

Why Were Arabs and Muslims Called Saracens in the Medieval and the Renaissance Literature?

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Abstract

Several English writers from different literary periods, including the medieval and the Renaissance literature portray the people coming from the Arabian Desert in the frame of racial and religious otherness. Most writings stress the danger of those people by describing them as people whose only goal is to fight and kill Christians in order to conquer their lands, destroy their churches and force them to convert to Islam. Furthermore, the writers avoided calling those people by their national name, Arabs, or even by their religious name, Muslims. They used the name of Saracens instead. This study explores the etymology of the name of Saracens as well as the reasons why this name was used to describe most peoples who come from Middle East. The research also points out the relationship between the name of Saracens and the skin color as a major characteristic that distinguishes Arabs and most Muslims from European people. The findings of this research are very important in part because they are a contribution to the etymological studies of the name of Saracen, and in part because they clarify the real reasons why Arabs and Muslims were called Saracens by the medieval and Renaissance writers. Since the name of Saracens was mostly used in an offensive way, the American writer and academic Edward Said's (1935–2003) theory of Orientalism is also considered in this approach.

Keywords: Saracens, Saracens in the medieval literature, Arabs and Muslims in the English literature, Orientalism

Introduction

Such words like 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' were almost completely absent in the drama and poetry that extended throughout the different periods of the English literature, if not of all European literatures, particularly in the medieval and the Renaissance literature. Very few isolated exceptional works used the words of Muslim and Islam before the sixteenth century. (Tolan, John V. 2002) Those words were commonly superseded by the name of Saracens.

In this research I am going to investigate this word, which seems a little confusing on the ground of origin and use. The name of Saracens was commonly used in the mediaeval as well as the Renaissance literature to refer to the Arabs, especially the Muslim Arabs. Different poets and playwrights used this word referring to certain characters in their works. Those characters often represent people from desert areas in or near what the Romans called 'Arabia'. The writers of those periods, with very few exceptions, did not use 'Arabs' or 'Muslims' in their works although those words were known to the European people, especially the Romans who had a major influence on the whole continent of Europe and its literatures. The word 'Saracens', referring to the Arabs or pagans, appeared in multi-religious, multi-ethnic contexts in many literary works that extend throughout the history of European literatures. Several efforts have been made to explain where this name comes from. However, none of those efforts provides a satisfying explanation. In this research, I try to trace back the origin of this word and how it was used in different contexts, so that it could be easy to figure out how and why this word superseded such words like 'Arabs' in particular.

The Name of Saracens in the medieval romances

The name of Saracens appears in several medieval romances which portray the violent primitive Saracen knights in battles against the civilized Christian knights. In the medieval romance *The King of Tars*, the Saracen sultan of Damascus is first depicted as a bloodthirsty killer who kills thirty thousand people in a battle against the King of Tars in order to win his daughter. Then the Saracen king of Damascus forsakes his gods and converts into Christianity, and his skin tone changes from black to white accordingly. In the following excerpt, the King of tars grows mad and says that he would rather die in battle and lose all of his lands than have his daughter marry a pagan.

Than the king of Tars this understode

Almest for wrethe he wex ner wode

And seyde thus in sawe:

“Bi Him that dyed on the rode,

Ich wald arst spille min hert blode

In bateyl to ben yslawe.

Y nold hir give a Sarazin

For alle the lond that is mine.

The devel him arst to drawe,

Bot sche wil with hir gode wille

Be wedded to him, hirselve to spille.

Hir thoughtes nought Y no knawe, (John H. Chandler (ed.)

The Saracen king of Damascus finally wins the daughter of the King of Tars, and the princess becomes pregnant shortly afterwards. When the Christian princess gives birth, the child is a grotesque with no eyes, nose or limbs. It lies if it were dead. However, when the Saracen king agrees to have the lump-child baptized by the prisoner priest, he is promptly transformed into a perfectly formed and fair baby. The Sultan immediately forsakes his gods and calls on the Christian trinity. Thus even the 'Saracen' baby is not spared. All the Saracens in the eyes of the writer are violent, aggressive, cruel, and freak.

Edmund Spenser and the three Saracen knights

Edmund Spenser (1552/1553 – 13 1599) was one of those writers who used this word in a highly pejorative way. In his *Fairy Queen*, Book I, He presents three characters, Sansfoy, Sansjoy, and Sansloy as Saracen knights who lack faith, joy, and law. His three characters are depicted as sinful, lustful, cruel, bloodthirsty, faithless, and uncivilized. In the following excerpt, Spenser describes one of the Saracen knights that the Red Cross Knight encounters during his travels.

