

621: Isidore of Seville on the Origins of the Term “Saracens”

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Abstract: In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville compiled the ancient knowledge about the pre-Islamic Arab sphere that was available in the seventh-century Latin West in the early seventh century. Based on the Old Testament, ancient ethnography, and late antique church history, Isidore categorised the pre-Islamic Arabs, known here as *Arabes*, *Ismaelitae*, and *Saraceni*, as aggressive, barbaric, desert dwellers who tried to feign legitimate biblical descent from Abraham’s wife Sara by calling themselves “Saracens.” The article shows that Isidore’s explanation does not concur with alternative etymologies of the ethnonym “Saracens” that have been proposed by historical research.

Source

Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiarum libri*, ed. Wallace Martin Lindsay, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, lib. IX, cap. 2,57, no page numbers. Translation adapted from: Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 195.

[IX,2,57] *Saraceni dicti, vel quia ex Sara genitos se praediceant, vel sicut gentiles aiunt, quod ex origine Syrorum sint, quasi Syriginae. Hi peramplam habitant solitudinem. Ipsi sunt et Ismaelitae, ut liber Geneseos docet, quod sint ex Ismaele. Ipsi Cedar a filio Ismaelis. Ipsi Agareni ab Agar; qui, ut diximus, perverso nomine Saraceni vocantur, quia ex Sara se genitos gloriantur.*

The Saracens are so called either because they claim to be descendants of Sara or, as some gentiles say, because they are of Syrian origin, as if the word were *Syriginae*. They live in a very large deserted region. They are also Ishmaelites, as the Book of Genesis teaches us, because they sprang from Ishmael. The Kedar also stem from a son of Ishmael, the Agarenes, from Hagar. As we have said, they are attributed with the perverse name “Saracens” because they pride themselves in being descendants of Sara.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Isidore, archbishop of Sevilla, was born around 560. Thus, before he turned thirty, he witnessed the official conversion of the Visigoths to Catholicism in the reign of Reccared (r. 586–601). Isidore succeeded his brother Leander—a close associate of Reccared also acquainted with Pope Gregory I—as archbishop of Sevilla shortly before his brother’s death. During his tenure, Isidore maintained close ties to the Visigothic king Sisebut (r. 612–621). Isidore’s work *De natura rerum* (613) was dedicated to Sisebut, who in turn penned a treatise on lunar eclipses. Isidore replied to Sisebut’s endeavours to force Jews to convert with a treatise entitled “On the Catholic Faith Against the Jews” (*De fide catholica contra Iudaeos*). Aside

from the *Etymologiae* cited here, his work includes a chronicle as well as a history of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi, whose migrations were relevant to history of the Iberian Peninsula.¹

Content & Context

[§2] The first version of the *Etymologiae* (*Etymologiae*) was finished in 621.² They can be regarded as a kind of early medieval Latin encyclopaedia that compiles and processes the knowledge available in Latin in the late antique Roman Empire. They are made up of twenty volumes, each of which is divided into topical chapters.³ The "Etymologiae" cover a wide range of subjects ranging from language and medicine to various trades and so forth. In addition, they include passages dealing with astronomy, zoology, and geography, as well as descriptions of certain human activities.

[§3] Isidore mentions numerous toponyms associated with the biblical and ancient Orient, but also the ancient and late antique Roman Middle East. These include the terms for the continents *Africa* and *Asia* as well as the names of various countries and regions, i.e. *Aegyptus*, *Aethiopia*, *Africa*, *Arabia*, *Armenia*, *Assyria*, *Babylonia*, *Chanaan*, *Coeloesyria*, *Cyrenensis Libya*, *Erythraea*, *Galatia*, *Galilaea*, *India*, *Israel*, *Iudaea*, *Libya*, *Libya Cyrenensis*, *Mauretania*, *Nabatheo regio*, *Numidia*, *Palaestina*, *Parthia*, *Persia*, *Phoenicia*, *Phrygia*, *Saba*, *Samaria*, *Syria*, the city names *Aelia*, *Alexandria*, *Ascalon*, *Bethleem*, *Caesarea*, *Damascus*, *Edessa*, *Gaza*, *Hierosolyma*, *Hierusalem*, *Palmira*, *Thebae*, *Tripolis*, *Tyrus*, the names of mountain ranges and bodies of water such as *Antilibanus mons*, *Asiaticum mare*, *Caspium mare*, *Euphrates*, *Indus*, *Indicum mare*, *Iordanis fluvium*, *Libanus mons*, *Libycum mare*, *Mareotis*, *Oceanus Aethiopicus*, *Oceanus Indicus*, *mare Rubrum*, *mons Sion*, *Tigris*. These toponyms show that Isidore had a general idea of the wider geographical area that would eventually give birth to Islam.

