

IMAGINING ISLAM: The Role of Images in Medieval Depictions of Muslims

On the edges of medieval Europe, there was real contact between Christians and Muslims. Multicultural, multi-religious societies existed in al-Andalus and Sicily, while cultural contact of a more contentious sort took place in the Near East. In most parts of medieval Europe, however, Muslims were seen rarely or not at all, and Islam was known only at second — or third-hand. Western European accounts written during the Middle Ages invariably misrepresent Islam; they vary only to the degree with which they parody the religion and its adherents. One might imagine that such misrepresentation is simply due to the limited information available to the medieval European curious about Islam and the Prophet. If such were the case, one would expect to find a linear progression in medieval accounts of Islam, moving from extremely fanciful depictions to more straightforward, factual chronicles. Instead, one finds accurate, even rather compassionate accounts of Islamic theology side by side with bizarre, antagonistic, and even hateful depictions of Muslims and their belief. During the twelfth century, the French abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, engaged several translators and went to Muslim Spain to produce a translation of the Qurʾān and to learn about Islam in order to effect the conversion of Muslims to Christianity by means of rational persuasion, approaching them, as Peter himself put it, “not in hatred, but in love.”¹

During the same century, however, the *chanson de geste* tradition flourished in France and began to be exported into the literatures of England and Germany.² In these twelfth-century epics glorifying war and chivalric heroism, Muslims are depicted as basically similar to Christians: the structure of their armies, their kings, and their martial techniques are essentially the same. The main thing that sets them apart is their religion. While the Christian knights appeal to their God and their saints verbally, without recourse to the veneration of

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¹James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, 1964), 231, 161.

²See Jessie Crosland, *The Old French Epic* (1951; reprint: New York, 1971), 230-70 (“The Old French Epic Outside France”).

images, the Muslims of the *chansons de geste* are polytheistic idolaters who worship graven images of Mahum (or Muḥammad), Apolin, Tervagan, and sometimes others as well. These idols are frequently mentioned in the *chansons de geste* as well as in the numerous Middle English romances based upon them. They serve as a signal of the waning power of the Muslims, who turn upon their gods whenever they suffer a military defeat.

The most famous example of this behaviour occurs in the *Chanson de Roland* where, following a disastrous battle, the Muslims attack an image of Apolin:

Tencent a lui, laidement le despersionent:
 "E! malvais deus, por quei nus fais tel hunte?
 Cest nostre rei por quei lessas cunfundre?
 Ki mult te sert, malvais luër l'en dunes!"
 Puis si li tolent ses ceptre e sa curune.

Par mains le pendent sur une culumbe,
 Entre lur piez a tere le tresturnent,
 A granz bastuns le batent e defruisent.
 E Tervagan tolent sun escarbuncle
 E Mahumet enz en un fosset butent
 E porc e chen le mordent e defulent.

They rail at it, they abuse it in vile fashion:
 "Oh, evil god, why do you cover us with such shame?
 Why have you allowed this King of ours to be brought to ruin?
 You pay out poor wages to anyone who serves you well!"
 They tie it by the hands to a column.
 Then they tear away the idol's sceptre and its crown.

They topple it to the ground at their feet,
 They beat it and smash it to pieces with big sticks.
 They snatch Tervagan's carbuncle,
 Throw the idol of Mohammed into a ditch,
 And pigs and dogs bite and trample it.³

vv. 2581-91

Interestingly, this is a scene not of idolatry, but of iconoclasm: the Muslims' idols are seen not when being worshipped, but when their disappointed followers smash their idols in anger. This act of literal iconoclasm serves to emphasise the impotence of the gods even while drawing attention to the idolatrous nature of the Muslims. Comparable pas-

³ All quotations from the *Chanson de Roland* are from Gerald J. Brault, ed. and trans., *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition* (University Park and London, 1978), and are cited in the text by line number.

sages appear through the *chansons de geste*, the Middle English romances loosely based on them, and medieval mystery plays.

In the following pages, I will describe four medieval texts in which the depiction of the clash of Christianity and Islam centres on the role of images in worship. That is not to say that medieval texts concerning Islam focus only on the role of images: on the contrary, there are other important aspects to be noted as well, including the role of the Muslim convert to Christianity; the demonisation of Muslims as grotesque monsters or giants; the role of the Muslim woman as mediator between pagan and Christian; and the Muslims' supposed licentiousness and flamboyant display of wealth.⁴ The use of images, however, offers a good starting point for an exploration of Christian attitudes toward Islam in the Middle Ages, both because Muslim idolatry is so ubiquitous in medieval texts, appearing in various genres and vernaculars, and appearing because it is prominent throughout the period, found in early medieval texts as well as later ones.

I will not attempt to offer a complete survey of medieval texts which depict Muslims as idolaters, mainly because the tradition is so widespread that one could do little more than describe the context of each in a few words.⁵ Instead, I will juxtapose two pairs of texts in which Muslim idolatry is prominent, not in order to argue that a diachronic progression appears in these texts, moving from less accurate depictions of Islam to more accurate ones, or vice versa; but rather to illustrate the range of depictions of Islamic idolatry, and suggest how one might interpret these depictions in the context of the cultures that produced them. I will begin with an account of the role of images in the *Chanson de Roland*, written down at the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century, and in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, composed by Jean Bodel around the year 1200. I will then go on to describe two texts written in English during the fifteenth century: the romance of the *Sowdone of Babylone*, based on the *chansons de geste* centred on the deeds of Charlemagne, and the Digby *Mary Magdalen* play. Although they are written in different vernaculars and various genres, these texts illustrate a certain consistency in the depiction of Muslim polytheistic

⁴ On the association of licentiousness and wealth with the rise of Islam, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "The Rhetoric of Antichrist in Western Lives of Muhammad," *Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997): 297-307.

