Medieval Western European perceptions of the Islamic world: From ‘active othering’ to the ‘voices in between’

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Providing an overview on medieval Western European perceptions of the Islamic world with a special focus on the period between the 12th and the late 15th century raises enormous difficulties, not only because the following essay cannot compete with the important and much more detailed syntheses on the subject written by Daniel, d’Alverny, Southern, Rodinson, Sénac and Tolan, among others.¹ Even if one regards medieval Western Europe or ‘Latin Christendom’ as a cluster of societies with several common features, including a specific form of Christianity and Latin as the main language of intellectual endeavors, it is not possible to claim that it constituted a homogeneous cultural orbit: in the period from Late Antiquity to the conquest of the Americas, mentalities and corresponding patterns of perception changed in line with geopolitical, economic and cultural developments, the rise and fall of polities, institutions and individuals, and the shift of axes of communication. Latin-Christian societies differed considerably from each other, not least concerning their position vis-à-vis the Islamic world: Christians in the border zones to the Islamic world on the Iberian Peninsula, in Sicily or in the crusader states gained different experiences and perceived the Islamic world differently from their more distant co-religionists in central Europe, on the British isles or – subject to Christian proselytism much later – in Scandinavia.² Consequently, formulating general theories about how


² Sénac, L’Occident, p. 9.
medieval Western Europe perceived the Islamic world poses the great challenge, not only of avoiding essentialisms, but also of ‘representing the unrepresentable polychromy of reality’. Generally speaking, scholarship has so far concentrated on those aspects of perception that are most obvious in the available textual and pictorial material – that is, explicit definitions and depictions that present the Islamic world as an ethnic and religious ‘Other’ that existed outside the sphere of medieval Western Europe. Regarded from this angle, it seems legitimate to claim with Southern that ‘the existence of Islam was the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom’.

The Saracen menace

Before the Arab-Islamic expansion in the 7th and early 8th centuries, Western European perceptions of the Arab sphere were mainly based on material provided by Roman ethnography and biblical narratives, depicting an uncivilized people at the fringes of civilization that was genealogically related to Abraham’s outcast son Ishmael. Initial confrontation on the Iberian Peninsula of the early 8th century resulted in the production of two Hispanic sources of exceptional content and value: the first Latin texts to mention Muḥammad, they define him as a noble Saracen leader, who was able to foresee the future and whose cunning enabled the Saracens to subjugate the Middle East. The rest of Western Europe still remained largely ignorant: early accounts of pilgrims to the Holy Land from the late 7th and early 8th centuries still do not seem to grasp the implications of the Muslim take-over. If they were aware of what was happening in the Mediterranean sphere at all, contemporary Latin-Christian authors, mainly from the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon realms, expressed their horror at the onslaught of ‘the Saracens’, one among

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3 Rodinson, Fascination, pp. 197-98.
4 Southern, Western views, p. 3.