Thomas Sizgorich

THE DANCING MARTYR: VIOLENCE, IDENTITY, AND THE ABBASID POSTCOLONIAL

Editor's Introduction by Michael E. Pregill

The untimely death of Tom Sizgorich in January 2011 deprived not just one but several intellectual communities of a talented, eloquent, and uniquely insightful voice. Tom's work intrigued and spoke to scholars in a number of fields. Well before the publication of his monograph, Tom's seminal articles caught the attention of scholars working on early Christianity, Late Antiquity, early and classical Islam, and, more diffusely, the complex relationships between religion and violence—both literal and discursive—that feature prominently in much of his research and that may be considered the characteristic theme of all of his studies. The function of boundaries in and between communities—their elaboration and maintenance, as well as their transgression—is another overarching theme in Tom's work, entirely fitting for a scholar whose concerns and proficiencies straddled and blurred the lines between disciplines and whose work brought different constituencies into contact and conversation.

Tom's book, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, is an incipient classic; just a few years after its publication, its wide impact is already discernible.[1] The rise in religious intolerance and intercommunal violence in the late Roman Empire, which eventually evolved into the distinctive conjunction of militant piety and imperial statecraft in early Islam, is one of the most significant overarching currents of the late ancient period. However, despite the attention Peter Brown paid to this phenomenon in his classic *The World of Late Antiquity*, as well as later treat-

[1] Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

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ments such as Garth Fowden's *From Empire to Commonwealth*, this subject remained largely unexplored in a way that did justice to both the late Roman and the early Islamic material until Tom took it up. The publication of his article "Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 2009 served to bring his approach to the attention of a broader audience, as well as making the deeper social and political implications of his work, largely unstated in his monograph, more transparent: "if, as some now suggest, the institution of jihad underscores within Islam some penchant for fanaticism or violence undertaken in God's name, so too is jihad legible as a trace of the penchant for violence individual Christians and whole Christian communities have manifested since long before the birth of Muhammad."[2]

The article presented here, which Tom was working on before his death, represents a new direction in his research. While his monograph examines particular continuities between late Roman and early Arab Muslim cultures, here Tom turns his attention to the relations—real or imagined—between Muslim elites and Christian subalterns in the early Islamic period. It must be read in tandem with another publication that would turn out to be one of his last, his contribution to the 2009 Festschrift for Stephen Humphreys, " 'His Girdle Wrapped about His Waist/It Is as Though It Is Made from My Heart': The Christian Exotic in Medieval Muslim Imperial Literature."[3] In that article, Tom explores the role of the objectified and idealized Christian subaltern in Muslim self-fashioning in the early Islamic empire, juxtaposing two very different topoi in Arabic literature of the Abbasid period: the Christian ascetic as forerunner to and analogue for the ideal Muslim, and Christian monasteries as idealized havens of seduction and delight for elite Muslim men. The common thread that draws them together is the "enticing alterity" of the subjugated and domesticated Christian subaltern.

"The Christian Exotic" is the critical link between Tom's older research and his new project, a second monograph he provisionally entitled *Where the Dark Wine Flows: Memory, Desire, and Dominion in Islamic Late Antiquity*. The role of ascetics in late antique culture, especially the continuities between the askesis of the militant monks of the late Roman Empire and their later Muslim analogues—both in the pursuit of *jihād fī sabīl Allāh*, or "striving in the path of God," among the Prophet's followers and in the distinctive place of renunciants or *zuhhād* in the social and religious landscape of formative Islam—is a recurring theme in *Violence and Belief*. "The Christian Exotic" returns to this topic, emphasizing the importance of the Muslim portrayal of Christian ascetics as a site not only for expressing affinity with and sympathy for Christian culture but also for locating Islam as the manifest successor to the legacy of these symbolic forebears, thus serving as a mechanism of colonial appropriation.[4]

[2] Thomas Sizgorich, "Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77 (2009): 1–27, 20.

[3] Thomas Sizgorich, " 'His Girdle Wrapped about His Waist/It Is as Though It Is Made from My Heart': The Christian Exotic in Medieval Muslim Imperial Literature" (hereafter referred to as "The Christian Exotic"), in *Historical Dimensions of Islam, Pre-modern and Modern Periods: Essays in Honor of R. Stephen Humphreys*, ed. James E. Lindsay and Jon Arjamani (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 2009), 17–43.

[4] Ibid., 27–31.

The monk becomes a metonym for all Christian subalterns, although an occasionally slippery and elusive one.[5]

"The Christian Exotic" revisits other aspects of the theme of imperial dominion Tom explored in various ways in *Violence and Belief*, although here he takes up the problematics of empire in antiquity from a new perspective, explicitly invoking the work of Edward Said:

> The study of the early Islamic caliphate . . . holds fantastic potential for applications of the various theoretical insights articulated in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, primary among these the observation that cultural forms produced in an imperialist or colonialist context, whether in the metropole or in the territories subject to imperial domination, are most usefully analyzed as artifacts of the imperial political and social circumstances under which they were produced. For historians, like myself, whose work considers the social, political and cultural lives of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities of the Mediterranean and Middle East in the decades and centuries before and after the *futūḥ* [Arab conquests] period, attention to the imperial contexts in which members of those communities lived, thought, and wrote allows for new and more insightful analyses of the texts and institutions produced within those communities.[6]

At the beginning of this article, Tom criticizes the reception of Said's work in recent years, in that it has become the basis for "moralizing attacks on the vocation, intentions and personal characters of generations of Arabists, Islam scholars and students of Middle Eastern cultures, politics and histories." The invocation of Said's *Orientalism* as inspiring and justifying such attacks—indeed, for a blanket condemnation of a monolithic and conspiratorial "West"—is particularly unfortunate because the result has actually been an inhibition of constructive conversation; "crucial opportunities occasioned by the postcolonial critique have [thereby] been lost."[7]

Tom then proceeds to describe the genre of *diyārāt*, remembrances of fond dalliances in monasteries, as a form of romantic travel literature that facilitated elite self-fashioning in the high Abbasid period—"a specifically imperial privilege, a function of the ability of Muslim men to enter such luridly alien environments and partake as they wished of forbidden pleasures in an environment that could not reject them, and among persons who could not say no."[8] If we substitute "European" for "Muslim" in the foregoing lines, these words could practically have been written by Said himself; travel (and specifically what we would now call sex tourism) as a discourse of self-fashioning of European elites is of course readily recognizable as a favorite theme of Said's in *Orientalism*. Tom's daring maneuver here is to brilliantly reverse the Saidian lens, for it is the role of Muslim men as imperial masters and not colonial subjects that he investigates here. Although this point is only implicit in "The Chris-

[5] Ibid., 34–36.
[6] Ibid., 18.
[7] Ibid., 17–18.
[8] Ibid., 23.

tian Exotic," I believe Tom intended this new project to challenge, if not subvert, the parameters of the Saidian critique as it has generally been understood and practiced—at least in contemporary American academia—and thus restore some of that critique's original potential for interrogation of historical (and contemporary) power structures. When Said's name and ideas are invoked as a blunt instrument for promoting specious claims and divisive agendas, this potential is squandered.

The *diyārāt* or monasteries literature is examined in only a few pages of "The Christian Exotic," but Tom explores this subject in a much more vigorous and nuanced way in the current article. The distinctive move that Tom makes here, which well justifies our bringing this final article to light, is his juxtaposition of the *diyārāt* literature with contemporary Arab Christian martyrological accounts, which he provocatively reads here as a literature of resistance. This is another link with Tom's earlier work, although the insights into early Christian martyr accounts he developed previously are now brought to bear in analysis of Christian literature of the early Islamic period, a rich corpus that is only now beginning to receive wider critical attention despite the seminal work of Griffith and others on this material going back decades.

In editing the conference paper that is the basis of this article, I have attempted to intervene only minimally in the language and structure of the piece as Tom originally conceived it, preserving the author's characteristically complex, dramatic, and vivid prose as much as possible. Only occasionally has it proved necessary to reorganize or relocate entire sentences or paragraphs in the body of the text. In a couple of instances I have added paragraphs in order to make use of material derived from "The Christian Exotic" or other materials at my disposal.

