



*Fear and Loathing in the North: Muslims and Jews in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region.* Jonathan Adams, Uppsala University; Cordelia Heß, Stockholm University, 10.06.2013-11.06.2013.

**Reviewed by** Cordelia Heß

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2013)

## **Fear and Loathing in the North: Muslims and Jews in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region**

Although scholars, particularly during the last seventy years, have investigated the medieval European perception of non-Christian groups, there has been little work on either the perception of or encounters with Muslims and Jews in Scandinavia and the Baltic Region. The conference was funded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, and the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation. We still lack knowledge about the portrayal of these non-Christians in literature and art, the role of the Church in the propagation of these images, the extent of Jewish settlement and material culture along the Baltic Rim, the level and types of interaction with the majority Christian population, and the role of Crusade preaching in the creation of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish stereotypes in the North.

The conference aimed to address this lack of knowledge by drawing together scholars from a range of disciplines to present their research interests and findings. In all, 22 scholars from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom gave papers.

The geographic limits of enquiry were those areas where the predominant language was Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic and the German dialects characteristic for the Teutonic Order's lands in the Baltic Sea region. Various aspects of Christian encounters with and/or visualisations of Muslims and Jews in the Middle Ages were discussed in seven thematic sessions over two days: religious texts, settlement, contact, reinven-

tion, images and stereotypes, hostility, and travels.

The first day began with a keynote lecture by ANTHONY BALE (London) that considered Margery Kempe's representation of Jews and Judaism alongside her descriptions of the Holy Land (and Kempe's representation of Muslims there). In particular, the lecture considered Kempe's indebtedness to St Bridget of Sweden and Pseudo-Bonaventure, religious authorities who significantly influenced the culture of *imitatio Christi* in Northern Europe and its concomitant emphasis on aesthetic persecution at Jewish hands.

In the first thematic session on religious texts, LOUISE BERGLUND (Årebro) used the Old Swedish sermons published by Svenska fornskriftsÅllskapet to demonstrate how Jews were portrayed in medieval vernacular Swedish sermons. She discussed the contexts in which they were presented and the purpose of these portrayals, and drew a distinction between references to Jews in exempla that illustrated a particular point regarding behaviours and their consequences and references to the New Testament and to legends, where Jews were described in their various roles in the life of Christ and his parents. Next, ANNA NOHLERT (Vallentuna) surveyed how Jews and Judaism are portrayed in St Birgitta's *Revelationes coelestes*, where they are mentioned several times. Attention was particularly paid to Rev. 7.15 in which Jews are portrayed as carrying out the Crucifixion. The paper also explored the more general question of *otherness* in relation to Judaism and Jewishness and

the *de-Judaisation* of Jesus and Paul in Christian theology. The paper by JONATHAN ADAMS (Uppsala) provided an overview of the extant East Norse vernacular sources that contain descriptions of Muslims, Islam and Muhammad. Attention focused on pilgrim guides, travel tales, miracle stories and accounts of military clashes that describe Muslim beliefs and behaviour as well as the life of the Prophet. It was noted that the presentation of Muslims is more diffuse and vague than the well-shaped and deeply embedded image of the Jews in East Norse literature. YVONNE FRIEDMAN (Ramat Gan) considered Peter the Venerable as the paradigm of medieval Christian anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim theological thought and the anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric employed in Scandinavia and the Baltic region in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Peter's greater tolerance for Islam as compared to his inveterate hatred of Judaism diverged from crusader anti-Muslim political propaganda. Although in Scandinavia and the Baltic region we find the same demonisation of the Jews in Christian sermons as in Peter's work, Muslims suffered a harsher rhetoric that was adopted from crusader propaganda and used as a metaphor in the fight against the local heathens, who were referred to as Saracens. This stands in stark contrast to the pragmatic approach that encountered and engaged the *Other* in the Latin Kingdom.

ANDERS ANDRÄN (Stockholm) who presented a forthcoming project in which he will try to trace Jewish settlements in Scandinavia through material remains. No Jewish settlement is recorded in Scandinavia before the seventeenth century, but AndrÄn wonders whether the lack of recorded Jewish settlements may not just be due to the few medieval written sources. The problems and prospects of the project were outlined. Stating that the Teutonic Order did not tolerate the presence of Jews in its territory, MICHALINA BRODA (ToruÅ) discussed the surprising temporary presence of three doctors of Jewish origin (Meyen, Jacob and Tham von Hochberg) in Prussia during the fifteenth century. They are known from the archives of the ingoing and outgoing correspondence of the High Master, including letters of request of Jewish experts in medicine and letters of safe conduct for their travels in Prussia.

