The Physiognomy of the Enemy: The Image of Saracens in Travel Literature

Ilaria Sabbatini

Abstract

Florentine writers of travel, on which is based this article, were no longer interested in writing about the Arabs as a people, charged with Christian symbols, but the Arabs became the subject of a new mode of observation. Something of the traditional theological device remained in the Florentine diaries but what interested travellers was the concrete observation made of the Eastern peoples grouped under the name of Saracens. The new approach, far from banishing symbolism from the representation of reality, stimulated its reinterpretation in the light of empirical observation. Field experiences were mingled with bookish knowledge; data collected first-hand was interwoven with the traditional repertoire of beliefs, producing an inseparable mixture. Given that the paradigm still remained that of St. Augustine, a great change had taken place: the Christian symbolism, in which the real city was that of God, passed to a civic symbolism whose point of reference was the city of men, shaped during the urban development that had changed the face of the West. The Augustinian background was always present, but was shifting its focus from being the city of God to the city built by Christians: the proximity to the city marked the degree of proximity to the human species. Only in the light of these considerations can one understand the full extent of the operation undertaken by Florentine diarists who described physically — but also socially — the populations of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords

Florentine Diarists, *Débat du Chrestien et du Sarrazin*, Muhammad, *Liber Phisionomiae*, Christianity, Saracens, *Liber de secretis nature*, *arabi salvatichi*, *arabi piccolini*, Mamelukes

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The Physiognomy of the Enemy: The Image of Saracens in Travel Literature

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Ilaria Sabbatini

In the library of Moulins, a manuscript of *Débat du Chrestien et du Sarrazin* by Jean Germain, personal advisor to Philip II of Burgundy has been preserved. This is an anti-Muslim text, written at the request of the Duke in preparation for a crusade against the Turks. The work, dated around 1450, was a great success at that time, as is evidenced by the numerous copies prepared during the second half of the 15th century, and it presents for modern scholars the advantage of being accompanied by a number of miniatures. Amongst these are two illustrations of Muhammad's life, the first depicting the Prophet as a camel driver, and the second as a devoted student of the monk, Sergio. The anomaly in these illustrations is in the physical appearance of the founder of Islam: Mohammed indeed is depicted as a dark skinned man with black, curly hair. This is a very unusual because in western miniatures and rare eastern figures, Mohammed is always represented as fair-skinned. In the same manuscript of Moulins, where we can see the illustrated debate conducted under the watchful eye of the Sultan, it is hard to distinguish between the somatic aspects of the Christian and Muslim adversaries (Jean Germain, 1490-99: f. 6v). The image of a black Mohammed is also found in other copies of the same work, and this suggests that the somatic aspect assumed importance in relation to the context and to the moral characterization that writers wanted to provide to historical

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personalities (Jean Germain, 1401-500: f. 14v). Christianity, used to forging common parameters with other religions, held their founders in high regard, comparing them, by affinity or by contrast, with the figure of Christ: but if the description of the character of Muhammad is negative, then this moral evaluation can be extended to all Muslims (Cardini 299).

From where did this physical characterization of the Saracens derive? When we talk about the conventional image of the Muslims in the West, in substance we speak of the kind of representation disclosed by the epic and chronicles of the Crusades. In the age of the Crusades, in particular when dispatching the biographical legend of Muhammad in the Western chronicle through the work of Guibert de Nogent (1052-1124), we begin a profound transformation of the way in which we represent the Muslim otherness. Before the principles of the religion inspired by Muhammad were known, the biography of the Prophet spread in the West and its legend constituted the basis for the formation of a persistent idea of Islam in the Middle Ages, and beyond. Until the time of the Crusades, Islam and its prophet had been interpreted in a strictly heretical way: the Muslim beliefs were still attributable to a known array of facts. The mentor of the prophet, monk Bahira, a key-figure in his biographical narration, was considered an Arian or Nestorian heretic: his name was often changed to Sergius, Nestorius or Pelagius to connect him to the heterodox doctrines. Nevertheless, the theologian John of Damascus (+ 749), in De *haeresibus liber,* did not hesitate to consider the new prophet as the advocate of overcoming pre-Islamic idolatry. The Syrian author caught the innovative nature of Muhammad, who was not counted as pagan but rather as one who though a heretic, had triumphed over the paganism of the Ishmaelites (*PL* 94: 764-66). Therefore, from the first knowledge of Islam there was not the slightest confusion between heresy and paganism, at least when it came to a didactic perspective. Things changed if the context became contentious; in fact the Damascene used the subject of the "idolatry of Islam" as an apologetic argument. On being accused by Muslims of idolatry, Christians defended themselves by accusing Muslims of the worship of Caba, but for the Syrian theologian it was clear that Muhammad had nothing in common with idolatry (*Ivi* 767-70). At the time it was thought that Islam represented not only a different religion from Christianity but also an illegal branch of the Christian experience. If Muslims rejected the theology of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ, they could not be other than followers of Arius and Nestorius.

