Medieval England, in its dramatically contrasting responses to the non-European, non-Christian nations, races and communities it encountered and found to be irreducibly alien can at first glance appear – like Britain – to be a collective entity altogether strange and unpredictable. For instance, in a European century in which canon law inveighed against heresy, and heretics were persecuted in inquisition and crusade, the English monarch Edward I and his courtiers, in an extraordinary gesture of benevolence, attended a mass of East Syrian liturgy in 1288 celebrated by Rabban Sauma, a Nestorian monk born in China, of Ongut or Uighur extract, who had been sent with companions on a mission to the West by Arghun Khan, the Il-Khan of the Persian Khanate of the Mongol empire. The Mongols represented by Sauma – a nomadic militant people usually called ‘Tartars’ in English records – had been horrifically evoked earlier in the century by the chronicler of St Albans, Matthew Paris (recording events in narrative and letter under the years 1238, 1241, 1242 and 1243) as a population of cannibals: a monstrous, inhuman race of men with abnormally large heads, who fed on raw flesh and human beings (‘carnibus crudis et etiam humanis vescuntur’), and who were bent on devastating the Western world after having successfully conquered the East.²

Not only did these inhuman, animalistic men drink blood (iv, 76), but chiefs and followers alike in war fed on the cadavers of the slain, with the mutilated paps of virgins savagely killed by repeated rape saved up as delicacies for the chiefs (iv, 273). Naming the Great Khan, Genghis, by name (‘rex eorum, Zingiton vocatus’), the chronicler of St Albans focuses on the rapacious hands, bloody teeth and eager jaws of the Mongols, emphasizing their readiness at all times to eat the flesh of men and drink human blood
The English chronicler's understanding that Tartars were cannibals was not unique: Latin Christian authors, and even the Franciscan and Dominican emissaries to Mongol Eurasia—who compiled eyewitness ethnographies—attested in letter and travel account, chronicle and commentary, annals and encyclopedias, to a mindset in the thirteenth-century Latin West that the Asiatic steppe peoples of the north were anthropophagi.

If, to Latin Christians, Sauma's masters comprised a race of rabid aggressors of repellent aspect and subhuman practices, the Asiatic monk himself belonged to a heretical sect of 'wicked Christians'—in the words of Roger Bacon, thirteenth-century scientist-encyclopedist—whose founder, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, had been condemned for heresy in 431 by the Council of Ephesus, with his followers subsequently exiled and dispersed across the Eastern world. Indeed, Sauma had earlier been intensely and closely probed, in lengthy disputations with the cardinals of Rome, on key Nestorian deviations from the Latin Christian faith and professions, and had had to assure the cardinals that he journeyed to the West neither to dispute with Latin Christianity nor to proselytize. Performed expressly at Edward's behest, Sauma's oriental mass with its heretical liturgy culminated in the English king's receiving the Eucharist from the Nestorian emissary of the unclean Tartar empire. After the mass, Edward seized the opportunity, in an extraordinary pronouncement, to declare the unity and undivided oneness of the Christian faith in the countries of the Franks.

Were we to desire an example of unequal English response to alien communities and nations, we need hardly look any further than here, in the English king's benign participation in a heretical sacramental rite—whether as a public act of international diplomacy, or in genuine piety, or both—and his gracious magnanimity to the Nestorian emissary of an empire-mongering race feared and detested in the Latin West. For Edward I of course is historically remembered for legislative and governmental virulence toward another community of aliens with which England transacted—English Jews—and infamous, in particular, for his mass expulsion of the Jews in 1290, scarcely two years after his equable generosity towards the Nestorian representative of the Tartars.

The English king is also memorialized as an energetic crusader against yet another community of the foreign, Muslim infidels; he had refused, as Prince Edward, to be deflected from his crusading mission by his father Henry III, Pope Clement IV, the overwhelming cost of the enterprise, or domestic unrest (Tyerman 1988: 131). On crusade in the Holy Land in 1271, he successfully recaptured Acre, Nazareth and Haifa with little over a thousand men, courageously surviving an Islamic assassin's assault with a poisoned blade the year after; at his death in 1307, the pious king desired that his heart be taken on crusade by English crusaders asked to serve in the Holy Land for a year. If the public actions, legislative policies and official pronouncements of an English monarch may be taken as an index of the temper of the times, what might we then understand of medieval England's widely divergent responses and attitudes to the radically other races and nations it encountered?
In the Jaws of the Nation: Jews, English Identity and the Production of Historical Race

From the late thirteenth century to the fifteenth, the range of English responses to cultural encounters with a variety of racial and religious others becomes historically intelligible when we grasp that the kind of difference represented by each community encountered is subjected to a mechanism of selection that is tacitly in place during the period. This mechanism of selection, which operates on a principle of usefulness to the consolidation of English collective identity, implicitly orders alien nations into a hierarchy of intelligibility that prioritizes among the various forms of difference they represent. A prioritized hierarchy means that some forms of encountered difference are tacitly deemed worthy of engagement for the yields they seem to promise, while other forms of difference are refused, and become useful and of value only by virtue of the process of their exclusion.

In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a dream of conversion and empire in the Latin West, and the prospective vision of an expansive, universal, Latin Christendom reaching across the globe, made gestures of rapprochement towards the Mongol empire – including unlikely sacramental gestures like the English Edward’s – a worthwhile undertaking for pope and monarch alike, and indeed of particular interest to monarchs of outward-looking countries like England that were in the process of calibrating the character, and the range of meanings, of their collective identity and place in the world.

