

John Tolan

Graeculus dixit: Byzantium as Intermediary between Islam and Latin Europe?

My subject is the curious and complex triangle of identity between three medieval civilizations: Byzantium, the Latin West and Islam. In particular, I want to look at how some Medieval Latin writers saw Byzantium as an intermediary between Latin Europe and Islam. “Intermediary” is a deliberately vague word, but appropriately so here: for various Latin authors, the Greeks are both important sources of knowledge about Islam and, like Muslims, prone to theological error. The Oriental penchant for error, ascribed to intellectual or to climactic causes, leads Greeks into error and makes them easy victims of the Saracen heresy. I particularly want to look at two texts from the 12th century, in the context of the crusades: a short biography of Muhammad by Adelphus and Guibert of Nogent’s preface to his history of the first crusade, the *Gesta Dei per Francos*.

1. Adelphus’ Graeculus

An otherwise unknown writer named Adelphus sometime in the early twelfth century penned a brief polemical biography of Muhammad. In order to explain how he learned about the life of the false prophet Muhammad, he opens his short text with the following preliminaries:

“The Greeks are the inventors or writers of almost all the arts. Their wit – ancient and modern – fills many Latin books. There is no story so fabulous that it does not contain some pure truth to be found hiding inside it, if it is sought out eagerly using that light which Latin vigilance can strike from the Greeks’ flint. Among these sayings of the Greeks are those which they relate about the Saracens. These I have collected as so many encyclopedic curiosities and have disposed them in proper style in the present work.”¹

¹ “Greci omnium pene artium aut inventores aut scriptores, quorum urbana facietia de veteri utre in novum vas deducta plurima Latina turget pagina, nil tam fabulose editum reliquere,

Here we find several stock images of the Greeks. First of all, they are credited with being the inventors of all the arts. Secondly, Adelphus contrasts their “urbana facetia”, light and brilliant (but perhaps not sufficiently serious), with the stolid seriousness of the Latins. It is the latter, the serious, sober Latins who are best qualified to separate truth from fantasy in this trove of Greek wit, or, in Adelphus’ metaphor, to strike sparks from the Greek flint. Adelphus, it seems, has compiled information about the Saracens from various Greek *sententiae*, presumably written texts. But then he cites a particular oral source:

“I frequently heard the Saracens invoke that horrendous monster Machomet by the sound of their voice, so that they can worship him in their bacchanalia, calling on him and worshiping him as a god. Astounded, I came back from Jerusalem to Antioch, where I found a certain little Greek man (*Greculus*) who knew both Latin and the Saracen language. From him I carefully sought to learn what I should believe about the birth of this monster.”²

This early twelfth-century author (about whom we know nothing beyond what can be gleaned from this text), it seems, went to Jerusalem either with the first crusade or sometime shortly thereafter, returning via Antioch. It is the contact with Islam that piques his curiosity. More precisely, it seems to be the call of the muezzin, the voice invoking Muhammad and “adoring him as a god,” that makes him seek to learn more about Islam. His “Greculus” teaches him to call Muslims “Agareni” rather than “Saraceni” (since they descend from Hagar rather than Sarah) and tells him of the life and deeds of Machomet.³

in quo non pura veritas intus quasi tecta reperiatur, si eo lumine, quod ab ipsorum silice Latina vigilantia cudebat, curiose investigatur. Quorum nimirum Grecorum ex sententia, qua ipsi cum Sarracenis disceptare solent, hoc, quod stili offitio commendare in presens disposui, quasi unus de curiosis cyclicis collegi.” Adelphus, *Vita Machometi*, ed. B. BISCHOFF, In: BISCHOFF, B., *Anekdota Novissima. Texte des vierten bis sechzehnten Jahrhunderts*. (Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters 7) Stuttgart 1984. 106–122 (p. 113). On this text, see TOLAN, J., “Adelphus”. In: THOMAS, D. ET AL. (eds.), *Bibliographical History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. vol. 3. Leiden 2011. 572–3; TOLAN, J., *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. New York 2002. 137–47.