During the age of the First Crusade, this consideration was radically changed: the religion of Muhammad was no longer a simple heresy but was recognized as a form of paganism. The idea of Muslim idolatry, which would have seemed ridiculous to the Eastern theologians of previous centuries, was now not only allowed but was also considered the only valid interpretation of Islam. The medieval vision of Islam was the result of a gradual slipping away from the initial schismatic conception to one of idolatry, a radical negation of Christianity (D'Ancona 199-281). Step by step the Crusades had raised the need to brand the followers of Islam as enemies; they had taken on the form of demonic characters and were conveniently represented as pagan. The monastic texts, the chronicles and then the epic defined Muslims as *pagani* or *gentiles* (Todeschini, 15-19) Many songs of the crusade disclose a description of the Muslim religion, which conforms to the models of ancient paganism. This image, radically distorted, was a part of the logic of propaganda, which answered the *chanson de geste* (Flori 246). The epic does not invent anything new but while the Greek Fathers used the argument of idolatry only in the context of apologetics, the *chansons de geste* made it a real militant *topos* (Sabbatini, 2011: 75-99)

When the legend of Muhammad appeared in the West, it seems that there was no direct knowledge of what had been written by the Greek fathers about Muhammad. The name and life of the founder of Islam had become the source of folk tales, so much so that

Guibert de Nogent could say that his writings were taken from oral histories available at the time (RHC Occ. 4: 127). He recognized — unlike the other commentators — that the Saracens were monotheistic, that Muhammad was not their god, and that they were not idolaters. With regard to popular beliefs about Islam, the historian was conscious of the groundlessness for those themes so widespread in the imagination of the West: he recognized that these were falsehoods told in mockery about the followers of Muhammad, who thought he was not a god but a righteous man and a prophet (*Ivi*: 130). Yet it was in the *Gesta Dei per Francos* by Guibert de Nogent that the devil appeared for the first time, in the Western tradition of Muhammad, thus giving a definitely anti-Christian character to Islam. Mohammed, by being named as a false prophet and heretic, became the founder of an idolatrous, demonically inspired cult. The image of Islam as a pagan institution contributed to the justification of the concept of the crusade: if the Western knights became the new Christian martyrs, the Saracens could be adjusted to the role of persecutors and thus enemies to kill (Flori 247-48; 56).

The new enemies of Christianity inevitably came to the places where the Antichrist lurked; cities taken from the biblical and patristic tradition, such as Babylon and Corozaim. These names became the linguistic protocol by which epic novels would be connected to ecclesiastical beliefs, becoming their appendix and attracting with them the legitimation of the religious tradition. Often, even the names of the Saracens found in epic tales had Biblical origins in their reference to negative characters, or contained a clear reference to evil. The names, in fact, had a strongly evocative function in that they represented the very first contact with the representation of the Saracens. The names of the enemies instantly portrayed the characters when they were called on stage, before the necessity of any other description. Designations relating to betrayal, to deformities, to cruelty, to lust were *Cain, Pilate, Goliath, Pharaoh, Lucifer*. Names that represented the deformation of the good were

Malatrous, Malars, Mauprians, Malprimis, Malquidant; those recalling falsehood as *Fausaron*; female names alluding to physical enjoyment as *Gaudisse*; names that evoked a wild nature as *Brehier*, the wild bush. Of course, to these grotesque names corresponded not only the moral qualities of the Saracens but also their physical representation as the embodiment of the deformities of their spirit (Sabbatini 2012: 257-61).