As a race of aliens outside Europe and England – and a global race palpably successful in the creation of a worldwide empire – Mongols were courted, despite their uncanny otherness, not only for their military value as allies against other cultural enemies (in particular, Muslims occupying the Holy Land) but also as a potential threshold in the expansion of Latin Christianity through the conversion of their populations, and for the lure and power of their example as successful globalists and empire-makers. Pope after pope wrote to Mongol khans urging conversion and instruction in the faith, and requested critical support for Catholic missions in Eurasia, West Asia and the Far East; English and French kings exchanged envoys and letters with Mongol khans, with Edward also engaging contingently in military alliances with Abaga Khan from as early as 1271.5

But the mechanism of selection that deemed one foreign nation worthy of engagement also operated to exclude other communities of aliens. Most notably, Jews – a community of internal aliens of ambiguous and contradictory status in England – troubled England’s aggressively Christian culture of the late thirteenth century, by virtue of both their presence in the English homeland and the intimate interdependence of Christian majority and Jewish minority populations within England’s borders. After their fiscal profitability to England’s economy had been exhausted through centuries of imposed legislative and governmental exactions, the Jewish minority population of unassimilated internal aliens became of greatest value to the English
collectivity, as matters developed, through their forcible expulsion and excision from English life.

English collective identity from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries incrementally underwent key transitions. A body of recent historical, sociological and cultural scholarship has concurred in seeing the most important of these transitions as shaped by historical circumstances and cultural forces functioning in tandem to facilitate the emergence of a medieval form of the nation in England (Bjørn, Grant and Singer 1994; Forde, Johnson and Murray 1995; Heng 2003; Menache 1985; Turville-Petre 1996).

The outcome was not an English nation-state, in the eighteenth- and post-eighteenth-century sense of that corporate entity, but a medieval configuration of an imagined political community - a community desired and projected by the polity through a range of popular articulations - and that is seen as arching over and across the many internal divides of class, region, status, occupation, language and local interests in the country, so that it is the unity and oneness (rather than the internal fragmentation of the collective community of the English) that is especially emphasized.

Key to the cohesion of an overarching English community otherwise riven by internal conflicts of interest is the outlining of the limits of membership in the privileged community through the specification of those who are outside it, by being demonstrably not English: those who are set apart, by virtue of religion, origin, phenotype, language, cultural practices and race, from any prospect of inclusion or belonging. Jews, 'aliens in medieval England to a more profound degree than perhaps anywhere else in western Europe' (Stacey 2000: 166), admirably served the centuries-long consolidation of English identity through the long haul: while they were resident in England; through their very removal from the homeland; and in the centuries afterwards, when the only figures of Jews to be found were those that existed exclusively in the English communal imagination and its wilful cultural creations of murderous, profaning Jewish ideotypes.

That England was obsessively focused on the alien minority in its midst is attested by the overwhelming attention and surveillance accorded to English Jews, so that modern scholars are driven to remark on the 'really exceptional feature of the history of the Jews in England', the oddity of 'how intensely they were recorded by the state: in no other country was a separate government department set up to control specifically Jewish affairs in the way the Jewish Exchequer did in England' (Skinner 2003: 2). English exceptionalism in over-documenting, regulating and controlling Jews concedes, of course, the importance of Jews as economic agents in English life - to crown, monastic houses and populace alike - and to an economic dependence on Jewish financial activity that partially accounts for the periodic mob massacres of Jews by the Christian English populace and opportunistic seizure and destruction of records of debt to Jewish financiers. Beyond the economic imperative, however, England's exceptionalism among the countries of Europe also ramified in a variety of ways that were in excess of economic rationality. For England

is . . . where the new anti-Semitic myths of Jewish greed, filth and diabolism found some of their earliest and most elaborate iconographic representations, on the west front of
Lincoln Cathedral, for example, and in the famous Cloisters Cross. England was also the first European country to stigmatize its entire Jewish population as coin-clippers and hence criminals... England saw the earliest royally sponsored efforts to convert Jews in numbers to Christianity; and in 1290, it witnessed the first permanent expulsion of an entire Jewish community from any European kingdom. (Stacey 2000: 165)

England was the first European nation to require, in 1218, the wearing of the Jewish badge a scant three years after the Fourth Lateran Council’s Canon 68 required by fiat that Jews be identified from Christians by a difference of dress. The tabula to be worn, a visible marker of Jewish apartness and non-belonging, eloquently testifies to the historical project of publicly identifying and naming a minority population that was not to be perceived as part of the national community of the Christian English (Despres 2002: 148; Roth 1964: 95–6). The rapidity with which England moved to administer this instrumental device for specifying difference was not, moreover, an isolated instance.

More durable than the badge was England’s early, and thereafter repeated, elaboration of a cultural mechanism that scholars today refer to as the ritual murder libel against the Jews: ‘it is notable... that the earliest and most frequent accusations of ritual child murder occurred in English settings’ (Skinner 2003: 9):

from the 1140s onwards, hardly a decade passed in which Jews were not accused of ritually murdering a Christian child... [Except for] two allegations in northern France... the child murder charge does not appear at all before the mid-thirteenth century and remains uncommon even then. It was... almost an entirely English enthusiasm. (Stacey 2000: 169)

The expulsion of 1290, it has been said (Menache 1985), was the visible culmination of a process in which medieval nations-in-the-making like England and France rid themselves of an 'Israel of the flesh' – troublingly represented by a living Jewish minority in residence – to facilitate the substitution of an 'Israel of the spirit' represented by the Christian English (or the Christian French) themselves as the new chosen people of God: an imaginative reconfiguration that forms a crucial step in the momentum of medieval nation-making and identity-consolidation. This insight is supported by institutional and cultural manifestations of various kinds. Historically, the creation by Henry III in 1232 of a Domus Conversorum (a hostel for the accommodation of Jewish converts to Christianity) did indeed result in the disappearance of Jews-in-the-flesh, more than half a century before Henry’s son’s mass expulsion of the community. Conversion, of course, is a form of identity death that ensures the vanishing of Jews: through the transformation of former Jews into new Christians. The conversionist sermons required by Edward I in 1280, which were preached by Dominicans and aimed at turning Jews from Judaism, were further attempts at reducing the presence of Israel-in-the-flesh.

