The image of Muhammad in Latin chronography of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries

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Abstract

The foundations of the western image of Islam were laid in the early middle ages, when the Prophet was presented as an instrument of apostates, at whose instigation he created a religion which was the very antithesis of Christianity. However, twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers embellished this picture with tales of an exotic world, drawing upon both motifs from folklore and contemporary fantasies of a Muslim Paradise of sensual delights. The increase in direct contact with Islam seems to have done little to modify either the traditional stereotypes or the newer exotica. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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There can hardly have existed a more acute problem for the West European mind than to define its attitude to Islamic dogma and also to Muslim tradition and culture. Western Christians saw Islam either as the teaching of Anti-Christ or as a realm of idols, a vale of sin and temptation. The well-known writer and religious figure Alvarrez of Cordoba, who lived in Muslim Spain in the ninth century, identified Muhammad with the Beast from the Apocalypse that destroys Christian sanctuaries.¹ The abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, who was the first to expound the doctrine of Islam to Christians, depicted the Prophet as a monster with the head of a man, the neck of a horse and the body of a bird.² For the Fathers of the Church Muhammad was indeed a monster in the allegorical sense, for he became the founder of a doctrine hostile to Christianity.

From the eighth century Islam became a favourite subject in the writings of the

¹Alvari Cordubensis Indiculus Luminosus, Patrologia latina, vol. 121, 534.
²Paris, Bibliotheque de l’Arsenal, Ms 1162, fol.19.
Church Fathers who saw the new religion as a great danger to Christianity. Their works reflected a negative image of Islam as a false religion, the main features of which were demonolatry, idolatry, and polytheism. This image of a hostile religion seems to remain unchanged in Church tradition over the centuries irrespective of real contact with the East.3

But was it really so unchangeable? Was Islam perceived only through the distorted mirror of ideological propaganda? The question of the evolution of Christian ideas about Islam has indeed given rise to dispute. Some scholars (M. Plocher, for example) believed that the image of Islam became increasingly clear and distinct thanks to contact with the East.4 Others (H. Prutz) took the view that contact with Muslims merely led to the growth of distorted ideas about Islam, and that the further one went ‘the more fantastic the picture of the East became’,5 and the stronger the prejudices and the stereotypes. Were the attitudes to Islam created by the Church really more tenacious than objective knowledge about the East and the experience acquired by Christians from direct contact with the East during the age of the Crusades? If it underwent changes, what did these changes reflect and what kind of evolution took place? We shall try to answer these questions by examining the works on Islam which were created in the age of the Crusades, i.e., in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The myth of Islam, however, created much earlier in ecclesiastical literature, had an antinomical structure. One of the most persistent elements of the medieval myth of the Muslim world was the idea of Islam as an absolute evil in contrast to Christianity, the religion of good. Muslims and Christians were contrasted not only according to their confession, but also their moral qualities. This idea was evidently of fairly ancient origin, for pagans were always depicted as bad people as far back as the Old Testament tradition. In the writings of the Church Fathers Muslims and Islam were identified with Satan and the forces of evil.6 Christians believed unquestioningly in the moral imperfection of Muslims. Another persistent component of the myth about the Muslim world was the idea of Islam as a religion of paganism and idolatry which was ascribed to Muslims by the fathers of the Byzantine Church, St John of Damascus, St Nicetas of Byzantium, and others.7 In the Christian tradition Muslims were depicted as practitioners of polytheism who worshipped statues and representations of Muhammad.8 The idea of Islam as a religion of the sword was also charac-

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4M. Plocher, Studien zum Kreuzzugsgedanken im 12. und 13 Jahrhunderten (Freiburg-in-Breisgau, 1950), 68.
5H. Prutz, Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge (Berlin, 1883), 73.
teristic of the Christian cultural consciousness. This idea was widespread in Byzantine patristics and in the Spanish cultural tradition, and is expounded most clearly in the writings of Peter the Venerable. The Christian model is implicitly present in all medieval writings on Islam; the Muslim religion is invariably seen as the antithesis of Christianity. This opposition was also understood in the widespread Christian myth of Islam as a religion of sensual indulgence. In the Christian tradition, the Muslim Paradise was portrayed as a place of carnal pleasures where the Muslim righteous engage in debauchery. This is how the world of Islam appeared to medieval Christians, and this is the image of Islam that developed in the European cultural consciousness.

