

THE TRANSFERENCE OF ATTITUDES TO ISLAM FROM FRANCE TO SCANDINAVIA IN THE *ELIE DE SAINT GILLE* AND *ELIS SAGA OK RÓSAMUNDU*

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1. Introduction

The year 1991 has been a fateful year in the long story of the sad encounter between the Western and Islamic worlds. Within a week of the attack of the Western alliance on the Iraqis in January of this year, Saddam Hussein was proclaiming a *jihād*, a holy war, in his confrontation with the West. Likewise President Bush and his allies invoked the support of the Almighty upon their military enterprises in the Persian Gulf. It is not unlike the Middle Ages revisited.

The aim of this paper is to examine the attitude to Islam in the texts of the mediæval French *chanson de geste*, "*Elie de Saint Gille*" (ESG), and the Norwegian translation, entitled "*Elis saga ok Rósamundu*" (ES), and against the cultural and historical background, and to investigate the dynamics of the translation of the material about Islam from the source into the receptor culture.¹

2. The plot and texts

The plot of the epic of Elie (Elis) and Rosamonde (Rósamunda) is simple. Elie, the son of Duke Julien of Saint Gille (St Egidius) in southern France leaves home in a state of discord with his father to prove his worth and soon falls into the hands of some Saracens who sail off with him to their country. He encounters Rosamonde, the daughter of King Macabré (Malkabrez), and is offered her hand if he is converted to Islam. He refuses and manages to escape from prison. With the help of a robber, really the son of a French count, Elie returns to Macabré's palace, wins the love of Rosamonde, and defeats an unwanted wooer. Rosamonde promises to become a Christian and they return to Saint Gille.

The French original was composed in southern France in the 12th century. the ON saga was translated, or rather freely rendered from the OF verse to the ON prose by Abbot Róbert, probably about the middle of the 13th century. He was presumably the Brother Róbert who translated Tristrams saga in 1226 at the behest of King Hákon Hákonsson.² The text he used must have been somewhat divergent from that which had been preserved in France.³ Constraints of time prevent an examination of the translation, but I would like to stress that the translator appears to have been a man of considerable literary and sociological sophistication.

3. The Western ideology

3.1 Both the OF and the ON texts are the products of the ideology of an age of a triumphalistic and aggressive Western Christendom. The mentality of the Western Church of the 11th and 12th centuries has its origin in the barbarian invasions in Western Europe and the expansion of the Latin Church beyond the Alps from the 5th century. Firstly, I shall take up several aspects of the inculturation of Christianity in the new conditions and the resultant ideological self-awareness and attitude to others.

3.2 (1) The term *inculturation* has been used by anthropologists and theologians to describe a process with which missionaries present their message within an alien

¹. The abbreviations used in this paper are ES for *Elis saga*, ESG for *Elie de Saint Gille*, OF for Old French and ON for Old Norse.

². See ES:59

³. See the bibliography for the texts used.

culture.⁴ *Inculturation* is the insertion of the Christian gospel into a specific cultural context, in such a way that this process not only finds expression through elements belonging to that culture, but then becomes a force that transforms the culture, thus effecting "new creation."⁵ Hence, *inculturation* is seen as an act of incarnation. It is the planting of the Christian seed in a specific culture within time and space. The seed germinates, the plant grows and ultimately bears fruit. This process of growth and maturation is itself generative and transformative in nature. A new cultural entity arises which combines the old and the new in an enriched and enriching symbiosis. Louis Luzbetak writes of the contextualisation of Christianity into local cultures as an accommodational or translational approach which "integrates the Gospel message with the local culture into a single, cognitive, attitudinal and motivational system".⁶

(2) The development of the Western Christian identity can be, perhaps, best understood by the concepts of *mythos* and *ethos*.⁷ *Mythos* comprises the theological and liturgical perspectives and structures of a religion and the *ethos* as the accepted norm of ethical behaviour. As a new religion is adapted by a tribal or national group, a new *mythos* replaces that formerly held, whereas the *ethos* need not necessarily undergo a substantial change.⁸

(3) Within the first millennium there were three main periods of expansion and subsequent reorientation of Christian culture. As the Christian Church grew and spread, the *ethos* of the new mission field was gradually institutionalised and built into the culture of the expanding religious community.⁹ The first period inculturation was when the Christian Church grew from a minority sect within Judaism into a more

independent, comprehensive body scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Both the *mythos* and the *ethos* underwent radical development in this wider environment.

The second great inculturation took place after the recognition of Christianity when the Church further expanded as the official religion of the Roman Empire to comprehend the whole of society. This reorientation promoted a further development of the already established *mythos*, with the absorption of the elaborate imperial ceremonial, and, less directly, with the influence of paganism. The *ethos* of an enthusiastic, persecuted, gathered church gave way to one of the confidence of a dominant state-church.

