
Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450 by Suzanne Conklin Akbari

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This is an interesting book written by a medieval literary historian about a subject which is currently much discussed. My first concern about the book, however, is whether the title gives the right impression to the prospective reader concerning the contents of the book. ‘Islam’ appears in the title but it is not until the fourth chapter (out of six) that Islam appears. The first chapter is about space—how the world has been divided into major parts, from Classical times until the late Middle Ages, the shift from north-south division into an east-west (orient-occident) division, the significance of climate and proximity to ‘the region of the Sun’ to physical and moral characteristics. The second chapter is about places—Jerusalem, India, and Ethiopia—especially as described in the medieval accounts of the campaigns of Alexander the Great. In this chapter, Jews are mentioned more than Muslims; and it is followed quite naturally by a chapter on the medieval representation of the Jew. This provides an archetype or point of contrast to the representation of the Muslim, which is dealt with first from the point of view of the characteristics of the Saracen’s body [ch. 4], and secondly from the representation of the beliefs of Muslims [ch. 5]. The sixth chapter brings together Muslim, Jewish, and Christian belief about ideal places: paradise and the place of philosophy.

If one is looking for Muslims then, one might resent having to read 150 pages before reaching them. If one is interested in idols too, it is really only in chapter 4 that they are discussed, in respect to the alleged idols of the Muslims. There is a clear agenda in this book (on which see below) but it is not indicated in an obvious way in the title. The book is deliberately not the last in line of

a series inaugurated by Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* [1960] and promoted most recently by John Tolan's *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* [2002]. Nor is it filling in the Middle Ages for Edward Said's *Orientalism* [1978]. Akbari orients her work carefully in respect to all three of these worthy predecessors and has a useful appendix on Renaissance and early modern orientalism [280–288]. But she seeks to go back to the most basic elements on which any concept of 'Oriental' and 'foreign' should be founded, namely, the orientation of the medieval viewer geographically and his or her conception of what constitutes differences between human beings. Perhaps because she wants to press home these basic considerations, she belabors her points and succumbs to repetition and reiteration (Europeans are 'bolde and hardy' at least three times within pages 42, 46, 47) or, at any rate, proceeds at a slow pace with much summarizing of arguments both before and after setting them out.

The basic thesis can be demonstrated clearly enough: that (according to the Western medieval sources) northern-western climes (the abode of Christians) are more conducive to reason, good morals, and a fair complexion; and southern-eastern climes are conducive to folly, bad morals, and a dark complexion. Jews and Muslims differ from Christians not only on an ethical level but also physiologically, though Saracen bodies are less immune to being changed into Christian bodies (for example, through intermarriage) than are Jewish bodies. The Jews offer a particularly complex case study, being both from the East (sometimes even identified with the races of Gog and Magog beyond the limits of civilization) and subject to melancholy, yet also dispersed and ever-present within western society. Yet, in spite of their inherited perverse dispositions, attention to Oriental peoples could provide not only entertainment but also edification. Medieval romances show remarkable interest in the Orient and positive views of its inhabitants, as indicated in the tales of Alexander the Great, the description of certain Ethiopians as 'white' [99], the 'white Saracen' female characters in the *chansons de geste*, and the detailed and approving portraits of several oriental women: e.g., Candace in the Alexander Romance and Floripas in the *Fierabras* story. Problematic is the outcome of a union between a Christian and a Saracen: in *Fierabras*, a lifeless lump, not animated by the seed of the Saracen father, can become alive by Christian baptism [188]. What

the narratives, histories, and debates about Orientals provide is the opportunity for western Christians to see reflexions of themselves in others (whether Jews or Saracens) and draw lessons from their behavior.

Akbari attempts successfully to erase the differences alleged by modern scholars between the discourse about the Saracens in the *chansons de geste* and romances in which Muslims are portrayed as polytheistic idolaters, and the ‘learned’ tradition which focuses on the biography of Muhammad and the heretical nature of his religion [200–247]. There is, rather, a continuous interplay between the learned (Latin) sources and the literary narratives. The section of the book that responds most closely to the implications of the title gives a good account of how Muslims were regarded as idolaters not only because of worship of the false trinity of ‘Mahom’, ‘Apolin’, and ‘Tervagant’ (as in the popular tradition) but also because of their idolatrous attitude towards Muhammad and the Ka‘aba in Mecca. In the ‘Chanson de Roland’, the Muslims abuse the statues of their defeated gods just as if they are men, and this parallels the Western accounts of Muhammad being disgraced and abused at the time of his death. On the other hand, the stories of Muhammad being ‘suspended in mid-air by the power of the magnet’ (according to the ‘Chanson d’Antioche’ [227]) and of the worship of Muhammad’s footprint, which reflected the reality at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, give the Prophet the nature of a statue. In reappraising western views of the Muslim paradise, Akbari draws parallels to the luxurious utopia depicted in the Land of Cockayne. The contrast between Western and Eastern conceptions is not necessarily black and white. The discourse of the book is shot through with the polarities of east and west, north and south, black and white, masculinity and femininity, self and Other, often with the intention of eliding their contrariety, though this concern sometimes taxes credulity. For example, to say that the traveller circumnavigating the world in *The Book of John Mandeville*

suggests that, if the traveler enters far enough into alien territory, he finds himself at home; to put it another way, a close look at the Other shows the self [63]

draws a farfetched conclusion in respect to a society in which the spherical universe was accepted as the reality.

