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**Purely Persecutions? An Examination of Muslims and
the Christian Dhimmi in the Near East**

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“Purely persecutions?” An examination of relations between Muslims and the Christian *dhimmi* in the Near East from the Islamic conquest until the eve of the first Crusade.

Introduction

On BBC Radio 4 there is a programme called “the Long View”, in which an episode from history is set alongside a contemporary news story to see what insights the former might shed on the latter. Perhaps that should have been the title for this survey of martyrology, since it has ended up by taking a very long view – or perhaps even an aerial view – of the world of late antiquity, tracking the development of Christian martyrological writings from its genesis as a response to clashes with pagan civic authorities, through its record of the Church’s sometimes stormy relationship with Zoroastrian clerics and Sasanid rulers, to its emergence as part of the Christian response to Muslim rule in various places around the Mediterranean. Another way of thinking about this enterprise is as a meal with four quite distinct courses that nevertheless compliment each other and combine to form a full meal.

The “main course” of this thesis takes the form of an examination of a group of martyrologies whose narratives are set in the Near East between the seventh and ninth centuries, with a view to establishing the extent of their value as historical resources. This will involve some reference to other sources for historical evidence for the period concerned, as well as placing the martyrologies in the context of the development of martyrological writing as a sub-genre of Christian hagiography. This contextualisation will form one of the two substantial “first courses” of the thesis.

The main focus of study will be the following passions – *the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, and the associated *Legend of Saint Florianus and his Companions; the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem; St Romanos the Neomartyr; St Peter of Capitolias; St Anthony Ruwah; `Abd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī; Michael of Mar Saba; the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*. It will be seen that they retain many features of a genre of writing that first developed when the Church faced a challenge – that of being a *religio non licita* – very different from the one posed to it by a supersessionist Islam. The similarities and differences between the situations of Christians under Islam and under Sasanid rule will also be considered. The greater volume of martyrologies from the Sasanid period

and the range of subjects tells its own illuminating story of a different kind of challenge to the Church. An examination on this forms the second “first course” of the thesis.

The texts from the caliphate period will be looked at individually with a view to drawing out any salient historical details contained within them – likely hard facts as opposed to *topoi*. But history also includes the history of ideas. Therefore attention will also be paid to what can be gleaned from the shape of martyrological writing as a genre at that particular time. In particular, what can be learned from the range and number of its subjects and the likely time (and place) of composition of these accounts? Although the main focus of study is the Near East and compositions mostly associated with the monastery of Mar Saba, reference will also be made to martyrological writings generated by the explosive mid-ninth century episode of the martyrs of Córdoba. Although it occurred outside the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, it is not unconnected with Mar Saba. As such, if the metaphor is not too banal to be deployed here, an examination of this episode and the martyrological writing it engendered forms the dessert course.

It is worth posing the question whether, once a confident Islamic culture had begun to emerge, martyrological writing became a less powerful theological response, as the cultural and theological challenge posed by the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate to Christians in the Near East was more profound and subtle than anything to be found in conflicts between the Early Church and pagan Rome or between the Church of the East and Sasanid Persia. Was disputation now a better theological weapon to field against the challenge of a supersessionist religion?

The aerial view of martyrologies concerning martyrdoms from the seventh to the ninth centuries involves looking back across the world of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, examining the genesis of martyrological writing and its place in the history of the Church in the Persian Empire, as well as different responses by Christians to Islam in the Near East and Spain. But Christian-Muslim relations belong to the present as well as to the distant past. These relations are a sensitive subject and still can provoke strong reactions among members of both faiths. Every effort will be made in presenting this piece of research to assess evidence and present findings

objectively and to resist the temptation to shape the research to suit any pre-existing theological assumptions.

1. Genesis and Development of Martyrology

Several centuries separate the production of texts like the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Martyrdom of Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*, yet both belong to the same genre of religious writing. Given the vast range of martyrologies it is natural that these writings are often looked at in isolation or only alongside contemporary works. But, given the consistency and durability of the basic framework of martyrological writing over an immense time span, it is helpful to set the martyrologies of the caliphate period in the context of the development of Christian hagiography. If they are not regarded as pure fiction, martyrologies are a literary response to persecution. To what extent were martyrologists of the eighth and ninth centuries responding to similar challenges to their forbears? The literary template in both cases may be similar, but what else has changed? It will be helpful to sketch briefly the development of this genre so that eighth and ninth century martyrologies can be seen in the light of their literary, historical and theological antecedents.

Does Christian martyrology have pre-Christian antecedents? For Bowersock the only cited antecedent parallels are the death of Socrates (in the fourth century BCE) and the period referred to by *Maccabees* (the second century BCE)¹. He argues that at the time these events were not seen as martyrdom, citing Campenhausen to say that martyrdom was alien to Greeks and Jews². In Judaism the concept of martyrdom – (*qidduš ha-shem*, meaning “sanctification of the name”) only occurs from Tannaitic period in late antiquity. However, Grig supports the predominant scholarly argument as set out by Frend, rejecting the notion of Christian invention and positing a Jewish background³. Grig underlines the permeability of concepts of “Jewish” and “Christian” at this stage of history⁴.

Differences between Palestinian and *Diaspora* contexts shaped Jewish thought in the ancient world and its response to Greco-Roman culture, which, as Frend argues throughout, in turn influenced eastern and western Christianity differently. For example, the *therapeutae* as described by Philo dedicated their lives to worship and

1 G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, (Cambridge) 1997

2 Campenhausen, H., *Die Idee des Martyriums in der alten Kirche*, (Göttingen 1936)

3 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford 1965)

4 L. Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, London 2004

moral excellence leading towards a heavenly goal. They point towards the ascetic philosophies of Clement and Origen rather than Tertullian's martyr ideal. Within Judaism, as well as within Christianity, there was much diversity.

Frend argues strongly for Jewish origins of the Christian martyr cult, stating that "without *Maccabees* and without *Daniel* a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been thinkable."⁵ The link between the cult of martyrs and apocalyptic thought was important. *Daniel* had prefigured *Maccabees* and provided cover for the manifesto of the *Hasidim*, teaching that martyrdom was preferable to idolatry. The apocalyptic outlook of *Daniel* shaped Christian thought in the age of martyrs. Reward and punishment after death were fundamental to the martyr's hope. A deliberate echo of *Daniel* is found in the Donatist *Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, where the three female saints are modelled on Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego, who stand against pagan authority at a time of apostasy – a story that would have resonated with the Donatists.

Although, as Bowersock states, the first allusion to the extant books of *Maccabees* only appears with Clement of Alexandria's late second century writings, antecedents of Christian martyrological thought can be traced to Old Testament and Apocryphal texts. As Grig summarises, later Old Testament texts develop scriptural themes of voluntary deaths for religious reasons, with the Hellenistic period seeing a big shift involving notions of cosmic reversal reached through death⁶. Apocalyptic eschatology offered hopes of resurrection and immortality.