But he, the Knight, whose semblaunt he did beare,
The true Saint George was wandred far away,
Still flying, from his Thoughts and jealous Fear;
Will was his Guide, and Grief led him astray.
At last him chaunst to meet upon the way
A faithless Sarazin all arm'd to point,
In whose great Shield was writ, with Letters gay,
Sans Foy: Full large of Limb and every Joint
He was, and cared not for God or Man a point. (The Faerie Queene, Book 1,
Canto 2, Representative Poetry Online, 2019)

It is worth mentioning that the bad images of the Saracens presented in the preceding works are just a few examples of the cultural and political views of the East that were held by the West. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said (1935-2003) argues the way of thinking about the Orient when contrasted with the Occident as presented in Western literature, political tracts, journalistic texts, travel books, religious and philological studies.

Historically, according to Said, the Orient has been situated as the opposite of the West, which is comprised of European powers and, later, the U.S. He describes how philology and anthropology played a large role in encouraging orientalist views of Islam, and how Arabs and Muslims are depicted as different, fearsome, sinful, and inferior to Europeans by the Western writers.

A comparatively modern image of the Saracens is also depicted negatively by James Elroy Flecker (5 November 1884 – 3 January 1915) in his poem *'War Song of the Saracens'*. In his paper, *A Textual Anatomy of a Poem: James Elroy Flecker's 'War Song of the Saracens' and the Poetry of Antara Ibn Shaddad*, Dr. Aiman Sanad Al-Garrallah, the professor of English literature at Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, Jordan, analyses this negative image and compares it with the Arabian codes of chivalry displayed in the pre-Islamic poet *Antara Ibn Shaddad's* poetry.

First, the author points out the strong relationship between the Saracens and wars that Flecker establishes in his poem's title. This relationship corresponds with the definitions of a Saracen in most European dictionaries - an aggressive, cruel, and immoral Muslim.

Like the epitexts of the poem, Flecker's title phrase—War Song of the Saracens—is the first peritext, whose function is to introduce the term (Saracens) to the reader, implying that the whole cycle of the poem revolves around it. The phrase (war song) establishes a strong relationship between Saracens and wars—a relationship that places more emphasis on surveying the meaning of Saracen. A Saracen is '(1) one of the nomads of the Syro-Arabian desert, (2) a Moslem, esp. an Arab. The Saracens invaded France (8th c.) and Sicily (9th c.), and fought against the Crusaders to retain Jerusalem. (Aiman Sanad Al-Garrallah 2014)

Then the author discusses the characteristics of Flecker's Saracens who 'are more sudden, more ineluctable, and more destructive. They do not stay at home in the company of crying women and children, but cautiously sleep near their camps, and attack their enemies.' (Aiman Sanad Al-Garrallah 2014)

Literature review

It is believed that European writers began to use the word 'Saracens' for the Arabs because they claimed that the Arabs descended from Ishmael (in Arabic Ismael) the elder son of Abraham (in Arabic Ibrahim) from his free wife Sarah. Arabs, therefore, were called 'Saracens' after Ishmael's mother Sarah. (Rubenson, Jay, 2019)

This claim cannot be reasonable because Ishmael is Abraham's son from his slave wife Hagar, not from his free wife Sarah. It is Isaac who was born to Abraham from Sarah, and the Arabs are not associated with Isaac in any way. Moreover, it is illogical to use 'Saracens' for all the Arabs in part because it is only Quraish (an Arab tribe lived in Makah) who descended from Ishmael, and in part because it would be more reasonable to call the Arabs after 'Ishmael', for example, rather than after Sarah or Hagar, or any other female name.

It is also believed that the word (Saracen) is derived from the Arabic root word 'srq' which means 'to steal'. (Shahid, Irfan, 1984) Words like 'sariq' and 'sariqin', which mean 'thief' and 'thieves', are derived from the root word 'srq'. The word 'sariqin' (in its different spellings, such as Sarakēné sarkenoi) was sometimes used in ancient works to describe peoples living the Arabian Peninsula, and sometimes as the name of a region in the northern Sinai Peninsula. The word 'Saracens', however, was also used to refer to the peoples living in the Syrian Desert, or the peoples living in the northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and ranging as far east as Mesopotamia, which was ruled by the Sassanid Persians. Both words of 'Saracen' and 'sariqin' appeared in several writings which belong to different literary periods.

The Online Etymology Dictionary suggests another Arabic root from which the name of Saracen is derived:

Old English, "an Arab" (in Greek and Roman translations), also, mid-13c., generally, "non-Christian, heathen, pagan," from Old French *saracin*, from Late Latin *saracenus*, from Greek *sarakenos*, usually said to be from Arabic *sharqiyyin*, accusative plural of *sharqiyy* "eastern," from *sharq* "east, sunrise," but this is not certain. In medieval times the name was associated with that of Biblical Sarah (q.v.). (Saracen, Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019)

Another Arabic verb root from which the name of Saracen might be derived is 'sarisa', which means to behave immorally. It is also used as a noun to refer to a man with penile agenesis. (al-Zabidi, Mohammed Murtagha, 2004) However, this term is no longer in use in the modern Arabic language nowadays.

