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Recommended Citation

APA Citation

Abdullah, T. (1996). *Arab Views of Northern Europeans in Medieval History and Geography*. American University in Cairo Press. , 73-80

https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/952

MLA Citation

Abdullah, Thabit *Arab Views of Northern Europeans in Medieval History and Geography*. American University in Cairo Press, 1996.pp. 73-80

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Europe and the Muslim World
Before 1700

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CAIRO PAPERS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE
Volume 19, No. 2

CHAPTER FOUR

ARAB VIEWS OF NORTHERN EUROPEANS IN MEDIEVAL HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

THABIT ABDULLAH

Notwithstanding a few recent works, the literature on cross-cultural encounters in the Mediterranean continues to be dominated by works dealing with various aspects of European views of the Arabs and Islam. While these have undoubtedly broadened our knowledge of this important and timely issue, their one-sidedness often gives rise to unwarranted notions. By uncovering the numerous misconceptions, biases, and fantasies that Medieval Europeans had about the Arabs, a perception has emerged that this might constitute a characteristic unique to European or western thinking.

In this paper I shall look at the works of a number of Arab historians and geographers of the medieval period from about 950 to 1400 A.D., or from al-Mas'udi (d. 956) to Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). Specifically, I shall look at how these medieval writers viewed the inhabitants of northern Europe, what they thought were their features, characteristics, and belief systems. I shall, therefore, avoid dealing with references to Byzantium, Italy, and Arab Spain that often permeated their works. I shall also avoid dealing with works that view the Europeans through the experience of the crusades since these might be considered prejudiced through war.¹

Climate and Human Character

Among the medieval Arab geographers there was universal agreement that the cultivated part of the earth is best examined from the vantage point of it being divided into seven zones (*al-Aqalim al-Sab'ah*) where the first was the southernmost zone and the seventh the northernmost. While the first zone was believed to be the warmest in temperature and the seventh the coldest, the fourth zone enjoyed the most temperate climate. It was also observed that civilization thrived only in the temperate third, fourth and fifth zones.

¹Like the works of Ibn al-Athir and Ibn Munqidh.

That climate was the primary determinant of human characteristics was also a widely held belief. Ibn Khaldun explaining what was a long-held view wrote that "the inhabitants of the zones that are far from temperate, such as the first, second, sixth, and seventh zones, are also farther removed from being temperate in all their conditions".² He further added that:

Most of them go naked. . . . Their qualities of character, moreover, are close to those of dumb animals. . . . The reason for this is that their remoteness from being temperate produces in them a disposition and character similar to those of the dumb animals, and they become correspondingly remote from humanity.³

He then goes on to explain how in all humans there is an "animal spirit" (*al-Ruh al-Haywani*) that expands with heat and contracts with cold. The expansion of the animal spirit causes the individual to experience great joy, happiness, and greater emotional sensitivity. Likewise, its contraction leads to sadness and a lack of emotional sensitivity.⁴ In this regard al-Qizwini (d. 1283) adds that cold regions lead to the stiffening of the human body and the closure of the pores of the skin. This in turn leads to the "strengthening of the heat of instincts" in the body causing the skin to appear red and the individual to become more animal-like.⁵

While this is clear enough, we run into two major problems when looking for specific examples of what the Arabs thought of the inhabitants of these cold regions. First, northern Europe received little, if any, attention in the works of most medieval Arab historians and geographers. Even such important works as al-Ya^cqubi's *Kitab al-Buldan* and ibn Khurdadhabah's *al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* say practically nothing on Europe. These regions were generally considered savage and barbaric with little to offer and, as al-Muqaddasi put it, it was not "worthwhile to describe them".⁶ Whenever European regions were mentioned, like in al-Idrisi's *Kitab Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq* (twelfth century) and Suhrah's *Kitab ^cAja'ib al-*

² Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton, 1967), p. 58.

³ Ibn Khaldun, p. 59.

⁴ Ibn Khaldun, p. 63.

⁵ Al-Qizwini, Zakariya bin Muhammad, *Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-'Ibad*, (Beirut, 1969), p. 9.

⁶ Al-Muqaddasi, *Ahsanut-Taqasim fi Ma'rifati-l-Aqalim* (Calcutta, 1901), p. 12.

Aqalim al-Sab'ah ila Nihayat al-'Imarah, it was, more often than not, limited to a description of some of the towns and cities with little information about the inhabitants.

Second, it is not clear who, according to the medieval Arabs, was a north European. The very concept of Europe did not yet exist. (My choice of the topic thus certainly has the twentieth century in mind). The term "*Ifranj*" almost always included the Franks, but usually went beyond. "*Rum*" at times meant only the Byzantines, but at others it included the Germans, Danes, and other northern peoples. Likewise, "*Saqalibah*" could refer to the Slavs alone or to a wider group. Notwithstanding these difficulties we can still delineate certain references that were obviously made about the northern Europeans. I have found al-Qizwini's *Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-'abad* to be the most useful, particularly because of its numerous references to older sources, but other sources were also used to establish the following picture.