In the transfer of the secular struggle to a cosmic level, opposing forces were viewed less as human oppressors than as representatives of demonic powers. Frend sees the rigorist Maccabean Jewish tradition influencing rigorist Christianity under persecution. Palestinian Jews under Antiochus faced the same dilemma as they would under Caligula and Hadrian and Christians would later. There are two accounts in 2 *Maccabees* of resistance to the order to eat pork– the second may well be a later addition⁷. Both stories (of Eleazar and of the seven sons and their mother) are

⁵ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 65

⁶ L. Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 9

⁷ 2 *Maccabees* 6.18-31 and 7, 1-43

subsequently amplified in *4 Maccabees*, which was written under the Roman Empire and significantly influenced eastern and western patristic writers alike⁸. *4 Maccabees* portrays graphically the torture of martyrs and in stressing endurance and its rewards, sets out themes of great significance for the theology of martyrdom. The author, who according to Musurillo, was possibly a Stoic-influenced Syrian Jew (and certainly a Hellenised Jew with a good grasp of rhetoric) writing in the 1st-2nd centuries CE, stresses the martyrs' salvific deaths as a ransom for Israel's sins⁹.

The literature of classical antiquity included many inspirational stories of those who had laid down their lives for a cause or principle, from Socrates to Seneca. In addition, there was a tradition of 'pagan martyrdom', attested to by the survival in literary fragments of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*. The production of these in the first three centuries CE coincides with the beginnings of Christian martyrdom and the martyrologies that it generated. As Musurillo demonstrates, some patristic writers (Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria) were prepared to cite with approval Greco-Roman pagan "martyrs" as examples. But this did not become the dominant view in the Early Church and does not seem to have been a major factor in the shaping of Christian martyrological writing.

In Judaism martyrdom meant witness that could lead to suffering, rather than people who died for the Torah, even if the distinction was a fine one. Although Bowersock notes that μάρτυς in the New Testament simply means "witness", and only refers to people put to death in *Revelation* 11, 3, the term is applied in *Acts* 22.20 with reference to Stephen. As Grig states, the proto-martyr Stephen's death and the subsequent persecution of Christians in *Acts* helped to "create the master genealogy of the suffering church"¹⁰.

As Brock and Harvey point out, a clear paradigm for martyrologies, given that the primary call for Christians to imitate Christ, is the gospels¹¹. *The Gospel of Mark* in particular emphasises the Passion of Christ above all else. Although Mark's Passion

8 For example Augustine stresses its importance in *City of God*, 18:36.

9 H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, (Oxford 1954); *4 Maccabees* 6, 28-9 illustrates the theme of redemptive sacrifice.

And in 13, 12 the martyrs invoke the sacrifice of Isaac as an example.

10 L Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 16

11 S. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (California 1987), 14

narrative begins in chapter 14, it is foreshadowed by Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem in chapter 11 and the shadow of the cross hangs over the narrative from the pivotal scene at Caesarea Philippi in chapter 8. Mark's Gospel has been called a "Passion with a prologue"¹². This shapes subsequent Passions. Ramsey observes "Polycarp does not simply follow Christ to his death"¹³. The whole course of his martyrdom is a re-enactment of Christ's own suffering". Later martyrologies draw on this example in framing their accounts. For example, the *Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda* relates how, like Christ, they are betrayed by an associate, abjured in the language of the High Priest, possibly forced to drink gall and vinegar and yet they rejoice at their hour of glory¹⁴.

But again we are driven back to the question of Jewish precedents. Were the Gospel passion accounts themselves derivative? Some see parallels in Jewish martyrdoms to incidents in the Passion of Christ, for example, the silence of the accused in 2 *Maccabees* 7, 12 and 4 *Maccabees* 8, 4. The mockery of Jesus by false witnesses echoes the *Ascension of Isaiah* 5, 1. There too the martyr prophesies just as Jesus does before the High Priest. Frend will only say that the Jewish martyrologer and the Christian evangelist were working in a similar mental climate, where Christians continued the traditional Jewish belief that the prophet-martyr was the acceptable sacrifice to God on behalf of sinful Israel¹⁵.

Pauline discussion of the death of the Christian is also important in forming the theology of martyrdom. As Castelli observes, "Paul's interpretation of the death of Jesus as an expiatory sacrifice for others both drew upon available models of suffering for others and also provided a template for later theorising about Christian martyrdom"¹⁶. Paul's thinking reflected Jewish apocalyptic – Christ's death had foreshortened, though not abolished, the terrible period of the last days. Christians

12 Morna Hooker, *The Message of Mark* (London 1983) page 88 and *The Gospel According to St Mark*, (London 1991), 12

13 B. Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London 1986) , 130

14 *The Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, chapter 5 refers to them being given "tatiba", a substance unknown elsewhere in medical or martyrological literature. It is discussed in M.A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, (Liverpool 1996) page 23, footnote, where she cites de Smedt's observation that it is a seasoned liquid to revive victims of interrogation by torture.

15 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 84

16 Elisabeth A. Castelli: *Martyrdom and Memory, Early Christian Culture-making*, (Columbia 2004), page 35

were guaranteed a share in Christ's sufferings and therefore in his glories¹⁷. Paul also made use of the authority that came from his own imprisonment¹⁸. Martyrological theology is very much about the imitation of Christ and of the glory of the cross, the latter being a major Pauline theme (as well as a Johannine one). As Ramsey observes, martyrs show an austere single-mindedness that reflects Christ directing himself towards Jerusalem¹⁹.

Other parts of the New Testament cover this ground too. As Castelli notes, "the first narrative of the Church, *Luke-Acts*, made the predictions of persecution an organising feature of the triumphant story it told. The gruesome portraits of righteous suffering and vindication in the book of *Revelation* wrote the story of Christian suffering within the broadest framework imaginable"²⁰. Indeed, *Hebrews* and *Revelation*, both probably written towards the end of the first century in places that had experienced local persecution, reflect the primitive Christian view of martyrdom. *Hebrews* associates the suffering and death of Christians with that of Christ and the prophets. In *Revelation* (a work attributed to the authorship of a suffering exile) "suffering, witness, judgement and ultimate triumph are welded into the single theme of martyrdom"²¹.

New Testament texts, along with other near-contemporary Christian writings, are ambiguous towards Rome. Christians, like contemporary Jews, express various views. The *Pastoral Epistles* urge moderate behaviour towards the state²². So does *1 Peter*. However the *Epistle of Barnabas* seems to portray the state as an instrument of Satan²³. *2 Peter* reflects the continuing influence of Jewish apocalyptic²⁴.

Such is the backdrop of Ignatius of Antioch (c35-107?). His seven genuine letters to churches in Asia Minor exhibit the most intense martyrdom theology of the primitive church. He is the first martyr apart from Paul to indicate his state of mind. As Frend

17 Romans 6,3-11

18 *Philippians* 1,21-2; *1 Corinthians* 4,9

18 B. Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, 130

20 Elisabeth A. Castelli: *Martyrdom and Memory, Early Christian Culture-making*, 35-6

21 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 91

22 *1 Timothy* 2,2; *Titus* 3,1

23 *Letter of Barnabas* 4; 20 and 21

24 Especially *2 Peter* 3

notes, “his letters display a state of exaltation bordering on mania”²⁵. He regarded martyrdom primarily as a sacrifice. He uses the word ἀντίψυχον (used rarely in Greek to mean “ransom”). It is found twice in *4 Maccabees* but four times in Ignatius to mean a substitutionary atoning sacrifice²⁶. He saw martyrdom as a vindication of Christianity before its opponents, including Docetists and Gnostics. He says remarkably little about the authorities who will martyr him and who have already martyred others.