If the names were the first approach to the representation of the enemy, the external description of the Saracens was also the most immediate way to explain their inner moral quality. The physical appearance of the enemy was shown as being clearly demonic: Saracens of the *chansons de geste* had the mark of monstrosity and were always represented as deformed, horned or black skinned (Jones 205). This idea of the Saracens reflected a general perception at a popular level that did not coincide with the widespread knowledge found in the higher clerical ambience, where the monotheistic and even Abrahamic character of the Muslim religion was well known and accepted. But the epics, born in relation to the first crusade, had been drawn up in secular environments, and the propaganda message, which was delivered, was addressed mainly to the laity and *illiterati*. Among the texts found in the epics of Crusade, intended for a wide audience, are the first descriptions of the physicality of Muslim enemies in their dual role as both military opponents and religious antagonists. It was the description of the body, rather than beliefs, which played a crucial role in shaping their characterization. If, as stated by Le Goff, the body became the focal point of medieval society, the consequence was that it was on this basis that the category of the enemy — that so deeply interacted with the self-representation of its community — was formed. The song of the Crusades was neither the first nor the only literary form in which a description of the Muslim appeared, but the central force of the body remained the prerogative of narrative genres more than of patristic texts.

At the end of the 12th century the character of Fierabras, the son of Balan, king of Spain, a Saracen knight in conflict with Roland, was depicted as a giant with a red beard and flattened face (Bodel 96). Michael Scotus reported, half a century later, in his *Liber phisionomiae* that those who have red hair are envious men, venomous, deceptive, and arrogant, and slanderers (Scotus ch. LIX). The description of Naisier in the *Gaufrey*, a century later, can be considered representative of the impression of Saracen monstrosity: son of a giant, he has a head bigger than an ox, skin blacker than a Moor, eyes like red embers, hair matted like brambles, huge nostrils, each large enough to hold an egg and a mouth that can encompass a whole loaf of bread (*Gaufrey* 90). The same features were already present in the *Li coronemenz Loois* (12th century) with the addition of there being a large distance between the eyes (*Li coronemenz Looïs* 25). In the face of this great enemy, how can we forget the Calydonian boar in Metamorphosis by Ovid (Naso 308) the Minotaur evoked by the image of an ox[1] or the giants Gog and Magog mentioned in the Bible as the embodiment of evil? Even Riccoldo of Montecroce, the first in chronological order of the Florentine diarists, speaks of the peoples of Gog and Magog — identifying them with the Tartars, as had been done since the time of Methodius — but, somewhat surprisingly, by giving them black skin (Montecruce 280). The boundaries of the medieval imagination must have been uncertain, when it came to demonic people, and the same Methodius, quoted by Riccoldo, had said that God would give a free hand to the Arab annihilators (CSCO 569: 95).

Taking a cue from the aforementioned character can be interesting in order to try to form an impression from the description of the physiognomy of the Nasier felon in relation to the

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[1] The myth of the Minotaur is reported by many mythographers. Among the Latins: Hyginus, *Fabulae* 40; *Mythographus Vaticanus* I 43; *Mythographus Vaticanus* II 126; *Mythographus Vaticanus* III 11, 7; Lactantius Placidus, *Achilleis* I 192; Servius, *Ad Aeneidem* VI 24. Particularly Virgil, *Bucolica* VI 46 and *Aeneis* VI 25-26; Ovid *Metamorphoseon libri* VIII 152 et seq.

Liber phisionomiae of Michael Scotus, which forms a good basis for comparison, even though it was drafted later than some epics. The work was the first original contribution to medieval physiognomy and came about as a result of the cultural renaissance that had animated the West since the 12th century while rediscovering the works of the Greek and Latin classics.[2] The art of judging the character of a person by the size of the limbs, the proportions of the body and the shape of the face had been part of Western culture since the classical Greek age. For this reason I think the *Liber phisionomiae* is a useful tool from which to interpret the description of the enemy, because it collects the beliefs about the physiognomy that were popular long before the text was written. The most ancient texts, unknown in the high Middle Ages, became available to Latin readers, 12th century onwards, stimulating the composition of original works. The *Liber Phisionomiae* — or even *Liber de secretis nature* — is the third section of *Liber Introductorius* composed by Michael Scotus during his stay at the Swabian court, approximately between 1228 and 1235. The last chapters of the book are a catalogue of physiognomic signs and of their meanings, from head to feet. The Swabian court played an important role both in the rediscovery of ancient physiognomic texts as in the development of new treaties. Indeed, it was at the court of Frederick II where the first translation of *Secretum secretorum* by Philip of Tripoli began to be circulated (whose book VIII is dedicated to physiognomy) probably together with the first versions of the *Fisiognomica* by Pseudo-Aristotle. Subsequently Bartolomeo da Messina developed his translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Fisiognomica*, destined to become the starting point of the debate on the subject.

