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IT IS NOW OVER 20 YEARS since Diane Speed, in a learned and valuable essay, attempted to determine the identity of the "Saracens" who invade the realm of Murri, king of "Suddene" (the Isle of Wight?) at the outset of the thirteenth-century romance known as *King Horn*.[1] Given that Islamic armies never reached English shores, critical opinion had long held that the Saracens to whom this poem refers were probably Vikings at the time of its composition, making *King Horn* a rare survival into the later Middle Ages of oral traditions concerning the period before the Norman Conquest.[2] Typical was the judgment of one of the poem's earlier editors, Joseph Hall:

> This poem, as we have it, is a story of the Danish raids on the south coast of England. It is, in the main, Teutonic in spirit and details: the names of the persons and places are mostly Teutonic or assimilated to Teutonic forms. (liv)

Speed's study was one of the first to explore doubts about such claims, which as she notes were "based upon a combination of historico-geographical and linguistic arguments, mostly advanced many decades ago" (565). After an exhaustive review of seemingly analogous references to pagans and "Saracens" populating the *chansons de geste* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in which Speed finds that persons so labeled "are usually oriental or Mediterranean peoples who were, or were regarded as, Islamic; occasionally Saxons; and very occasionally Scandinavians" (572), Speed throws cold water on any further associations of this poem with pre-Conquest oral history:

> The materials with which the author of *King Horn* seems most likely to have been familiar depict the Saracens as Islamic peoples, although it is not impossible that he was also aware of some group of "Saracens" which included Germanic pagans as well. His conscious concern, however, was probably rather with the functional identity of the Saracens as the enemy in his literary construct. The Saracens of *King Horn* are essentially a literary phenomenon, based not on figures from real life, but on other literary phenomena.

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[1] On the identification of "Suddene" with the Isle of Wight, see Sands 1986: 16 (who casts doubt on this supposition). There is to my knowledge no certainty regarding the identity of "Suddene."

[2] Typical is the view expressed in Sands 1986: "The Saracens . . . never landed in force on the English coast, although the Scandinavians did (in several great waves beginning in the eighth century) and it is probably they who conditioned the minds of both minstrel and audience to the savagery of deep-sea raiders" (16).

While Speed's essay immediately assumed its place as the definitive study regarding this aspect of *King Horn*, not all of its claims have received uncritical acceptance. A recent article by Kathy Cawsey begins its critique of Speed's thesis by drawing attention to the version of John Lydgate's *Lives of Ss. Edmund and Fremund* in British Library MS Harley 2278, a manuscript datable to the year 1433. In an image on fol. 98ᵛ, the men accompanying the Danish king Swein ashore "wear armor over embroidered robes or tunics, carry curved swords, have forked beards and, most noticeably, sport elaborate, towering headdresses which look remarkably like turbans" (381).

Turbaned Vikings. (Photograph: Courtesy of the British Library.)

Other depictions of Vikings with turbans and forked beards in this manuscript – itself, as Cawsey notes, a "shorthand" for Muslims in late medieval iconography – leave no doubt that their appearance as such is not an illuminator's arbitrary flight of fancy (382-83). These and other conflations of Northern pagans with Islamic Saracens lead Cawsey to doubt whether the poet of *King Horn* understood his Saracens solely as the stock characters of earlier Old French narratives:

> The pagans of *King Horn*, therefore, probably owe at least some of their heritage to the Muslim Saracens of the *chansons de geste*; but their depiction remains ambiguous, and their characterization is essentially hybrid. We simply cannot answer the question

of what *Horn*'s author and audience visualized when they imagined the pagan invaders of Westerness: did they see turbaned, scimitar-wielding Moors, or axe-waving Danish warriors? (385)

Cawsey's thesis implies that identification of Saracens as adherents to Islam in narrative texts of the later Middle Ages does not (as Speed had suggested) require us to exclude the possibility of their being regarded as Vikings as well. While it is not my purpose here to offer any major challenge to assertions made in either of these articles, I would like to draw attention to a pair of texts not considered by Speed or Cawsey that may reveal more about how the "Saracens" of *King Horn* were understood by its earlier audiences. The two analogues to *King Horn* to be discussed in this essay will offer further proof that the tendency not to distinguish Islamic and Northern "Saracens" was a commonplace of earlier English romance. This brief essay further suggests that persons so labeled were not always Vikings: any Germanic pagan from the period before the Norman Conquest might be designated a "Saracen" and expected to display all the accoutrements of membership in this group.

Before pursing this inquiry, it must be admitted that what little the Saracens of *King Horn* have to say about themselves does not offer us much to work with. They are described only as "sarazins kene" whose stated intentions are limited to the destruction of "[all] Þat Drihte [*or* Christ] l[e]ueth upon" ("all who believe in God/Christ") as well as all sites of Christian worship (ll. 40-66). Such traits would link them as easily with Vikings as the stereotyped Islamic Saracens of romance.[3] That Horn is spared by the Saracens' *Admira[l]d* (l. 91) perhaps suggests their identity with the latter group given the derivation of this word from Arabic *amīr al-mā'i,* "emir of the sea," but such a conclusion would still face the difficulties posed by Cawsey's suggestion that Northern "Saracens" assumed a "hybrid" identity in narrative verse of the later Middle Ages.[4] Speed appears to assert that the author did not know (or care) what was meant by the term: "In the case of *King Horn . . .* we cannot be sure what imaginative associations the author, or the thirteenth- century audience, brought to the terms *painime, paien,* and *geaunt* or what kind of people they thought were *Sarazins*" (594). The first analogue unremarked in either study that might tip the scales in favor of Cawsey's view is the fourteenth-century poem *St. Erkenwald,* which imagines a pre-Conquest, pre-Conversion England made up of persons whose religious habits differ little from those of the conventional Saracens of twelfth and thirteenth-century *chansons de geste.*[5] Upon being sent to Sandwich by Pope Gregory to reacquaint inhabitants of the British Isles with the tenets of the faith, Augustine finds himself confronted with the sort of religious environment in which the Saracens of the *Chanson de Roland* would have felt very much at home:[6]

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[3] Citations (somewhat modified to reflect variations in other manuscripts) are from Allen 1984.