⁵ Numerous cases of the attribution of idolatry to Muslims in medieval texts can be found in Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste* (Edinburgh, 1984); Paul Bancourt, *Les Musulmans dans les chansons de geste du cycle du roi* (Aix-en-Provence, 1982); and Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, 1977).

idolatry; at the same time, different aspects of idolatrous practice are highlighted in each text, showing what function these accusations against the Muslims serve for the community that produced and enjoyed each text.

It is often assumed that idolatry is ascribed to Muslims in order to emphasise the basic similarity of Islam to other kinds of paganism, including the veneration of classical deities by the Romans and the Greeks as well as the adoration of images described in Old Testament accounts. In other words, a pagan is a pagan is a pagan: they are all fundamentally the same, because they are all non-Christian. This tendency to see pagans as all alike is evident in the variety of Muslim gods named in medieval texts: Muḥammad, called "Mahum" or "Mahound," appears, but he is accompanied by such classical-sounding deities as "Apolin" and "Jubitere" (that is, Apollo and Jupiter) or even "Platon."⁶ The continuity of ancient and modern idolatry is underlined by the frequent emphasis on the opulent gold of the Muslim idols, recalling the golden calf adored by the Israelites in the prototypical episode of idolatry recounted in Exodus 32. The conflation of classical, biblical, and Muslim false gods is also evident when, for example, a biblical figure such as Herod is found swearing "by Mahound" despite the fact that the prophetic mission of Muḥammad began almost six hundred years after Herod's death.

Yet while there is certainly a conflation of various kinds of paganism, the extraordinarily detailed accounts of Muslim idolatry found in a variety of literary genres reveal much about medieval views of the Islamic empire to the south and east, especially when contrasted with the relatively realistic accounts of Islam written during the same period.⁷ They show not only how medieval Christians saw Muslims, but also how they saw themselves, because Christians used their own theology in order to imagine Islam. For example, the Muslims' abuse of their own images, recounted in the passage from the *Chanson de Roland* quoted above, is not the bizarre anomaly it may seem: it resembles the punishment of images practised by medieval Christians, when an image of a saint or of the Virgin Mary would be displaced or even verbally abused until the saint once again displayed the efficacy expected by

⁶ On the names of the gods, see C. and Y. Pellat, "L'idée de Dieu chez les Sarrasins des chansons de geste," *Studia Islamica* 22 (1965): 5-42.

⁷ See the numerous essays on this subject by Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, reprinted in *La connaissance de l'Islam dans l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Charles Burnett (Aldershot, Hampshire and Brookfield VT, 1994); and also Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (1960. Revised edition, Oxford, 1993).

the supplicant.⁸ Similarly, medieval texts refer to the Muslims having "bisshopes"⁹ as the Christians do, even though Islam has no such established clergy. The habit of using one's own religious practice in order to imagine the religious practice of another is not peculiarly medieval: until fairly recently, Westerners referred to Muslims as "Mohammedans," indicating that they assumed that the position of Muhammad for the Muslim is comparable to that of Christ for the Christian. The depiction of Muslims as polytheistic idolaters is a similar projection of expectations based on Christian theology onto an imperfectly understood enemy.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Chanson de Roland*, in which the Christian Trinity is mirrored by a corresponding pagan anti-trinity of Apolin, Mahum, and Tervagan. In almost all respects, the Christian force led by Charlemagne resembles the pagan force led by Marsilie: each has an elite corps of twelve knights, each king is depicted surrounded by retainers and seated on a sumptuous throne, each side includes warriors distinguished by their bravery. The two sides differ, it seems, only with regard to their leadership: Charlemagne's men owe allegiance to "Deus," or God, while Marsilie's men follow "Mahum" (e.g. 3641). The deities, both Christian and pagan, are seen as military leaders, whose success or failure is measured on the battlefield. Marsilie's queen, Bramimonde, laments the Muslims' losses, saying "Cist nostre deu sunt en recreantise. /... / Noz chevalers i unt lesset ocire. / Cest mien seignur en bataille faillirent" ["Those gods of ours have given up the fight. /... / They allowed our knights to get killed. / They failed my lord in battle" (2715-18)]. Conversely, when Charlemagne weakens in the midst of battle, God sends the angel Gabriel to encourage him (3608-11; cf. 2526-68 and 2458-59). Gods participate actively on both sides of this holy war.

⁸ Patrick Geary describes how, through the physical debasement of the saints' images, "the saints themselves were humiliated, punished in order to force them to carry out their duties" (135); such behaviour typified "an earlier sort of Christianity, one in which both men and saints could honour or humiliate, reward or punish each other, depending on how well each did his part in a mutually beneficial relationship" (138). See his "Humiliation of Saints," in Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (Cambridge and New York, 1983), 123-140; and cf. Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978), 23. An illustration of the humiliation of Mary in response to a military setback appears in the fourteenth-century romance the *Sege of Melayne*, in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo, MI, 1990), lines 547-64.

⁹ See, for example, the *Sowdone of Babylone*, in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo, MI, 1990), lines 2511 and 2775.

