Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe

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The Andalusian jurist Ab? Bakr al-?ur??sh? (d. 1126) was once asked whether or not it was permissible to eat cheese imported into Alexandria from the Christian territories along the northern coastline of the Mediterranean. The question clearly intrigued al-?ur??sh?, since he went to considerable lengths to research the subject before issuing his final response. Naturally, he checked the principal textual sources for Islamic law and for relevant legal precedents, but he also interviewed those he could find who had witnessed the production of cheese in these lands and the conditions in which it was transported across the sea to Muslim lands. This is one of the many examples offered in Daniel König’s new book (at pp. 11–12, 99) to demonstrate the serious interest shown by many Muslim scholars from around the Mediterranean and even beyond in the customs as well as the social, economic, religious and political conditions of those living in the Latin-Christian world.

It is in demonstrating this widespread interest shown by Arabic-Islamic scholars – that is scholars who were both Muslim and wrote in Arabic – in the Latin-Christian world, both its contemporary and past societies, that König’s book can be considered a real success. Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West, following on from Nizar Hermes’ 2012 study (1), clearly shows both that there was interest among Muslim scholars in several aspects of Latin-Christian history and that such interest could go beyond a desire simply to denigrate or stereotype Latin-Christian societies. The preface and first chapter of König’s book actually set up an even more ambitious aim than this, with the author declaring that this is not a cultural or social history (p. v), but rather a historiographical one, tracing ‘if and how the notion of a Latin-Christian sphere emerged in an Arabic-Islamic scholarly tradition that accumulated data over the centuries in reaction to important geopolitical developments and resulting social processes’ (p. vi). The principal objective of the book is to draw out a ‘double process of “emergence”’: the recognition by Muslims of Latin-Christian Europe’s development towards being an active player on a global scale by the 15th century and the emergence of Latin-Christian Europe as a discernable phenomenon in Arabic-Islamic sources (p. 1).

König sets out to achieve this through three introductory chapters followed by five chapters dealing with specific case studies of Arabic-Islamic writing on particular issues concerning Latin-Christian societies and their histories. In the first chapter (pp. 1–26), König offers a historiographical overview and introduces his
study’s approach. In particular, he emphasises the problems inherent in looking for a single Arabic-Islamic perception of Latin-Christian Europe. He also suggests that modern historians should not always be so quick to see the religious identities of Arabic-Islamic scholars as the main driving force behind their depictions of their non-Muslim neighbours. Instead, he seeks to downplay the overwhelming focus on the ‘ideological overtones’ of Arabic-Islamic works about non-Muslim western Europeans and suggests that many of these scholars’ perceptions were ‘characterized by the wish to understand particular historical, geographical, or social phenomena’ (p. 25). The second chapter (pp. 27–71) then offers an interesting and thoughtful overview of how Muslims could come by information about the Latin-Christian West and how the availability of access to such information shifted over the medieval period between the seventh and 15th centuries. This is a very well researched chapter that provides food for thought on a range of issues, including the extent to which Muslims around the Mediterranean were able to work with languages other than Arabic (pp. 64–8). König also offers here (at pp. 69–70) an important reminder that the authors who wrote our extant sources were often at the end of very long and complex chains of transmission and so can only be considered representative of one part of a broader picture of Arabic-Islamic views of the Latin-Christian West. Chapter three (pp. 72–113) then follows on from this observation and discusses how these scholars went about composing discussions of the Latin-Christian Europeans based on the information they had at their disposal. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the role of Andalusians in transmitting and shaping such material in the period before Latin-Christian expansion into the eastern Mediterranean from the late 11th century onwards is seen as important (pp. 77–80). As König himself notes (p. 112), his aim in this chapter is to consider the factors other than ideological reasons why Arabic-Islamic scholars may not always have had accurate, up-to-date information about the Latin-Christian West and how they might misinterpret that material they did have.

