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Citation for final published version:

Phelpstead, Carl 2022. 'Kringla heimsins': Old Norse sagas, world literature and the global turn in medieval studies. *Saga-Book 46* , pp. 155-178.

Publishers page:

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SAGA-BOOK

VOL. XLVI

VIKING SOCIETY FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

2022

KRINGLA HEIMSINS:
OLD NORSE SAGAS, WORLD LITERATURE AND THE GLOBAL
TURN IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

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Presidential Lecture delivered to the Viking Society on 20 November 2020

I HAD CHOSEN TO REFLECT IN THIS LECTURE on the relationship between Old Norse literature and the global turn in medieval studies before the arrival of COVID-19, but the topic has taken on new resonance in the midst of a pandemic which has so starkly demonstrated how interconnected are the peoples of the world.¹ It also seems fitting to explore global connections and encounters in the Viking Society's first ever meeting on the worldwide web, a novel opportunity for members from around the world to hear a talk together. After describing the global turn in medieval studies and drawing attention to some of the issues of periodisation and cultural imperialism that it raises, I will argue that Old Norse literature ought to feature more prominently in the new global medieval studies and especially in the related field of world literature studies than has so far been the case. I will use examples from several different saga genres to demonstrate ways in which relations between medieval Europe and other parts of the world are reflected or imagined in Old Norse literature. Finally, I will return to some of the ethical issues raised by global encounter and propose a new approach to understanding such encounters in Old Norse literature by drawing on contemporary philosophical cosmopolitanism.

¹ This is a revised, expanded and more fully documented text of my Viking Society Presidential Lecture, given under a slightly different title (“‘Kringla heimsins’: Old Norse Literature and the Global Turn in Medieval Studies”) at an online meeting of the Viking Society for Northern Research on 20 November 2020. The lecture had originally been scheduled for the end of my term as president in summer 2020, but the coronavirus pandemic led to the cancellation of that meeting and required that the postponed lecture be given online. This revised version largely retains the original lecture's mode of address but gratefully takes account of responses from members of the audience (especially Richard Perkins and Basil Price) and includes discussion of relevant work published since I delivered my talk. I am grateful to my colleague Megan Leitch for comments on a draft of this article.

The Global Turn in Medieval Studies

Asa Simon Mittman characterises the recent global turn in medieval studies as follows:

‘Global Middle Ages’ is a term that is gaining increasing currency as part of a welcome and much-overdue effort to acknowledge in teaching and research that the Middle Ages can encompass more geography than present-day Europe, more religions than Latin and Byzantine Christianity, and more humanity than whiteness (Mittman 2019, 99).

Medieval studies have in the past frequently crossed national and linguistic boundaries, but mainly within Europe, and often enough only Western Europe; the distinctive new turn involves looking for connections and comparisons with the world’s other continents.

This global turn or shift of attention to worldwide connections has been stimulated by awareness of globalisation as a contemporary phenomenon and by a desire to explore that phenomenon’s history, what Bryan C. Keene calls ‘our shared global past’ (2019, viii). Many branches of the humanities are undergoing a global turn, but in medieval studies it frequently takes on a particular hue, being in part a reaction against, and correction of, prevalent narratives that see global connection and encounter as characteristically modern phenomena. On the contrary, medievalists are able to demonstrate that ‘the peoples of medieval Europe were not isolated but engaged dynamically with neighbouring cultures, through trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and much else’ (Keene 2019, vii). The same was true of people in India, Ethiopia or China in this period. As Keene later claims, ‘The history of a connected world is therefore not merely a “modern” phenomenon’ (2019, 6).

One can see the impact of this new global approach to medieval studies in such titles of recent books as *Toward a Global Middle Ages—Encountering the World through Illuminated Manuscripts* (Keene 2019), *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages* (Hermans 2020), *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began* (Hansen 2020), *Global Medieval Contexts 500–1500: Connections and Comparisons* (Klimek et al. 2021) and *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Heng 2021). The global turn in medieval studies often, as in most of those books, crosses disciplines to become multi- or interdisciplinary. Here, however, I am more particularly concerned with reading Old Norse *literature*—more specifically, different kinds of saga—in the light of this global turn.²

² For accessible recent accounts of the Norse-speaking world’s place in the global Middle Ages from the alternative disciplinary perspectives of, respectively, an historian and an archaeologist, see Hansen 2020 and Jarman 2021.

The concept of a ‘global Middle Ages’ is far from unproblematic, and its proponents have necessarily had to think through some fundamental questions about periodisation. As Jacques Le Goff remarks, ‘there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time up into smaller parts’ (2015, 2). Most obviously, ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘medieval’ are Eurocentric terms, coined to label a period in European history between the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century and a constellation of cultural changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is no reason to expect that the millennium between 500 and 1500 should form an identifiable period, let alone a ‘middle’ period, in the history of any community outside western Europe. When western scholars began seriously to study non-European histories, they did so with a concept of a Middle Ages which they might not have found in those other cultures had they not brought it with them. One can certainly discover a Middle Ages of sorts in some other cultures if one goes looking for it: it is a possible way of characterising the period between the late sixth-century fall of the Gupta empire and the sixteenth-century rise of the Mughal empire in India, for example. Or one might note parallels with European history in the descent of classical Chinese civilisation into turmoil in the fourth and fifth centuries, as the western Roman Empire was collapsing, followed by the rise of a flourishing, newly unified state in the Tang and Sung dynasties (though the parallel runs into problems given the subsequent cultural continuity in China through to the early twentieth century). Nevertheless, in finding such parallels, historians trained in a Eurocentric tradition have, whether consciously or not, interpreted non-European history in terms of a framework inherited from their own tradition.