The *Liber phisionomiae* argued that long and straight hair signified timidity and meekness; strong and curly hair indicated strength, courage and fallacy; those with frizzy hair, simple-mindedness; those with a fringe, vanity and lust; thick and curly hair suggested arrogance, mendacity, malice and wrath; those with thick hair, cruelty. All of these flaws were confirmed by the behaviour of the Saracens in epic literature. Bloodshot eyes revealed anger, haughtiness, cruelty, shamelessness, infidelity and mendacity; wide nostrils indicated large testicles therefore lust, but also falsehood and envy; the wide mouth was considered a sign of shamelessness, warmongering, voracity and impurity; a large head and broad face corresponded to a suspicious nature; an elevated and strong constitution meant cruelty, haughtiness, vainglory, malice and deceit.[3] The Saracens, in epic literature, were giants in the physical aspect, and in moral vices bestial men without the faculty of judgment but at the same time, cruel, cunning and malicious. They were inhuman figures and were characterized by their extraordinary stature and abnormal traits, which revealed them as enemies of the divine order. According to medieval authors, it was commonly thought that gigantism was the emblem of demonic arrogance that, in its highest elevation, manifested itself in the form of heresy.[4] Gigantism, as it appears in the letter *De rebus in Oriente mirabilibus* of likely Anglo-Saxon origin, was one of the characteristics that had been attributed to the oriental race from the sixth century. It represents the beginning of teratological and fantastic literature in the Middle Ages.[5] But one of the most interesting contributions is by Origen who tells of giants, along with the Titans, that were cast out of heaven for their impiety towards God and now bask in the bodily filth and dirt of the earth. They can discern the future but being disembodied insinuate themselves in the wildest and meaner animals to dupe people into belief in divination (PG XI: 1169-72).

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[2] For the physiognomics see also book II of *Liber ad Almansorem* by Rhasis (al-Rāzī), translated by Gerard of Cremona (+ 1187).

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[3] Michael Scotus, 1477: ch. LIX, LXIII, LXV, LXVI, LXXVII, C.

[4] See Isidorus Hispalensis PL 83:113 and Gregorius Magnus PL 76: 50. See also *Doon de Maience* 192.

[5] The work was already circulating in the 6th century. Sebenico 84.

Besides gigantism, another important element in the physical type of the enemy were the eyes which are described, in the *Gesta Tancredi* and the *Chanson de Roland*, as being disproportionately distant.[6] The common feature of the Saracen enemy is to be very tall and ugly but their deformity is not always the same: the novel *Gui de Bourgogne*, in the late 12th century, describes a ragged male with big bushy brows, no teeth, drooping ears and sunken eyes (*Gui de Bourgogne* 54). The image, not hostile and almost pathetic, seems to refer to a suggestion derived from the iconography of panotians, one of the monstrous races that were thought to be living at the ends of the known earth. The panotians were men with huge ears that in the Middle Ages were considered inhabitants of the region of Scythia. Isidore of Seville talks about the panotians in the 6th century, taking from Solinus, and is in turn taken from Rabano Mauro and Vincent of Beauvais. This kind of *monstruum* is an interesting choice because it is the symbol of those who hear the word of God and who, thanks to what they have heard, can cover their body with ears against the snares of sin (Kappler 9). The *Liber Monstrorum*, referring to *De rebus in Oriente mirabilibus*, spoke of men who live in the East, reaching fifteen feet in height, with marble white bodies and ears like sieves, under which they wrap themselves during the night (220). There are few medieval authors of high literature that reflect the legend of panotians. Probably the lack of a true monstrosity is the reason for their insignificance, because the popularity of the monsters depended on how menacing they were and on their ability to inspire fear (Lecouteux 263). Mohammed himself, in the 12th century, was described by Peter the Venerable as a monstrous chimera with a human head, horse neck and body of a bird.[7] This hybrid is also similar to the centaurs of the *Liber Monstrorum*, composed in the 8th century, which says centaurs have the mixed body and nature of horse and man and have bristly heads like those of beasts, but in other ways are similar to the human: they can appear to start talking, but the lips however, are unfit for human speech, and cannot organize any sound into words.[8]

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[6] RHC Oc. III: 648. See *La chanson de Roland* 230.