The five chapters of case studies on particular issues then follow; in the first four cases, developments in Arabic-Islamic scholars’ understandings of a particular issue is charted over the seventh–15th centuries. In line with the interest shown in the first three chapters on reducing the attention paid to ideological reasons for developments in the material used and discussed, König tends to focus in these chapters on developments and discrepancies in the availability of information to scholars from the Muslim world writing on these particular topics. The first of the case studies (pp. 114–49) deals with the history of the Roman Empire and the second (pp. 150–88) with the history of the Visigoths who ruled the Iberian Peninsula before its conquest by Muslim armies from 711. The next two case studies then move from Arabic-Islamic scholars’ views of what they would probably have seen as pre-Islamic history to the ways they discussed the history of more contemporary issues, the Franks (pp. 189–230) and then the institution of the papacy (pp. 231–67). Each of these chapters is very well researched and offers a wealth of material from the main primary sources on each issue. The chapter on the Franks offers a particularly interesting analysis of the varying uses of the term ‘Frank’ (Ar. firanj, ifranj) in Arabic-Islamic sources and especially (at pp. 221–25) on the rising awareness of France as a distinct kingdom. The analysis in these chapters of the patterns of availability of information to Arabic-Islamic scholars interested in these topics is generally convincing, although I suppose I could not help but think that all the evidence in the chapter on the papacy does really suggest, pace König, that Arabic-Islamic scholars do on the whole seem to have displayed a relative ‘lack of curiosity for the papal office’ (p. 265). The final case study chapter (pp. 268–322) is a little different from the other four and looks at how Latin-Christian expansion around the Mediterranean from the 11th century onwards led to more precise knowledge being available to Arabic-Islamic scholars about the details of Latin-Christian history, politics and geography. Although there is some discussion (at pp. 268–71) of the ‘trauma’ evidenced in some Arabic-Islamic responses to this expansion, the focus is again primarily on the expanding opportunities it presented for communication and transfer of information about Latin-Christian Europe into the Islamic Mediterranean world.

The final chapter (pp. 323–47) offers some concluding thoughts on all this material. König returns here to his argument that there was clearly ‘not much room for a uniform and coherent “Muslim” world-view’ (p. 325) when it came to Latin-Christian Europe. Although recognising that there were preconceptions about non-Muslims and the inhabitants of Europe that were expressed in much Arabic-Islamic scholarship, he also
argues strongly here again that ‘Latin-Christian societies and their members were not only subject to “othering” in religious terms, but were often simply regarded as alternative manifestations of human life and its social and political organization’ (pp. 327–8). There is a very brief comparative section (at pp. 336–43) comparing Arabic-Islamic information about Europe with that about India and then with Latin-Christian information about the Islamic world, which leads König to conclude that there was a close connection between ‘imperializing culture, expansionism, and the systematic production of records’ (p. 343). Right at the end of this final chapter (pp. 343–7), König returns to one of the key questions posed right at the start of the book and concludes that Arabic-Islamic scholars did indeed develop the idea of Latin Christendom as a coherent sphere, albeit in an appropriately vague and imprecise way.

König’s main success lies in undermining earlier arguments that Muslim scholars largely treated non-Muslim societies with disdain and were generally uninterested in their affairs. His alternative approach, focusing on developments that affected flows of information from the Latin-Christian to the Arabic-Islamic world, does demonstrate clearly that religious ideologies were only one factor among a great many that affected how Muslim scholars wrote about their Christian European neighbours. He also shows that sometimes Muslim scholars could get very interested in certain aspects of Latin-Christian history, society and culture.

All of this, combined with the impressive breadth of research employed in support of these arguments, makes Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West an important book. The following thoughts raised in response to the arguments and approach offered in König’s book are not intended to undermine that achievement, but rather simply to raise some issues for discussion. The main thought that occurred while reading this book was that, without wishing to return to arguments that Muslim scholars only treated Latin-Christian Europeans with disinterest and disdain, their preconceptions and concerns do perhaps need to be a bigger part of the story. After all, few nowadays presumably would doubt that although medieval Muslim historians and geographers, writing about any topic, were dependent on the kinds of information and sources to which they had access, the final shape of their works and narratives was also determined by how they chose to select and then present that material. Despite König’s frequent recognition of this point, the overall impression often gained reading this work is that Arabic-Islamic material about the Latin-Christian West was primarily determined by the ease of access to information. This can only be a part of the story.

