

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

*Daniel G. König*

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Interactions between Latin Europeans and the Islamic world during the medieval period have received great attention in numerous scholarly studies. The focus of such works often consists of an attempt to delineate the construction of identities and the extent to which they were utilized to mark out an “other.” By contrast, one of König’s most important conclusions demonstrates that for medieval Arab-Islamic scholars writing about the Latin West, these Latin Christian societies “were often simply regarded as alternative manifestations of human life and its social and political organisation” (pp. 327-28).

This is primarily a historiographical investigation with a macro-historical approach. König analyzes material spanning the early Islamic period (the seventh century) to the later medieval period (the fifteenth century) and covers a range of genres. It could be said that such an approach fails to critically analyze the motivations of individual Muslim authors, something that the author does acknowledge in his preface. However, such analyses lie beyond the scope of the project at hand. Furthermore, a macro-historical approach is necessary for challenging previous scholarship on the subject. Bernard Lewis asserted that the Latin West was perceived as a united barbaric monolith, one viewed at best with disinterest in the minds of Muslim writers – a view that continues to influence scholarship to this day.

König’s approach successfully overturns this conception. He concludes that Muslim writers understood that “shared Roman roots and the willingness to cooperate against common enemies of different ethnic origin and religious affiliation bound Western European peoples together occasionally” (p. 346). He does well to establish that medieval Arabic-Islamic writers recognized diversity and change within Latin Christian societies that appear far from monolithic and stagnant in their works. The breadth of König’s survey is certainly impressive, and the conclusions he draws are important contributions to scholarship. And it may also be said that his investigation should be a necessary reference for future scholarship within the field.

The work consists of nine chapters. The first chapter defines what the author means by *Arabic-Islamic* and *Latin-West* and reviews the existing scholarly literature that has shaped discussions of the topic at hand. This is an important opening chapter, for it makes the case for the “multiperspectivity” of Arabic-Islamic views of the Latin-West against a tendency in scholarship to limit Mus-

lim views to stereotypes of Latin-Christians. The second chapter traces how the changing sociopolitical landscape from the seventh to the fifteenth century affected the channels of transmission through which information reached the Arab-Islamic world. The third chapter focuses on factors that influenced the reception of knowledge about the Latin-West in the medieval Muslim world. Together, these three introductory chapters set the groundwork for König to move on to an analysis of the texts themselves.

The fourth and fifth chapters, dedicated to the history of the Latin-West in Arabic-Islamic writings, focus on the Roman and Visigothic pasts, respectively. After this, König turns his attention more directly to Muslim views of medieval Latin Christendom. Chapter 6 concentrates on the Arabic-Islamic conception of the *Franks* by analyzing the term's usage both in its generic and more specific capacities. Chapter 7 discusses the extent to which Muslim writers understood the papacy's significance for Latin-Christians as well as how it exercised power. The penultimate eighth chapter turns to the expanding Latin-Christian sphere's impact on acquiring knowledge about Latin-Christian societies in the Arabic-Islamic world. Finally the ninth chapter summarizes the book's main contributions and offers some comparative analyses.

One of König's most important contributions is his analysis of the Muslim world's accumulation of knowledge about the medieval Latin sphere. In the fourth and fifth chapters he emphasizes that it fell to thinkers in al-Andalus to sketch a more detailed the history of the Latin world's Roman and Visigothic past, but that this had to wait until al-Andalus established itself as a society with a distinct regional identity. Hence, such information became more relevant to medieval Muslim societies as they became socially and politically established and their intellectual traditions gathered pace. König also explains why later medieval Muslims in the Islamic West seemed to know less about al-Andalus' Visigothic past than their forebears did: Visigothic history spread to the Islamic East, where it became part of standardized history, only to fall out of use in the Islamic West during the later medieval period. This decline of interest is presented as a consequence of Latin expansion, where "Muslims were under attack from Christian powers who laid claim to Visigothic heritage" (p. 185).

The subsequent chapters argue more strongly that Muslim writers came to appreciate the heterogeneity of the Latin-Christian world. In his discussion of *Frank*, König shows that this term acted as a generic word for Western Europeans who came into contact with the Islamic world. However, he argues that the term never achieved a definition that encompassed all Western Latin Europeans. For example, it never referred to Christians of the Iberian Peninsula

(apart from the Catalans) or attained a geographical significance. This investigation is also particularly important for demonstrating that Arabic-Islamic views of Latin societies were not stagnant and unchanging. Despite the term's generic usage, König shows that Muslim authors gradually developed a narrative of Frankish history that explained their expanding sphere and rise to power within the Mediterranean region. They also arrived at accurate depictions of feudal relationships between European kingdoms (e.g., France and England) and even the tripartite organization of Paris in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hence, as knowledge about Latin-Christians became more available, Muslim authors developed more accurate and nuanced descriptions of these European societies.

Furthermore, König shows that in their discussions surrounding the papacy, Muslim authors were able to identify both differences and similarities to their own social and political organization. They found it rather natural to employ terminology that was familiar to them in order to describe the papacy, referring to the pope as *amīr* and *khalīfah* (p. 263). On the other hand, he mentions that Ibn Taymiyyah refers to the pope as one who falsely claims to be an intercessor and a mouthpiece for God (p. 266). It would have been interesting to highlight here that this polemical account was perhaps intended as a critique of those figures and institutions that maintained similar claims in the Islamic world at the time. This is of course beyond the scope of König's work; however, he lays the groundwork for further investigations here.

In his final chapter, König briefly compares medieval Arabic-Islamic discussions of Europe with those focusing on India. Here he remarks that no Arabic-Islamic work on Latin-Christians rivals the scholarly quality of al-Biruni's book on India. He cites several possible reasons for this put forward in the past, including that Muslim scholars could have been inspired by the sciences they received from India or that India may have been seen as an older, more developed society worthier of study. However, instead of relying solely on such ideological explanations, he focuses on the extent to which Muslim scholars had access to the information necessary for producing such studies.

Indeed, analysis of these streams of information is essential throughout König's project. He posits that while "Byzantium seems to have obstructed the Arab's view to the West," the Sassanids did not bar their view to the East (p. 337). He also briefly illustrates that Latin-Christian knowledge of the Arabic-Islamic world became more detailed during periods of expansion, which leads him to suggest that the emergence of systematic records is linked to imperializing culture and expansionism. König then concludes that the production of records documenting other cultures depends upon a complex network of re-

sources, infrastructure, the geopolitical balance of powers, and religious ideologies. Here, the latter constitutes only one factor among many (p. 343).

Another important aspect of König's work is to show that rather than simply encouraging polemical and hostile depictions of the Latin-West, conflict was often accompanied by a greater transferral of knowledge. This book highlights that Muslim authors did not simply emphasize the violence of Latin-Christians while neglecting to record the sociopolitical structures that supported their expansionist aims. Hence, Latin-Christian expansion spread both an image of the Latin-West as violent and barbaric as well as a greater awareness of Latin-Christian sociopolitical diversity among Muslims. König provides a much needed systematic investigation that convincingly and robustly traces the emergence of medieval Europe in the minds of medieval Arabic-Islamic thinkers. Establishing this process of emergence in itself is an indispensable contribution to scholarship, as it overturns some of the most misleading assertions that have shaped the study of this subject in the past.

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