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Cancel Culture in the Middle Ages

Projecting and Negating Minds in Old Norse Literature

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore how non-Christian deities are described, in comparison to the Christian God, in three Old Norse texts, belonging to different genres: *Heimskringla*, *Barlaams saga og Jósafats*, *Elíss saga ok Rosamundu*. These texts describe the pantheons of the Nordic cultures, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Saracens. The main question that I discuss is whether these texts may be seen as transmitting useful knowledge and information about these religions and pantheons to their Nordic audiences or whether they are meant to mainly serve the mandate of their Christian authors. I interpret my results by deploying cognitive literary theory and the concept of mentalization. To conclude, I discuss whether the way non-Christian deities are described may be seen as a mental guide for Old Norse readers to practise mentalization according to the Christian empathetic scripts, in order to reach a deeper cognitive and religious conviction and thus strengthen their Christian identities and communities during the times of the Crusades.

Keywords: Old Norse literature, medieval Christianity, cognitive literary theory, mentalizing, projecting and negating of minds, empathy, cognitive transformations

Literature is often thought of as a mirror or a window to the authors' and readers' minds. We read for many different reasons, but in some way or another we always see or search for reflections or inversions of ourselves and our own societies. Literature is highly culturally dependent, it is written in a particular language, composed in a particular cultural and historic context, but it is also a powerful medium that triggers people on a deeply emotional and personal level. Literature has the amazing capacity to trigger our minds, thoughts, and emotions even when we read texts from or about a culture that we do not know much about. It makes us feel for the characters, have empathy for them, or dislike them. In other words, it gives us an excellent occasion to mentalize, i. e. to imagine the minds, thoughts,

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and feelings of other people. In this respect, literature may help us learn about new cultural and historical contexts, but it also offers a link to and a reflection of our own relations, emotions, and reactions. Literature may thus be seen as a medium of communication between cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts, as well as a very efficient trigger of deeply personal and emotional reactions.

In this article, I will focus on how this double role of literature – as a social and a cognitive trigger – is attested in Old Norse literature. Norway and Iceland were, and still are, on the fringe of inhabitable land. The area has been seen as peripheral to the major medieval religious centres, such as Jerusalem, Rome, or Constantinople. As is well known, however, ever since the Vikings, the Norsemen were renowned seafarers, they raided and traded along the coasts of Europe, North America, and the East. After the Christianization in the tenth and eleventh century, Scandinavians travelled to Rome and Jerusalem on pilgrimages, participated in crusades in the Holy Land, and Norse kings had political alliances with rulers in Western Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa. The idea of the centre of the Christian universe, i. e. Jerusalem, was transferred to and imprinted on medieval Scandinavian culture, and thus asserted that Old Norse culture was strongly connected to and participated in the rest of medieval Christendom (Aavitsland and Bonde 2021). This suggests that medieval Norse societies were indeed far less culturally and religiously independent and homogenous than traditionally presumed (Adams/Hefß 2015). Despite its geographical peripheral position, Norse medieval culture was a blend between its own local and historical peculiarities and pan-European Christian stories and histories.

The inter- and multi-cultural nature of Old Norse culture is also attested through numerous literary translations of Latin, French, and German texts into Old Norse. Old Norse literature comprises highly original indigenous poetry and prose, which record fictionalized versions of historic events, such as the travels, raids, trades, discoveries of the Vikings, the medieval Norwegian kings, and Icelandic chieftains. Indigenous poetry includes, among other genres, mythical and heroic poems, which even though unique, were also transcultural with their links to German and English poetry. In addition, there are numerous Old Norse translations, some of which are multilingual translations of Greek and Arabic texts, containing numerous cultural and intellectual references to antiquity and pan-European Christendom. The writers and translators of these texts often wrote under the commission of Norwegian kings or queens, or their powerful aristocrats, who were well connected internationally. Most of the writers and scribes themselves belonged to various religious orders of the Church, thus participating themselves in highly international European networks.

Having in mind the highly international nature of Old Norse literature and culture, the main question in this article is: how are other cultures and, more specif-

ically, other religions described in Old Norse literature, especially when viewed in comparison to the Christian God? A second question would be whether Old Norse literature was meant to pass on knowledge about foreign cultures and religions and thus expand the mental and cultural horizons of its Nordic audience or whether it primarily served the programmes of its Christian authors, by adapting foreign cultural elements to the competence and expectations of the Norse readers. To conclude, my third main question is whether the way non-Christian deities are described in Old Norse literature may be seen as a mental guide for the Old Norse readers to practise mentalization according to the Christian empathetic scripts, and thus reconfirm and strengthen their Christian individual and collective identity.

Mentalizing and literature

This investigation, and especially the last main question, is legitimized by recent studies in cognitive and neurosciences about mentalizing and the role of reading for individual cognitive change and social relations. To mentalize is an innate cognitive ability. In other words, our minds are wired to attribute minds and mental states to ourselves and others. We attribute and project minds to everything – to nature, animals, things (imagine a child with all their stuffed animals and the wonderful tea-parties they have) – in order to relate to them, to feel a sense of community with them, and to have compassion for them. Good abilities to mentalize lead to a stronger sense of self, better social relationships, better mental health, as well as a generally greater level of success in life. On the other hand, people who have reduced abilities to mentalize have also reduced abilities to relate and to sympathize. In other words, they attribute minds to a lesser degree and fail to imagine other people's mental states. In the best-case scenario, this leads to disconnection and mental and emotional distance; in the worst-case scenarios, this leads to dehumanization to such a degree that millions of people can be killed as they are regarded as "others" and "unhuman" (Bateman/Fonagy (eds) 2012; Skårderud/Sommerfeldt 2014; Skårderud/Karterud 2007).