The largest part of the sources is vernacular encyclopedias, chronicles, and *chansons de geste*, in which the author's *forte* lies. Prominent among these are John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomew the Englishman's *On the Properties of Things*, *The Book of John Mandeville*, Thomas of Kent's *Roman de tout chevalerie*, *King Alisaunder*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, the versions of *Fierabras*, *The King of Tars*, *Parzival*, 'La Chanson de Roland', *Le jeu de saint Nicolas*, *The Sowdene of Babylone*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and 'The Land of Cockaygne'.

There is clearly more insecurity about Latin texts as the numerous mistakes in citations and translations testify:

- 'orbus' for 'orbis' [20, 36];
- 'septentrio' interpreted as the 'north star' rather than the seven plough oxen of the Big Dipper [37];
- 'ortu solis' [44 bis], 'ortum solis' [68, 69 bis], 'ortus sol' [69, 72], should all be replaced by 'ortus solis';
- 'historia naturalia' for 'historia naturalis' [75, 84];
- 'signo in caelo' for 'signa in caelo' [80];
- 'iuxta Alexandro' for 'iuxta Alexandrum' [82];
- 'in fine iste libro' for 'in fine istius libri' [82];
- the 'Summa totius haeresis Sarracenorum' is the summary of the whole heresy of the Saracens', not 'of all Saracen heresies' [250];

and so on. It is safer to leave out Greek letters altogether because they are almost bound to be misprinted [83]. I wonder too whether 'meneliche' in 'meneliche disposed' has a pejorative sense [42] or rather, like the original Latin 'mediocrity', simply means 'in the middle'; and whether 'dessouz nous' [63] should mean simply 'beneath us', not 'directly beneath us'.

Some arguments are farfetched or rely on other people's farfetched arguments, such as that of Tuttle seeing a 12-fold division in the *Liber floridus* of Lambert of St Omer as reflecting the 12 books of the eighth-century commentary on the Apocalypse written by Beatus of Lièbana [76]. It is unlikely that 'prester' in 'Prester John' would have evoked the extremely rare Latin word 'prester' as 'snake' [87]. It would have been nice to have some contemporary evidence that Jonitus was identified with Prester John [87]. It is difficult to see Roger Bacon's 'multiplication of species' as being analogous to his

idea of the history of philosophy [274]. And how can a prism be 6-sided [274]? On page 116, Acon is ‘Acre’ (modern ‘Akko’), and ‘Comagene’ is the ancient Middle Eastern kingdom of Commagene (not Carthage), while the Marcomanni [119] are a well known Germanic tribe.

In respect to the main thrust of the book (the perception of the Oriental or Muslim), one must always bear in mind that, in the Middle Ages, scientific learning taken from Arabic sources was greatly respected and not regarded as ‘Islamic’. Akbari has usually been careful to do this, adducing the example of Roger Bacon, who made ample use of Latin translations of philosophical works written by Avicenna, even to the extent that he makes Avicenna critical of tenets of Islam [272–273]. But one can go further in saying that it is not ironic that Bacon should condemn Islam whilst at the same time drawing from the Muslim astrologer Abu Ma‘shar [275]. He avowedly cites Abu Ma‘shar as the leading authority on astrology in the West to provide ‘scientific’ information on which he can build his own theory of the progression of religion. (For this progression, he cites ‘Ovid’ who is in fact the pseudo-Ovid, author of the poem *De vetula*, which is likely to have been composed in Bacon’s circle). It is misleading to talk in terms of ‘Islamic’ philosophy in ‘Bacon’s presentation’ [269], although this term is often used for philosophical works written in Arabic.

It is useful to have an up-to-date account of medieval conceptions of space and time, of *chansons de geste*, and romances on oriental themes, on the life of Muhammad [224], and of Muhammad’s heavenly journey [252]. The reference [260] to John Mandeville’s private audience with the Sultan of Babylon ‘in which the comparative merits of Islam and Christianity are debated’ (surely a reflexion of al-Kindi’s *Apologia*, which gives the same scenario) joins a host of other references to an attitude of tolerant inquisitiveness towards Orientals. One has sympathy with the irenic intentions of this book, in contrast to literature in which the Jew and the Saracen are always betrayed with hostility and fear. Akbari has written a challenging and original account of East-West relations and her work should join those of Norman Daniel, John Tolan, and Dominique Logna-Prat in any bibliography on these relations in the Middle Ages.

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