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Typologies of the medieval cultural border²

Tipologías de las fronteras culturales de la Edad Media

Abstract:

This article seeks to explore the ways in which ideas about the peripheral, which drew on images from the Bible and from Graeco-Roman literature, were used in the Middle Ages to formulate other cultures. In this way, the border between the describing culture and the described culture often came to signify a border between the central and the peripheral, between the known and the exotic. I will here be dealing with a handful of features typical of the peripheral other in medieval text and thought. My aim is first of all to show how widely these features were applied across centuries, and secondly to show how similar descriptions of the peripheral could be even when describing very different peripheries.

Keywords:

Medieval literature; Medieval Culture; Medieval History.

Resumen:

Este artículo pretende explorar los modos en los que las ideas sobre lo periférico, que tomaban imágenes de la Biblia y de la literatura grecorromana, eran utilizadas en la Edad Media para formular otras culturas. De esta manera, la frontera entre la cultura descriptora y la cultura descrita a menudo denotaba una frontera entre lo central y lo periférico, entre lo conocido y lo exótico. En el presente artículo propondré distintas características típicas de la alteridad periférica tal y como las encontramos en el pensamiento medieval y en distintos textos de esta época. Mis objetivos son, en primer lugar, mostrar cómo estas descripciones fueron ampliamente utilizadas durante siglos, en segundo lugar, cómo descripciones similares de la periferia podían coincidir aun en textos que describen periferias muy diferentes.

Palabras-clave:

Literatura medieval; Cultura medieval; Historia medieval.

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1. Introduction

In the text now known as *The Primary Chronicle*, an early twelfth-century chronicle from Russia and probably written at the monastery of Caves, one of the chroniclers has included a quotation from the Byzantine historiographer Georgios Hamartolos (fl. mid-ninth century). The quotation is incorporated into the introductory part of the *Primary Chronicle*, and sets up a distinction between those nations that have a written law and those who follow ancient custom.³ The text then lists a few examples of nations without a written law, and this list includes the Seres (commonly, but not certainly, identified as the Chinese),⁴ the Babylonians, the Amazons, and the British (Ostrowski, 2011: 246). Hamartolos' original purpose of this list was to distinguish between the civilization of the Byzantine Empire and lack of civilization found in other cultures, and we should probably expect all of these cultures, including the British, to be pagan. The anonymous Russian chronicler emended this quotation by adding the Polovtsians, a steppe people, to the list (Ostrowski, 2011: 246). The purpose of this addition was presumably the same as the purpose of Hamartolos' list itself, namely to distinguish between Us and the Other by way of establishing a cultural border drawn along the practice of custom versus a written law code.

In addition to illustrating one of the many ways in which a medieval text could draw up a cultural border, the quotation from Hamartolos also provides a timely reminder that what constitutes a periphery depends entirely on where the centre is located. For the Byzantine Hamartolos, a monk living in Constantinople in the ninth century, the British in the West were of a similarly peripheral status as the Amazons, the fierce women who are traditionally situated somewhere to the north.

In the following text, I wish to examine a handful of topics belonging to the cultural delineation found in medieval texts, and which draw on either biblical typology, Graeco-Roman typology, or a combination of the two. First I will provide an overview of the Biblical and Graeco-Roman typologies and some examples of medieval texts that apply these in their description of the cultural other. I will then move on to the three topics by which I seek to demonstrate my point. The topics are as follows: 1) the monstrous nations of medieval imagination; 2) monstrous women; and finally 3) the legend of Alexander and Gog and Magog.

2. Background - the biblical and the Graeco-Roman traditions and their typologies

³ The term "nation" is here taken from Ostrowski's translation of the original Russian text.

⁴ I am indebted to Doctor Dale Kedwards for notifying me that this identification is doubtful.

The biblical tradition furnished the medieval cultural imagination with a set of ideas about the north as a place of evil. The north of the biblical prophets was of course placed in a different position from the north of the later Christian European historiographers or poets. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the geographical north moved from its original position somewhere north of the kingdom of Israel and further up along the European map. Even though the geographical north changed with the dissemination of the Christian religion, the typology of the biblical north was retained, and this typology could be applied by a wide range of different authors.

The biblical typology of the north was drawn from three books of the Old Testament prophets, namely Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. According to Jeremiah, the north was a home of great evil which was famously likened to a bubbling cauldron about to burst. It was from this north that God would send forth an evil nation to punish the iniquitous and idolatrous Hebrews (Jeremiah 1:13-14). According to Isaiah, the north was where Lucifer sought to build his throne, and from this throne he would rise to Heaven and attack the Lord (Isaiah 14:13-14). According to Ezekiel, the north was the home of Gog and Magog, an evil king of an evil kingdom who will join forces with close-lying nations and descend upon Israel (Ezekiel 38:15). In Revelation 20:7-8, Gog and Magog had become identified as separate nations, both to be led by Satan at the end of days. This identification of Gog and Magog as two nations – as we shall see much later – affected how these names were understood and used in medieval texts.

These images of the north were widely accessible to those with biblical knowledge in medieval Europe, and the images resonated strongly with authors who were familiar with the attacks from northern raiders, such as the Huns, the Magyars, or the Mongols (Anderson, 1932: 9-14). The biblical typology of the north became a useful tool for understanding these raids and these people within the general framework of Christian history. It is important to keep in mind here that throughout the Middle Ages, history was understood as a linear progression from Creation to the Apocalypse. Within this framework the progression of history was marked by types and antitypes, which means that events in the distant past served as typological mirrors of events in the more recent past, and also in the present. This was seen throughout biblical history: When Christ was understood as the new Adam, he was thereby interpreted as the antitype to Adam. In Christian history, moreover, the passion of Christ was seen as the type for the sufferings of the saints who imitated Christ and thereby became his antitypes. In this matrix of types and antitypes, the biblical typology of the north was also believed to apply to the north of the contemporary history of medieval authors, as we shall see.

The medieval cultural imagination also inherited a set of ideas and images concerning the distant north from Graeco-Roman authors. Several of these ideas

and images can be first found in Herodotus, but were transmitted to the Middle Ages through the *Historia Naturalis* of Pliny, who in turn was made even more widely accessible through the book of Solinus variously known as *De mirabilibus mundi*, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, and *Polyhistor*. Furthermore, authors such as Martianus Capella and Macrobius, as well as poets such as Horatius, Ovidius and Vergilius, also provided access to the trove of Graeco-Roman ideas about the north to the medieval imagination.

Unlike the biblical north, however, the north which was disseminated through the Graeco-Roman works was both less singularly evil and at the same time more precisely located within the geography of the world. Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, for instance, provides detailed, although not accurate, descriptions of how one travels to reach the distant places such as the Maeotian Swamps or the Riphean Mountains, both names that came to signify savage areas (see Hope, 2017). However, although the Graeco-Roman north was more geographically fleshed out than the biblical north, its names and descriptions and its general setting within the physical world was still mostly unknown to medieval intellectuals, as it had been for the Graeco-Roman intellectuals. The names provided in the Graeco-Roman and the biblical material were therefore fixed, but the locations corresponding to these names were not, and consequently scholars identified these names with very different geographical locations. Even though the names remained the same, the geographical placement of these names could vary significantly. Furthermore, with the expansion of Christianity, the map of the Roman world and medieval Europe were also different, which also opened up for the variety of identifications by medieval authors.

The Graeco-Roman typology of the north contributed to the medieval cultural imagination in two particularly important ways. First of all, it provided the medieval authors with a set of names, such as the ones already mentioned, which allowed these authors to use these names when trying to align the geography of their own times with the geography of Pliny. Secondly, the Graeco-Roman typology furnished the medieval imagination with descriptions of the landscapes and, perhaps most importantly, the various peoples who inhabited these distant regions. These peoples, or races, or nations, were often markedly different from the peoples of the Roman and, later, the medieval world. The differences could be simply a matter of ways of living and cultural practices. However, some of the most lasting images were those of peoples who differed not only culturally, but also in physical shape and form. These were the monstrous nations, and it is to them we will turn shortly.