Cultural artefacts also bear witness to other strategic reconfigurations. It has been argued that the Hereford mappamundi, created either around the time of the expulsion,
c.1290, or slightly later, c.1300, is part of a range of documents that makes an important distinction between the Israelites of the Old Testament, 'who prefigured Christians, yet because of historical necessity could not be Christians' and medieval Jews, 'born after Christ'. The map carefully names and distinguishes by legend the race of biblical Israelites ('populus Israel'; 'filiorum Israel') whose most important stories are narrated and linked through textual and pictorial traditions. Post-biblical Jews, by contrast, are not referred to as the people of Israel but as 'Iudei' and are depicted as idolaters, so that the biblical group of Israelites on the Hereford map can be embraced as the predecessors of Christians, even as the group of post-biblical Jews is condemned in the very moment of their naming. Like the Hereford world map, Mandeville's Travels, another cultural text that renders an expansive account of global geography, history, cosmology and ethnography, makes a similar distinction between biblical Israelites and post-biblical – medieval – Jews within its own context of the mid- to late fourteenth century, both artefacts in their own ways serving 'medieval nationalism' in the 'construction of [English] identity'.

If 'England was severe in implementing the Fourth Lateran Council's anti-Jewish legislation' (Despres 1994: 415–6) and brutal in the expurgation of an entire community by executive order, the stigmatization of Jews as a vile and malignant race occurred most effectively and durably in the informal realm of culture, rather than in the formal realm of state and canon law. Among the array of cultural instruments advanced against English Jews, the accusation of Jewish ritual murder of innocent Christian boy children of tender years – who were putatively seized, tortured and crucified by Jews in symbolic, purposeful re-enactments of the killing of Christ – has a special status. The accusation of ritual murder accrued ever-greater force through its repeated recitation over generations, involving different children in different cities, and coalesced as a formidable technology of power wielded against English Jews – a technology of power with the ability over time to bring about the legal state execution of English Jews on the basis of a cultural fiction.

Installed in England before anywhere else in Europe, the accusation of ritual murder began in Norwich in 1144 and was repeated at Gloucester in 1168, Bury St Edmunds in 1181, Bristol in 1183 or 1260, Winchester in 1192, 1225 and 1232, London in 1244, the 1260s and 1276, Lincoln in 1255 and Northampton in 1279. Ritual murder stories had a way of transforming the child victims at the centre of the anti-Jewish accusations into child martyrs whose veneration then often produced monastic shrines with ecclesiastical support – devotional sites around which feelings of Christian community could gather, pool and intensify. Seven such shrines were established in England, of which three (at Norwich, Bury and Lincoln) survived till the Reformation (Stacey 2000: 170). Shrines of child martyrs and accusations of ritual murder were thus mutually interactive cultural partners in invented testimony against the Jews, and served in multilayered ways to buttress local, regional and national identities and group purposes. Together they bear witness, in fact, to the power and volitional force of informal mechanisms that narrate communal belief; for they show how, in different ways from formal mechanisms like law, informal cultural instruments marshal group consensus.
and advance the ends of majority-group power by telling key stories that manipulate affect and emotion.

In August 1255, when the putrefied body of an eight-year-old boy named Hugh, the son of a widow, Beatrice, was discovered in the city of Lincoln, and the Jews of Lincoln were accused of slaughtering the child, the anti-Jewish discourse of ritual murder had been well sedimented in English culture for more than a century. A predictable series of events followed, and on 4 October 1255, by order of Henry III, ninety-one Jews were imprisoned and one person executed for the martyrdom of Hugh; on 22 November, eighteen more Jews were executed, ‘drawn through the streets of London before daybreak and hung on specially constructed gallows’. Nineteen Jews were thus officially executed – legally murdered – by the state through acts of juridical rationality wielding a discourse of power and affect compiled by communal consent over the generations against a minority target.

When state executions of targeted group victims – victims condemned by community fictions allowed to exercise juridical force through the violence of law – occurred in the twentieth century, such official practices have often been understood by historical scholarship to constitute de facto acts of race: institutionalized hate crimes of a sanctioned, legal kind committed by the state against members of a targeted internal population. In the twentieth century, the phenomenon of legalized state violence against target groups within national borders occurred most notoriously, of course, under the regime of apartheid in South Africa. In the United States, an example of legalized official violence against an internal population might be Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, an order that created ten internment camps across seven states for the incarceration of 119,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, on the presumption that Japanese Americans constituted a community of internal aliens who would betray their country, the United States of America, to the enemy nation of Japan in wartime, simply by virtue of their race.

Were we to hold thirteenth-century applications of state power to parallel standards of ethical measurement as twentieth-century applications of state power, we would have to understand that the historical execution – the legal murder – of nineteen Jews in 1255 in England, on the basis of a community belief in Jewish guilt and malignity, constituted an act of medieval racism committed by the state against an internal minority population. That scholarship has yet to come to this fundamental acknowledgement attests to the dominance of canonical race studies in the twenty-first century by definitions of race and racisms compiled from historical examples across an overly limited range of historical time (generally, the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, when questions of skin colour, biology and pseudo-scientific racisms dominated definitions of race and racisms) in the countries of the West. Were we to apply a fundamental working hypothesis of race as differences that are conceptualized as absolute, and that are used to distribute powers and positions differentially to human groups in an historical period, we see that in medieval England the institution of the Jewish badge, the expulsion order and the legal execution of nineteen Jews all bear witness to the consolidation of a community of Christian English – otherwise internally fragmented and ranged along numerous
divides – through the exercise of legislative and juridical violence against a human group that has, on these historical occasions, spectacularly entered into race.

The example of medieval Jews also helps us to understand the forms of racial law that were in place in the medieval West. Fourth Lateran’s Canon 68, mandating that Jews be publicly set apart from the Christian populace by a difference in dress (and facilitating the legal manipulation of Jewish populations in England and Europe) can be seen as a species of racial law that authorizes racial government. Canon 68 arises out of, witnesses and contributes to the rise of a political Christianity in the West that installs an ‘internal frontier’ within national borders, reinforced by discourses of affect – like ritual murder libel in the story of young Hugh of Lincoln – which mobilize communal fear and hate through stories of race. The gradual coalescence of England’s collective character, as a national community united across disparate (but always Christian, and European) peoples, thus pivoted on the political-legal emergence of an abjected Jewish minority into race, under forms of racial government supported by political Christianity.