But it is the third great contextualisation which is of relevant to our topic. It followed the expansion of the Church amongst the barbarians within the old Empire and beyond the Alps. This time there was little change in the inherited *mythos* comprising the ecclesiastical structures, cult and theology. But, on the other hand, the ancient Germanic *ethos* predominated. The hagiographer of Adalbert, Bruno of Querfurt, expressed the missionary's work amongst the Hungarians with the significant phrase "the shadow of the Christian symbol"¹⁰ The heroic *ethos* became a principal ingredient

4. Other terms which have been current to describe this and similar processes are *contextualisation*, *adaptation*, *incarnation* and *indigenisation*.

5. Arrupe, Pedro, "Letter to the Whole Society", in *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits*, vol. 7, June 1978, 2.

6. Luzbetak (1988), p.79.

7. This was developed by George Fenwick Jones in his study on the *Chanson de Roland*; see Jones (1963), p.152.

8. Jones, loc. cit.

9. Latourette (1948) divides the expansion of the Christian Church into different categories than those used in this paper. He writes of an initial advance until A.D. 500 (pp.19-33), the first and greatest recession from 500 to 950 (pp.34-49), and the second great age of advance 950 to 1350 (pp.50-65)

in a new Christian setting; it was "baptised" into the new Christian spirituality, replacing the spiritual *ethos* of the gospels.

3.3 Even if six centuries separate the baptism of Clovis in 496 and the composition of some of the early French *chansons de geste*, the *ethos* which dominates these great epics has deep roots in the ancient Germanic tribes. The model Christian warrior at the time of the Crusades was typified by a heroism which meant famous deeds as regards a leader and unswerving loyalty and courage from his followers.¹¹

There were three understandings, which lay behind the military *ethos* of the crusaders. The prophetic understanding assumed that it was God's will that the infidels be subjugated by military force. Secondly, the feudal model perceived God as the supreme liege lord for whom all Christian knights are obligated loyalty to fight and and maintain His honour by the sword. Finally, there was the assumption (not unknown to us in the 1990s) that God would protect and support His warriors, granting them ultimate victory, at times by means of miracles.¹² We can sum up this mentality by saying that the Christian hero, fighting in the worldly order, was acting, at the same time, as an instrument of God's will. The enemies of Christendom (such as the Saracens) were, *ipso facto*, also diabolical enemies of God. It was, therefore, incumbent upon the knights of Christendom to subjugate them in order to maintain the honour of God's name,

4. Contacts with Islam

The Prophet Muhammad died in 632, and within a decade Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt had fallen to the new religion as it spread with a burst of terrific energy. Persia succumbed a year later. Subsequently, the Umayyads moved across to consolidate their grip on Northern Africa, and advanced into Spain, finally to be repulsed by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732. When the Muslims first entered Spain and pushed up into France the reaction was that this was yet an affliction from yet another barbarian group. The Venerable Bede, just after the Battle of Poitiers, wrote how a terrible plague of Saracens ravaged Gaul with cruel bloodshed.¹³

At first the attitude of the Moors to the Christians was one of limited tolerance. Christians and Jews were seen as "peoples of the book". The conquered infidels were encouraged to accept Islam, but were generally allowed to exist if they refused, so long as they did not malign the Prophet or his sacred book. Although the Spanish experience brought the Christians into close contact with the Muslims, there appears to have been no attempts between the two great religious blocs towards a mutual comprehension. There were, of course, trading and political contacts throughout the Mediterranean, but generally a strict "apartheid" was observed.

The Crusades set the stage for the ensuing development of Christians-Muslim contacts. The First Crusade, in response to an impassioned appeal by Pope Urban II in 1095, aimed to free Palestine and Syria from the Seljuk Turks. The capture of Jerusalem in 1099 brought an end to the First Crusade. Despite the subsequent establishment of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and the smaller dependent states centred on Edessa, Antioch and Tripoli and the obvious close physical contact of Christians and Muslims and their communities, the situation did not lead to a more profound understanding as far as the Crusaders were concerned. Jerusalem was in Western hands until 1187, and its recapture by Saladin led to the Third Crusade. The Latins still persisted in clinging to their former prejudices and employing the old framework to perceive their Islamic neighbours and antagonists.

10. The hagiographer wrote: "Adalbert visited them personally and, when they had forsaken some of their errors, he raised over them the shadow of the Christian symbol." This significant statement by the biographer of Bruno of Querfurt is quoted in Dvornik, F., *The Making of Central and East* G.D. Baker in Cuming, G.F. (ed.) *The Mission of the Church and* Cambridge 1970, pp.17-28.