The medieval continuation of the Graeco-Roman ideas about the peripheral is evidenced by the numerous references to and depictions of these monstrous nations in various texts, illuminations, or mappaemundi throughout Middle Ages. This endurance was partly because medieval authors or illuminators developed the

Graeco-Roman heritage further and continuously revived the old ideas. The endurance also owed a significant part to the fact that the old authors were continuously read even in the later Middle Ages and so provided a direct source of the Graeco-Roman ideas. As an example of this we see William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium* (late 1250s) in which he describes his journey to the court of Möngke Khan. In chapter 29, in which he relates various occurrences at the Khan's court, he also mentions that he has made inquiries about the monsters and humanoids which Solinus and Isidore describe, but that no one had ever seen or heard such things there. Friar William remarks that this casts doubts on the descriptions (William of Rubruck, 2009: 201). Although William came to adopt a critical attitude to the information disseminated by Solinus and Isidore, it is telling that he – presumably in preparation for his great journey eastward – had consulted these two authors for information about the Far East.

As a final point in this overview, it is important to note that even though I have here used descriptions of the north, this does not mean that these two typologies were only applied to the northern periphery. I have elsewhere contended that the Graeco-Roman north - as well as the biblical north - moved with the expansion of Europe, and therefore could apply both to the north according to Ezekiel or Pliny (the Black Sea and beyond) and the medieval authors (anything north and east of their own varying vantage points) (Hope, 2017). It is therefore important to keep in mind that the typological descriptions of otherness which are situated vaguely in the north are in fact applied to any kind of periphery, as we will see.

3. The monstrous peoples

In his book *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, John Block Friedman makes a very important point regarding these exotic, peripheral nations. These nations were - despite their many and sometimes strange differences from the European norm – “varieties of men, whose chief distinction from the men of Europe was one of geography” (Friedman, 2000: 1). Furthermore, he points out that the “monstrous races were always far away”, and this far away was a movable location, starting with the India or the Ethiopia of Pliny's time (which was often confused as the same location), and then gradually shifting to also include the far north and eventually the New World (Friedman, 2000: 1).

It should be emphasized that even though the monstrous people came to inhabit new areas throughout the Middle Ages, this did not necessarily mean that the places they had previously inhabited became any less monstrous, foreign and wild. When Pliny wrote about the north belonging to the man-eating Scythians and the happy Hyperboreans, this was a north situated some place north of the Black

Sea. When we find these peoples moved further to the west and to the north of the continental European vantage point – like that of Abbo of Fleury (d.1004) or Adam of Bremen (fl. 1070s) – the territories north of the Black Sea did not cease to incite wonders, and was not necessarily thought of as less wild. To put it differently, the north – or the habitation of monsters – did not necessarily move from one to location to a new because the former had been tamed or brought into Christendom. The north moved because with new writers came new ideas about where the north actually was. Furthermore, even when such a habitation of monsters was brought into the Christian world, this did not mean that its monstrous or wondrous aspect disappeared, only that the border between Christendom and its pagan hinterland was pushed a bit further away. As an example, we see that with the Christianization of Scandinavia the north did not cease to be a place of wonder and monsters, only that this place of wonder of monsters no longer corresponded exactly with the new Christian kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

Moreover, the territories beyond the Black Sea, the north of Pliny and other Graeco-Roman authors, retained much of its mythical quality throughout the Middle Ages. We see this for instance in the Letter of Prester John, composed c.1163, in which the priest-king's kingdom is described as the home of many monstrous races – including an army of man-eaters (Beckingham and Hamilton, 1996: 79). The kingdom of Prester John continued to appear as part of reality even to travellers who went to Central Asia, such as William of Rubruck and Marco Polo (William of Rubruck, 2009: 167; Marco Polo, 2016: 167-70).

The monstrous and the uncivilized - two categories of peripheral nations

What qualifies as monstrous, or exotic, is not unequivocal. Even though the Graeco-Roman and medieval authors had very clear ideas about what belonged to the category of Other, this category in itself included a wide range of peoples who were marked as culturally different by various factors.

Some of the peripheral peoples were monstrous by virtue of their physical appearance, such as the famous blemmyae described by Pliny as having no head and having their mouth and eyes in the chest: “*Blemmyis traduntur capita abesse ore et oculis pectori adfixis*” (Pliny: Book 5, Chapter 8; Loeb: 252). As with several monstrous races, the blemmyae came to move habitation, from their original home in Libya (according to Pliny) to the Far East (according to for instance John Mandeville). Another people were the sciopods, whose physical peculiarity was that they had only one leg, and to this leg was attached an enormous foot under which they lay down to hide from the sun. There were also the cynocephali, the dog-heads, or the panotii whose ears were big enough to envelop their entire bodies.

The second qualification by which a peripheral nation could be deemed monstrous was its cultural practices. Here we are reminded of Hamartolos' distinction between those who practice custom versus those who have written law codes. Hamartolos mentioned the Amazons as belonging to the peoples following custom. But since I will return to the Amazons in some greater detail in the next section, I will here dwell on another culturally monstrous nation, namely have the Anthropophagi, the man-eaters. Pliny places them in Scythia, and elaborates on some of their practices, namely that they not only eat flesh, but that they also drink from the skulls of their enemies and use their scalps as napkins (Pliny: Book 7, Chapter 2). The Scythian Anthropophagi are placed together with the Arimaspi, a nation of cyclops who battle griffins for dominion over gemstone mines, and people of the country Abarimon, who have their feet turned backward and who cannot live outside their own country since they can only breathe the air of Abarimon. The Anthropophagi stoked the medieval imagination and blended well with the ideas about the evil north which was inherited from the biblical typology. This is seen very clearly in Abbo of Fleury's biography of Saint Edmund of East Anglia, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, which was written in the 980s and which describes the virtues, passion and miracles of Saint Edmund. In the fifth chapter of the *Passio Eadmundi*, Abbo gives an account of the Danes, who are the diabolic antagonists in this passion drama. In this chapter, Abbo underscores the evil of the Danes by connecting their homeland with the Jeremiah and the boiling cauldron, and with Isaiah and the north as Satan's throne. To further underscore that the Danes are evil from the beginning, he presents them as neighbours to some of the peripheral nations, among them the Anthropophagi (Abbo, 1972: 72).

There were several elements which could signal the cultural monstrosity of a peripheral nation. The lack of cities or urban centres was a clear marker of cultural otherness, or monstrosity, and belonged for instance to the cave-dwelling troglodytes of Ethiopia. The wearing of animal hides rather than textile was another marker that pointed to lack of civilization, and this is found for instance in Marco Polo's *Travels* (written c.1298). In his description of the inhabitants of Belor, Marco Polo denounces them as savages. This denunciation does not only come from their practice of idolatry, but also because they hunt instead of cultivating land and dress in animal furs (Marco Polo, 1958: 80; see also Kline, 2005: 35). A third element is diet, and several races are named after what they consume. There are the apple-smellers whose only subsistence comes from the smell of apples, and of course the ubiquitous Anthropophagi who has the most monstrous diet of all: human flesh. However, the foundation of the diet itself needed not be that monstrous, and in some cases it was more a matter of the singularity of the diet than the diet itself. As examples we have the Homodubii, or maybe-humans, of the Old English *Wonders of the East*, who eat only raw fish (Fulk, 2010: 20-21), or the Ictifafonas, or fish-fauns, of the Letter of Alexander to Aristotle whose monstrosity are partly exemplified by their gigantic stature, partly by their lack of clothing, and partly by their diet of water and whale flesh (Fulk, 2010: 66-67).