In the *Chanson de Roland*, Muslims resemble Christians in every way except in the gods they follow: as the redactor of the poem puts it, "Païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit" ["Pagans are in the wrong and Christians are in the right" (1015)]. Pagans are "wrong" because they are a "gent averse" (2630, 3295), that is, a people who have turned away from the right. The battle of pagan and Christian can only end, says the redactor, when "li uns sun tort i reconuiseit" ["one of them admits he is in the wrong" (3588)]. Since "Pagans are in the wrong," only they can come to realize their own error. Thus when the pagan emir Baligant sees the standard of Muḥammad brought low in battle, signifying the god's military defeat, he "s'en aperceit / Que il ad tort e Carlemagnes dreit" ["begins to realise / That he is in the wrong and Charlemagne is in the right" (3553-54)]. Baligant's realisation, however, does not move him to convert and join his righteous enemy: unlike some later *chansons de geste* and Middle English romances, the *Chanson de Roland* does not include valiant pagan heroes who willingly convert when they observe the superior power of the God of the Christian knights. Instead, in the *Chanson de Roland*, conversion takes place by the sword. After the conquest of Saragossa, Charlemagne orders that baptismal water be prepared, and that any who wish to remain Muslim "fait prendre o ardeir ou ocire" ["be taken prisoner, burned, or put to death"]. In order to escape this fate, writes the redactor, "Baptizet sunt asez plus de .C. milie" ["Well over a hundred thousand are baptised" (3670-71)]. Only the queen, Bramimonde, is taken to France, because Charlemagne wishes her conversion to be "par amur" (3674), that is, motivated by true conviction rather than by force.

The conversion of "over a hundred thousand" Muslims at Saragossa is simultaneously accompanied by the destruction of pagan idols. Unlike the abasement of Mahum, Apolin, and Tervagan by the disappointed Muslims themselves which takes place earlier in the poem, this episode of iconoclasm has as its purpose the erasure of any memory of image-worship at Saragossa:

A mil Franceis funt ben cercher la vile,
 Les sinagoges e les mahumeries.
 A mailz de fer e a cuignees qu'il tindrent
 Fruissent les ymagenes e trestutes les ydeles,
 N'i remeindrat ne sorz ne falserie.

Orders are given for a thousand Frenchmen to search the city,
 The synagogues and the mosques.
 Holding iron hammers and axes,
 They smash the statues and all the idols,
 No sorcery or false cult will remain there. (3661-65)

This passage differs interestingly from the earlier episode of iconoclasm practised by the Muslims themselves. There, the redactor emphasises the humiliation of the gods themselves rather than the physical destruction of the graven image. This is more evident in the original Old French text than in the modern translation, because the translator has three times inserted the word “idol” to describe what is being abused, while the original text implies instead that the god himself is abused. A more literal translation of the text would read:

They run to Apollo, in a crypt,
They rail at him, they abuse him in a vile fashion:

.....

Then they tear away his sceptre and his crown.
They hang him by the hands on a column,

.....

From Tervagan they wrench his jewel,
And throw Muḥammad into a ditch,
And pigs and dogs bite and trample him.

(2580-91; my translation)

The punishments enacted on the gods sound less like the smashing of stone, metal, or wood than like the torture and humiliation that might be enacted on a living prisoner, hung up by his hands, his body gnawed by animals. In fact, this last fate is one which Charlemagne’s men fear that they themselves will suffer if the Christian army does not come to their aid in time: Bishop Turpin hopes that their bodies will be retrieved and buried in hallowed ground, where “N’en mangerunt ne lu ne porc ne chen” [“Neither wolves, nor pigs, nor dogs will devour us” (1751)]. In this scene, the gods worshipped by the Muslims are conceived of as more than just idols. They have an independent existence, although they are ultimately impotent and “wrong.”¹⁰

Conversely, the scene of iconoclasm practised by the Christians, recounted near the end of the *Chanson de Roland*, emphasises not the independent existence of the Muslim gods but their status as material objects which must be destroyed in order to wipe out any memory of what they once represented. What this accomplishes is not only the extermination of the rival religion, but also the destruction of any evidence that idol-worship was practised. To put it another way, the fact that

¹⁰ Norman Daniel notes that, often in the *chansons de geste*, “the god is conceived as having a separate existence from his idol”; see *Heroes and Saracens* 149-50. This is evident in the Middle English romances as well; for example, in the *Sowdowe of Babylone*, the deceased pagan Lucafere is said to be with “his god Mahoun” (2017), while at the death of the pagan Estragot, “Mahounde toke his soule to him / And broght it to his blis” (447-48).

there are no pagan images at Saragossa, no evidence of Muslim idolatry, is perfectly understandable: they were all systematically destroyed by Charlemagne's victorious army. Charlemagne's victory is designed as an erasure of the Muslim culture that previously ruled Saragossa: thousands of Muslims are compelled to convert; those who decline to do so are burned; and the images that might otherwise remain as mute testimony to earlier practice are reduced to dust.

Jehan Bodel's *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, written about 1200, maintains many of the conventions regarding Muslims seen in the *Chanson de Roland*. The earlier poem's declaration that "Pagans are in the wrong and Christians are in the right" is echoed in the later play when a Christian on the battlefield states "Paradys sera nostres et eus sera ynfers" ["Paradise will be ours and hell will be theirs" (406)].¹¹ As in the *Chanson de Roland*, Muslims worship a pagan anti-trinity composed of Apolin, Mahum, and Tervagan. They swear by the names of these deities and, like the Muslim knights of the *Roland*, express their allegiance to the gods in terms of fealty or military command, declaring "a Mahommet soions nous commandé" ["Let us be commanded by Muḥammad!" (395)]. When the Muslim king decides to convert to Christianity, he makes what amounts to an oath of fealty, offering himself up "de mains et de cuer" ["with hand and heart" (1451)] to Saint Nicholas and telling the saint "Sire, chi devieng jou vostre hom" ["Sire, here and now I become your man" (1459)].