The original text was supplied with only a handful of skeletal hints about sources and references, and so the voice in the notes is entirely mine. I have often been able to draw apposite references from Tom's other works, particularly "The Christian Exotic," which I have also used to flesh out some of the quotations from primary sources from the *diyārāt* literature cited here. In other instances it has been necessary for me to go farther afield to supply necessary cross-references in the pertinent literature.

After this revision of Tom's article was sent to the publisher for review, it came to our attention that a third posthumously published piece by him on similar themes had appeared in print: "Monks and Their Daughters."[9] Remarkably, although that piece treats subject matter that is very similar to that surveyed here and in "The Christian Exotic," there is actually almost no overlap between the current article and "Monks and Their Daughters," where Tom adduces an almost completely different set of primary sources to pursue points complementary, but by no means identical, to those explored here. We thus urge readers interested in Tom's work to compare the current piece and "Monks and Their Daughters." Viewed together, they indicate the rich and provocative work Tom planned to do in *Where the Dark Wine Flows* and perhaps may point the way forward for future research building on the significant legacy Tom bequeathed to us in these short pieces.

[9] Thomas Sizgorich, "Monks and Their Daughters: Monasteries as Muslim-Christian Boundaries," in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Space*, ed. Margaret Cormack, AAR Religion, Culture, and History Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 193–216.

When I first met Tom in 2008, I was immediately impressed by his erudition, his wide-ranging interests, his unique perspective on all manner of topics, and his kindness and humility. We spoke excitedly about the strange coincidences between certain Greek and Arabic accounts of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus—the *Ahl al-kahf* of the Quran—and necromantic traditions about talking heads that foretell the future in medieval Jewish and Islamic sources. We immediately committed to pursuing an article on this together, but in true academic fashion, we procrastinated, thinking we had all the time in the world. I thank Kim Stratton, the editor of this issue, for allowing me the great honor of having this opportunity to collaborate posthumously with Tom here, at least in this small way.

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INTRODUCTION

It is always exciting to find evidence of conversation and exchange between confessional communities of the late ancient and early Islamic Mediterranean and Middle East. This is particularly so when such exchanges are reflected not in intercommunal debate or polemic but rather in texts composed and consumed within Muslim and non-Muslim communities that indirectly reveal their shared concerns, conceits, anxieties, and preoccupations. These sorts of discoveries are uncommon, however, and require reading the texts produced among the Muslim and non-Muslim literary communities of the late ancient and early medieval Muslim world in tandem with and, when possible, in dialogue with one another.

This is not an easy mode of reading to pull off, however, because of the apathy the Muslim and Christian communities generally inspired in each other. By the ninth century of the Common Era, with the flourishing of a new golden age of literary production among both Muslims and Christians, those communities, conjoined and enmeshed with one another in Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Iberia, and other parts of the *Dār al-Islām*, produced texts that were, with occasional exceptions, markedly inward-looking. This is not to suggest that the hagiographers or chroniclers of the Christian communities of these regions took no notice of the Muslims and their status as rulers of the formerly Roman and Persian lands now subsumed within a specifically Muslim empire, nor is it to suggest that the Muslims who ran that empire could completely ignore their non-Muslim subjects.[10] Rather, it is to say that the local communities

[10] These non-Muslim subjects were universally termed *dhimmī*s or *Ahl al-dhimma*, the "People of the Pact," after the treaty of protection under which non-Muslims were granted toleration and autonomy in governing most communal affairs under Islamic rule. For balanced introductions to the contentious topic of the *dhimmī* experience in early Islam and Muslim perceptions and portrayals of non-Muslims, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 255–83, and *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

now producing texts describing the past or the contemporary world most often seem to have written in a historical moment in which religious others had in many ways become merely part of the backdrop to the stories they felt compelled to tell, and often rather muted figures within that backdrop at that.

It may seem strange to modern readers that the oldest texts by Muslims available to us with which to reconstruct the early history of the Islamic world (i.e., texts from the late eighth and ninth centuries) should so often fail to remark on the non-Muslim communities of the empire. However, modern readers must bear in mind that while these sources represent our earliest window into the early *Dār al-Islām*, they were produced within a world in which Muslim and non-Muslim communities were no longer strangers to one another and in which the "shock of the new" that comes with first contact would have long since melted away.[11] Similarly, the initial confusion regarding Islam that one senses in our earliest non-Muslim accounts of Muhammad and Islam has, by the eighth and ninth centuries, given way to depictions of Islam and Muslims that communicate familiarity, understanding, and, frequently, even comfort.[12]

In other words, although we might like to find some traces or remnants of first-contact fascination in such texts, we should not be surprised to find instead a frankly complacent indifference born of a century and more of relatively pacific, if not dull, coexistence. This is true even in those texts in which Muslims and non-Muslims debated the relative merits of their respective systems of belief. Differences of creed remained, of course, but even the discussion of difference tended to be conducted in a manner sparing of polemic and on the basis of exceedingly intimate mutual knowledge concerning scripture, mythos, and organizing communal narratives.[13]

[11] That is to say that by the time of the shift from oral tradition to literary culture in early Arab Islamic society, which commenced no earlier than the late eighth century CE, Muslims and non-Muslims had already acclimated to each other, more than a century having passed since the initial Arab conquests. On the early development of Islamic historiography, see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1998); and Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18–38; on the literary turn in general, see Gregor Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

[12] On the perception and portrayal of Muslims by their non-Muslim subjects, see, e.g., Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1997); Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 23–44; and Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas, eds., *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

[13] The culture of the learned disputation (*munāẓara*) provided one of the primary arenas in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Islamic lands exchanged ideas. Apologetic and polemical concerns played a particularly significant role in shaping systematic theological reflection in all three communities, termed *kalām* ("discourse") after the disputational context that gave rise to it. Aside from formal or semiformal disputation at royal courts and the like, less formal ex-

However, when we read closely and with the benefit of the critical insights of a generation or more of postcolonial critique and analysis, the literature of both the Muslims and the Christians of the Abbasid world confesses—however unintentionally—an abiding set of anxieties and fascinations with the dynamics of imperial power, and in particular with problems of intimacy, mimicry, desire, and seduction. This shared array of concerns is often difficult to detect because it is expressed in literary idioms specific to the Muslim and Christian communities that articulated them. Nevertheless, when we listen closely to the tone and tenor of the voices that these texts have preserved, and note the themes and plots in accordance with which their texts were articulated, it becomes clear that for Muslim and Christian literary communities alike, the problematics of imperial power and the responses it invited and incited constituted an acute and enduring dilemma. What is more, as recorded in both Christian and Muslim texts of the early Abbasid period, these were not autonomous meditations on the problem of imperial power; rather, they were produced by conjoined, dialogical, and relational processes of reflection and debate.

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on two genres of Abbasid writing, one Muslim, the other Christian. The subgenre of early Abbasid Muslim writings I will examine is known as the *diyārāt*, or "monasteries," literature.[14] It is a subgenre of the Abbasid-era Arabic literature known as *adab*, most often translated in Western scholarship as "belles lettres."[15] Only one relatively complete example of *diyārāt* literature survives, although one other has been reconstructed from material preserved in other texts. We know of the popularity of this genre in part because of references to *diyārāt* works

changes took place in the salons organized by circles of learned men from various communities; as in public disputation, these more informal sessions (*majlis*/*majālis*, a "sitting together" as opposed to the Classical symposium or "drinking together" on which it was modeled) were generally governed by unspoken rules of courteous engagement and conduct. See the articles in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Mark R. Cohen, Sasson Somekh, and Sidney H. Griffith (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999).

[14] On this literature, see Hilary Kilpatrick, "Representations of Social Intercourse between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Some Medieval Adab Works," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 213–24, and "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The Diyarat Books," in *Christians at the Heart of Muslim Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in ʿAbbasid Iraq*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 19–37; and Gerard Troupeau, "Les Couvents chrétiens dans la littérature arabe," in *Etudes sur le christianisme arabe au Moyen Age* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), chap. 20, all cited in Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 38 n. 3. According to the *Fihrist* of the tenth-century bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm, books of traditions on the *diyārāt* were compiled by some of the earliest Muslim historians, including Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn al-Kalbī (see Kilpatrick, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes," 19–20).

