhibit external difference, what is it in their inner nature that must be kept away? When premarital intercourse is already a sin, why is it considered so much worse to sleep with a Jew that the issue requires its own legislation? When legislators begin to concern themselves over the intermingling of Christian and Jewish bodies, their thinking may yet be described as anti-Jewish, but the drift towards a somatic discourse betokens at least the beginnings of something racial.³¹ In this way, the author of the Old Norse *Erubescat* miracle may have misunderstood the historical origins of the ‘yellow badge’, but his work is a product of the same psychology.

This way of thinking is developed further elsewhere in the Norse *miracula*. In the *Toledo Miracle*, the voice of the Virgin Mary is heard from the heavens, warning the Toledans that the local Jews are planning to re-enact the crucifixion *með mikilli slægð ok illzku* (with great cunning and evil). The archbishop summons a crowd, and they begin a search for where the Jews might be intending to carry out their secret rite. The episode is resolved as so:

Ok fóru þeir fyrst til halla þeira, er byskup gyðinga átti, ok rannsökuðu þar. Ok þá er erkibyskup kom í þinghús þeira, þá fannz þar líkneskia gör af vaxi í líking lifanda mannz.

³⁰ Marcus 1999, 154.

³¹ See also Heng 2000, 137; Kruger 1997, 167–168.

Hon var börð ok hrækt, ok þar vóru menn margir af fólki gyðinga ok féllu á kné fyrir líkneskiuna, sumir gáfu henni kinnhesta. Þar stóð ok kross hiá, ok höfðu gyðingar þar ætlat at negla líkneski þetta þar á krossinn til spotz ok svívirðingar við dróttin várn Jesum Krist ok alla þá er á hann trúðu. En er kristnir menn sá þetta, þá brutu þeir þetta líkneski, en drápu alla gyðinga, þá er þar vóru við staddir.³²

[First they went to the hall which the rabbi (*byskup gyðinga*) owned and searched there. And when the archbishop came to their synagogue (*þinghús*) there was found a statue made of wax, in the likeness of a living man. It was battered and spit-drenched, and there were many people of the Jewish race (*fólk*) falling on their knees before the statue, some slapped it on the cheek. Also, there stood a cross nearby, and the Jews had intended to nail that statue to the cross for the mockery and insult of Our Lord Jesus Christ and all who believed in Him. And when the Christians saw this, then they destroyed that statue and killed all the Jews who were present.]

While the narrative voice has not introduced the theme of a visibly different Jewish body, when we consider the motivations of the Jewish antagonists a little more closely the author's proto-racial message becomes apparent. What are the Jews really doing in this scene? Superficially, their performance is a straightforward ridicule of Christianity. There is a rich tradition of mockery by sculpting an insulting effigy in Old Norse literature, and although the *Toledo miracle* is a translation, I find it hard to believe that Icelanders hearing it were not at least occasionally reminded of the valences of parodic statues in their own culture. This tradition is known as *trénið* (wooden insult) – *nið* refers to a particular kind of humiliating denigration, often but not universally understood to have sexual implications. Its chief quality is that it “seek[s] to degrade a person in the opinion of others by referring to him or representing him as a despicable person” and “always conveys contempt”.³³ Indeed, the mockery and irreverence of *nið* would have made a perfect analogue with the stereotype of the sceptic, bilious Jewish assailant. That such a connection was plausible to the minds of medieval Icelanders is confirmed by the Old Norse saga of St. Peter (*Pétrs saga Postula*) where the word *gyðingr* (Jew) is at one point replaced with *guðniðingr* (lit. one who commits *nið* against God).³⁴

³² “Af líkneski várs herra.” in *MaS*, 110–111.

³³ Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 28–29. For interesting comment on *trénið*, see Finlay 2001, 21–44.

³⁴ Berulfsen 1958, 126–127 (also 1963, 77) argued that this was deliberate folk etymology: “En slik folkeetymologi er ofte en utmerket indikator på hva man egentlig legger i ordet [Such a folk etymology is often an outstanding indicator of what one really invested in the word].” The context here is Peter's explanation of Simon Magus' circumcision: “Til þess tok Simon skurðarskirm, at hann mætti framarr bleckia andir ebreska manna, ef mann syndi sik vera [*gyðing/guðniðing/Juda*] ok leti sem hann kendi guðs lógmál [This is why Simon was circumcised, he could further mislead the souls of the Jews if he showed himself to be a (Jew/mocker