It is worth mentioning that the name of Saracen appeared not only in the literary works but in political documents as well. The ancient Roman administrative document of *Notitia Dignitatum*, which enumerates the major offices of the government and the army units of the late Roman Empire, contains the name of Saracens along with the name of Arabs. The Saracens were distinguished from Arabs as two different comprising units of the Roman army. (Resto, Jan, 2014) The Roman document of *Notitia Dignitatum* is very important for this research in part because it reveals that the name of Arabs was also known and used in Latin and Greek, which were the official languages of the Roman Empire, and in part because it reveals that the name of Saracen was not always used in a negative way. In this vein, the name of Arabs was widely used in the major languages of the people who had contact with the Arabs and Muslims, such as the Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Chinese languages.

After the preceding account, we come to know three important points: First, since the word 'Saracens' was used to describe different peoples living

in different vast areas of Asia and Africa, the word was not used ethnically to describe a specific group of people living in a limited region. Second, since both names of 'Saracens' and 'Arabs' were used in the Roman administrative document of *Notitia Dignitatum*, they probably refer to different peoples, or Arabs were considered to be part of a larger group of people who shared certain characteristics and were thus all called the Saracens. Third, since the two words of 'Saracen' and 'sariqin' were used almost in the same periods of time in different writings, the first word has nothing to do with the latter one. Each word has its own literal meanings and connotations. In addition, the name of Saracen was clearly restricted to the European languages, so it must have come originally from a European language which had a profound influence on the other languages of the continent. It is never related to the Arabic words of 'sariqin', 'sharquiyyin' or 'sarisa'. It is of a purely European origin.

Does the word 'Saracens' refer to peoples sharing certain characteristics? And what are the characteristics those peoples have in common?

My answers to the above questions come as a main aim of this research. Basically, ethnicity and religion have nothing to do with the use of the word 'Saracens' although it was often used to describe groups of people with certain religious beliefs, usually pagans. It is the color which gave this name. All peoples that were referred to as 'Saracens' have the same skin color; it is the color of buckwheat, which was heavily focused on when describing those peoples. In the second above excerpt from the medieval romance *King of Tars*, the Sultan of Damascus is described as a pagan with black skin, and when he converts into Christianity, his skin tone changes from black to white. The color black is thus heavily present in the *King of Tars*, and it is prominently present wherever the Saracens are mentioned as well. It is, therefore, worth considering the concept of color when the word 'Saracens' is investigated as a description of certain peoples who share certain characteristics.

Semantically, what is the relationship between the word 'Saracens' and the skin color that characterizes those peoples mentioned in the old writings?

It is clearly noted that most peoples who live in the Middle East and North Africa share the same skin color which is the color of buckwheat. This small dark grain is known as *grano saraceno* in Italian and *sarrasin* in French. According to *Le Petit Robert*, a popular French dictionary, the word 'sarrasin' is the name of a grain of dark color, which is grown in France, especially in Brittany. (Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française, 2006) The Bretons of Brittany are the last vestiges of the Celtic Britons that migrated from Great

Britain and gave their name to this northwest section of France. The word 'sarrasin' is, therefore, used in the Breton language, which is the only Celtic language still spoken on the European continent today. (Walker, Suzette, 2019)

According to Louis Reynier (1762-1824) in his *De l'Économie Publique Et Rurale des Celtes, des Germains Et des Autres Peuples du Nord Et du Centre de l'Europe*, the French name 'sarrasin' was Keltic. (de Candolle, Alphonse, 2018) Thus, the name 'sarrasin' was given to the Arabs and other peoples because of their skin color, which is the same as the color of buckwheat, and it has nothing to do with the name of Abraham's free wife, Sarah. It has nothing to do with the Arabic root word 'srq', either.

Can colors be used to denote peoples?

Some colors are widely used in several languages to represent groups of people that share the same skin tone. 'Negro', from Spanish and Portuguese from Latin niger, nigr- 'black', (Negro. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2019) is a prime example of people represented by their complexion.

The Latin word niger, meaning black, is probably derived from the Proto-Indo-European root 'nek', which means 'to be dark'. 'Nek' and night are akin, and this explains how 'negro' was first used to denote peoples with dark skin.

Another example of peoples represented by their complexion is from the Arabic language. The ancient Arabs used different terms to refer to the European peoples. The most common of these are 'Ifraj' or 'Firanjah', which is the Arabic form of the name Franks, and 'Rum'. However, the skin color was also considered by the Arabs in the terms they applied to people. 'Bani Al Asfar', which means 'sons of the yellow', was another term applied to the Europeans by the ancient Arabs. They first used this term to refer to the Greeks and Romans, and later to the natives of Spain and to all the Europeans in general. It is clear that the Arabs applied this term because of the lighter skin color of Europeans, seen as yellow in contrast with the brown color of the Arabs and other Middle Eastern peoples and the black color of the African peoples.