[7] PL 189: 655. The description was recovered from the incipit of *Ars poetica* by Horace. See Brink 55.

It should also be remembered that it is an ambivalence of monstrous races that can sometimes be drawn into the authority of the Christian imagination, becoming symbols of the deficiency rather than the aversion of non-Christian peoples. This is the case found in the figurative complex of the gable of the church of Sainte-Madeleine in Vezelay, built in the XI century on the French pilgrimage routes, where Jerusalemite travellers would stop to visit the relics of Mary Magdalene. The sanctuary of Vézelay was also the place where St. Bernard preached the Second Crusade in 1146: the story itself seems to combine the ideas as in the imagination of the Christians with the theme of the representation of the enemy. The tympanum of the central portal depicts the mission of the apostles. Under the main scene, separated from the ocean that divides the known world from chaos, we can recognize two monstrous races: the pygmies and the panotians, while on either side of Christ are a couple of dog-heads and one of "people without a nose." The presence of monstrous races in the works of art found on the routes to the Holy Land was a sort of prelude to the East and reflected the popularity of such imagery in the medieval world, in which even the monstrous peoples were placed in a Christian context because their existence seemed to be part of a divine plan.

Naturalia and *mirabilia* were not opposed to this medieval perception, indeed it would be wrong to compress the extraordinary into the category of the fantastic, in the modern sense, as a synonym for unreal: *naturalia* and *mirabilia* may be defined as two different but complementary aspects of the same family of *realia*. For St. Augustine himself there is no contradiction between nature and wonder: a miracle is not contrary to nature but only contrary to our understanding of nature (PL 41: 721). The question was related to the weakening of knowledge: during the first centuries of the Middle Ages a number of factors weakened the classification of skills. Both the lack of interest in high culture and the drastic reduction of relationships contributed to this shift, which tended to isolate the community and make it increasingly difficult to exchange information in medieval Europe. In addition, the persistence of knowledge acquired during the period of Greek-Roman classicism became unstable and the disappearance in the West of shows with exotic animals had a big impact on this knowledge. The *venationes*, in fact, constituted an important opportunity for contact with exotic animals, not only during the performance but also in the *vivaria* where the animals were kept before their show (Ortalli 494-95). Lions, tigers and elephants became as distant and intangible as harpies and chimeras. The erudition handed down from the ancient world was limited to those codes that still were transcribed in the scriptoria of the monasteries. The reference point for understanding the nature stopped being the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny and became the *Physiologus* with all its Christian symbolism.[9] The work gave a description of the properties of animals, plants and stones based on a dense texture of reference to the mystical and theological meanings, which constituted the real object of representation. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the physiognomy of the Saracen was strongly marked with a sense of moral vice and its somatic features were borrowed from beasts: all contributed to shape a physical image that communicated to an audience ready to seize on the visible signs of the ethical quality of the enemy.

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[8] See also Isidorus Hispalensis PL 82: 424.

A separate discussion for the colour of the skin has been created, being one of the most evident elements of continuity in the physical representation of the Saracens between epic and travel literature. The Arabs are dark skinned, that is an objective fact, but the interpretations of this data form the essential difference between one literary genre and another: the first is marked by a symbolic reading of the otherness, as denial of its identity, and the second is related to the observation of the external situation. The black colour of the skin, which only later will be associated with the physical features of the Africans, was important as an ethical description and an ethnographic observation. The black skin had a demonic connotation and the same apologetic and patristic tradition — then it transferred to the iconography of the epic — depicting Egyptians or Ethiopians as demons (Cardini 42).

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[9] The *Physiologus*, by an anonymous author, composed between second and third centuries, was the model which inspired the late ancient and medieval bestiaries. The text had two other principal editions: one Byzantine in the 5th-6th century and one pseudo-Basilian in 10th-11th century.