[15] See Julia Ashtiany, T. M. Johnstone, J. D. Latham, R. B. Serjeant, and G. Rex Smith, eds., *ʿAbbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 5.

within other extant texts and in part because of the survival of material from these now-lost texts incorporated within other still-extant texts from different genres. The two works on which this essay will rely are al-Shābushtī's *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, a large and diverse work of the tenth century that preserves material from earlier examples of the genre, and a *diyārāt* work attributed to the major tenth-century author Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, author of the famous *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, reconstituted by Jalil al-Attyeh from later sources that are still extant.[16]

Multiple discourses converge in these works, including geographical writing, *faḍā'il* and *ʿajā'ib* traditions cataloguing and extolling the "virtues" and "wonders" of certain cities or regions, historiography, and biographical or *ṭabaqāt* traditions. They produce narratives of travel that are particularly remarkable for their capacity to communicate a sense of radical dislocation even as they describe elite Muslim men exploring geographical expanses that were in fact located at the very center of Abbasid imperial power. As we encounter the monasteries in these texts, each emerges as a kind of portal through which elite Muslim men pursued and discovered fulfillment of imperial fantasy and, more specifically, sought the resolution of certain irresolvable tensions and discontents inherent to the early Muslim imperial project. The desire that motivates this pursuit pretends, in these texts, to resolve itself via an imperially inflected mutual jouissance shared between dominant but gentle and enlightened Muslim men and submissive but admiring Christian women, boys, and men.

Among Christian communities, however, reciprocal concerns about the problematics of empire manifest themselves in the well-worn genre of the martyr narrative. In many ways this is unsurprising, despite the stark contrast with the attitude and ethos of the *diyārāt* literature. The governing themes and plots of early Christian and late ancient martyrologies bear the indelible imprint of older Roman imperial conceits concerning the function of juridical ritual and the truth-making capacity of that ritual and its attendant vocabulary of rationalized violence.[17] Indeed, the dramatic tensions that animate martyr narratives derive in part from the unmasking of the ultimate impo-

[16] In contrast to the well-known al-Iṣbahānī, al-Shābushtī remains a relatively obscure figure; see C. E. Bosworth, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (1995), s.v. "Al-Shābushtī"; and Shams al-Dīn Abū'l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn Khallikān, *Ibn Khallikān's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. William Mac Guckin de Slane, 4 vols. (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1843–71), 2:262–63. On al-Iṣbahānī's *diyārāt* work, see Kilpatrick, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes," 19 n. 3.

[17] For a succinct examination of the evolution of conceptions of martyrdom in the context of distinctive Roman linkages between juridical procedure, suffering, and truth, see Anthony Harvey, Richard Finn, and Michael Smart, "Christian Martyrdom: History and Interpretation," in *Witnesses to Faith? Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam*, ed. Brian Wicker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 33–48.

tence of the violence that so long served as the guarantor and consort of imperial Roman reason as manifested in juridical ritual. That is, the latent violence coiled within Roman juridical ritual was without the power to compel or coerce if through the exertion of force it actually produced not an object upon whose body was inscribed a text testifying to the might of Roman imperial power but instead a novel and in many ways monstrous subject whose own claim to power resided in his or her capacity to absorb and nullify Rome's most fearsome juridical violence.[18] In this sense, Christian (and, to a lesser extent, Jewish) martyr texts had already presented strategic glosses on the limits of imperial power half a millennium before the advent of Islam. As we will see, however, martyr literature produced under Muslim rule departed in unprecedented ways from martyrologies produced during the previous centuries of Roman dominion.

"A HUMAN GAZELLE STALKING MAN AND JINN": THE *DIYĀRĀT* LITERATURE

We will begin with a sampling of the sort of narratives with which Muslim men of the Abbasid world dreamed the dreams of a dominant imperial class. Central to those dreams were the themes of seduction of desirable Christian men and women by cultured and desired Muslim men and the admiring and longing gaze of the conquered in which bearers of imperial privilege luxuriated and frolicked.

Sometime in the ninth century of the Common Era, an Abbasid prince named Abū ʿAlī b. al-Rashīd was stretched out before a Christian monastery and flogged. The rationale given for the flogging was that Abū ʿAlī had offended against the dignity of the caliph and violated the norms of the Muslim community. The nature of his specific offense is suggested by the following excerpt from al-Shābushtī's *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*:

> Dayr Mudyān [the monastery in which Abū ʿAlī cavorted] was an ancient structure,[19] with water flowing into it and then overflowing, for its flow is blocked and brought to a halt by a floodgate, which then opens into the Euphrates. It is a beautiful monastery, magnificent, surrounded by gardens and buildings. Poems were composed in honor of its beauty and in honor of its wine. . . .
>
> There was one Abū ʿAlī b. al-Rashīd, who was always hanging around this monastery, always drinking in it. And he had singing girls that he would load up and take

[18] The phenomenon of Jewish and Christian martyrdom in antiquity is the subject of an immense scholarly literature. See Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, chap. 2, and sources therein on the fundamental role played by the memory of the martyrs in Christian self-fashioning and boundary maintenance in this period.

[19] There is some debate over both the location and the proper name of this monastery; see Abū Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. George Awwad (Baghdad: Al-Maʿarūf, 1966), 353.

along to the monastery, and he would spend days in it, producing unending music and racket, and he was amazingly shameless![20]

An example had been made of Abū ʿAlī in part because his raucous parties had created a scandal among the Muslim neighbors of the monastery.[21]

However, Abū ʿAlī was hardly alone in his affection for Christian monasteries as locations in which to partake of forbidden pleasures. Indeed, early Abbasid literature contains volumes of stories in which elite Muslim men entered Christian monasteries and found there a long list of exotic delights.[22] One ʿAmr b. ʿAbd al-Malik al-Warrāq described "human gazelles" who stalked and tempted male Muslim visitors to another monastery as they passed cups of wine among them:

> I see that my heart has inclined
> Toward Dayr Mar Yuḥannā
> Toward its fields, the fragrant [or grassy] ones
> Toward its *baraka*, its riches
> Toward a human gazelle
> Stalking man and jinn. . . .
>
> And when dawn shines forth
> We share a jug among us
> And as the cup goes 'round
> We pass among us a song
> And when our entertainers slumber
> We sleep entwined with them.[23]

Evidently these "gazelles"—an ancient description of desirable young men and women common in Arabic poetry—were quite adept at taking their prey, given the entanglement at its denouement. ʿAmr, we are told, was famous for

[20] Ibid., 33–34.

[21] Tom relates this anecdote about Abū ʿAlī b. Rashīd, the son of the famous caliph Harūn al-Rashīd and half brother to his successors al-Amīn, al-Maʾmūn, and al-Muʿtaṣim, at greater length in Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 21–22. There, he connects the episode of the prince's public punishment for his offense, which occurred during the caliphate of al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833–42), to the larger issue of breaches of morality as potentially threatening to communal boundaries. This, in turn, is the central theme of Tom's discussion of the influential jurist Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855) in Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, chap. 8. Ibn Ḥanbal's vision of a Sunnī society guided by divine law advocated strict maintenance of moral standards as essential to preserving communal integrity but simultaneously problematized the role of central authority in executing the divine will through enforcement of the religious law.

[22] For a detailed account of the larger milieu of the Christian communities of Iraq, see Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 343–83.