The most famous of his martyr texts is his *Epistle to the Romans*. The martyr’s death that he desires is part of the *imitatio Christi*. Ignatius had seen his death as a sacrifice and a ransom, paralleling the salvific function of Jesus’ own sacrificial death²⁷. There is a striking element of stage management in his procession from Antioch to Rome. As Castelli observes, Ignatius’ martyrdom journey is like a parody of an imperial spectacle²⁸. He uses athletic imagery (as found in Paul and *4 Maccabees*). He attacks docetic belief about the physical suffering of Christ, showing how martyrdom can become the scene for theological or ecclesiological debate.

Although only two of Pliny’s 104 letters from Pontus and Bithynia concern Christians, they indicate intermittent local small-scale persecution in Asia Minor even before the death of Polycarp²⁹. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the product of just one of the persecutions during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Asia Minor was the centre of the storm. But the text became the most direct paradigm for martyrologies right down to the caliphate period. Eusebius later transcribed most of it into his *History of the Church*, though he omitted a couple of miraculous incidents. It is especially interesting because it is the martyrdom of a figure known by his writings as well as by his death. One text of Polycarp survives, the *Letter to the Philippians*, partly in Greek, partly in a Latin version, containing mostly general exhortations and moral advice for widows, wives, deacons, young people and presbyters. Polycarp was immersed in the apostolic tradition and knew New Testament writings well, but apparently not the Septuagint.

25 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 197

26 *Ephesians* 21, 1; *Smyrnaeans* 10, 2; *Polycarp* 2, 3 and 6, 1

27 Ignatius, *Ephesians*. 21.1; *Smyrneans*. 10.2; *Polycarp*. 2.3; 6.1

28 Elisabeth A. Castelli: *Martyrdom and Memory, Early Christian Culture-making*, 123

29 Pliny, *Letters* x.96 & 97

The elderly Polycarp (who allegedly knew St John the Evangelist) was probably martyred on February 23rd 155CE. The martyrology mentions no particular charge against him. Polycarp, who dies in an arena, is urged by a voice from heaven to “be strong and play the man”³⁰. The martyr’s endurance is linked explicitly with images of heroic strength³¹. The *passio* stresses that Polycarp had not sought the honour of martyrdom.

Already a rudimentary theology of martyrdom is evolving. Polycarp experiences a deep union with Christ in his sufferings³². The whole course of his martyrdom is a re-enactment of Christ’s own suffering³³. Polycarp waits to be delivered up, while thinking of others³⁴. He receives premonitions of suffering while in prayer and prays that God’s will be done³⁵. He is betrayed by intimates who in the end perish like Judas³⁶. He suffers on Friday at Passover and even enters town on a donkey³⁷.

His death is described in Eucharistic terms³⁸ (the theology of martyrdom in patristic writings was to make much use of sacramental language, invoking the dominical sacraments of baptism and Eucharist). Sacrificial language is a feature of the martyrdom too. At his death Polycarp had been described as being like a ram³⁹.

Other echoes of the Passion of Christ include: the presence of an officer called Herod⁴⁰; armed people coming to arrest him by night like a thief;⁴¹; Jews trying to prevent his body being taken by Christians⁴². The author even repeats the phrase κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον⁴³. The author, claiming to be a witness, is trying to represent Christ as

30 *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9,1

31 E.g. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14,1

32 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2-3.

33 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1

34 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5

35 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5,2 and 7,1

36 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6,2

37 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8

38 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14 & 15,2

39 *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. 14, 1-3

40 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6,2

41 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 7,1

42 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17,2

43 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1,1

the model for Christians and the martyr as the best imitator of him⁴⁴. Ignatius wrote “Let me be an imitator of the Passion of my God”⁴⁵. Polycarp wrote something similar in *Philippians* 8, 2.

For Delehayé the prayer of Polycarp has echoes of liturgical texts in it, but he does not see it as a literary construction. He sees no reason why eye witnesses could not have compiled the essence of it from memory⁴⁶. The authenticity of the text as a document by and large close to the events that it describes, rather than a later reworking of the story, is supported by some more recent scholarship⁴⁷. However others, notably Hans von Campenhausen, have argued for a later dating of the text, explaining differences between the martyrdom of Polycarp and Eusebius’ version as stemming from the existence of different redactions that had been reworked over a period of time. Parallels with the Passion of Christ were therefore the work of an “evangelising redactor”. A recent piece of scholarship by Elizabeth Leigh-Gibson sees the text, not as a simple, literal account of the situation in Smyrna at the time, but as a work with an intra-Christian theological agenda about the implication of Christian discipleship for the continued observation of Jewish customs⁴⁸.

Polycarp’s martyrdom had been in 150. According to Tertullian the first persecutions in North Africa were around 180, when the proconsul, Vigellius Saturninus, carried out active measures against Christians. A cluster of *acta* from North Africa includes the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. This Passion, in its fullest form coming from a Montanist group, is from the circle, if not the hand, of Tertullian. For Delehayé this Passion is the “chef d’oeuvre” of hagiographic literature. Also included are the *Acts of Cyprian*, associated with his deacon, Pontius and the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* and the *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* (both of which depend on the Perpetua story).

44 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15

45 *Romans* 6,3

46 H. Delehayé, *Les Passions des Martyrs*, (Brussels 1921) chapter 1

47 E.g. Victor Saxer, “L’authenticité du “Martyre de Polycarpe”: bilan de 25 ans de critique”, *MEFRA* 94 (1982), 979-1001

48 Elizabeth Leigh-Gibson, “The Jews and Christians in the Martyrdom of Polycarp” in Becker, A.H. and Reed, A.Y. (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (2003), 145-58

Severus issued an edict in 202 forbidding conversion to Christianity or Judaism, possibly as an attempt to halt the influence of both groups in the east, where they were powerful. According to Frend, the Severan persecution was, even if limited in its range of victims, the first “world-wide” persecution against Christianity⁴⁹. By this time it seems that many Christians actively courted their own deaths as martyrs. Voluntary martyrdom continued for over a century and eventually provoked a response in patristic theology. But special status was accorded even to those who did not suffer violent death. Cyprian of Carthage advocated the commemoration of martyr status for those who died in prison⁵⁰. Those who suffered in prison and were released were called confessors. In the third century Hippolytus wrote that they could claim the presbyterate without the laying of hands. But in North Africa Cyprian inveighed against confessors for undermining episcopal authority (they felt that they had the right to admit lapsed Christians to communion).

Social changes in the empire in the third century impacted upon Christians. The *Constitutio Antoniana* of 212 under Caracalla extended citizenship to most free men in the empire, making them liable to inheritance taxes and city liturgies. Hitherto participation in the Imperial cult had not been forced upon provincials and had been of importance only to troops or as a test when someone was accused under the law. The Decree of Decius in 250CE was a watershed. Its intention was reform and unification of sacrifice and religious practice in the Roman world rather than persecution of Christians. Christian accounts of it refer as much to cases of apostasy as to persecution. On the eve of the Decian persecution, Christianity had become respectable and office could be sought to win respect in the community, even though in 248 there had been a pogrom against Christians in Alexandria when a priest stirred up the pagan population against them. Decius’ motives for persecution are not clear, though he had called himself “Trajan” and was trying to restore traditional Roman values. It is impossible to provide accurate statistics for the persecution, but Frend puts the number of martyrs in hundreds rather than thousands⁵¹.