If the global turn in medieval studies forces us to acknowledge that ‘medieval’ is a problematic term for referring to non-Western European history, it may also remind us that it is a problematic fit for Europe too: its origin was, of course, pejorative, with the idea of the Middle Ages arising only after they were believed to have ended.³ The implied view of the period as a regrettable lapse between the glories of classical and early modern civilisation is, sadly, one that medievalists today still have frequently to correct. From a specifically north European perspective, one might argue that the idea of a ‘medieval’ period unhelpfully encompasses Vendel, Viking and ‘late’ medieval periods, also overriding what might otherwise be seen as the truly epochal division between pre-Christian and Christian periods. All periodisation is imperfect,

³ Bull 2005, ch. 2 offers an accessible brief account of issues associated with the terms ‘medieval’ and ‘Middle Ages’. Reuter 1998 (repr. in Reuter 2006, 19–37) is an influential and well documented earlier discussion with observations on the use of the term for non-European history; more recently see also Le Goff 2015.

but foisting a periodisation from one part of the world onto other histories (whether one is imposing a Mediterranean-centred framework on northern Europe or a European concept onto Asia or Africa) not only risks inaccuracy, but can be ethically problematic and ‘imperialist’ in its universalising. I will return to ethical issues of this kind later in this lecture.

Although proponents of global medieval studies are well aware how problematic the idea of a medieval period of global history is, they have (as the book titles listed above indicate) continued to use it, if with appropriate caveats. As long as one recognises the issue and acknowledges that all periodisation is problematic, the concept of a ‘global Middle Ages’ may still serve a useful purpose in enabling certain kinds of comparison and analysis. It is in that spirit, but with an awareness of the problems, that I will employ the term in the remainder of this lecture (cf. the pragmatism of Klimek et al. 2021, xxiii–xxiv, 3).

Study of a global Middle Ages extends the focus of medieval studies beyond Europe, but in doing so it exposes the fact that ‘Europe’ is as much a social construct as ‘medieval’. Indeed, Timothy Reuter contends that ‘it is probably more questionable to talk about “European” history than it is about “medieval” history’ (2005, 28–29). The very interconnectedness of global culture, in the Middle Ages as today, makes it impossible to maintain sharp lines between Europe and that which is not Europe.

So, if we need to be sensitive to the Eurocentric perspective of the concept of the ‘medieval’, we need also to recognise that the idea of Europe is equally contingent. Inevitably, when viewing any object, one must view it from somewhere. But if that somewhere is from within a Eurocentric tradition, then it is crucial to be as aware as possible of the limitations of one’s viewpoint.

Old Norse as Weltliteratur

Suzanne Conklin Akbari draws a distinction between a global medieval studies and what she calls the ‘worlding’ of medieval studies: ‘that is, reconceiving the discipline in ways consistent with the fields of world history or world literature’ (2019, 90). She alludes here to an academic development of the last couple of decades that reflects our profoundly interconnected global existence: the rise of world literature studies, a field given much impetus by the prolific David Damrosch (2003, 2009, 2014, 2017, 2020) and his Harvard colleague, Martin Puchner (2017). Inspired by Goethe’s conception of *Weltliteratur*, world literature studies can be distinguished from the longer-established discipline of comparative literature by its increased attention to non-European literatures and by a strong focus on ways in which texts produced in one literary culture are received globally (on the history

of world literature studies see D'haen 2011). Of necessity, since there are limits to the number of languages one may acquire, courses and scholarship on world literature have often to engage with some of their material in translation, another way in which the new discipline differs from comparative literature, the practitioners of which typically engage with (a therefore necessarily more limited range of) texts only in their original languages.

In this context, 'world literature' is usually taken to mean something other than simply all the literature that exists in the world. In his influential book *What is World Literature?*, Damrosch explains that

I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin . . . a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture (2003, 4).

Much Old Norse-Icelandic literature has surely become world literature in this sense. The mythological *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* have been widely influential, and Sagas of Icelanders, for example, have circulated in numerous English translations with an international readership for more than two hundred years (Kennedy 2004)—and in translations into many other languages, too. The burgeoning scholarship on Norse medievalism, the post-medieval reception and influence of Old Norse literature, has amply demonstrated the sustained and varied impact of numerous Old Norse texts on readers outside Iceland.⁴

The quantity and quality of surviving texts and the extent of their international readership from the eighteenth century onwards ought to secure Old Norse literature a more prominent place in world literature studies than it has hitherto been afforded. One cannot adequately judge a scholarly field by a single volume, but if we take Volume B of the six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, which covers the period 100–1500, as representative of the medieval world literature canon, then we will be sorely disappointed by its neglect of Old Norse literature (Puchner et al. 2018). Among many other texts, it contains extracts from the Qur'an, the whole of *Beowulf*, generous selections from Persian, Old French and medieval Latin literatures, lyrics translated from Occitan, Hebrew, Arabic, Middle High German, Welsh, Tamil, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese, Kalidasa's Sanskrit play *Sakuntala*, and extensive selections from the Ethiopian *Kebra*

⁴ This is a large and very quickly growing field of scholarship; among book-length works that each discuss the influence of Old Norse literature on multiple authors writing in English one might note e.g. D'Arcy 1996, Wawn 2000, Clark and Phelpstead 2007, O'Donoghue 2014.

Nagast, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Japanese classics such as *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon and Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, but not a single Old Norse text. It is easy to criticise any anthology for what it omits, and other medieval literatures are also noticeably missing: Old Irish, for example, or Byzantine Greek. But for reasons that I will come to shortly, Old Norse seems a particularly regrettable omission, and in so far as this prominent anthology offers a snapshot of the state of world literature studies, it indicates that there is much to be done to achieve wider recognition of the value and importance of Old Norse texts for a truly global literary studies.