² “Dum frequenter Saracenos monstrum quoddam Machomet horrendum vocis sono, utpote quia bachanalia colunt, invocantes et pro deo adorescentes audivissem vehementique admiratione percursus Antiochiam ab Hierosolymis in redeundo advenissem, Greculum quendam tam Latine tam Saracene lingue sciolum super huiusmodi conveni et, quod vel unde illud monstrum oriundum credere deberem, omni qua poteram cautela sciscitatus sum.” Adelphus, *Vita Machometi* 113.

³ On the use of the terms “Ishmaelite”, “Hagarene”, and “Saracen”, see TOLAN, J., ‘A Wild Man,

What did the Greculus tell Adelphus about Muhammad's life? Yet another version of what in the twelfth century became a standard hostile and mocking biography of the prophet.⁴ Adelphus' Muhammad is a swineherd who falls in with the heresiarch Nestorius, performs bogus miracles, reveals a new law based on debauchery, murders his master Nestorius while drunk (this explains the Saracens' prohibition of alcohol), and marries the Queen of Babylon to accede to the throne. He is also adept in the black arts:

“This swineherd was a supreme magician, student of diabolical doctrine, of the evil art, a very learned man in necromancy, from whom ‘no herb nor root lurking in dark places escaped.’”⁵

Indeed, it is his skill in magic, it seems, that allows him to trick people into following him:

“He performed so many wonders (*tam mirabilis*) among his people, that they liked to invoke him as a god. That is how good his magic (*mathesis*) was.”⁶

Yet divine wrath eventually strikes this magician. Adelphus says that Machomet is out hunting when he is attacked and killed by roving pigs. Once they are finished with him, only one arm is left. This is supposed to explain why Saracens don't eat pork.

At the end of this brief biography, Adelphus again justifies his text and distances himself from it by reminding the reader of his source, the *Greculus*:

“Enough has been said about Machomet, the Nestorius of the Agarenes, based on what the Greek told me. If anyone says these things are false, the reader shouldn't blame me, but attribute it either to his own ignorance or to the inventiveness of the Greeks (*Grecorum inventioni*).”⁷

Whose Hand Will Be Against All': Saracens and Ishmaelites in Latin Ethnographical Traditions, from Jerome to Bede. In: POHL, W. – GANTNER, C. – PAYNE, R. (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World. The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*. Farnham 2012. 513–530.

⁴ See TOLAN (n. 1) chapter 6.

⁵ *Vita Machometi* ll. 89–91, citing Horace, *Epod.* 5,67.

⁶ *Vita Machometi* ll. 303–04.

⁷ “Hec de Nestorio Agarenis Machomete, prout Grecus mihi retulit, dixisse sufficiat. Verum quisquis falsa putaverit, mihi cesset exprobare, cum verius debeat vel sue ignorantie vel Grecorum inventioni id imputare.” Adelphus, *Vita Machometi* 122.

Adelphus seems anything but confident in the truth of what he narrates; he prefers to attribute the scurrilous tale to his “Greculus.” Adelphus claims to get his information from his Greculus and more generally from the *sententiae* of the Greeks.

2. The role of Greek texts on Islam in the formation of Latin knowledge about Islam

Did Adelphus actually get this information from a *Greculus*? Or is this just a convenient *topos* meant to give him free reign to recount these scurrilous *fabulae*?

One of his sources may have been the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes, who wrote c. 815, and whose *Chronographica* was translated into Latin by Anastasius the Librarian in the 870s.⁸ Theophanes presents Muhammad as a false prophet and heresiarch who forged a new heresy out of Christian and Jewish elements. Theophanes had access it seems to writings of Eastern Christians living under Muslim rule: he gives distorted and hostile descriptions of Muhammad’s marriage to Khadija, the recognition of his calling by the Christian monk Bahira, the cult at Mecca and the Muslim conception of heaven. While the Latin translation of Theophanes may conceivably be one of the sources of Adelphus’ Greek *sententiae* about Muhammad, Adelphus is much readier to indulge in scurrilous legends that have nothing to do with Muslim tradition and that are not to my knowledge frequent in Greek writing about Islam. This kind of polemical biography of Muhammad as a colorful trickster was however popular in 12th-century Latin authors such as Embrico of Mainz, Gauthier de Compiègne and Guibert de Nogent (to whom we will return).⁹ This suggests that Adelphus’ Greculus may simply be a *topos*.