In the age of the Crusades, apart from chronicles written by Crusaders, there were also historical works which reflected medieval ideas about Muslims. It was this period that saw the writing of the first detailed lives of the Prophet by such writers as Sigebert of Gembloux, Gauthier de Compiègne, Tommaso of Tuscany, and others. What kind of image of Muhammad and this doctrine do we find in the works of writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? Let us try to examine these chronicles in the context of the Christian cultural tradition. We shall be interested not so much in the filiation of different information and reinterpretation of facts or creation of new texts, as in the psychological aspect, i.e., in what lies behind changes of information, what immanent aims and stereotypes they reflect.

The works of the Byzantine and Latin Church fathers from the seventh to the ninth century could serve as prototypes for biographies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The first information about the life of Muhammad was provided by St John of Damascus in his treatise On Heresies. He wrote of the self-styled prophet Muhammad who, having read many stories from the Old and New Testament and made the acquaintance of an Arian monk, founded a new Arian sect, imagining himself to be the creator of a new religion. Another Christian writer, Nicetas of Byzantium, who wrote a treatise entitled A Refutation of the False Book Written By Muhammad in the mid-ninth century, portrayed him as a weak man who attempted to spread a heretical doctrine, but was denounced and forced to seek salvation from his friends, who proclaimed him to be a great prophet. According to Nicetas, Muhammad founded a sect of ‘Hagarenes’, the name by which Christians traditionally called Muslims, believing them to be descendants of the Old Testament slave-girl Hagar, who bore Abraham a son. Muhammad was also denounced as ‘a liar and a cheat’ in the Chronograph by the ninth-century Byzantine chronicler Theophanes. He again writes of a weak man, who was an instrument in the hands of a heretical monk, left the Christian Church and created a false doctrine. Theophanes’ Chronograph was translated into Latin by Anastasius the Librarian and was well-known to the medieval

reader. The Byzantine writer, Bartholomew of Edessa, saw Islam as a heresy. He wrote about a Nestorian monk called Bahir who converted ‘Mamed’ to heresy and persuaded him that Muhammad was a great prophet fated to found a new religion. This legend about Bahir, the monk–heretic who used Muhammad to struggle against the Christian Church became one of the most widespread subjects in patristic writings. The Spanish writers, Eulogius of Cordoba and Pedro Alfonsi, reproduced the legend of Bahir almost unchanged: the orphan Muhammad, who was taught by a heretic, marries a rich widow, and then, with the heretic’s support, proclaims himself to be a prophet. Finally, a work entitled The Life of Muhammad, written in the eleventh century by Archbishop Embricon of Mainz, merely repeats the information on the Prophet’s life known at that time. In their biographies of Muhammad therefore, early medieval authors sought to depict the Prophet as a weak man who was an instrument in the hands of apostates, and the doctrine created by him at the instigation of the enemies of Christianity as heresy and lies. It is precisely to these elements that ecclesiastical writers draw particular attention. This distorted image of the Muslim world provided a firm basis for ideas about Islam and Muhammad in the following age as well.

One of the first works to give a lengthy description of the Prophet’s life is a poem about Muhammad by the twelfth-century writer Gauthier de Compiègne. His biography of Muhammad (the so-called Otia Machometi) was written in Chartres between 1137 and 1155 in Latin and later, in the thirteenth century, was translated into French by Alexander Dupont. The poem tells about Muhammad, a poor Arab sent as a child to be brought up by a baron who made his fortune in Persia, India and Ethiopia. By his zealous service Muhammad wins the baron’s trust. At that time he visits a Christian hermit who tells him about the Old and New Testaments. When his master dies, his mistress, who is looking for an heir, agrees to marry him. Muhammad suffers from epileptic fits which he explains as instructions from the Archangel Gabriel. By means of violence and threats, Muhammad forces the hermit to confirm that he has the gift of prophecy. Muhammad then begins to preach his false doctrine to the Arabs. Under the ground he keeps a white bullock, which he teaches to answer his call, and he creates canals which he fills with milk and honey. Then Muhammad invites rich people to listen to his sermons and tries to persuade them he is right. Speaking of the bliss of life in Paradise, he leads them, as if by chance, to the canals full of milk and honey and asks God to send him a new law, at the same time calling his tame white bullock. The bullock with a book that has been tied to its horns earlier comes trotting up to Muhammad and lays down at his

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18 Embricon de Mayence, Vita, 1054–1215.
feet. The Prophet announces that the book contains the law written by God. And so Muhammad persuades everyone to believe in his doctrine. Gauthier goes on to describe how the Prophet waged war against neighbouring Oriental peoples with the aim of converting them to Islam.  