However, even though our ability to mentalize is innate, it is not fully developed in infancy – young children have very limited ability to mentalize. Mentalizing needs to be practised and developed in order for it to become better and stronger. In other words, we need other minds in order to get connected with our own mind; we need someone else (a parent, a teacher, etc.) to project a mind, feelings, and emotional states upon us, in order to learn to do the same for ourselves and the people around us. Through this learning process, mentalization

may be guided according to specific empathetic scripts, and people in different cultures may learn to mentalize in different ways. There are many ways to learn and practise mentalizing, and one of them is through literature. Literature, and especially fiction, has been shown to be an important and efficient medium that improves our mentalizing and empathizing abilities, because it demands mental and emotional involvement, both positive and negative, and it necessitates that we project or sometimes negate minds to the characters we read about (Leverage et al. 2011; Zunshine 2006; Palmer 2004). Reading has thus been proven to contribute to individual cognitive change, better mental health, and more successful social participation (Fialho 2019).

Old Norse literature on various religions and ‘other’ gods

With this knowledge about the true power and potential of literature and reading, we can now return to Old Norse literature and the way it describes other religions and their deities, in comparison to the Christian faith and God. Old Norse literature contains numerous narratives about intercultural and interreligious encounters and different religions and cultures. The topic has been discussed by many scholars, who have focused on studying the literary representation of gods worshipped by the Norse pagans,¹ the Muslims,² and the Jews,³ among others. In various sources, pagan gods are explained through euhemerism (pagan gods were actually men), demonology (heathens are victims of the Devil or evil demons), analogy (paganism is a kind of imperfect Christianity, derived from the essence of the human heart and from nature), or a combination of these.⁴ A common contention in Christian texts, which can be traced back to Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*, was that heathens were enthralled by magic and demonic powers when they worshipped humans or demons as gods.⁵ Such attitudes to the faith of heathens and their gods were common in the Bible, hagiography, and patristic literature, and

¹ On Óðinn and other pagan deities, see the works of Annette Lassen 2003; 2005; 2009. On Þórr, Taggart 2015.

² Adams/Heß (eds) 2015; Sverrir Jakobsson 2016; on Iberian “others”, see McDonald 2020. On Turks and “others” along the *austurvegr*, see Beck 1994, Katona 2021.

³ See the work of Richard Cole 2017.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion, see Lönnroth 1969, who refers to Schomerus 1936.

⁵ See for example the discussion by Annette Lassen (2009, p. 260–261) based on several *fornaldarsögur* and other Old Norse religious texts, such as *Stjórn*, *Barthólómeuss saga postula*, *Kle-*

the destruction of their cult figures was a common motif in Old Norse literature for centuries.⁶ Scholars like Sverrir Jakobsson (2016) and Annette Lassen (2018), for example, have pointed out that for Christians, also those in the North, it was not worth distinguishing between various types of pagans, as these were all seen as representing the binary opposite of the Christian Self. According to the myth of the tower of Babel, which was well attested in Old Norse sources, the different pagan religions, for example the Graeco-Roman and the Nordic gods, were to be seen as local variants of the same basic misunderstanding of the naïve pagans (Lassen 2018).

In this article, I will build upon the insight gained from such studies, and I will continue the discussion by investigating a variety of genres and texts that are not usually studied in juxtaposition to each other. I will focus primarily on three Old Norse texts, belonging to three different genres, because they contain variations on one and the same literary motif – namely, the physical destruction and verbal criticism and negation of the agency of non-Christian gods, including a very specific characterization of their qualities and abilities.⁷ The first text, *Heimskringla*, and more specifically the sagas about the kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, written by the Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson, about 1230, retell about Christian kings who try to convert believers in the pagan Norse pantheon to Christianity.⁸ The second text is *Barlaams saga ok Jósafats*, from about 1250, an Old Norse translation of a Latin version of the legend, where the Christian religion is defended against the mythologies of the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Egyptians.⁹ The third text tells us about the Christian knight Elís, who defends his own Christian God and faith when captured by Saracens while on a crusade in foreign lands. The saga about Elís was translated about 1250 from the Old French *chanson de geste Elye de Saint Gille*.¹⁰ By studying the representations of other

ments saga. Weber (1986, p. 423) argues also for similarities between *fornaldarsögur* and hagiographic literature.

⁶ See Wellendorf 2017; 2018. In the latter publication he explores how Christian authors, nonetheless, sought to ‘re-tie’ the bonds between humans and the gods of the past by creating a ‘physical theology’ that explained them in a new way (p. 22).

⁷ Many more examples could have been included, and some are mentioned below in order to demonstrate the richness of the topos.

⁸ On the origin and the transmission history of the text see the introduction in *ÓsT* and *ÓsH*. For English translations of the texts, see Finlay and Faulkes (transl.) 2011 and 2014.

⁹ On the origin and the transmission history of the text see Magnus Rindal’s editions from 1980 and 1981. For a Norwegian translation of the text see Kinck 1852. For further discussions of the Nordic versions of the text, see Haugen/Johansson 2009 and Rindal 2009.