Even when the Jews have very nearly succeeded in their conspiracy, there is still a logical flaw at its core. The whole point of *níð* is that it must have an audience who are thereby shamed and wounded. But this strange performance was never actually intended for Christian eyes. Indeed, were it not for the intervention of the Virgin Mary, it would have remained known only to the Jews who participated. This is the very same conundrum we saw at work in the *Erubescat* miracle; the inscrutable, irrationality of the Jews. But it is intensified here by the apparent frenzy that apparently consumes them. It is not merely a question of stubbornness, but actual derangement akin to the Jewish *dementia* posited by Bede.³⁵ There is no sense here that the Jews are guilty of misunderstanding the scriptures. Rather, they are incapable of understanding anything at all. The author has taken a step towards separating ‘Jews’ from ‘Judaism’: The antagonists of this episode can hardly be said to belong to a structured religion. There is no one officiating over this frenzied display, nor any sense of congregation, an opposing scripture, or non-Christian ritual. Noticeably, the rabbi’s house is empty. The Jews of Toledo present the image of having a leader and being a religious community in their own right, but this is only a pretence. They attack Christianity instinctively, irrationally, and ineffectively, quite without the need for the organizational hierarchies characteristic of Christianity. Their incapability to think or reflect also means that apostasy is impossible. In contrast to the *Erubescat* legend, the Jews are not even offered the chance to be *snúazk til réttar trúar* (turned to the correct faith). Whatever it is in Jewishness that makes the Toledan Jews hostile and crazed, it cannot be undone by conversion. Thus, the only response available to the Christians is to kill them all. The author’s concerns over the indelibility of inner nature rather than the mutability of religion are also exposed in his choice of language. He speaks of a *gyðinga fólk* (lit. ‘people of the Jews’, but translated in accordance with Jordan’s earlier call for simplicity as ‘Jewish race’). The author does not speak of a *gyðinga trú* (Jewish faith). He does not conceive of Judaism as an erroneous religion to be proselytized away so much as he thinks of Jews as a strange people to be wiped out.

This application of the word *fólk* to the Jews in an interesting development, and it warrants further comment on terminology. *Fólk* is a rather semantically narrow term, quite possibly equivalent to Bartlett’s previously cited identifica-

of God/Jew) and pretended that he accepted God’s commandments],” *Petr’s Saga Postola*, 99–101. This might hint at perceived etymology on the part of the scribe, but could equally be a scribal error, or indeed an accidental expression of subconscious anti-Jewish sentiment.

35 Scheil 2004, 38–49.

tion of *populus*, defined in the *Icelandic-English Dictionary* as ‘folk, people’.³⁶ Its use in the *Toledo Miracle* may hail a phenomenological shift from thinking solely about Judaism to a further consideration over ‘the Jews’, but it is not a racial descriptor *per se*. Cleasby and Vigfússon maintained that “the Germ[an] sense of *people, nation* [Dan(ish) *folket*] is strange to Icel[andic]”.³⁷ Their generalization is not entirely correct. An Old Norwegian homily on the massacre of the innocents exerts considerable effort in delineating the *gyðinga fólk* from the *gyðinga kyn, kyn Palestinorum* and *kyn Jacobs*.³⁸ It seems hard to believe that the homilist is not conceiving of the term as an ethnic identifier there. Several Old Norse texts also use variations of the term *Isræls fólk* to refer the Jews, including *The Old Norwegian Homily Book, Stjórn*, and *Konungs Skuggsjá*. *Thómas saga Erkebyskups* refers to the French as *Frankaríkis fólk*. Snorri Sturluson frequently uses *fólk* to describe the diverse races of gods, elves, and giants who populate his *Prose Edda*.³⁹ But if *fólk* only very occasionally conveyed a sense of ethnic delineation, there is one example from Old Norse literature where the Jews are referred to with a collective noun that did have explicitly racial connotations. The word *kyn* conveys the idea of genetic extraction, but also of type or species. Thus Cleasby and Vigfússon suggest the Latin translation *genus*, or modern English “kin, kindred [...] a kind, sort, species”.⁴⁰ There are several moments in Old Norse literature where people are described in terms of their *kyn*. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, a trader by the name of Nagli is “skozkr at kyni [Irish by descent]”,⁴¹ which Sverrir Jakobsson has proposed as a marker to explain his discomposure and cowardice in battle.⁴² Similarly, Ívarr Ingimundarson in *Morkinskinna* is said to be “íslenzkr at ætt ok stórættaðr at kyni, vitr maðr ok skáld gott [Icelandic by descent and noble in extraction, a wise man and fine poet].”⁴³ Is Ívarr poetically gifted and Icelandic, or poetically gifted *because* he is Icelandic? After all, Theodoricus Monachus and Saxo Grammaticus both praise the Icelanders’ reputation as poets, and the majority of known *skálds* were Icelanders.⁴⁴ Demonstrating considerably less subtlety,

36 Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 164.

37 Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 164.

38 *GNH*, 94–97.

39 For these examples and more, see *ONP*, s.v. “folk”.

40 Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 366.

41 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 33.

42 Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, 153.

43 *Morkinskinna*, 102.