[4] See Allen 1984: 263-64.

[5] Indeed, it seems to me that *St. Erkenwald* – a text wholly unmentioned in Cawsey's article – does as much as, and perhaps more than, Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale (a text to which Cawsey's study devotes great attention) to demonstrate that English audiences of the later Middle Ages were in the habit of imagining their pre-Christian ancestors as worshipping in the manner of Muslims.

[6] The poem is cited here from Morse 1975.

> He turned temples þat tyme þat temyd to þe deuell
> & clansyd hom in Cristes nome & kyrkes hom called;
> He hurlyd owt hor ydols & hade hym in sayntes
> & chaungit cheuely hor nomes & chargit hom better.
> Þat ere wos of Appolyn is now of Saynt Petre,
> Mahon to Saynt Margrete oþer to Maudelayne,
> þe Synagoge of þe Sonne was sett to Oure Lady,
> Iubiter and Iono to Iesu oþir to James.
> So he hom dedifiet & dyght all to dere halowes
> þat ere wos sett of Sathanas in Saxones tyme. (ll. 15-24)

The poem is rather explicit that turning the inhabitants of Britain from Christ to "Mahoun" and Apollo was the work of the Saxon invaders who "bete oute þe Bretons & brogt hem into Wales" (l. 9). According to Ruth Morse, "[t]he poet's list of pagan gods is a combination of imagination and alliterative commonplaces" (66), an effect of the poet's having lapsed into formulaic language and stock imagery and thus no real indication of how he imagined the religious situation of the British Isles before the conversion. That it instead makes use of a much older tradition is suggested by Layamon's reference to the idols of the unconverted Anglo-Saxons as "maumets" (Cawsey 384). Given Speed's admission that at least two of the French texts she considers classify Danes and Saxons as "Saracens," the fact that in *St. Erkenwald* pre-Conquest English paganism looks so much like Islam as it existed in the imagination of twelfth-century *jongleurs* suggests that the term might easily have referred to inhabitants of Germanic Europe.

The relevance of *St. Erkenwald* in spite of its lateness becomes clear when it is compared with the other analogue to be proposed in this essay, the much earlier *Mirror of Justices*. This text is in all likelihood contemporaneous with *King Horn,* and its author's awareness of the *Horn*-tradition is established in an article I published some years ago.[7] Here I argued that the occurrence of the name *Horn* among the corrupt justices its author imagines were hanged by King Alfred the Great is not (as was long thought to be the case) evidence of the text's having been written by Andrew Horn, chamberlain of London until 1328 and remarkable compiler of English legal antiquities. Instead, this name seems to reflect the author's wide reading in vernacular romance, which appears to have constituted his chief source of knowledge of earlier English history – something which explains the presence in this text of Alfredian justices named *Tristram* and *Yve*. And so it is that in a list of "criminal sins" under royal jurisdiction, the *Mirror* – which claims rather absurdly to be the product of pre-Conquest materials – offers the following:

> Ou issi: Nolling, illoec, est defamie de bons giens q*e* atiel jour ec*et*., reneia il son baptesme e se fist circumcire e devient jeu, ou Sarasin, ou adora ou sac*ri*fia a Mahoumet en despit de dieu e en dampnacion de sa alme.
> Or thus: Nolling, who is there, is defamed by good folk for that on such a day, etc., he denied his baptism, and had himself circumcised and became a Jew, or a Saracen, or adored and sacrificed to Mahomet, in despite of God and to the damnation of his soul. (60-61)

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[7] See Jurasinski 2006.

That the name assigned to this hypothetical Anglo-Saxon adherent to an unspecified Semitic faith has been assigned with some care by the author of the *Mirror* to give it the appearance of Germanic derivation is surely significant. It occurs alongside the names of other offenders – *Wymound, Seburgh,* and most ludicrously, *Cuthbert* – each of which is selected to give a spurious impression of antiquity to the incidents related in this text and thus lend authority to the treatise as a whole.[8] The author of the *Mirror* may well have believed such forms of apostasy to have constituted a genuine temptation for the pre-Conquest English. At the very least, he felt able to dupe his contemporaries into believing this was so, and his confidence perhaps suggests something of the milieu within which *King Horn* took shape.

It may be said that the author of the *Mirror,* in implying the existence of Islam in Anglo-Saxon England, was led to such conclusions above all by his reading of *King Horn,* leaving the *Mirror* a text that ultimately reveals little about the background of the poem. However, even this conclusion, which I do not hold unlikely, may itself illuminate the background of *King Horn.* Knowledge of what one reader or auditor who experienced this poem shortly after its composition made of its contents brings us as close as we may hope to come to what *King Horn*'s author may have had in mind. The evidence of the *Mirror,* once read alongside *St. Erkenwald* and other texts assembled by Speed and Cawsey, makes clear that late medieval English audiences were in some instances able to project without hesitation the features of the Saracen onto the English- as well as Danish-speaking denizens of the pre-Conquest British Isles. When it came to events in the era before the Conquest, it appears, the extreme myopia of the *Mirror of Justices* seems representative of popular historical consciousness in later medieval England, some trace of which, I would suggest, we find in the "Saracens" of *King Horn.*

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[8] Of possible significance is the fact that the protagonist of *King Horn* disguises himself under the name *Cutberd.*

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