Yet, in the Saint Nicholas play, the symmetry of the Christian and Muslim gods is more fully elaborated than in the *Chanson de Roland*. The central deity in the Muslim pantheon is not Muhammad but Tervagan, who appears in the play as a large golden statue in a "mahomerie" or mosque adjoining the palace of the king. Like the Muslims of the *Roland*, the king abuses his idol, rebuking it for their lack of military success and mocking the statue's "lait visage et ... lait cors" ["ugly face and ... ugly body" (137)]. Tervagan is not the only statue in the play, however; his power is countered by that transmitted through a simple "home de fust" (1200; cf. 31), a wooden statue of Saint Nicholas.¹² It has been suggested that the symmetry of the two

¹¹ Jehan Bodel, *Le Jeu de saint Nicolas*, ed. Albert Henry (Geneva, 1981). Quotations are cited in the text by line number; translations are my own, though a somewhat idiomatic English translation is available in *Medieval French Plays*, trans. Richard Axton and John Stevens (New York, 1971).

¹² In *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge and New York, 1989), Michael Camille argues that the image of Saint Nicholas in this play is "a two-dimensional picture ... an icon rather than an idol" (127; cf. 133). He is able to make this point only by focusing on the identification of the saint's representation as an "ymage"

deities, one pagan and one Christian, would have been heightened during the staging of the play, with the golden idol of Tervagan placed opposite to the wooden image of Saint Nicholas.¹³ The symmetry is also underlined by the Muslims' repeated reference to the image of Nicholas as a "mahommet cornu" (458); to them, an image of Nicholas is fundamentally just like an image of Muhammad.

As one might expect, the image of Saint Nicholas proves to be efficacious, because the saint performs miracles wherever the image is present; conversely, the image of Tervagan repeatedly fails the Muslims. Finally, at the end of the play, persuaded by the power of Saint Nicholas and repelled by the impotence of his own god, the Muslim king converts to Christianity and has the golden statue of Tervagan thrown down from its place. Yet this episode differs from the Muslims' abuse of their statues of Mahum, Tervagan, and Apolin in the *Chanson de Roland*. In the earlier work, the gods survive after being thrown into the ditch: the Muslims continue to swear by Muḥammad, and idols of the gods must continue to exist since they are said, at the end of the poem, to be destroyed utterly by the victorious Christians. Conversely, in the Saint Nicholas play, the destruction of Tervagan is final: when the Muslim king goes beyond humiliation of his idol and destroys it, the two episodes of iconoclasm recounted in the *Roland* are conflated, and the credit for the act of destruction is assigned not to the Christian forces of military conquest but to the saint who effects a far-reaching spiritual conquest.

It is striking that, even though Tervagan is ultimately rejected by his followers as an ineffectual deity, he is not simply an inanimate golden statue. When his former worshippers are on the verge of converting to Christianity, Tervagan comes alive and speaks several lines in an incomprehensible tongue. But the words that appear to be gibberish to the Christian audience are actually in a foreign language and are subsequently translated by the Muslim king (1512-19). When the Christian man present asks what Tervagan is saying, the king replies "il muert de duel et d'ire / De che c'a Dieu me sui turkiés; / Mais n'ai mais soing de son prologe" ["he is dying from sorrow and anger / because God has converted me. / But I don't care anymore what he says" (1517-19)].

and disregarding the numerous times that the representation of Nicholas is referred to as a "mahommet" (458; cf. 465, 513, 585, 779), a term which in Old French texts invariably refers to a free-standing statue. Camille himself notes that the Middle English term "'maumet' ... signified any pagan idol" – not a two-dimensional image (135).

¹³ Henri Rey-Flaud, *Pour une dramaturgie du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1980), 44. See also pp. 572-73 in his article "Le sentiment religieux dans *Le Jeu de saint Nicolas*," *Mélanges de langue et littérature françaises du motan âge offerts à Pierre Jonin* (Aix-en-Provence, 1979), 571-77.

Tervagan's "language" is bizarre, creating an effect partly comic, partly frightening.¹⁴ But it also serves to reiterate the correspondence of Christian and pagan religions, for Tervagan's dying words are almost immediately followed by words from the Christian liturgy, spoken in a language only imperfectly understood by the majority of those who used it in worship: the *Te Deum laudamus* concludes the play, supplanting Tervagan's now obsolete foreign tongue with the language of the Christian church.

The *Chanson de Roland* and the Saint Nicholas play differ in genre, in dialect, and in other particulars. But they share a common context: both were written for a French-speaking audience during a period when the notion of a crusade to the Holy Land had assumed great importance in the popular imagination. The surviving redaction of the *Roland* was composed around the time of the First Crusade, which was preached at Clermont in 1095.¹⁵ Jehan Bodel wrote the *Jeu de saint Nicolas* in or about 1200, at just the time when he himself took up the Cross to join the Fourth Crusade.¹⁶ In each case, the enemy portrayed in the literary work—whether it be those who oppose Charlemagne in Spain or those who persecute the followers of Saint Nicholas—is coloured by the contemporary conflict between European Christians and the Muslims of the Middle East. Both the conquest of Saragossa and the conversion of the king by Saint Nicholas are expressions of the desire on the part of western Christians to regain the sacred space of the Holy Land.

It is fruitful to juxtapose these two texts, different in literary form yet similar in language and historical context, with another pair of texts drawn from a different place and time. The *Sowdone of Babylone* and the Digby *Mary Magdalen* play were both written in Middle English during the fifteenth century.¹⁷ Each has something in common

¹⁴ A comparable passage of pagan gibberish (with "Englys" translation) appears in the account of Richard II's military victories in the Holy Land which concludes the *Romaunce of Richard Coeur de Lion* (lines 6829-34). *Der mittlenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz*, ed. Karl Brunner (Wien, 1913).

¹⁵ See "Date et manuscrits de la chanson" in *La Chanson de Roland: Edition établie d'après le manuscrit d'Oxford*, ed. Luis Cortes (Mayenne, 1994), 142-46, esp. 144.