49 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 321

50 Cyprian, *Epistles*. 12, 1, 2-3

51 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 413

The persecution did not halt the advance of Christianity, which over the next few decades spread from urban strongholds into the countryside in the southern and eastern Mediterranean. It spread wherever there had been a strong Jewish Diaspora to prepare the way, or where the national cults had Semitic roots. Some Christians held high public office and were condemned by the Council of Elvira for offering sacrifices in that connection. The catacombs at Rome show that Christianity was prospering and expanding. At this time the intensity of the Christian devotion to the martyrs was being vividly demonstrated by the crowded graffiti invoking their aid and memory on the walls of the shrine on the Via Appia under the Church of St Sebastian.

It is not possible here to discuss in depth possible reasons for the spread, but it is worth noting that this difficult time in the empire's history was producing expressions of social discontent. Lactantius provides evidence for the revival of anti-Roman and pro-Persian oracle literature that had been widespread in the first and second centuries CE⁵². Discontent (e.g. in Egypt) was seeking outlet through religion with an anti-Greco-Roman flavour. The Oxyrhynchus Papyri show contemporary evidence of the increasing financial burden, especially on the peasants⁵³. The same term, *anchoresis*, was used in Egypt to describe both flight in the face of debt and flight to fulfil a religious vocation. Ascetic developments in Egypt were another example of Christianity developing along its own regional lines. Early ascetics lived on the Bible alone and their thinking was very different from Alexandrian Logos theology. As Frend observes, Anthony of Egypt was not so much anti-hierarchical as non-hierarchical, rejecting the institutions of the world – including Christian ones.

Other systematic persecutions, instigated by Valerian and Gallienus in 257-9, were followed by the Great Persecution under Diocletian in 303. Diocletian's tetrarchy was based in part on the restoration of religious traditions – this was a time when temples were rebuilt. Pagans like Porphyry ascribed disasters afflicting Rome to the Christians. His *Against Christians* may possibly have influenced some of Diocletian's advisors⁵⁴.

52 Lactantius, *Institutes*, VII, 15 and 18

53 Papyri. *Oxyrhynchus*. 1477

54 Lössl, J., *The Early Church: History and Memory*, (London 2010), 116

Persecution had mostly ended in the west by 306-7 and in the east by 324. An important outcome was schism with African Donatists and Egyptian Meletianists. In Spain the Council of Elvira excommunicated adult baptized Christians who had made pagan sacrifices, and was severe with those who had held formal pagan priesthoods (i.e. men who held civic offices) and would have been compelled to attend spectacles or sacrifices. Constantine renewed Septimus Severus' ban on Jewish proselytism. However, among Donatist Christians, martyrs were still being made – and those cast in the role of persecutors were now Catholic Christians. When Christianity became a state-supported institution, Christians had rethought their relationship to it. Eusebius' response was the Pauline-Lukan approach of seeing it as an instrument of the establishment of divine order. Later on Augustine, in the *City of God*, was to see it as a condition of temporal existence, neither sainted nor diabolical, and destined to pass away at the end of the world. But the Donatists revived the idea of the state as Anti-Christ when it assisted Catholic Christians in their persecution.

Donatists received their name from Donatus, a bishop of Carthage. Stories of Donatist martyrdoms come principally from periods of severe repression – 317-321 and 346-348. The Donatist Church grew between 321 and 346, especially in Numidia. They sent bishops to their congregation in Rome and established themselves in Spain. After the persecution of 346-8, there was uneasy co-existence until another imperial persecution (411-420) but the controversy was displaced by the Vandal invasion of North Africa from the 420's onwards, after which the movement seems to have produced no more martyr literature⁵⁵. *The Donatist Passion of Cyprian, The Acts of St Felix, Bishop and Martyr, The Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda, The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs, A Sermon Given on the Passion of Saints Donatus and Advocatus, The Passion of Maximian and Isaac and The Martyrdom of Marculus* form an impressive and fascinating record of the “Church of the Martyrs” and its high theology of martyrdom⁵⁶. The texts contain passages that encourage voluntary martyrdom⁵⁷. They also contain apparent attempts to refute the Catholic charge that Donatists were practicing self-martyrdom by hurling themselves to their deaths. Tilley

55 Catholics and Donatists discouraged mixed marriage; families were divided (Augustine himself had a Donatist cousin).

56 Maureen A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, (Liverpool 1996) provides an accessible translation and commentary of these collected works.

57 *The Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, chapter 4, “The Passion of Maximian and Isaac,” chapter 18 (n Tilley, 1996)

sees this as being behind the unique nature of Marculus' martyrdom by jumping from a cliff⁵⁸. Strong echoes of the apocalyptic strain in Donatist theology are found in citations from *Revelation*. In *The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, the confessors cite *Revelation* in support of excommunication of those who associate with "traitors"⁵⁹. In *The Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, Isaac, while under torture, hears a voice citing three times an echo of the sentiments of *Revelation* 18,10, 16 & 19 and *1 Corinthians* 7.31– "Woe to you, world, for you are perishing!"⁶⁰.

But there is a caveat in the story of persecution and martyrdoms in the early Church: the disjunction between the wealth of Christian writing on the subject and the dearth of pagan evidence, suggesting that each group perceived what was going on differently (the same is true of the discrepancy between Christian and Muslim records about persecution under the caliphs, where again Christian references to the subject predominate). Grig is cautious (she is even cautious about the value of the court reports as historical evidence in martyrologies).

So can we identify the root of the clash between Roman society and the early Church? Some recent historical work has seen early Christian conflict with Rome in the context of the differing understanding of sacrifice⁶¹. What did it mean to be Roman in a vast, multicultural empire? For men, an important part of the answer lay in the civic cults that linked religious observance to the well-being of the social order. Castelli summarises it by saying that sacrificial ritual maintained a range of ordered social and political relationships. To abstain was to reject elements of social order such as kinship and gender identity⁶².

A notable feature of early martyrdoms is the urban, highly public nature of much of the conflict. Great crowds attend the martyrs⁶³. Martyrologies commandeered aspects of the most famous of Roman cultural phenomena – spectacles. Spectacles included

58 Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, 77

59 *The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, chapter 21 (in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*)

60 *The Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, chapter 9 (in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*)

61 Plass, *Paul, The Game of Death in Ancient Rome; Arena Sport and Political Suicide*, Madison, (University of Wisconsin Press) 1995.

62 Elisabeth A. Castelli: *Martyrdom and Memory, Early Christian Culture-making*, 50-51

63 Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 42

chariot races, athletic events, military triumphs, staged battles, mythological re-enactments, gladiatorial contests, executions in the arena and tragedies, comedies and mimes – public displays that served a number of different religious, political, social and civic functions. Ancient Roman games involved extravagant expenditure and conspicuous consumption.