In fact, with the notable exception of Theophanes, few Greek texts about Islam seem to have been known in Latin Europe. Robert Grosseteste translated John of Damascus’ *Disputation between a Saracen and a Christian* in the mid-13th century. But on the whole, Latin works translated from Arabic into Latin played a far larger role in the forging of Latin notions about Islam. One could

⁸ For Theophanes Greek text and Anastasius’ Latin translation, see *Theophanis chronographia*. Lipsiae 1883. For an English translation, see *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*. English translation by Cyril MANGO and Roger SCOTT. Oxford 1997. See also VAIΟΥ, M., “Theophanes the Confessor”. In: THOMAS D. ET AL. (eds.), *Bibliographical History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. vol. 1. Leiden 2009. 426–36; NEIL, B., “Anastasius Bibliothecarius”. *ibid* 786–90.

⁹ TOLAN (n. 1) chapter 6.

cite in particular the corpus of texts translated at the behest of Peter (the Venerable), abbot of Cluny, in the 1140s: the Quran, first of all, but also an essential 10th-century Arabic Christian polemical work, the *Risalat al-Kindi*. From the twelfth century forward, Latin writers on Islam seem to be little influenced by Greek works: on the contrary, it is a key Latin text, Riccoldo da Montecroce's *Confutatio Alcorani*, that Demetrios Kydones translates into Greek in 1385.¹⁰

3. Greeks and Christendom

Adelphus, as we have seen, exploits the common imagery of Greek brilliance and inventiveness, which leads them to concoct fables; this in contrast with stolid Latin rationality. He does not specifically accuse the Greeks of heresy and schism; other authors will of course do so. Here is not the place to trace the well-known history of the divisions between the Byzantine and Roman churches: the tensions caused by Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800, the supposed schism of 1054, the tensions during the first crusade and after, the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the 4th crusade. Increasingly, in the twelfth and especially thirteenth century, Greeks are seen by Latin churchmen as schismatics and their error is associated with other Oriental errors, in particular Islam.

a) Innocent IV's five *Dolores*

Let's look, first, at one key example from the thirteenth century. At the first council of Lyons (1245), Pope Innocent IV identified five "dolores" that weighed on the Church:

"He [Pope Innocent IV] began to preach concerning the prophetic passage 'With the multitude of pains in my heart, your consolations lightened my soul' [Ps 94:19; Vulgate 93:19], beginning by saying that his pain was multiple, that five pains surrounded him. The first was the corruption of prelates and their officers, the second the insolence of the Saracens, the third the schism of the Greeks, the fourth the ferocity of the Tartars, the fifth the persecution of Emperor Frederick."¹¹

¹⁰ See DE LA CRUZ PALMA, Ó. – FERRERO HERNANDEZ, C., "Robert of Ketton". In: THOMAS (n. 1) 508–19; GONZÁLEZ MUÑOZ, F., "Peter of Toledo". *ibid* 478–82; BURMAN, TH., "Riccoldo da Monte di Croce". In: THOMAS D. ET AL. (eds.), *Bibliographical History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. vol. 4. Leiden 2012. 678–91.

¹¹ "Incepit predicare de auctoritate prophete 'Secundum multitudinem dolorum meorum in

Two of the pope's "dolores" involve internal problems of Christendom: clerical corruption and conflict with the Emperor Frederick II. The other three are threats from the East which menace the spiritual and territorial integrity of Christendom. These three represent what Christendom is not and what it has to defend itself against. Central European polities such as the kingdoms of Hungary and Poland defined themselves as bulwarks or shields of Christendom, both to affirm the legitimacy of their own rule over their subjects and to promote it in the eyes of other Europeans.¹² The Greeks, mentioned between the Saracens and the Tartars are a hostile force in opposition to Christendom, represented by the pope. The pope's listeners were clearly familiar with this theme and this lumping together of eastern, less than orthodox enemies must not have surprised them. It already had a long history, dating back to Carolingian times.

b) Charlemagne's Europe/Christianitas as an anti-Byzantine construction

As Bronisław Geremek has shown, various Carolingian writers use the term Europe to describe Charlemagne's realm. The classical geographical term is largely anti-Byzantine in inspiration: over and against Constantinople's claim to universal Christian Empire, the Roman Church and Frankish Emperor affirmed their sway over Europe. For Geremek, "Europe" was a *political* project, not a cultural identity, which explains that after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire, few authors invoke it in the same way.¹³ Indeed, in the following centuries, such use of "Europe" will virtually disappear.