HENRIK WILLIAMS (Uppsala) kicked off the next session on *contact* with a paper that described the Vikings' journeys into the east and south, raiding, trading and settling. Williams discussed several early Swedish written sources, runic inscriptions that testify to Scandinavian presence in areas that were probably Muslim at the time. Along with the more positive evidence

of Arabic/Muslim influence in Sweden, these sources paint a picture of rather peaceful contacts. In his paper, BJÄRN BANDLIEN (Oslo) investigated whether images of the heathens in Northern Scandinavia changed during the Middle Ages, and if such developments were influenced by perceptions of Saracens from elsewhere in Europe. Trading relations between medieval Scandinavians and SÄmi were compared to see if they were legitimised in the same way as they were between Muslims and Christians in the Mediterranean. The paper by CHRISTIAN ETHERIDGE (Copenhagen) considered the influence of Islamic scientific works on medieval Iceland. Such works had arrived in Iceland possibly as early as the late eleventh century and were being used at least until the fourteenth century. These Islamic works both supplemented and augmented earlier Icelandic treatises. The transmission of these ideas shows that Scandinavian and Islamic interaction in the medieval period is an example of non-hostile relations.

In the final session of the day, *reinvention*, ANNIKA BJÄRKLUND (Stockholm) investigated how cultural heritage tourism has developed fiction, authenticity and historical knowledge to create a tourist industry in VÄstergÄtland around medieval history and the fictional character Arn Magnusson (invented by the Swedish author Jan Guillou). Despite the Middle Ages being a period of significant foreign influences in Scandinavia and contacts with the Muslim world being stressed by Guillou in the Arn story, BjÄrklund showed that these medieval foreign influences are more or less invisible in tourism marketing, and instead simplistic and stereotypical pictures of the Middle Ages are being produced.

The first session of second day, *images and stereotypes*, started with ELINA RÄSÄNEN (Helsinki) discussing the visual representations of Jews and Muslims in the Kalanti altarpiece (ca. 1420), containing paintings from the Meister Francke tradition and sculptures of Hamburg or LÄbeck origin. She found familiar strategies of depicting the Jews in the Marian picture cycle as ugly and inferior, while the pagans present at the torture of St Barbara were associated with imagined Oriental outfits. SHLOMO LOTAN (Ramat Gan) described the evidence of non-Christians in the early historiographic works of the Teutonic Order, namely, the chronicle by Peter of Dusburg, and connected this evidence to the experiences of the Teutonic Knights deriving from the Holy Land and its loss. A striking aspect was the adaptation of the term *Saracens* for the pagan inhabitants of the land conquered in the Baltic, as well as the ascription of

deeds and characteristics to them known from Crusading propaganda in the Holy Land. JURGITA VERBICKIENĀ (Vilnius) talked about the development of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim resentment in Early Modern Lithuania. Despite the fact that Lithuania was itself christianised relatively late and that Jewish settlements are not known before the seventeenth century, anti-Jewish stereotypes were widely spread amongst the upper echelons of society already by the mid-sixteenth century. While these reflected the adaptation of a universal stereotype in form and content, the resentment against the Tatars was more complicated, since it included both Tatars as a hostile outer group attacking the Lithuanian state and those Tatars legally yet if separated living in the country. Also MADIS MAASING (Tartu) described the adaptation of a well-proven stereotype, that of the Turks, to an entirely different group, viz. the Russians, who had become a major threat to Livonia, where the Teutonic Order engaged in a war with the Grand Duchy of Muscovy in the beginning of the sixteenth century, followed by intense polemic writing identifying the 'schismatic Russians' with the infidel Turks.

CORDELIA HESS (Stockholm) questioned the common explanation of the absence of Jewish communities in medieval Prussia. German scholars in particular have assumed that the Teutonic Order had simply forbidden Jews to settle in its newly founded territory in order to maintain its entirely Christian character. But the source basis for this assumption derives from a contradictory and late historiographic tradition, while various sources from both the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries offer several hints towards Jews living in Prussia, both before and after the Black Death persecutions. The Teutonic Order, occupied with the wars against the pagans, the Polish king and the Lithuanians, seemed fairly uninterested in regulating Jewish settlement. SARIT COFMAN-SIMHON (Jerusalem) discussed the *Ludus Prophetarum*, a play staged in thirteenth-century Riga described in the chronicle by Henry of Livonia. The play itself is no longer extant but the paragraph in Henry's text has inspired scholars to speculate about the content and performance of the play, which contained war scenes and Old Testament stories. The connection between the play and the *Ordo Prophetarum*, a sort of Christmas play, triggers questions regarding the usefulness of proven anti-Jewish stereotypes in the dramatic attempts to convert the pagans. RICHARD COLE (London) investigated the depiction of Jews in Old Norse literature to sketch out some Norse positions on what we would now think of as notions of 'race' or 'ethnicity'. Presenting the most typi-

cal ethnic and racial identifiers, for example skin colour, hooked noses, grotesque features, he found that they resemble modern antisemitic stereotypes very closely.