¹⁰ On the origin and the transmission history of the text see Kölbing 1971. The French version is edited and translated by Hartman and Malicote 2011.

religions and gods in such different texts, we will be able to reach a further understanding of the role of stories about various non-Christian religions and deities in the Old Norse socio-cultural context, as well as about the way the content and wording of these stories may have triggered the mentalizing abilities of the Old Norse audience.

The Nordic gods in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*

The kings' sagas by Snorri Sturluson, collected in his saga compendium *Heimskringla*, tell about, among other things, the struggles between the early Christian kings and the pagan people of their own lands. The two main kings responsible for the Christianization of Norway are King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson. The former manages to convert parts of the country, but when he is defeated, pagan chieftains and paganism regain power. The latter decides to conquer the same areas as his predecessor Óláfr Tryggvason and fights anew for a unified Christian kingdom. It is only with his death and his subsequent canonization, turning him into St Óláfr, the national saint of Norway, that Christianity becomes the formal and permanent religion. The two kings' struggles against the heathens may be seen as typologically similar – the kings travel through the same areas of the country and convince people in similar ways, with nice words first and, if unsuccessful, with torture and violence. A couple of episodes may be given as examples.

The first king, Óláfr Tryggvason, meets the greatest resistance to his conversion project, in Þrændalög. In the district of Mærin, he meets the pagan chieftains who are the greatest opponents to the Christian religion. The king summons everyone to a *þing* and orders them to take the new religion. The peasants protest and ask the king to join them in an offering to the pagan gods, as other Norwegian kings before him have done. The king listens to them and suggests that they all go to the pagan temple, to see what the pagan deities are and how they behave.

At the temple, they come to a statue of Þórr, who is said to be the chieftain of all gods, and he is decorated in gold and silver (*ÓsT*, ch. 69). The king lifts his gold-inlaid axe and strikes Þórr's statue off the pedestal that it is positioned on. The king's men follow his example and strike down all the other god-statues off their pillars. In the meantime, the peasants' leader Járnskeggi (Iron Beard) is killed in front of the temple. When the king walks out of the temple, he gives the peasants two alternatives – to fight him or to convert. As their leader is killed, the only choice they have is to accept Christianity (*ÓsT*, ch. 76). The episode does not

say much more about how pagan deities and their role are perceived, but we have a clear narrative about the gods being simple statues that are easy to strike down and destroy physically.

In his story about Óláfr Haraldsson, Snorri tells us a similar story but with a few more details. In ch. 112 (*ÓsH*), the king meets Dala-Guðbrandr and his people and wants to convert them to Christianity. When the chieftain Dala-Guðbrandr hears that King Óláfr is travelling and making people accept Christianity, he summons his people at Hundþorp farm. He suggests that in order to prepare for Óláfr's arrival, they should carry forth the statue of Þórr – as Þórr has always stood by them. Dala-Guðbrandr knows that when Þórr looks at Óláfr and his men, they will melt away and be turned to nothing. Before they meet, the peasants try to defeat the king in a battle, but they just flee at the sight of him. The king meets the peasants at a *þing* at Listad and that day it is raining. The king tells the peasants that they have to convert to Christianity, but the peasants tell him that they do not know anything about the Christian God as they have never seen him; their pagan god they see every day, even though that day, the god was inside because it was raining. The peasants challenge King Óláfr by asking him to get his almighty God to stop the rain the next day when they can meet again. In the evening, the king has Þórr described to him: he is of great size, with a hammer in his hand, hollow within and he stands on a high stand when he is out. “Eigi skortir hann gull ok silfr á sér. Fjórir hleifar brauðs eru honum færðir hvern dag ok þar slátr við” (*ÓsH*, p. 187)/“There is no lack of gold and silver on him. Four loaves of bread are brought him every day and meat with it” (Finlay/Faulkes 2014, 122). The king spends his night praying and, in the morning, the weather is as he had desired – the rain has stopped.

The next day the king's bishop continues preaching and once again the peasants state that they cannot know much about the powers of the Christian God, unless he brings sunshine the next morning; if that happens, they can meet. The king spends the next night in prayers again. In the morning, they meet at the *þing*, with the statue of Þórr, in the middle, referred to as a “skrímsli” (*ÓsH*, p. 188)/“monstrosity” (Finlay/Faulkes 2014, 123). Dala-Guðbrandr opens up with a speech about how their god must inspire fear now that he is out. The king denies that, pointing out that the god is blind and deaf (“blint ok dauft er”), and can neither protect himself nor others (“má hvártki bjarga sér né qðrum”), as he cannot even move around without being carried (“kømsk engan veg ór stað, nema borinn sé”) (*ÓsH*, p. 189). In the same moment, he invites the peasants to look east and see their God advancing in bright light – at that moment the sun rises. When everyone looks towards the sun, one of the king's men strikes the idol and it bursts asunder, with mice as big as cats, reptiles and adders running out of it. The peasants try to run away, but the king summons them back and points out to the obvious lack

of power of their deity and urges them again to accept the Christian God. Since the pagan god could not help his people, Dala-Guðbrandr understands that he cannot protect and help them and accepts the new faith.