A fourth marker of great importance is the possession of language. The Greek term “*barbar*” signifies someone speaking unintelligibly, and the basic sentiment of this mark of otherness remained an important factor throughout the Middle Ages. In his *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, the German historiographer Adam of Bremen includes a description of the Norwegians living at the northernmost edge of the country. These Norwegians, obviously different from the parts of the country further to the south, are described as not speaking but gnashing their teeth together, so that they are barely intelligible to their neighbours (Adam, 1876: 180). A similar idea of intelligible language as a mark of cultural identification can be seen used by Thomas Aquinas in his treatise *De Aeternitate Mundi* (written 1271). The full title of this work is *De Aeternitate Mundi Contra Murmurantes*, i.e. “The Eternity of the World, Against the Murmurers”. By “murmurantes”, Aquinas had in mind those theologians who argue poorly for Orthodoxy, and these were designated by Aquinas as “those who murmur” (Herraiz, 2016: 213).⁵ These, then, are thus identified as belonging to an Other. The same divisive rationale underlies the term Lollard, a “mumbler” in Middle Dutch, a group whose members were deemed to be downright heretical.

Combining categories

Although we can distinguish between the nations who are physically alien and those who are alien primarily by cultural practice, this distinction is in reality of little practical consequence. Both types of peripheral nations were situated on the other side of the cultural border, and beyond that border the various nations were neighbours. One very clear illustration of this can be found in *Gesta Hammaburgensis* where Adam of Bremen enumerates some of the nations living along the Baltic rim. Among these we find the Dacians, the Alans, and the Sarmatians, nations which - although this is not stated explicitly - should be expected to belong to the so-called uncivilized nations. Together with these historical peoples, Adam also includes the aforementioned Troglodytes, and also the Anthropophagi whom Pliny, as we saw, situated in Scythia and which Abbo of Fleury also presented as being neighbours of the Danes. Adam's sources for these details are Solinus and Martianus Capella (Adam, 1876: 163ff).

I also wish to dwell on another example of why this distinction between the uncivilized and the monstrous is a distinction more for academic convenience than for the application by medieval authors. In the fourth and last book of *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Adam gives a description of the *scritefingi*, the Samis or the Finns in

⁵ I am indebted to Doctor Pilar Herraiz Oliva for notifying me of this treatise and its title, and for expounding the meaning of “murmurantes” in this case. I am also indebted for help with the shaping of the text, and translation from Spanish.

Northern Norway. Adam describes them as being hunters and nomads – one of the marks of cultural monstrosity as seen above – and they move across the snow using skis that allow them to chase animals. They dress in the furs of the animals they kill and have no permanent dwelling, which are two further markers of an uncivilized nation, as the inhabitants of Belor mentioned by Marco Polo. For all their lack of civilization, however, the *scritefingi* are not presented as physically different from their neighbouring Norwegians, although some of these Norwegians themselves are noted for their lack of intelligible speech. However, Adam provides one interesting detail that does suggest that for the peripheral nations, the distinction between uncivilized and monstrous is not that significant. When describing the Samis or the Finns, Adam notes that they cannot live without snow (Adam, 1876: 180). This might be a purely practical statement since they make their livelihood from chasing animals in the snow, but it does bear a striking resemblance to Pliny's description of the inhabitants of the country of Abarimon. About these people, Pliny states that their feet are turned backwards and that they cannot live outside Abarimon because they can only breathe the air of their own country (Pliny: Book VII, Chapter 2). This is not to say that Adam consciously drew on Pliny for this description, because Adam might not have known Pliny except through Solinus and Solinus does not mention the Abarimons. However, it does suggest that Adam draws from the same typological inheritance as Pliny did when describing the Abarimons. The Abarimon nation is undoubtedly a monstrous nation, but the merely uncivilized *scritefingi* are nonetheless cast in a very similar mould, which suggests that the distinction between monstrous and uncivilized is of little importance.

It should also be emphasized that although some of these peripheral nations are different by way of cultural practice, the Graeco-Roman tradition does not present the northern nations as only evil or warlike. Although the majority of these nations appear warlike and fierce, the great counter-example is the happy nation of the Hyperboreans (Pliny: Book IV, Chapter 26). This is a nation so far to the north that they are further north than Boreas, the north wind, and therefore have no winter, and who - according to Solinus - are a blessed people who love quietness and do not love war (Solinus: Book XVII, Chapter 1). The Hyperboreans were also known to medieval writers, although their depiction by the Graeco-Roman authors did not always remain the same in works from the Middle Ages. Isidore of Seville, for example, writes in his *Etymologies* that the name “Hyperborea” meant that the north wind raged beyond them, rather than that the Hyperboreans were themselves beyond the north wind (Isidore: Book XIV, Chapter 8). In *Passio Eadmundi*, moreover, Abbo of Fleury states that Antichrist will come from the Hyperborean mountains (Abbo, 1972: 72), which turns the classical idea of the Hyperboreans on its head and infuses it with the biblical typology of the north as a seat of the devil. Abbo's treatment of Hyperborea testifies to the malleability of the Graeco-Roman typology, and this malleability is in itself part of the explanation of the endurance of the Graeco-Roman inheritance. The names of peoples and places could remain, but their position in the world could shift and their meaning in the grand scheme of

things could undergo significant changes. To Abbo the north was a place of evil, and the Hyperborean mountains were a natural starting point for Antichrist, in light of Isaiah's prophecy about Lucifer building his throne in the north.

Monsters in the Western Periphery⁶

As mentioned above, the Graeco-Roman and the Biblical typology were usually applied to a distant north and a far east, and this continued to be the case throughout the Middle Ages. However, as literatures belonging to the Atlantic seaboard also became involved in this tradition there emerged more clearly visible western periphery, not unlike how the European West had been peripheral to the Byzantine Hamartolos. Examples can be found in works produced in Norway or in Iceland in the High Middle Ages which not only engage with a geography different from that of the Graeco-Roman heritage, but which also were clearly influenced by that heritage and sought to engage with it. This engagement with the classical as well as biblical past was a conscious strategy for incorporating these lands into the grand scheme of Christian history (see Hope, 2017; Mortensen, 2005: 103-06).

One such text is the anonymous *Historia Norvegie*, written in Norway and most likely composed in the 1170s. The first few chapters provide a geographical survey of Norway and the North-Atlantic islands, and within these areas there are also found people who are described as culturally Other, such as the inhabitants of Greenland, and the Finns. In Greenland, for instance, there is a small nation called the Screlinga. Their cultural difference is marked by their lack of iron, and their physical difference is noted by the fact that one can see by their wounds if they will die. If the wound is non-lethal it turns white, whereas if the wound is deadly it will not stop bleeding (Ekrem and Mortensen, 2003: 54-55). The anonymous author applies the word “*homunciones*”, little people, rather than the more famous “pygmy”, but the description can easily be connected to the pygmies of the Graeco-Roman tradition. A similar case of cultural monstrosity can be seen in the description of a shamanistic séance, in which the pagan priest, termed *magus* or magician in the Latin text, enters the spirit world to rid a woman of an illness. When the *magus* dies in the spirit world, his body on earth changes colour so that he becomes “*totus niger ut Ethiops*”, black all over as an Ethiopian (Ekrem and Mortensen, 2003: 62-63). The association is thus made between the pagan Finns and the much-maligned Ethiopians whose colour often was connected to evil. In Athanasius’ *Life of Saint Antony*, for instance, the hermit saint encounters the spirit of fornication, who is portrayed as a black boy (Athanasius, 1950: 23; 109, n.35).