44 Theodoricus Monachus states that “I have been able to learn by assiduous inquiry from the people among whom in particular the remembrance of these matters is believed to thrive – namely those whom we call Icelanders, who preserve them as much celebrated themes in their ancient poems.” Theodoricus Monachus 1998, 1. Saxo does not refer to poetry explicitly, but

Bergr Sökkason makes very clear his concept of *kyn* as an ethnic appellation and as a foreshadowing of character. In his *Nikolaus Saga Erkibyskups*, he tells the story of a troubled merchant who approaches a Jewish moneylender: “sækir hann heim gyding nockurn storliga rikan at gulli ok silfri, sem þess hattar kyni er veniuligt, bidiandi, at hann seli honum sva mikit gull at lani [he seeks the home of a certain Jew, very wealthy in gold and silver, as those of this kind of race usually are, asking that he might loan him much gold]”.⁴⁵ Predictably, Bergr’s stereotype does not proceed to behave with much integrity in the following transaction. Just as Nagli’s Irish *kyn* made him cowardly, Ívarr’s *kyn* made him poetic, and the Jewish moneylender’s *kyn* makes him wealthy and dishonest. Bergr’s moneylender will ultimately convert to Christianity, but in my view the triumph of God’s love over ‘bad blood’ does not erase the implication of inherited, innate negative qualities. Just as Bergr chose to end on a theme of divine redemption, he also chose to begin with the notion of *kyn*. He might have spoken of *þess háttar trú* (this kind of faith), *þess háttar starf* (this kind of profession), *þess háttar stétt* (this kind of rank), etc. He did not.

As seen, textual depictions of Jews from Iceland and Norway may well approach Jewishness as something irremovable, inheritable, and therefore racial, but they do not use the body to articulate this essentialism. Visual culture, on the other hand, is a different matter. As we have seen in the case of Mosse-Mokke cited by Bale, other medieval European cultures frequently used pictures of Jews to communicate anti-Semitic notions of Jewish difference. Students of Old Danish and Old Swedish have a rich array of sources to choose from in this regard, as Denmark and Sweden are richly endowed with surviving examples of church art. Old Norse specialists have a dramatically narrower range with which to engage: There are some impressive manuscript illustrations from Iceland, but virtually no church art survives there, and for depictions of Jews the Norwegian material is only marginally superior.⁴⁶ But in the Icelandic case, we have one surviving collection of illustrations known as the *Teiknibók* (AM 673a, 4^o), which is widely reckoned to have served as a model

his Icelandic sources for mythology can hardly have been prose: “The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others’ deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence. They regard it a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation”. Saxo Grammaticus 1996, 5.

⁴⁵ Bergr Sökkason 1877, 134.

⁴⁶ On Norway, see Dæhlin 1966, 291–299; Fuglesang 1996. On Iceland, see Jakob Benediktsson 1981, 299.



Fig. 5: Malchus struck by St. Peter, *Teiknibók*, fol. 9^r. (Photograph: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)

for manuscript illustration and church art throughout the Middle Ages.⁴⁷ Naturally, we cannot be certain how closely Icelandic church-painters copied these models, but it is probable that the images contained in the *Teiknibók* were not completely unique, and it seems safe to assume they are broadly representative of the medieval Icelandic visual culture which we have now largely lost.

The *Teiknibók* features several images of Jews, many of which exhibit classic racist tropes – I do not mean to put the Middle Ages on trial by using the word ‘racist’; rather, I intend only to highlight the fact that the artist in question apparently rehearses the notion that Jews look a certain way, and he clearly does not intend his depictions as compliments.⁴⁸ Three artists are thought to have worked on the manuscript, but all the depictions of Jews here are by the same hand, dated between 1330 and 1360.⁴⁹ In addition to the usual hooked noses (see fig. 5 and fig. 6), there are also some slightly subtler strategies of somatic difference at play. The Jews are generally much less physically imposing than Christ and his apostles. One image (fig. 7) features a particularly dainty, elfin Jew, who would scarcely reach Jesus’ armpit were he to stand:

⁴⁷ Jakob Benediktsson 1981, 300.

⁴⁸ There are three Jewish figures in a crucifixion scene on fol. 6^v, two Jewish figures crowning Jesus with the crown of thorns on fol. 6^r, two Jews or one Jew and a Roman soldier in the judgement of Pilate on fol. 9^v, Malchus and Judas on fol. 9^r, one Jew being shown out from the washing of Christ’s body on fol. 13^v, possibly one Jew in a deposition scene on fol. 13^r, Jacob wearing a *pilleus cornutus* on fol. 14^r, Jewish doctor attending a deathbed scene on fol. 17^v.

⁴⁹ Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir 2013, 102.