[23] Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 172. The poetic irony here, of course, is that the gazelle, normally the prey, becomes the hunter in this context.

his passion for "the beardless ones in the monasteries" and for the wine about whose qualities he composed many poems.[24]

The identity of one of these "beardless ones" is made more specific in a passage in Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's reconstituted *Kitāb al-Diyārāt* describing the amorous exploits of another Abbasid aristocrat:

> Bakr b. Khārja was passionately in love with a Christian boy whose name was ʿĪsā b. al-Barāʾ al-ʿIbādī al-Ṣayrafī.[25] Bakr composed a two-piece *qaṣīda* about him, mentioning in it the Christians and their religious prescriptions and their holidays and naming their monasteries and ranking them.
>
> One who heard the poem informed us about it, and recited Bakr's words about ʿĪsā b. al-Barāʾ al-ʿIbādī thusly:
>
> His girdle wrapped about his waist
> It is as though it is made from my heart.
>
> And Bakr further said about ʿĪsā b. al-Barāʾ al-ʿIbādī:
>
> By the Gospels that the monkish old men recite in Dayr al-Jāthlīq
> And by the Mass and by the crosses
> If you do not have pity on my stricken, longing heart, rewarding me,
> I will die from my heart's grief.[26]

Bakr's words emphasize the Christianness of his beloved ʿĪsā (not incidentally, the Arabic version of "Jesus") repeatedly, for example, through reference to the *zunnār*, or "girdle," all Christians living under Muslim rule were obliged to wear to mark them as Christians.[27] Elsewhere we read of another

[24] See Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 20–21. It should be noted that encounters between Muslim elites and Christian subalterns in the monasteries could function as an arena in which the theatrics of privilege and protocol were rehearsed without becoming explicitly sexual, despite the erotically charged environment; see Andras Hamori, "A Sampling of Pleasant Civilities: A 4th/10th Century *qiṣṣa* by al-Babbaghāʾ," *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002): 57–69, for an example that is somewhat different from those explored here.

[25] The *nisba* ʿIbādī marks young ʿĪsā as a member of the Christian community of al-Ḥīra in southern Iraq, the former capital of the Lakhmid tribal confederation and a center for the growth of Arab Christianity in pre-Islamic times. The various Arab tribes that settled there and accepted Christianity, primarily Nestorianism, seem to have been collectively called *ʿibādiyyīn*, "the Faithful"; see the discussion of Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Ḥīra* in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 1 (600–900)*, ed. David Thomas and Barbara Roggema (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 510–14, s.v. "Ibn al-Kalbī." The professional *nisba* Ṣayrafī (moneychanger) is presumably just a family name.

[26] Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Al-Diyārāt li-Abī'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī*, ed. Jalil al-Attyeh (London: Riad El-Rayyes, 1991), 61.

[27] See Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 20. Note that the Muslim Bakr swears by Christian *sancta*. Superficially, this might simply be thought to be an appeal to his beloved's religious sentiments, but we might also interpret this gesture as a kind of code switching punctuating

Muslim man who fell in love with a Christian boy in a monastery, this one a young monk. The man's devotion to the boy was so extreme—and indeed so abject—that it eventually caught the attention of the older monks. Fearing that the Muslim would persuade the young monk to leave the monastery and his faith, the older monks conspired to launch the besotted Muslim from the walls of the monastery itself.[28]

Of course, it was not just beautiful young males that besotted Muslim visitors to the monasteries; young Christian women also attracted the attention of their elite male visitors. Take, for example, the following narrative included in another passage from al-Iṣbahānī:

I went with Abū'l-Fatḥ . . . to Dayr Thaʿālib . . . and there was a young woman there, shining like a *dīnār* as they say, and she was swaying and swinging like a branch of sweet basil in the northerly breeze. And she thrust her hand into the hand of Abū'l-Fatḥ, and she said, "O Master, come and read this poem written on the wall of the martyr shrine."

And we went with her, and God knows we were delighted with her, and with her elegance and the wit of her speech. And when we entered the shrine, she bared an arm like silver and she motioned to a spot, and on it was written:

> She goes out on the day of her holiday
> In the garments of a nun
> Enrapturing all who come and go with her haughtiness.
> To my misfortune I saw her
> On the day we visited Dayr al-Thaʿālib
> Walking among the women
> A swollen-breasted one among the swollen-breasted
> She among them like the moon among the stars.

And we said to her, "By God, you are the one described in these verses!" And we had no doubt that she had written the verses herself. She did not depart from us for the rest of the day . . . and after that there began between her and Abū'l-Fatḥ an affair. Then he set out for Syria, and she was with him when he died, and I do not know what happened to her after that.[29]

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the Muslim's transgression of boundaries: Bakr is "going native" in the affective and linguistic, as well as geographical, space inhabited by the subaltern object of his affections.

[28] There is no citation for this anecdote in Tom's original draft, but luckily it is also discussed by Kilpatrick ("Monasteries through Muslim Eyes," 23): the anecdote is al-Shābushtī's (*Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 185–86), concerning a disgraced bureaucrat named ʿAbbāda in the time of the caliph al-Mutawwakil who seduced a young monk at Dayr al-Shayāṭin (the "monastery of the satans") west of the Tigris near Mosul. Fortune was on ʿAbbāda's side, as it turns out, for he discovered the monks' plot and got away before they could carry it out.

[29] Al-Iṣbahānī, *Al-Diyārāt*, 57–58; cf. Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 19. Dayr Thaʿālib is reported to have been close to Baghdad.

Elsewhere in al-Iṣbahānī's *diyārāt* text, the caliph Mutawakkil (d. 892) meets a dark-eyed Christian beauty in a Syrian monastery. The girl, whose name was Saʿānīn, also happens to be the daughter of one of the monastery's monks. Immediately, Saʿānīn ensnares the caliph with her devastating beauty and her refined manner. When she recites exquisite stanzas of Arabic poetry, the caliph is transfixed; he begs the girl to spend the day with him and his companions, and she agrees. The desire the caliph feels for the monk's daughter is reciprocated, and when she passionately sings one of the songs of her people, the mutual seduction of Muslim caliph and Christian monk's daughter is complete.[30] As we have also seen in the passage cited above in which Abū'l-Fatḥ seduces and is seduced by a nun who "shined like the moon among the stars," refined, consensual, and mutual seduction between Muslim men and their love objects was the abiding theme in Abbasid *diyārāt* literature.[31]

The element of consensuality is absolutely key here, bringing the critical background to these stories sharply into focus, namely, the origins of the Christian subaltern in the brutality of the Arab conquests that established Islamic dominion over much of the eastern Christian world in the seventh century CE, as well as in the continual raiding and slaving that occurred at the frontiers of the Abbasid world throughout the ninth and tenth centuries. The continuing procurement of slaves at the imperial marches—especially at the northern Syrian frontier with Byzantium—furnished Muslim elites with concubines and slave girls who played an essential role in the literal propagation of Islam by bearing children who were predetermined to be Muslim according to the dictates of Islamic law. This role is acknowledged in a particularly candid way in a prophetic hadith: "Seek a child from the *ummahāt al-awlād* [i.e., the *umm walad*s, slave concubines who bore their masters children], and God will make a miracle within their wombs."[32] To

[30] Al-Iṣbahānī, *Al-Diyārāt*, 112–14; cf. Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 23. The story of al-Mutawakkil and Saʿānīn is taken from Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's *Kitāb Adab al-ghurabāʾ*, ed. Ṣalāh al-Dīn Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972), 64–68; see the translation by Crone and Moreh (*The Book of Strangers: Mediaeval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia*, trans. Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh [Princeton, NJ: Weiner, 2000], 58–62 n. 51), where they note that Saʿānīn is likely to be an invented name meant to sound stereotypically Christian, reminiscent as it is of ʿĪd al-Shaʿānīn or Palm Sunday (ibid., 116).

[31] Oddly, Tom never comments on what seems like the most puzzling aspect of the *dayr* as topos in Abbasid literature, namely the brazen flaunting of oaths of chastity—or even basic rules of propriety—by the monastery's inhabitants. Was there particular cachet associated with indulging in dalliances not only with *dhimmī*s but with supposedly chaste religious personnel? Or is this simply a lascivious stereotype—Muslims engaging in fanciful reimagining of the monastery or nunnery as a den of iniquity and vice, similar to the caricature so often exploited by European Protestants in literature of the post-Enlightenment era?