There are a few important aspects about the way the pagan deities, and the Christian God, are perceived. The pagan gods are described as idols who are hollow inside, they have no power and agency of their own, they cannot even move if not moved by someone. They are presented with a “demonic” aura, when huge mice, reptiles, and adders come out of the hollow stump. They can easily be struck and destroyed, i. e. they cannot protect themselves, and neither can they protect the people who believe in them. The people who worship them can indeed see them, as they are physical structures, but ultimately the people are described as engaging in folly and the worship of fake idols, and not gods.¹¹ The Christian God, on the other hand, protects His people. He cannot be seen, except through such major deeds as the rising of the sun and the change of the weather. He is thus almighty and all powerful. There is a clear opposition between the strengths and abilities of the non-Christian gods and the Christian God.

The pantheons of the Chaldaeans, the Greek, and the Egyptians in *Barlaams saga ok Jósafats*

The same topic – the destruction of false idols – is treated in another Old Norse text, which has a very different background and contains very different cultural and religious references, namely, in *Barlaams saga ok Jósafats*. This is a translation of the Latin legend about Prince Jósafat’s spiritual growth and his acceptance of the Christian faith, under the close guidance of the hermit Barlaam. This was originally the story of Buddha, which gradually got a Christian attire, and which in the Middle Ages existed in several Latin versions and almost all vernaculars.

Barlaams saga includes two sections that are relevant for our discussion. The first passage is a short story about a hunter and a nightingale, told by Barlaam, which has a clear Christian moral lesson (Rindal 1981, 30–31; Kinck 1852,

¹¹ This topos is also much discussed in the Sagas of Icelanders, which also address the perpetuation of heathen practices even after the introduction of Christianity. *Fóstbræðra saga* (Regal 1997, 385) is a good example, where an old woman called Gríma is portrayed as having some heathen habits, engaging in magic, and not going to church. In her living room, she has a wooden figure of Þórr on a chair, and she states that she can demonstrate how little she cares about him by smashing him. She does not do that in the saga, but instead uses it as the site where she makes one of the sworn brothers invisible when he is chased by his persecutors.

ch. 45–46). The hunter catches a nightingale and is planning to kill it and eat it, when the nightingale asks him to set him free; in return the nightingale promises the gift of three wisdoms, which will give the hunter happiness and luck for the rest of his life. The hunter changes his mind and sets the nightingale free and accepts his three pieces of wise advice: one, do not try to achieve things that you cannot achieve; two, do not cry over spilt milk, when all hope for getting it back is gone; and three, do not believe in impossible things. When the man has set the bird free, the bird tests whether he has learned anything of his advice. The nightingale tells him not to regret that he has let him free, despite the fact that he has a precious stone in its tummy, which is worth a lot, and which is bigger than an ostrich-egg. Immediately, the man regrets that he has let the bird go and tries to catch it again. The bird understands then that the man has not learned anything of his wise lessons: he tries to catch something which is impossible to catch; he cries over spilt milk even though all hope is out, and he believes something that is obviously unbelievable – a small bird like a nightingale cannot have big precious stones in its tummy.

Barlaam's explanation of this parable is that the man symbolizes all damned people who choose to believe in various idols that they make themselves, that they protect and watch over so that thieves do not steal them. People call such idols their protectors, even though the idols cannot even protect themselves. People pray to such idols and give them money and other offerings. Such idols cannot even come out and show themselves unless they are carried out. People who believe in such idols are wretched and condemned. This is the reason why Barlaam advises Jósafat to choose away such false deities and choose instead the Christian God, who is the creator of all and who shows mercy to all – the Holy Father, His son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This leads Jósafat to start reflecting on his own doubts, regrets, mistakes, and new possible choices.

In my opinion, it may be discussed whether the explanation of the parable makes much sense. Most immediately, the parable tells something about people who fail to learn from their own mistakes, people who fail to take in and internalize lessons given to them, and people who are steered by their own greed. Only on a deeper level does the parable address the topic of what one should believe in; it alludes to the topic of what is true as opposed to what is false; what is real and what is fake. It communicates that things are not always what they seem to be. It invites people to use their critical thinking, their reason and rationality and not aim for or believe unbelievable and implausible things. This point is indeed relevant if the story's message is to criticize the irrationality and folly of men who believe that simple statues, which are lifeless and helpless, are their gods. The description of these idols in the parable is reminiscent of the way Snorri described Þórr in the saga about Óláfr Haraldsson. The difference is that Snorri tells of such

an idol in a very specific historical context of the Norwegian Christian kings fighting their pagan enemies. The episode in *Barlaams saga*, like the whole saga itself, is rather pedagogical, aiming to teach its audience that every event can be interpreted on a moral and tropological level too, following the *quadriga* model of reading (Eriksen 2019). The motif does not include the physical destruction of the idols, but it is emphasized that they are lifeless and helpless and Jósafat is advised not to believe in them, even though they may be seen. The false idols are morally destroyed and negated for good when Jósafat converts to Christianity.