[§4] The pre-Islamic Arabic sphere is dealt with in Books IX (*De linguis, gentibus, regnis, militia, civibus, affinitatibus*), XII (*De animalibus*), XIV (*De terra et partibus*), XVI (*De lapidibus et metallis*), XVII (*De rebus rusticis*) and XIX (*De navibus, aedificiis et vestibus*) in particular. Isidore covers the flora and fauna of the Arabian Peninsula—camels, snakes and the phoenix in the animal world (XII,1,35; 4,29; 7,22), and primarily spices and aromatic plants in the plant world (XIV,3,13–26; XVII, 8,1–12; 9,4; 9,11). He also turns his attention to precious gems (XVI,7,9; 7,11; 8,3–5; 13,6). Finally, some passages deal with the habits of groups defined as *Arabes*: He mentions pierced ears, specific types of clothes, as well as houses built of salt blocks in addition to trade with Egypt (XV,1,35; XVI,2,3; XIX,23,7; 25,6; 26, 10). These specifications clearly do not refer to the conditions in and around the Arabian Peninsula of the late sixth and early seventh century. For the most part, they draw on references to the descendants of Ishmael in the Old Testament. The geographical and ethnographical content, however, is based on ancient Latin treatises.⁴

Contextualization, Analysis & Interpretation

[§5] The quoted excerpt is important in so far as—in a period preceding the emergence of Islam—it classifies Arab groups as part of a biblical genealogy, which accords them the status of barbaric desert dwellers in turn. The reference text is Genesis 16, which deals with Abraham's descendants from his legitimate wife Sara and his maid Hagar: tension arises between the two women, when Hagar conceives before the much older Sara. After harsh

¹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., pp. 4–9.

² Fontaine, *Isidore*, p. 173, 436.

³ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., pp. 9–16.

⁴ Philipps, *Die historisch-geographischen Quellen*.

treatment from Sara, Hagar flees, but is stopped by an angel, who instructs her to call her son Ishmael, i.e. “God has hearkened”, and to return to Sara. In regard to Ishmael, the angel makes the following prophecy (Genesis 16,12): “And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.” When Isaac is born, Sara demands that Abraham send Ishmael and his mother Hagar away, the latter defined as an Egyptian in this context, asserting that “the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son” (Genesis 21,10). Abraham’s reluctant expulsion of mother and son is approved by God himself, who, however, reassures Abraham, “for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also, of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed. (Genesis 21,12-13).”

[§6] Unlike Syriac texts of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, which often employ a name derived from the Arab tribe of the *Ṭayyi*’ and thus refer to the pre-Islamic Arabs and early Muslims as “Ṭayyāyē” or (west Syriac) *Ṭayōyē*,⁵ late antique and medieval Greek and Latin texts written by Christians often use the terms *Ἰσμαηλίται* / *Ismaelitae* or *Ἀγαρηνοί* / *[H]Agareni* both for the pre-Islamic Arabs and for the Muslims. Deriving from the names Ishmael and Hagar respectively, these ethnonyms are obviously biblically inspired. Although it is already documented as an adjective in Dioscurides’ *Materia medica* in the middle of the first century, the proper ethnonym *Σαρακηνοί* only made its first appearance around the middle of the second century in Ptolemy’s *Geographia*,⁶ only to be used around 200 CE in its Syriac form *Sarqāyē* by the Syriac author Bardaišān.⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus (d. c. 400) as well as Jerome (d. c. 420) introduced the Latin variant *Saraceni* as a new term for *Scenitas Arabas*⁸ or *Arabes et Agarenos*⁹ respectively. Most likely, Jerome came across this new term in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339–340).¹⁰ The Christian Jerome already identified the Arabs or Saracens with the descendants of Ishmael that are branded as savage desert tribes in the Old Testament.¹¹ The etymology of the term “Saracens,” which leads this ethnonym back to an act of usurpation that serves to appropriate a form of legitimate descentance from Abraham’s wife Sara, can also be found both in the writings of Jerome¹² and the Greek church historian Sozomen (d. c. 450),¹³ but may well have originated in a lost work by Eusebius.¹⁴ The biblical explanation for the origin of the Saracens was then adopted in the Latin West, not only by Isidore,¹⁵ but also by the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede the Venerable (d. 735) among others. In the latter’s case, however, the etymology was inserted into a description and evaluation of the Arabic-Islamic

⁵ Shahīd, *Ṭayyi*’, pp. 402–403.