[32] ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Nisāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Turkī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1992), 153–54.

borrow the phrasing of Donna Haraway, through the economy of raiding, coercion, and reproduction, early Islamic society undertook "the construction of the self from the raw material of the other."[33]

In this context of imperial subjugation and ongoing conquest, Muslim elites responded as colonial elites often have: by reimagining a world created and maintained through violence and domination as one in which mutual erotic fascination, and even love of the subaltern for the master, was possible. The fantasies of the *diyārāt* thus serve as a kind of internal apologia for consumption by enlightened Muslim males, who both transcended the realities of their culture's fundamental power dynamics and secured their place as members of the dominator class through such consumption. There were other modes of apologetic popular at this time, of course; for example, some of the literature of this period confronts the allegation by subalterns that Islam was spread by the sword with remarkable frankness. Others reacted more viscerally to the realities of imperial subjugation:

> When the cities of Cyprus were conquered, the people fell upon the captives, dividing them up and separating them. The captives cried out for one another, and [a Muslim man] also began to cry, and then he went away and sat with his head on his knees, wrapped in his garment and clutching his sword. The others said to him, striking him on the shoulder: "You cry on a day like today, on which God has ennobled Islam and its people, and humiliated unbelief and its people?"
>
> He replied, "Woe to you! How hateful do God's creatures seem to Him when they go astray from what He has commanded! Even if it is a powerful community that seems to everyone to possess dominion, if they go astray from what He has commanded, they wind up as you see here."[34]

The theme of *ubi sunt* is a popular one in classical Islamic literature, never too far removed from Quranic ruminations on the topos: "How many gardens and springs have they left behind, how many a field and noble structure, and things in which they delighted; thus have We given them to others to inherit" (Q. 44:25–28). Scripture provided a constant reminder of how quickly human fortunes are reversed for Muslims who would stop to consider how their subjects had once been masters, or their slaves the sons and daughters of free Roman, Syrian, or Persian men.[35]

[33] Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 11.

[34] Abū Isḥāq al-Fazārī, *Kitāb al-Siyār*, ed. Fārūq Ḥamāda (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1987), 142 n. 108.

[35] I have added these paragraphs on the trope of consensuality and the varied Muslim responses to the guilt of the imperial oppressor, largely drawing on Tom's treatment of these themes in Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 24–25 and the sources cited on 39 nn. 17–18. On the treatment of non-Muslim slaves and the intimate connections between conquest, mar-

While the Quran furnished the faithful with reminders of the thin line between freedom and slavery and the rapid reversal of fortune to which all mortals are vulnerable, it also provided vivid glimpses of the sensual rewards promised to the blessed dead in the afterlife. These paradisiac visions no doubt informed Abbasid authors' portrayal of the seductive settings of the monasteries they conjured, romantic tableaus worthy of the most shameless of twentieth-century bodice-rippers. As a rule, *diyārāt* texts describe the interior and environs of the monasteries at the center of their narratives as lush garden spots full of running water, flowing wine, and sumptuous food. In and around the monasteries, delectable fruit hangs temptingly from trees, while the built environment of the monasteries is a study in marble and precious stones, lofty domes, and precious serving vessels.[36]

In one passage of al-Shābushtī's *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, for example, we are shown a monastery called Dayr Mar Jīrjīs (St. George's) in al-Mazrafa on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, about two or three leagues (six to nine miles) from Baghdad.[37] The monastery was a destination spot for the people of Baghdad, and in the evenings they would stroll through it and outside its walls, on the banks of the Tigris. Here there seem to have been stationary boats set in the water, alongside sumptuous gardens and wine shops and "everything else one could require," including "gazelles passing cups [of wine]."[38] The delights of this monastery and its environs were unmatched in any land, we are told, and in its honor were written many poems by men like Abū Jafna al-Qurashī, who we are assured was "one of the wanton ones, one of those addicted to drink, one of those fallen ones in the monasteries and wine shops." In addition to his weakness for good wine and strolls in the setting Iraqi sun on the banks of the Tigris, we learn that Abū Jafna had one further vice: he

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riage, and concubinage, at least from the juridical perspective, in early Islamic society, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 5. On Muslim ambivalence regarding jihad and the claim that Islam was spread by the sword, see Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 369–85. Finally, note that Kilpatrick also makes the connection between Abbasid power, the *diyārāt* literature, and the theme of *ubi sunt* ("Monasteries through Muslim Eyes," 26), noting the frequent association of the monasteries with vanished (and vanquished) kingdoms and dynasties.

[36] There is an ironic circularity here, given that the Quranic depictions of paradise that clearly informed Muslim descriptions of earthly analogues such as the monasteries themselves show strong points of similarity to older portrayals of Heaven and its rewards in Syriac Christian literature, most notably Ephrem the Syrian's *Hymns on Paradise*.

[37] For the location of this city, see Guy Le Strange, "Description of Mesopotamia and Baghdad, Written about the Year 900 by Ibn Serapion: The Arabic Text Edited From a MS. in the British Museum Library with Translation and Notes," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 27 (1895): 1–76, 255–316, 39; and Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Baghdādī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), 5:121.

[38] Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 69–71.

was utterly given over to his passion for "wicked slave boys . . . from whom he never abstained, and of whom he sang."[39]

Abū Jafna may have been a weak and vice-ridden man, but he was not alone in his vices or even in his specific tastes. One of his fellow frequenters of Christian monasteries, a man named Muṣʿab al-Kātib, composed the following verses:

> I am the shameless sodomite (*lūṭī*), unique of my religion
> And I am indeed a desirous one well practiced in rebelliousness
> I am a sodomite, but not a fornicator
> And whoever is a sodomite
> I will be to him a boon companion until Judgment Day
> I profess the faith of the shaykh Yaḥyā b. Aktham.[40]

For Muṣʿab al-Kātib, the primary attraction of the monasteries he frequented seems to have been the young men and slave boys about whom, it is said, all of his poems were composed. As we have already seen, those who inhabited the monasteries were imagined by early Abbasid authors as men and women who were every bit as desirable, as exotic, and ultimately as accessible as the other delights of the monasteries. In one passage from al-Shābushtī's text, for example, a group of bandits on the run from a posse sent out by the caliph holes up in a Christian monastery called Dayr al-ʿAdhārā, or "Monastery of the Virgins." The monastery had been so named because "in it were ascetic, untouched maidens (*jawārin*, sing. *jāriya*) who were its inhabitants and its inmates."[41] During their stay in the monastery, however, the bandits spend the night in seclusion with the delectable and very willing "maidens" of the monastery, much to the amusement of later poets.

In my reading of this literature, this persistent theme emerges in part as an ornate confession of the abiding desire of Arab Muslim elites in the early decades of the Abbasid Caliphate to see themselves reflected within the desiring gaze of their non-Muslim subjects. This desire to be desired, and to see oneself as desired, is by no means unique to the imperial projects of self-

[39] Ibid., 69.

[40] Ibid., 193. Yaḥyā b. Aktham was an extremely distinguished jurist and *qāḍī* of the ninth century, a courtier of the caliph al-Maʾmūn who is perhaps most famous for being the man who declared *mutʿa*, or temporary marriage, to be unlawful and tantamount to fornication, leading to the abandonment of the practice among Sunnīs. Numerous sources on the period discuss the allegations of his weakness for attractive young men; in the account of Ibn Khallikān (*Ibn Khallikān's Biographical Dictionary*, 4:33–51) the *qāḍī* is portrayed as acknowledging his predilections and yet insisting that he never acted on them. This would appear to be the basis of Muṣʿab's claim to be a sodomite without being a fornicator (*alūṭ wa-lā-azṇī*)—i.e., owning up to being a *lūṭī* and proudly admiring the object of one's affections, without actually committing a deed prohibited by religious law.

[41] Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 107.

fashioning taken up by Muslim elites in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries CE. Indeed, critics and scholars of empire and imperialisms have remarked frequently on such discourses in British, Roman, Athenian, and other imperial literatures.[42] As in these other cases, the dalliances of Abbasid aristocrats served not only to defuse and redirect the lingering guilt of the dominator class but also to distinguish elite males as elite vis-à-vis other Muslims to whom strict rules regarding appropriate behavior toward non-Muslims applied. Indulging in seductions across the social and religious boundary was a privilege exercised over the subaltern, but it was also one that was asserted in defiance of the strictures that constrained other Muslim men. Breaking the rules and violating norms conferred prestige and validated elite status.[43]

One final scene from the *diyārāt* genre will further illustrate this point. Sometime during the years 866–69 CE, we are told, the caliph al-Muʿtazz was out hunting with two of his companions when he became separated from the main body of his party.[44] As he wandered the wilderness with his companions, the caliph complained of his thirst. One of his companions, an Abbasid prince, poet, and man of letters named al-Faḍl b. al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʾmūn (d. 882)—the narrator of the anecdote—mentioned that he knew of a very personable Christian monk who lived in a monastery nearby and asked whether he should take the caliph to meet the monk. The caliph liked this idea, and al-Faḍl led the ruler of the Abbasid Empire to the monastery.