The second passage from *Barlaams saga*, which is even more directly relevant for our discussion here, is Aristides' Apologia (Rindal 1981, 120–134; Kinck 1852, ch. 134, 198–219). This is a speech in defence of the Christian faith, an argumentative monologue about why all the other faiths and gods cannot be true. First, we are told that everything created by the true God is attested by the fact that everything in nature moves according to its given order and position. This is because He is almighty, and His creation is endless and perpetual. In His non-stoppable natural universe, there are three kinds of people: those who believe in various gods, the Jewish people, and the Christians. The people who believe in various gods are the Chaldaeans (Babylonians), the Greeks, the Egyptians. The Chaldaeans are said to have chosen to believe in the creations, rather than the creator, and idols and representations of the Heavens, the Earth, the ocean, the sun, the moon, and the stars.¹² These are kept in castles and other places so that they cannot be stolen or destroyed. People who believe in such idols do not realize that they themselves are more powerful than the gods they believe in. The narrator asks – and this starts to ring a bell – if the gods could not even protect themselves, how would they be able to protect others? Such people believe in dead images as their gods, whom they call masters. But such people do not understand that the basic elements of nature, as created by God, were meant to serve people. This leads to the logical conclusion that images and idols that are made of nature and its elements (wood, stone, or metal) cannot really have greater powers than humans. It is further explained that the four elements of the world are air, earth, water, and fire, and that these are created by God from nothing, but that they are not God. Therefore, people should not believe in the sun or the moon or the winds or any other of the elements, nor other humans as their gods.

The Greeks are said to believe in Saturn, Jupiter (who is also called Þórr), Venus, Ganymede, Vulcan, Mercury, Asclepius, Mars, Bacchus, Hercules, Apollo,

¹² Babylonians are also depicted in *Floreis saga ok Blankiflúr* (Adams/Heß 2015, 5).

Diana (sister of Apollo), Adonis.¹³ All these gods are described as very immoral, and their function as moral examples for humans is thus weakened.

The saga continues and states that the Egyptians' faith is even sillier than the other peoples', as they worship voiceless animals, who live on earth and in the sea, as well as the forest, trees, and blossoming herbs. They worship people: the woman Isis, her brother Osiris, and Typhon, etc. The saga lists all the animals Egyptians have as their gods. The narrator wonders how these groups did not see that their gods could be eaten and destroyed, burnt, and destructed. Consequently, he ponders how they could believe in such gods, who could not even protect themselves, let alone others, and when they knew that the gods' images were manmade, i. e. carved and formed or cast in metal (Rindal 1981, 130–131; Kinck 1852, 213). The saga does not say a lot about the Jews, except that they were not grateful towards God and did not believe in the teachings of God's son, and let the Romans kill him.¹⁴ The speech concludes with a description of the Christians, who, as expected, are the only people who have the true faith.

The Apologia-speech in *Barlaams saga* is a very common genre in medieval literature. But this version of Aristides' apologia is the oldest preserved and of great interest. Aristides was a second-century philosopher in Athens, who gave this speech to Emperor Hadrian in 126 (Haugen 2009, 52).¹⁵ Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare the Old Norse version to a specific Latin text, as there are 62 manuscripts of the Latin version that the Norwegian version is based on, and there is no critical edition of all of them. Magnus Rindal (1981, 50) points out that there are some, but not huge differences between the Latin and the Old Norse versions, and that the Old Norse translation seems to be relatively freely based on the Latin. In her recent book on the Old Norse *Barlaams saga*, Vera Johanterwage (2019) also points to differences between the Latin and the Old Norse versions of the story, as well as to the variances between the Old Norse versions themselves.¹⁶ The translator seems to have added some Nordic elements in his Apologia, as for example when he claims that Jupiter is the same as Þórr and some additional explanations

13 Notice that Apollon is also mentioned in *Elíss saga*, together with Maghun, Terrogant and Fabrín, see below.

14 For a much more detailed discussion of how Jews, together with Muslims, are depicted in sources from medieval Scandinavia, see Adams/Heß (eds) 2015. Old Norse sources that are primarily concerned with Jews are *Jóns saga Hólarbyskups ens Helga* and *Gyðinga saga*. For a discussion of visual depiction of Jews in medieval Norwegian paintings, see Stang 2021.

15 He should not be confused with another Greek philosopher of the same name who lived 530–468 BC.

16 For a summary and a review of the book, see Johansson 2021.

of the four elements. Otherwise, the Old Norse translation is close content-wise, but independent and rich in parallelisms (Haugen 2009, 53).

In any case, when read as an Old Norse text, written and read by people in thirteenth-century Norway, the two passages from *Barlaams saga* that we have discussed here promote a similar understanding of non-Christian deities and the Christian God to the one in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. The Christian God is almighty, all-knowing, the creator of all, including man and nature and its elements. The deities that many other people worship, such as Chaldaeans (Babylonians), Greeks, and Egyptians, are either people or animals, or are made by man of nature's elements and therefore cannot possibly be real gods. They are either bad models, or are lifeless, mindless, powerless, and helpless. Believing in them, even though they are material and visible, is irrational, illogical, and mindless.

The Saracens and their deities in *Elíss saga ok Rosamundu*

A last example of the same literary motif to be discussed here is from *Elíss saga ok Rosamundu*, a translation of the Old French *chanson de geste Elye de Saint Gille*. This is the story about Elye, or Elís, his adventures in Terrasanta, where people believe in Mahomet (in Old French) or Maumet or Maghun (in Old Norse), and his love for the Saracen princess Rosamunda.¹⁷

A very relevant episode occurs in the middle of the story when Elís and six other knights are taken prisoner on a Saracen ship on its way to Alexandria. The pagan king wants Elís to convert and promises to make him rich and give him his daughter in marriage if he does so. The king brings out a sculpture of his god Makon, on a pillar, which is all covered with precious stones. Then he addresses Elís and asks him to renounce his God, because this god does everything for him and provides the winds he needs when he sails. Elís answers by calling his god a devil (dioful):

þetta ma eigi hræraz því at huorki | hefer þat lif ne likam ok ef nu kæmi einn huer *madr ok lyfti hann vndir eyrat nidi | hann falla fem alldri hefði hann lif haft. Vei verdi hanf krapti ok svo þeim er honum þiona.* (Kölbing 1971, 56).