Gautier de Compiègne’s poem was one of the first biographies of Muhammad in the age of the Crusades. It was largely a reworking of *The Life of Muhammad* by Archbishop Embricon of Mainz. In his poem Gauthier also makes use of subjects which arose in Byzantine polemics with Islam — Muhammad’s illness and teaching by a Christian monk. The poem reflects traditional ecclesiastical ideas about Islam: Muhammad’s doctrine is portrayed as lies, deceit, and the religion of the sword. However, we may notice that the usual account found in Church historiography is embellished by subjects of folkloric origin, since the narrative includes the legend of the ‘white bullock’ and descriptions of rivers of milk and honey. Gauthier concentrates attention on certain exotic details of Muhammad’s life, describing his childhood (25–93); about his trading journeys around the towns of the East (93–128) and about his life in Mecca (1216–1584). In the French writer’s poem, the teaching founded by Muhammad is shown not only as something satanic, which is typical of works by Byzantine writers, but also contains information which could satisfy contemporaries’ taste for the miraculous and their desire to hear about exotic features of Islam. For medieval man the work was entertaining as well as instructive.

Another life of Muhammad, belonging to the pen of the chronicler of the First Crusade, Guibert of Nogent, also contains a number of exotic episodes from the Prophet’s life. Borrowing from Byzantine subjects — Muhammad’s epilepsy and his contact with a heretic — the chronicler also makes use of folk legends, in particular, the ‘legend of the white bullock’.

This penetration of ‘folk’ legends into medieval literature on Islam was by no means a continuous, on-going process, however, as can be seen from the description of Muhammad’s life by the French writer Sigebert of Gembloux (mid-twelfth century), in which both folkloric motifs and new information are absent. Borrowing the subject line from Gauthier de Compiègne, he creates an image of the Mulim prophet and heretic. Sigebert of Gembloux recounts in detail the story of Muhammad’s marriage, saying how he used his epileptic fits as proof of his prophetic gift and how he managed with the help of deception to spread his heretical teaching among the Arabs. For the French writer, as for the Church writers in general, Muhammad is a false prophet, a liar and a fraud. Sigebert of Gembloux shares other Church prototypes as well: in particular, the idea of Islam as a religion which panders to the senses. He describes a carnal paradise of Muslims, in which the righteous gorge themselves and indulge in various sexual pleasures. In the spirit of ecclesiastical stereotypes he portrays Islam as a religion of the sword. Muhammad is said to

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21 *Sigeberti Continuatio Gemblacensis*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Series Scriptorum), vol. 6, 323.
22 *Sigeberti Continuatio*, 323.
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assure his pupils that ‘he who kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy shall go to heaven’. The chronicle reproduces the well-known clerical stereotype and the corresponding quotation from Anastsius is repeated almost word for word. 23

Sigebert of Gembloux’s life of Muhammad reflects many stereotypes from earlier ecclesiastical literature. These stereotypes were firmly rooted in the consciousness of the medieval chronicler. In this sense the Prophet’s biography created by Sigebert hardly differs at all from ecclesiastical biographies of Muhammad. In describing the life of Muhammad and the rules established by him, Sigebert, like other Christian writers, constantly contrasts Islam with Christianity. Muhammad is depicted as a kind of antonym to Christ; the Christian model is always implicitly present in the text. Islam, the religion of the sword, is contrasted with the religion of love, Christianity; the religion of sensual indulgence with the ascetic principles of Christian dogma. By interpreting an alien culture and confession on the principle of inversion, antithesis, examining it as a mirror reflection of Christian culture, medieval writers deepened their knowledge of the special features of their own cultural tradition. Islam, the Muslim world, became for them a mirror thanks to which they became aware of themselves. The opposition of Muhammad–Christ was of decisive importance for the Christian cultural consciousness.