The resilience of ritual murder as a story to be told and retold about English Jews – a story of quintessential Jewish malevolence directed at the vulnerable core of the Christian English domus represented by its family life – testifies to the efficacy of cultural mechanisms in harnessing group sentiment satisfactorily. To underscore the story’s tenacity, Langmuir tracks the spectacle of Jewish guilt through three thirteenth-century chronicles (Matthew Paris’s Chronica Majora and the Burton and Waverley annals) and an Anglo-Norman ballad, to Chaucer’s Prioress’s Tale, Malrowe’s Jew of Malta, the Bollandists in the Acta Sanctorum of the eighteenth century, and Francis Child’s collection of twenty-one divergent versions of the ballad of ‘Sir Hugh’ or ‘The Jew’s Daughter’ in the nineteenth century. Langmuir notes wryly that, even in 1911, a brochure published in Lincoln still directed people to ‘the very well in the Jew’s house in which Hugh’s body had been thrown.

In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England other anti-Jewish fictions also gained in prominence and popularity, and occasionally dovetailed into the story of ritual murder to create finely complex aesthetic hybrids like Chaucer’s rendition of Jewish homicide in the Prioress’s Tale of the Canterbury Tales. Popular anti-Jewish fictions of late medieval England include the Host desecration libel that narrates how Jews covertly acquire and torture the consecrated Host (which bleeds yet remains whole, thus proving the authenticity of eucharistic transubstantiation while foiling attempted deicide) and the story of the ‘Jew of Bourges’, a Marian miracle tale in which the Virgin poignantly saves a Jewish boy cast into an oven by his own father for having received the Host. Thematically, these fictions efficiently work in late medieval England to buttress faith in eucharistic Real Presence, intensify popular devotion and reinforce the cult of the Virgin. They may feature plot trajectories that end in the pivotal selective conversion of Jews to the Christian faith, the superiority of which is then affirmed as the Christian community itself is enlarged and strengthened, in fiction, by the new recruits.

Whether the plot of Jewish guilt was acted out in public spectacles of community drama (at Corpus Christi in the Croxton Play of Sacrament, the N-Town Assumption of
the Virgin) and preached publicly in sermons, or depicted in recreational and devotional materials intended for individual and family use in private reading, meditation and prayer (psalters and books of hours, compendia such as the Vernon manuscript). Jews were thus forced, post-expulsion, to enact and re-enact a set of ritualized gestures in which they were once again identified, marked, punished and relocated outside the English Christian community – or, alternatively and with equal vengefulness, converted and conscripted into that community – but this time in the medium of culture.

Thus lodged and ritualized in culture, the gestures of diabolical Jewish guilt, post-expulsion, could be usefully renewed and elaborated, proliferating through a variety of cultural forms, and plotted with local variations, to affirm and witness the legitimacy, authenticity and ultimate solidity of Christian identity, subjectivity and corporate life in England. Whether they are stories of bleeding, suffering Hosts that retain their integrity and wholeness under sacrilegious Jewish torture, dramatic performances of Jews assaulting Mary’s bier with the intention of desecrating her body, or miracle tales in which little boy children are hurt by murderous Jews, these rituals of Jewish culpability specialize in eliciting a spectrum of passionate emotional response. Drawing on the dependability of human passions, they tapped an amassed archive of affect in the medieval cultural imagination – pathos, rage, indignant laughter – to unite and pull together the English Christian community, whose collective identity, and devotional and corporate life, were thus sustained by the repeated renaming and re-expulsion of the alien in pious and recreational acts of solidarity.

From Outremer to Home: Saracens, Islam, a History of Crusades, and Medieval English Literature

Medieval habits of thinking and understanding by means of analogy, coupled with an historical tendency in the Latin West to perceive conspiracies among infidel nations when Christian territory was invaded, contributed to a mindset, in England as in Europe, that Jews and Muslims in their difference from Christian folk were proximately alike: two alien communities linked by points of resemblance and historical ventures, it was thought, against the West. Examples of endeavours in which Jews were reportedly collaborating with Muslims included the Arab–Berber invasion of Visigothic Spain in 711, Abd-al Rahman’s encounter with Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732, the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim’s destruction of the Holy Sepulchre in 1009 and Saladin’s resettlement of Jerusalem after its Islamic reconquest in 1187 (Heng 2003: 78–82).

Indeed, the royal physician to Henry I, the Spanish scholar and Jewish convert to Christianity, Petrus Alphonsi, had insinuated in his twelfth-century Dialogue of Peter and Moses that Jews had been complicitous in the very creation of Islam, when he suggested that the prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, had been influenced by a heretical Jew earlier in life. Revealingly, the strictures on dress in Fourth Lateran’s Canon 68 were addressed not only to Jews, but to both Jews and Saracens, as if the two infidel races were halves of a single body of semitic aliens. The association of the infidel within
Europe (Jews) and the infidel without (Muslims) is manifested in medieval literature with particular vivacity. The thirteenth-century Middle High German Parzival sees no contradiction in designating the Sultan of Babylon ‘the Baruch’, while the late Middle English Richard Coer de Lyon accuses Saladin’s Muslims of well-poisoning, a favourite anti-Jewish calumny of the fourteenth century, especially during the plague years. Examples of such twinning of Muslims and Jews abound, and Islam has even on occasion been depicted as if it were a species of Judaism, as Paul Olson notes, in pointing out how Islamic law, in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale, is defined as ‘sacrifice’, like ‘Old Testament Judaism’. Conversely, Judaism is conflated with Islam (often thought to be a pagan religion organized around idolatry) on the Hereford world map: the demon-headed idol in the Near East defecating a string of coins is worshipped by ‘Iudei’ (dedicated devotees of money), and the idol’s name is ‘Mahum’ (i.e., ‘Mahound,’ a shortened form of ‘Mahomet’ which appears to contract the prophet’s name and ‘hound’).

