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The racial fuss surrounding the "Moors" in medieval Europe

Illustrations from *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, 13th century, reign of Alfonso X

(click on thumbnails to see the full images)



In this illustration from medieval Spain, a Muslim witnesses a miracle and decides to convert to Christianity. Click on the thumbnail to open the full image, and observe that the medieval writing above the picture (written in the old Galician-Portuguese dialect) describes the man, who is not black, as a "mouro" (Moor). As demonstrated here and below, the word *mouro* is used in the *Cantigas* to describe all Muslims regardless of race or ethnic origin. **The definitions of the word "Moor" and its cognates have varied considerably throughout different ages, places, cultures, and languages!** Just because "Moor" acquired a racial connotation in Elizabethan England does not mean that it had the same connotation in medieval Spain.



Muslim soldiers under Almanzor (al-Mansur) attack San Esteban de Gormaz, in 989 CE.



Muslim ("Moor") troops from North Africa kidnap a German nobleman from the Portuguese coast and force him onto a ship. The crew is mostly light-skinned as a whole -- the Black African soldiers that are present among the crew members are obviously a minority. Even so, it was the exotic-looking "black" contingent of these armies that stirred the hearts and imaginations of medieval Europe, and sometimes appear prominently as symbols in medieval art, literature, and heraldry. However, that kind of "blackamoor" symbolism (such as black African heads on coat-of-arms) does not constitute evidence that most Muslim occupiers of southern Europe looked like sub-Saharan Africans, or that black Africans were the driving force behind Islamic civilization in Europe. In fact, the evidence on this page suggests that wasn't the case at all.



The naval force of *mouros* turn their attention to Arrendaffe, their admiral. Although a black African rower is visible, the rest of the crew including the admiral is obviously of a paler shade.



An army of Muslims approaches a Christian city. Again, the troops are described as *mouros* in the Old Galician writing at the top of the clicked-on picture (*Como os mouros veneron cercar huna cidade*).



This shows an army of Muslims, mostly pale but with a dark-skinned minority, especially among the foot soldiers and servants in the rear.



Muslims ask their king to have a church removed from La Arrijaca.



Moroccan soldiers in a tent.



King Umar al-Murtada, the Almohad ruler of Morocco, is persuaded to ally with Christians.



Moroccan soldiers and Christian allies, readying for battle in the city of Marrakech. Moroccan Arabs and Berbers accounted for a large part of the Muslim settlers of Spain. Although Berber tribes can exhibit various skin tones, as a whole they are not normally considered black in the sense of Sub-Saharan Africans either by themselves or others.



The Moroccan army of King Umar al-Murtada, with the help of Christian allies, routs a rival army of Moroccans under Abu Yusuf.



Five *mouros* in Portugal, throwing a statue of the Virgin Mary into the sea. This miniature, together with the rest, depicts the Muslim population of Spain as predominantly light-skinned. (Like before, the medieval writing atop the full image explicitly refers to them as Moors: *Como os mouros deytaron a omagen de Sancta Maria no mar por desonrala.*)



The king of Granada holds court.



Muslim troops from Granada, on their way to attack a Spanish castle.



This picture depicts a Spanish woman manipulating her blackamoor servant as a pawn in a plot against her daughter-in-law. At least one site I saw displays this picture as if it supports the "Moors = black" theory. It doesn't.

Alphonso X's Book of Games, 13th century

(from the [Alphonso X Book of Games page](#))



The above picture of particularly dark-skinned Muslims is shown on various "Afrocentric" web pages attempting to prove that Black Africans dominated Spanish society during the Muslim occupation. But further examination of more pictures from the same Book of Games reveals the same

pattern as in the Cantigas: the component of the Muslim population that approached "black African" in appearance seems to have been a small minority. If the pictures are any indication, then the bedrock of Islamic society in Spain consisted of people who resembled European or Middle Eastern types.



- Problem No. 13: Three Arab scholars consulting manuscript
- Problem No. 19: Three Arab ladies, one playing lute
- Problem No. 55: Two veiled Arab ladies
- Problem No. 69: Two Arabs with manuscript



- Problem No. 86: An Arab and a Spanish girl
- Problem No. 102: A Jew and an Arab
- Problem No. 103: A Spaniard and an Arab playing in a tent

Note: I use the label "Arab" because the Book of Games web page does. However the figures also qualify as Mouros/Moors as noted previously.

Muslims of Spain as they depicted themselves

Illustrations from the Tale of Bayad and Riyad, Islamic Spain, early 13th century



Pyxis of al-Mughira, Cordoba, 968 AD



Hispano-Arabic Casket, Pamplona, 1004-1005 AD



The Skylitzes Chronicle

The illustrated manuscript of the medieval Byzantine historian Johannes Skylitzes covers three centuries of Byzantine history (811-1057), including accounts of Muslim invasions of Mediterranean Europe. The illustrations, dating from the late 12th century, contradict the myth in popular culture that

the invaders were mostly Black Africans (for example, as put forth in Quentin Tarantino's film *True Romance*).