When they arrived, parched and hungry, the monk greeted them warmly and gave them cool water. He then invited the Muslims to refresh themselves in the monastery and offered to feed them from the monastery's resources. Touched by this invitation, the Commander of the Faithful accepted. Leading them to their meal, the monk asked al-Faḍl who the two men with him were. "They are young commanders (*min abnāʾ al-jund*)."[45] The monk answered,

[42] On the eroticization or romanticization of the subaltern as a means of negotiating the complexities and ambiguities of imperial hegemony, see Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), who calls attention to the ambivalence embedded in colonial travel writing, which shows a characteristic tendency toward "anti-conquest . . . strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (9). Pratt's particular focus is on European accounts of transracial love as romantic fantasies in which hierarchy is temporarily suspended, surely a fair summation of the underlying dynamic of the *diyārāt* literature as well.

[43] Sizgorich, "The Christian Exotic," 22–23.

[44] Al-Shābushtī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, 163–65. In Islamic historiography, the hunting party is a common topos: a caliph or other high-ranking personage is temporarily dislocated from the lofty world of courtiers and officials and momentarily brought into contact with his subjects. Historians of the Abbasids such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Masʿūdī tend to use this topos as a means of conveying particular insights about the human condition and the realities of life in the Islamic empire or as an occasion for moral reflection or nostalgic contemplation.

[45] Ibid. Literally, "from among the sons of the army," indicating that the youths were cadet members of the military establishment of Samarra, which became the Abbasid capital under

"Nay, rather they are two escapees from among the mates of the *houris* [i.e., the black-eyed virgins of paradise promised to martyrs]!" To this al-Faḍl answered, "But this [the concept of the *houris*] is not of your religion, and has nothing to do with you!" When the monk shot back, "Well, now it *is* of my religion, and it *does* have to do with me!" the caliph laughed.[46] The monk and his fellow Christians then fed their guests sumptuously and with gorgeous serving vessels.

After the meal, the caliph directed al-Faḍl to ask the monk a question: between al-Faḍl and the third member of their group, Yūnus b. Bughā, who would he wish to keep with him, never to be parted? When the monk heard the question, he replied with an ancient Arabic adage: "Both of them, and some dates!" When he heard the monk's reply, the caliph laughed so hard he had to lean against the wall of the monastery. When al-Faḍl insisted that the monk would have to choose one of the two, he replied, "Making a choice about this would be a disaster! God did not make reason [sufficient] to decide between them!"[47]

As the rest of the hunting party arrived, the caliph declared his protection and friendship for the monk and ordered that he be given a large sum of money. The monk swore by God to accept the money only on condition that the caliph should agree to call on the monk, along with whomever the caliph wished, anytime he liked. The caliph agreed and returned on the appointed day and was presented by the monk with "the sons of Christians" who "served [the Muslims] most nobly."[48] This, we are told, made al-Muʿtazz happier than al-Faḍl had ever seen him. The occasion cemented a friendship between the caliph and the monk that lasted for the rest of the caliph's life, founded in intimacies that would surely have placed a Muslim of lesser status in dire jeopardy.

DESIRE AND DANGER IN ABBASID-ERA MARTYR NARRATIVES

As we shift our own gaze from the Muslim to the Christian subject, we might begin by observing that some of the subject peoples of the early medieval *Dār al-Islām* recognized and understood their place within contemporary Muslim processes of imperial self-fashioning, as objects of Muslim desire who

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al-Muʿtaṣim, the father of al-Muʿtazz. Al-Faḍl was an Abbasid prince, grandson of the caliph al-Maʾmūn, while Yūnus b. Bughā was a scion of one of the Turkish military officers who dominated Abbasid affairs at the time. He is possibly the son of the court official Bughā the Younger, who helped al-Muʿtazz secure power after the coup d'état that overthrew his cousin al-Mustaʿīn (r. 862–66). In the story, it is unclear whether the monk actually recognized al-Muʿtazz as the reigning caliph.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

were imagined, or even expected, to reflect this desire back on their imperial overlords. Further, there is ample evidence that suggests that some Christian subalterns responded to this objectification in an ancient hagiographic idiom, the martyr narrative, in order to destabilize or even subvert the discourse of imperial desire that animated the sorts of texts we have sampled here.[49]

Another text from the early Abbasid era, this one Christian rather than Muslim, openly acknowledges that the arena of elite Muslim desire was one of not only acute ambivalence but also moral and physical danger for the Christian subaltern. In the *Martyrdom of Elias*, we are told of yet another young Christian who found himself serving at a party given in honor of a powerful Muslim.[50] This Elias had come to Damascus from Heliopolis (Baalbek) in search of work to support his mother and siblings back in his natal village in the Lebanon. The party at which he now served celebrated the birthday of a Muslim infant. Elias was not a waiter by trade; he was a carpenter and had gotten the serving job from a man who had come from his home region and who had been, like himself, a Christian. This man was also able to employ Elias as a tradesman at building sites in Damascus because he too had a patron, a powerful local Muslim. It was the grandson of this man's Muslim patron at whose party Elias now tended the guests.

As the twelve-year-old Elias moved among the Muslim revelers, they took notice of his grace and fine manners. They asked him, "How is it, boy, that we see you to be courteous and celebrating with us?" Elias's patron answered for him: "He is my hired boy in my trade, a fine lad, as you see." The Muslims, charmed with Elias, invited him to accept Islam: "Do you wish, boy, to put away the Christian belief and be like us, becoming not as a servant to your master but as a son?" Elias was, as the text makes clear, "only twelve years old . . . polite and wishing joy for the party as he was by nature an obliging and most harmless boy." It is perhaps because of this, and perhaps also because of the power dynamics at play in the setting in which this scene unfolds, that the young man refuses this invitation with the flirtatious good humor of one used

[49] On the subaltern, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi," *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001): 120–63; and Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 1475–90.

[50] On this Greek martyrology, composed sometime in the ninth or tenth century, see Stamatina McGrath, "Elias of Heliopolis: The Life of an Eighth-Century Syrian Christian Saint," in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations; Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicolas Oikonomides*, ed. John W. Nesbitt (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 85–107 (including a full translation into English); and Stephanos Efthymiadis, "The Martyrdom of Elias of Helioupolis (Elias of Damascus)," in Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim Relations*, 1:916–18. The Greek text is published in Athanasios Papadopoulous-Kerameus, ed., *Syllogē Palaistinēs kai Syriakēs hagiologies*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg: Pravoslavnago Palestinskago Ob-Va., 1907–17), 1:42–59, now available online via Hathi Trust (http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015006962891).

to unwelcome advances of all kinds. Instead of a zealous rebuke or simple no, he says, "You guys came to party, not to play the demagogue, so just drop it."[51]

Momentarily deterred but not offended, the Muslim merrymakers replied, "For now, since you're here, come and eat with us." Elias, "going forth in a state of innocence," agreed, and later, when the party ramped up to a round of drunken communal dancing, the Muslims "prevailed" upon the boy and induced him to join them. "And so then, forming up [for the dance], they undid his girdle [*zṓnē*; i.e., the *zunnār*, an obligatory marker of Christianness] and tossed it off to the side, so as not to hinder him and to set his body free for the dance." Some hours later, the guests at the party passed into drunken slumber.

In the morning, however, as Elias got up to go to church, one of the hungover Muslim guests asked him where he was headed. To prayers, the boy answered. "Did you not finally deny your faith last night?" the man asked. Elias did not deign to answer this puzzling question, but later in the day the episode came to make terrifying sense: the removal of his girdle—one of the distinctive markers of Christian identity imposed by the so-called Pact of Umar, to which all non-Muslims of the Islamic empire were subject—had been taken by those present as a declaration of apostasy.