Something of this theological device remained in the Florentine diaries, and it could not be otherwise, but what interested travellers was the concrete observation made of the Eastern peoples grouped under the name of Saracens. The new approach, far from banishing symbolism from the representation of reality, on the contrary stimulated its reinterpretation in the light of empirical observation. Field experiences were supplemented with bookish knowledge; data collected first-hand was interwoven with the traditional repertoire of beliefs, producing an inseparable mixture. The reflection of the traditional idea of the Muslim world was still present in the literature of the pilgrimage, but direct contact with the Saracens in the flesh influenced the method of their representation in a progressive evolution of the ethnological perspective, that characterized the transition from the late Middle Ages to the Modern Age. In the Florentine diaries of pilgrimage, which form the subject of my research, the description of the black body was not always used as a negative moral characterization. Rather the colour of the skin was no longer a symbolic element according to a religious interpretative context but was a concrete sign of bestiality in relation to the degree of civilization of the people. The Augustinian background was always present, but was shifting its focus from being the city of God to the city built by

Christians: the proximity to the city marked the degree of proximity to the human species.

Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages, two different modes of representation of the Orient have co-existed, and it is unthinkable that they were strictly separated. The one occupied the area of theological disputes, preaching, militant literature and political acumen; the other, less ambitious but also less obsessed, concerned the observations that travellers acquired in their contact with the *Outremer*. Through preaching, an image of the East was disclosed which reflected a theological system aimed at providing an eschatological reading of the historical events. Close contact with other peoples could not replace the existing knowledge of that period of time: the pilgrimage was not a sufficient resting place to show the phenomena of cultural contamination resulting from a continued cohabitation. Nevertheless, the nature of these texts was strongly marked by the matrix of the mercantile writings, which were not only adapted to provide a practical guide for the other pilgrims, but also to compose a report which would provide proof of its experience.

The physical features of the black, naked Arab was common amongst many authors who wanted to represent the animal nature of these Saracens that seemed like devils (Poggibonsi 111). Describing the meeting with the Saracens at the port of Tenesi, in the Nile delta, friar Niccolò by Poggibonsi writes in the middle of the 14th century:

> The Saracens immediately came to us and when I beheld them, I said "What is happening here?" There were more than thirty on the boat, all naked and black and who seemed like devils. That Jesus Christ is with us! I thought, if they are all like this, how could we save ourselves amongst them? Yellow with fear we went on board the boat with them, and they took us to the port of Tenesi (Poggibonsi 111; translation mine).

The devil in the form of a black, Ethiopian man appears in many patristic stories. Peter the Venerable (12th century) described the devil as a black and monstrous creature according to a style similar to epic literature: the demon assumed the form of an Ethiopian, small and black, with hand-shaped growths protruding from his ears, a tongue of fire and a putrid mouth (PL 189: 869). From the time of John Cassian (4th-5th century) the devil was identified with an *Aethiopem tetrum*; St. Ambrose (4th century) had explained that the colour of the Ethiopians indicated the darkness of the soul; Cassiodorus (5th-6th century) called the Ethiopians a people of sinners, whose abhorrent appearance corresponded to inner wickedness; in Rabano Mauro (8th-9th century) the devil could manifest itself as an Ethiopian and even as a dragon. So the devil was not just black but also definitely Ethiopian, and often appeared in the form of a small child. There is a profound distance between the demonic child of religious literature and the beautiful children of the stories of pilgrimage. An important traveller such as Frescobaldi, with a diligent type of indulgence, noted the grace of the bodies of Egyptians children:

> On the bank of the Nile we found several boys and girls aged fourteen or so, all naked, as black as coal, who asked us for lemons, as is their custom, and we threw some to them and they collected them without any shame of being naked (Frescobaldi 139; ttranslation mine).

Yet it would be reductive to explain such a radical change with only the chronological and geographical distance in view. The distance exists, and is so wide that it makes the two worlds appear completely separate. But in my opinion, there is also a degree of cohesion that combines the unnerving stories of the demons in the patristic with the quiet descriptions of the travellers in the late Middle Age. The measure of this difference is to be found not in a change of the attitude or cultural climate, but in the consideration that, during the Middle Ages, there was always an ambivalent vision of the identity of the other, especially if he came from the land of the biblical tradition. In the diaries of pilgrimage such ambivalence was simply transposed from the entire population of the non-Christian world to a specific ethnic and social group: that of the Bedouins.