Capua and Benevento in Southern Italy besieged by the Muslims. The emir speaks with an ambassador of the besieged cities who had been sent to Constantinople to seek help but was captured by the emir's forces.



Combat between Saracens (aka Moors/Muslims/Arabs) and Byzantine troops commanded by Procopios.



The southern Italian town of Taranto (which begat Quentin Tarantino's surname) is retaken from the Saracens by Byzantine troops. A group of imperial soldiers is about to enter into the reconquered city as the Muslims leave.



Assault of the Sicilian city of Syracuse by Muslim forces (878 AD?)



The conquest of Tauromenion (in Sicily) by Islamic forces, who take the inhabitants as prisoners and massacre some of them.



Sack of the Greek city of Thessaloniki by Muslims who kill some of the inhabitants and force others on their ships as prisoners.



The Byzantine emperor sends back the North African princes (who were sent by Fatlum) with gifts.



Defeat of the Byzantine imperials by Muslims in Sicily.



Defeat of Manuel in Sicily. The Byzantines are flanked by two groups of Muslim soldiers.



The emir of Tripolitania (in Libya), Pinjarah, passing beside the imperials, is received by the Byzantine emperor Romanus III Argyrus (1028-1034). The emir is accompanied by three of his men.



Conquests of George Maniakes in Sicily (1037-40). The Byzantine troops, headed by Maniakes, start to unload on the coast of Sicily. They attack the town of Remata, which is defended by Muslim soldiers. Some of the defenders escape and others are scattered on the ground, out of combat.

Grandes Chroniques de France de Charles V (1370-1380)



The *Grandes Chroniques de France* of Charles V is an example of a manuscript in which the Muslims are portrayed in a notably darker color than in the Spanish and Byzantine manuscripts. The two images above show (1) a peace treaty between Philippe III and the Sultan of Tunis, and (2) a scene from the 3rd crusade in the city of Acre in Palestine. The artist's style of emphasizing the color contrast between Muslims and Christians is not reason to believe the North Africans were in general "black," since the presumably non-black Middle Eastern Arabs are portrayed in exactly the same manner.

What about textual references?

Certain sites on the web ballyhoo examples of indigenous North African peoples being described as "black" by certain medieval Arab and European sources, while omitting other sources that distinguish them from "black," or even call them "white." A commonly overlooked fact is that "black" and "white" are culturally dependent terms which, in earlier times, sometimes meant "dark-complexioned" or "light-complexioned" rather than the strict racial definition in common use today. According to the anthropologist Peter Frost:

This older, more relative sense has been noted in other culture areas. The Japanese once used the terms shiroi (white) and kuroi (black) to describe their skin and its gradations of color. The Ibos of Nigeria employed ocha (white) and ojii (black) in the same way, so that nwoko ocha (white man) simply meant an Ibo with a lighter complexion. In French Canada, the older generation still refers to a swarthy Canadian as *noir* (black). Vestiges of this older usage persist in family names. Mr. White, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Black were individuals within the normal color spectrum of English people. Ditto for Leblanc, Lebrun, and Lenoir among the French or Weiss and Schwartz among the Germans.¹

Another example of this usage comes from Joseph ben Nathan of 13th century Europe who quoted his father as saying "we Jews come from a pure, white source, and so our faces are black."² Of course Jews weren't black African, as medieval manuscripts show them looking little different from Europeans.

Old Arab descriptions of "blacks" also reveal that what they meant by "black" is not necessarily what we understand it to mean today. Some medieval Arab writers such as al-Jahiz applied the term "blacks" to practically all peoples darker than the average Arab, and "whites" to peoples lighter than the norm:

"The blacks are more numerous than the whites. The whites at most consist of the people of Persia, Jibal, and Khurasan, the Greeks, Slavs, Franks, and Avars, and some few others, not very numerous; the blacks include the Zanj, Ethiopians, the people of Fazzan, the Berbers, the Copts, and Nubians, the people of Zaghawa, Marw, Sind and India, Qamar and Dabila, China, and Masin... the islands in the seas between China and Africa are full of blacks, such as Ceylon, Kalah, Amal, Zabij, and their islands, as far as India, China, Kabul, and those shores."³

Jahiz's inclusion of Indians, Sindhi, and Chinese as "blacks" reinforces the point that color terms taken out of their cultural contexts are too ambiguous to determine the physical characteristics of peoples with much accuracy. One Afrocentric web page offered an opinion that Jahiz was only referring to minority Negroid tribes in India or China, not to the population at large. But then, couldn't the same be said about his descriptions of North Africa?

