

# Collapsing Muslim and North African Identities in Christian Chronicles from Medieval Iberia



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## Abstract

There is a fair amount of scholarship and analysis devoted to the religious implications and associations of words like “Saracen,” and “Ishmaelite,” that Christians in medieval Iberia used to describe their Muslim neighbors both in the peninsula and across the Strait of Gibraltar. These labels worked to highlight what was perceived as descent from an inferior branch of scriptural figures, and to cast Muslims as deceptively claiming a more prestigious heritage for themselves. Other terms like “Moor” and “barbarian,” however, drew instead on a long history of Greco-Latin and Arabic usage that, in Christian texts, tended to associate Muslims with a specific geographic origin, North Africa, and ethnocultural background, Berber. That Christian chroniclers often applied these terms to Muslims in Iberia, as well as North Africa, thus effectively collapsed their religious and ethnocultural identities, erasing specificity and instituting a kind of religious racialization. This paper will trace the usage of such terms in Christian Iberian chronicles from the eighth through the thirteenth centuries, considering times when they worked to distinguish between Iberian and North African Muslims as well as times when they chose to elide geographical and ethnocultural specificity. I argue that this was often done for colonial purposes, as a way of justifying a rhetorical (and at times more literal) expulsion of Muslims from Iberia and advocating for their “return” to North Africa.

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