The Florentine pilgrimage diaries reveal their originality by the way in which they are able to depart from the perspective of the traditional doctrine. The writers were not interested in the Muslim religion: its description is based, without any originality, on ideas assimilated by the countries of origin. They were interested in the tangible authenticity of what they could experience during their travels, what happened in their presence and often fell outside the known categories, forcing them to follow new paths in the way in which they interpreted reality. The distance between "us" and "them" was not erased: their journey did not make the cultural baggage made over the centuries simply disappear. Rather the elements of what constituted a common reference system was recognised in the conception of narrative structures aimed at the western reader. But, at the same time, these tales gave place to unexpected perspectives, revealing thus that even the strong architecture of a consolidated model is not always able to meet the stresses of the new one. It was the narrative patterns, based on recognisable models, where the inevitable curiosity about the ethnological aspects of a world hitherto unknown could be filtered.

Travellers — despite one's expectations — described Muslim cults without adverse commentary; they were considered simply as part of the customs and traditions characteristic of Saracen populations. In this ideological dismantling can be found the substantial difference between the traditional image of the Saracen as an enemy of Christianity and the representation of the Muslim world as seen in the diaries of pilgrimage. Thus, I am convinced that it is not a transformation from one approach to another, but it is the literary manifestation of the ambivalent vision of Muslims, active in the West during the Middle Age alongside the military epics of the 12th and 13th centuries, nourished by religious symbolism and full of theological allusions, that the popularity of the travel journals was growing in public taste. It was a similar but different genre of adventure, which was still speaking of exotic and strange topics but which replaced the far away charm of the *mirabilia* with that tangibility of the *naturalia*.

Pilgrim writers were no longer interested in writing about the Arabs as a people, charged with Christian symbols, but the Arabs became the subject of a new mode of observation. The matter was not so much the transition from a symbolic representation to a concrete description of the Saracens, but the change in the kind of symbolism that they were carriers as a representation of otherness. Given that the paradigm still remained that of St. Augustine, a great change had taken place: the Christian symbolism, in which the real city was that of God, passed to a civic symbolism whose point of reference was the city of men, shaped during the urban development that had changed the face of the West. Consequently, the principles of reference had not changed, but were renegotiated in the light of the fact that, now, the city of God had taken on specific characteristics, through its modelling in civic institutions, urban arrangements, social organizations and economic dynamics. Only in the light of these considerations can one understand the full extent of the operation undertaken by Florentine diarists who described physically — but also socially — the populations of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Attention to the Saracens and their origin, despite the uncertainties related to an unknown identity, had entered in the vocabulary of the Latin Fathers since the V century. Isidore of Seville spoke of these people in the *Etymologiae*, by recounting the vulgate belief that the Saracens were so called because they were descendants of Sarah, Abraham's wife (PL 82: 329). It had been eight centuries since the *Etymologiae* when the Florentine pilgrims had begun to draw up their reports, centuries during which the osmotic processes operating on the border between Christendom and Dar al-Islam had helped to make the idea of the East and its image more complex and complete. If, on the one hand, the epic had taken possession of the western imagination by painting the Saracens as a distant enemy who were mythologically awesome, on the other hand, they had represented them in travel literature as a seamless variety of people, groups, cities, villages, nomadic tribes and sedentary societies. The interpretation of opposites, of Christians and pagans, human society and animal nature, had not changed but it had been applied on a different level: the Christian *civitas* of the Augustinian tradition had turned into the urban society of the late Middle Ages. This attitude is the way in which the peoples and ethnic groups in the Mediterranean Middle East were represented. The men of the Middle Ages, when they spoke of Arabia, considered that the Roman province of Arabia, that is the area between the present Sinai, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as a region, before the arrival of the Muslims, was to all effects Christian (Cardini 1991: 301). One would expect, therefore, that the first approach to the description of the Arab peoples would depart from the application of a religious, cultural or identitary nature. Instead none of the authors of the Florentine diaries of pilgrimage use the term *Islam*, nor refer to worship or mention the people who adhered to this religion. Once the first and most important division between Christians and Saracens had been established, populations were defined according to the lifestyles they led:

> The first are the Mamelukes, who are all Christian renegades, and are slaves because as soon as they become renegades, they immediately become slaves, and there can be no lord if previously he was not a slave (...) the children of these Mamelukes, who are born of them, are not slaves, or Mamelukes, nor are they Moors, but they remain free. (...) And then there are the Arabs and these are bestial men, without any discretion or allegiance, and without lordship;

> and they have their homes in the mountains and are dishonest men (Figline145-46; translation mine).