General Characteristics

According to several sources, the northern Europeans were believed to be the descendants of Japheth the son of Noah.⁷ Their physical features, however, were certainly determined by the cold climate. Al-Mas'udi writes that due to the excessive cold and humidity, those who inhabit the "northern quarter" (first and second zones) have large bodies, thin skin, and massive muscles. Their colors, he adds, have become so white that they border on being blue.⁸ Yaqut mentions that their skin color is more red, while al-Idrisi tells us of an island in the north Atlantic inhabited by a people with no necks.⁹

The cold also affected their personalities. Al-Mas'udi writes that they have "coarse characteristics and rough manners; their mouths have grown dumb and their tongues have become heavy". He adds that "those of them who dwell to the north are dominated by stupidity, coarseness, and savagery and this increases in them as one goes further north".¹⁰ As for al-Ansari, he

⁷ Al-Qizwini, p. 614; and al-Ansari, Shams al-Din, *Kitab Nukhbat al-Dahr fi 'Aja'ib al-Barr wa al-Bahr* (Leipzig, 1923), p. 261.

⁸ Al-Mas'udi, Abi al-Hasan, *al-Tanbih wa al-Ishraf* (Baghdad, 1938), p. 22.

⁹ Yaqut, Shihab al-Din, *Kitab Mu'jam al-Buldan*, vol.3 (Beirut, 1957), p. 416; al-Idrisi, *Kitab Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Iktitaraq al-Afaq* (n.p., n.d.)

¹⁰ Al-Mas'udi, p. 22.

adds that the "excessive cold . . . ruined their manners and hardened their hearts. . . . Their color is, of course, white, and they, like beasts, care only for war, combat and hunting".¹¹ This savage mentality, according to al-Ansari, leads those who inhabit the northernmost regions to cannibalize any stranger who might wander into their territory.¹² While al-Qizwini says that the *Ifranji* were a "traitorous people" with "low manners"¹³, he nevertheless also speaks admiringly of their fighting spirit, saying that they never flee from the battlefield because death to them is more acceptable than defeat.¹⁴

Beliefs, Morality, and Hygiene

Most of the Arab writers knew that Christianity had reached the inhabitants of northern Europe. Yet they had no doubt that their faith could not have been strong. Al-Mas'udi writes that "there was never any strength in their religious beliefs".¹⁵ For some reason Abi Hifs chooses to single out the Galicians (*al-Jalaliqah*) for particularly harsh words when he says: "[They are] dominated by ignorance and arrogance, and they neglect their religion like beasts or even worse".¹⁶

Because of this lack of solid faith they developed a strong attachment to witchcraft and various other superstitions. Al-Qizwini mentions that in the lands of the *Saqalibah* (central and northern Europe) the inhabitants fall prey to witchcraft every twenty years. They believe that the witches responsible for this evil always come from among the older women in their communities. Thus, whenever such curses appear they take all the old women, tie their hands and feet, and toss them into a river. If the woman floats, she is declared a witch and promptly burnt. If she sinks, she is declared innocent.¹⁷ Al-Qizwini also writes about the "strange" system of justice that existed in the northern Europe of his day. He mentions, for example, that if one accuses another of a crime, the two are given a sword each and directed to fight. The victor's word is taken to be the truth. Another

¹¹ Al-Ansari, p. 275.

¹² Al-Ansari, p. 262.

¹³ Al-Qizwini, p. 498.

¹⁴ Al-Qizwini, p. 576.

¹⁵ Al-Mas'udi, p. 22.

¹⁶ Abi Hifs, Saraj al-Din, *Kharidat al-^cAja'ib wa Faridat al-Ghara'ib*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Al-Qizwini, p. 616.

example is that the accused is made to hold a hot iron rod and walk three steps with it after which his hand is tied with a cloth. After three days the hand is examined. If it is infected he is declared guilty and if not he is set free.¹⁸

While this system of justice seemed utterly ridiculous to al-Qizwini, he appeared to have been more confused by their sense of morality. He reports, for example, that someone had told him that among most of the Europeans adultery is considered a terrible crime for both the man and the woman and is likely punishable by death. Nevertheless, he adds that these people still have no problem allowing their wives and daughters to wash naked in the river side by side with men!¹⁹ Even more disturbing for al-Qizwini, and indicative of the sexual perversions that exist among some European communities, is that in some unspecified region of *bilad al-Rum*, they are in the habit of castrating their sons because they believe that only the priests should impregnate their wives. The castration, however, is not full, for they take care to remove only the testicles while allowing the penis to remain. This, they believe, allows the man to perform sexually for a much longer time, thus fully satisfying his wife. Al-Qizwini adds that when they get married, the groom takes his bride to the priest and watches as the priest performs his sexual duty.²⁰

Other, far less controversial practices, include a reference by al-Qalqashandi to the poor manners of the Galicians and how "one enters the house of the other without waiting for permission".²¹ Al-Qizwini comments on a very "odd" way of buying and selling in one Frankish city. Shopowners there simply write the price on the article and leave it in their store. If a customer wishes to purchase the item he simply takes it and leaves the amount indicated in its place.²² Another practice that puzzled al-Qizwini to no end was that if anyone entered to see the king he had to remove his hat and place it under his arm until he takes leave of the king. And if the king were to go out, then all whom he looks at must remove their hats and refrain from wearing them until the king passes.²³

¹⁸ Al-Qizwini, pp. 610-611.