The ability to understand one alien people and their religion as proximately substitutable for another meant that historically, when crusades against Muslims were called out, the projective massacre of the Islamic infidel in the East was preceded by massacres performed on the Jewish infidel in Europe, prior to any arrival in the Holy Land – a phenomenon on display from the First Crusade on. In England, even the coronation of a crusader king, Richard Lionheart, in 1189, occasioned the massacre of Jews at Westminster and London, with the violence spreading to Lynn in Norfolk, Norwich, Stamford and York. The events were celebrated by English chroniclers like Richard of Devizes and William of Newburgh with as much relish as the slaughter of Muslims in Richard’s campaigns in the Holy Land.

In the crusades against the Saracens, England’s signal role has long been underemphasized, despite the fine scholarly efforts of Tyerman (1988), Lloyd, Luttrell, Keen and others, because it has been overshadowed by the massive documentation on French crusading history in the East. Yet from the inception of the crusading movement, the royal family and ruling caste of England were in the forefront of crusade leaders, with prominent responsibility for the only two crusades that can be considered successful in the interminable history of European hostilities in the Holy Land: the First and the Third. Robert Curthose, eldest son of the Conqueror and heir to the throne of England, was the highest-ranking military leader in the First Crusade, an eleventh-century venture dominated not by royals (although the English contingent included members and relatives of the royal family, including Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, half-brother of the Conqueror, Stephen of Blois, husband to Adèle, daughter of the Conqueror, and Robert and Adèle’s cousin, Robert of Flanders), but by baronial Normans from England, France and Southern Italy.

The Third Crusade, the other crusading enterprise historically considered effective, at least in ideological and strategic terms, was led by a twelfth-century English king, Richard Lionheart, and Philip Augustus of France (Philip being outperformed militarily, diplomatically and ideologically by the larger-than-life Richard). Despite repeated failures in European crusading in the East thereafter, the deep investment of English royalty and nobility in crusading and the Holy Land endured through the next centu-
ties, rooted in part by historical blood ties between the ruling dynasties of England and Jerusalem. Edward I, a committed thirteenth-century crusader, was genealogically linked, like his forebears and descendants, to the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem through his great-great-grandfather Geoffrey Plantagenet, son of Fulk of Anjou, Jerusalem’s third king. In the fourteenth century, chivalric nobles continued to be held up for admiration and emulation because they were crusaders: Henry Grosmont, first Duke of Lancaster and Earl of Derby (and great-grandfather of Henry IV) is praised by John Capgrave as ‘the father of knights’ by virtue of his extensive crusading missions in the Near East, Prussia, the Mediterranean and Spain. The urgencies and unresolved fate of the Holy Land meant that the crusade, as Maurice Keen puts it, continued to be ‘very much in men’s minds in England . . . among the highest and most influential in the realm, in the late 1380s and 1390s’, and late medieval English knights continued to risk ‘body and fortune’ in what was ‘still widely regarded as the highest expression of chivalrous dedication’. Tyerman, with others, emphasizes the special allure of the Levant through the centuries: ‘as a focus of idealism and a goal of ambition, the Holy Land was unrivalled’ (1988: 280).

Medieval England’s absorption with crusading, Saracens and the Holy Land is of critical importance because, as I show in Empire of Magic (Heng 2003), the long history of crusading in the East has been intimately intertwined with the emergence and development of medieval romance – a genre that witnesses some of the finest extant examples of Middle English poetry and prose, including the extraordinary Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the alliterative Morte Arthure, Mandeville’s Travels and Malory’s (and Caxton’s) Morte Darthur. Indeed, Arthurian romance and the King Arthur legend itself, I have argued, first coalesced in literary form in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of Britain in 1130–9 as a form of cultural rescue in response to trauma in the First Crusade – the trauma of crusader cannibalism committed on the bodies of Saracens in Syria – which called forth a reconstituted species of cultural fantasy when historical narration, as a genre, faltered in the negotiation of traumatic crisis.

Medieval romance in general, and Arthurian romance in particular, I suggested, developed as a narrative system in which history and fantasy collided and merged, each into the other, without apology, at the precise junctures where both history and fantasy could be mined to best advantage – producing a genre in which historical traumas, crises and pressures could safely be brought into discussion and explored in a medium in which pleasure, not anxiety, was paramount. Out of crusading encounters with the East, Geoffrey’s chronicle–romance developed exemplary models, a characteristic vocabulary and a structure of desire that would shape and serve elaborations of medieval romance thereafter. With literature primarily from England in Latin, French and English from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries as examples, I described how key historical developments in England – the idea of a medieval English nation, crises in knighthood and the encroachment of forms of modernity threatening chivalric feudalism, the rise of conversion and missionizing as alternative forms of conquest to military adventurism, and the expanding sense of an infinitely enlarging world in which England
was located – found expressive voice by retelling the history and meaning of the crusades against the Saracens and Islam.

'The Middle Ages', as R. W. Southern observes, 'were the Golden Age of the Islamic problem' (1962: 13), and it should not surprise that Saracens and their religion pervasively inhabit the documents of medieval English culture, both within and outside contexts of crusading. Muslims and Islam are ruminated upon in philosophical and quasi-scientific treatises, encyclopedias, sermons, chronicles, travel literature, allegorical and didactic texts, maps, manuscript illuminations, carvings, collections of tales, drama, poetry and, of course, romances. Saracens appear as warriors and knights, princesses and queens, hybrid monstrousities, giants, idols and false gods, the prophet Muhammad in his various incarnations, priests, magicians, Sultans, nurses, merchants and traders, converts, advisers, mothers-in-law, husbands, travellers, Moors, Turks, black men, legendary pairs of lovers, and even babies. Late medieval English culture also exhibits the full range of descriptions of Islam proffered throughout the Latin Middle Ages as explanatory accounts of the religion, with descriptive traits derived from alternative, even competing, accounts sometimes overlapping. Islam is variously portrayed as a Christian heresy, as a species of paganism, as in some ways resembling Judaism, or as a monotheism in its own right with self-distinguishing features and traditions.