Making matters more worrisome still was the revelation that unbeknownst to the boy, his patron had himself secretly apostatized some time previously. Now this apostate insisted that Elias had rejected Christianity and threatened to bring witnesses to the authorities to accuse Elias of deserting Islam—a crime punishable by death—unless he did in fact accept his new Muslim identity. When his apostate patron also refused to pay him for the year of work he had performed, Elias fled the city. After hiding for eight years, Elias was finally caught by the Muslim authorities, stripped naked, and subjected to prolonged torture. In the end, he would die as a resolute, but in many ways accidental, martyr for the Christian faith.

Reading this text in tandem with the roughly contemporary Muslim texts with which we began this article, it would be difficult to miss certain key affinities between them. The organizing motif in each of them is Muslim imperial power underscored by the presence of pleasing Christian subalterns. The theme of these juxtapositions is not simply the obvious inequalities in power, however. Rather, in each case, we find our authors fascinated with the economies of pleasure and power inherent in relations of domination

[51] The party is described in sec. 6 of the martyrology (Papadopoulous-Kerameus, *Syllogē Palaistinēs*, 1.46, lines 9–10; McGrath, "Elias of Heliopolis," 94–95). Tom gives us a rather colloquial, but memorable, rendering of Elias's rebuke ("deipneîn sunḗchthēte, mḕ gàr dēmēgoreîn; áphete taûta légein moi"), while McGrath offers the more literal but less colorful "You have gathered here to feast, not to offer public speeches. Stop saying these things to me."

and submission, and in particular with the tensions and ambiguities within which these relations function as grammars to structure such inequalities of power.

For our Muslim authors, mutual desire between Muslim and Christian builds on the basis of a highly refined, gentle, and playful process of seduction. Above all, such seduction underscores the restraint shown by the high-minded Muslim man who seeks consensual affection with his love object and yet all the while emphasizes that this restraint is the greatest possible proof of the Muslim man's inner virtue, given the vulnerability of the non-Muslim subject whose desire he seeks. Accordingly, the desiring gaze within which the imperial Muslim man is held by his Christian lover is the ultimate testimony to the virtue of the Muslim subject and to the legitimacy of his power.

Our Christian author is also fascinated with economies of pleasure, desire, and power. Here, however, the pleasing grammars that so felicitously lubricate Muslim-Christian social intercourse are themselves the source of peril for Christians at home in the empire of Islam. Indeed, it is the structures of tolerance that provide Christians access to capital, possibilities for social and professional advancement, and personal security that serve as snares for even the most innocent and committed Christians.

For example, as we have seen, it was in attempting to negotiate his way through a social predicament fraught with radical power inequalities on the basis of grace and wit that the Christian boy Elias found himself unintentionally an apostate from two religions at once. Serving at a party for elite Muslims (much like the "sons of the Christians" the old monk brings to serve at his dinner party for al-Muʿtazz), Elias attracted the attention of the guests with his graceful bearing and good manners. It was in part his light touch in dealing with his Muslim masters, however, that eventually led to his accidental martyrdom. When invited to accept Islam, rather than refusing in a way that might have offended the Muslims, he diverted their advances by suggesting not that the invitation to accept Islam was wasted on him but that it is simply misplaced because of the venue—"you came to party, not to play the demagogue." His no, in short, could be read as a "not now" or "not yet." This was its specific utility in the charged circumstances in which Elias found himself—like the monk asked about his favorite of two elite Muslims, he needed to respond without giving offense to a question for which there was no socially viable firm answer.

In the event, however, the answer Elias gave—intriguingly not that of a zealous fourth- or fifth-century martyr but rather that of a clever and wary boy well versed in the "strategies of the weak" devised by those native to environments of abiding social and political inequality—effectively invited disaster. For when he allowed his girdle to be removed, the perception of the Muslims with whom he celebrated was that his equivocal no had become a

yes, and the charming Christian boy had become a Muslim. It is here that the role of Elias's apostate patron becomes particularly telling.

As a dissimulating but equally clever religious hybrid, Elias's apostate patron implicitly understands what the Muslims do not—that the boy has not really become a Muslim but is in fact merely a Christian stripped down to dance. Beyond this, however, his understanding exceeds that of Elias, and he is able to view the situation from both sides of the Muslim-Christian divide on which the text itself insists. He knows long before Elias does just what the Muslims have perceived as the boy allowed himself to be stripped of his girdle—and, as it turns out, he is quite ready to take advantage of the ambiguities of the situation. By insisting that Elias has now become a Muslim, he insinuates himself with his own Muslim patrons and, not incidentally, manages to avoid paying Elias for a year's worth of wages.

Both this Christian Arabic text, the *Martyrdom of Elias*, and the Muslim *diyārāt* texts we examined earlier tend to couch their meditations on questions of imperial privilege, power, and prerogative in an idiom of sexual desire, acquiescence, and availability. In all of this, I would suggest that questions of boundaries and communal divisions are also at stake.[52] In the Muslim texts, the virtue of the patient, gentle, and eventually triumphant Muslim seducer is particularly legible as virtue when considered within the all-important Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy that structures so many power relations within the *Dār al-Islām*. The restraint of the Muslim male protagonist dramatically underscores both the enlightened virtue that has prevented any abuse of imperial power and the scale of that power itself. What is more, this power is dramatized in such a way as to testify to its own legitimacy, wedded, as it seems to be, to gentleness, ethical responsibility, and humane self-restraint.

For our Christian author, meanwhile, the particular danger presented by Muslim wealth, tolerance, and power gently wielded is the capacity of these phenomena to conceal and elide crucial day-to-day communal boundaries that properly set Islam and Christianity, Muslim and Christian, apart. For the author of the *Martyrdom of Elias*, power garbed in tolerance represents an all but irresistible basis for seduction, and in seduction resided a very real danger to the survival of the Christian communities of the Islamic empire.

Indeed, the *Martyrdom of Elias* may be read on one level as an extended meditation on the dangers of boundary transgression couched in a provoca-

[52] Tom's conception of communal boundaries is deeply informed by the work of the anthropologist Frederik Barth; see Frederik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), and "Boundaries and Connections," in *Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values*, ed. Anthony Cohen (London: Routledge, 1999), 17–36.

tive, sexualizing idiom. As the ostensible hero of the text, Elias is cast in a role comparable to a woman (or man) rendered responsible for her (or his) own sexual assault by her/his lack of care for her/his virtue. What was he doing at that Muslim party in the first place? If he meant no when asked to convert, why did he not say no in a way that would stick, in a fashion that would remove all doubt and ambiguity about his real intentions? Why did he surrender his virtue so easily by allowing his girdle to be removed in the context of a round of drunken dancing?

The text as a whole exhibits a transgressive and eroticized tone. The youth and innocence of Elias, who is described repeatedly in the text as having "rented himself out" in the city, is again underscored as he interacts with the debauching Muslim guests. At the climax of his peril at the hands of the drunken Muslim men, for example, we are shown his protective, hymen-like girdle being taken and flung away "so as . . . to set his body free for the dance." Moreover, when his martyr's ordeal begins, the nakedness of his body upon being publicly stripped and exposed to the whips of the Muslims is foregrounded: "Thus the judge called for the saint, having been stripped, to be flogged . . . having stripped the holy megalomartyr nude, and having stretched him out with cords, they beat him . . . until the blood ran down."[53]

Seeming to support such a reading is the interpretation of Luke 7:36–50 with which the author of the *Martyrdom of Elias* begins his narrative. There he writes thusly of the woman who came and anointed Jesus with her tears and precious ointments: "If, then, the woman was of bad character, as you have heard, and the philanthropy of Jesus, because of her tears and the perfume, set her free from all of her bad character, don't you suppose perhaps that through the tortures and the pouring out of their blood these martyrs would have been forgiven greater sins than their own minor ones?" Although the sins of the woman in question are not specified, that they are linked syntactically with her presence in the city implies prostitution or, at the very least, promiscuity. In introducing the main theme of the narrative of the martyrdom of Elias, the author has drawn specifically on a story of sinful behavior (implicitly sexual in nature) that is overtly bound to the presence of the sinner "in the city" to suggest that those Christians who shed their blood in defense of the faith (like Elias, of course) may be forgiven sins even greater

[53] Papadopoulous-Kerameus, *Syllogē Palaistinēs*, 1.49; McGrath, "Elias of Heliopolis," 97–98. The portrayal of Muslims as debauched drunkards seeking to ensnare the Christian faithful is a recurring theme in Christian representations of Islam in the Middle Ages; seduction into sin leads to and is equated with seduction into Islam itself. The gendered and sexualized aspects of this portrayal have ancient roots, ultimately stemming from the biblical reliance on the marital metaphor for covenantal relations as well as the later Christian modeling of the ideal faith as a chaste marriage to Christ.

than (but similar in character to?) those forgiven the sinful woman of Luke 7: 36–50. Accordingly, the theme of sexualized transgression and redemption that haunts the story of Elias's martyrdom would seem to have been signaled from the opening chapters of the passion itself: the clear implication is that Elias placed himself in jeopardy through his literal or metaphorical wantonness. In short, although the narrative is ultimately tailored to valorize him, on some level, it hints that he asked for it.