11. Erdmann, Carl, (1935), p.16.

12. Adolph (1957), p.46.

13. Bede, book 5, ch.XXIII, (ed. Colgrave et al.) pp.556-7.

5. Some general Christian views of Islam

5.1 The Islamic world and Latin Christendom confronted each other as two blocs, fated to mutual misunderstanding. It has been pointed out that the West was agrarian, feudal and monastic, whereas the Islamic world was urban-oriented, controlled by wealth courts and influenced by flourishing trade centres. On the one hand the Christian ideal was celibate, clerical and hierarchical, whereas the Islamic was in principal egalitarian, non-sacerdotal and less restrictive in its freedom of scholarship.¹⁴

R.W. Southern, in his study on Western attitudes to Islam in the Middle Ages, contrasts the intellectual environment of Gerbert, who was born in Aurillac about 940 and who died as Pope Sylvester II in 1003 which that experienced by Avicenna, who was born at Bukhara in 980 and died in 1037. The contrast between these two cultural milieux highlights the cultural sophistication of Islamic culture and the backwardness of the West.¹⁵ Until the period of the First Crusade (1096-99) the West was blissfully ignorant of the Muslim world. Southern aptly calls this failure to comprehend an ignorance of "confined space".¹⁶

5.2 One of the misconceptions was that the Muslims were polytheistic as were the the Saxon, Scandinavian, Slav or Magyar tribes which the Church had encountered. Hence all were dubbed as "pagans" in the Francophone world and "heathens" in the Germanic. This popular attitude towards Islam spread and developed throughout the West between 700 and 1100 A.D.

The incursion of the Crusaders into the Middle East in 1096 did not alleviate the ignorance of confrontation. Indeed the Crusaders and their immediate successors consistently perceived what they saw and experienced only according to their inherited preconceptions. They began with a surprising lack of interest or curiosity, and this was augmented by their initial success. There then followed a period which Southern succinctly characterises as being "the ignorance of a triumphant imagination".¹⁷

Before 1100 there is only one reference to Muhammad in European literature outside Spain and southern Italy, but from 1120 the West had a picture of Islam and the Prophet which was "brilliantly clear" but not based on reliable knowledge.¹⁸

As the two religious blocs became increasingly polarised, the boundaries between them were intensified. As in the Cold War from the 1950s between Western capitalism and Soviet communism, there developed two hostile blocs, two systems in dramatic opposition. East system was dominated by a single ideology which united the bloc in thinking and behaviour.

5.3 In the West there were a few isolated attempts in the 12th century to understand Islam. They were, however, rare.¹⁹ Such scholars as Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny (1094-1156), the first Westerner to have some accurate information about Islam,²⁰ and Robert of Ketton, who finished a translation of the Qur'ân in 1143, were isolated cases.²¹ Their influence was, however, limited to small circles and a deeper perception of Islam did not seep down to the general population.

14. Southern, pp.7-8.

15. Southern pp.9-12.

16. "This is the kind of ignorance of a man in prison who hears rumours of outside events and attempts to give shape to what he hears, with the help of preconceived ideas"; Southern p.14.

17. Southern, p.28.

18. Southern, loc. cit.

19. Southern (p.34) somewhat optimistically calls this period the century of "reason and hope".

20. Rodinson p.13.

21. Rodinson, p.14.

5.4 To the Westerns the Muslims were seen to be idolators, with Muhammad as their chief god. The Prophet, in turn, was thought to be an arch-heretic who founded a schism from the Church rather than a new religion. Therefore to Dante he and his ilk were *seminatori di scandali e di scisma*.²² He was perceived to have been seized by diabolical impulses which arose from his monumental carnal desires and his wounded pride.²³ According to legend Muhammad had once been a Christian cleric who, having failed to be elected patriarch - variously at Jerusalem, Alexandria or Rome - turned to malicious magic. After a life of excess, he died ignominiously and his body was thrown to pigs.²⁴

In summary, we may observe that the popular western stereotype of Islam was incredibly distant from the reality of the situation. The Westerners committed two travesties of truth: they transformed the world's most unidolatrour of ethical religions into a crass polytheism, made its honourable founder into a man of ignomy and confused its followers with all possible heathen people.²⁵

6. The picture of the Saracens and their gods

In the following analysis I shall take both texts simultaneously, at times indicating the difference between them. Let me first state that the general concept of Islam in ESG is transferred to ES without significant change.²⁶

6.1 The two terms used in the OF to describe the inhabitants of the Islamic world are interchangeably *sarrasins* and *paiens*; both are translated into ON as *heiðingi*. For example Elie says: "*Paien et Sarrasin sont entré en ma terre*" (ESG: 391), and in the ON this is rendered as "*heiðingjar eru komnir í land vort*" ch.12.

In the OF text the Saracens are portrayed in a negative light but in the ON much stronger language is used. Whereas Rodoan is called *paiens* in ESG (322), he is described as *koikr fiandi* (living devil) (ES:23). Whereas ESG talks of the group of opponents which Elie vows to slay (ESG:242), ES adds *af þeim helvitis hundum* (of those cursed dogs) (ES: 6). Instances of this tendency abound.