¹⁷ The God Maumet appears also in *Flóvents saga*, where the Saxons and the Franks are presented as heathens. Flovent sacrifices to Maumet and then prays to the Christian God. For a discussion see Kalinke 2017, 51.

This cannot move and has neither life within, nor a body; and if any man comes now and hits him under his ear, he will fall down, as if he had never had a life. Wretched are his powers, and also those who serve him! (my translation)

This provokes the pagan king, who promises his god that he will avenge these disparaging words. At this point in the story, the ship is approaching land and in the temporary chaos, Elís manages to steal back his own horse and to escape from the ship. When the Saracen king sees that, he gets very angry and calls upon his god, accusing him of allowing Elís to escape and questioning his powers. Then he kicks the god with his foot and pulls him off the pillar, breaking his nose and his right arm (Kölbing 1971, 58).¹⁸ The king's men are appalled by the king's behaviour and stop him. The king understands that he has done wrong and turns towards his god Makon/Maumet again, asking him for help to catch Elís on land. If he gets the god's help, he promises to use 400 thousand marks of purified gold and to make a sculpture of his head and shoulders, hands and fingers, legs and the calves on the legs, ankles and feet. The sculpture will be bigger than ever and restore his honour (Kölbing 1971, 59).

This episode has clear parallels to the way other pagan gods are described in the two texts that we have studied already. Even though the gods there belong to different religions, the image of the non-Christian god remains the same: it is a lifeless image or sculpture, covered in gems, but otherwise powerless and helpless. Note, however, that Elís calls him 'dioful', which brings to mind the agency of evil demons or demons. In hagiographic narratives, it is a common motif that such evil powers could reside in idols, and make it possible for them to speak, but not move, and thus manipulate heathen people to worship them.¹⁹ Despite such devilish powers, it is easy to destroy the statue, or the idol, physically and negate it verbally, and it is illogical to expect help and protection from him when he cannot even protect himself.²⁰

Not only does this description of the Saracens' god remind us of the deities in the two other texts, but Maghun is not the only god mentioned in the texts; we hear also of Terrogant, Apollon, and Fabrín (see for example Kölbing 1971, ch. 22). The Saracens' religion thus becomes comparable to the polytheistic pagan pre-Christian religion in the North, or the religions of the Babylonians, Greeks, and Egyptians as presented in *Barlaams saga*. In the latter text, it is very clear that the

18 For a discussion of the meaning of losing one's nose, based on examples from other Old French and Old Norse texts, see Budal 2012 (see esp. p. 208).

19 See Wellendorf 2017, 92–93.

20 The main message of the Old French version is the same, but there some minor differences in details, see Hartman and Malicote 2011.

Jewish religion is acknowledged as monotheistic, but similar knowledge about Islam seems to be lacking. It is known that in connection with the crusades in the eleventh to the thirteenth century, Christians became increasingly aware that Islam and Christianity had some common roots, but they thought that Muslims believed in a fake prophet, i. e. Muhammad (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 214; Tolan 2002, 123–33). Despite that, the Old Norse translator did not choose this explanatory model, but rather represented the Saracens as cultivating false idols, as is done in other polytheistic faiths.

While this passage from *Eliss saga* tells about attitudes toward the Saracen god that resemble the descriptions of other deities in other Old Norse texts, other passages in the saga give a different impression. At one point, Maghun is described as the god that gives the trees leaves and blossoms and fruits (Kölbing 1971, ch. 14). In the French version, Mahomet bestows strength and causes flowers and fruit to bloom (Hartman/Malicote 2011, l. 746).

Another time, the Saracen princess Rosamunda is up one early morning listening to the beautiful songs of the birds, addressing her god Maghun as powerful and mighty ('kroftugr oc mattugr'), who draws leaves and flowers and fruit out of the trees ('þu | dregr or viðinum lauf. oc blom. oc alldin'). She prays to this god to save Elís from "the heathens" ('heiðingia') (Kölbing 1971, ch. 32).²¹ These passages may be explained in different ways. They may indicate that in the Old Norse imagination, Maghun was seen as a complex deity – powerless and helpless on some occasions, but almighty and creator-of-all on others. On the other hand, such descriptions may be seen as misunderstandings or blends between the image of Maghun and typical twelfth-century neoplatonic imaginations of the Almighty Christian God, creator of all nature and life. The believers in such a Maghun may thus be seen as "noble heathens", who are able to perceive, imagine, and worship a divine figure reminiscent of the Christian God.

Other sagas and examples

Before I proceed to the final discussion and interpretation of these examples, it should be mentioned that Old Norse literature contains many more descriptions of non-Christian deities and a variety of combinations between them.²² In the

²¹ In the Old French version, Rosamunde is clearly praying to the Christian God, see Hartman and Malicote 2011, lines 1370–1378.