Patristic writers disapproved and saw a demonic element in them. Tatian was against all games. Coming from either on or beyond the eastern frontier and looking at Rome as an outsider, he was an extreme example of a rejection of pagan society and culture. But Tertullian was opposed to shows as well. In *De Spectaculis* he makes his most sustained case against the games. They promote falsehood (the use of created things for wrong purposes⁶⁴), passions⁶⁵ and idolatry⁶⁶. The arena had a role in the judicial system. Plass argues for its importance in Roman society – controlled social violence being a means of restoring order; if society is like a body, then violence in the arena is an immunising response to possible social disequilibrium.⁶⁷ But Castelli demonstrates that Christians accrued aspects of the spectacle while challenging its culture. The church had its spiritual athletes and gladiators⁶⁸.

Later patristic writing reflected various approaches to martyrdom. Tertullian, a trenchant spokesman for a certain type of North African Christianity, eschewed martyrdom himself. But he rejected pagan Rome, its civil obligations, literary and philosophical heritage. He saw little room for compromise between Church and State, giving new impulse to the two cities theology of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and making it part of western theological thought. He felt that it was the profession of the Christian to suffer; persecution was a test instituted by God; peace was to be found in prison among the martyrs⁶⁹, in struggling and dying for a better cause than the pagans did⁷⁰. For Bowersock, Tertullian's writing on martyrdom is "Roman" and reflects the

64 *De spectaculis* 2,11; 23,5-6

65 *De spectaculis* 16,1; 21, 2-4

66 *De spectaculis* 2,9; 8,7

67 Plass, Paul, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome; Arena Sport and Political Suicide*, NB especially page 59 where he refers to "raw sacrificial violence staving off political violence".

68 Elisabeth A. Castelli: *Martyrdom and Memory, Early Christian Culture-making*, 117; Tertullian, *Ad martyros* 1,2; 3,3-5; *De fuga* 1,5.

69 *Ad martyros*, 1,6; 2,2-8

70 *Ad martyros*, 5,2

thought and language of Cicero and Seneca⁷¹. If so, this is an ironic compliment to pay to one who comprehensively rejected Roman values⁷². For Tertullian, martyrdom made the Church grow; he famously and evocatively said: “*semen est sanguis Christianorum*: the blood of Christians is seed”⁷³. His treatise on baptism refers to martyrdom as baptism in blood for those who have never been baptised in water, symbolised by the streams of blood that flowed from Christ’s side on the cross. Moreover, it offers the remission of sins for those who have lost their baptismal innocence⁷⁴.

The Christian Platonist Clement of Alexandria has a different perspective. Clement’s theology is shaped by the strong belief that philosophy and Christianity were partners, albeit not equal partners (like Philo, Clement thinks of them as Sarah and Hagar), so the Church and the Greco-Roman world could be reconciled. Clement rejected what he sees as the dualism, fatalism and anti-social individualism of Gnosticism as well as the Biblical Christianity of ‘simple Christians’ which itself rejected everything that came from pagan origins, including Greek philosophy.

Clement (who did not become a martyr himself) addresses martyrdom in detail in Book IV of *Stromateis*. He returns to the root meaning of the word: a confession of faith – not necessarily involving death at all, but an expression of one’s commitment to God. According to Clement, those who throw themselves in harm’s way are not really Christians. They are committing suicide without gaining martyrdom⁷⁵. For Clement the essence of martyrdom is ἀπολογία rather than violent death⁷⁶. He even says that those who provoke magistrates incur the guilt of making others sin. They are accomplices in sin⁷⁷. This is consistent with earlier tradition⁷⁸.

For Clement martyrdom could be a cleansing from sin (ἀποκάθαρσις). But for him, unlike for Tertullian, it was not the only sure means of salvation. He saw martyrdom

71 *Ad martyros* 4,4-8

72 W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 373

73 *Apologia* 50

74 *De bapt.* 16,2 “hic est baptismus qui lavacrum et non acceptum repraesentat et perditum reddit!”

75 *Stromateis*, IV,4

76 *Stromateis*, IV, 4

77 *Stromateis* IV.10

78 E.g. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.1 and 4

as simply the culmination of a life already directed towards God; a daily act involving word, life, conduct – the whole person. Salvation was to be won, not by short cuts, but through long and hard schooling in self-mastery, through prayer and contemplation inspired by love of God. As Frennd notes, Clement was “the first Christian writer who placed the ascetic ideal on the same level as that of the martyr”⁷⁹.

On martyrdom Origen seems closer to Tertullian than to Clement. A complex figure, Origen was a zealot for martyrdom, preaching defiance against the authorities, and yet a mystic and philosopher who continued Clement’s work of absorbing Platonism and Stoicism into Christianity⁸⁰. Eusebius’ *History of the Church* presents the ascetic, brilliant Origen as a would-be martyr⁸¹. Origen’s *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, written around 235CE is a theological investigation of the subject which compares a martyr’s death with the death of Christ. Origen’s theology of martyrdom is the most sacrificial of any ancient Christian writer. He sees martyrdom as an expiatory sacrifice. He connects ancient Israelite sacrifice, the death of Jesus interpreted through the figure of Jesus as the high priest offering himself as a sacrifice, and the deaths of martyrs expressed as priestly imitations of this same sacrifice. For Origen martyrdom is a second baptism – in blood, and thus greater than water baptism – a crucial theme in martyrdom theology⁸².

Origen also draws parallels with the Eucharist, linking the blood of Christ with the blood of the martyr. Martyrdom is the chalice of salvation⁸³. This too builds on earlier tradition - Polycarp’s prayer on his funeral pyre with its epiclesis and doxology⁸⁴.

The implications of Origen’s ideas would later cause problems for ecclesiastical authorities. Did martyr/confessor status automatically confer ordination or not? And Origen suggests that the martyr’s blood can atone for others’ sins⁸⁵. In this

79 W.H.C. Frennd, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 356

80 According to tradition, when Origen was young his father, Leonides, had been martyred under Septimus Severus. At that time his mother had hidden his clothes to prevent him from joining him, though tradition says that Origen himself, when aged about 70, was tortured under Valerian and, though released, subsequently died; hence he has been regarded as a martyr.

81 Eusebius, *History of the Church* VI,1

82 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 30 trans Rowan A Greer, (New York, 1979)

83 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 28-29

84 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14

85 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 29

interpretation the martyr wins the right to sit and judge with God, rather than be judged by him – hence the problem of the martyr’s status with the ecclesiastical authorities.

In the *Exhortation to Martyrdom* Origen draws inspiration for resistance from Old Testament and Apocryphal heroes (especially from *Maccabees*) and from the example of Jesus himself⁸⁶. The *Exhortation to Martyrdom* refers to the death of the martyr and his rejection of family and life⁸⁷. For Origen the martyr’s work has cosmic significance – a “joining with Christ in defeating the world of principalities and powers”. Along with growth and journeying, warfare is one of his metaphors for Christian life⁸⁸. The final restoration of all things (ἀποκατάστασις) will involve a greater paradise than Eden⁸⁹.

