

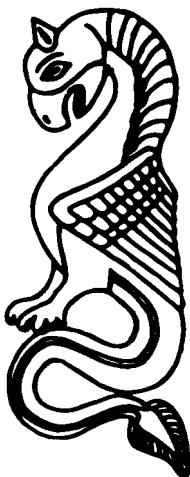
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## THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'SARACEN.'

Scholars have long been puzzled by the name *Saracen*, which has been given to a tribe of Arabs, or used as synonymous with *Arab*, since the end of the classical period in Greek (*Sarakēnoi*), and in Latin (*Saraceni*) whence it spread to all the European languages. The surprising thing is that although the word is in general use in Europe, it is unknown to the Arabs.

The etymology first suggested is from Arabic *sharki* 'eastern.' This suggestion was made by Relandus, and has often been repeated, as by Pocock (1715), Skeat *Etymological Dictionary*; Dozy and Engelmann *Glossaire des Mots Espagnols et Portugais dérivés de l'Arabe* 241-243, Devic *Dictionnaire étymologique des mots français d'origine orientale* 72, Lammens *Remarques sur les mots français dérivés de l'arabe* 57-58, Eguilaz *Glosario etimológico de las palabras españolas de origen oriental* 348, Meyer-Lübke *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* 7595, Glaser *Skizze* ii, 230, Lokotsch *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der europäischen Wörter orientalischen Ursprungs* 1856, and most of the modern European dictionaries, of which only the Oxford *New English Dictionary* definitely rejects this etymology. Against it can be pointed out that Arabic *sharki* or its plural form *sharkīn* would not phonetically give the Greek *Sarakēnoi*; also that the Arabs would not refer to themselves as eastern people; also that the name was in use before any Arabs had moved to the west; also that neither they nor the Hebrews (who might conceivably refer to the Arabs as 'the eastern people') apply the name *sharkīn* to people living to the east.

A second etymology suggested is from Arabic *sahara* 'desert,' the form *saharīn* being put forward as meaning 'desert people'; but again this would not give phonetically the Greek *Sarakēnoi*; nor is the word so used in Arabic.

A third and more malicious guess is that the word is from Arabic *saraq* 'to steal,' the *saraqīn* being 'thieves.' It is

certain that the Arabs would not call themselves thieves, or apply the word (even as a sobriquet) to one of their tribes; and it cannot be shown that the Greeks knew sufficient Arabic to call the Arabs by so abusive a name, even had they wished to. Scaliger, Hottinger and Valesius supported this etymology. Pocock rejected it, 'because they were public thieves, not private,' in favour of the first suggestion examined above.

A fourth suggestion, made by Fuller, is that the word is from Syriac *sarak* meaning empty and barren, since Arabia may be so described. The form *sarakīn* might then mean 'the people of the wilderness.' But Hottinger was quick to point out that the Arabs would hardly give themselves, or take from the Syrians, a Syriac name; and the suggestion has not been repeated.

A fifth attempt was made by Winckler in *Altorient. Forschungen* ii Ser. i 74-76, who thought he had found the word *sharraku* to mean 'desert-dwellers' in Sargon's Annals, and proposed this as an etymon. He has not been followed by any scholars of note.

Sprenger in *Die alte Geogr. Arabiens* 328 suggested Arabic *sharik* 'partner' as the root, a suggestion which is rejected by Mordtmann and most recent writers on the subject. It would be necessary to derive our word from the plural form *shurraka*—which is phonetically impossible.

A seventh guess, made by St. Jerome in his commentary on Ezekiel and by Sozomenos (*Hist. Eccles.* vi Ch. 38), and still seriously considered by the *New English Dictionary*, is that the word is derived from Sarah, the wife of Abraham. It is said that they took this name (*Sarahīn*!) to hide the fact that being Ishmaelites they were descended from her servant Hagar. But against this it is pointed out that the Arabs never regarded themselves as descendants of Sarah: on the contrary they are proud of their descent from both Ishmael and Hagar. This suggestion was scouted as ridiculous by Scaliger, Fuller, Hottinger, Pocock and Stubbe; but apparently has not yet been laughed out of court.

The only etymology which is worthy of further consideration is that from the place-name Saraca or Saraka, the *Sarakīn* being the inhabitants of Saraka, or the tribe camping about that place or district. It must be admitted at the outset that there is in Arabic (as far as is known at present) no reference either to the *Sarakīn* or to Saraka. A further difficulty here is to identify the place, which has ceased to have that name, and the tribe, which has either disappeared or changed its name.

The best-informed article on the subject of Saraka is in Pauly-Wissowa *Real-Encyclopädie* (1920), by Moritz. The article by Mordtmann in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* s.v. Saracen, which takes into account the work of Moritz, is also most valuable.