²² Many scholars have studied attitudes towards the Sámi (Bandlien 2015; Stang 2021), or the Karelians, Bjarmar, Wends, *blámenn* in the Old Norse king's saga (Aalto 2010, Bandlien 2018,

Icelandic romance *Kirialax saga*, believers in Muhammad also address “himnaguðinn Júpiter” (‘the heavenly god Jupiter’) and refer to him as Þórr (Kålund 1917, 44). At other places in the saga, Saturn and Jupiter are referred to as humans (‘menn’).

Breta sögur, the translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie*, describes an array of pagan deities, such as Freyja (appears in a dream of Aeneas) and Sif (appears in Lavinia’s sleep and warns her about Aeneas); Óðinn, Þórr, and Gefjon; as well as Mercury, Þórr, Týr, and Frigg; Mercury (who is sometimes called Óðinn). Brutus, for example, participates in a ritual in an ancient temple where he lights fires to Óðinn, Þórr, and Gefjon. He addresses them as the deities who know heaven’s tidings, the order of the entire world, who know Hell’s dominion, and he asks them about his fate, which Gefjon tells him in a dream (Black 2014, 15).²³ This reflects the medieval tendency to blend the Roman and the Nordic gods, as they have the same origin.²⁴

In *Karlamagnús saga*, a Saxon king is depicted as praying to “Maumet guð vorn” (‘our God Muhammad’) (Loth 1980, 170–171). The saga mentions four main gods – Mahon, Muhammad, Tervagant, and Jupiter. It also adds that these four gods had to receive the customary honour by being adorned with gold and jewels and engravings (Unger 1860, 135). The weakness of these deities is proven when their worshippers lose their battle; God helps the Christians win, while the pagan deities are powerless. In other parts of the saga, the Saracens’ faith is presented almost as monotheistic, with Muhammad being the messenger of God (in addition to other gods sometimes), or the almighty God himself (Unger 1860, 145–146). Here Arabs are also portrayed as believing in Muhammad and in other pagan gods.²⁵

Last but not least, it is relevant to remember that Old Norse literature presents one other view of pagan gods, namely as the forefathers of important Norse families, i. e. as men (Faulkes 1978–79). In Snorri’s *Prose Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, for

101–102), or Muslims and Jews (Adams/Heß (eds) 2015). For further references see Bandlien 2018, 107–108. For a discussion of visual representations of Jews and Muslims, as well as Sámi, in Norwegian medieval paintings, see Stang 2021, 498–99. Stang shows that the iconography in Norwegian parish churches is not particularly innovative and that it is based on a common European mindset, or imaginations, of these groups.

²³ I conduct a more detailed analysis of the literary representation of minds and mentalizing in *Breta sögur* in my ongoing work on the monograph *Minds and Mentalizing in Old Norse Literature*.

²⁴ *Trójumanna saga* presents another combination of the Graeco-Roman and Nordic gods, where several of the Roman deities’ names are translated – Jove is translated as Þórr and the mother of Achilles is called Sif. For a discussion, see Lassen 2018, 114.

²⁵ For more references to various ethnic groups who believe in Muhammad, and for examples from other sagas, such as *Alexanders saga* and *Andreas saga postula*, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 219, 227.

example, Freyr and the Vanir are presented as the main forefathers of the Norwegian kings, with links back to the Trojans, and ultimately to Adam.²⁶ In his *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus has a similar view of the pagan gods, presented in the story about the man Othinus, who was falsely believed to be a god. He lived in Uppsala, but a statue of him was sent to Byzantium for worship and veneration, which led other men to pretend divinity and thus kick-started the origin of the gods (Olrik/Ræder 1931, 25–26). This motive is relatively common in medieval European literature and is also used as an explanation of the background of the British in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, and its Old Norse translation *Breta sögur*. In the major Icelandic compilation manuscript Hauksbók, the gods Þórr and Jupiter are also presented as men and Haukr himself claims a relationship to them (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 220).

These examples confirm that sometimes pagan gods are seen as a category that is the binary opposite of the Christian God (as demons), or as men, while at other times they are blended with the Christian God and are described as having similar qualities, even as all-knowing and almighty.²⁷ Admittedly, as recently shown by Declan Taggart (2021), super-perception and super-knowledge are attributed to Old Norse gods and supernatural agents also without such direct and explicit juxtaposition to the Christian frame of reference. This may nonetheless be implicitly embedded in the intrinsic Christian nature of the sources, as commented by Taggart himself (2021, 389).

All these examples are an excellent demonstration of how the authors of medieval literature could blend the fictional universes and characters they wrote about. They excused their forefathers' faith in pagan gods by attributing powers and minds to these and thus turning them into legitimate god-like figures from the past, in some sources, while at the same time metamorphosing the gods into demons or men, in other sources. In situations where the Christian God is directly compared to non-Christian deities, as in the examples discussed in this article, the contrast between them is clear and consistent. The Christian God is all-powerful and all-knowing, while all pagan deities are mindless, helpless, lifeless figures.

26 For a very relevant discussion of how Snorri treats the Babel myth in his *Edda*, seen in relation to the Old Norse *Elucidarius*, see Lassen 2018.

27 Bjørn Bandlien (2018, 133) shows also that the perceptions of Muslims as a religious other was mixed with the idea of the chivalrous Muslim in Old Norse literature.

Expanding minds or intentional adaptations?

At the beginning of the article, we asked whether such descriptions of non-Christian deities may be seen as aiming to teach the Nordic audiences about other religions or whether such knowledge was adapted to serve the purpose of the Christian authors and their communicative aims.