¹⁶ Bodel became ill before he could embark upon the Crusade. See the biographical note in Albert Henry, ed., *Le Jeu de saint Nicolas* 21-26. As Rey-Flaud puts it, "Le *Jeu de saint Nicolas* est d'abord l'histoire d'une croisade" (*Dramaturgie* 139).

¹⁷ The *Sowdone of Babylone* is dated at the end of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth century on the basis on some echoes of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. See Lupack's Introduction to the *Sowdone of Babylone* in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances* 1. The Digby *Mary Magdalen* play is dated at the end of the fifteenth century by Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., in *The Late Medieval Religious*

with the Old French texts described above: like the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Sowdone of Babylone* concerns the deeds of Charlemagne and his men, and centres on the martial conflict of Muslim and Christian; like the Saint Nicholas play, the Digby *Mary Magdalen* focuses on the efficacy of saints in the lives of believers, and on their ability to convert the unbeliever and destroy the idols he worshipped before. By exploring how these varied yet comparable texts represent the function of images in worship, it is possible to get a sense of how the depiction of Muslims changed during the years from 1100 to 1500. Four texts are hardly enough to offer a comprehensive picture of how the representation of Islam changed; but they do offer some reference points on which to base a fuller understanding.

The *Sowdone of Babylone*, like the *Chanson de Roland*, concerns the deeds of Charlemagne and his men as they attempt to beat back the advance of the Muslim armies in Spain. It follows the *chanson de geste Fierabras*, however, in extending its narrative beyond the events at Saragossa, telling the story of the sultan's son, Ferumbras, who converts to Christianity and becomes a knight on the side of "right." Like other Middle English romances, the *Sowdone of Babylone* restates and emphasises motifs found in the Old French epic. While the *Roland* alludes only briefly to the dark skin of the Muslims,¹⁸ the *Sowdone of Babylone* repeatedly characterises them as not only black but deformed and even chimerical, having leopard's heads and boar's tusks (e.g. 2191-98; 346-57; 1005-6). The anti-trinity of Mahum, Apolin, and Ter-vagan worshipped by the Muslims of the *Roland* is in the *Sowdone of Babylone* expanded into a wider pantheon, including not just Mahounde, Apolyne, and Termagaunte but "Jubiter, Ascarot and Alcaron also" (2762).¹⁹ As in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the Muslim idols are said to be made of gold; but in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, the luxuriousness both of the idols and of the sacrificial materials offered up to them is emphasised even more. The Sultan orders his men to burn frankincense before the idols, to blow brass horns in their honour, and to offer them milk, honey, oil, gold, and silver (677-86, 2449; cf. 1020-30, 2519-22, 2787-89). The abuse of the Muslim gods by their worshippers, occurring once in

Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160 (Oxford, 1982), xl. Quotations from the *Mary Magdalen* play are from this edition and are cited in the text by line number.

¹⁸ "Rollant veit la contredite gent / Ki plus sunt neirs que nen est arrement, / Ne n'unt de blanc ne mais que sul les denz" ["Roland sees the accursed people, / Who are blacker than ink / And whose teeth alone are white" (1932-34; cf. 1917-18, 1631-35)].

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that this identification of "Alcaron" as a god is not precluded by the more accurate identification of the Qur'an earlier in the poem: after a funeral, the Muslim mourners "songe the Dirige of Alkaron, / That Bibill is of here laye" (2271-72).

the *Chanson de Roland* and twice in the Saint Nicholas play, appears four times in the *Sowdone of Babylone*. But what in the *Roland* was tragedy appears in the *Sowdone of Babylone* as farce. The Sultan never goes through with his threat to burn his idols, but instead becomes remorseful and renews his sacrificial offerings. The repeated deferral has a comic effect as the same reaction of fury and repentance appears again and again following each defeat in battle (2431-56, 2495-2526, 2761-90; cf. 276-77).

One aspect that remains constant in the Middle English adaptations of the *chansons de geste*, however, is the fundamental reality of the gods represented by the image, their continuing presence. In the *Chanson de Roland*, the gods are still invoked even after their images are thrown into a ditch while, in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the statue of Tervagan weeps in sorrow and speaks aloud even as the Muslim king renounces him. Similarly, in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, the gods preserve an independent existence beyond the image that embodies them. When the Muslim giant Estragot is killed in battle, "Mahounde toke his soule to him / And broght it to his blis" (447-48; cf. 2017). The pagan gods, like the Christian God, take part in the battle, though sometimes, as the poem puts it, they "come to late" (410) or "holpe us not todaye" (898; cf. 913-17). They are, as in the epic, still martial leaders, which is why the vow to convert is also a vow of fealty. The Muslim Ferumbras tells the victorious Oliver, "I yelde me to the, / And here I become thy man. / ... / To Jhesu Crist I wole me take / ... / And alle my goddes forsake" (1353-54, 1360-62). When Ferumbras takes Oliver as his lord, he becomes the vassal of Oliver's divine Lord as well. The king in the Saint Nicholas play takes this vow of fealty even more explicitly, telling the saint "here I become your man / And leave Apolin and Mahom / And that bastard [pautonnier] Tervagan" (1459-61).