The fourth edition of the Norton anthology is the most recent work of its kind and the one most easily obtainable internationally, but it is not alone. Old Norse literature is similarly absent from one of its competitor textbooks, *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature. Book 2: The Middle Period, 100 C.E.–1450* (Davis et al. 2004). Old Norse fares a little better, however, in *The Longman Anthology World Literature. Volume B: The Medieval Era* (Damrosch et al. 2009). This collection includes dates for Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and *Njáls saga* in its chronological table and mentions *Njáls saga* in its introduction (Damrosch et al. 2009, 4), but nevertheless includes just one extract from an Old Norse text (Damrosch et al. 2009, 653–61): a brief selection from *Hrólfs saga kraka* appears in a 'Resonances' section as an analogue of *Beowulf*, the whole of which is included in the anthology. Not surprisingly, critical introductions to, or surveys of, world literature generally mirror the anthologies in giving little or no attention to Old Norse literature.⁵

This neglect is not only regrettable, but also ironic, since (as far as is known) the term *Weltliteratur* was first used in a discussion of medieval Icelandic literature. Although genealogists of 'world literature' as a concept typically trace its origins to Goethe in the 1820s, Wolfgang Schamoni (2008) has drawn attention to the fact that the term *Weltliteratur* was used half a century earlier by the Göttingen historian August Ludwig von Schlözer in his *Isländische Litteratur und Geschichte*, published in 1773. Schlözer writes that

Es giebt eine eigene Isländische Litteratur aus dem Mittelalter, die für die gesammte Weltliteratur eben so wichtig, und größenteils außer dem Norden noch ebenso unbekannt, als die Angelsächsische, Irländische, Rußische,

⁵ A notable recent exception to this tendency is Sif Rikhardsdottir's chapter in the six-volume *A Companion to World Literature* (Sif Rikhardsdottir 2020), which explores the relevance and appeal of Icelandic prose sagas and Eddic poetry to 'the modern (global) reader' (3). Her approach differs from, but complements, that of this lecture.

Byzantinische, Hebräische, Arabische, und Sinesische, aus eben diesen düstern Zeiten, ist. (Schlöder 1773, 2)

(There is a distinctive Icelandic literature from the Middle Ages, which for the whole of world literature is just as important and is for the most part—outside the North—still just as unknown as the Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Russian, Byzantine, Hebrew, Arabic and Chinese [literatures] from these dark times.)

Schlöder's discussion is mainly concerned with the *Prose Edda* and skaldic verse, rather than with the sagas which are my focus here. Especially given the texts with which Schlöder is primarily concerned, however, Schamoni is right to observe that 'Bemerkenswert ist, daß Schlöder die isländische Literatur nicht als uralt und ursprünglich darstellt, sondern als Produkt vielfältiger Kontakte mit dem mittelalterlichen Europa' (Schamoni 2008, 290; 'It is remarkable that Schlöder does not present Icelandic literature as ancient and original, but as the product of diverse contacts with medieval Europe'). The term *Weltliteratur* is thus coined in the context of an argument for the importance of Old Norse-Icelandic texts for world literature and that argument recognises that Old Norse literature is itself a product of the international interaction of different literary traditions.

Global Awareness in Old Norse Literature

With the challenge of achieving wider recognition of the value and importance of Old Norse texts for a truly global literary studies in mind, we can turn now from the idea of Old Norse literature *as* world literature to reflect on what texts in Old Norse reveal about global awareness and global encounters, specifically encounters with peoples outside Europe. The subject is a potentially vast one, and the following discussion is necessarily limited to a few specific examples that are, however, deliberately chosen from a wide range of different saga genres.

We may begin with the source of the phrase *kringla heimsins*, quoted in my lecture's title. These are the opening words of *Ynglinga saga* in the great kings' saga compilation which nowadays takes its title from them: *Heimskringla*. The passage these words begin is a classic statement of global awareness in Old Norse literature: the text opens by stating that *Kringla heimsins, sú er mannfólkit byggir, er mjök vágskorin* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 10; 'The disc of the world that mankind inhabits is very indented with bays'; Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 6). There follows a geographical description of the *orbis terrae* in similar terms to the depiction of the world on medieval maps, including those examined in Dale Kedwards's recent book on the Icelandic *mappae mundi* (2020). The *Ynglinga saga* description envisions the inhabited world as a circle divided into three

continents centred on the Mediterranean Sea: Africa, Asia and Europe, a conception given cartographic form in the famous T-O map genre.⁶

It is striking how quickly the opening of *Ynglinga saga* moves from geography to ethnography, and a global perspective in medieval studies requires careful attention to the representation, or construction, of race and ethnicity in Old Norse texts, a topic on which valuable work has been done in recent years (see e.g. Lindow 1995, Jochens 1999, Cole 2015, Heng 2018, Price 2020, Sverrir Jakobsson 2001, Vídalín 2020). *Ynglinga saga* divides Africa into lands named after the people who inhabit them and who are perceived to be different from Europeans: *Serkland it mikla* ‘Saracen-land the Great’ (= North Africa) and *Bláland it mikla* ‘Blackland the Great’ (= [Sub-Saharan?] Africa) (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 10). To use Geraldine Heng’s terms (2018, 6), we have here a combination of religious race (Saracens) and epidermal race (black people). Remote, non-European lands are thus characterised in terms of the difference of their human populations, but the text goes further, blurring species distinctions between human and monster or animal:

þar eru ok margskonar þjóðir ok margar tungur. Þar eru risar ok þar eru dvergar, þar eru blámenn, ok þar eru margskonar undarligar þjóðir, þar eru ok dýr ok drekar furðuliga stórir. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 10)

There are also nations of many kinds and many languages. There are giants there and dwarves, there are black people there, and many kinds of strange nations. There are also amazingly large wild animals and dragons. (Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 6)

Although, as here, the process will often lead to conclusions that modern readers find uncomfortable, passages of geographical and ethnographic description such as the opening of *Ynglinga saga*, and comparable passages in other texts, can be read alongside related sources such as the Icelandic world maps discussed by Kedwards to give a sense of medieval Norse-speakers’ global awareness, their understanding of their place in the world and their relationship to other peoples. Having considered an example of how the world as a whole was viewed, what follows will explore how Old Norse sagas witness to or imaginatively represent global encounters in a series of specific global locations.