In the middle of the twelfth century another biography of Muhammad appeared, the work of the Italian writer Tommaso of Tuscany. In his Deeds of the Emperors and Popes he gave a detailed description of the Prophet. The information he provides is fairly banal. He tells about the poor orphan Muhammad, the servant of a rich widow whom he soon marries. Shortly afterwards, Muhammad becomes rich himself, travels a great deal and learns about the habits and religious customs of different peoples. Borrowing the Byzantine theme, the Italian writer also recounts the legend of the Nestorian monk–heretic, Muhammad’s teacher. The Prophet’s teaching, Tommaso shows, is a mixture of the Old and New Testaments, and also some cock-and-bull stories which he invents himself. 24 However, Tommaso does not only convey the usual stereotypes, but includes other subjects in his chronicles, such as the ‘legend of the white bullock’. He also retells another legend, about how Muhammad taught a dove to peck corn out of his ear and told the ignorant people that this was the Holy Spirit whispering the words of a sermon to him. Here he makes use of a well-known Christian motif, the dove as the symbol of the Holy Spirit. 25 The story of the false miracles has a certain entertainment value. Tommaso adds nothing new to Muhammad’s biography, but it is interesting that he focuses attention on exotic subjects and legendary motifs connected with the Prophet’s life.

A similar example of a medieval life of Muhammad which contains exotic and entertaining elements is an unpublished biography in the form of a thirteenth-century manuscript text from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Ms.fr.1206). The text is

25 Thomae Tusci, Monumenta, 493.
entitled *De vita et malicia Machometi* (On the life and misdeeds of Muhammad). This biography recounts the facts of Muhammad’s life in detail, how he spent his time in the company of thieves and robbers, how he was taught by the apostate monk Sergius, how he studied Judaism and Christianity under this heretic and wanted to be recognised as an authority in both religions. Further the author of this life recounts in detail the story of how Muhammad taught a dove to whisper in his ear and fed it specially with grain for this purpose. Then, during his sermon, Muhammad calls the dove and claims that it has been seen by the Holy Spirit. Then comes an account of how the new faith spread quickly over the whole of Asia and how Muhammad propagated it by the use of force. The *Life* is full of the usual stereotypes, according to which Islam is a heresy and religion of the sword, but nevertheless the accent is placed on the legendary elements of Muhammad’s life.

Frederick I Barbarossa’s court chronicler, Gottfried of Viterbo, included an account of Muhammad’s life in his chronicle. In his *Pantheon* he relates the already familiar Byzantine legend of the apostate who inspired Muhammad to create a false doctrine. The writer stresses that the Prophet was successful only in places inhabited by pagans and idolaters and that it was mainly criminals and robbers who listened to him. For Gottfried Islam is synonymous with heresy and paganism, and the teaching created by Muhammad is a moral evil, so it is not surprising that the Prophet’s followers were mainly criminals. In these assessments the German author does not diverge in the slightest from the stereotypes. Muhammad himself is portrayed as sensuous and dissolute, with his seventeen wives and numerous concubines. Gottfried relates in particular detail the story of the Prophet’s marriage to Zeinab, the wife of his adopted son Zayd, with whom Muhammad fell in love and subsequently secured their divorce — a favourite subject which provided many Church fathers with grounds for accusing the Prophet of debauchery and depravity. The writer believes that the laws established by the Prophet also encouraged sexual promiscuity. Even the life after death promised by the Prophet to the righteous is a sensual paradise, flowing with rivers of milk and honey, where carnal pleasures await them. The religion created by him is a ‘broad path’ for everyone, and for this reason Muhammad promised everyone salvation. Gottfried’s work contains few innovations. Yet all the same his chronicle is embellished by certain folkloric subjects and legends. He describes the Prophet’s false miracles in detail. One such miracle was that Muhammad split the moon into two halves and then put them together again. According to another legend, the Prophet met a hungry wolf during his travels, but miraculously put it to flight. All these stories about Muhammad’s miracles

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26Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Fr. 1206, f. 69–70.
27*Gotfredi Viterbiensis Pantheon, Monumenta Germanica Historia: Series Scriptorum*, vol. 22, 280. The part of this chronicle was published by E. Cerulli, see note 28.
contain folkloric and fantastic motifs, which reveal the exotic side of the medieval image of Islam.