In broad terms, the depiction of Muslims in western European texts is designed to hold up a mirror to medieval Christian practice, showing the readers of those texts what they are *not* so that they may understand what they *are*. It is a startling inversion: Muslims, whose devotion is centred on the unity of God are seen as polytheists, while Christians, who venerate a triune God, are represented as monotheists; Muslims, who reject the use of images, are seen as idolaters, while Christians, who use images in worship, communicate with the divine more directly. It is striking that, in the works depicting Muslims as idolaters, Christians are almost always shown appealing to their God and saints directly, without the intervening medium of any image. The one exception to this appears in the Saint Nicholas play, in which Jehan Bodel directly confronts the distinction between idolatry and the right use of images in worship. He counters the golden statue of Tervagan

with the simple wooden statue of Nicholas, and shows how strongly the saint's power outweighs that of his pagan rival. More frequently, however, texts depicting Muslim idols show the Christian protagonists using an alternative mediator between the world of spirit and the material world, one which functions like the image of the saint but which more readily evades the charge of idolatry.

I refer, of course, to the relic, which plays an important part in both the *Sowdone of Babylone* and the Digby *Mary Magdalen* play. Although the relic appears more frequently in later medieval depictions of the conflict of Christians and Muslims, it appears in earlier works as well. For example, in the *Chanson de Roland*, Durendal, the sword wielded by Roland in battle against the pagans, has embedded in its handle "La dent seint Perre e del sanc seint Basilie / E des chevels mun seignor seint Denise, / Del vestement i ad seint Marie" ["Saint Peter's tooth, some of Saint Basil's blood, / Some of my lord Saint Denis's hair, / Some of Saint Mary's clothing" (2346-48)]. Charlemagne's sword, Joyeuse, is similarly endowed: its pommel contains "la lance ... / Dunt Nostre Sire fut en la cruiz nasfret" ["the Lance ... / With which Our Lord was wounded on the Cross" (2503-04)]. In these weapons, the union of religious and national goals is epitomised: a military victory represents conquest both by France and by Christ.

In later medieval depictions of Islam, the depiction of relics serves a slightly different purpose, perhaps due to the changing status of the relic in religious practice during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²⁰ Relics come to seem valuable not only to the Christians, but to the pagans as well. In the *Chanson de Roland*, the Muslims' interest in acquiring Durendal was based on its status as the sword wielded by Roland (2281-82); conversely, in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, the Muslims seize "alle the relekes ... / The Crosse, the Crown, the Nailes bente" even before they "dispoile al the cite / Both of tresoure and of golde" (664-68). The theft of the relics is referred to repeatedly (716, 748), highlighting their importance and creating anticipation of their return to their proper place following the Christians' victory in war.

The recovery of the relics is indeed an important part of the climax of the narrative (3137-50); but they are not replaced in "Seinte Petris" (663), from where they came. Instead, Charlemagne donates the Cross to Notre Dame de Paris, the Crown to Saint Denis, and the Nails to Boulogne (3235-38). Charlemagne redistributes these relics in order to

²⁰ Geary observes that, during the ninth through eleventh centuries, relics "assumed their broadest and most essential roles.... After this period, they faced increasingly stiff competition from other sources of mundane and celestial power" (*Furta Sacra* 17).

make their spiritual power available not in their traditional home, Rome, but in various places distributed throughout his newly formed Empire. Charlemagne's donation is a manifestation of *translatio imperii*, or the transfer of empire from ancient Rome to the medieval Holy Roman Empire. A similar transfer is enacted through different means in the *Chanson de Roland*, where Charlemagne's army is said to bear a marvellous battle standard: "Seinte Piere fut, si aveit num Romaine, / Mais de Munjoie il oec out pris eschange" ["It once belonged to Saint Peter and its name was 'Romaine,' / But it had taken the new name Monjoie there" (3094-95)].²¹ In the *Roland*, what formerly belonged to Peter now belongs to Charlemagne, and the name evoking Rome has been replaced by the battle cry of the Emperor's men. The movement of the relics described in the *Sowdone of Babylone* is also a transfer from Peter to Charlemagne, from Rome to Holy Roman Empire. But here the transfer is expressed not through a symbol or emblem, but through a tangible remnant of the presence of the divine on earth. More powerfully than in the *Roland*, the movement of the relics in the *Sowdone of Babylone* displaces the centre of the empire—Rome—to what was formerly the periphery—France.

Relics play an important part in the Digby *Mary Magdalen* play as well; but, startlingly, they are used not in Christian worship but in the pagan worship practised by the King of Marseilles. The Digby *Mary Magdalen* play is not a typical case of the representation of Muslims in medieval literature, for it is clearly anachronistic to find Muslims in the life of a saint contemporary with Christ. Yet the King of Marseilles, whom Mary visits in an effort to convert him and his people, sounds very much like the Muslim rulers found in the *Sowdone of Babylone* and other Middle English romances. Like them, he makes sacrifices to his god "Mahownd" (1210; cf. 1140) and, like the Muslim king in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, he is in the end persuaded to convert by the miracles performed by the Christian saint.

The scene of sacrifice is expanded, however, in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*: the offerings are accompanied by song and an elaborate liturgy performed by the king's "Prysbytyr" and his young altarboy. The climax of this religious ritual is the display of sacred relics: the Muslim presbyter displays "relykys bryghth," including "Mahowndys own nekke bon" (1232-33). He allows the worshippers to kiss the bone, along with another relic: "Mahowndys own yeelyd" (1237). The eyelid is a particularly appropriate relic for the Muslims of the Digby *Mary*

²¹ See the discussion of *translatio imperii* in Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition. I. Introduction and Commentary* (University Park and London, 1978), 289-90.

Magdalen, because the closed eye symbolises the pagans' inability to perceive the light of God. They have eyes, but do not see; as the Muslim presbyter observes, the relic of Muhammad's eyelid "woll make yow blynd for ewyrmore" (1240). The centrality of relics in Muslim worship, as depicted in the play, is emphasised by such repeated exclamations as "be Mahondys bonys" (142) and "Mahovndys blod" (1175).