Another key term that emerged in the Carolingian era as a marker of collective identity, recognized at least by a clerical elite associated with the twin powers of Empire and Papacy, was "christianitas": Christendom. It is perhaps as the Carolingian empire was crumbling that we see emerge the notion of *christianitas* as a territory and heritage to defend against external enemies (Vikings, Saracens, Magyars) and internal ones (lay usurpers of clerical prerogatives). But of

corde meo consolationes tue letificaverunt animam meam, incipiens, quod multiplex erat dolor suus, quia V dolores circumdederunt eum. Primus erat de deformitate prelatorum et subditorum, secundus de insolentia Saracenorum, tertius de schismate Grecorum, quartus de sevitia Tartarorum, quintus de persecutione Frederici imperatoris" MGH Leges, Const. 2: 501.

¹² KNOLL, P., Poland as "Antemurale Christianitatis" in the Late Middle Ages. *The Catholic Historical Review* 60 (1974) 381–401; BEREND, N., *At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims, and "pagans" in medieval Hungary, c. 1000-c. 1300*. Cambridge, UK – New York 2001.

¹³ GEREMEK, B., *The Common Roots of Europe*. Cambridge 1996.

course the term conserves its polyvalence and its ambiguity: it can mean either “Christianity,” “Christendom” or both at the same time. While I will not develop this here (I do so in a forthcoming article on the concept of Christendom), let me note finally that it is in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the context of reform movements in the Church and of the launching of the first crusades, that various Latin writers evoke and develop the notion of *christianitas* threatened by external and internal enemies. For Tomaž Mastnak, “the heyday of *christianitas* coincided with the rise of the papal monarchy, and the idea of Christendom finally ‘triumphed’ under the pontificate of Innocent III”.¹⁴ Closely associated with the construction of *christianitas* as a unified whole under papal rule was the theory and practice of holy war. Crusading chronicles were among the first texts to elaborate a notion of *christianitas*.¹⁵

c) The view from Constantinople: Byzantine Christendom and the “Kelts” according to Anna Komnena

This, interestingly enough, is paralleled in the ways that some contemporary Greek writers saw the Latins, as we see in the following passage from Anna Komnena’s *Alexiad*:

“Kelts assembled from all parts, one after another, with arms and horses and all the other equipment for war. Full of enthusiasm and ardour they thronged every highway, and with these warriors came a host of civilians, outnumbering the sand of the sea shore or the stars of heaven, carrying palms and bearing crosses on their shoulders. There were women and children, too, who had left their own countries. Like tributaries joining a river from all directions they streamed towards us in full force, mostly through Dacia. The arrival of this mighty host was preceded by locusts, which abstained from the wheat but made frightful inroads on the vines. The prophets of those days interpreted this as a sign that the Keltic army would refrain from interfering in the affairs of the Christians but bring dreadful affliction on the barbarian Ishmaelites.”¹⁶

¹⁴ MASTNAK, T., *Crusading Peace Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order*. Berkeley 2002. 92.

¹⁵ ARDUINI, M. L., Il Problema Christianitas in Guiberto Di Nogent. *Aevum* 78 (2004) 379–410; Katzir, Y., The Second Crusade and the Redefinition of Ecclesia, Christianitas and Papal Coercive Power. In: Gervers, M. (ed.), *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*. New York 1992. 3–12.

¹⁶ Anna Komnena, *Alexiad* 10,5,6–7; Translation from SEWTER, E. (trans.), Anna Komnena, *The Alexiad*. Harmondsworth 1987. 309.