¹⁹ Al-Qizwini, p. 615.

²⁰ Al-Qizwini, p. 587.

²¹ Al-Qalqashandi, Ahmad ibn ^cAli, *Subh al-A^csha*, vol. 5, (1913), p. 414.

²² Al-Qizwini, p. 576.

²³ Al-Qizwini, p. 615.

Needless to say such a people were bound to have very weak family bonds and odd marriages. We are told, for example, that the father continues to guide his son until he grows to be sexually mature. Thereupon the father gives his son a bow and arrows and orders him to leave and fend for himself. From that point on the son is treated like any other stranger.²⁴ In some places, their virgin women walk about with no cover on their heads. If a man sees a woman that he likes he simply goes up to her, places a shawl over her head, and she instantly becomes his wife. This is why, al-Qizwini explains, their men are more often than not married to several women.²⁵

If there seems to have been confusion concerning the Europeans' moral standards, the medieval Arab writers unanimously agree that their sense of personal hygiene left a lot to be desired. Al-Qalqashandi writes that the Galicians never wash their clothes nor do they ever remove them until they fall apart.²⁶ Al-Qizwini writes of the *Ifranj*: "You will never see a filthier people . . . for they do not clean or wash except once or twice a year with cold water and they never wash their clothes".²⁷ He adds that they are in the habit of shaving their beards causing it to grow "rough and ugly". When one of them was asked why they shaved their beards he answered that body hair was unclean and "if you (meaning you Arabs), remove it from your private parts how can we leave it on our faces?"²⁸

Script, Speech, and Song

Medieval Arab writers considered European script, speech, and singing to be either irrational or devoid of any sense of aesthetic. Ibn al-Nadim tells us that in the region "between the Rum and the Ifranj" there is a people that write from left to right. He mentions that in their view the movement of the pen will thus be away from the heart and not towards it.²⁹ Al-Qizwini tells us of a city on the Atlantic called "Shalshwiq" which was visited by one Hasan who says "I have never heard singing more terrible than that of the

²⁴ Al-Qizwini, p. 616.

²⁵ Al-Qizwini, p. 616.

²⁶ Al-Qalqashandi, p. 414.

²⁷ Al-Qizwini, p. 498.

²⁸ Al-Qizwini, p. 498.

²⁹ Ibn al-Nadim, Abu al-Faraj, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, p. 18.

people of Shalshwiq. It is a sound that emerges from their mouths like the barking of dogs or much worse than that".³⁰

Fantastic Creatures

Lastly, the medieval Arabs believed that in the remote northern regions there lived fantastic monster-like creatures. Abi Hifs mentions an island off the coast of the Atlantic ocean named "Qalhat" inhabited by humans with fish-like faces. They are capable of swimming underwater and emerge with great catches of fish.³¹ Al-Qizwini lists a city in the "land of the Ifranj" named "Kartanah". He says that the faces of its inhabitants are divided into a white-colored half and a half "of moderate color".³² Al-Qizwini also lists a city named "The City of Women" which, he says, exists on an island in the west sea. Quoting al-Tartushi he adds that this city is composed primarily of women who are its rulers and known to be great warriors. These women have male slaves who sneak into their mistress' tents at night, sleep with them, and sneak out at dawn. If the woman gives birth to a boy he is killed immediately. Al-Qizwini adds that al-Tartushi assures us that the City of Women is without doubt a known fact.³³

Conclusion

It is clear that the medieval Arab writers were not very interested in Europe let alone northern Europe. About the only characteristic that they found admirable was the martial qualities of the northern Europeans. And this, they believed, was due to their cold habitat. Thus, they basically did not believe that there was anything to be gained by studying the manners of these savages.

Notwithstanding the fact that some of their observations were quite correct, the notions that the Arabs had of the northern Europeans were, generally speaking, also full of misconceptions, biases, and fantasies. Studies such as this, I believe, help show that the problem of

³⁰ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

³¹ Abi Hifs, p. 54.

³² Al-Qizwini, p. 607.

³³ Al-Qizwini, p. 607.

misrepresentation for self-aggrandizement was not a trait unique to European thinking. Thus if we are searching for the causes of modern western imperialism (which is actually behind the current interest in such studies), we will have to look well beyond the issue of historic misrepresentation.

Conclusion

It is clear that the medieval Arab writers were not very interested in Europe and its culture. From the only characteristics that they found in the material culture of the western Europeans, Arab historians generally speaking, also full of misconceptions, biases, and fantasies. Studies such as this, I believe, help show that the problem of

²⁴ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

²⁵ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

²⁶ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

²⁷ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

²⁸ Al-Qizwini, p. 602.

²⁹ Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitab al-Fihrist*, p. 602.