The elaboration of Islam as a Christian heresy is exemplarily represented by Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Higden's *Polychronicon*, where Muhammad is depicted as an ambitious Christian clerk who would be pope (PP B 15.390–415, C 18.165–7), and is taken by Muslims for their Messiah (PP C 18.159) despite being in reality a false prophet practising witchcraft and necromancy (Polychronicon: Lumby 1876: vi, 18–23). Muslims are none the less often seen, in variants of this representation, to share critical common ground with Christians in their love for, and belief in, one God (PP B 15.392–4, C 18.132–5), and the view of Islam as a monotheistic offshoot of Christianity acknowledges, in its fashion, commonalities in the heritage of both religions.

By contrast, the depiction of Islam as a polytheistic pagan apparatus turning on idol worship and false gods – a depiction ubiquitous in the popular Middle English 'crusading' or 'Saracen' romances influenced by Old French *chansons de geste* – is an aggressive polemical stance of denigration and dismissal. Romances in the English Charlemagne/Roland cycle, like the *Sowdan of Babylon* and *Otuel and Roland*, or hybrid popular fictions like *Beves of Hamtoun* and the *King of Tars*, exuberantly feature a multiplicity of Saracen gods and idols (of which four favourites in the pantheon – 'Mahoun', 'Tervagant', 'Appollo/Appolyn' and 'Jove/Jovin' – are commonly invoked by name) and represent a contact zone in culture where the enemy contestant for the Holy Land and their false gods can be defeated in fictional contests functioning as an imaginative correlative to historical crusades. Polytheistic Saracen idols are also visually evoked in manuscript illustrations and carvings, and by the sixteenth century, one scholar remarks, Islam had been furnished with about a dozen deities in this tradition.

Intriguing glimpses also sporadically exist of an Islam accurately represented in its key features beyond any particular resemblance to Christian equivalents or referential relation to Christianity. A remarkable example can be seen in *Mandeville's Travels*, when
Jews, Saracens, ‘Black Men’, Tartars

an accurate transcription of the central Islamic profession of faith (‘there is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet’) is offered by the narrator: ‘there is no God but one, and Muhammad [is] his messenger’. Also remarkable in this instance is the direct quotation of the avowal, in which the Arabic designation for God, ‘Allah’, appears, when the *Travels* attempts the transliterated Arabic, garbling the alien polysyllables only moderately: ‘La ellec olla syla Machomet rores alla’. The Arabic designation for God rarely appears, as such, in medieval English literature, even when Muhammad (‘Makomete’), the Koran (‘Alkaron’), and a monotheistic supreme deity (‘grete God’) with Muhammad as his prophet (‘Goddes message[.]’) are accurately invoked (e.g., in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale, 332–4, 356, 340).

How Islam and Saracens are depicted depends substantially, of course, on the context and purpose of discussion in which the religious foe appears. The daunting magnitude of the international endeavour of crusade and/or conversion of the infidel was analysed in theological, military and political terms in sober treatises, as well as handled with larky insouciance in imaginative literature. Peter the Venerable, who commissioned the first translation of the Koran by the English scholar Robert of Ketton in 1143, and who well understood Islam’s global reach, soberly estimated that ‘Islam contained a third, or possibly even a half, of the people of the world’ (Southern 1962: 43). Roger Bacon, whose knowledge of the strength of the Islamic religion was derived from Islamic intellectual traditions of rational philosophy represented by distinguished intellectuals like Avicenna/Ibn Sina (whose authority Bacon cites as readily as Augustine’s and Aristotle’s), gloomily lamented in his *Opus Maius* of the thirteenth century that there were in reality few Christians, and the world was occupied by infidels.

In medieval English romance, however, a different attitude prevailed, and emirs and sultans, along with their military hordes, were shown to be eminently vanquishable, and their royal heirs (warriors of note) only too ready to consort with the Christian enemy, turn renegade and convert to Christianity. In romance, the younger generation of Islamic nobles, like the redoubtable Ferumbras and Otuel, may possess prowess, dignity and courage – rendering them worthy opponents and highly desirable as recruits – but they are also ever ready to undermine the Islamic patrilineage from which they spring, and their conscription into the ranks of Christianity neatly robs Muslim dynasties of a royal line of succession, at least in literature. Royal daughters and other Saracen princesses, who are invariably beautiful and, as Jacqueline de Weever shows, often whitened in the narrative to seem more aesthetically desirable, more potentially, intrinsically, European, turn out to be aggressive seductresses who long for the love and bodies of Christian knights, and are unabashedly vocal in articulating their desire. Saracen princesses, too, turn traitor to the Islamic cause, marry the Christian men they single-mindedly court, and cheerfully convert to Christianity. Islamic families, it would seem, can willy-nilly be trusted to disintegrate from within, by themselves, once they encounter Christians, such is the strength of one religion and the weakness of the other. After all, as the *Chanson de Roland* has it, ‘pagans are wrong and Christians are right’ (1015).

If romance themes of sex and seduction, family betrayal, religious apostasy and Christian military triumph blithely reassure, entertain and speculate, they are also often
rounded off with the exhibition of spectacular Saracen monstrosity in the form of Saracen giants: giants who may be depicted as dramatically black, with the head or face of an animal, sexed as female, or possessing giant babies. Like the apostate Saracen warriors and princesses, Saracen giants are invested figures and, accordingly, are awarded individual exotic names (Alagolafre, Estragot and Barrok in the *Sowdan of Babylon*, Gulfagor in *Sir Perumbras*, Ascopart in *Beves of Hamtoon*, Amiraunt in *Guy of Warwick*, Baliagog in *Sir Tristrem*, Vernagu in *Roland and Vernagu*) and put on display as exotic exhibits for gawking consumption. Just as the royal apostates who are paraded in their beauty, bloodlines and prowess represent the martial-erotic sublime in the Saracen universe, the monstrous giants in their spectacular extremity anchor the demonic pole of the exotic Saracen panorama (Heng 2003: 284, 448 n. 46, 426 n. 9).