Christian writers of the fourth to fifth centuries further developed martyrological themes. It was believed that the triumph of the Church was won by martyrs’ sufferings. Martyr narratives feature greatly in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (and Rufinus’ Latin adaptation of the work further amplified those accounts). Eusebius (260-339/40) had been a pupil of Pamphilus, who became a martyr. Though Eusebius had studied under a martyr, he was vulnerable to opponents for his own failure to be a martyr or even a confessor. He was attacked for this by a pro-Athanasian Egyptian bishop and confessor at the Council of Tyre. In response he could only claim that he admired martyrs and point to what he had written on them, especially in Books VIII and IX of the *Ecclesiastical History*. Persecution and martyrdom are indeed significant themes for Eusebius. Other important documents of Eusebius on the subject are the *Chronicle*, *Collection of Ancient Martyrdoms* and the *Martyrs of Palestine*. Eusebius records an account of the martyrdom of Polycarp (regarded as the supreme martyr) and martyrs in Gaul⁹⁰. From the *Ecclesiastical History* we see that Eusebius admired voluntary martyrdoms in the case of Basilides, the three men at Caesarea and the would-be martyrdom of Origen⁹¹. But he condemns it elsewhere

86 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 22-26

87 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 14-16

88 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 2, 18 and 34

89 Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 14

90 Eusebius, *History of the Church*, IV, 14-15 and V, 1-5

91 Eusebius, *History of the Church*, VI. 5. 5-6; VII.12; VI. 2.3-5.

along with rigorism in confession and sectarian conduct. He certainly does not include Montanist or Marcionite martyrdoms as examples in his writings.

Augustine, unlike earlier patristic writers such as Origen or even Eusebius, could be more retrospective in his writings on martyrdom. For Augustine martyrdom is proof of the Church's superiority over paganism. It is not a major theme throughout his great work, *City of God*, though it begins to feature significantly at the climactic conclusion of the work in chapter XXII. He wrote *City of God* in defence of Christianity at a pivotal moment in the history of the west. The fall of the city of Rome to the Goths in 410 (an event more important symbolically than politically) had provoked a discussion of the role of divine providence in history. Had Christianity brought it about? Augustine wrote his *magnum opus et arduum* (it took him thirteen years), offering its title as a contrast to the *Republics* of Plato and Cicero.

In *City of God* Augustine traces the story of the human race from Adam to the Last Judgement in six ages. Books I to X respond to the charge that Christianity has weakened the empire. In Books XI to XXII he uses Scripture to trace the developments of City of God (Jerusalem) and the ungodly city (Babylon). In this context he invokes the steadfast faith of the martyrs to show the superiority of the one over the other⁹². In Chapter XXII he sets out an eschatological framework. In doing so he echoes an earlier famous pronouncement on martyrdom by his fellow North African, Tertullian, when applauding the faith in the resurrection of martyrs going to their deaths and producing a "harvest"⁹³.

He lists various miracles associated with the remains of or the cult of martyrs, such as Protasius and Gervasius, the Twenty Martyrs and – especially – Stephen. The miracles attest to the truth of the resurrection that the martyrs died for⁹⁴. He goes on to assert, with a characteristically rhetorical flourish, that the wounds of the martyrs – beautiful by association with faith, rather than ugly – may be visible at the bodily resurrection, though amputated limbs will be restored⁹⁵. For Augustine the martyrs

92 Augustine, *City of God*, XX, 6

93 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII, 8.

94 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII, 9

95 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII, 19

were the fullest example of how people's lives were transformed by a reorientation of the human spirit away from earthly realities towards the City of God.

Two subjects important in patristic thought became closely linked to martyrdom – virginity and monasticism. Virginity was seen as involving a comparable struggle and producing a similar effect – death to self. Marriage was seen as permitted by Paul, though hardly encouraged, as a remedy for lust⁹⁶. Many patristic writers saw the sex act bound up in the Fall, as Cain was only conceived after expulsion from paradise. Virginity, however, was about nearness to God. *Parthenia* (virginity) becomes *partheia* (nearness to God) simply by changing one letter. Virginity, like martyrdom, becomes a return to paradise. Ambrose stated that in virgins we see the life left behind in paradise⁹⁷. Jerome wrote that in paradise Adam and Eve had been virgins⁹⁸. Thus virginity was, like martyrdom, the fullest expression of the Christian love for Christ and the yearning to be one with God and to share in his incorruptible nature.

In later patristic thought monasticism became the next best thing to martyrdom. Anthony of Egypt, the ascetic paradigm, left the desert temporarily for Alexandria in 311, when he was already elderly, where he had hoped to die a martyr in the persecution of Maximin Daia⁹⁹. Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* intended that he should be a model, so certain themes of monastic life in it filtered into subsequent monastic literature and echo some themes associated with martyrology. The monk receives opposition from spiritual forces – as does the martyr¹⁰⁰. The monastic life, like martyrdom, is about a return to paradise (Anthony's settlement on the inner mountain is reminiscent of Eden)¹⁰¹. The complete control of the ascetic over passions (ἀπάθεια) evokes the serenity under torture of the martyrs. Both appear to be dead to the world¹⁰². The immanence of divine power is a theme too. Anthony receives numerous visions and is capable of miracles too – further echoes of martyrological material¹⁰³.

96 1 Corinthians 7,9

97 Ambrose, *de Virginitate* 17. 104

98 Jerome, *Epistolae* 22 18-19

99 Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 46

100 E.g. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 4-6,8-9, 51-53

101 Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 50

102 E.g. Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony*, 7,11,

103 Athanasius, *Life of Anthony* 48, 49, 57-59, 71, 82

How should martyrologies be read? For Harnack¹⁰⁴ they were a continuation of the apostolic witness of the New Testament and demonstrated the power of Jesus living, speaking, and dying in the martyr. They are documents of Christian witness, and thus it becomes difficult to separate the factual record (*hypomnêma*) from *apologia* and *didachê*. For Delehayé, Harnack's theory is seductive but "conceived outside of the facts"¹⁰⁵. For him the acts were spontaneous products of their milieu and circumstances.

When considering such texts, we should acknowledge the relationship in antiquity between history and rhetoric. Martyrology is a sub-genre of hagiography and, in reflecting generally on hagiography, Delehayé notes that even for ancient historians literary effect could override meticulous attention to material truth¹⁰⁶. But he still asserts that in a case like the martyrdom of Apollonius, an eloquent man in the presence of a Roman judge prepared to listen to an *apologia*, the long speech reported in the text could have been made¹⁰⁷.

One can be more sceptical about that, but still concede that some earlier, shorter *acta* reflect the style of Roman court transcripts (an *exceptor* was present at the judicial audience, who recorded questions and replies: The resulting document included the day, year, consulships and sometimes the place; the judge asks the name, origin and condition of the person before him and after questions the judgement is recorded too).