Some new pages were added to the legend of Muhammad by the medieval chroniclers of the thirteenth century, Matthew Paris and Vincent of Beauvais. Like many ecclesiastical authors Matthew Paris expounds the known facts of Muhammad’s biography. He tells of the poor orphan who is brought up by a stranger in places where idolatry flourished. As a young man he worked for the rich widow, Khadija, whom he very soon married. Having grown rich and influential, he began to preach his own doctrine to the people. Matthew Paris stresses that Muhammad’s first disciples were ‘robbers and thieves’, and that he himself was a deceitful man. In the spirit of traditional Church views, Matthew Paris interprets Islam as a moral evil and portrays Muslims as idolaters and pagans. The writer stresses that, since Muhammad grew up in places where idols were worshipped, his sermons were listened to only where the population consisted mainly of idolaters. The chronicler goes on to say that Muhammad preached among the poor and illiterate, counting upon success with the uneducated and consciously deceiving them. How did the medieval reader react to these details? In the mind of medieval man only Anti-Christ could act in that way, for Anti-Christ also tempted weak souls, first and foremost. Another feature which undoubtedly likened him to Anti-Christ was the fact that the doctrine created by him was inspired by a heretic, a monk excommunicated from the Christian Church. Heresy was a distinguishing feature of Anti-Christ. But what likened the founder of Muslim doctrine even more to Anti-Christ was falsehood. Muhammad, as the writer shows, is a false prophet. He is also portrayed as a false miracle-worker. Yet Matthew Paris also describes legends about the miracles performed by the Prophet: about the dividing of the moon into two halves and the meeting with the wolf who was put to flight (see ). Incidentally, these miracles were known also from the work by Gottfried von Viterbo. The English chronicler describes another miracle — a roasted lamb, in which Zeinab had placed poison in order to kill the Prophet — warned Muhammad in a human voice, ‘Don’t eat me, I have been poisoned’. The main miracle promised by Muhammad, however, that he would be carried up to Heaven on the third day after his death, did not take place. Matthew Paris shows that all the Prophet’s miracles are false ones, although his accounts of Muhammad’s miracles are not devoid of entertainment and popular fantasy. In the system of Christian ideas, however, these miracles are nothing but signa mendacii, the deeds of a false prophet, Anti-Christ. In general Muhammad’s whole biography as portrayed

33Mattheus Parisiensis, Chronica, 345.
34Mattheus Parisiensis, Chronica, 346: pagani, idolatrae, pauperes et indocti.
35Mattheus Parisiensis, Chronica, 345–346.
38Alphandéry, ‘Mahomet’, 349.
by Matthew Paris resembles that of Anti-Christ as it appeared to the Christian consciousness — the same false ideas and false prophecy, false miracles, magic and deception. The life of Muhammad is similar to the life of Christ. It contains the same preaching activity and the same miracles, but all in reverse. Muhammad is a kind of antipode to Christ. His speeches are similar to those of Christ: ‘Not with miracles and signs was I sent to you, but with a sword’, yet they always have the opposite sense. As Matthew Paris puts it, the sword of Muhammad is intended for those who do not accept his prophecies: those who reject his teaching will be killed and their wives and children sold into slavery. In the age of the Crusades, when an eschatological mood prevailed in society, it was perfectly logical to equate the Prophet of the Muslims with the Anti-Christ. The very idea of Muhammad the Anti-Christ is of fairly ancient origin and connected with one of the stereotypes of Islam.

Yet Matthew saw more than the satanic and diabolical in Islam. By describing the miracles connected with the life of Muhammad and the history of his preaching, Matthew Paris was covertly satisfying medieval man’s need for the miraculous and magic. Magic did not fit into the Christian conception of the supernatural. Official Christianity had broken with folk legends and fairy-tales. The magic, however, lived on in the popular consciousness. In fact there were very few miracles in Islamic dogma. The one and only main miracle is the revelation of the Koran. In the Christian medieval consciousness, however, the Muslim world was a world of the magic and miraculous, or to be more precise, the miraculously exotic.