North America

Despite its total omission from the medieval volume of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Old Norse literature should figure prominently in

⁶ On Norse conceptions of the world and its geography see further the invaluable compilation of sources, German translations and commentary in Simek 1990.

accounts of the global Middle Ages because it bears witness in a unique way to the first known encounters between the peoples of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas, the bringing into relation of the populations of the world's two main land masses. Writing with Norse-speakers' encountering North America around the year 1000 in mind, Valerie Hansen claims that 'For the first time in world history an object or a message could travel all the way round the world' (Hansen 2020, 2: one should perhaps emphasise the word *could* in that sentence). Norse-speakers' engagement with native Americans connected pre-existing trade routes in Afro-Eurasia with those across the Americas and, Hansen claims, 'today's globalized world was the ultimate result' (Hansen 2020, 3). She maintains that her book is the first to recognise events around the year 1000 as 'globalization' (2020, 5). One might argue that the lack of continuity between the short-lived Vinland settlements and today's world makes events *c.*1000 a false start for globalisation rather than the direct origin of our current geopolitical and global economic condition, but even if the immediate impact was short-lived, one can appreciate Hansen's sense that around the year 1000 Norse-speaking explorers 'closed the global loop' for the first time (Hansen 2020, 25). Sverrir Jakobsson (2012), however, very pertinently emphasises that it is only with hindsight of the European discovery of the Americas five hundred years later that we recognise Norse-speakers as encountering a new continent around the year 1000. The Norse explorers will themselves have understood their discoveries in the light of their existing understanding of geography and are likely to have thought that they had ended up in Africa, rather than discovered a hitherto unknown continent (just as Columbus was sure he had reached Asia five hundred years later).

The archaeological remains found at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland during the 1960s constitute the definitive proof of what Hansen refers to as the closing of the global loop: the scientists who have recently dated European activity at the site to the year 1021 describe their work as offering 'a new point-of-reference for European cognisance of the Americas, and the earliest known year by which human migration had encircled the planet' (Kuitens et al. 2021, 2). Brief discussions of Vinland by north European historians such as Adam of Bremen in the 1070s and Ari Þorgilsson in 1122–33 provide the earliest European written records (in Latin and Old Norse respectively) of the existence of what we now know to be the Americas (Trillmich and Buchner 2000, IV 39 (38), pp. 488–90; Jakob Benediktsson 1986 ch. 6, pp. 13–14). It is, however, the two thirteenth-century Icelandic Vinland sagas, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*, which furnish the earliest extended literary accounts of contact between inhabitants of the Afro-Eurasian and American land-masses, the

first texts in which writers (at least in part) imagine, rather than briefly report, contact between those previously separated parts of the world. In this sense, it is in Old Norse that literature first becomes global, even if that is something that we can appreciate only with hindsight. The Vinland sagas are an obvious, but necessary, point of departure for reflecting on the representation of global encounters in Old Norse literature.

Such reflection needs also to be aware of ways in which those encounters resonate today. I began the preface to my recent book, *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders*, by referring to the killing of two people on 26 May 2017 in Portland, Oregon, by a man who had earlier that month posted ‘Hail Vinland!!! Hail Victory!!!’ on Facebook (Phelpstead 2020, ix). Despite the fact that the Vinland settlement was a short-lived failure which, if anything, demonstrated that the indigenous population was much better able to thrive in the region, racists across North America have long seen the settlement as somehow prefiguring and justifying white dominance of the entire continent. With an awareness that encounters between different peoples in the past are not wholly unconnected to issues in the present, I went on in chapter one of my book to consider the memorable episode in *Eiríks saga rauða* in which the pregnant Freyðis confronts and scares off attacking indigenous people by exposing her breast and slapping it with a sword (Phelpstead 2020, 1–4). That encounter between Norse-speaking would-be settlers and the native inhabitants known to them as *Skrælingar* is one of violent conflict, a failure to appreciate what people have in common with those who are different from them that parallels the racism of white supremacists who identify with Vinland today.

Later in *Eiríks saga* we encounter a more complex interaction between European and native American. Karlsefni’s crew sail further south along the North American coast and capture two boys (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 233–34):

Sveina þessa tvá höfðu þeir með sér. Þeir kenndu þeim mál, ok váru skírðir. Þeir nefndu móður sína Vethildi ok föður Óvægi. Þeir sögðu, at konungar stjórnuðu Skrælingum, ok hét annarr þeira Avaldamon, en annarr Avaldidida. Þeir kváðu þar engin hús; lágu menn þar í hellum eða holum . . . Nú kómu þeir til Grænlands ok eru með Eiríki rauða um vetrinn.

They kept these two boys with them. They taught them their language and they were baptised. They [i.e. the boys] named their mother Vethildi and their father Óvægi. They said that kings ruled the Skrælings, and one of them was called Avaldamon and the other Avaldidida. They said that there were no houses there. People there lived in caves or holes . . . Now they came to Greenland and they are with Eiríkr the Red during the winter.

There is a coercive aspect to this example of global encounter that echoes colonialist aggression against native populations in many other places

and periods: the boys are abducted, removed from their families and forced to become Christian. Their journey eastwards from north America as captives grimly foreshadows the mass export of African slaves in the opposite direction centuries later. Appalling though the boys' abduction is, this episode also gestures towards the possibility of a different kind of interaction between European and non-European peoples. By learning to speak Norse, the boys become able to converse with Karlsefni's crew and later with Eiríkr the Red and other Greenlanders. Dialogue between peoples and some understanding of different cultures thus become possible. Featuring both coercion and conversation, the episode as a whole captures the horror and the potentially more fruitful side of global encounters through the ages.