There is no question that the literary texts described above misrepresent Islam: they suggest that Muslims practice polytheism and idolatry, that they have an established clergy, and so on. Yet the Digby *Mary Magdalen* is unusual in also suggesting that Muslims use relics in worship, thus showing how closely the author modelled his notion of Muslim religious practice on his experience of Christian ritual. The pagan worship displayed in the Digby *Mary Magdalen* is, in sum, a parody of Christian worship: it employs images, song liturgy, and ritual sacrifice in the veneration of "Sentt Mahownde" (1205). This parody is pronounced in the holy text, called the "Leccyo mahowndys," read by the Muslim presbyter's altarboy (1186-1201). This "lesson" is gibberish, like the sounds uttered by the dying Tervagan at the end of the Saint Nicholas play; but unlike Tervagan's words, which sound imposing and rather frightening, the words uttered by the altarboy have a comic effect. The Latinate endings of "cownthtys fulcatum" and "fartum cardiculorum" (1189, 1191) thinly conceal scatological language which could only have titillated the play's audience.

In the Digby *Mary Magdalen*, as in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, comic parody is evident in the depiction of Muslims to an extent not seen in the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*. In both of these early works, the depictions of Muslims can be described as parodic in a very general sense. Etymologically, the parody is "para odê," beside the song or a parallel to it. So too the Muslim of the *Roland* is "fiers" (897) as any Christian knight, while in the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, Christian and Muslim each venerate a "mahommet." But the aspect of ridicule integral to parody is not in evidence in these earlier depictions of Islam; conversely, in the *Sowdone of Babylone* and the Digby *Mary Magdalen*, comic parody is clearly at the fore. The increasingly exotic descriptions of Muslims in the Middle English romances as giants having the faces of animals, "Some bloo, some yolowe, some blake" (*Sowdone of Babylone* 1005), show that the elements of comedy and fantasy became increasingly important in representations of the east produced during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Yet the use of relics by the pagans of the Digby *Mary Magdalen* fulfills more than a merely comic function. The repeated reference to the different parts of the body of "Seyntt Mahownde" —the "nekke bon," the "yeelyd," "bonys" and "blod"— invites the reader to see pagan

practice as characterised by fragmentation, as being of an essentially partial and decaying nature. The degenerate language of the "Leccyo mahowndys" reinforces this message, reminding the hearer of the medieval identification of Babylon, home of the great sultan, with Babel, the place where pride caused the confusion of tongues.²² In a recent study, Caroline Walker Bynum has eloquently described how central the notion of fragmentation was to medieval conceptions of the self, and points out how thirteenth-century hagiography reveals the "tendency to assert wholeness," a triumph of the saint—and of the saint's community—over the decay and degeneration endemic in a post-lapsarian world: "What is underlined repeatedly is either a reassembling of body parts for burial or ... the victory of intactness over division."²³ The scattered parts of "Seyntt Mahownde" are more than parody; they illustrate the degenerate nature of the religious practice he represents.²⁴ The body of Muhammad in the Digby *Mary Magdalen* manifests the lack of unity which, for the medieval Christian, lay at the heart of Islam. The relics in the hilts of Durendal and Joyeuse unify the community of the *Chanson de Roland*; the rallying cry "Monjoie," derived from the name of Charlemagne's sword, continually renews the solidarity of the group, and guarantees their victory (2503-11). Conversely, "Mahowndys own yeelyd" secures for his people only spiritual blindness and failure.

Images remain central to popular medieval depictions of Islam, whether written during the twelfth century or the fifteenth. Many readers have commented on the absurdity of suggesting that Muslims worship idols in view of Islam's absolute condemnation of any veneration of images. Interestingly, however, the accusation of idolatry has played a part in polemics against Islam written as early as the eighth and ninth centuries. Kathleen Corrigan has recently shown that the ninth-century Byzantine psalters created in the wake of the Iconoclas-

²² See, for example, the false etymology of Babylon in the closing lines of the thirteenth-century *Roman de Mahomet*: "Babylon, c'est confusions: / Pour chou li fu donnés li nons / Que on i fist la tour jadis / Pour monter haut em paradys, / Par grant orgueil et par grant rage, / Mais dex lor mua lor langage" ["Babylon, that is, 'confusion'; / it was given the name because / the tower was built there long ago / in order to climb up as high as paradise, / out of great pride and great passion; / but God then transformed their language"]. *Le roman de Mahomet de Alexandre du Pont* (1258), ed. Yvan G. Lepage (Paris, 1977), lines 1978-83.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York, 1995), 309; 312.

²⁴ In her description of the *Legenda Aurea* of James of Voragine, Bynum notes that "the good are intact when divided, while the evil fragment or decay even without violence" (313).

tic Controversy associated Islam with idolatry. They did so, Corrigan argues, in order to defend their Christian belief in the efficacy of images in worship against the accusations of idolatry levelled at them by Muslims and Jews. Christians thus turned the accusation of idolatry back upon their accusers.²⁵

A similar approach was taken even earlier by the eighth-century Byzantine theologian John of Damascus, famous for his defence of the use of images in worship during the Iconoclastic Controversy. John concludes his *De haeresibus* with a refutation of Islam in which he accuses Muslims of idolatry. "Why then," he says, "do you rub yourselves against that stone at your Ka'ba, and love that stone to the point of embracing it?" Not content with suggesting that Muslims' veneration of the Black Stone at Mecca is idolatrous, John goes on to associate it with classical paganism: "It is said that this stone is the head of Aphrodite, before which they prostrate themselves.... And to this day, the traces of the carving appear to those who stare at it intently."²⁶ By claiming that the Black Stone is Aphrodite's head, John suggests that the spiritual centre of Islam is contaminated in two ways: it is both an expression of idolatry and a focus of worship polluted by the presence of feminine sexuality.