Fig. 6: Bald, hook-nosed Jew helps apply the crown of thorns. *Teiknibók*, fol. 6r. (Photograph: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)

Like the equally petite Malchus, he can also only muster a wispy stubble in contrast to Christ's full beard. This concept of the Jew as somehow lacking vitality, or indeed masculinity, is wholly lacking in textual sources, but appears on multiple occasions in the *Teiknibók*. In fig. 6, the Jew seems curiously physically degenerate, with sickly, downturned eyes and complete hair loss from the beard upwards. In the case of these two examples, recent work by Carl Phepstead on the proclivity for Old Norse literature to align baldness and poor beard growth with effeminacy or emasculation ought to be borne in mind.⁵⁰ It is not impossible that here we can observe literary and visual expression in concert. In fig. 8, although the folio is damaged, we can see that the Jew nailing Christ's left hand to the cross has long, feminine eyelashes. The assertion of Jewish

⁵⁰ Phepstead 2013, 1–19.



Fig. 7: Detail from Crucifixion, *Teiknibók*, fol. 6^v. (Photograph: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)

queerness was commonly rehearsed in medieval culture, e.g., the idea that Jewish men menstruate, that circumcision was sexually damaging, that Jews forcibly circumcise or murder Christian children because they despise their virginity, etc.⁵¹ As Steven Kruger has pointed out, the racial and religious implications of this motif were not clearly disambiguated:

The idea of Jewish and queer bodily degeneracy and danger is linked also to a claim about ideas, a belief that homosexuals and Jews were not just physically but *intellectually* perverted, and in particular unable to read and interpret texts properly. Jews of course, were thought wilfully to misunderstand the truth of Christ's life, and of Scripture both 'Old' and 'New'; just as they possess debased bodies, their readings debase texts by focusing only on the material, never the spiritual.⁵²

Nonetheless, Kruger describes this medieval Christian avatar for Jewishness as the “the religiously *and* racially queer Jew” who appears in “anti-Semitic texts”.⁵³ The strategy is ambidextrous: The weak, feminized Jews of the *Teiknibók* can be read metaphorically. In that capacity, they serve as symbols of a

⁵¹ Kruger 1992, 303 ; Bale 2010, 131–132; Resnick 2012, 50–52; Trachtenberg 1963, 50, 149–150.

⁵² Kruger 1993, 34–35. Interestingly, Kruger integrates his general analysis of queerness with Old Norse sources, namely the accusation of *ergi* in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.

⁵³ Kruger 1993, 33, 35 (my *emphasis*).



Fig. 8: Jew with effeminate eyelashes from Crucifixion, *Teiknibók*, fol. 6^v. (Photograph: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)



Fig. 9: Dark-skinned Jew? The manuscript is defective and the colouring is most likely accidental rather than original artistic intent. Nonetheless, the face is noticeably darker than the liripipe it surrounds. *Teiknibók*, fol. 6^v. (Photograph: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)

religion that lacks vitality, that is fading away, that is utterly perverse. But like any metaphor, they can also be read literally – in this case, as a comment on the moral degeneracy and physical alterity inherent to the Jewish people, or to use a term we saw earlier, the *gyðinga fólk*. A lay audience of uneducated Icelanders, observing copies of these illustrations daubed on church walls while they listened to their preacher tell the *Erubescat* or *Toledo* miracle, may well have understood things in such literal rather than symbolic terms.

Lay misunderstanding of Jews exhibited through visual culture can also be found in another, rather more unlikely, place. The *Codex Upsaliensis* (DG 11, 4^o) is an Icelandic manuscript written in the early 1300s. It is most famous for containing a unique recension of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, but it also preserves several other shorter works: *The Second Grammatical Treatise*, *Skáldatal*, *Lögsgumannatal*, and, most importantly for our purposes, *Ættartala Sturlunga* (The Reckoning of the Heritage [ætt] of the Sturlungs). This text is a short genealogy of the Sturlung clan, which held power over much of western Iceland during the thirteenth century, and to which many prominent Icelanders belonged, not least Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284) and Snorri himself. It is generically related to the regnal lists of the Norwegian royals, where the male line begins with Adam, proceeds to the Greeks/Trojans, then the Anglo-Saxons, and continues right up to the incumbent monarch.⁵⁴ However, it is unusual amongst such genealogies for the number of errors it contains. Details which would have been common knowledge to anybody with even slight insight into the Bible are quite confused. The son of Adam, for example, is listed not as Seth but 'Sech'. Similarly, Enoch becomes 'Enon'. Likewise, details from Classical literature which are elsewhere well understood by Old Norse authors, are