Other works also contain the idea of the Western periphery as a location of

⁶ I am indebted to Doctor Dale Kedwards for valuable input regarding the content of this section.

wonders. In the book *Konungs Skuggsjá*, the mirror of kings, written in Norway in the thirteenth century, the first chapter of the book provides an overview of natural wonders on Iceland and in Greenland, and also in Ireland (whose wonders had elicited a combination of awe and disgust from Gerald of Wales around half a century earlier). Among these wonders is the *margyger*, the sea-troll-woman, whose description is akin to that of the Graeco-Roman siren (Jonsson, 1920: 64-65). One final example will further serve to show how monstrous the Western periphery could be. In the Icelandic *Eiriks Saga Rauda*, known in two versions and written down after 1263 (Sigurdsson, 2008: ix), we are told about a native archer ambushing the Norsemen, and this archer has only one leg on which it moves remarkably swiftly, akin to the Sciopods of Graeco-Roman geography. In the Norse text, this creature is called an “*einfætingr*”, one-footed, and the Norsemen accordingly names that location *Einfætingaland*, or Land of the one-footed (Sveinsson og Thordarson, 1935: 231-32; Halldórsson, 1935: 431-32). These examples from Norwegian and Icelandic texts show that even at the Western extreme of European geographical knowledge, the Graeco-Roman typology still had its effect.

The malleability of the Graeco-Roman geography and its typology allowed later writers to adapt the names and the descriptions to their own physical and spiritual worldview. The pre-Christian geography continued in writings by Christian authors and, as in the case of Abbo's treatment of Hyperborea, could have a biblical dimension conferred upon them. Not only the Graeco-Roman, but also the Germanic pagan heritage could be infused with Christian meaning, as when the monstrous antagonist Grendel in the Old English poem *Beowulf* (8th century) is interpreted as descending from Cain (Williams, 1982: 19-39).

Christians in the wild

Since the medieval reception, interpretation and continuation of the Graeco-Roman typological heritage belonged to a Christian context, it is also important to point out a few caveats to the points made above regarding the marks of cultural otherness. Although the ideas about cultural otherness found in the Graeco-Roman travelogues and geographical descriptions were continued in writings by authors belonging to the Christian contexts, it is worth remembering that Christianity itself once belonged to a cultural other and that some of its early literature illustrated and even emphasized the differences between the Roman and the Christian cultures. Christianity, in other words, belonged to the monstrous other once. Therefore, we need to understand that in the construction of otherness in medieval thought, the question of religious affiliation plays a crucial part. In the following, I will provide some examples of how several aspects typically attributed to the monstrous other in the Middle Ages, could belong to Christians, as long as they professed faith in Christ's resurrection.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in the early Christian attitude towards the Roman city and its urban life. Services in the early church were often conducted in the cemeteries outside the walls of the Roman city, and the cult of martyrs emerged around the extramural gravesites of the Christians who had died for their faith. Some early Christians even shunned urban life altogether and sought the peace of the wilderness, in order to avoid the worldly corruption of the city. Such an idea, presumably nurtured by a hostile relationship between Christians and Roman civic authorities, also had strong biblical resonance since the Bible often presents the city as a place of sin. For instance, the first city was established by Cain according to Genesis 4:17, and as such was marked by the sin of the first murderer. Furthermore, the city was established after Cain's wife gave birth to their son Enoch, and thus the establishment of the first city is associated with sexual intercourse which in Christian thought is seen as a negative desire. Moreover, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah met their destruction because their inhabitants deviated from the commandments of God (Genesis 19:1-29). The city of Sodom became a frequent point of reference for the biblical prophets, such as Ezekiel (16:49).

The primary example of the Christian distaste of the urban scene is Saint Antony, the father of monasticism, whose life by Athanasius describes how he fled the city and established his cell in the desert. That the wilderness was known to be the habitation of monstrous races even to Christians at this point, can be clearly seen in Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes*, in which he describes the old Antony's journey to his senior in sanctity. On his way to visit Paul, Antony meets a Hippocentaur, a being whose monstrous nature is identified both by physical appearance (half man, half horse) and his barely intelligible speech (Jerome, 2001: 229). Jerome ponders whether this beast was presented to Antony by the devil to discourage him, or whether it belonged to the desert. In any case, Jerome states that the desert is the home of monsters (Jerome, 2001: 230). The home of monsters, then, also becomes the home of Christians who seek a life in prayer and solitude. Saint Antony provided a powerful example to later Christians who also sought to settle outside the urban scene. We read for instance in the *Life of Martin* by Sulpicius Severus that when Saint Martin came to Poitiers, he sought the wilderness outside the city (Sulpicius Severus, 1949: 111-12). The same underlying desire to dissociate with the secular world is also a fixture of monasticism until the coming of the mendicant orders of the thirteenth century.

Another element typically belonging to the culturally monstrous of Graeco-Roman and medieval thought, is the clothing or lack thereof. As mentioned above, a lack of textiles was seen as a mark of otherness. In some cases, the lack of textiles resulted in clothing made of animal hide, whereas others – such as the pygmies reported by several Graeco-Roman authors – only hide their nakedness by clothing themselves with their own hair (Friedman, 2000: 18). Naturally, nakedness itself was also seen as a mark of cultural monstrosity. However, Christian history also contains

several figures who did not use textiles and who lived in the wild. A primary example is John the Baptist who, in the manner of Old Testament prophets such as Ezekiel, Jeremiah or Elijah, lived in the desert and only wore a loin-cloth made of camel hair and fed on locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4). Another, post-biblical, case is Saint Mary of Egypt who repented from a life of prostitution and sought refuge in the desert. When her clothes disintegrated from long use, her hair grew long and covered her nakedness. As we have seen, this bears some resemblance to the Graeco-Roman pygmies, although these cases are completely independent.

From the above examples, we see that aspects that belonged uniquely to the monstrous nations according to Graeco-Roman thought, could belong to figures revered by Christians for their faith. Moreover, these differences do not appear to have caused any problems or embarrassment for the later Christian authors picking up the Graeco-Roman typology of the cultural other. The important factor here, the disestranging factor as it were, is that Antony, John the Baptist and Mary of Egypt were all examples of the Christian faith, and therefore were assured a place on this side of the cultural border. By professing the true faith, Christian figures could remain outside the monstrous despite living in the monstrous regions or practicing certain culturally monstrous affectations.

This did not only count for important individuals from Christian history, however. A similar sentiment, namely that monstrosity can be bridged by disestranging factors, can be seen in the fictitious *Letter of Prester John*, in which the many monstrous vassals of Prester John are nonetheless Christian, because they cultivate land (Friedman, 2000: 60). By cultivating land – and thus rejecting a nomadic lifestyle – and accepting Christianity, they have nonetheless overcome their physical monstrosity and become Christians. However, not all Christians were guaranteed a place on this side of the cultural border. Heretics were of course on the other side of the cultural border. The obverse point can also be made, however, namely that a commendable lifestyle cannot relieve monstrosity if it is performed by non-Christians. This is clear in the frequent inclusions of the Gymnosophists among the monstrous nations. In his encyclopedic *Liber De Natura Rerum* from the mid-thirteenth century, Thomas de Cantimpré talks about how the Gymnosophists live in poverty and humility and spurn the vanity of transitory life (Thomas de Cantimpré, 1973: 98). These are all aspects that are hailed in Christian saints in medieval hagiography, but because the Gymnosophists are not Christian – and presumably because tradition has always treated them as such – Thomas includes his account of this nation in his third book, which deals with the monstrous humans of the east.

4. Monstrous women

One of the underlying rationales for deeming something monstrous is an awareness, and a disapproval, of deviation. In the Christian culture of medieval Europe, this awareness and this disapproval was inherited from the Graeco-Roman texts and supplied with the religious anxieties of the medieval church and the medieval social hierarchy. As a consequence, we see that unorthodox Christians are subject to various degrees of scepticism. This scepticism ranges from the scoffing epithet of “murmurantes” given by Aquinas to poor defenders of Orthodoxy, to the dismissal of Nestorian Christians as well-intentioned but essentially malpracticing by William of Rubruck, and onward to the more damning descriptions of various heretical sects of the central Middle Ages.