6.2 As in the inherited tradition, the Saracens are seen as being polytheistic. In the general OF tradition up to 30 different gods are named throughout the corpus of literature but only three appear consistently. All three are named in ESG and ES. Muhammad, transformed into a divinity in the Western tradition, is seen as the chief of the gods, but is sometimes mentioned with the other two. The names in the ESG and ES are as follows:

ESG	Frequency	ES	Frequency
Mahomet	23	Maúmet	4
Mahon	10	Magún	20
Tervagant	4	Terrogant	2
Apolin	4	Apollon	2
		Fabrin	1
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Total	41	Total	50

There is great irregularity in their use in the two texts, and they do not often

²² Dante, *La Divina Commedia, Inferno*, XXVIII 35.

²³ Comfort, p.634.

²⁴ This was seen as the etiology of the Muslim prohibition on eating pork; see Comfort, p.633.

²⁵ Hence the terms such as "pagan" and "heathen" were used by the Western writers for Saracens and Muslims.

²⁶ In the following section the references to *Elie de Saint Gille* (ESG) refer to the line numbers of the poem and those to *Elis saga* (ES) refer to the chapter numbers.

correspond. In 11 instances ESG uses a name of a god which does not occur in the corresponding passage in ES, and conversely there are 24 references to a god in the ON and not in the corresponding passages of the OF.²⁷

The significant fact is that the term Mahomet in ESG has a frequency of 56%, but is supplanted in ES by Magún which has a frequency of 80%; in ESG Mahon has a frequency of 23.4% and in ES Máumet has one of only 8%. It is apparent that the name Magún as the chief god attributed to the Moslems was already established in the Norwegian *riddarasaga* tradition by the time that Abbot Roðbert translated the text.

6.3 In the OF text there is a lack of attributive adjectives when the names of gods are mentioned but they occur frequently in the ON text. Magún is called *fagr* (ES:25), *háleitr* (ES:32), *kröftugr* (ES:32), *máttugr* (ES:32, 39, 49), *mikill* (ES:31, 42); Máumet is called *dyrlegr* (ES:25). Presumably, these Scandinavian attributives of the divinities are derived from Christian liturgical sources, with the exception of *fagr*.

7. The functions of the Saracen divinities

7.1 The gods were seen as creators in both texts. In ESG there occurs the line about Muhammad, *Mahomet qui cest siecle estora* (ESG:2213). Strangely enough, ES refers here not to the creative activity of a god but gives a formula *Pat veit Magún* and adds *ok allir skurðgu ðir, er vér trúum á* (ES:54). There a reference elsewhere to the fact that *Magún skapa ði heimini* (ES:26), which does not occur in the OF.

7.2 There are frequent references to the ruler of the universe of the universe. typical is *U se crois Mahomet qui de siecle governe* (Or do you believe in Mahomet who rules the world? ESG:385) and the ON rendering of the same passage *Trúir þú á Magún er öllum heiminum styrir* (ES:12). The phrase *Mahomet qui le* (or *cest*) *siecle governe* recurs as a formula in ESG (e.g. 1413, 1863, 2291 and 1749). A variant is *Mahon qui tout a baillier* (*Mahon who governs all*).

7.3 There is the idea of agrarian prosperity being in the power of Mahomet. In the OF text Mahomet makes trees flourish, fruit grow (ESG:746) and in the ON in the equivalent passage (ES:42) Magún sustains trees, leaves, flowers and fruit. This passage follows a reference to the fact that Terrogant works miracles for the favour of men.

Rosamonde looks out of her window and beholds the glory of the birds and nature (ESG:1365-9) and then she exclaims:

"True God," said the young girl, "how wonderful thou art!
Thou makest the trees to grow, to bear leaves and flowers,
And makest the harvest spring up from the earth in love,
And at the time of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin. (ESG:1370-4)

This Christian view in the OF version the liturgical calendar with its reference to the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is inappropriate in the mouth of a Muslim lass. However, in the ON rendering Abbot Roðbert is careful to make Rósamunda's utterances consistent with heathenism:

"O my sublime :Lord Magún," she said, "thou art so powerful and mighty that thou makest leaves and flowers and fruit to sprout from the trees, save for me my Frenchman from the hands of evil chieftains and heathens ..." (ES:32)

7.4 The gods require dedication from their devotees and interfere in the course of human history to help their favourites. King Macabré exclaims *Mout nos est Mahomet fierement guionage* (*Mahomet has very gloriously guided us*. ESG:260) and in the