Unlike 'negro', however, 'Bani Al Asfar' was never used by the Arabs as an offensive description. It was used neutrally in literature and in some prophetic traditions as well.

Oday Bin Zaid, a poet from the Pre-Islamic era, mentions 'Bani Al Asfar' in his verse that tells how life changes from a state to another, that no kings or powers are to remain for good. (Al-Alousi, Mahmoud Shukri, 2009)

أيها الشامت المعير بالدهر أنت المبرأ الموفور؟

أم لديك العهد الوثيق من الأ
يام بل أنت جاهل مغرور
أين كسرى كسرى الملوك أنوشر وان أم أين قبله سابور؟
وم لم يبق منهم مذكور وبنو الأصفر الكرام ملوك الر

O man, who gloats over the others' grief, are you the best?
Are you faultless?
Are you in protection against the misfortunes of life?
Or do you think life won't make you suffer like the others do?
You are such an ignorant, arrogant man.
Look where Khosrow ²⁶ Anūshirvan is now!
And look where Shapur ²⁷ is now!
And look where the honorable kings of 'Bani Al Asfar' are now!
None of them still lives today. (My translation)

Another Arab poet who used the name of 'Bani Al Asfar' in his verse was Abu al-Salt (1068 – 1134). In the following lines, Abu al-Salt describes how he feels about the beauty of a lady from 'Bani Al Asfar' who has fascinating eyes: (Diwan Al-Hakam Bin Abi Al-Salt, 2019)

بي من بني الأصفر ريم رمى
سهم من اللحظ رمتني به
كأنما مقلته في الحشا
قلبي بسهم الحور الصائب
عن كئيب قوس من الحاجب
سيف علي بن أبي طالب

I am suffering from
A deadly arrow of fascinating eyes
Shot at my heart by a lady from 'Bani Al Asfar'
She shot me closely with a glance-arrow
From her eyebrow
Her eyes are like Ali bin Abi Talib's sword ²⁸
Stabbed in my heart. (My translation)

Unlike Edmund Spenser and the other writers who used the name of Saracens in a pejorative way, it is clear that Abu al-Salt, since expressing his love to that lady from 'Bani Al Asfar', did not use the name of 'Bani Al Asfar' in an offensive way. Neither did Oday Bin Zaid. The messenger of Islam,

²⁶ A Persian king who ruled the Sāsānian empire from 531 to 579 and was remembered as a great reformer and patron of the arts and scholarship.

²⁷ The 10th king the Sāsānian Empire of Paersia (born AD 309—died 379).

²⁸ Ali bin Abi Talib was the cousin and son-in-law of the messenger of Islam, Muhammad. His famous sword, known as Dhulfiqar, was given to him by Muhammad as a gift.

Muhammad, also used this name in a neutral way to refer to the Romans. (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 2019)

It is also worth mentioning that the concept of the skin color is also heavily present in the names of some countries. Geographers or explorers used the skin color of the inhabitants as a name or part of the name to the country or the region in which those people live. For example, the name of the Afro-Arab country of Sudan 'derived from the Arabic expression bilad al-sudan ("land of the blacks"), by which medieval Arab geographers referred to the settled African countries that began at the southern edge of the Sahara.' (Sudan. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

The name of the African country of Ethiopia is also based on the concept of the skin color. 'Most writers, however, credited the Greeks for coining the term *Aethiopia*, which repeatedly means "burnt-faces," and it is widely believed to have been by Homer.' (Bekerie, Ayele, 2004)

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to point out the real explanation of the use of the name of Saracens to describe Arabs and Muslims and to argue the other given explanations. Despite the limited length of the article, the research done in the article revealed that the skin color is used in several languages to represent people, sometimes offensively and sometimes neutrally. The research also revealed that the word 'Saracen', which is the French name of buckwheat, was used to describe Arabs and some other peoples with the same skin tone, akin to the color of the buckwheat, because of their complexion. However it was often used to refer to peoples with certain moral qualities and religious beliefs. The name of Saracens, therefore, does not have any negative meanings by its own. It is the way the writers used the name that makes it acquire negative connotations of immorality, paganism, violence, and brutality. In The ancient Roman administrative document of *Notitia Dignitatum*, for example, the name of Saracen was used formally and neutrally to refer to certain people who were part of the Roman Empire and formed a major military unit of its army.

The article demonstrated how the other efforts to study the name of Saracens etymologically provided unconvincing explanations and thus not acceptable for the preceding reasons.

Further research is needed to explain the reasons why the English writers used the name of Saracen in such an offensive way to describe people living in regions as far as the Middle East in times when cultural contacts between the West and the East were so few if not so rare.

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