A single Saracen monster is a unique freak of nature, but the repeated materialization of hybrid bestial-human Saracen giants in romance after romance, along with the depiction of she-giants, and giant children — monstrous families — is an imaginative argument for the viability of the existence of monstrous races. These giants and their right-sized Saracen human counterparts, moreover, come from everywhere within a heterogeneous, expansive East that spans, but extends beyond, the geopolitical Islamic empire: Alexandria, ‘Babylon’, Egypt and Ethiopia, in Africa; Ascalon in the Levant; Baghdad in West Asia; Andalusia in the Iberian peninsula; and even India. Converging upon Christian centres from an Islamic ‘Orient’ that stretches from the West, to the South, to the East, in an encompassing sweep of cardinal points that designate the horizons of the world, Saracens in romance are none the less neatly managed and contained by the military and conversionist strengths of triumphal Christianity (Lawton 2003: 192).

### Global and Cartographic Race: Blackness, Monsters, Tartars and Others in the Mapping of the World

In cultural depictions of Saracens as black (not only giants, but sultans, warriors and other Saracens are singled out for identification in various contexts of medieval English culture as black, or bluish-black, in skin colour) we see how an important discourse on colour, at work in the description of the races of the world, is in the process of stabilizing in England and Europe in the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Saracens are designated as black, of course, because of their infernal religion (the association of blackness with the devil has a cultural history that long antedates this period); and in one fourteenth-century romance, *The King of Tars*, a literal bleaching of skin colour is dramatically depicted when the Saracen Sultan of Damascus converts to Christianity and is baptized. At baptism, the Sultan transforms from being ‘black and loathly’ and black and ‘foul’ (*King of Tars*, 928, 799, 393) to ‘all white’ without any taint (929–30), like his Christian wife the princess of Tars, a fair beauty whose whiteness of skin has been trumpeted early and repeatedly.
Yet another Middle English text of the fourteenth century, the *Cursor Mundi*, features a Saracen bleaching that does not even require the sacrament of baptism or the narrative logic of romance. When four Saracens, who are ‘black and blue(-black) as lead’ (8072) meet King David, and the king holds forth three rods blessed by Moses to kiss, the Saracens transform from black to white on kissing the rods, taking on, we are told, ‘*the hue of noble blood*’ (8119–22, emphasis mine) (Edwards 1992; Kelly 1993). In illuminations, a thirteenth-century Canterbury psalter not only visually represents devils and those possessed by devils as black, but also gratuitously depicts the vicious-looking executioner of John the Baptist as a black African phenotype – following in this a perceptible artistic development in Europe, from the thirteenth century, of depicting ‘executioners and torturers’ who harass biblical luminaries, including Christ, as black men with negroid features and hair.41 With a range of cultural artefacts exhibiting a colour dualism in which white is valued positively, as the colour of the noble-born and Christians, and black is valued negatively, as loathly and foul, and the colour of infernal heathens and killers, the activity of a colour line in medieval culture can be seen to exist – a colour line in which the desirability of whiteness as a central, defining category of group identity is in the ascendant.

Because religion is the dominant discourse, the master-discourse, of the medieval period, the assigning of a hierarchical difference of colour (white over black) to human beings is often decided upon by a hierarchy of religious difference (Christianity over Islam). But nature, operating in the form of environment, climate and the influences of geographical location, can also assign and predispose colour, and Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon*, Bartholomeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum* and John Metham’s *Physiognomy* are among a number of texts which, following classical tradition, explain that Ethiopians, Moors, Africans, Indians and others are black because of the heat of the sun. However, although natural causes, in medieval theories of climate, physiognomy and environment, may proffer explanations for the blackness of some human races, the negative value of blackness is not thereby assuaged, nullified or dissolved by virtue of natural origin and natural explanation so that black and white then become neutral descriptors of human difference and connotatively equal terms. Indeed, Higden’s *Polychronicon* insists that the African sun, in making the men of Africa short of body, black of skin and crisp of hair, also makes them cowards at heart, while Europe brings forth men who are fairer of shape, greater of body, mightier of strength, hardier and bolder of heart, since all that lives and grows does better with cold than with heat.42 *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, which also observes that cold lands produce white folk and hot lands produce black, similarly insists that white is a visual marker of inner courage, while the men of Africa, possessing black faces, short bodies and crisp hair, are cowards of heart and guileful.43

In this anthropological mapping of the world wherein races and populations are geographically identified by location, physically described and then ascribed moral attributes according to their somatic features and geographical habitats, we see the incipience, if not the maturation, of a system of value and meaning in which to be European, Christian, of elite status, and imbued with courage, strength and moral
The project of European identity-making that is in process from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries is vested in a description of the world that anatomizes alien nations, populations and races in ways that would secure and stabilize the moorings of what it means to be Christian and European.

One genre that therefore answers very satisfactorily to the needs of the historical moment is the *mappamundi*, or world map, a genre that spectacularly lends itself in multiple ways to the dissection of the world and its constituent populations. A thirteenth-century English *mappamundi* such as the richly detailed Hereford, with its more than 500 pictures, 420 towns, fifteen biblical events, five scenes from classical mythology, thirty-three plants and animals, and thirty-two peoples of the earth,\(^{44}\) puts on display the 'cosmological, ethnographic, geographical, historical, theological and zoological state of the world',\(^{45}\) in significant part by the insertion of distinctive objects, legends and peoples that it locates into place as stakeholders for the meaning of a site. Europe is ubiquitously visualized on the Hereford in this way by architectural features such as fortifications and cathedrals – the built environment that symbolizes advanced civilization – and bordered by natural features such as rivers.

Outside Europe, however, place is often represented as ethnography and zoology, with regions being identified as the habitat of peoples and animals that are distinctive by virtue of their difference. Each vector of the world is thus made visible and projected on the map through a landscape identified by its relative distance from Europe in *human and cultural*, as well as spatial, terms. In its most grotesque and spectacular forms, cartographic race on *mappaemundi* is equated with the monstrous races of malformed, bestial or hybrid populations located by the Hereford and other English *mappaemundi*, like the Duchy of Cornwall and Psalter maps, in Asia and Africa,\(^ {46}\) lands which teem with human monsters of many kinds (figures 15.1, 15.2). Very palpably on these maps, the depiction of pygmies, giants, hermaphrodites, cynocephali, sciapods, troglodytes, panotii, blemmyae and other malformations of the human inherited from classical tradition harnesses the inheritance of the ancient past to a late medieval survey and dissection of the world that reflects on the meaning and borders of European self-identity and
Race appears on the map, outside Europe, and pressing on the edges of the Latin West.