²⁷ In a few cases the names are altered in the ON version. Twice Tervagant is translated as Magún, and once Mahomet is rendered by the pair Magéun and Terrogant. Moreover, on one occasion Mahon is replaced with the word *guð*

parallel section in the ON King Malkabrez says: *Tigurlega hefir nú Maúmet holpið os* (Honourably has Maúmet now helped us. ES:7). In the ON only there is the reference to the fact that Maúmet can interfere and help 700 knights who lie in wait for the fleeing Elis and to bring him back. Again there is recorded there, but not in the OF, how Malkabrez says that, if Elis were to accept Islam, then Magún would ensure that he was *í friði* (in peace) and that no injury would befall him (ES:58). Again in the ON alone Malkabrez says that Magún has the power to transport him to Africa, Scotland or a harbour in Dalmatia, if he wills (ES:53)

7.5 This act of divine favouring requires a positive response from the devotees. In the ON alone there is a reference to a curse on those who are disobedient to the gods. After a crushing defeat at the hands of Vilhjálmr úr Orengiborg and his companions, Jósi úr Alexandría says:

Magún and Apollon, woe to the neck and shoulders of that man who will worship you day and night, if you let these men escape who have caused so much shame, disgrace and damage, few men against so many men. (ES:22)

The effect on this on the Saracens was one of encouragement for a renewed counter-attack.

7.6 A belief in the French mediæval tradition was that the gods of the Saracens were law-givers. This is a distorted reflection of the role of the Prophet as a law-giver in Islam. There is no reference to this aspect of the gods in ESG, but there is one in ES:59, where laws are attributed to an otherwise unknown god called Fabrín. the text says: *þú ert heiðinn ok trúir á lög Fabríns* (You are a heathen and believe on the laws of Fabrín. ES:59).

8. Idols and worship perceived in the Saracen world

8.1 The gods were believed to be represented by idols. In the OF they are called *ideles* (e.g. ESG:901, 906), but the term *skurðgoð* occurs more frequently in ON text (e.g. ES:24,, (twice), 26, 30).²⁸ What is a most significant aspect of this word is the fact that it is made from the substantive *goð* used by the ancient Scandinavians for their own heathen gods. Elsewhere in ES the gods attributed to the Muslims are called *guð* which is the word for the God of the Judæo-Christian tradition. These idols are portable, such as Mahomet and his idols (ESG:905, 916) and Maúmet (ES:49). Sometimes they were set on pillars (ES:25, with no parallel in ESG) or on a rock or a crag (ES:49). The ON tradition, perhaps harking back to memories of less distant heathenism, refers to idols of Magún and Terrogant as *tréguðir* (ES:59). What is interesting here is that the term *guð* was chosen in preference to *goð*.

The OF tradition has the idols swathed in materials (ESG:750-1). A graphic description of an act of adoration by Macabé occurs in ESG:906-913, the idol of Mahomet being brought forth with others and covered with brown fabric:

Behind he was supported by a tree of Syria,
Which does not fall forward nor bend backward,
thus curtained like a woman in childbirth.
More than 1,000 Saracens adore him and prostrate themselves;
Macabré, the emir, worships him himself.

So impressive is the idol of Mahomet and the ceremony that the emir asks Elie whether he had seen so beautiful and rich a god in all his life? (ESG:920). This event in ES describes the idol of Magún, totally made of gold and gems, as it is set upon a column for adoration and to impress Elis. the king asks Elis: *Sástu nokkurt sinn fyrr svo fagan guð*

²⁸ In ES:54 the form *skurðguðir* is used.

sem þessi guð er? (Did you ever see a god so fair as this one? ES:25)

8.2 Worship of Mahomet and more idols is implied in the passages just quoted but there are no details given. One senses that, when it comes to a description of the exact form which the worship took, the French and Scandinavian writers are here totally in the dark. Therefore, they rather imply the form of worship and leave the rest to the imagination of their listeners or readers. The composers of the *chansons de geste* and the *riddarasögur* used the familiar as a point of departure to understand the imagined worship of the Muslims. One might have wished to assume that in Norway (and Iceland) there was some residual knowledge of the ancient heathen worship of their ancestors which would have helped this exercise of fantasy, but this does not seem to have been so in the case of ES, with the exception of the word *skurðgoð*. Christianity had taken such deep roots within mediæval society that all memories of the cults of the gods, in both France and Scandinavia, were obliterated as far as the poet and the translator were concerned. Hence those who wished to the conjure up an image of long-forgotten cults were obliged to go to the Old Testament, the works of Classical authors and the writings of the Christian Fathers for information about exotic cults and use the liturgical practices of the Latin Church as a framework for a reconstruction of what they postulated as Islamic worship.

8.3 The following elements are attributed to the worship of the Saracens:

1. The idols of the gods were carried out at the celebration of public cults and set in high places for communal adoration, such as in ESG:1259 and ES:49. They were bedecked with fabrics and jewels, as in ESG:907 and ES:25.