In the discussion of the Arabic-Islamic versions of the history of the Roman empire, for example, it is surely significant that some authors such as al-Mas??d? (d. 956) who wrote relatively detailed accounts of Latin-Christian societies were adamant that the Islamic caliphate was a more legitimate heir to the ancient world than the Christian Byzantine empire, let alone the successor kingdoms of western Europe and the Mediterranean.(2) There are plenty of examples offered by König of Muslim scholars who went to considerable lengths to actively acquire information about Latin-Christian societies: think of the case of al-?ur??sh? with which this review began. Such examples surely suggest that at least some other scholars could also have found out more information if they had wanted to. Furthermore, al-?ur??sh?’s interest in northern Mediterranean cheese was not, as König recognises, driven by a simple interest in dairy products. He was a Muslim legal scholar who was asked specifically about whether the importation and consumption of this product was in line with Islamic dietary and purity regulations. Al-?ur??sh?’s fatwa is a nice example of expanded opportunities for the exchange of information from the northern to the southern side of the Mediterranean in the early 12th century; it is also a reminder that it was Muslim scholars’ own concerns that drove their interest in utilising such opportunities.

Sometimes it is very hard to know whether arguments made by Arabic-Islamic scholars about Latin-Christians is based on actual information they obtained or shaped with particular concerns in mind. A good example comes in the sermons on jihad delivered by the Damascene preacher ?Al? ibn ??hir al-Sulam? (d. 1106) in response to the success of the First Crusade. Al-Sulam? makes a point about how the Latin-Christian invaders were motivated specifically by thoughts of holy war.(3) On one level, this could be taken as an example of the increased access brought about by the Crusades for Syrian scholars to pick up information about Latin-Christians: al-Sulam? is referring to what we today call crusading. On another,
however, it is very clear that al-Sulam? is using this point to urge his listeners to undertake their own holy war against the Latin-Christian invaders: if even infidels can get themselves worked up for the cause of holy war, why can the true believers not do the same to resist them? If we read the passage in the latter way, then it is not actually necessary for al-Sulam? to have known anything at all about the motivations of the first crusaders. Staying with the era of the Crusader States, a related point can be made using Us?ma ibn Munqidh’s (d. 1188) discussion of the character of the ‘Franks’ in his Kit?b al-I?tib?r.(4) König seems keen to underplay any significance we might attribute to Us?ma’s famously sensational depiction of Latin-Christian social, religious, legal and medical customs (p. 271), and that is fair enough, but there remains an important point to be made here. Us?ma, in light of information obtained over the course of his travels, presumably could have offered any number of anecdotes of ‘Franks’ behaving in ways his Muslim audience could have considered boringly normal. That he did not is another clear reminder that opportunities for information exchange alone cannot explain everything that is going on in Arabic-Islamic accounts of the Latin-Christian West.

König’s own selection of material emphasises those cases where Muslim scholars discussed recognisable topics such as the history of the Roman empire, of the Visigoths and so on, but largely removes from view other instances in which our extant Arabic texts focus on what they often call the ?aj??ib wa-ghar??ib, ‘wonders and marvels’, of the Latin-Christian West. Just as medieval Latin-Christian writers could create ‘oneiric horizons’ in the world of the Indian Ocean, so too could Muslim writers in the lands of the Latin-Christian West.(5) Nicola Clarke has demonstrated in some detail the ways in which Muslim writers from Baghdad to al-Andalus itself portrayed the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the invasion of 711 as the home of talismanic idols, enchanted cities and even giant, man-eating ants.(6) It is not clear where König would find a place for this kind of material in his information-exchange model for the development of Arabic-Islamic views of the Latin-Christian West.

With these points in mind, I wonder if we should not think a bit more seriously about differences in the kind of information presented and the uses to which that information is put between texts written in different genres. There are, of course, important overlaps in the kinds of material presented in works of history and geography, for example, but it is surely important to consider more seriously the varieties of ways in which narratives are built out of that material. There are now a number of important studies of Arabic-Islamic historiography and geography writing and the arguments and ideas presented in these studies are worth bearing in mind more seriously when evaluating the material such works contain on the Latin-Christian West.(7) If nothing else, these studies would warn us to hesitate in referring to the activities of Muslim scholars writing about the Latin-Christian West as ‘documentation’, the ‘production of records’ and even ‘a systematic production of records’ (p. 329; my emphasis added). Virtually all of the sources analysed by König are literary and narrative in character and so the use of these terms to describe the activity behind their compilation needs to be justified a bit more thoroughly.

None of these thoughts, however, should detract from the importance and achievement of this book. They merely suggest that there is still room for further investigation of this topic. Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West will be a key resource for future scholars interested in medieval Muslims’ views of their non-Muslim neighbours. In particular, no-one will now be able to work on such topics without treating seriously the question of how information about non-Muslims outside the Islamic world could become available to Muslim scholars and how that availability of information had an important role to play in the ways in which their views were formed.

Notes


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