The Holy Land

Although one could say much more about the proper place of the Vínland sagas in a truly global medieval studies and in world literature studies, we travel next to the Holy Land. Focusing on global connections in the medieval period is a reminder that one of the taproots of European history and culture, the Christian faith and its scriptures, came originally from western Asia. This too frequently overlooked fact is of some relevance to the issues of appropriation and universalism that I want to explore in the last part of this lecture.⁷

One might approach the Holy Land in Old Norse literature via the collection of biblical translation and commentary known as *Stjórn* (Astås 2009), or via *Gyðinga saga*'s Jewish history (Wolf 1995), or Abbot Níkulás Bergsson's guide for pilgrims, *Leiðarvísir* (Simek 1990, 479–90), but instead I want to look at the encounter between Norse speakers and non-European places and peoples described in *Orkneyinga saga*'s account of Earl Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson's Mediterranean adventure.

Rǫgnvaldr's expedition to the Holy Land occupies Chapters 85–89 of *Orkneyinga saga* and includes twenty-six of Rǫgnvaldr's thirty-two verses in the saga. The pilgrimage has elements of a crusade about it. As his company travel along the coast of Moorish Spain they harry widely and seize much plunder. Near Sardinia Rǫgnvaldr's company encounter a large sailing ship, or *drómundr*. Rǫgnvaldr says that if its crew are Christians then they will make peace with them, but if they are heathens, *þá mun almáttigr guð vilja veita oss þá miskunn, at vér munum vinna*

⁷ We might also recall here that for Ari Þorgilsson and Snorri Sturluson Norse culture also has roots in Troy and what we now call the Near East: see Ari's *Íslendingabók* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, 27) and Snorri's *Edda* (Faulkes 1988, 6) and *Ynglinga saga* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 11).

sigr á þeim (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 224; ‘Then Almighty God may wish to give us such grace that we may win a victory over them’.) To encourage God in this direction, they promise to donate a fiftieth of their plunder to the poor. They engage with the *drómundr* since it turns out that its crew are *Saraceni*, at *køllum vér Maímets villumenn*. *Þar var mart blámanna* (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 225; ‘Saracens whom we call Mohammed’s heretics. There were many black men’). Here we see the non-European enemies characterised in that same combination of religious and epidermal racial categories that we noted at the start of *Ynglinga saga*.⁸ All the opponents are killed, except for a tall man perceived to be the leader. After failing to sell him as a slave in Serkland, Røgnvaldr’s men release him; he turns out to be a Saracen nobleman who could have them killed, but he allows them to go in peace because they spared him. This encounter is a far from fruitful one: the Saracen nobleman bids farewell by expressing the hope that he will never see Røgnvaldr and his men again.

The account of the time the pilgrims spend in the Holy Land is very brief (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 231):

Þeir Røgnvaldr jarl fóru þá ór Akrsborg með lið sitt til Jørsalaborgar ok sóttu alla ina helgustu staði á Jørsalalandi. Þeir fóru allir til Jórdánar ok lauguðusk þar. Þeir Røgnvaldr jarl ok Sigmundur øngull lögðusk yfir ána ok gengu þar á land ok þangat til, sem váru hriskjör nökkur, ok riðu þar á knúta stóra.

Røgnvaldr then went from Acre with his men to Jerusalem and they visited all the most holy places in the Holy Land. They all went to the River Jordan and bathed there. Earl Røgnvaldr and Sigmundur øngull swam across the river and went onto the land there and to where there were certain pieces of brushwood, and they tied big knots there.

Verses about the event by Røgnvaldr and Sigmundur are then quoted. After the men’s return to Jerusalem the saga cites the only verse that suggests that the expedition had a religious dimension; it is one of Røgnvaldr’s (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 233; verse 78):

Kross hangir þul þessum,
þjósti skyli lægt, fyr brjósti,
flykkisk fram á brekkur
ferð, en palmr meðal herða.

A cross hangs on the breast of this sage [i.e. Røgnvaldr], but a palm [branch] between his shoulders. Anger should be laid aside. Men crowd forward up the slopes.

⁸ For a richly documented study of Muslims/Saracens in Old Norse literature generally, see Sverrir Jakobsson 2016.

The present tense in this verse suggests composition while still in the Holy Land: this stanza, and the verses cited shortly before it, could therefore be considered examples of what we might call West Asian Old Norse literature.

The account of Rognvaldr's Mediterranean expedition and pilgrimage displays awareness of (and antagonism towards) differences of religion, skin colour and culture. It also, however, recalls the historical connection between Norse Christians and the Holy Land established by the conversion of northern Europe to a faith with west Asian origins. A comparable combination of alterity and interconnection can be seen in the text we turn to next.

Russia and the Caucasus

The Old Norse romances and *riddarasögur* frequently situate their marvellous adventures in lands to the east or south of Europe (Schlauch 1934, Barnes 2014). A comprehensive study of the literary representation of global encounter in Old Norse would give extended consideration to the *riddarasögur*. Such an account is beyond the scope of this lecture, but I want next to consider a text which, while not being a *riddarasaga*, similarly features marvellous adventures east of Europe: *Yngvars saga víðförla*.⁹ This text witnesses to relations between Northern Europe and the Caucasus region.

There is evidence from other sources besides *Yngvars saga* for encounters between Norse-speakers and peoples in the Caucasus. Twenty-six runic inscriptions in Sweden commemorate men who died with a certain Yngvarr on a journey to the east: 'No other event is attested by so large a number of extant stones' (Jonathan Shepard 1982–83, 222). The date of Yngvarr's death (1041) is given in Icelandic annals, although it is possible that this evidence is not independent of *Yngvars saga*.¹⁰ A number of Russian, Georgian and other sources have also been adduced as evidence that a Scandinavian expedition ended somewhere in the area of the Caspian Sea sometime around the middle of the eleventh century.¹¹ Despite some basis

⁹ Guðni Jónsson 1954b. *Yngvars saga víðförla* is often, though not unproblematically, categorised as a *fornaldarsaga*: see Phelpstead 2009. Sverrir Jakobsson notes similarities between the representations of Norse-speakers encountering other peoples in the *Vínland sagas* and in *Yngvars saga* (2001, 90–92).