2. The devotees would prostrate themselves before these idols, ESG:911 uses the word *acliner* and ES:22, *líta*. In ES:26 on hearing of the peril in which Elis has fallen, Rósamunda prostrated herself before her idols and prayed with all her might that they would be protected from shame and death.

3. Then the gods were invoked by some sort of formula. In an act in intercession King Macabré used the phrase *gentilleus dieus deboinaires* (ESG:977, 984, 998). In a passage in the ON the phrase *hinn ríki guð* is used, ES:25.

9. Oaths sworn by the gods

Throughout both epics there are frequent oaths sworn by the gods, always by Mahon and Mahomet in the OF and Magún in the ON. Only once is another god mentioned in an oath and that is in ESG:2064 *par l'ame Teroagani* (by the life of Teroagani); the parallel passage in ES has *Magún hin máttugi*. This latter oath is interesting in that it has a genuine ring of Islamic tradition behind it. The swearing of oaths by things that are sacred was equally much part of the Islamic tradition as it was of the Christian. One of the most popular Christian oaths was "by my faith", especially in ES (e.g. twice in ES:40). Swearing by one's faith or belief was not part of the Arabic tradition, but it is found amongst modern speakers of Urdu. The usual Islamic form of oath was to swear by Allah, by the prophet or by the life of Muhammad²⁹. It is this latter form which makes the oath in ESG:2064 seem genuine.

The aim of the oaths in the poems is to invoke the aid of a god or gods, in order to stress the point that one is making or to intensify the earnestness of one's intention.

There are certain formulaic patterns which are different in the two languages and for which there is no definite correlation. In the OF there are such patterns as *Mahomet me confonge* (or *confuse*, or *confond*) and *par Mahomet* or *par Mahon*; whereas in the ON the basic pattern is *þat veit Magún*, often where there is no oath in the parallel passage in ESG. It appears to play the function of a marker to indicate that it is a Muslim who is speaking.

The great variability can be seen in the following few typical examples of how

²⁹ I would like to thank Associate-Professor Abdul Kasi of the University of Melbourne for this information.

Abbot Roðbert handled the OF oaths in ON:

Mahomet me confonge (379)	Svo hjálpi mér Magún. (11)
Mahomet me confuse (472)	Magún.verði mér reiðr. (14)
Mahomet me confonge (1573)	Nú gefi Magún mér svívirðing. (38)
par Mahon (2059)	Pat veit mín trú. (49)
par Mahomet (746)	Svo hjálpi mér Magún. (24)
par Mahon (1254)	Pat veit Magún. (30)
par mon cief (394)	Pat veit Magún. (12)

10. The assumed ideological superiority of the West

10.1 The OF and ON versions of the story of Elie/Elis perceive the Islamic world from the bastions of Christendom and use the political and religious structures of the West to comprehend those of the East. They see on the other side of the ideological barrier a world with a social structure of emirs, knights, soldiers, townsfolk and slaves which corresponds to the secular world familiar to them in Western Europe.

The authors of the two epics are well aware that there is a difference in religion, but are far less specific when it comes to precise information as to what that difference is. Whereas they see the Western secular world reproduced in Islamic countries, they were aware enough to know that the religious patterns were so different that they did not correspond to those of the Latin Church in all aspects.

However, that did not prevent our authors from starting out from the familiar Christian base at times. We find the Muslim Macabré glibly talking about plans to marry his daughter at Easter (ESG:1723), and Rosamonde uses the feasts of Pentecost (ESG:1803) and the Annunciation (ESG:1374) to denote points of time. No attempt is made to grasp the Islamic calendar, because the Christians have a monopoly on divine time.

As far as chivalry is concerned, similar rules pertain in the Muslim world as in the Western. In ESG:1791 it is stated that the Saracen knights are dedicated to their god. In ES:45 we learn that Muslim knights regulate their behaviour according to a strict code of chivalry:

Now Galopín goes his way and wants to have no followers or companions not does he wish to stop until he came to the tent of King Júbien and found him outside and greeted him courteously according to the customs of heathen men. (ES:45)

10.2 Nevertheless, besides the viewing of aspects of the Islamic world from a Western frame of reference, there is the constant portrayal of Islam from a siege mentality. This pervading attitude of confrontation rests upon the unshakably solid foundation of the belief of the ideological superiority of the West. The God of the Christians is superior and alone effective, whereas the idols of the "heathens" are vain, weak and ineffectual. When Triacle asks Elie a question about his religion, he receives an answer, thrust back with the confidence of a confirmand who knows his catechism well. This encounter is totally changed in the ON:

Are you then a Christian of the evil people
Or do you believe in Mahomet who rules the world?
No, not I, said Elie, but in God the Lord (ESG:384-6).