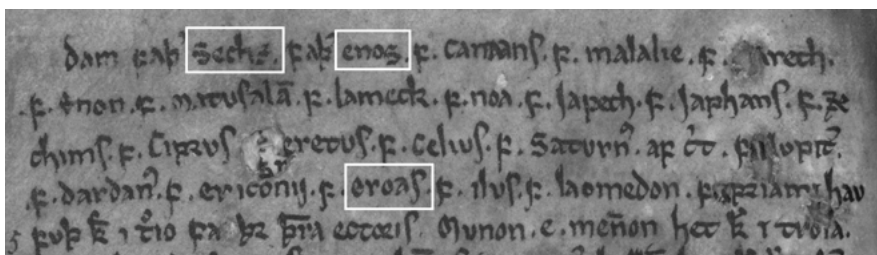


Fig. 10: “Sechz” (cf. Lameck), “Enos”, “Eroas”. *Codex Upsaliensis*, fol. 25^v. (Photograph: Uppsala universitetsbibliotek)

⁵⁴ For a full presentation of the Old Norse regnal tradition with accompanying translations, see Bruce 2002, 92–96, 111–113, 114–119, 121–122, 141–150; see also Faulkes 1977, 177–190.

corrupted in the *Ættartala*, e.g., Tros becomes ‘Eroas’ (see fig. 10). These may well be simple scribal errors, but if so we can at least be certain that the hand responsible was very much a layman – nobody with a modicum of clerical training could have made such mistakes. Here, we should also note that there is no reason why the scribe should not also have been the author, having adapted his own *tala* from the material provided in the genealogy of Óðinn given in the prologue to *Snorra Edda*.⁵⁵ This ignorance of biblical history on the part of the hand should be borne in mind when we consider the illustrations which immediately precede the *Ættartala* on fol. 25^r.

The popular explanation for the three figures on fol. 25^r has been that they are dancers.⁵⁶ Olof Thorell described fig. 11 as a “man i halvfigur med hak-skägg, hållande en stav med krycka [man in profile with a goatee, holding a staff with a crutch]”.⁵⁷ There are several reasons to describe it more properly as a caricature of a Jew. Most obviously, there is the *niðrbjúgt nef* that we have seen previously. Thorell acknowledges the goatee, but neglects to add that this style of beard was a staple of anti-Semitic imagery during the Middle Ages.⁵⁸ The theme of physical deterioration, manifested in the figure’s wearied wrinkles, recalls our earlier example from the *Teiknibók* (fig. 6). The man’s headgear is not readily discernible: Is the hair covering the ears a crude parody of the *peyot*, is he wearing a *kippah*, or is he sporting a head of tight curls? All three possibilities would resonate with medieval depictions of Jews – and indeed contemporaneous notions of race, particularly if we consider the *peyot* or *kippah* in light of Bartlett and Jordan’s definition of medieval race as including law and customs.⁵⁹

A logical question to pose at this point is: Why should there be a Jew in the *Codex Upsaliensis*? A flippant response might be: Why should a troupe of dancers be there either? However, while I am ready to accept the hypothesis that the scribe of the *Ættartala* drew a Jew simply because he could, we might also be able to relate the image to the text in question, and in doing so illuminate some of the ways that he perceived the concept of *ætt*. As previously alluded to, the *Ættartala* cleanly shifts from Biblical names, to Greek names, to

55 Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1940, 64.

56 Thorell 1977, xviii. This interpretation is followed by Heimir Pálsson 2012, xcvi–xcvii.

57 Thorell 1977, xviii.

58 On the importance of the *Ziegenbart* and the association with goats more generally, see Trachtenberg 1963, 44–48.

59 With particular application to Jews, see Jordan 2001, 166–167. On the racial implications of curly hair in the Middle Ages, see Strickland 2003, 38, 85; on curly hair and Jews, see Trachtenberg 1963, 26. It is also argued that this illustration was informed by anti-Semitic visual language in Cole (forthcoming).

Old English names – or approximations thereof, e.g., Scef becomes Sesef, Godwulf becomes Guðólf, Hereræd becomes Hereðei, etc. – before finally arriving at Old Norse names, which in turn can be divided into the royal Norwegian Ynglingar line and the Icelandic Sturlung clan. It is possible that the *Ættartala* scribe conceived of the first, biblical portion as being Jews. Anyone with basic knowledge of the Bible would know that they were not. The line goes from Noah to Japheth, and then onwards to the Greeks, following the assertion first popularized by St. Isidore of Seville that Europeans were descended from Japheth.⁶⁰ The *Ættartala* diverges several generations prior to the first Jewish patriarch. But as previously seen, our scribe's understanding of Bible history was very much confused. It may be the case that the Jew on fol. 25^r is a graphic representation of how he believed people such as Lamech and Noah would have looked. It is worth noting that he appears to be measuring between two points on the item that Thorell described as a crutch. Is he, perhaps, indicating the portion of the *tal* or *tala* to which he belongs?⁶¹ The two female figures in fig. 12 and fig. 13 appear to be making similar measuring gestures, explicating their own demarcations of the Sturlung pedigree. Are they perhaps depictions from another part of the *Ættartala*, possibly the only two-named female Sturlungar (Vigdís Svertingsdóttir and Helga Sturludóttir)? Alternatively, one of the women may be the only named female Yngling (Ólöf Vémundardóttir). The figure with a sword in fig. 12 might be any number of the warriors in the *Ættartala*, from Hector to Sighvatr Sturluson.