Another form of deviation which was closely connected with the monstrous is that female behaviour which is not sanctioned by established social custom. Such female behaviour therefore became an example of cultural otherness, and very often this otherness was understood to inhabit the periphery of the medieval world. In short, women on the monstrous peripheries were different from the women of Christian Europe, and by examining how these peripheral women were formulated, we get an even clearer sense of the otherness that these monstrous nations represented. In the following, therefore, I wish to present how the Amazons, the hairiness of peripheral women, and sexual deviation, all combined into an idea of the monstrous other in medieval thought.

This negative view of deviation did not originate among Christian thinkers, and can be seen already in the Graeco-Roman texts. However, with the rise of Christian culture and literature, this form of deviation also garnered a poignant religious dimension due to the traditional negative role of women in biblical history. Women's deviation from the norm was therefore often used in satire or in descriptions of the monstrous, and the purpose was usually to emphasize the nature of the right order of society by lifting up its mirror image.⁷ This deviation could be seen for instance in fantasies about women who ruled without men, as in the case of the Amazons (cf. Friedman, 2005: 55-56). Another form of deviation was of course sexual deviation, exemplified by promiscuous women, or for that matter any kind of sexually active women. As an example of this, we have the mountain women encountered by the narrator in *Libro de buen amor* by Juan Ruiz (d.c.1350). These women are not only physically monstrous but also sexually dominant, and they inhabit the periphery of the civilized Spain (Hartmann, 2005: 148-54). In the following, we will see this kind of sexual as well as physical otherness exhibited by women inhabiting peripheries even further away from Christian Europe.

⁷ I am indebted to Professor Roman Hankeln for this point.

The Amazons

The most famous of these women are of course the warlike Amazons. This nation of warrior women, who even cut off one of their breasts to be better able to shoot with bow and arrows, has a long history in Graeco-Roman literature. Originally, it appears that they were placed in Thracia, which is where they are located by Vergilius in the Aeneid (Book 11), but as so many other monstrous nations they too were moved about in the peripheral geography. As often appears to be the case, moreover, the change in location was often dictated by the vantage point of the new author or the subject matter of the new text (cf. Baynham, 2001: 115). Therefore, in the Alexander romance attributed to Pseudo-Callisthenes and translated into Latin in the fourth century and into Armenian in the fifth (Wolohojian, 1969: 2), the Amazons are situated somewhere in the east in the land of Amazonia, an island placed in a great river and inhabited by 200 000 warrior maidens (Wolohojian, 1969: 141ff). We also saw in the introduction that a similar placement in the east can be found in the historiography of Hamartolos. The notion that the Amazons inhabited some location in the east was common throughout the Middle Ages, and was perpetuated by the popularity of the Alexander romance and its numerous vernacular renditions. Thomas de Cantimpré (1201-72) includes the Amazons among the “monstrous humans of the Orient”, *monstruosis hominibus orientis*, found in book three of his *Liber de Natura Rerum* written in the mid-thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, John Mandeville repeated the general substance of the Alexander romance regarding the location of Amazonia in his *Travels*, and gave the location as “next to Chaldea” (Moseley, 2005: 116).

Although medieval authors were generally in agreement about Amazonia being somewhere in the east, one significant exception can be found in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis*. In this chronicle of the Hamburg church province, the Amazons feature in three passages which are all important to our subject here. In the last of these three passages, Book 4, Chapter 25, Adam sets out to give a brief description of Sweden. He begins by outlining the location of Sweden's most important cities, and proceeds to describe the territories east of Sweden. Here, Adam says, are the Riphean Mountains, a mountain range well known to the Graeco-Roman authors and usually placed much further south and east. The snow-covered wilderness of the Riphean Mountains is populated by several monstrous humans, “*monstruosi hominum*” (Adam, 1876: 173), and among them we find the cyclops, the dog-heads and the Amazons. From this description Adam goes on to describe the superstitions of the Swedes. (On its signification, see Garipzanov, 2011: 22ff.)

A more extensive description of the Amazons near Sweden can be found in Adam's first two references to them. The first mention of the Amazons comes in Book 3, Chapter 15, which continues as an epilogue to the story of how the Swedes

had chased off Bishop Adalward. In the opening of this chapter, Adam says explicitly that what he is about to relate happened as a divine punishment for driving away the bishop. Then Adam tells of how Anund, the son of the Swedish king, was sent off to conquer land and came to the fatherland of women, “*patriam feminarum*”, which is the land of the Amazons. When the Swedes entered this country, the king’s son and the entire army were killed by water which the Amazons had poisoned (Adam, 1876: 105-06).

The final reference to Amazons in *Gesta Hammaburgensis* can be found in Book 4, Chapter 19. Here Adam describes the Baltic rim, and he states that this is where the land of women, “*terra feminarum*” is located, which is where the Amazons reside (Adam, 1876: 166-67). A note to this passage repeats the story of the Swedish king’s son, and it is not clear whether this was added by Adam or by a later reader who noted that both passages dealt with the Amazons. It is also not clear whether Adam envisioned these two descriptions to refer to the same place, described by two slightly different names, or whether we are here dealing with two different tribes of Amazons. However that may be, Adam provides some further details about the Amazons by the Baltic coast, and in this we see that Adam was also influenced by the traditional legends of the Amazons and their practice for reproductions. There are, we read, four explanations as to how these Baltic Amazons become with child. Some say that they get pregnant from drinking the water, while others say that they are impregnated by either passing merchants or prisoners which they keep among them. The fourth version tells of how they have sexual congress with monsters, “*monstris*”, which are not rare in that area. This last version is the one Adam himself presents as the most likely one, and he buttresses that claim by stating that all passing men are driven away in a manly fashion. As for the children of the Amazons, Adam tells this: If the child is male, it is a Cynocephalus, a dog-head. If the child is female, it grows up to be a beautiful woman. This anecdote is then followed by a description of the Cynocephali, and that some of them have been seen in Russia as captives (Adam, 1876:166-67).

The description of the Amazons according to Adam of Bremen is unusual among the many stories concerning the Amazons in medieval literature. What is perhaps particularly interesting for us here is that Adam increases the degree of their deviation. The Amazons of *Gesta Hammaburgensis* are not only refusing to submit to the rule of men, they also have intercourse with monsters and engender new monsters. An echo of Adam’s account can also be found in the aforementioned *Historia Norvegie*, in which the anonymous author records an account of a certain Virginum Terram, a land of maidens, north of Norway where the women conceived by drinking sea-water (Ekrem and Mortensen, 2003: 54-55). In their modes of procreation, and in their dominant relationship with men, the Amazons belonged clearly to the cultural other in medieval thought.

Hairy women on the peripheries

The Amazons belong to the culturally monstrous and are indubitably the most famous of these deviant, monstrous women. But there are also other peripheral women who have a claim to be monstrous for various other reasons. They encompass a wide variety of monstrous nations, and therefore I take this as an opportunity to present some examples of monstrous women who are not Amazons.

The first example can be found in the *Letter from Alexander to Aristotle*, in its Old English translation found in BL Cotton MS Vitellius A XV and translated by R. D. Fulk. This manuscript is believed to be written c.1000, but the date of the translation of the letter itself is not clear. The letter of Alexander is a literary tradition in its own right and engendered several versions of the narrative (Friedman, 2000: 7). In the Old English translation, which is retained, the Amazons do not feature, but it is here we encounter the aforementioned fish-fauns, the “Ictifafonas”, and they are described as so hairy and rough as to resemble wild animals (Fulk, 2010: 66-67). Among the Ictifafonas, the women are not different from the men of the nation, but they do present us with one important characteristic of some wild women, namely their hairiness.