The examples above illustrate the ubiquity of the claim that Muslims are idolaters: they range from the eighth to the fifteenth century, and include writings not only by people whom one might assume were truly ignorant of Islam, whose knowledge of Muslims was at best second- or third-hand, but by people living in close proximity to the Muslim world, removed from the Hegira only by a few generations. In the case of descriptions of Islam produced in the west, it is easy for the modern reader to laugh at the apparent ignorance of the medieval writer and his audience, and to suppose that Muslim idolatry is nothing more than a playful fantasy. Yet several medieval texts written for a wide audience give a more realistic account of Islam and make it clear that idolatry plays no part in Muslims' worship: these include James of Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, Higden's *Polychronicon* (also available in the Middle English translation by Trevisa), and even Langland's *Piers*

²⁵ Kathleen Corrigan, *Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters* (Cambridge, 1992), 35-37, 91-94.

²⁶ *De haeresibus* chap. 100, para. 5, pp. 218-21 in Jean Damascène. *Écrits sur l'Islam*, ed. and trans. Raymond Le Coz (Paris, 1992). English translation is based on Le Coz's French translation with emendations to render the text more literal. See also Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden, 1972).

Plowman.²⁷ The ready availability of such texts makes it hard to deny that the popular depiction of Muslims as idolaters was not the product of ignorance, but was instead deliberately constructed.

It is striking that John of Damascus, a man who knew a good deal about Islamic theology, who spoke Arabic and worked at the court of the Damascene caliph, similarly associates Islam with idolatry. He does so in part to protect his fellow Christians from the charge of idolatry in their use of images in worship, turning the accuser's charge back against him as Corrigan suggests. In part, however, John levels that charge in order to understand what it is that lies at the centre of Muslim worship. Just as medieval Christians used their own experience of religious ritual to imagine what Muslim ritual might be like, so too perhaps John of Damascus brought his own experience of the veneration of images to his depiction of Islam. This may help to explain why it is John specifies that it is necessary to "stare ... intently" at the Black Stone in order to make out the form of Aphrodite. The intent gaze actively projects an image of what the Christian viewer longs to see at the centre of Islam.

In the *Chanson de Roland*, the final act of Charlemagne in the newly Christian city of Saragossa is to convert the population by force and smash the idols in the synagogues and mosques (3662). This act both exterminates non-Christian worship in Saragossa and guarantees that no evidence of idolatry will survive. In other words, it is not necessary to produce an idol in order to prove that Muslims are idolaters; there is no evidence because the idols were destroyed. It is easy to imagine Christian knights entering the mosques of a conquered city and finding only the empty *miḥrāb* or prayer niche.²⁸ The *miḥrāb* looks like a niche for the display of an image, but it is always empty since its purpose is

²⁷ On the popularity of the *Legenda aurea*, see Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, ed., *Legenda Aurea: Sept siècles de diffusion: Actes du colloque international ... à l'Université du Québec à Montréal, 11-12 mai 1983* (Montréal and Paris, 1986), and Konrad Kunze, "Jacobus a (de) Voragine," *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexicon* (Berlin, 1983), vol. 4, col. 454. Higden's *Polychronicon* also circulated in the Middle English translation by Trevisa; see *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis together with the translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby (London, 1876).

²⁸ "Within a century of the Revelation, the main components which make up a mosque ... [including the *miḥrāb*] had all become generally accepted....No fixed forms were prescribed for any of these components, although the *miḥrāb* was a niche (243)." Oleg Grabar, "The Mosque in Islamic Society Today," *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*, ed. Martin Frishman and Hasanuddin Khan (London, 1994), 242-45. On the recessed *miḥrāb* in the oldest Near Eastern mosques, see Do» an Kuban, "The Central Arab Lands," *The Mosque 77-99*, esp. 89-91.

simply to point out the direction of Mecca.²⁹ The Christians may have seen the empty space, and imagined what had been there. This was certainly the experience of certain crusaders to the Holy Land who reported finding mosques in Jerusalem resplendent with idols.³⁰ The empty space that Christians see at the centre of Islam becomes for them a richly elaborated fantasy of luxuriousness, gold, and images that speak in a language they cannot understand.

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²⁹ It is fascinating to note that, even today, scholars are divided with regard to the purpose of the *mihrāb*: a recent colloquium on the history and function of the *mihrāb* concluded with a rather impassioned debate in which several Muslim panelists (Rachid Bourouiba, Abdelaziz Daoulati, and Abdel Majid Wafi) maintained that "la niche indique toujours l'orientation" (177), while Alexandre Papadopoulo, the organizer of the colloquium, stoutly maintained that the *mihrāb* instead represents "une 'absence' du Prophète qui suggère sa présence" (179). *Le Mihrab dans l'architecture et la religion musulmanes. Actes du colloque international tenu à Paris en mai 1980 publiés et pourvus d'une étude d'introduction générale*, ed. Alexandre Papadopoulo (Leiden and New York, 1988).

³⁰ The *Gesta Tancredi*, written after 1131 by Raoul de Caen, describes the Christian Crusaders' discovery of a monumental statue of Muhammad on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (the site of the al-Aqsa mosque). See Xenia Muratova, "Western Chronicles of the First Crusade as Sources for the History of Art in the Holy Land," *Crusader Art in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Jaroslav Folda (Oxford, 1982), 47-69. Fulcher of Chartres states that the image of Muhammad is in fact located in the *Templum Domini* (the site of the Dome of the Rock), as does a fourteenth-century pilgrims' guide to the Holy Land. See H. Omont, "Un guide du pèlerin en Terre Sainte au XIV^e siècle," *Mélanges offerts à M. Gustav Schlumberger* (Paris, 1924).