If the illustrations surrounding the *Ættartala* are indeed inspired by the scribe's understanding of the text, then fig. 11 is a striking visualization of a 'Jewish'⁶² *ætt*, just as we earlier encountered the *ætt* of slaves in *Rigsþula* or the *ætt* of Icelanders in *Morkinskinna*. Moreover, it stresses the ethnic/genetic component of 'Jewishness'. The Sturlung line does not become Christian until the Scandinavian branch (and then quite late on; this line even includes Óðinn himself), so it cannot be religious status that undoes the hooked nose and wizened appearance. In the mind of the scribe, the fact that the contemporary Sturlungar did not 'look Jewish' must have been attributed to an idea that 'Jewishness' was something that was inherited and could therefore be bred out-

⁶⁰ St. Isidore of Seville 2006, 193.

⁶¹ The title *Ættartala Sturlunga* is a modern descriptor, although both *ættartala* and *ættartal* are medieval words used to describe this kind of genealogy or pedigree. The noun *tala* refers to a tally or number, while *tal* connotes a list more specifically. See Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 624–625, 760.

⁶² I use scare quotes here throughout this section because, as seen, the people described were obviously not Jews.

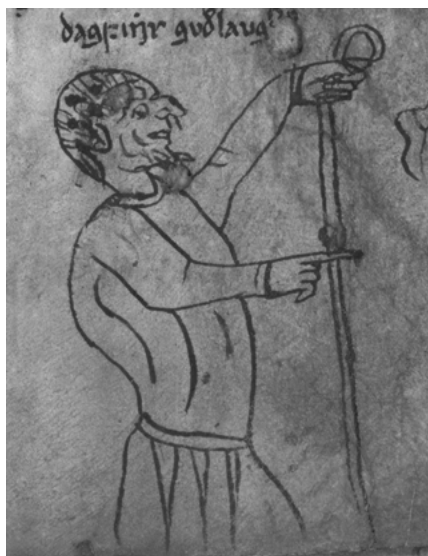


Fig. 11: “Jew” with tally? *Codex Upsaliensis*, fol. 25^r. (Photograph: Uppsala universitetsbibliotek)

over the generations. His identification of Noah *et al.* as Jews might well have been idiosyncratic in medieval Iceland, but as we have seen such notions of hereditary characteristics were not. In any case, even if fig. 11 is quite unrelated to the adjacent text, the image’s rehearsal of the anti-Semitic tropes previously outlined constitutes a further example of medieval Icelanders expressing hostile sentiments about the inner nature of the Jews via the site of the body.

I will conclude with one more example of what I believe to be a racialized image of the Jewish body from the Old Norse-speaking world. Ål Stave Church was constructed during the twelfth century in what is now Ål Kommune, south east Norway. During the early 1300s a lavishly painted chancel ceiling was added, depicting 23 scenes from the Bible. Although the church was demolished in 1880, these paintings were recovered and survive to date. Imagining being packed into the church, staring up at the vibrantly coloured images while the priest read material from the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* or the *miracula*, one can understand how powerful the lay experience of Old Norse religious literature must have been. Returning to earlier observations made on the reception of the *Teiknibók*, we might even speak of ‘the multimedia Jew’. An illiterate Old Norse-speaking layman could look from panel to panel on the chancel ceiling of Ål stave church, following visual depictions of Jewish cruelty during the Passion at the same time as the preacher narrated them (we might even make an educated guess at what such a sermon might have been like,



Fig. 12: Illustrations on *Codex Upsaliensis*, fol. 25^r. (Photograph: Uppsala universitetsbibliotek)

e.g., *Dominica palmarum sermo* from *The Old Norwegian Homily Book*).⁶³ What the written/spoken word did not say of the Jewish body, church art could show.

Some of the imagery from Ål is conversant with what we have previously seen from the *Teiknibók*. The Icelandic fig. 5 and the Norwegian fig. 15 both depict Malchus as hook-nosed and diminutive. As suggested in fig. 9 from the *Teiknibók*, the Ål Jews have visibly darker skin. In fig. 14 and fig. 16, Jesus and his disciples exhibit a ruddy, fleshy tone. Judas and the Jews are of a browner

⁶³ For the original text, see *GNH*, 111–116.