After the conversion of Constantine there arose a publicly celebrated cult of martyrs, and therefore a need for panegyrics at the tombs of saints. Hence there emerged a new wave of martyrological writing. Basil and the Cappadocians celebrate their regional martyrs – Basil writes of St Gordius, Juliette, and Mamas¹⁰⁸. He and Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem all give panegyrics to the sixty martyrs of Sebastia¹⁰⁹. John of

104 von Harnack, A: *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius*, 3 vols. (Leipzig 1904, repr. 1958); Harnack, A: "Das ursprüngliche Motiv der Abfassung von Märtyrer- und Heilungsakten in der Kirche" in *Sitzungsberichte der kön. Preussischen Akademie*, (1910), 106-125

105 H. Delehayé, *Les Passions des Martyrs*, Brussels 1921, chapter 1

106 H. Delehayé, *The Legends of the Saints: an Introduction to Hagiography* (London 1907), 65

107 H. Delehayé, *Les Passions des Martyrs*, Brussels 1921, chapter 1,

108 BHG 703,972, 1020

109 BHG 1205, 1206-1208, 1204

Chrysostom's work comprises of a sort of commentary on martyrs of Antioch (Saints Babylon, Barlaam, Bernice, Prosdoce and Domnina, Drosis, Ignace, Juventinus and Maximinus, Julian, Lucian, Pelagius, Romanus and the Maccabees)¹¹⁰. Gregory of Nazianzus also composed a panegyric to the Maccabees¹¹¹. St Ambrose dedicated much of his *de Iacob et vita beata* to them. Augustine devoted two sermons to them as well¹¹².

The format for the encomium was a preamble, *topoi*, the eulogy and an epilogue. The preamble spelled out the importance of the subject and insisted on the difficulty of doing it justice and the inadequacy of the orator to his theme. The encomium considers such things as the hero's origins, family, birth, natural qualities, education, infancy; occupation, acts and fortune.

Hyperbole is a common rhetorical feature in panegyrics. Exaggerated similes are common¹¹³. Favourite comparisons (an obligatory tool of panegyric) are often from the games¹¹⁴. Often rhetoric means that persecution is described in generalities that yield no real historical information¹¹⁵. Delehaye notes that descriptions of Roman emperors are undifferentiated and that they often (quite implausibly) call the martyrs before their tribunals¹¹⁶. Judges rage furiously like lions – they are foils to the constancy of the martyrs¹¹⁷. Judgement often happens before an immense crowd¹¹⁸. Common *topoi* include the combination of threats and bribery, the offer of a pagan priesthood or even the friendship of Caesar¹¹⁹.

110 BHG 207, 222, 223, 274, 566, 816, 975, 967, 998, 1477, 1601, 1008-1010

111 BHG 1007

112 300, 301 in *PL* t. XXXVIII, p. 1376-85

113 E.g. *The Passion of Andrew the General* 6 (BHG 118); *The Passion of St Florian* 7-8 (BHL 3058) *The Passion of Ss Luxurius, Camerinus and Cisellus* 6 (BHL 5092); *The Passion of St Menas* 5 (BHG 1250)

114 e.g. *The Passion of Andrew the General* (BHG 118) 5; *The Passion of St Christopher* 9 (BHL 1764); *The Passion of St Florian* (BHL 3058) 1

115 *The Passion of Maurice and the Theban Legion* 2 (BH;L 5740) *The Passion of St Menas* 1 (BHG 1250)

116 H. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: an Introduction to Hagiography*, page 22

117 E.g. *The Passion of Andrew the General* 8, 9 and 11 (BHG 118); *The Passion of St Florian* 5 (BHL 3058) *The Passion of Ss Luxurius, Camerinus and Cisellus* 6 (BHL 5092)

118 *The Passion of St Christopher* 23 (BHL 1764); *The Passion of Ss Sergius and Bacchus* 27-29 (BHL 7599)

119 *The Passion of St Theodore the Recruit* 6 (BHL 8077); *The Passion of St Victor* 2 (BHL 8580)

Among *topoi* in the least plausible accounts is the conversion of torturers¹²⁰. Miraculous humiliation of pagans is to be found in the destruction of temples and idols¹²¹. The laws of nature become suspended¹²².

Tortures are a key part of the battle between good and evil as portrayed in these accounts. These are stylised but graphic and shocking¹²³. Miracles accompany or follow the martyr's death¹²⁴, which often can only be by beheading; fire and wild beasts cannot do it, as in the case of Polycarp (and of Donatilla in the Donatist account of her martyrdom¹²⁵). Nature, God's created order, recoils from the task, so human hands have to perform the task. In miracles nature reacts to the breaking of its laws, just as the sun had darkened and an earthquake rent the Temple veil at the death of Christ (e.g. the sea thwarting attempts to lose forever the remains of Donatist martyrs¹²⁶). Martyrs greet their death sentences with praise and thanksgiving. Polycarp prays at the time of his arrest and is filled with joy while threatened by the proconsul with a fiery death¹²⁷. The physical transformation of the martyr is a classic feature and is found in the earliest such narrative – the martyrdom of Stephen¹²⁸.

Delehayé recognised that there was a literary quality to hagiography, even if in his day what mattered was the quest for an *Urtext* - the revelation or concealing of historical truth in the formation of the saint's legend. However, there is benefit in focussing on the text itself and its context: its hero, author, language, writing style, models, audience and underlying message. This is an approach favoured in recent times by scholars of Byzantine hagiography such as the L. Rydén and his successor at Uppsala, Jan-Olof Rosenqvist and developed greatly by Stephanos Efthymiadis who has worked under them. Efthymiadis believes that more effort should be put into seeing the literary merit of hagiography, rather than becoming suspicious about literary embellishment of hagiographic texts. For Efthymiadis literary analysis should

120 *The Passion of St Christopher* 13-18 and 19-21 (BHL 1764)

121 *Passio S. Cornelii*, BHG 371; *Passio S. Orestis*, BHG 1383; *Passio S. Nicetae*, BHG 1343

122 *The Passion of Ss Sergius and Bacchus* 27 (BHL 7599); *The Passion of St Victor* 4 (BHL 8580)

123 *The Passion of St Menas* 5-6 (BHG 1250); *The Passion of St Mercurius* 11 (BHG 1274)

124 *The Passion of Andrew the General* 12-13 (BHG 118); *The Passion of St Florian* 9 (BHL 3058)

125 *The Passion of Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda* ch. 6 in M.A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories* (Liverpool 1996)

126 *The Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, chapters 14-16

127 *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, .1-3 & 12.1

128 *Acts* 6,15

advance beyond questions of dating and pinpointing classical reminiscences and literary borrowings. He even argues for the priority of literary over historical interpretation and a new awareness of the place of rhetoric in the literature of late antiquity¹²⁹.

Delehaye's definition of hagiography centres on edification and an intention to promote devotion to the saints¹³⁰. In ancient Christian texts the border line between history and edification is obscure. It can be argued that hagiography embodies a similar process to what is found in the gospels themselves. As Brock and Harvey observe, Christian hagiography is about a brief intersection between the human and the divine¹³¹. Hagiography echoes the incarnation. The hagiographer is attempting to show holy presence in human life. Therefore hagiography is rarely biography, rather as the gospels, upon which much hagiography is consciously modelled, are not what we would today understand as biographical texts. Hagiography is much more of an interpretation of events rather than a mere retelling of them. In Delehaye's eyes hagiographers were attempting to teach rather than impart factual information¹³². During a time of peace the saint's life mirrors the asceticism of Christ; during persecution it is the manner of the saint's death that is significant. Indeed, in a martyrology we may be told next to nothing else about the saint apart from his or her death.