¹⁰ Storm 1880, 108, 250; see Hofmann 1981, 192, and Pritsak 1981, 424. There is also a reference to Yngvarr and his saga in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (Guðni Jónsson 1954a, 165).

¹¹ For detailed discussion of this evidence see Shepard 1984–85. Although others have argued in favour of various different routes and/or dates for the expedition, Shepard convincingly defends the consensus view that Yngvarr died *c.* 1041 in the Caspian Sea region.

in historical reality, however, most of what happens in *Yngvars saga* is (at least to a modern reader) very obviously not history, but legend or fiction.

As in many Icelandic romances, the east is associated in *Yngvars saga* with fabulous beasts and legendary monsters. In chapter 5 one of Yngvarr's company goes ashore against orders and steals a silver cauldron from a giant's house. Some days later another man goes ashore and discovers the ground covered with dragons, the largest of which is called a Jakúlus. The flying Jakúlus attacks the ships and its poison destroys one ship and its crew. The survivors encounter an ugly man-eating giant, whom they trap and kill (ch. 6). Yngvarr and his men later encounter a dragon sitting on a huge hoard of gold. On a later journey Yngvarr's son Sveinn leads a company who encounter Cyclopes (ch. 9), a man with a beak (ch. 9), the Jakúlus (ch. 11) and other marvels.

These encounters reveal more about classical scholarship in Iceland than about the natural history of Russia and the Caucasus: the Cyclopes that Sveinn's expedition encounters have an obvious classical ancestry, perhaps reaching Iceland via the work of Isidore of Seville (Olson 1912, lxxxiv) and the Jakúlus in chapters five and eleven can similarly be traced back through Isidore to Lucan's *Pharsalia* (IX.720).

Although *Yngvars saga víðförla* has some historical basis in expeditions by Norse-speakers through Russia and the Caucasus region, the exotic and monstrous fauna described in *Yngvars saga* were encountered not at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, but in books that came to Iceland from elsewhere in Europe, and so witness to a different kind of cross-cultural encounter. The saga in turn offered the delights of armchair travel to its medieval Icelandic readers. In narratives like this, Norse literature becomes itself the site where—imaginary—global encounters take place for readers of the texts.

India

Our world tour ends with two texts connecting the Norse-speakers of northern Europe with India in different ways: *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* and *Bartholomeus saga postola*. The story of Barlaam and Josaphat has become something of an iconic text for the new global medieval studies. Its origins lie in Indian accounts of the life of the Buddha. In his youth, the future Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, was shielded by his father from knowledge of the world's suffering by being kept ignorant of sickness, old age and death. His eventual encounters with such suffering outside the palace led him to renounce his princely status, royal family and possessions, embarking on the life of a wandering renunciate that would lead eventually to his enlightenment while meditating at Bodh Gaya and his

subsequent preaching of the dharma as a Buddha. The story of the youthful prince's revelatory encounters with sickness, old age and death went on a global journey from India via an Arabic version that was adapted into a Christian text in Georgian by monks in eighth- or ninth-century Palestine, later translated into Greek, thence into Latin, and from Latin into most of the vernaculars of western Europe, including the Old Norse *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* (Rindal 1981). During that journey all knowledge of the Buddhist origin of the story was lost. Josaphat's name is a corruption of the Mahayana Buddhist term *bodhisattva*, referring to an aspirant to Buddhahood who postpones attaining Nirvana in order compassionately to help other sentient beings attain enlightenment. As the story passed from language to language the central character was transformed from a being on the way to Buddhahood into a Christian convert and ascetic, convinced of Christianity's truth by a desert ascetic named Barlaam.

The appeal of this tale in its many versions for those seeking to understand global connectivity in the medieval period is obvious and there has been a flurry of recent publications on the story reflecting the global turn in medieval studies; these notably include *In Search of the Christian Buddha* co-written by the eminent Buddhologist and Tibetologist Donald S. Lopez Jr. and the medievalist Peggy McCracken, and a comprehensive guide to European versions of the story and the scholarship on them by Constanza Cordini (2014). The way in which the tale has become iconic for global medieval studies is exemplified by its being the subject of Bryan Keene's Prologue to the essay collection *Toward a Global Middle Ages* (Keene 2019, 1–4).

One particularly interesting recent contribution to Barlaam and Josaphat studies is Donka D. Marcus's book *Reading Medieval Latin with the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat* (2018). This offers an edition of Jacobus de Voragine's abridged Latin version of the story from his *Legenda aurea*, edited specifically for intermediate-level students of Latin. Marcus argues that the text is suitable for such readers not only on account of its manageable length and linguistic level, but also because it is a text that 'gives voice to many commonly shared ethical principles and philosophical truths'—shared, that is, across different global cultures today as well as in the past. She hopes that her edition will make 'Latin an attractive subject to students of diverse backgrounds and will highlight the important role of Latin in the development of humanity's global self-consciousness' (Marcus 2018, xii); she thus offers a text of Eastern origin that became important in the medieval West with the hope that it 'will resonate with contemporary students of Latin' (Marcus 2018, back cover).

The main Old Norse version of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat has also recently received considerable attention, most notably in a collection of essays edited by Karl G. Johansson and Maria Arvidsson (2009) and a book-length study by Vera Johanterwage (2019), both of which pay some attention to two independent shorter versions of the story in Old Swedish and a version translated from a Low German text in the early sixteenth-century Icelandic legendary *Reykjahólarbók*, in addition to the Norwegian saga of Barlaam and Josaphat. The Norwegian *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* was translated into Norse from Latin, but from the longer Vulgate version of the story, not the abridged text by Jacobus de Voragine presented in Marcus 2018. The saga was produced in Norway around the middle of the thirteenth century, and Johanterwage's book explores ways in which it is representative and expressive of the courtly culture and translation activity associated with King Hákon Hákonarson's royal court at Bergen. Recognising the way in which it witnesses to global textual transmission, she appropriately calls the saga *ein Stück Weltliteratur* (2019, 23, 259; 'a piece of world literature').