The message of this text, then, is that Elias, although socially and, it was believed by his accusers, confessionally promiscuous in life, paid for his transgressions through the effusion of his own blood; through the horror and violence of martyrdom, he was able to redeem himself. Accordingly, although the overt point of this text, like all martyrologies, is to glorify martyrdom, its implicit message is that of underscoring the dangers of ignoring communal boundaries—especially in the alluring mixed milieu of the urban environment, where Muslim and Christian commerced and cavorted together freely. Clearly, there were Muslims who would have agreed concerning the dangers implicit in crossing communal boundaries, as Abū ʿAlī b. al-Rashīd, the young prince flogged for partying in a Baghdad monastery, discovered. However, for many other Muslims and Christians who moved through the early medieval *Dār al-Islām*, the seductive qualities of the strange-yet-familiar, the welcoming other, and the allure of power tended all too often to confound definitions and efface boundaries that legal experts, bishops, and hagiographers so stridently insisted on maintaining.

In the case of the *Martyrdom of Elias*, what I find to be remarkable is that one now-anonymous Christian writer seems to have engaged the question of communal boundaries and their transgression in an idiom that referenced the ancient tropes of the martyr narrative and yet resonated with a contemporary genre of Muslim writing that reflected both the delights and anxieties of the caliphate's ruling elites. That this author could do so suggests much about the simultaneous continuity of Abbasid Christian society with the rich and powerful cultural traditions of the late ancient past and its deep and rich engagement with the self-consciously Arab and non-Christian culture of Abbasid elites.

CONCLUSION

This discourse left its mark far beyond the Abbasid world, particularly in the hagiographic projects of commemoration of Christian communities from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. In the same decades that al-Shābushtī was collecting the material for his *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, at the other end of the Islamic world, across the Mediterranean in Cordoba, a handsome young Christian named Pelagius was put to death by the caliph ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III (r. 912–

61) after violently disparaging Islam and its prophet.[54] According to the account of a Saxon nun named Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (d. 1002), the boy had been a hostage at the court of the Andalusian caliph and kept in chains in a dark dungeon until the "*viri . . . primi*" of Cordoba came to "gently soothe the mind of the youth in the cause of piety" and took pity on him: "All savored the sweetness of his voice / his precious words smeared with honey / They wished to free him from such an adornment of chains."[55]

Noting the beauty of the boy, and knowing the caliph to be "corrupted by a sodomite's lifestyle," with a passionate ardor for pretty-faced young men, the *viri primi* devised a plan to spring the desirable young hostage. They approached the caliph and said to him:

> It is not proper to your image, most powerful princeps
> That you order to punish a beautiful boy so harshly
> And bind the tender limbs of a blameless prisoner.
> If you were to see his gorgeous form, or at least savor his honeyed speech,
> You would desire to attach to yourself such a boy
> And most assuredly to have him at hand in the first military rank
> So that he might serve you with his gleaming white body at court![56]

The caliph was understandably intrigued with this suggestion. He summoned the boy to his court but first issued a command

> To cleanse [Pelagius's] entire body with a pure and clean bath
> And to drape his members in sumptuous purple coverings
> And his neck with an ornament of metal and gems
> So that he could go among the soldiers in the well-heeled court.[57]

The scrubbed and bejeweled young prince was a hit at court, particularly with the caliph, who lusted after his new royal attendant. When the caliph made a pass at the boy, however, the young man first rebuffed him with harsh words about Islam, suggesting that the religion was idolatrous. When the caliph warned Pelagius against blaspheming his religion and went in for another try at a kiss, Pelagius punched him in the face. The king, getting over his passion for the pretty boy, now ordered him flung with a catapult over the

[54] On the martyrs of Cordoba and the impact of the movement on contemporary Spanish Christian apologetics, see John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 85–97.

[55] Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, "Passio Sancti Pelagii Pretioissimi Martyris Qui Nostris Temporibus in Cordoba Martirio Est Coronatus," in *Hrotsvithae Opera*, ed. Karolus Strecker (Leipzig: Teubner, 1905), 54–66, 59–60, lines 198–202. See discussion of Hrotsvit's account in Tolan, *Saracens*, 106–8.

[56] Hrotsvit, "Passio Sancti Pelagii," 60, lines 210–15.

[57] Ibid., 60, lines 220–23.

city walls and into the river. Pelagius, now a martyr, was crowned with a laurel crown of celestial light for retaining his virginity.[58]

Hrotsvit's narrative is derived from a much shorter prose account of the martyr's death by a Cordoban churchman named Raguel (d. 967).[59] In Raguel's original text, the themes of attempted sexual and confessional seduction also form the core of the narrative. While languishing in prison, the young Pelagius spends three years perfecting himself in anticipation of his martyrdom:

> Meanwhile, this reputation coming to the notice of the king's ears, it was most pleasing to them, but in an improper way: For the servant of God Pelagius seemed beautiful even in the confines of the prison. And so the king, seated at a feast, sent secretaries who would bring to him the future sacrifice to Christ whom it was needful to see.
>
> But because of omnipotent God, the possibilities remained delayed, with the stated things having been completed, and the courtiers cast down Pelagius the servant of God headlong to carry him off in chains. In that manner, they were heard making a racket in the court of the king, when a tumult of chains had been cut away.[60]

When the caliph tries to coax the boy into a union and into Islam, Pelagius replies with a series of choice words, including the expected, "I will not deny Christ; a Christian I was, I am and I will be," and then a more provocative, "'Push off, dog,' said Saint Pelagius, 'Do you think me in any way to be a sissy like you?'" Then, oddly, the young saint "stripped off his garment and made himself like a strong athlete in a wrestling school" ("fortem in palestra se alletam constituit").[61] The text does not say whether this aggressive disrobing—which we might see as an inversion of Elias stripped of his *zunnār* so he could dance freely—confused the caliph, as it very well might have, given the boy's earlier resistance to his advances. However, it did enrage him, and shortly thereafter Pelagius is martyred.

[58] Ibid., 63, lines 308–10: "Tandem nulla piis potis est depromere verbis / Lingula laureolam caelesti luce coruscam / Qua bene servata fulget pro virginitate."

[59] On the short account of Raguel, see Patrick Henriet, "Raguel," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 2, *900–1050*, ed. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 377–80. I have correlated Tom's original citation of the *Acta Sanctorum* text with the critical edition of Gil (Raguel, "La Pasion de S. Pelayo," ed. Juan Gil, *Habis* 3 [1972]: 161–200, with Latin text on 187–93), to which I have had more ready access; a number of other editions are available as well.

[60] Raguel, "La Pasion de S. Pelayo," 190, 5.16–19.

[61] Ibid., 191, 6.12–13, 7.1–4. This odd narrative moment exploits the tension between the sexualized nudity the caliph desires and the belligerent nakedness with which he is suddenly confronted. Pelagius's stripping off of his garment is not a seductive gesture but rather signals his readiness to be tortured and martyred; this is indicated, above all, by the invocation of the image of the athlete in the wrestling school. The language of athleticism and physical struggle, a Christian appropriation of Greco-Roman cultural aesthetics, is very common in early Christian and late antique martyrologies, as well as in depictions of monastic struggles against Satan. I thank Adam Becker for his insights on the language and context of this allusion.