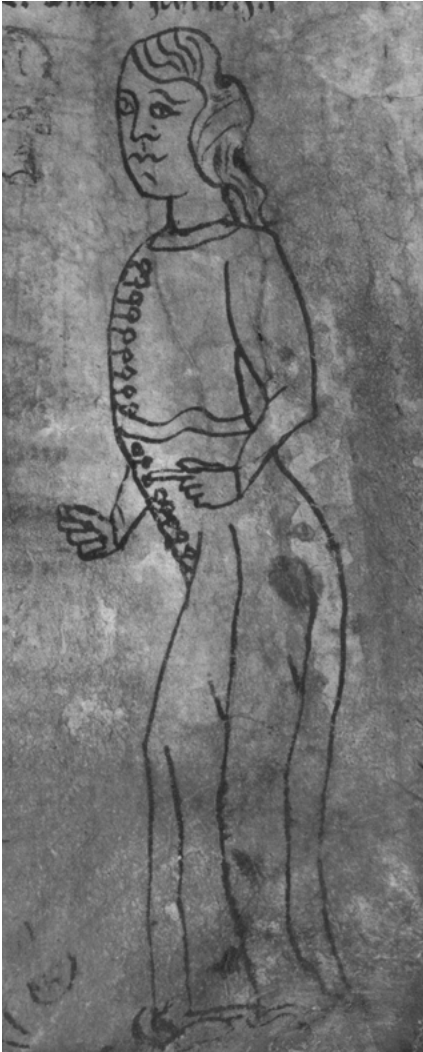


Fig. 13: Female figure on *Codex Upsalensis*, fol. 25^r. (Photograph: Uppsala universitetsbibliotek)

hue, which somehow simultaneously conveys the image of being more pallid and sickly, while also not being quite as ‘white’.⁶⁴ Again, the visual and literary cultures of West Norse-speaking Scandinavia coalesce on this topic: dark complexions in general were often distrusted by Old Norse authors, being seen as ugly or suggestive of loutishness, impudence, or malevolence. It is a common

⁶⁴ On medieval notions of ‘whiteness’, see Cohen 2003, 197–198; Akbari 2000, 19–34.

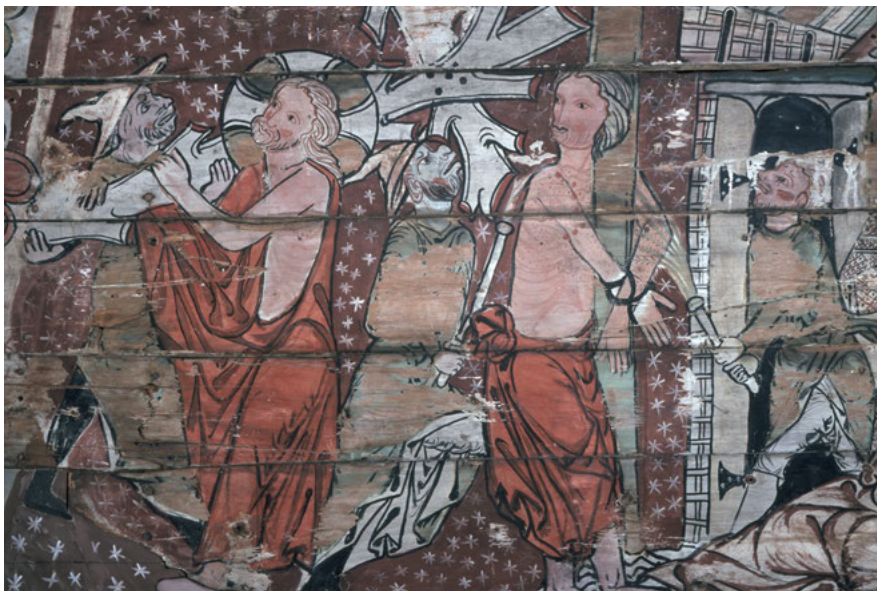


Fig. 14: Jews from Passion scene (detail), Ål Stave Church. Note skin tone in relation to Jesus. (Photograph: Eirik Irgens Johnsen)

trope in the *Íslendingasögur*, that of two brothers, the one with a darker complexion will be a troublemaker, e.g., Grímr and Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, then Egill and Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson in *Egils saga*.⁶⁵ The sociologist Christen T. Jonassen went as far as to claim that this eulogizing of fair features at the expense of the dark was part of “a rather complete racist theory which was integrated with [...] mythology and [the Scandinavian] total value system, and

⁶⁵ On the Kveld-Úlfssynir: “Var Þórólfr manna vænstr ok gørviligastr; hann var líkr móðurfrændum sínum, gleðimaðr mikill, qrr ok ákafamaðr mikill í qllu ok inn mesti kappsmaðr; var hann vinsæll af qllum mǫnnum. Grímr var svartr maðr ok ljótr, líkr feðr sínum, bæði yfirlits ok at skaplyndi [Þórólfr was the most beautiful and accomplished of men. He took after his mother’s side, a very cheerful man, generous and enthusiastic about everything, and the greatest champion. He was popular with everyone. Grímr was a black and ugly man, like his father both in appearance and disposition].” On the Skalla-Grímssynir: “Þórólfr var gleðimaðr mikill [...] varð hann brátt vinsæll af alþýðu [...] (Egill) myndi verða mjök ljótr ok líkr feðr sínum, svartr á hár [...] hann var brátt málugr ok orðvís; heldr var hann illr viðreignar, er hann var í leikum með qðrum ungmennum [Þórólfr was a cheerful man (...) he soon became popular with the common people (... Egill) would turn out very ugly like his father, black of hair, he was often talkative and witty. He was rather hard to get on with, when he was playing with other youths]”, *Egils saga*, 5, 80.