The transmission of the story of the Buddha's life to northern Europe has an analogue in material culture in the small (8.4 cm high) bronze statue of the Buddha famously discovered on the Swedish island of Helgö, in Lake Mälaren, in 1954. This sixth-century figure (dated *c.*500) was probably made in or near Kashmir and is likely to have found its way to Sweden via the Russian river routes used by men like Yngvarr and his companions. It is a striking physical manifestation of the interconnectedness of the medieval world with immediate appeal to anyone interested in the idea of a global Middle Ages: it has accordingly appeared on the front cover of the recent textbook *Global Medieval Contexts 500–1500* (Klimek 2021; cf. the brief discussion on pp. xxvi–xxvii) and featured prominently in Cat Jarman's new account of Vikings in the East (Jarman 2021, 103–30).¹²

It is doubtful whether anyone who encountered the Helgö statue in Viking-Age Sweden had any idea about what it originally represented. In the course of the development of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, an originally Buddhist story about the early life of the Buddha was likewise transformed into an account of the conversion to Christianity of an Indian prince who came later to be venerated throughout Europe as a Christian saint. A thirteenth-century Norwegian reader of the saga of Barlaam and

¹² Mikkelsen 2002 places the Helgö Buddha statue in the context of other Swedish archaeological evidence for trade and religious connections between the Buddhist, Islamic and Scandinavian worlds. On the possibility that iconography of the Buddha influenced images of Scandinavian gods see Perkins 2001, 144–46.

Josaphat would have had no idea that they were reading about incidents in the life of the founder of another world religion. Lopez and McCracken write that ‘In all its tellings, Barlaam and Josaphat was a tale of conquest’ (2014, 215): the story was repeatedly taken from one global context to serve a quite different worldview elsewhere. This kind of appropriation of aspects of another culture is common in a globally connected world, but it raises issues about the ethics of global encounter at which I have hinted a few times already and which I want to address more directly in the final part of this lecture.

Old Norse Sagas and the Ethics of Global Encounter

The recent global turn across the humanities is informed by awareness of modern European global hegemony, imperialism and colonialism. It is typically critical of that history and accordingly seeks to transcend the limitations of a Eurocentric viewpoint. But in doing so it continually risks forcing non-European subject matter into Eurocentric paradigms—as with the use of the term ‘medieval’—and it can be open to the charge of appropriating the non-European or non-Western for its own agenda. Despite its good intentions, one might thus see a global medieval studies as (at least at risk of becoming) comparable to the Greenlanders’ abduction of Skræling boys in *Eiríks saga rauða*, or the transformation of the Buddha into a Christian saint as his story was translated into the languages of Christendom. The value of seeking to understand the Other has to be set against the risks of doing so in a way that fails to respect its autonomy.

Thinking about Old Norse literature in the context of a new global medieval studies thus demands a way of understanding how one may relate ethically to that which is outside one’s own culture. In the last part of this lecture I want to propose that contemporary philosophical cosmopolitanism provides a possible means of doing this.

Cosmopolitanism encompasses a variety of philosophical positions united by the claim that all human beings are worthy of equal respect and consideration regardless of their national, state or other affiliations. Its proponents typically trace their tradition’s roots from ancient Cynicism and Stoicism via the Christian universalism articulated by St Paul in Galatians 3:28 (‘There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Douai-Reims Bible)) to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and responses to increasing globalisation since then (on the history of cosmopolitanism, see Kleingeld and Brown 2019). Medieval Christianity was heir to both Stoic and Pauline traditions, but there is a tension in the

way in which medieval Christians recognised the unity of humanity while also maintaining exclusivist convictions apparently at odds with a truly cosmopolitan affirmation of the equal value of different cultures. That tension is already evident in Galatians 3:28, which can be read as eliminating rather than respecting difference when Paul affirms that Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are in reality ‘all one’: the assertion of equal value is achieved by denial of difference. Similarly, for medieval Christians, the unity of humankind ought to find expression in universal adherence to a single creed (Christianity), rather than a diversity of belief and culture.

Contemporary philosophical cosmopolitanism, as articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, neither expects nor desires that every person or society should live the same way. It affirms a universal common humanity while also valuing and affirming the diversity of human cultures. Appiah proposes that the slogan of cosmopolitanism might be ‘universality plus difference’ (2007, 151); it respects cultural difference at the same time as believing in common humanity.¹³

One might therefore assume that medieval Christian universalism and twenty-first-century cosmopolitanism are opposing models of encounter with other cultures: while both recognise the unity of humanity, one sought to match that unity with uniformity of creed, while the other affirms diversity within the unity. Does contemporary cosmopolitanism have anything to learn from the Middle Ages? The editors of a pioneering collection of essays on *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages* emphasise the value of the Middle Ages as a period preceding modern colonialism and European global hegemony from which one might re-theorise cosmopolitanism, or, as they put it, ‘reassess cosmopolitanism from the vantage point of the global Middle Ages’ (Ganim and Legassie, 2013, 3; see also Ganim 2010). Contributors to their collection discuss such varied authors and topics as Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Muslim Spain, the Crusades, *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer and Erasmus.¹⁴

Old Norse literature provides a further vantage point, in addition to those explored in Ganim and Legassie’s book, from which to attempt such a

¹³ The only previous research on Old Norse literature to draw on Appiah’s thinking of which I am aware is Price 2020, which fruitfully employs Appiah’s concept of ‘racializing’, but does not engage with the broader philosophical project of cosmopolitanism. I am grateful to Basil Price for drawing my attention to his then forthcoming essay after I gave my lecture.