That monstrous women could be identified by excessive growth of hair can be seen in various medieval texts. Again we can turn to Adam of Bremen, in whose chronicle it is said that, allegedly, in the mountains of Norway there are bearded women, whose men hide in the forest and – as we saw above – do not speak but rather gnash their teeth together (Adam, 1876: 179-80). Adam’s account bears a striking resemblance to a passage in Pliny (Book 6, Chapter 36) which was also included in Solinus (LVI, 10-12), where we are told of the island Gorgades, the former dwelling-place of the Gorgons of ancient myth, situated two days’ sailing from the Atlantic seaboard of the African mainland. Pliny states that the Carthaginian explorers of this island told of women who were covered in hair and that the men ran away. In Solinus’s rendition of the story the women are also described as fast as birds. This tale of a Carthaginian encounter with what presumably were African monkeys, then, later came to provide a description of the inhabitants of Northern Norway in Adam of Bremen’s chronicle. It should be noted that Adam applies a different lexicon, “*mulieres esse barbatae*”, than Pliny, “*hirta feminarum corpora*”, and Solinus, “*hirta [...] corpore*”. We do, however, know that Adam read Solinus, through Adam’s own references to him.

It is possible that Pliny’s account of the Carthaginian expedition to the Gorgades draws from the same material which provided the Alexander tradition with its Ictifafonas and the Old English *Wonders of the East* with its Homodubii who likewise are covered with hair (although the women are not singled out here) (Fulk, 2010: 20-21). Pliny himself has probably inspired a wide range of stories concerning

hairy women throughout medieval texts, as I suggest to be the case for Adam of Bremen. These trajectories of Plinian inspiration are of course impossible to map comprehensively, but at least we know that Pliny was the basis for several of the descriptions of marvellous humanoids in medieval texts. One example is Thomas de Cantimpré's *Liber de Natura Rerum*, whose material is largely taken from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, and the material about the Gorgades, or Gorgones Insulae, can also be found in Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, book 1, chapter 79 (Vincent of Beauvais, 1965: 29). Among the various monsters from the east, we find the some women from India whose beards reach to their breasts and who dress in animal skins and live by hunting (Thomas de Cantimpré, 1973: 99). The monstrosity of these bearded women recorded in *Liber de Natura Rerum* is expounded more fully in a verse translation into French by the so-called Clerk of Enghien, c.1290. This clerk translated the short third book into verse with added moral commentaries connecting the monstrous races to figures of his own society. The bearded women represent women who transgress the natural balance between men and women, and the clerk explains this by stating that a beard signifies boldness and a woman should not be bold but meek (Friedman, 2000: 127-29). Here we see how physical monstrosity is closely connected with anxieties about social transgression in the medieval imagination, and the hairy women thus represent a monstrous otherness because of a physical attribute, but also due to their boldness, presumably to be understood as sexual boldness. Further examples of the sexual side of the monstrous otherness of peripheral women will be examined in the subsequent section, in order to show how prominent a place sexuality had in the formulation of otherness in the Middle Ages.

Sexual monstrosity in women

The history of Christian literature is rife with negative views of sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular. The plethora of texts advocating virginity from Late Antiquity onwards is a strong testimony to the ubiquity of this negative view, and we need not delve far into the details of this literature here. Since sexuality was seen as a negative force even when enacted within the bounds established by canon law, it is not surprising that sexual transgression was considered monstrous. Consequently, one of the most significant forms of deviation among monstrous women in the medieval imagination was sexual deviation. We have seen hints of this in Adam's treatment of the Baltic Amazons who engender Cynocephali from intercourse with local monsters. The gravity of intercourse between the species is also emphasized as an explanation of the monstrosity of hyenas who, although not human or humanoid, are evaluated according to the same standard of morality as a human would be. In one thirteenth-century bestiary, Oxford MS Bodley 764, part of the hyena's monstrosity is that it breeds with lions and engenders a monster called the crocote (Barber, 1993: 47).

In Thomas de Cantimpré's third book of *Liber de Natura Rerum*, we find one remarkable instance of such sexual transgression. Here, citing a certain Jacobus, Thomas presents a monstrous nation in the mountains of India where the children are born together with toads. If, Thomas relates, the child is born without a toad companion, the mother is judged as an adulteress and is repudiated by her husband (Thomas de Cantimpré, 1973: 99). The toad was seen in a very negative light in the Middle Ages. This can be exemplified by Thomas de Cantimpré himself, who elaborates on the toad in book 9. Here he says that it is a venomous creature which has a pestilential appearance (Thomas de Cantimpré, 1973: 299).

When talking about monstrous birth, it is also important to note that such occurrences were not unknown to have happened among civilized nations. In book 11, chapter 3 of his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville provides an example of such a monstrous, unnatural birth from Lucan's *Pharsalia*, where the poet refers to a woman in Umbria who gave birth to a serpent (Isidore, 2010: 244). However, in this case the monstrous birth was an exception to the natural order, and an exception which was believed to be a portent (cf. Friedman, 2000: 107-30). Consequently, although the birth was monstrous, the Umbrian people were not monstrous as a whole because this was something extraordinary. The nation in the Indian mountains in Thomas de Cantimpré's *Liber de Natura Rerum* was monstrous as a whole because this monstrous birth was common, indeed expected, order of things among them.

As a final example of sexually monstrous women on the periphery, I want to dwell on an anecdote from John Mandeville's *Travels*. The anecdote is found in a description of a number of inhabited islands beyond the dangerous valley. In one of these islands, Mandeville states, the women are believed to have poisonous serpents within them, so that when a woman lost her virginity the man she lay with would get bitten in the penis and die. For this reason, there was established a class of young men, *gadlibriens* or "fools of despair", whose task it was to sleep with a woman on the first night of her wedding night in order to save her husband's life (Moseley, 2005: 175). This is a kind of monstrosity where the woman represents not only a deviation from norms but also a danger to men. This anecdote is one among several depicting the socially monstrous nations of these various islands, and is another example of how women can be depicted as monstrous through their sexuality, even though they are not transgressing the bounds of nature. The otherness of these islanders, in other words, is framed by the danger which the woman represents for the man through sexual practice, not too dissimilar from how the Amazons were culturally monstrous for being sexually, as well as socially, dominant in their relationship with men.

5. The Alexander Tradition, and Gog and Magog

Andrew Anderson wrote that “[t]he legend of Alexander’s Gate and of the enclosed nations is in reality the story of the frontier in sublimated mythologized form” (Anderson, 1932: 8). In other words, Alexander’s Gate becomes a physical example of the divide between the observer and the cultural other which permeated medieval thought, and in this section I wish to explore how the iconography of this wall played a part in the construction of otherness among several medieval authors. In the present discussion, I will especially look at how the story of Alexander’s Wall was presented by Isidore of Seville and Theodoricus Monachus, and how this story became tied up with the biblical story of Gog and Magog. In order to show that Alexander’s Wall also played a role in constructing otherness in cultures beyond Christendom, I will provide examples of how the Alexander legend became fused with the Quranic tradition in the Muslim world.

Some of the earliest literary treatments of the periphery of the Graeco-Roman world were centred on Alexander the Great and his campaigns in Central Asia (Friedman, 2000: 7). The most famous of these is probably the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, which was even translated into Old English. Out of this legendary repertoire, there also came the so-called *Romance of Alexander*, which was most likely composed “in Alexandria sometime before the fourth century A. D.”. This text was widely disseminated throughout the medieval world, and was translated into a number of vernacular languages. Some manuscripts wrongly attribute the work to Aristotle’s relative Callisthenes, and the author has therefore become known as “Pseudo-Callisthenes” (Wolohojian, 1969: 1).

It was not only these fictional enterprises which helped to establish Alexander’s place in the medieval literary history. In his geographical descriptions in *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder also made frequent references to the travels of Alexander, presumably to provide his readers and listeners with a better sense of the location of the many countries and cities included in his work. Since Pliny provided material for generations of encyclopedists and geographical writers in the Middle Ages, we should not underestimate his effect on the dissemination of Alexander material as well. For instance, Pliny’s references to the Alexander legend were also retained by Thomas de Cantimpré in his *Liber de Natura Rerum*, and regardless of whether Thomas himself was familiar with the legendary tradition so widespread in the Middle Ages, he must either have seen some usefulness in these references or had too much awe for his source material to omit them.