The first reference to a town in Arabia called Saraka is by Ptolemy (VI, 7, 41) in the second century after Christ. He names it between Maifa and Sapphara, thus placing it roughly north-east of Aden. This town has been identified by Glaser in *Skizze* 238 with the modern Zebīd. We must accept the authority of Ptolemy on the early geography of Arabia, since the study of geography by the Arabs did not begin until the reign of the Caliph Al Ma'mun (813-833); and then as the translation and study of the writings of Ptolemy. It is valuable to note that the Arabs accepted Ptolemy as the authority on the subject, as they would not have done had he been misinformed on the geography of Arabia. Unfortunately we possess no Arabic translation of Ptolemy made at that time; and in the adaptation made about 830 by Al Khwarizmi Saraka is not mentioned.

But this can hardly be the town we are looking for: to explain the Greek references to the *Sarakēnoi* (many of which are collated by Pape in his *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen*) we must look for the tribe in the north of Arabia, or in the Sinai Peninsula. And there indeed we find them. Stephanus Byzantinus says that Saraka was a province in Arabia, beyond the Nabateans, the inhabitants of which (he says in so many words) were the *Sarakēnoi*. This Saraka is identical

with *Sarakēnē* (Ptolemy V, 17, 3), a province in Arabia Petrea 'which lies west of the mountains of Judea towards Egypt.' In a further reference to the Saracens Stephanus says that they lived north of the Taïy, and quotes the Arabian historians Ulpianus and Uranios as his authorities. They lived, then, on the Sinai Peninsula towards the Egyptian frontier, near the Nabateans. It is interesting to learn that Moritz in *Der Sinaikult in heidnischer Zeit* in the *Abh. G. W. Gött.*, New Series, XVI/ii, 9 seq. has identified them with the modern Bedouin tribe of *Sawārke*. This identification is not yet generally accepted. Dr. E. Littmann writes 'I thought that the name Saracen for all Arabs was a generalization of the name *Sawārika*; this tribe, now called *Swārke*, lives on Sinai Peninsula. But I am now not quite sure of this. There may have been another tribe with the same or a similar name in Syria.' Whether or not the *Sarakēnoi* were the *Sawārke* does not affect our argument; to the best of our knowledge there was a Bedouin Arab tribe called *Sarakīn* on Sinai Peninsula during the first three hundred years of the Christian era.

The Alexandrian Greeks would be more familiar, and indeed were more familiar, with the name of this tribe than with the name of any other tribe, camping as it did just over their frontier. From the references to the Saracens by the Alexandrian Greeks (one of which is in the first century), and from the references in Latin, we gather that the small tribe of the Saracens rose to importance during the third century, and led other tribes in disturbances on the Roman frontier. In the early ecclesiastical histories the Arabs were referred to by the biblical term Ishmaelites. Later they were called Hagarenes or Agarenes (i.e. after Hagar instead of after Ishmael). Later, by both Eusebius and St. Jerome in the fourth century, they were called Saracens, that tribe being taken as typical. From the fourth century onwards all Arabs were called Saracens by Greek and Latin writers. For several particular references see the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* s.v. Saracen.

It was an easy transition, after the foundation of Islam, to

apply the name to all Moslem subjects of the Caliph; and even to go on calling all Moslems Saracens after the fall of the Caliphate of Baghdad, the name being spread by the Byzantines to all Crusaders, and by them spread over the whole of Europe. Since the time of the Crusades, when the Christians applied the name to all their enemies in the East, as well as to the Arabs in Sicily and the Moors in Spain, it has survived chiefly in histories and romances, though we still talk of Saracenic as synonymous with Islamic art and architecture.

In pressing the claims of this etymology my first contention is that very often the name of a tribe is used ignorantly for the whole nation, as for example *Allemand* (i.e. the Allemanni) in French, *Sassenach* (i.e. Saxons) in Scotland. The *Persians* are so called from one tribe of Iranians. Thus later or less accurately informed Greeks called all Arabs Saracens, since the Saracens were the typical tribe, in much the same way as all Europeans in Egypt were called Franks (i.e. Frenchmen) from the time of the Crusades up to a hundred years ago (see Lane *Modern Egyptians* s.v. Franks). The Greeks themselves are so called after the *Graeci*, a single tribe. My second contention is that, whether or not the Saracens were the modern Swärke, they certainly were a tribe of Bedouin Arabs camping near the Egyptian frontier, known to the Alexandrian Greeks before the time of Ptolemy, camping in a district which at that time was called Saraka or Sarakēnē. My third contention is that the names of peoples are usually taken from proper nouns (usually from place-names) and not from common nouns or epithets. This is so in the Semitic as well as in the Indo-European languages. This is an additional reason for rejecting the first six suggestions quoted above, and for suspecting the seventh.

In conclusion, may I refer to Ibn Battúta (the XIVth century Moroccan traveller, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, pp. 157 and 163—London, 1929) who records that the Byzantine Emperor (Andronicus III) referred to him as "Saracen (meaning Muslim)"?

WALT: TAYLOR.