¹⁴ For a further example of medieval literature as cosmopolitan, see the reading of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Cliges* as exemplifying a type of cosmopolitanism distinct from both Stoic and modern definitions in Vishnuvajjala 2014.

reassessment. A group of texts with rich potential for such a project belongs to the earliest stage of saga writing: translations into Old Norse of Latin Christian literature, including the apocryphal lives of apostles that were transformed into the *postola sögur*. As records of the acts of apostles, the *postola sögur* are preoccupied with conversion, and thus with the cultural clash between early Christian missionaries and non-Christian peoples. While attempting to convert people to one's own worldview might appear irreconcilable with a cosmopolitan respect for other cultures, I wish on the contrary to argue that the attempt to persuade is itself a recognition of the equal humanity of one's interlocutor; missionary activity can in this way be seen as a mode of cosmopolitanism, rather than its opposite. Appiah, one of the leading proponents of modern philosophical cosmopolitanism, has stressed the importance of dialogue, promoting a model of 'conversation—and in particular, conversation between people from different ways of life' (2007, xix). With this in mind, I want finally to offer here a framework for how one might see intercultural encounter and conversion in the *postola sögur* as manifesting a kind of medieval cosmopolitanism.¹⁵

Most of the examples of global encounter we have considered have involved conflict and coercion, though we have also seen the possibility of a different approach through conversation. Once the abducted Skräling boys in *Eiriks saga rauða* have learned to speak Old Norse some cultural exchange is possible; in *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* Josaphat is converted by Barlaam's explication of Christian faith in dialogue with him. *Postola sögur* set in India feature both kinds of encounter, coercion and conversation. The AM 652/630 4to text of the saga of St Thomas, *Thomas saga postola I* (Unger 1874, 712–27), catalogues the apostle's conversion of Indians through a series of displays of divine power, miracles which, if they do not entirely remove the non-Christian's capacity to withhold assent, certainly leave little room for any doubt about Christianity's truth claims. The same tactic is employed in St Bartholomew's Indian missionary work as recounted in the AM 652/630 4to text of *Bartholomeus saga postola I* (Unger 1874, 743–62). In that saga, however, as in some *postola sögur* set in places other than India, there are one or two episodes which convey a sense of the possibility of a non-coercive universalism which respects the common humanity of one's non-European interlocutors, even as it tries to convince them of their error.

A revealing example occurs in the course of an encounter between St Bartholomew and a king called Polimius in 'farthest India' (*hit yzta*

¹⁵ I hope to publish a fuller account of cosmopolitanism in the *postola sögur* in the future.

Indialand).¹⁶ After he has healed the king's demon-possessed daughter, Bartholomew appears to the king in a dream and gives him a long explanation of Christ's incarnation and birth from the Virgin Mary, arguing that *þat var rett, at meyiar sonr stigi yfir þann, er fyrr hafði stigit yfir meyiar son* (Unger 1874, 747; 'it was right that the son of a virgin should overcome the one who had previously overcome the son of a virgin' (Roughton 2002, 761)). Polimius responds: '*Hversu sagðir þu meður guðs sonar mey vera, ef annarr var fyrr meyiar sonr?*' ('How can you proclaim the mother of the son of God to be a virgin, if there was another son of a virgin previously?'). Bartholomew explains that by the first son of a virgin he meant Adam, formed from the earth '*ok var af því iorðin meðir hans, en hon var mæ'r*' ('and therefore the earth was his mother, but she was a virgin') because she had not yet been polluted by people's sins nor been broken open to bury people. What I particularly want to draw attention to, though, is what Bartholomew says immediately after Polimius's question and before giving that explanation: *Postolinn svaraði: 'Þakkir geri ek guði því at þu hlyðir mer með athuga'* ('The apostle answered: "I give thanks to God, for you listen attentively"'). Those words capture perfectly the nature of dialogue between people of diverse belief who nevertheless respect each other's equal humanity.

In this example from *Bartholomeus saga* we see that even Christian missionaries who seek to erase diversity of belief by converting non-Christians engage in dialogue with those non-Christians, thus recognising their common humanity and their capacity for rational argument. If encounters with non-Europeans in Old Norse sagas often involve violent conflict or coercion, there are also at least some hints of the possibility of a medieval kind of cosmopolitan dialogue based on mutual recognition of common humanity.

Conclusions

Dale Kedwards ends his recent book on medieval Icelandic world maps by declaring that 'Medieval Icelanders had the world on their minds' (2020, 183). The examples I have discussed in this lecture demonstrate that, in their different ways, not only Icelanders, but also other Norse-speakers—Orcadians such as Earl Rognvaldr and his men, or Norwegians

¹⁶ Chapter 2 of the saga explains that there are three Indias: one next to Africa, one next to Serkland, and Farthest India, which ch. 9 of the saga says *liggr víðr heims enda* (Unger 1874, 752; 'is located at the end of the world' (Roughton 2002, 770)). On this concept of three Indias elsewhere in Old Norse literature, see Simek 1990, 155–57.

at the court of Hákon Hákonarson where *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* was translated—cherished global perspectives.

In the conclusion to his book, Kedwards writes that

The Icelandic sagas may have been one of the most significant channels through which geographical information was disseminated in Icelandic culture. Icelanders may have achieved their knowledge of distant places from the northern *fornaldarsögur* . . . and the southern *riddarasögur*: (Kedwards 2020, 181)

There is some irony in suggesting at the end of a book about Icelandic maps that Icelanders may have relied more on narratives than maps for their knowledge of other parts of the world, but the point is a valid one. We should not underestimate the importance of literary texts as media through which readers made (and make) their own global encounters. Indeed, as the examples I have discussed demonstrate, knowledge of distant places and peoples (whether accurate or not) came to medieval Norse-speakers not only from the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* that Kedwards mentions, but also via sagas of Icelanders, kings' sagas, and sagas of apostles and other saints. Old Norse sagas deserve a prominent place in global medieval studies because they bear witness to encounters with peoples of other continents, because they exemplify the global transmission of tales and texts, and because they express an awareness of and interest in belonging to the wider world.

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