"What sort of man are you, O knight?" he said, "Do you believe in Magún who rules the whole world?" "Definitely not," said Elis, "Nor in anyone who serves him!" (ES:12)

This confidence in the superiority of the Christian religion pervades the whole epic in both the French and the Scandinavian versions. Perhaps it is best vindicated by the acknowledgement of the truth of Christianity by Rosamonde in

ESG:1370-79 and then her subsequent baptism, which is just touched upon in the ESG.

10.3 There is no doubt that God is on the side of Elie/Elis and his followers. This awareness is abundantly evident in both the OF and the ON texts. About Elie the OF says *que Dieus ait en sa garde (whom God has in his protection, ESG:346, and the ON comments því at guð varðveitti honom (because God protected him, ES:11). Elsewhere Elie proclaims: Mais Dieus m'aimme de ceur, qui me gara tous jours (But God loves me with His [whole] heart, who always protects me. ESG 462) and the ON words it as follows: minn guð Jesús Christus varðveittir mik jafnan í miskunn sinni. (but my God, Jesus Christ, constantly protects me in his constant mercy. ES:114)*

10.4 The corollary of this confident presentation of Christianity is the negative interpretation of Islam and its believers. The Saracens are often presented in a negative light and the polemic is intensified by insulting epithets, such as *bólvaðir hundar* in ES:22. One Saracen is first described as a *trúlaus heiðingi (infidel heathen)* and then addressed as *höfuðfól allra fóla (the chief fool of all fools ES:24)*

The characters in the poem often taunt the Saracens on their weak points. Elie in his combat with a gigantic Saracen teases him that Mahon and Apolin cannot experience joy or utter any noise (ESG:749) and that they are not worth the four deniers of silver which lies below their idols (ESG:750). In a famous passage Elie in seeking to persuade Macabré of the folly of his religion, upbraids him thus:

Why do you hold as a god such an empty thing?
He has no sould in his body, nor power of speech, nor even life;
If one were to strike him fifteen times with a club behind his ear,
He would not display any anger or wrath,
Nor croak any more than does a deer. (ESG:926-30)

The same passage in the version of Abbot Roðbert presents a scene which is typical of many confrontational situations in both versions of the epic:

"Sire" says Elis, "you're joking or talking childish talk or stupidity, when you say that you have this accursed devil as a god. He cannot move and has neither life nor body. And should any man now come and strike him under his ear, then he would fall as he has never had any life. Woe betide his strength and also those who serve him." (ES:25)

10.5 One of the techniques to indicate the inadequacy of the Saracen religion is to make the devotees of the false gods to deny their divinities and then curse them for the failure of their support in combat or battle, when the "heathens" realise that the gods are ineffectual. Hence Jossiens curses Macabré and Apolin when he sees his nephew Salatré lying dead. This frustration is then expressed in threats to break the idols and then in the actual smashing of them.

Again, Macabré threatens to break off the idol's nose and ears if Elie escapes on horseback. The French knight escapes and so Macabré, true to his word, damages the idol. However, his enraged subjects are so irate at his action that he promises to repair it. (ESG:979-1003 and ES:25)

11. An example of confrontation between the Islamic and the Christian blocs

To illustrate the point of confrontation let us take one example, following the ON text (ES:24-6). A very dejected Elis, all of whose companions have fallen, encounters a "faithless heathen", an immense giant, who shouts at his puny, defenceless antagonist:

"So help me Magún! You, O knight, have opposed us, now has the hour come that will be vanquished. Now I counsel you to abandon your religion and god and believe in Terrogant who performs miracles for us and in Magún who gives foliage and flowers and fruits to the trees."³⁰

Elis' reply is couched in words which are symbolic not only for this specific combat, but for the broader confrontation in chapters 24-26 and in the whole *

And Elis answered, "You are the chief fool of all fools. The Lord, my Creator, knows that I would be worse than all villains and like the wretched Jew who abandoned St Martin on account of a certain hall in which he was sitting, if I abandon and desert the Lord of all the world and of all creation on account of your idols. I am rather prepared to vindicate in the power of God that Magín, Terrogant and Apollon, your gods, are not worth a straw next to the saints of God who dwell in heaven."³¹

Elis makes an escape on horseback, and a frustrated Malkabrez (ES25) shouts at Magún:

"You evil god," he says, "What are you doing? Are you honourable or are you asleep? I have given you my trust, woe betide your power and also those men who serve you. Now the Frenchman is riding away, who constantly put us to shame."³²

He then thrust his foot into Magún's side, knocking him down from the pillar and breaking off his nose and his right arm. His shocked and enraged subjects thronged around and bade him repair the broken idol, but Malkabrez adamantly refused, saying:

"I swear this be my head, that he is so foolish who worships him or believes in him, because all his power is destroyed and come to naught, and he is nothing but deceit and falsehood. He let the Frenchman ride away, who had dishonoured and killed his men"³³

12 The religion of the Saracens in the ON and OF versions

12.1 A stated aim at the beginning of this paper is the examination of the dynamics of the transferring of material about Islam from the source to the receptor culture. To what extent did Abbot Roðbert and the presumably Icelandic author who completed his saga filter their material through their pre-conceived ideas?