⁶ Retsö, *Arabs*, pp. 505–506, on the basis of Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Geographia*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Nobbe, Leipzig: Carl Tauchnitz, 1845, vol. 2, lib. 6, cap. 7.21, p. 102.

⁷ Bardaišān, *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, ed./trans. H.J. W. Drijvers, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965, p. 50, l. 11.

⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, lib. XXII, cap. 15,2: “Scenitas praetenditur Arabas, quos Sarracenos nunc appellamus;” lib. XXIII, cap. 6,13: “Scenitas Arabas, quos Saracenos posteritas appellavit.”

⁹ Hieronymus, ep. 129,4, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (CSEL 56), Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1918, pp. 169–170: “Arabes et Agarenos, quos nunc Sarracenos vocant, in vicinia urbis Jerusalem.”

¹⁰ Tolan, *A Wild Man*, p. 515.

¹¹ Hieronymus, *Liber quaestionum hebraicarum in Genesim*, ed. Paul de Lagarde (CCL 72), Turnhout: Brepols, 1959, cap. 16, p. 26.

¹² Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Ezechielem*, ed. François Glorie (CCL 75), Turnhout: Brepols, 1964, lib. 8, cap. 25,1-7, p. 335: “Madianaeos, ismaelitas et agarenos, qui nunc saraceni appellantur, assumentes sibi falso nomen sarae quo scilicet de ingenua et domina uideantur esse generati.”

¹³ Sozomenos, *Kirchengeschichte / Historia ecclesiastica*, ed./trans. Günther Christian Hansen (Fontes Christiani 73/3), Turnhout: Brepols, 2004, vol. 3, lib. VI, cap. 38,10–16, pp. 826–830. Also see Esders, *Herakleios*, p. 274.

¹⁴ Shahīd, *Rome and the Arabs*, p. 105, FN 63. Citing Shahīd, Tolan, *A Wild Man*, p. 518, purports that Jerome may have invented the etymology himself. This would not explain, however, why it was also documented by the church historian Sozomen, who would have copied the etymology from Eusebius rather than from Jerome.

¹⁵ On Isidore’s extensive use of Jerome, see Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. Barney et al., pp. 9–16.

expansion to the West: for Bede, the prophecy, that Ishmael's "hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him" (Genesis 16,12), seemed to have fulfilled itself.¹⁶ The Latin Middle Ages then continued to adopt this explanation.¹⁷

[§7] Research does not explain the term "Saracens" by pointing to a deficit of legitimacy of ancient and late ancient Arab groups and a resulting "onomastic act of usurpation." While the origins of the term are still disputed, scholarship has proposed geographical, ethnic, and linguistic explanations. A geographical explanation traces the Greek term "Saracens" back to toponyms located in the Sinai or in the northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula that are already recorded by ancient authors such as the geographer Ptolemy. An ethnic explanation assumes the existence of an Arab tribe bearing the ethnonym "Saracens" whose name would then have been extended to other Arab groups during the emergence and disintegration of pre-Islamic tribal confederations. Linguistic explanations associate the term "Saracens" seemingly related Arabic or Aramaic terms. According to such theories, Σαρακηνοί / *Saraceni* could derive from *sāriq* / *sāriqīn* (Arab. "stealing" / "thieves"), from *šarqī* / *šarqīyyūn* (Arab. "eastern" / "Orientals"), from *serāq* (Aram. "emptiness," "wasteland"), finally from *šarika(t)* (Arab. "association," here in the sense of a "federation").¹⁸

(Translation: Barbara König)

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¹⁶ Beda Venerabilis, *In principium Genesis usque ad natiuitatem Isaac*, ed. C.W. Jones (CCL 118A), Turnhout: Brepols, 1967, lib. IV,16, p. 201; Bede, *On Genesis*, transl. Calvin B. Kendall, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, p. 279; Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions*, pp. 128–129; Tolan, *A Wild Man*, pp. 513–530.

¹⁷ Tolan, *Saracens*, pp. 127–128; Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 100.

¹⁸ Compare the different arguments (with further literature) in Shahîd, *Bosworth, Saracens*, p. 27; Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs*, pp. 123–141; Graf, *Saracens*, pp. 14–15; Hoyland, *Arabia*, p. 235; Retsö, *Arabs*, pp. 505–520.

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