The texts we have looked at present some knowledge about various world religions, they give the names of many gods from various pantheons, and some basic facts and stories about them. However, the information is not consistent, it is full of confusing errors, which may be seen as interesting cognitive and cultural blends, but not as anything educational. This was especially, but not exclusively, evident in the description of Islam. Many scholars have pointed out that the Old Norse audience had a very superficial, vague, and even wrong knowledge of Islam. This was possibly due to the great distance between the cultural contexts, but also possibly to the eminence of the Christian dualistic ideology that clustered together all other religions in juxtaposition to Christianity, making the differences between them irrelevant (Sverrir Jakobsson 2016, 215). The aim of Christian narratives about other religions was not to provide enlightenment.

It becomes thus logical to read these adapted representations of various non-Christian deities as intentional acculturations and Christian propaganda. There is indeed a scholarly agreement that “adaptation of a textual and cultural tradition in a peripheral area always leads to hybridization of knowledge (...) and other forms of cultural adaptation, alienation, and appropriation.” (Adams/Heß 2015, 5) The numerous examples of the motif of interreligious encounters that we have examined demonstrate that in thirteenth-century Norway and Iceland the motif of lifeless, immovable, untrue, and fictional non-Christian gods proliferated, often in clear opposition to the tales about the Christian God who was seen as the Creator of all life, thought, nature, and humanity. This was presented as the truth, as a historical fact, and everything else was false and fictional. The clustering together and the blends between all other gods are thus not so surprising. From this perspective, misconceptualizations and misrepresentations of non-Christian gods in Old Norse literature may be seen as intentional adaptation serving one main function – to propagate the Christian message, to define Christian identity (as opposed to all others), and thus to strengthen Christian community. This is a valid argument, even when we keep in mind the representations of some heathens as “noble”, i. e. as having the cognitive potential to convert and believe in the true God.²⁸

²⁸ See for example Lönnroth 1969.

Medieval cancel culture: literature, mentalizing, and cognitive transformations

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when these Old Norse texts and their European source texts were written, was an age of aggressive Western Christendom, both militarily and culturally/literally. As we know, Jerusalem was in Western hands until 1187, and its reconquest by Salah al-Din triggered the Third Crusade. Twelfth-century European literature was rich in references to Muhammad and Islam, compared to the literature of the previous centuries. Even though the representations were consistent and clear (i. e. Muslims were polytheistic and diabolic enemies of God), with very few exceptions, they were ignorant and unknowledgeable (Martin 1990). These same attitudes to Islam, and other religions and pantheons, were transmitted to and represented in the Old Norse literature of the thirteenth century.²⁹ We have shown that during such times of global defence of the Christian sites and rites, also in the North, it was relevant to remember the process of conversion and the encounter with other religions as a serial, repeated, and thus continuous defeat of pagan religions, which culminated with the inevitable victory of the almighty and all-powerful Christian God. Even though Christianity was not new in any way during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christian identity and community needed continuous strengthening because of the contemporaneous immanent threat to sacred Christian sites and Christianity's hegemony.

The last question to be addressed here is then: What was it about the Christian missionary and narrative methods, or about the way the Christian message was formulated and communicated, that led so many people to change on a mental and emotional level, to fight for the Christian mission, and to stay faithful to it? In other words, what was the psychology of medieval Christianity and how was it embedded in medieval Christian texts? The answer that I would like to propose here, as indicated in the introduction to the article, can be found in the powerful impact literature and narratives can have on our mentalizing activities. As mentioned, our minds are not only wired to mentalize and empathize, but these abilities need to be practised, in order for them to develop. One way of practising mentalizing is by reading (or listening) to literature and stories, which provide endless occasions to imagine the world through the eyes of others, to empathize with them, or not, to project or negate minds to fictional characters.

²⁹ There were also exceptions to the rule, as for example in *Orkneyinga saga* and its story of the noble Saracen on Rögnvald's crusade.

Christianity also operated through fictional narratives, many of which were written down and transmitted throughout Europe and all the way to the North. When a new religion is introduced, or when a religion needs to defend itself from immanent threats, it is natural that the agents behind this religion would want to remind people about what and who they can project minds, souls, and life to, and what minds should be negated. By creating stories about pagan deities – of any kind – lifeless, soul-less, body-less, agency-less, mindless – these Christian texts aim to eradicate the existent mental connection between people and their previous gods. Transforming deities into lifeless and mindless objects made it easier to allow for their repeated, serial, and continuous shattering and destruction on all levels, verbally, physically, and mentally. Such Christian stories strengthened the connection between people and their Christian God, who was not only given endless agency and life, but was presented as the origin of all life, all souls, all minds.

From this perspective, these literary texts may be seen as mentalizing guidelines, or empathetic scripts, which include the projection of omnipotence to God, as well as the negation of the minds of, and the recommended disconnection from, any other irrelevant entities. Christianity had strict guidelines not only about faith, but also about compassion and piety, which were not virtuous if they pertained to pagans and sinners; it was only God who could take care and have compassion for all. Characterizing all other gods as mindless may thus be seen as a universal way of explaining that all these other deities were not relevant, that people could disconnect from them and demolish them. The Old Norse descriptions of non-Christian deities as mindless are thus not only sources for the historical, literary, and religious development of medieval Norway, Iceland, and Europe as a whole, but they also give specific insight into how and why the Christian narrative was so successful with its new cognitive, mentalizing, and empathizing programme.

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