The Alexander legend in its various forms and outlets had a powerful impact on the medieval geographical imagination, especially the monstrous inhabitants along the Oriental periphery. The Alexander legend, both in the *Letter* and in the *Romance*, is rife with memorable monsters, both humanoids and beasts. Among

these, the hirsute Ictifafonas have already been mentioned (Fulk, 2010: 67; Wolohojian, 1969: 115), and of course the most famous Amazons (Wolohojian, 1969: 141). Almost as famous as the Amazons are the Gymnosophists, otherwise known as Bragmanni (Wolohojian, 1969: 121), the naked, cave-dwelling philosophers who, in the course of their literary trajectory, came to be known as two distinct nations, as we see in Thomas de Cantimpré's *Liber de Natura Rerum* (Thomas de Cantimpré, 1973: 98).

The Wall of Alexander

One of the most notable features of the Alexander legend as it came to be known in the Middle Ages, however, was that of Alexander's Wall. This story exists in various versions and can, as we shall see, be found both among Muslim writers as well as Christian writers of the medieval period. The core of the story goes as follows: Alexander encountered a people on the brink of destitution due to the violent raids committed by a joint force of many nations from the north. These nations were by their culture and their appearance so repellent to Alexander that he ordered a giant wall to be built across a mountain pass, lest they break loose upon the entire world. The most succinct summary of how this material was conflated with Christian eschatology and the descriptions by Solinus is found in the Hereford Mappa Mundi (Kline, 2005: 36-37).

It is not clear at which point the gate entered into the Alexander legend, but Andrew Anderson has pointed out that implicit or explicit literary testimony for the idea of Alexander having built a wall can be found reaching all the way back to Tacitus and Suetonius (Anderson, 1932: vii). This wall was believed to have been constructed at Dariel north of Tiflis, i.e. Tbilisi in modern-day Georgia. Later, the Iron Gates, a fortification constructed at Derbend in modern-day Dagestan by the Persian king Chosroe Anashirwan (d.579 AD), became confused with the legend of Alexander's Gate (Anderson, 1932: vii-viii). This can be seen in William of Rubruck's account of his travels, in which he identifies the Iron Gate at Derbend with the gate constructed by Alexander the Great (William of Rubruck, 2009: 260).

The attraction of the story of Alexander's Gate is easily understandable within a literature which has as one of its primary features the emphasis on the exoticism of the culturally other, as is the case of so many geographical texts from the Graeco-Roman period through the Middle Ages. For the Christian and Muslim writers, however, Alexander's Gate held an additional attraction, namely the identification of the nations which inhabited the area beyond the gate. Throughout the medieval period, several historical nations were identified as the ones who had been walled up by Alexander, and who eventually managed to break through the gate. During its reception in the Christian and Islamic worlds, the Alexander legend

took on an additional dimension, as the nations beyond Alexander's Gate were identified not only with historical nations but also with the land of Magog ruled by Gog as found both in the Book of Ezekiel and in Revelation (see above) and in the Quran. This provided an apocalyptic dimension to the inclosed nations.

The exact history of this confusion of the enclosed nations and Gog and Magog is complex. It does not follow a straight trajectory since both the identification of the nations and of Gog and Magog could vary according to the writer's historical setting and the texts which influenced him. In this section, therefore, I will only point to a few selected texts to illustrate how the story of Alexander's Gate became a feature in the medieval construction of the other.

In his *Etymologiae* (Book 9, Chapter 66), Isidore of Seville introduced the Huns into the Alexander legend, in a way. According to Isidore, the Huns – whom he also identifies as the Avars – first lived in the Maeotian Swamps. The Maeotian Swamps, known in Islamic geography as the Bahr Mayutis or Sea of Maeotis (Lunde and Stone, 2012: 235, n.38), is one of those names from Graeco-Roman geography which took on a sinister connotation. This connotation was partly due to its position in the nebulously defined northern world, and perhaps also because, as John Friedman argues, that swamps were among the wild landscapes, like desert or mountains, often associated with monsters (Friedman, 2000: 152). These Huns, Isidore continues, broke through the enclosure erected by Alexander in the Caucasus to keep out the wild nations, and after this they terrorized the East and even exacted tribute from Egypt and Ethiopia (Isidore, 2010: 195). It is worth noting that the Huns are not identified as one of the inclosed nations, only that they broke through Alexander's Gate. At an earlier section of the *Etymologiae* (Book IX, Chapter 27), Isidore identifies Magog as a historical individual who was the son of Japheth, son of Noah. According to some, Isidore says, the Goths and the Scythians descended from him, although Isidore himself does not confirm this. Isidore's legacy was strong and long-lasting, and on his account of his mission to Mangu Khan in 1253, William of Rubruck also made references to Isidore and his version of the history of the Huns (William of Rubruck, 2009: 138-39).

Isidore's version of the story of Alexander's Gate does neither provide any detailed imagery for the enclosed nations, nor for the Huns. Centuries later, however, Isidore's text seems to have provided the basic details for a much more sinister picture drawn by the Norwegian chronicler Theodoricus Monachus, who wrote his *Historia antiquitate Regum Norwagiensum* around 1180. In chapter 17 of his book, Theodoricus presents his own version of the origin of the Huns, and even though he lists Jordanes' *Getica* as his source, it is likely that the version ultimately comes from a confusion of Jordanes and Isidore, possibly via Sigebert of Gembloux (Theodoricus, 1998: 81-82, nn. 159-61; cf. Mierow 2006: 85-86). In the *Historia antiquitate*, Theodoricus also identifies the homeland of the Huns as the Maeotian Swamps, but according to him this was the place where Alexander

enclosed them, and it was from here they burst forth into Europe (and not into the East as Isidore says) and killed saints in France and Germany. Theodoricus spends some time describing their half-wild, “*semifera*”, appearance, such as how they have black holes in lieu of eyes, and how they are cut in their cheeks so as to learn to endure pain already when receiving their mothers’ milk (Theodoricus, 1998: 24). The purpose of this lengthy description is to provide a type for the Norwegian pagans who killed King Olaf Haraldsson, Norway’s patron saint, two chapters later in the book. Nonetheless, this is an example of how the story of Alexander’s Wall could evolve to fit into narratives of the medieval world.

Theodoricus Monachus employed the story of Alexander’s Gate to strengthen his own narrative, but the story itself was to him ancient history. Another, earlier, twelfth-century source, however, deals with the enclosed nations as a matter of contemporary history. This is the aforementioned *Primary Chronicle* from the Caves Monastery in Russia, written down c.1118. In a passage from this chronicle there is a story of a people far to the north who lives behind a mountain, and who has managed to make a small opening in the rock through which they trade. Their language is incomprehensible, and they are identified as the people shut in by Alexander when he beheld their bestial and impure behaviour, such as their all-encompassing and unclean diet. After a brief description of the erection of the gate, the chronicler states this and other filthy nations of the northern mountains shall emerge into the world on God’s command at the end of the world (Lunde and Stone, 2012: 180-81). Although the *Primary Chronicle* does not overtly identify these nations with Gog and Magog, the reference to the end times places this nameless northern nation in the context of Revelation 20:7-8. This is the same mechanism we see in Abbo of Fleury’s *Passio Eadmundi* when talking about the Hyperboreans. Even though he also does not mention Gog and Magog by name, it is clear that the Hyperboreans are in the same company as Gog and Magog according to Revelation (Abbo, 1872: 72). Similarly, Adam of Bremen identifies Sweden as the home of Gog and Magog by recourse to Ezekiel, but does not invoke Revelation. However, as Ildar Garipzanov has argued, the apocalyptic connotation is clear enough (Garipzanov, 2011: 24-25). In other words, we see how the apocalyptic iconography of Gog and Magog is so strong that even without the overt identification a distant, peripheral and monstrous nation can still be presented in the same mould and fill the same narrative function in a historical vista.

The Islamic Tradition⁸

Perhaps the most forceful merging of the Alexander legend with the account of Gog and Magog can be found in the Islamic tradition. Since Islam is an offshoot

⁸ I am indebted to Doctor Shazia Jagot for advice regarding Islamic exegesis.

of the same religious branch as Judaism and Christianity, the names of Gog and Magog have their place also in the Quran, and we read about them in the Sura al-Kahf, the sura of the cave (Quran 18:83-100). In this passage we are told the story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn, "He of Two Horns", a figure set upon earth by God.⁹ In the Sura Al-Kahf, we are told how Dhu'l-Qarnayn met a people greatly depredated by the raids of Ya'juj and Ma'juj, or Gog and Magog, who here seems to be identified as two different persons, as in Revelation 20:8. Dhu'l-Qarnayn then erects a strong wall of iron to keep them out, and God states that Gog and Magog will eventually come out from their enclosure, and this will be a day of Judgement.

The parallels between the story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn and Alexander the Great are evident. We do not know whether this story draws on the existing Alexander legend, but later Islamic writers had no difficulty in identifying the two as the same figure. For instance, Qudama ibn Ja'far (d.948) in his *Kitab al-kharaj wa sina'at al-kitaba*, provides a version of the Alexander story in which Dhu'l-Qarnayn, as an Alexander following God, went north after a peace treaty with the king of China – an anachronistic insertion – and learned of several Turkic nations who bordered what must be the Arctic Sea. These nations were raiders, and were locked in on all sides by mountains and the Arctic Sea, except that there was a small pass through which they travelled. This passage was then duly closed by Dhu'l-Qarnayn (Lunde and Stone, 2012: 95-98). Qudama ibn Ja'far does not mention Ya'juj and Ma'juj, but nor does he have to since the Quran tells us that these are the nations whom Dhu'l-Qarnayn enclosed. The story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn and Gog and Magog is repeated by several Islamic authors, and was interpreted variously by several medieval Islamic exegetes. In these exegeses, it is interesting to note that also the people whom Dhu'l-Qarnayn saves from these monstrous nations are themselves often described as possessing features common to the monstrous or at least culturally different, such as unintelligible speech and lack of proper housing (Nasr, 2015: 756-61). This underscores that in Islam, as among certain Christian commentators, cultural monstrosity in itself was not an obstacle to obtain redemption at the end of times.

The iconography of Gog and Magog

The conflation of the Alexander legend and Gog and Magog provides one of the clearest examples of a boundary against the other in medieval literature. However, as we saw in Theodoricus' treatment of the enclosed Huns, this physical boundary is in and of itself not enough to create the proper distinction between the authors and the people beyond Alexander's Gate. Rather, the story seems to have invited further extrapolations of their monstrosity, as in the Russian *Primary Chronicle* in which, drawing on the writings of Pseudo-Methodius (Garstad 2012: 22-27), the

⁹ I use the spelling of this name as provided in the Study Quran (Nasr 2015).

diet of this culturally monstrous people also comes to include flies, serpents and aborted fetuses (Lunde and Stone, 2012: 181). The *Primary Chronicle* does not provide any details regarding the appearance of this monstrous nation, but several Islamic authors described them in some more detail. Ibn Khurradadhbih (d.c.911), for instance, recounts that these two nations, Gog and Magog, are of different sizes, with the nation of Gog as the taller of the two, and the heights of the inhabitants can vary between one cubit (45.7 centimetres) and one cubit and a half (Lunde and Stone, 2012: 101). It is tempting to see in this a conflation between Gog and Magog and the pygmies believed to inhabit the Far East, and of whom both Pliny and Thomas de Cantimpré speak. Zakariya al-Qazwini (d.1283), however, was much more colourful in his description of Ya'juj and Ma'juj in his *Athar al-bilad wa akhbar al-'ibad*, written in 1263 and revised in 1275. Here, the monstrous aspect of the two nations is depicted very clearly, and not only do they eat vermin and grass, they also multiply by the thousands. Their bodies are only half of a medium-sized human, but their appearance is terrifying as they have fangs and claws, hair growing down their backs, and two very big ears. One of these ears is hairy on the outside and hairless on the inside, while with the other ear it is the other way around. We might here detect an echo of the Panotii of Pliny, and we see also that a physical frontier was not sufficient to distinguish between “us” and “them”, also an emphasis on the monstrous features of “them” was an important part of establishing the cultural boundary.

Alexander's Wall represented a cultural border both to Christians and to Muslims, and thus the Wall allows us to see how otherness is constructed along the same lines both to Christians and to Muslims in the Middle Ages. The otherness was marked by physical as well as cultural monstrosity, and an aspect that was just as important – as illustrated in the story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn – was the matter of religious affiliation.

6. Summary remarks

The construction of otherness in medieval thought brought into play a wide range of aspects from Graeco-Roman and biblical texts. Added to these aspects were the concerns, anxieties and norms of the medieval societies in which the ideas about otherness were formulated and put to writing. Throughout the Middle Ages there was composed a plethora of texts in which both cultural and physical otherness, and its often explicit monstrosity, was formulated. Even though the texts could emphasize different aspects of this monstrous otherness, we see how formulations of otherness appear in very similar forms in texts originating from markedly different geographical and cultural backgrounds. We also see how the same traditions, the Graeco-Roman and the biblical, influence texts written far apart geographically, chronologically, and culturally, and we see how these traditions infuse both Christian as well as Islamic formulations of otherness.

Throughout this discussion I have sought to bring together a wide range of sources in order to emphasize the similarities in the medieval construction of otherness. In many cases these similarities can be ascribed to a common source, and we see this perhaps most clearly in the longevity of the biblical imagery of the north, or in the monsters formulated by Pliny the elder, or by the fusion of the Alexander legend with quranic material. Moreover, one important point to be made when considering the impact of these common sources is that the trajectories of influence are often immensely complicated. This means that although several texts have a common source for their formulation of otherness, this common source might have influenced various texts in different ways and through different routes. This point is important to keep in mind. Although two texts contemporary to each other exhibit similar ideas about otherness, the trajectories of their influences might differ markedly. As such, I have intended this article both as a way to show the similarities in formulations of otherness across a wide geographical, chronological and cultural span, but also as a way to warn against any temptation to oversimplify the complex web of textual and cultural connections which have influenced the formulation of otherness in medieval thought.

Another point to this article has been to show how the longevity of the Graeco-Roman and biblical traditions has been aided by an inherent malleability in the original texts, which allowed authors from very different time periods and geographical locations to appropriate and adapt the formulations of otherness into their own cultural and geographical horizons. This is how the biblical north, or the Sciopods or Amazons of Graeco-Roman literature, could be relevant to authors in Germany or Scandinavia long after the composition of their source material.

Furthermore, by exploring the many forms of otherness expressed in this range of medieval texts, we also see how a seemingly simple construction of otherness can in fact be a very composite image. We see that there are several factors at play in this construction, and that some of these factors can in fact be smoothed over in those cases where they belong to individuals who profess what is believed to be the true faith. This point should also prevent a too simplified picture of the construction of the medieval ideas of otherness. The other in medieval thought was not merely an amalgamation of various monstrous qualities. Rather, otherness was based on the peripheral, marked by such aspects as language, religion, physical appearance, cultural practices, gender, and/or geographical location. However, a geographical periphery was in and of itself not sufficient to establish otherness, some or all of the aforementioned featured had to be at play, and these features could all be smoothed over by affiliation to what was considered the true religion.

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