This is how the Byzantine princess Anna Komnena describes the irruption of the “Kelts” into the empire of the Romans during what historians would subsequently call the First Crusade. This massive movement of people is compared to a force of nature, like the streams surging together into a river, or like the plague of locusts that, according to Anna, preceded their arrival. She is aware of the diversity of these people who come from different regions of Europe: Normans, Provençaux, Italians, etc. Yet she groups them together as “Kelts”, in contradistinction to the “Ishmaelites” (Muslims) and the “Christians”, whom she elsewhere calls “Romans”. She is of course aware that the Kelts are Christian, yet she uses the term “Christian” to refer to Byzantines, as if somehow these other people were not quite *bona fide* Christians. She would probably be surprised to learn that at about the same time, these “Kelts” began to define their common culture as *Christianitas*, Christendom. In both cases, a “Christian” collective identity is defined over and against both a foreign Christian community seen as not quite as Christian and against Muslims (or Ishmaelites, Hagarenes or Saracens, to use the terms these authors employed).

4. Guibert of Nogent

This brings us back full circle to the crusades and the twelfth century. In 1109, Guibert de Nogent, at the opening of his chronicle of the *Deeds of God through the Franks* (*Dei gesta per Francos*), contrasts the valor and religious zeal of the Franks with the moral turpitude of the Orient, nest of heresies from the time of Arius onward. This contrast justifies and glorifies the Frankish exploits in the Holy Land. Guibert is aware that Muslims “contrary to what some say, do not believe that he [Muhammad] is their god, but a just man and their patron, through whom divine laws were transmitted”¹⁷ He gives a brief biography of “Mathomus,” hostile and mocking. Guibert’s Mathomus, like that of Adelphus, is a colorful scoundrel whose acolytes provide a satisfying enemy for the Frankish knights. For Guibert, Muhammad learned his trade of deceit from a heretical Eastern Christian mentor whom Guibert does not name, though he compares him with Arius. Guibert manages to make Islam into both the most recent and virulent strain of Eastern Christian heresy and a divinely-ordained punishment meted out to the Greeks and other Eastern Christians for their heretical proclivities. The message, at the beginning of this

¹⁷ Guibert de Nogent, *Dei gesta per Francos* I (CCCM 127A, 1996) p. 100; the translation is mine since the translation by Robert Levine is in error here (LEVINE, R. (trans.), *Deeds of God through the Franks*. London 1997. 36.

chronicle of the first crusade, is clear: good stolid orthodox Latins need to go to the Holy Land and clean up this Oriental mess.

Guibert develops many of the themes we have come across so far. He attributes the Greeks' peculiar character to the effects of the climate: the purity of the air makes their bodies lighter and their intellects quicker. But this unfortunately leads them to instability and to reject the authority of the Church Fathers. Hence the East is the fount of countless heresies, which Guibert enumerates in some detail. In religion as in politics the East is plagued by *asiaticam levitatem*. He goes on to catalogue differences over the Eucharist (their use leavened bread), over Greek refusal to recognize papal authority, non-respect of clerical celibacy, doctrinal errors over the Trinity. As a result of all this they were punished for their sins: foreign peoples (the Muslims) invaded their lands, drove them out, or made them pay tribute.

Adelphus and Guibert play on similar and well-established stereotypes of Greeks: Greeks are clever, cultured, brilliant – but also unstable and untrustworthy. They are clearly different from the Latins: stolid, serious, trustworthy. True, the two authors manipulate these images to slightly different ends and in different ways – and Guibert does so to a much greater extent. Adelphus uses these *topoi* mainly to give a plausible source to his colorful and hostile legends about Muhammad: at once to posit a true (and exotic) source of information and to distance himself from his narrative (he's just repeating what his *Graeculus* told him).

Guibert is doing something different, as we have seen. For him, Eastern brilliance and instability are the cause of heresy – indeed of a range of heresies ranging from Greek Orthodox Christianity to Arianism, Nestorianism and Islam. This is Orientalism very much in Edward Said's definition of the term: "Orientalism is Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."¹⁸ Orientalism as discourse, for Said, is the ideological counterpart to the political and military realities of British and French Empires in the Near East: Orientalism provides justification for empire. Here Guibert's portrait of *asiatica levitas* justifies the conquests of the first crusade. While he does advocate conquest at the expense of Byzantium, it would not be much of a leap to do so, and it is easy to see how other Latins could do so in the following decades.

¹⁸ SAID, E., *Orientalism*. New York 1978. 3.