

Preface

What might have been considered an aberration of the “dark Middle Ages” or an isolated event of Nazism is frighteningly as relevant as ever. Antisemitism, racism, and intercommunal hostility are all said to be on the rise. At the same time, we live in a world where the difference between fact and fiction is becoming increasingly compromised, and where presidents and politicians in the “Free World” brand real events and fact-based reports “fake news.” Much of this book was written during the global Covid pandemic, and, as a medievalist, it has been hard not to see the flourishing conspiracy theories, scapegoating, vitriolic diatribes, and even outbreaks of violence through the lens of the fourteenth-century Black Death and the associated vilification of groups considered different from the social majority.

There are lessons for us to learn for today from investigating the portrayal of Jews and their use by authorities in countries entirely devoid of any religious minorities in the past: about how poisonous and cruel fictions are propagated and empathy eroded; how religious and ethnic difference is mocked from the pulpit (or any other soap-box); how hatred is celebrated in writing, images, and even music; how ignorance becomes the basis of a worldview and the obscenity of oppression merely a necessary trifle in ensuring the nation’s well-being; and how regulation – emotional, behavioural and social – is shaped through revulsion and hostility.

In many ways this book is an experiment, an attempt to see whether we can even talk of “Jews” in medieval Denmark and Sweden, let alone of a widespread attitude towards them. It does not aim to be exhaustive: indeed, it would be far beyond the scope of this book to discuss all East Norse texts that mention Jews. I have often had to focus on a selection of texts or works in either Old Danish or Old Swedish, but not both. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this book will open up new material and uncover strands of thought for other researchers and students to investigate further and demonstrate ways in which this might be done. While many of the topics will be familiar to historians of Jewish–Christian relations, the sources most probably will not. The book shows that Jews, or rather Christian fantasies of “the Jew,” were integral to medieval Scandinavians’ sense of themselves, of the infallibility of their faith and the Church, of time and history, and of place and geography. Although, perhaps, not a central feature of medieval Scandinavian thought, Jews permeate many different types of literary (and artistic) works, and alongside other “outside groups,” such as vagrants, foreigners, monsters, and even wandering preachers, provide a mirror through which we can see previously hidden characteristics of medieval Scandinavian society. And, as always, the many-centuries-long Middle Ages in all their variation – both familiar and strange – provide us with a glass in which to see our own reflection and to know ourselves better.