KRZYSZTOF KWIATKOWSKI (Toruń) presented evidence of Muslim prisoners of war living in Prussia in the fifteenth century, who were kept by the Teutonic Order especially for their skills as horse keepers and breeders. Initially they seem to have formed small communities, but after only two to three generations the sources turn quiet, which Kwiatkowski interpreted as a result of processes of assimilation and acculturation, maybe also conversion. VERONIKA KLIMOVA (Poznań) discussed the Karaite settlement in the Lithuanian town Troki from the thirteenth century on, pointing out the relatively large amount of religious freedom and social integration this Jewish group enjoyed. This status granted them an important position in Lithuanian society as well as acting as a positive model for later Jewish communities in their struggles for privileges.

The final session on 'travels' had KAY JANKRIFT (Augsburg) talk about the reports of Ibrahim ibn Yacqub (mid-tenth century), a Jewish convert, who was fascinated by the whale hunting practised by the Norsemen, and the Arab ambassador al-Ghazāl who visited a Viking court in Denmark about 845 CE. STEFAN SCHRÄDER (Helsinki) accounted for the unusual travel route of the Dutchman Jost van Giselen to the Holy Land and Northern Africa. Van Giselen's encounters with the 'other' were described and compared with those in other travel writings, for example *John Mandeville's Book of Marvels and Travels*.

Most of the speakers at this conference presented work in progress, and thus many results were tentative and will require more research, from cataloguing the available sources and overviews over older research to actual studies of texts and communities. Despite the large variety of papers, some common aspects were frequently mentioned and will hopefully inspire future research and cooperation on the topic: similarities between the regions east and west of the Baltic Sea regarding the adaptation of especially anti-Jewish stereotypes and a certain fascination for Muslims despite a general ignorance of Islam as a religion became apparent; the necessity of a different periodisation of Jewish history or rather the Jewish Middle Ages especially in the peripheries of the Christian world; and the many examples of relatively conflict-free coexistence of Christian and small but existing non-Christian communities despite the enormous amount of polemic and propaganda against the infidels.

**Conference Overview***Keynote*

Anthony Bale (London): Margery Kempe, the Jews, and the Northern Jerusalem

*Religious Texts I*

Louise Berglund (Årebro): 'The Palpable Jew': Exemplar and Biblical References Portraying Jews in Late Medieval Swedish Sermons

Anna Nohlert (Vallentuna): A Survey and Critical Examination of the Role of Rhetorical Jews in St Birgitta's Revelations

Jonathan Adams (Uppsala): The Image of Muslims, Islam and Muhammad in East Norse Texts

*Religious Texts II*

Yvonne Friedman (Ramat Gan): Christian Hatred of the 'Other': Theological Rhetoric vs. Political Reality

*Settlement I*

Anders Andr n (Stockholm): Were There Jewish Settlements in Medieval Scandinavia? Archaeological Problems and Prospects

Michalina Broda (Toru ): Jewish Doctors in the State of the Teutonic Order of Prussia in the Fifteenth Century

*Reinvention*

Annika Bj rkklund (Stockholm): In the Landscape of Arn: Authenticity and the Creation of Medieval History in Cultural Heritage Tourism

*Images and Stereotypes I*

Elina R s nen (Helsinki): Circumcision, Conversion and Torture: Images of Jews (and Muslimized Pagans) in the Kalanti Altarpiece

Shlomo Lotan (Ramat Gan): The Image of the Muslims (Saracens) in the Teutonic Order Tradition in the Baltic Region and in the Latin Kingdom in Jerusalem

*Images and Stereotypes II*

Jurgita Verbickien  (Vilnius): The Image of 'Infidelis' in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Comparison and Tendencies of the Creation of Anti-Jewish and Anti-Muslim Stereotypes

Madis Maasing (Tallinn): The 'Infidel Turks' and the 'Schismatic Russians' in Late Medieval Livonia

*Hostility*

Cordelia He  (Stockholm): A Bulwark against Jews? The Teutonic Order's policy for Jewish Settlement in Prussia

Sarit Cofman-Simhon (Jerusalem): The Riga *Ludus Prophetarum* and the Imagined Jew

Richard Cole (London): *Kyn / folk /  j  /  tt*: Proto-Racial Thinking and Its Application to Jews in Old Norse Literature

*Settlement II*

Krzysztof Kwiatkowski (Toru ): Muslim People from the Volga Cultural Circle in Prussia in the Fifteenth Century

Veronika Klimova (Pozna ): The Settlement of the Karaites in Medieval Lithuania

*Travels*

Kay Jankrift (Augsburg): Fire-Worshipping Magicians of the North: Muslim Perceptions of Scandinavia and the Norsemen

Stefan Schr der (Helsinki): Muslims and Islam as Seen by Christian Pilgrims: Joos van Ghisele's Journey to the East 1481-1485

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Cordelia He . Review of , *Fear and Loathing in the North: Muslims and Jews in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39663>

Copyright   2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redis-

tributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact [H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU](mailto:H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU).