

Iris Grötecke

**The Visibility of the Pagans
Transformation and Dissemination of an Undervalued Ancient Motif
in Northern European Medieval Art**

At first glance, religious alterity – in contrast to other concepts of alterity – is not as comprehensively represented in medieval visual arts as it was perceived and discussed by contemporaries. However, in addition to the conspicuous and well-researched development of the Jewish hat, more signs for the visual display of religious difference from Christianity developed during the same period. This essay is devoted to one of these signs, the winged head, which has been little studied and whose semantics are largely underestimated. The geographically wide distribution of the winged head in Northern Europe in the period from about 1200 to 1500 and its meaning as an attribute of pagan belief are outlined. The reshaping of ancient mythological representations with bird's wings into a medieval symbol can be understood as an appropriation of Antiquity and a creative invention of new signs by medieval artists. The use of the winged head in very different subjects demonstrates that, from the perspective of medieval northern Europeans, paganism remained a flexible concept that did not in every case focus on the contemporary confrontation with Islam, but could designate individuals in geographically, culturally, and chronologically different situations.