In a paper I read at an Old Norse Workshop at the University of Sydney in August 1989, I found that in general, when the *chansons de geste* and the *riddarasögur* are compared and contrasted, the attitude to Islam as the distance and time as well as fantasy and fascination for the exotic increase.

There is some good evidence for this tendency in the two versions of the Elie/Elis story. The following points may be mentioned:

(1) We noticed that in the ESG the popular name for Muhammad was *Mahomet* and that the form *Mahon* was used there far less frequently. However, this is not the case in ES, where the form *Magún* (= *Mahon*) appears five more times than the form *Maümet*. This change in the names used for the Prophet indicates that there was already a pre-established tradition of nomenclature by the time that ES was translated into ON.

(2) The observation has been made that the term *guð*, normally used to denote the Judæo-Christian God, was used to translate the OF *dieus*, when the latter was used to denote the "heathen" gods attributed to the Saracens. We also noted that the ancient word, *skurðguðir* was used for the idols, except for the one occasion when the translator wrote *skurðguðir*. Here we can detect a surviving memory of the past. Similarly, the term *tréguðir*, used to describe the wooden idols, is more reminiscent of ancient Scandinavia than it is of the mediæval French perception of how Saracens might

³⁰ ESG:742-7.

³¹ ESG:747-51.

³² ESG:790-5.

³³ ESG:798-1003.

worship.

12.3 The most popular oath in ES is *Pat veit Magún*, which was either a pre-established mode of swearing as it appears elsewhere in the *riððarasögur* or an idiosyncratic phrase of the translator. In any case, the use of oaths has been shown not to correspond in the OF and the ON versions of the story, and here in the transmission the material has altered.

12.4 The finale to ES, chapters 60-70, has not yet entered this investigation. This appears to be of purely Scandinavian, likely Icelandic, origin, not based on foreign models. In this section, which is enacted around in a Saracen kingdom and then in France, there is not reference to Islam at all, nor are there any oaths whatsoever. The term *heiðingjar* is used several times (e.g. ES:65), however, not as a term of religious abuse, but rather only as national denotation. There is a reference to a *Fabrin* (ES:64), but this is not the mysterious god, but a knight. In the lively battle scenes the outcome seems to be rather the result of skill and of the necessity of the plot than adherence to an ideological bloc. Indeed the only reference to a non-Christian religion is to the elf-woman who made the fantastic cloak (ES:67).

In these chapters we are in another world. We have left behind the confrontation of the two great civilisations and have entered a world which delights principally in fantasy.

There is no reference to Rósamunda's renouncing the religion of her fathers or of the reaction of her kith and kin to this abandonment of their ancestral faith. However, there is a graphic description of her civic and liturgical reception in the town and church respectively at St Egidius, and the splendid singing and impressive procession of clerics caught the imagination of the writer. Likewise the wedding of Rósamunda and Elis is described in glowing terms, the religious and liturgical elements predominating. We have slipped from Saracendom to Christendom without noticing that we crossed the frontier.

13. Conclusion

As I write this conclusion, the Gulf War has just come to an end. Australia, like many other countries with a Western tradition, has a considerable Arab and Muslim population, the concentration of these communities having increased greatly in the past 20 years. We have had so a few examples of vandalism of mosques and more of insults hurled at veiled Muslim women, that the government had set up a commission to attempt to foster peaceful relations between the threatened minority community and the bulk of the population. We seem to have progressed little from the 12th and 13th centuries.

We need desperately to listen afresh to some wise words from the great French Jansenist, Blaise Pascal who wrote:

Ne voyons-nous pas mourir et vivre les Turcs comme les Chrétiens? Ils ont leurs cérémonies, leurs prophètes, leurs docteurs, leurs saints, leurs religieux, comme nous.³⁴

Although, on the one hand, Pascal shows in this passage no antipathy towards Islam, on the other, he does not harbour any healthy curiosity concerning the great world religion. The latter tendency, if not the former, point was typical of mediæval Christendom. But in his tolerant perception Pascal steps far beyond the closed mind of some of his mediæval ancestors with his profound humanity.³⁵

³⁴. "Do we not see Turks live and die like Christians? they have their ceremonies, their prophets, their doctors, their saints, their religious, like us." This comment by Pascal is quoted by Comfort p. 659.

³⁵. I would like to thank Dr Abdul Kazi, Miss Eileen Gillies, Dr Anne Gilmore-Bryson, Professor Göran Hammarström, Mr Graham Miller, Dr Andrew Newell, Dr Denise Ryan and Dr Ann Trindade for help in the writing of this paper.

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