Fig. 15: Malchus detail, Ål Stave Church. (Photograph: Eirik Irgens Johnsen)



Fig. 16: Detail from Last Supper, Ål Stave Church. Note skin colour of Judas (L) in relation to the other disciples. (Photograph: Eirik Irgens Johnsen)

which in most respects paralleled the myths of modern racist dogma”.⁶⁶ It is particularly relevant for our purposes to stress that in Old Norse literature dark skin was considered to be a heritable trait, derived from ones *ætt*. In *Bragða-Mágus saga*, for example, King Karl interrogates the titular hero, who has presented himself at his court in the guise of a man who is half Ethiopian (*blámaðr*) and half Scandinavian:

“Hvar lannda ertu fęðingr?” segir keisara. Hann mællti: “Ek em barnfęddr a Blálanndi. Enn blamaðr var faðir minn, enn moðir min var ęttuð norðan yfir haf; ok því em ek blár

⁶⁶ Jonassen 1951, 157. Although not written by a medievalist, this neglected article presents some novel arguments and deserves further attention; see also Jochens 1997, 313–314.

öðrum megin, at mer bregðr þui til feðr mins; ok marga megi þer þar seá aBlalanndi sva vorðna, sem ek em, ok micklu endimligri, ok sva aSithia hinni Micklu”⁶⁷

[“Of which country are you a native?” says the emperor. He said: “I was born in Bláland. My father was a *blámaðr*, but my mother was descended (*ættuð*) from the north over the sea, and thus I am black on one side, which I get from my father, and you can see many in Bláland who look like me, and much more hideous besides, and also in Greater Scythia.”]

For a Norse-speaking congregation, who had never seen actual Jewish people and so had no reason to suspect that the iconographic traditions used to depict them might not be intended literally, it seems unlikely that the skin tone of the Jews would have been interpreted as a religious metaphor, but rather as a biological reality. The same can probably be said for the facial features of the Jews in fig. 14, which are distorted to the point of looking scarcely human. Their noses are so hooked that they merge back into the face like a snout, their ears are oversized and flapping, their mouths are twisted into snarls. The rather canine impression conveyed by their grimaces may well have been intentional on the part of the artist. The ‘Jewish dog’ was common in anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic invective in the Middle Ages, and Jews are described as dogs twice in the Norse *miracula*.⁶⁸ In one legend, it is said of a Jew who steals a statue of the Virgin Mary that “eptir gløpzkvfvilla hvndz gerð helldr enn mannz hvarf hann allr i brott, sva at hann fannz all dri siðan [in the manner of a malice-filled dog rather than a man, he completely disappeared so that he was never found again]”.⁶⁹ In an Old Norse account of the host desecration trial that took place in Güstrow in 1330, the Jews allegedly responsible are described as “hinu vondu hundar [those evil dogs]”.⁷⁰ By accident or design, this is an example of the verbal and visual languages of anti-Semitism overlapping.

If the Ål congregation sometimes heard sermons or miracle tales which were focussed on a purely religious conception of Jews, the images which surrounded them nonetheless articulated an overwhelmingly racial paradigm. The trope of dark skin and implications of a bestial nature do little to communicate the impression of Judaism as a rival belief system, and much to enforce the suggestion of the instinctively, corporeally Othered Jew. Such a propensity to complement engagement with Judaism as a religion with striking criticism of the Jews as a people is the common theme in all the textual and visual encounters we have discussed. Obviously, Old Norse-speaking culture reached its apex

⁶⁷ *Magus saga jarls*, 34–35.

⁶⁸ Stow 2006.

⁶⁹ “Einn gyþingr for svivirðvliga með likneski varrar frv.” *MaS*, 255–256.

⁷⁰ “Af vndarligum atburd i pyveska landi.” *MaS*, 1058–1059.

long before the rise of the Enlightenment ideals which Arendt and the medievalists who, by accident or design, follow her intellectual footsteps consider to be necessary for the apprehension of race. Nonetheless, many of the requisite concepts for racial thought had long been attendant to the medieval Scandinavian experience. As we have seen, Old Norse literature exhibits an awareness of hereditary traits, concerns over skin colour, dehumanizing invective, and sophisticated terminology for describing kinship and descent groups. In the examples presented here, *kyn*, *fólk*, *þjóð*, and *ætt* are really ‘race’ by any other name.⁷¹

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