Matthew Paris was particularly interested in the Muslim Paradise. Christian ideas about Paradise were vague and woolly. Already in the New Testament tradition the portrayal of Paradise is fairly abstract. Celestial bliss was understood as a person’s inner state, the attainment of sanctity: ‘But as it is written “Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him…”’ (1 Cor., 2,9). Medieval thought tried to concretise these ideas. Attempts to determine the location of Paradise, to find it on the end of the earth, were made from time to time by medieval travellers, monks and merchants. As early as the sixth century the well-known Irish monk Brendan set off in search of the Promised Land and described the places he saw. On maps medieval authors usually placed Paradise in India: they believed that it contained four rivers — the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, and Ganges — and that happy and innocent people lived there. On becoming acquainted with Islam, medieval authors encountered some extremely concrete and vivid ideas about Paradise. Their imagination was undoubtedly impressed by this. The picture of Muslim Paradise was a precise one. In Paradise

41Preuss, Die Vorstellungen, 28–30.
42Mattheus Parisiensis, Chronica, 350. Cf. Mt.10:34.
43Mattheus Parisiensis, Chronica, 349.
45On the different types of miraculous in the world culture, see T. Todorov, Introduction à la littérature phantastique (Paris, 1970), 60.
47Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis, ed. by C. Selmer (Notre Dame, IN, 1959).
Carnal pleasures awaited the righteous, for there, as in India, were four rivers of wine, milk, honey, and water. Matthew Paris describes this picture in detail. As we know, for the mythological consciousness milk and honey are, first and foremost, an archetype for abundant food, abundance in general. For medieval man the Muslim world was one of abundance, a model of the best world. The righteous in Paradise eat their fill and indulge in carnal pleasures. In Paradise, Matthew Paris continues, there are houris who bestow affections on men and the righteous give themselves up to the pleasures of the flesh. The Muslim Paradise is the antithesis of the Christian Paradise. Thus, according to Muslim religious customs cohabitation is permitted during fasting. The month of fasting means that one must not pray on an empty stomach, and on pilgrimages, before which Christians in accordance with their customs cleanse themselves from sin and fast, Muslims are allowed to eat and drink as much as they like.

All the Muslim rites are interpreted in inverse categories, Islam being a reflection of Christianity in which the familiar rites and traditions acquire the opposite meaning. For medieval man, however, a ‘back-to-front world’ is a world of the miraculous. In this imaginary world everything changes place: instead of fasting there is an abundance of food, instead of abstinence sexual licence. What is impossible in the real world is possible here. To the medieval mind the ‘age of gold’ or ‘earthly Paradise’ was the opposite of the real world. It should be recalled that in the medieval consciousness the main elements of the miraculous were an abundance of food, sexual licence, a naked body, and idleness; and this was precisely what the West European chroniclers saw or wanted to see in the Muslim world. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a flowering of western literature on imaginary realms of abundance, on the land of Kokan. The Islamic world and its exotic wonders, which astounded West European Christians, were partly identified with the imaginary world. The world of Islam was the real world upside down, and everything that was impossible in the real world was possible there. In the Christian myth of the Muslim world we see a return to the pagan myth of the ‘age of gold’. The Muslim world is an earthly Paradise, a pagan Paradise, moreover; after all, the Moslems themselves were regarded by medieval Christians as pagans.

In the middle of the thirteenth century another biography of Muhammad appeared, by the French writer Vincent de Beauvais. In his Speculum Historiale he portrays Muhammad as a magus skilled in sorcery and black magic. With the help of lies and deceit Muhammad succeeded in persuading the Arabic people that he was the