It bears mention that the term *Sudan* ("Black") in classical Arabic usage did not usually encompass such a broad range of peoples. In fact the Arabic term *Bilad al-Sudan* ("lands of the Blacks") denoted the whole area of Africa south of the Sahara desert -- from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in the East -- but did *not* normally include Egypt or the Maghrib (Northwest Africa).⁴

The 14th century historian Ibn Khaldun divided the known world from the equator to the northernmost lands into seven zones, by climate, south to north. The zones in the middle -- the third, fourth and fifth zones -- were the temperate ones. He wrote:

"The human inhabitants of these zones are more temperate in their bodies, color, character qualities... Such are the inhabitants of **the Maghrib**, of Syria, the two 'Iraqs, Western India, and China, as well as of Spain; also the European Christians nearby, the Galicians, and all those who live together with these peoples or near them in the three temperate zones."⁵

Later he goes on to write that "the inhabitants of the first and second zones in the south are called the Abyssinians, the Zanj, and the Sudanese. These are synonyms used to designate the particular nation that has turned black."⁶ So it is clear that in his view the people of North Africa are not black; the people to the south of them are. Ibn Khaldun, unlike some Arab writers, was himself a Maghribi and thus was presumably familiar with what people

looked like in that region.

The Tunisian traveler Ibn Battuta specified a boundary of the Black lands when he wrote "We then arrived at the town of Iwalatan... Iwalatan is the northernmost province of the Blacks."⁷ Iwalatan, presently Walata/Oualata near the southeast corner of Mauritania, sits near the southern limit of the Sahara desert. The lands north of that, which make up the main bulk of Berber territory, were not counted by Ibn Battuta as among the black lands.

In the course of his travels, he observed a notably pale Berber tribe which he described as follows:

"At length we arrived among the Bardama. They are a Berber tribe. [...] The Bardama women are the most perfect in beauty, most remarkable in their appearance, of the purest white in their complexion and very fat."⁸

The writer al-'Umari counted even the southernmost Berber tribes as white:

"In the north of the country of Mali, there are Berber tribes who are white and are under [the Sultan of Mali's] dominion They are: the Yatansir, the Shagharasan, the Maddusa and the Lamtuna."⁹

and,

"The country of the Blacks also contains three independent kings, white Muslims, belonging to the Berber race: the sultan of Aïr, the sultan of Damushuh and the sultan of Tadmakka. These three white Muslim kings are in the southwest area ranging between the Barr al 'Adwa, empire of the sultan Abu l-Hasan, and the country of Mali and its dependencies."¹⁰

A source of misunderstanding about the identity of "Moors" in Europe is the Frankish epic Song of Roland, in which a contingent of one of the Saracen armies is described as "black as pitch" and "broad in the nose." But this shouldn't be too surprising, considering that the army included Ethiopians:

But what avail? Though fled be Marsilies,
He's left behind his uncle, the alcaliph
Who holds Alferne, Kartagene, Garmalie,
And Ethiopie, a cursed land indeed;
The blackamoors from there are in his keep,
Broad in the nose they are and flat in the ear,
Fifty thousand and more in company. ...¹¹

On the claim that the North African "Moors" used to resemble equatorial Africans before and during the Islamic occupation of Europe, and that the ethnic/racial changes came later

Highly unlikely -- see the numerous [coinage portraits](#) of North African rulers centuries before the Islamic conquest. Furthermore, the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, and the initial wave of Arabs all came *before* the penetration of Islam into Europe, not after. So the adherents of the Black Moors theory face a terrible paradox: they have to maintain that the Islamic-era immigration to North Africa drastically altered the racial makeup of the Berbers/Moors, while simultaneously denying that the pre-Islam immigration of the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, and the initial waves of Arabs made any significant genetic impact at all. It makes no sense.

And if there was any significant genetic change in Northwest Africa from the Arab conquest to the present, there is no reason to assume that the population lightened or became more "Caucasian" during that time. In fact the trans-Saharan slave trade and immigration from the lands south of the Sahara, continuing up to very recent times, may have had just as much (or more) genetic impact as any European or Arab immigration; although this would be difficult to verify one way or the other.

References

1. Frost, P. (1990). Fair women, dark men: the forgotten roots of colour prejudice. *History of European Ideas*, 12, 669-679.
2. Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Le Juif médiéval au miroir de l'art chrétien* (Paris, 1966), p.21
3. al-Jahiz, *The Boast of the Blacks against the Whites*, quoted in *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, vol 2, ed. by Bernard Lewis
4. Lewis, Bernard, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 1990, p. 26, 50.
5. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, tr. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958) "Third Prefatory Discussion" p.167-168.
6. *ibid.*, p. 171.
7. Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, tr. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929) p 317-323. Actually Gibb translates the Arabic *Sudan* as "Negroes"; Cuoq (see below) translates it literally as "Blacks."
8. Ibn Battuta, quoted in Norris, H. T., *The Berbers in Arabic Literature*, Librairie du Liban, 1982. pp. 191-2
9. al-Umari, *Masalik al-absar fi mamalik al-amsar* (source: J. M. Cuoq, *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIII^e au XVI^e siècle*, 1975, p.264; also see p. 374; French-to-English translation is mine)
10. *ibid.*, p. 284
11. *Chanson de Roland*, verse CXLIII (translation: Charles Moncrief)