It may be inferred that, in the view of Westerners, the Mamelukes represented the governing class while the Arabs were nomadic Bedouin and the Moors were the social component of the inherent urbanite.[10] Such complex perceptions of the Muslim world certainly influenced the representation of the enemy as determined in the diaries of pilgrimage, which was no longer conducted in a belligerent way but was based on the criterion of urban civilization: those who lived outside urban society were more easily recognizable as having an animal nature rather than one that was human. On the antithesis between domestic and wild, urban and rural, the pilgrims modelled their perception of the enemy: he no longer an abstract and theological opponent but had assumed the concrete features of a difficult neighbour. What was once a demonic enemy, titan-sized with a misshapen appearance was reduced into the meagre dimensions of the desert nomad, who menaced travellers with occasional raids and petty theft rather than apocalyptic threats.

The Panciatichiano Anonymous first discusses these attacks by identifying the nomadic people as the author. This road, explain the author, is very dangerous to pass, if a man is not accompanied by a good guide, because of the people named Bedouins. They gather here all day to steal and extort from those who travel from Caesarea to Jaffa (Dardano 163-64). A century later, Leonardo Frescobaldi explained that they were rude and nomadic people and described their customs, underlining the precariousness of their shelters where they slept in promiscuity, men and women, adults and children, animals with humans (154). The assimilation to the beast was a widespread attitude among the Florentine diarists, who not only compared these people to the canine species — far beyond the appellation of *Saracen dogs* — but used in their narrative stylistic devices designed to represent the others in terms of animals:

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[10] For a correct etymology, the Moors should correspond to the *Maures*, Berbers of Maghreb and Spain, but the Jerusalemites pilgrims needed new linguistic coordinates that were invented by borrowing names from other geographical contexts.

> And the same day we found among those mountains wild Arabs with their wives, and they had many little Arabs with them; I did not think such squalid and miserable people would be so numerous. And they were all naked, males and females, all black, and their private parts were covered with the skins of camels (Poggibonsi129; translation mine).

The use of expressions such as *arabi salvatichi* (wild Arabs) or *arabi piccolini* (little Arabs) and, in general, the whole climate of the description, may be accredited to that of a herd of new and strange animals, before which the Western observer has a demeanour not unlike when he observes a giraffe or an elephant. In the Augustinian conception, the *feral* nature of the pagans was what distinguished the infidels from the human nature — and therefore spiritual nature — of the Christians (Todeschini 15-19). But in the new context, the wording changes: the *feral* nature of Arab nomads was what distinguished them from human nature — and therefore the urban nature — of the Christians. It ranges from the opposition of a *feral* and a *spiritual* nature to the opposition of a *feral* and an *urban* nature: the closer he became to the urban civilization, the closer he moved towards human nature. Niccolò da Poggibonsi was not limited to qualify the Arabs as wild creatures, but he spelled out a differentiation between wild and domestic Arabs that remained unexpressed in the other writers:

> On the ninth day, on the ninth hour, we passed through a valley and we found a hundred caves of wild Arabs. All the Arabs were dressed in leather made from camels and they seemed like those who are in hell. (...) And the interpreter said: "Do not be afraid because the Arabs are to take their

> flocks to pasture and these are the females who do not hurt others, but are delighted to see what to them is a huge event: to see people" (Poggibonsi 141; translation mine).

With the word *dimestichi* (domestic), Niccolò da Poggibonsi alluded to the groups of Bedouins who had settled as farmers and formed an important part of the rural population of Syria and Palestine. The domestic Arabs did not enjoy more consideration in the minds of the pilgrim, but constituted a distinct group from the Bedouin nomads. Also, their activities put them in touch with the sedentary society of the city (Ashtor 297-98). A very different attitude arose, in fact, from the Mamelukes. Clean, polite, well dressed the Mamelukes were the expression of the urban aristocracy who held the reins of the government in Cairo. Even the native inhabitants, defined as Moors, had their place in the urban society of the medieval Near East. Only the Arabs without obedience and without dominion — only the Bedouin nomads — could not enjoy the status of human beings as portrayed in the accounts of Western travellers.

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