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49 Matthaeus Parisiensis, Chronica, 353.
51 Matthaeus Parisiensis, Chronica, 355.
52 Matthaeus Parisiensis, Chronica, 355.
55 Vincentii Bellovacensis, Speculum historiale, Bibliotheca mundi (Douai, 1624), vol. 3, Lib. XXIII.
messiah. Vincent de Beauvais expounded the details of Muhammad’s life in such a way that one can easily discern the similarity of this biography of Muhammad to the account of the life of Anti-Christ. The latter also studied black magic and at the age of thirty appeared in Jerusalem to proclaim himself the messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting. Like Anti-Christ, Muhammad also won recognition in Arabia through lies and deceit and became a false prophet. The *Speculum Historiale* reflects the widespread ecclesiastical idea of Muhammad as Anti-Christ. In the spirit of the Byzantine tradition it describes Muhammad’s epileptic fits, which the Prophet himself explained as visions of the Archangel Gabriel. In this section the description becomes more lively, when the writer conveys folkloric subjects in his work as well, the legend of the dove which takes grain from the Prophet’s ear, the legend of the white bullock and the tales of Muslim Paradise. It tells us that the Prophet dug canals and filled them with milk and honey specially in order to show the ignorant Arabs their future in Paradise. All these miracles are false, Vincent de Beauvais states, yet they contain a fair amount of exotic detail so dear to the heart of medieval man. In keeping with the myth of Islam as a religion of the sword, Vincent de Beauvais tells us that Muhammad converted people to his faith ‘with the sword, force and destruction’. He maintains that the main method of conversion to Islam was by force: Muhammad seized the possessions of the weak by force and devastated the lands of neighbouring peoples to compel them to convert to Islam. Vincent de Beauvais also shares another traditional stereotype, according to which Islam is the religion of indulging passions. He describes the Muslim Paradise and carnal pleasures in detail. God is supposed to say to the righteous in Paradise: ‘Eat and drink without a care, lie down on couches… we shall give you… the most beautiful women… all sorts of fruit… and meat to eat’. The Prophet himself is an extremely dissolute man. Medieval writers in general, and Vincent de Beauvais in particular, were deluded by the Muslim cult of the goddess Venus, which they themselves invented, and which the French encyclopaedist explained by the Arabs’ love of carnal pleasures and their sexual promiscuity.

At the same time the world of Islam is for Vincent de Beauvais also an upside-down world, a world of miracles where everything is ‘the other way round’: during fasting one is allowed to eat and drink, during pilgrimage one is allowed to worship idols, and in Paradise the righteous indulge in idleness and carnal pleasures. The Muslim world is shown as an earthly Paradise, in which earthly pleasures are accessible. Vincent de Beauvais created a dual image of the Islam world — on the one hand, it is the satanic world of the Anti-Christ, on the other, the world of miracles. These descriptions reveal the fantastic and exotic side of the medieval image of

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56 M. Plocher, *Studien*, 69–70.
57 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. XXXIX.
58 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. XI.
59 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. LXII.
60 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. LXVI.
61 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. LI.
62 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. LXI.
63 Vincentii Bellovacensis, *Speculum*, Lib. XXIII, cap. LXXII.
Islam. The French encyclopaedist’s essay is one of the few thirteenth century medieval compendiums which reflects ideas of Muhammad and Muslims in the age of the Crusades. It is the culminations of a whole number of works on Islam written in the period when the image of Islam acquired more distinct features in the West.

Let us now return to the question which we posed at the beginning of the article: what was more tenacious — ecclesiastical stereotypes and prejudices or real contacts and experience of life, increased knowledge of Islam? We have seen that the stereotypes really did exert quite a considerable influence on people’s attitudes — spiritual values were higher than knowledge and experience, and this compelled the chroniclers to describe Muslims as idolaters, bad people, Muhammad as a man who indulged his passions, an aggressive man who spread his doctrine by the sword, and Islam as a religion of the sword and vice.

On the other hand, direct contacts with the East created the need for a fuller and clearer image of Islam.64 In their attempts to satisfy this need the writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries drew attention to Muhammad’s life, full of exotic details and adventures. The biographies of the Prophet reflect not only the usual stereotypes, but also folkloric subjects, exotic tales and legends that catered for medieval man’s need for the miraculous. In these chronicles the Muslim world is depicted not only as a realm of idols and the vale of Anti-Christ, but also as an earthly Paradise, a world of miracles. Through the layers of the Church myth of Islam other subjects and details began to penetrate, connected not only with the purely negative assessment of Islam characteristic of Church tradition. This process was not a steady one by any means; while inserting new elements into the medieval picture of Islam, the chroniclers frequently returned to the former stereotypes. This evolution cannot be perceived as a direct line, but rather as zigzag between the two poles. On the whole, the destruction of the traditional myths of Islam was very slow, the image of Muhammad and Christian ideas of Muslims evolved only slightly, further proof that medieval man’s picture of the world changed very slowly.