Though much has been written on a uniquely medieval sense of the marvellous that celebrated ‘wondrous diversity’ through prolific depictions of freaks and monsters in literature, art and cartography, the insistence that medieval absorption with freakery and monstrosity differs from modern absorption should not suggest to us that medieval pleasure would therefore be of a simply and wholly innocent kind. We see that Gerald of Wales’s depiction of Ireland as the habitat of monstrosities and barbarities of diverse, wondrous kinds, in his *Topography of Ireland*, compiles a highly interested anatomy of Ireland that serves the purposes of twelfth-century Anglo-Norman elites embarked on
the colonial project of subjugating an Ireland conveniently represented as in need of England’s civilizing influence and normality.

Scott Westrem and others have also underscored how one particular monstrous race singled out in late medieval descriptions of the world like Mandeville’s Travels – the unclean monstrous race of cannibals traditionally supposed to have been enclosed by Alexander the Great behind a barrier of mountains in north-west Asia, bordering Europe – are identified with medieval Jews, also defined as unclean and monstrous by virtue of the blood libel against them. The eschatological tradition that these enclosed unclean descendants of Cain would break forth in the last days of the world to war on Christendom, often supported by the very tangibility of the creatures visibly marked out on mappaemundi, is thus a racial script whose sub-theme, in marking Jews as one of the monstrous races, presents them as a perennial, looming threat to Christian Europe, and whose ultimate malignity would only be hideously realized at the end of time. Finally, if there is a symbolic evocation, on the Hereford mappamundi, of the relationship between race and chaos, it would be located in the largest single edifice on the map: an imposing Tower of Babel, key image in the biblical narrative of the fabulous origin of proliferating human diversity, and a resonant figure of incommensurate and unassimilable differences among human populations. Babel is a looming architectural presence that towers above the castles and cathedrals, the built environment, of civilized Europe.

Cartographic and imaginary race ultimately issues a grid through which the European cultural imagination perceives and understands global races and the alien nations of the world. Gregory Guzman (1991) details how a race of Tartars, disseminating from Central Asia, was understood by authors in the Latin West, including Matthew Paris, through a conceptual grid, supplied by classical authors, of the monstrous cannibal races of the world and their geographic locations. Equated, then, with the imaginary race of cannibalistic monsters cartographically located in north-west Asia, are historical races: Jews (in Mandeville’s Travels), Tartars (in the Chronica Majora of Matthew Paris) and Turks (in the Hereford mappamundi). The ‘Monstrous Races tradition’, as Debra Strickland’s recent art-historical study puts it, ‘provided the ideological infrastructure’ for ruminating on and understanding ‘other types of “monsters”, namely Ethiopians, Jews, Muslims, and Mongols’ (2003: 42). Even our four marvellously black Saracens who meet with King David and undergo a wondrous cutaneous transformation, in the encyclopedic Middle English Cursor Mundi, are pointedly not only Saracens bearing great riches, but also ambassadors from a monstrous race: with their mouths located in their chests (8078), they are a subpopulation of the Blemmyae, a favourite race of freaks described in English literature as early as the tenth-century Old English Wonders of the East (section 15), whose early medieval survey of the world also seamlessly located and described Ethiopians (section 32).

Race – whether imaginary, or historically grounded, determined by religion, nature or geographical-environmental conditions – is what the rest of the world has. The utility of race in the late medieval period, made visible and projected through a variety of cultural forms, answers well in this time to the specification of an authorized range of
meanings for Christian, European identity, the disarticulation of that identity from its founding genealogies like Judaism, and the securing of new moorings (including imperial moorings, launched by missionizing and conversion efforts across the globe) opposite to the historical moment. The field of forces within which homo europaeus appears in the late Middle Ages overlaps, thus, with the grid in which racial thinking is made. The consequences, in the final analysis, can be political: as the Bishop of Winchester says on the subject of Tartars and Saracens, and as Matthew Paris reports, England (and by extension, Europe) should leave the dogs to devour one another, so that they may all be consumed and perish; and when Latin Christians proceed against those who remain, they will slay the enemies of Christ and cleanse the face of the earth, so that the entire world will be subject to one catholic church (iii, 489).

Yet, extrapolating from the Bishop of Winchester’s darkly savage military humour, the conversionist dreams and projects of popes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the avid interest of cultural texts in the skin colour of Christian Europeans and an elite membership of noble blood, it would also be true to say that race makes an appearance in the late Middle Ages not only through fantasmatic blacks, historical Jews and the collections of hybrid humans pressing upon the edges of civilization, but can also be found at the centre of things, in the creation of that strange creature who is nowhere, yet everywhere, in cultural discourse: the white Christian European in medieval time.

See also: 2 English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 16 War and Chivalry, 20 Middle English Romance, 21 Writing Nation, 37 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 38 Blood and Love in Malory’s Morte Darthur.

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Notes


3 Guzman 1991 lists six Latin writers who expound on the cannibalism in thirteenth-century documents.


12 Ibid., pp. 211–12.

13 Ibid., pp. 219, 205, 202.


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25 Westrem, Hereford Map, pp. 121, 123, maps 3, 7, 8.
30 Keen, ‘Chaucer’s Knight’, pp. 57, 60.
36 Cotton manuscript, in Hamelius (ed.), Mandeville’s Travels, vol. 1, p. 92. In the Egerton manuscript, the avowal quoted is slightly more latinate: ‘La elles ella sila Machomet rores alla hec’ (ed. Warner, p. 71). Both Cotton and Egerton are missing one reference to Allah in the original Arabic, and resemble imperfectly heard and mimicked quotations. In Arabic, the profession of faith is: ‘La illaha illa Allah wa Muhammad rasul [messenger] Allah’ (Arabic transliteration by courtesy of my Islamicist colleague Denise Spellberg).
39 See Melizki 1977; but also Alice Lasater, Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1974); and Maria Rosa Menocal, The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) on the transmission of Arabic culture from Spain.


