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# **FLORES OCH BLANZEFLOR AND THE ORIENT: DEPICTING THE OTHER IN MEDIEVAL SWEDEN**

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to explore the representation of the Other in *Flores och Blanzefflor*, a 1312 translation of a French “roman idyllique”, *Le conte de Floire et Blancheffleur*. As most of the action takes place in the Orient and as many of the main characters are pagan, including one of the main protagonist, Flores, *Flores och Blanzefflor* offers an opportunity to analyze how the Other was depicted in medieval Scandinavia. I argue in the present article that, probably influenced by the Germanic tradition, the translator chose to depict both the Orient and its inhabitants in a rather positive light. This Other, who appears to be almost the same as the society of the text’s audience, allows to address the anxiety caused by the recent military success of the Saracens, an anxiety that seems to affect the Scandinavian elite despite their remoteness from the frontlines.

## **Keywords**

*Flores och Blanzefflor*, *Eufemiavisorna*, Crusades, Swedish Medieval Literature, Courtly Culture, 14<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia, *Floire et Blancheffleur*

One of the features that sets *Flores och Blanzefflor* apart from the other *Eufemiavisorna* is its setting: whereas *Herr Ivan* and *Hertig Fredrik av Normandi* take place in a mostly European setting, *Flores och Blanzefflor* takes the reader to the Orient for the vast majority of its plot. Only the first few verses and the last few take place in Europe (respectively in Spain and in France), the rest of the action is set between the realms of Apolis and Babylon, following Flores’ attempt to rescue his beloved Blanzefflor. This also means that the vast majority of the characters depicted in *Flores och Blanzefflor*, including our hero Flores, are pagans: only Blanzefflor and her mother are initially Christians. This overabundance of “pagan” locations and characters in a work translated in 14<sup>th</sup> century Sweden opens interesting avenues for the modern researcher looking for sources on the representation of the Other in medieval Scandinavia. While it is true that *Flores och Blanzefflor* is a (rather close) translation of the Norwegian Icelandic *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*, itself a translatio<sup>1</sup> of the French “roman idyllique” *Le conte de Floire et Blancheffleur*, I have argued in my PhD dissertation (Reiter, 2015) that the Swedish translator managed to produce a rather original work worthy of attention on its own merit rather than something to be dismissed as a “translation of a translation”. This article will first focus on the depiction of the Otherness of both the locations and the characters appearing in *Flores och Blanzefflor*. This will lead me to show how the representation of

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<sup>1</sup> In the sense popularized by Rita Copeland (Copeland, 1995).

the Other in *Flores och Blanzeflor* was influenced by the political and societal context of 14<sup>th</sup> century Sweden.

The concept of Otherness is relatively recent in Medieval studies but has opened interesting avenues of inquiries, notably on the subject of Medieval literature. Concepts such as/like Otherness and Orientalism should however be used with caution when studying Medieval texts. They originate after all from the very contemporary fields of Post-colonial studies, and, as such, can lead to dangerous anachronisms. As noted by Albrecht Classen in *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* (Classen, 2015, 14), while

Edward Saïd's approach to Orientalism proves to be a valuable theoretical concept [...]. Saïd's theoretical model cannot simply be transferred to the Middle Ages with their very different socio-economic, religious, and cultural conditions.

Indeed, to ascribe modern racist or colonialist viewpoints to the author of *Flores och Blanzeflor* would be ignoring the cultural and intellectual context of the Middle Ages. The Other in medieval times isn't as much a question of race as of religion. The authors describing pagan and Muslims Others seems more guided by an ideal of eternal salvation for all of mankind<sup>2</sup>, as demonstrated by Flores' conversion at the end of the romance, than by a desire to conquer and subjugate people who would be perceived as "inferiors" by later authors. The author's descriptions of pagan spaces and pagan characters in *Flores och Blanzeflor* appear nonetheless to reside on the frontier between fantasy and realism, between real toponyms and descriptions of marvels not unlike the spaces of adventures described in *Herr Ivan*. In short, those spaces and characters could be characterized by their Otherness vis-à-vis the world as it was known by the author and his intended audience. While certainly real, they are so removed from the translator and his audience that they can safely be described as a space where the supernatural and the marvelous can and will happen, and where the young heroes of the romance can safely transgress the rule of courtly society without destroying the social order of more familiar spaces.

But are the representations found in *Flores och Blanzeflor* unique to the Swedish text? While there is always an element of ambiguity between translation and adaptation when talking about medieval texts, *Flores och Blanzeflor* leans more towards adaptation, with his own style, unique modifications compared to the original and to the Norse saga and its own context of production. It is however true that the text's intrigue follows rather closely *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* and that the main difference between the two Scandinavian versions resides in *Flores och Blanzeflor*'s verses versus *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*'s prose. Differences in the content itself exist but are rather subtle. The Swedish translator tends to be more present in the text itself, offering his commentary in a few places, especially when it concerns Flores and Blanzeflor's love. He also tries to offer clearer explanations for his characters' actions and inner lives to his audience, offering for

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<sup>2</sup> See on the subject David F. Tinsley: Mapping the Muslims: Images of Islam in Middle High German Literature of the Thirteenth Century. In Frakes Jerold C. (Ed.) (2011). *Contextualizing the Muslim Other in Medieval Christian discourse* (pp. 65-101). New York: Pallgrave McMillan.

example a more realistic explanation as to why Flores' father chooses to name his son according to a Christian custom. The part from *Flores och Blanzeflor* concerning pagan characters and pagan lands are however very similar to the Norse version and it could be argued that the two Nordic versions share a Scandinavian representation of the pagan Other. But Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß raise an interesting question about what qualifies as the Other in their article in *Fear and Loathing in the North*: "Was the lavish continental courtly culture depicted in *Floris and Blanchefleur* not just as foreign to the Scandinavian reader as the religion and lifestyle of the "Babylonians" in the romance?" (Heß & Adams, 2015, 5) Sofia Lodén has commented on how the *Herr Ivan*'s translator, like in *Flores och Blanzeflor*, tends to express himself more compared to his Norse counterpart (Lodén, 2012, 80 et seq.). Maybe the Swedish translator's effort to offer more commentary could be attributed to a better understanding of courtly customs from the Swedish audience at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century compared to the Norwegian audience of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the *Eufemiavisorna* are the first courtly texts translated in Old Swedish, the intense contacts between the Norwegian, Danish and Swedish aristocracy make it entirely possible that the Swedish audience would have had time to familiarize itself with the courtly customs introduced in Norway at the court of Håkon IV more than half a century earlier. Even if the *Flores och Blanzeflor*'s translator sometimes feels the need to clarify some French words for his audience (for example, Flores and Blanzeflor's name), it appears that the courtly customs on display are in large part no longer foreign to the Swedish audience. They could have on the contrary provided a sense of familiarity amidst the Otherness of the Orient and of its pagan inhabitants.

For the Orient, which seems to cover in *Flores och Blanzeflor* the territories not yet converted to Christianity, appears to fascinate more than to repulse the Christian audiences of the Middle Ages. Far from being unanimous, Medieval authors' depictions of the pagan Other, particularly Muslims<sup>3</sup>, vastly varies depending on period, location and of course the authors themselves and their visions of the relationship between Christians and "pagans". Even in areas which could be thought of as little concerned by the war efforts of the Crusades, such as the Scandinavian realms, analysis of contemporary sources reveals that the nobility and the kings in 13<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia are very much aware of the war efforts and, if they did not participate themselves after the First Crusade, tried to support) those directly involved in the conflict (or to appear to do so. Such is the case for Håkon IV of Norway, who was asked by the king of France, Louis IX, to join the Crusade in a commanding role. Håkon eventually declined, pretexting an "incompatibility of character"<sup>4</sup> between Norwegian and French troops which could cause tensions between the ranks. Several characters appearing in sagas are also said to have directly participated in the Crusades: the main protagonist of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the Jarl Ragnvald, is said to

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<sup>3</sup> It should of course be noted that the representation of the Other can't be reduced to the interactions between Muslims and Christians in the medieval period, especially in Medieval Scandinavia where the crusading efforts were directed toward the "Saracens of the North", pagan and orthodox Baltic population and Slavs. While this goes well beyond the scope of this article, see for example Heß & Adams, 2015 for a more in-depth discussion of Otherness in Medieval Scandinavia.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Matthew Paris in his *Chroniqua Majora*, vol. IV, 651.

have departed to the Holy Land and ended up in Constantinople. Even those who could not or would not get directly involved seem to have taken an interest in what was perceived as an existential menace to Christianity. Scandinavian authors mention popular theses of the time about the origin of Islam, such as a supposed Christian origin of Mohammed. The author of the “Speech against the Bishops”, a small book from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, cites Mohammed in a long list of evil bishops:

En þó at vér hafim þessa talda eru margir ónefndir, þeir sem þá váru villumenn ok mikill stóðskaði af þeira villu. En svá var einn verstr er mestr stóð skaði af er Nicholas advena var kallaðr er var lærisveinn Dróttins sjálfs ok síðan var byskup á Serklandi ok er nú kallaðr Mahomet, ok stendr sú villa hátt er hann boðaði í sínum byskupsdómi at nálíga annarr helfningr heims trúir á hann, ok kalla han guð vera.

(Other than those we have enumerated, there are many more that we couldn't name, who were heretics and caused great damage by their mistake. But the worst of all, the one who caused the most damage was named Nicholas Advena. He was one of the disciples of the Lord himself before becoming a bishop in the land of the Saracens. He is now called Mahomet. The heresy he preaches in his diocese has spread as such as almost half the world believes in him and pretend he is God.)<sup>5</sup>

There is also mention of the Letter from the Priest John, a famous counterfeit circulated in European courts which promised the help of a mythical Christian realm in India to the crusaders in the *Konungs Skuggsjá* (Barnes, 2012), proof that the Scandinavian realms were very much aware of the ongoing debate on Islam and the Crusade despite their geographical remoteness from the frontline. And while some Christian authors indeed saw the enemy as mere savage beasts<sup>6</sup>, others were more nuanced, advocating for a theological response or even peaceful approaches towards those they saw more as lost souls to be converted than as mortal enemies of Christianity.

It could be argued that the author of *Flores och Blanzeflor* stands more in the latter camp, when considering the plot and the way pagan characters are depicted. The text follows the classic model of the “romans idylliques”, but switches the gender roles: it's not the girl, Blanzeflor, who is a pagan like in Aucassin et Nicolette, but the boy, Flores. Otherwise, *Flores och Blanzeflor* follows the classical pattern of two very young lovers separated by their religion and wise beyond their years, who become separated by evil parents or authority figures and defy said authority to be reunited. *Flores och Blanzeflor*

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<sup>5</sup> David Brégaint, Stéphane Coviaux, & Jan Ragnar Hagland (2013). “*Le Discours contre les évêques*”. *Politique et controverse en Norvège vers 1200*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Who are even worthy of being eaten in certain case, see for example an episode in *Richard Coer de Lyon*, where King Richard is given, to his great pleasure, the flesh of slain Saracens. Cf. *Richard Coer de Lyon*. In Henry William Weber (Ed.) (1810). *Metrical romances of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: published from ancient manuscripts*. Vol. 2 (pp. 1-147). Edinburgh: A. Constable.

begins with the abduction of Blanzeflor's mother by Flores' father on the road to Compostella. Blanzeflor's mother becomes the maid of Flores' mother and the two women give birth on the same day. The two children become quickly fond of one another and show extraordinary abilities at a very young age. Felix, Flores' father, worries that his son will soon ask for the hand of a Christian slave and sells the young girl to merchants, who then sell her to the king of Babylon. Flores learns the truth from his parents and decides to rescue his beloved, who is destined to soon marry the king. Aided by the cunning and diverse characters he befriends during his adventure, Flores manages to reunite with Blanzeflor after winning a judiciary duel against one of the king's men. The two children marry and become king and queen of Apolis after the death of Flores's father. The Scandinavian versions add a sort of epilogue where Flores converts during a trip to France, convinced by Blanzeflor of the superiority of the Christian faith. Thus, *Flores och Blanzeflor* depicts both "pagan" locations and characters, and more remarkably perhaps, do so in a rather positive light.

Apart from the very first few scenes, where we briefly see Felix lay waste to the country of Saint Jacob (possibly Spain), and the last few who take place in Paris, the entirety of *Flores och Blanzeflor* takes place in pagan spaces, first of all in the realm of Apolis, one of the few locations mentioned in the romance which researchers have difficulty to link to a real place. Flores' quest then takes him to Bagdad and Babylon, before going to France with Blanzeflor via Venice towards the end of the romance. There is however a clear dichotomy between the two latter ones and the first few: Paris and, to a lesser extent, Venice are presented as peaceful cities, full of "wise knights" and beautiful churches, without any mythological or fantastical elements. Bagdad and Babylon, on the contrary, are presented in a much less grounded way: neither the geographical indications given by the translator (Bagdad is described as a coastal city, situated four days of travel away from Babylon) nor the description of the cities themselves appear to have any basis in reality. This has led Patricia Grieve to call the question of the geography of the legend of Floire and Blanchefleur deeply problematic (Grieve, 1997, 46) and to argue that the Bagdad and Babylon of *Flores och Blanzeflor* could very well be instead our Alexandria and Cairo (Grieve, 1997, 47). It is true that on the one hand, one could dismiss this apparent opposition by attributing it to a careless author who filled with his imagination what he couldn't find from his own experience or his own readings. However, those traces of the imagination of the author and translator are still worthy of analysis as a trace of how the spaces of the Orient were appropriated and reinvented for the needs of a European audience by European authors. The fantastical descriptions of the Orient could serve two purposes: first, they offer to Flores a space at the margin where he can find "adventure" without directly disturbing the social order in place. They can also demonstrate a desire from the author and translators to present the Orient as a place full of riches, ripe to be conquered by those willing.

While the image of the crusader more motivated by the financial opportunities than faith has been largely nuanced by the most recent researches on the Crusades (Lethnonen, Jensen, Malkki, and Ritari, 2005) it remains true that the "riches of the Orient" was a frequently invoked topos, often to denounce a "carnal" nature of the Islamic faith, theorized by Saint Thomas of Aquinas in his *Summa contra Gentiles* (Tolan, 2003, 322 et seq.), but also maybe as a promise of glory and riches for those who would dare claim the



Holy Land in the name of Christianity. The *Letter of Priest John*, for example, evokes the riches of his fabled Christian realm, and claims that he is ready to share his wealth with the crusaders if they aid him against the pagans. And the Orient of *Flores och Blanzefflor* seems indeed full of marvels and riches, as embodied in the description of the king of Babylon's tower, where Blanzefflor is kept prisoner. A hundred brass tall and large, the tower is crowned with a sphere made of gold, on the top of which a jewel shines so much that it provides light to the surroundings for "ten miles". And the interior of the tower isn't less marvelous:

(There are three floors inside the tower,  
 Made of the finest marble one can find.  
 As such as nobody can understand  
 How they can stay upright.  
 On the lowest floor, there is a pipe  
 Which goes to the top.  
 The pipes go to each floor  
 Like a ring.  
 They are built of white marble  
 Well cleaned and well fashioned.  
 At the center of the floor there is a horse  
 Made of silver, of the fairest fashion.  
 The purest water flows from its mouth;  
 On each floor there is a source,  
 As such as the young maidens may go there  
 Whenever they desire.)

Thry golf aff steen ij tornith ær inne  
 Aff wænasta malmar man ma finna  
 Swa æt ængin kan thet forstanda,  
 Huath them ma oppe halda.  
 A nidhersta golfuith stolpa sta,  
 The op vnder øfuersto hwalffuith ga;  
 The stolpa gaa thet golf om kring,  
 Alla skippade ij een ringh;  
 The æro aff hwita malmar steen,  
 Skygde wel ok yfrit reen.  
 Mit a golfuith staar een hæst  
 Aff silfuer giordh, som han ma bæst.  
 Thet renasta vatn gaar aff hans mun,  
 a thet golf gør the teen brun,  
 Swa at the iomfrur magho ther ij fara,  
 Tha them thykkir tima til vara.<sup>7</sup>

But even more than the riches, the Orient in *Flores och Blanzefflor* appears to be almost mythical: there is a juxtaposition between the very real location names and fantastical elements. Once again, we can take the tower as an example: it is said to have been raised by giants, and to contain a garden which reminiscent of the garden of Eden:

([The orchard] has a guard post,  
 With well-built fortifications of stone,  
 Covered with gold to the top.  
 In every opening that one can find  
 Has been molded in copper on the wall  
 Forms of birds and animals  
 Of a yellow so bright it looks like  
 The fairest su there is.  
 When the wind blows  
 They make their voice heard.  
 Birds of all species you can find there,  
 Big and small;  
 The most ferocious creatures which walk the

Ena værn han hafuer om sik  
 Medh borggha muradh kostelik,  
 Lagdher medh gull op a the tinna.  
 A huart viskardh tha ma man finna  
 Aff kopar støfft op a thæn mwr  
 Foghla liknilse ok andra diwr,  
 Swa skær aff gul at se op a,  
 Som solin vænast væra ma.  
 Tha vædhar komber skiwtelik,  
 Tha hafuer huart thera røst om sik.  
 Alzkona foghla æru ther op a,  
 Badhe stora ok swa smaa;  
 The grymaste diwr a jordhen gaa,

<sup>7</sup> *Flores och Blanzefflor*, v. 1015-1030, the author's translation.

earth,  
 When they hear their voices  
 Put aside their ferocity  
 And suddenly become tame.  
 Those animals free of all worries,  
 Because every one of them has its natural voice.  
 And those voices are harmonious when they  
 come together;  
 The one who hears them, his happiness know no  
 ends,  
 But for the one who knows  
 That he doesn't have his beloved.  
 On the other side of the orchard  
 Runs a river of Paradise  
 Called the Euphrates.)

Tha the then røstena høra fa,  
 The lata thera grymer falla  
 Ok vordha genast blidhe allæ.  
 The diwr skilias qwidho løst,  
 Thy huart thera haffuer sina naturlika røst,  
 Ok ær thet faghirt the koma saman;  
 Hua thet høre, honum brister ey gaman,  
 Vtan thet honum a mot gær,  
 At han hafuer ey sina hiærta kær.  
 Annan væghin thet æpla riis  
 Løper eet vatn aff Paradiis  
 Ther man ma Eufrates kalla.<sup>8</sup>

This description of the orchard could be a direct reference to the book of *Genesis*, where Paradise is described as a place where animals live in harmony and where the Euphrates is indeed the fourth river flowing out of Paradise. Once again, the Orient is presented as a place of marvels and riches that Christians must aspire to conquer: the cup given by the merchants in payment for Blanzeflor come in direct line from the emperor Caesar, and when Flores asks his father to financially support his quest, he is rewarded with immense riches: precious stones, precious cloth and even the horse of his father with its ornate saddle<sup>9</sup>. The fantasy of a rich Orient feeds also into the hope of seeing powerful and rich pagan kingdoms join the Christian camp after conversion: this is precisely what Flores does when he converts. The translator tells us that Flores imposes the Christian faith on the realm of Apolis after having converted and uses its resources to help the Church<sup>10</sup>.

As a space where adventures can happen, the Orient is also full of strange things and danger. Blanzeflor risks not only separation from Flores by marrying the king of Babylon, but also death. The text tells us of the king's "strange custom"<sup>11</sup>: the women he marries are executed a year after they are chosen, to make place for a new wife and to ensure that no women touched by the king will know another man. And when Flores asks for help from his friend in order to enter the king's tower, he is warned of the ferocity of its guardian, one of the "most vicious man who ever lived", ready to kill anyone he wishes without consequence or second thought. They can also find magical objects during their travels in the Orient: the ring that Flores's mother gives her son makes him impervious to damage. Perhaps most magical of all, the spring that runs through the tower's orchard allows the king to see if the maidens he wishes to marry have been with another man: its water will

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, v.1103-1132.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 547-566.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 2155-2158.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1081.



turn red when the unfaithful maiden crosses it<sup>12</sup>. This also illustrates that while the Orient is a rather dangerous place, it's also a place where transgressions are, if not encouraged, at least allowed: Flores and Blanzeflor, as soon as they are reunited for the first time, retire in a private chamber where they find an entertainment that the translator, maybe with a dose of fake modesty, refuses to describe. And no doubt that the tower full of the "most beautiful maidens in the world"<sup>13</sup> waiting to be rescued can also be read as a rather erotic motive. As such the Orient is at the same time enticing and full of perils, both for the body and for the soul: riches and beautiful maidens cohabit with mortal danger and the hero runs the risk of becoming, inspired by the teachings of Mahomet who "invented a sect in accordance with carnal pleasures", as Alain de Lille warns in his *Contra Paganos* (Tolan, 2003, 230). This dual nature of the Orient is also reflected in its denizens, who are presented as living in a society very similar to the European medieval society while at the same time presenting elements of Otherness.

The pagan societies of Apolis and Babylon, as presented in *Flores och Blanzeflor*, seem very close to their European counterpart, to the point where the translator didn't deem necessary to adapt the title of the rulers: whereas the author of *Le conte de Floire et Blanchefleur* speaks of the "émir" of Babylon, *Flores och Blanzeflor* uses "kung", the king. Pagan nobility is also designated by Scandinavian terms: when Flores is threatened with the death penalty, it's the "jarl" Gripun who intervenes to remind the king of the necessity of an equitable trial. And even when they have "strange customs", such as the king of Babylon, they still seem to obey in part to Christian morals. Even if the latter changes spouses regularly, he is never presented as polygamous, but seems to practice what Catherine Gaullier Bougassas has called "successive polygamy" (Bougassas, 2003, 57). Even who they pray to seems to be a source of confusion: the translator more often than not uses "Gudh" in the singular form when pagans evoke their god, but the king of Babylon swears at one point on "all the gods he has" that he will kill the one he finds with Blanzeflor<sup>14</sup>. To quote Nejib Selmi: "the pagan king and his wife are no more figures of the Other, but of the Same" (Selmi, 2013, p.12), to the point where the nobles of Babylon seem to follow the same code of honor as the European knights. For example, the jarl Gripun shames his peers and his king when he reminds them of the law after most of them called for the immediate execution of Flores:

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<sup>12</sup> An episode which could remind the audience of another story translated into Old Norse: the *Lais du cort Mantel*, translated during the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the name of *Möttuls saga*.

<sup>13</sup> *Flores och Blanzeflor*, v. 1038-1039.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1665 – 1666.

<p>         (“Oh, wise men, you conduct yourselves poorly,          When you condemn them unjustly.          All of you have too sworn          To judge every man fairly.          Truly you know very well          That every man must be able to defend himself;          Therefore I think it’s good advice          That we summon them here both          So we can hear directly from them          The answers they want to give.”)       </p>	<p>         “Vise mæn, ij gørin ey væl,          Ij dømin them for vtan skæl,          Ok hafuin tho alle sworith slæt          At døma hwaríom manne ræt.          Ij vitin thet ræt her sannelik,          At huar man siælf skal swara for sik;          Thy thykkir mik thet radhelikt wæra,          Man lote them badhin kalla hæræ,          At vi matte thet aff them hær forsta,          Huath the villo til anzwar fa.”<sup>15</sup> </p>
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And when Flores triumphs over the king’s man in his judiciary duel, the king praises his “courteous” behavior and offers him to rule his realm in his stead. And it is true that Flores’s outburst following an offer of gold from the king obeys to the letter the chivalrous ethic:

<p>         (The king brought forth gold,          That he owned [Flores]          Flores said when he saw this:          “This shall not be!          God forbids me in every circumstance          To prefer treasures over glory.”)       </p>	<p>         Konungin loot gull bæra ther,          Thet som han honum skyldogh ær.          Tha sagdhe Flores, tha han thet sa:          “Thet skal alder vara swa!          Gufh forbiudhe thet ij alla saka,          Thet iak skal goz fore æro taka.”<sup>16</sup> </p>
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The pagan societies in *Flores och Blanzeflor* seem to mirror the Christian societies of the time, to the point where Christianity appears to be admired: when the mother of Blanzeflor is captured by Flores’ father, he praises her for being “high born” and remarks that she will be a present of choice for his wife, who specifically asked for a Christian woman. And the present indeed pleases the queen, who expresses her contentment when she first meets Blanzeflor’s mother:

<p>         (“I take [this woman] from you with more pleasure          Than gold or precious stones.          She will follow me and be of trust          And will keep her Christian faith          If she so desires.”)       </p>	<p>         “Iak thigger henne aff idher gærna,          Hælder æn stena æller gull.          Hon skal mik fólghia ok vara hull          Ok halda tho sina kristelika tro,          Om henne siælfue thykkir swo.”<sup>17</sup> </p>
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Christianity is seen by those who live in the Orient not as the enemy but on the contrary as a prestigious trait: in *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*, Flores’ father chose the name of his son in

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1815 – 1824.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1968-1972.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 74 – 78.

honor of the Christian tradition of Palm Sunday. The Swedish translator prefers to explain it with the beginning of the Spring, he nonetheless still mentions that Flores is raised in almost every way in the “Christian custom”<sup>18</sup>. The admiration has however its limits: Flores’ father refuses that his son marries a Christian woman, daughter of a slave, and it requires the intervention of Flores’ mother to save Blanzefflor’s life. This depiction of pagans admiring and emulating the Christian way of life feeds into the fantasy of an Orient who is simply waiting for the Christian faith so that they can see the errors of their way, a thesis popular among Christian scholars of the time, particularly after the military failures of the Crusades. Some are preaching non-violent means of conversion, including marriage between pagan princes and Christian women, a motive that appears to mirror the conclusion of *Flores och Blanzefflor*. The desire for a peaceful conversion effort seems to have found an echo in Scandinavia, since a few years after the translation of *Flores och Blanzefflor*, the famous Swedish mystic St Brigitta criticized the crusades against the eastern pagans led by the Swedish crown (Maillefer, 2002).

However much the kingdom of Apolis or Babylon look like mirror societies of their Christian counterparts, some character traits of their inhabitants still seem to illustrate the perceived sins of Islam. Flores is a notable exception: while technically a pagan, he will never depart from his very courteous attitude and will end up converting, convinced by the riches of the Church and the insistence of Blanzefflor. Strangely enough, the translator speaks of “the two pagans” who converted to Christianity, implying that Blanzefflor, against all appearance, was at one point a pagan, despite being born of a Christian mother. While it could very well be simple absentmindedness from a copyist, it could also indicate a geographical component to the pagan status: since Blanzefflor is born in pagan lands, she is still considered a pagan even though she is presented as a Christian in the book. The vast majority of the named characters in *Flores och Blanzefflor* are however pagans, and some of them manifest traits commonly used by Christian thinkers to deride and criticize the enemy, like, in the first place, a supposed tendency to a violent and aggressive temper, and an unhealthy attachment to material things. This is best illustrated in *Flores och Blanzefflor* by the character of the porter. Flores is warned by his newfound friend Darias of the perils he faces should he attempt to infiltrate the king’s tower:

<p>         (“[The guards] have a master above them,          He is cruel as no one          And he watches the door constantly;          Inside others come and go constantly          With sword unsheathed, for this is how they          operate,          And kill everyone he points at          And do what he wants.          His chamber resides next to the door          Through which one can access the tower.          There is no man, how brave he is,          That isn’t terrified to go there,       </p>	<p>         “En mestara ower them haffwa thee;          Han æ ilder innan sik,          Ok waktar han portin idhelik;          Hine andre idhelika ga          Medh draghin swærdh, the gøra swa,            Ok dræpa hwar han tækna til,          The gøra och ee hwat han wil.          Hans herbærghe vith portin star,          Ther man jn i tornit gaar.          Æn nakar man swar diærfuer ær, ther til          forwitne komber ther,       </p>
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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 114.

The master threatens to beat him;  
 What he desires, he takes;  
 The king allows him  
 To do as he pleases.”)

Han hører honom at bæria oka sla;  
 Huath han hafuer, han tagher honum fra;  
 Han haffwer ok orloff af konungin til  
 At göra the tilt han siælfwer wil.”<sup>19</sup>

The porter is a perfect example of uncourtly conduct: he is both prone to violence without justification and attached to material things such as riches. The latter trait will be exploited by Flores to enter the tower: since the porter likes to gamble (another sin), Flores will use his appetite for treasure to lure him into swearing fidelity to him. Unable to betray his word, the porter will end up helping Flores to enter the tower, a feat deemed impossible by everyone previously encountered. In contrast, Flores is depicted as extremely liberal with the treasures that his father gave him for his journey, a trait particularly underlined by the translator since it demonstrates his ability to be a successful and fair ruler. But the pagans’ desire for earthly delights doesn’t stop with treasures and gold: the sexual appetite of the king of Babylon is the principal source of the conflict of *Flores och Blanzefflor*, and is indeed presented as a fault of character and a dangerous trait. His “strange custom” of killing his previous spouse and choosing another one every year is one of the king’s uncourtly characteristics. It takes the beauty and virtue of Blanzefflor to make him reconsider this tradition.

*Flores och Blanzefflor* seems to emphasize the “carnal” traits of pagans, in accordance with the predominant Christian views of the time: the promises of earthly rewards in the afterlife, present in the Quran (which had been translated into Latin during the 11<sup>th</sup> century), were used to criticize the Islamic doctrine by several Christian thinkers, who thought it to be too attached to materialistic pleasures (Tolan, 2003, 322). The porter is once again a good illustration of this supposed fault of character: his love of riches will ultimately cost him his honour and would have, if not for Flores’ magnanimity, cost him his life.

The violence of the porter, who is said to kill whoever he wishes, also epitomises a trait frequently emphasized by Christian authors: the savagery in battle of the Saracen, which shocked the Christian knights during the Crusades, more used to warfare between other Christian lords where casualties amongst the nobility often wasn’t a desired outcome (Barthelemy, 2012, 254). This rather casual attitude towards death is also shared by the king of Babylon, who does not hesitate to kill the spouse he grew tired of, and by the Babylonian lords who each propose worse and worse punishment for Flores and Blanzefflor before the wise jarl Gripun reminds them of the necessity of a fair trial (see note 18 p. 6). The judiciary duel between the king’s man and Flores is another example of the supposed ferocity of the pagan, and is once again used in contrast with Flores’ positive qualities:

(The knight is so full of rage  
 He strikes Flores so quickly  
 That he breaks his helmet in four  
 And cuts a piece of his hair  
 So that the blood flows.

Then riddare swa illa vredher var;  
 Han hugger Flores nu swa fast,  
 Thet fiærdha deli naff han hiælme brast,  
 Ok skar een deel aff hans haar,  
 Swa at blodhit ther genom gaar.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1056 – 1070.

<p>[...]  Then Flores thought of love,  Of what he had to endure for Blanzeflor's  sake  He cut his opponent's right shoulder  So that it fell on the floor in front of him  And the other fell there dead.)</p>	<p>[...]  Tha thænkte Flores a amur,  Huath han hafðhe tholt fore Blanzaflur;  Hans høggra axl han hiog honum fra,  At hon lankt fra honum a markine la,  Ok styrte han thaghar dødher nidher.<sup>20</sup></p>
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Whereas the pagan knight is motivated by his rage, Flores only has his love to help him during the fight: another demonstration of the superiority of Christian morals, since this is enough to give the victory to the young prince, despite the knight being the king's best fighter. This tendency to violence is one of the elements separating the pagans and the Christians, and reflects the peaceful message of the text and the reasoning behind the Crusades, which are perceived as defensive (and just) wars against the persecutors of Christians in the Holy Land. In a letter from 1213, addressed to the Christians of Sweden, Pope Innocent III asked them to go to the Holy Land in order to relieve the suffering of the Christians who lived under the rule of the Saracens and their "pseudoprophet" Muhammad<sup>21</sup>. The Other is presented as the aggressor, which in return justifies the response of Christianity, however violent it could be.

As we have seen both with the geography and the people of the Orient, the Other is two-faced in *Flores och Blanzeflor*: at the same time very near the Christian societies of Europe, but also deeply different and often dangerous, while still keeping a certain aura of mystery and fascination. By creating an Other that is very close to a Same, the translator of *Flores och Blanzeflor* offers a safe and reassuring depiction of the Orient, in a context where the military failures of the Crusades had left Christianity in a deep state of doubt and fear for its very existence. By describing and circumventing the Other in a certain space *Flores och Blanzeflor* allows its readers to create their own reassuring, and even enticing, version of an Orient which is usually a source of anxiety for its Christian audience. As such *Flores och Blanzeflor* is an important testimony on how Scandinavian audiences perceived and received the Orient at the time of the translation: is there a "Nordic Orient" which would be specific to the Scandinavian authors and translators? Even if *Flores och Blanzeflor* is a rather faithful translation of *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*, the choice of translating a certain work over another remains significant for the study of the history of representations. While the contacts between the Middle East and Scandinavia were sparse during the Medieval period, the Scandinavian kingdoms were still very much aware of the "blámen" or "blue men", the term used in medieval Scandinavia to describe pagans and non-white. In fact, contacts between the Orient and Scandinavia dates back from the Viking age, with Viking parties conducting raids in Spain and Portugal, which were at the time under the Omeyad's control on the Western route, and the Varegues going to Constantinople and beyond on the Eastern route. Archeological evidence points to regular contact between the Islamic world and Pre-Christian Scandinavia, with large quantities of

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1942 – 1959.

<sup>21</sup> This letter can be consulted on the *Svenskt Diplomatorium Huvud Kartoteket* under reference n° 311.

Arabic coins found in Scandinavian dig sites. There are even Arabic sources alluding to diplomatic contacts between the Omeyyads and an unnamed Viking king, even if the authenticity of the source has been recently questioned (Pons-Sanz, 2004). The conversion to Christianity and the end of Viking raids however greatly reduced the amount of contacts between Scandinavia and the Islamic world. We have however already seen that this did not stop the Scandinavian kingdoms from being fully aware of the Crusades towards the Holy Land. *Flores och Blanzeflor* was translated in 1312, a few decades only after the loss of the last Christian possession in the Middle East. It could be argued that the story of *Flores och Blanzeflor*, which ends with the peaceful conversion of a pagan king and his realm, can be linked with the political context of an aristocracy wishing a peaceful end to a costly conflict which resolution was still uncertain.

But this rather positive depiction of the Saracens is not new in the Germanic world. While we have seen that the pagan characters of *Flores och Blanzeflor* aren't without flaws, they are still presented as rather courteous and not too dissimilar, all things considered, to the Christian aristocracy that is the audience for this book. Catalina Girbea links the tendency from Germanic authors to depict the Saracens in a positive light with the controversy on the use of force by the Pope during the Crusades, which is particularly present in the Holy Roman Empire already during the First Crusade (Girbea, 2014, 541), and continue to appear in works such as Willehalm from Wolfram von Eschenbach. It could also be a consequence of Eufemia's influence, since the queen of Norway, who ordered the translation, was born a Von Rügen, a noble family from northern Germany who already counted literary authors among its ranks. The queen, as such, was certainly well acquainted with the literary work of the time. If *Flores och Blanzeflor* shows/contains an inversion of the gender of the protagonists compared to other works that include the motive of a young interfaith couple, hagiographies and even political commentaries are full of examples of young women married to pagans who successfully manage to convert their husband. *L'Histoire des Francs*, composed by the bishop Gregoire de Tours in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, already presents the portrait of a queen (Clotilde) aiding in the conversion of her husband Clovis, by badgering him about his gods and their supposed impotence<sup>22</sup>. The way Blanzeflor convinces Flores to convert isn't far removed from trickery either:

("You must wait a bit longer!  
 I want to tell you quickly  
 What I have promised to God;  
 When I was in great danger  
 I promised to God that before my death  
 I would live peacefully 6 winters,  
 Then go live in a cloister,  
 Unless it so happens  
 That you become Christian.  
 You must now choose between the two:  
 What you want to do,

"Ij skulin æbidha ena stund!  
 Iak vil idher sighia brat,  
 Hwath iak hafuer gudhi iat;  
 Tha mik gik til the høggha nødh,  
 Tha iætte iak gudhi fore min dødh,  
 Matte iak siæx vinter lifua medh ro,  
 Tha skulde iak sidhan ij kloster bo,  
 Vtan thet kan swa koma til,  
 Thet ij Kristin vardha vil.  
 Nu skulin ij vælia aff thæssa twa,  
 Hwath ij vilin hæller gøra swa,

<sup>22</sup> Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*. Transl. Robert Latouche (1999). Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 117.



Either you leave without me  
Either you convert  
- So that everyone in the country  
You shall baptize them too, my lord  
And the people with you-  
The options lay before you.”)

Iak skal her æpter idher væra,  
Æller villin ij kristnas hære  
- swa ok them, the hema æra,  
Skulin ij lata kristinas, herra, ok al thet  
folk medh idher ær-;  
Thet vilkor nu til idher stær.”<sup>23</sup>

*Flores och Blanzeflor* doesn't reveal a particular way to represent the Orient in medieval Scandinavian, but it illustrates how the Scandinavian courts, and particularly the Norwegian court where the text was likely translated, received, along with the translation of French and German courtly literature, an ensemble of cultural codes and representations, including those concerning the Orient, that the local audience had to appropriate and adapt to their own needs. In such works, the Other in *Flores och Blanzeflor* resembles the Other in other European cultures, particularly in the Holy Roman Empire because the translation reflects a greater integration of the Scandinavian elite into the larger network of the European Christian elite. As such, *Flores och Blanzeflor* mirrors the anxiety of those elites towards a Saracen Other that seemed unstoppable, anxiety felt even in the Scandinavian courts, even if they were far removed from the frontlines.

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<sup>23</sup> *Flores och Blanzeflor*, v. 2128-2144.

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