Hagiography transcended differences of language and culture in late antiquity.

Hagiographers with little material could rely on standard descriptions of other hagiographies to give their meagre material structure. They could embellish with amplification too. For example, in a martyrology persecution is always as black as possible – the emperor or judge unremittingly monstrous. The examination of the martyr was an opportunity for discourses to show the noble sentiments of the martyr. Rarely do these reveal any personal, characteristic trait. On reading martyrologies it becomes clear that there is a standardised script behind the texts. There is frequent repetition of motifs and storylines. Grig argues that such repetition is a crucial part of

129 S. Efthymiadis, "New Developments in Hagiography: The Rediscovery of Byzantine Hagiography", Paper for the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 2006
www.wraith.plus.com/byzcong

130 H. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: an Introduction to Hagiography*, 2

131 Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 13

132 H. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: an Introduction to Hagiography*, 62

the narrative, adding to their effect¹³³. It also puts distinctive details, where they actually occur, into sharper relief. Standard features include the charge against the Christian involved, to which the martyr responds in such a way that death is the only outcome, even though the persecutors themselves seek alternative resolutions. Christians and non-Christians may have been able, in reality, to live in harmony much of the time, yet, as Brock and Harvey note, the passion narratives set up a situation in which this is impossible.¹³⁴

Martyrologies posed a challenge to their audiences, who, like the audience of gospel passions, were reminded of their complicity in the demonic and their call to holiness. Like the Passion of Christ in the gospels, martyrologies contain paradox. The victim is victor – the greater the violence directed against the martyr, the greater the possibility for total victory; the more scope there is for courage and endurance to be shown. In the Christian scheme of things, the final death of the victim is the ultimate victory (sometimes there is ironic reversal in that the torturer, rather than the victim, is worn out by the tortures).

In the post-Constantinian church the celebration of martyrs' feasts became a big public event. By the time of Augustine martyrs' feasts began with a night vigil preceding the actual feast day. Dancing, drinking and flirting occurred at these times¹³⁵. On the feast day a service was held either at the basilica or the cult site. The growth in the cult of relics in late antiquity shaped the development of martyrology. Relics could include anything – the whole body, but also fragments, ashes, even dust.

The *acta* or *passiones* were read at basilicas or shrines – in the North African church at least (evidence for the western church as a whole is patchier). Augustine tried to divert his congregation from the games with the reciting and expounding of martyrologies¹³⁶. Examples of his preaching on these occasions include a sermon preached on the feast day of Perpetua and Felicitas¹³⁷. The reading took place before the sermon, at the part of the service open to catechumens. According to Grig, the

133 L. Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 39

134 Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, (1987), 17

135 Augustine, *Confessions*, 6, ii refers to Monica's abstemiousness and suggests that this was by no means typical behaviour.

136 e.g. Augustine, *Sermones*. 51.2

137 Augustine, *Sermones* 280

confessional statement also has a didactic role in the liturgy. As Delehaye notes, the word “legend” has its roots in hagiography – it is the passion of the martyr or the eulogy of the confessor, something to be read (*legenda*) on the saint’s feast¹³⁸. When reading martyrologies it is helpful to recall that what the scholar reads privately in a library nowadays originally had a public, liturgical function.

Christian martyrology appears to have its roots in the theology of Jewish scriptures such as *Daniel* and the Books of *Maccabees*, with their world of persecution, cosmic conflict, apocalypse and anticipation of resurrection. The importance of New Testament thought in shaping the development of martyrologies is great as well. In particular, martyrologies need to be read through the prism of the Passion of Christ, which they often imitate. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a key text, as it is like a template for so many texts that came afterwards.

By the end of late antiquity there had built up not only a corpus of martyrological texts, of which some were simple court transcripts but of which many were elaborate literary constructions. There was also a body of patristic thought on martyrdom, which contained a range of perspectives on the desirability or otherwise of “voluntary” martyrdom. Christians writing about martyrdom in the Abbasid era potentially had much material from the patristic period on which they could draw. But there was another source of inspiration, closer in time and space than the world of Greco-Roman antiquity – namely the history of the Church under Sasanid rule.

138 H. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: an Introduction to Hagiography*, 10

2. Christians under Sasanid Rule

Background

The martyrologies of classical antiquity were not the only corpus of writings available by the time that similar texts from the caliphate period began to be written. In the Roman Empire, after the coming to power of Constantine, the great age of Christian martyrdom was over, although persecution briefly resumed under Julian, and of course there were Donatist martyrdoms. But Christians under Sasanid Persian rule were challenged by a resurgent Zoroastrianism, leading to a new crop of martyrdoms and martyrologies. The following pages will examine Christianity's growth in a religiously cosmopolitan empire, seeing how the Church's position vis-à-vis Persian rulers was linked to a wider political and military context regarding the relationship between Persia and the Roman (later Byzantine) Empire, with reference to martyrologies of the period, particularly the comprehensive collection known as the *Acts of the Martyrs*¹³⁹. Nothing on the scale of this work exists for the early Islamic period. The Sasanid Empire, like the Islamic Caliphate, contained for much of its history a Christian subject population, many of whom could look to Rome/Byzantium as a potential liberator and were thus potentially politically suspect. A comparative study of the fate of Christians under Sasanid and Islamic rule is thus illuminating.

Like the Roman Empire, the Iranian empire under the Achaemenians, Arsacids and Sasanids was a multi-ethnic, religiously diverse entity. Jews were well established in Persian territory before the emergence of Christianity (under the Achaemenians, Aramaic was a *lingua franca*). They generally enjoyed good relations with Persian rulers – even the Sasanids. For example, Jews supported Kavad in his siege of Tella in 502-3¹⁴⁰ and Jews fought against Belisarius in 531CE¹⁴¹. Although the late third century inscription of Kartīr (an important and rare text erected by the second of the high priests of the Sasanid era), says that he opposed Jews and that under him they, and followers of other religions, were “broken up”, there is nothing in the Babylonian

139 Oskar Braun, *Ausgewählte Aspekte persischer Märtyrer*. BdK. Bd 22. Kempten (Munich 1915)

140 *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, trans with notes and introduction, Trombley, F. and Watt, J.W, (Liverpool 2000), ch. 285

141 Zachariah of Mitylene, *Chronicle*, tr. E.J. Hamilton and E.W. Brooks (London 1899), 225-6

Talmud to echo the persecutions described in Christian or Manichaean sources¹⁴². The development of the Babylonian Talmud in the sixth century CE under Sasanid rule was arguably the most important event in the history of Judaism¹⁴³.

Christianity itself may have spread into the Parthian empire through Jewish-Christian communities, though evidence is tantalisingly thin. The border between the Roman and Persian empires was never hermetically sealed. According to *Acts* 2.9, the Pentecostal miracle in Jerusalem was witnessed by Jews from Parthia, Media and Elam as well as the (then) Roman province of Mesopotamia¹⁴⁴. The main strength of Christian groups was in Adiabene (main town: Irbīl) and Osrhoene (main town: Edessa). According to the sixth century Syriac *Chronicle of Arbela*, Christianity in Adiabene stands out from around 100CE when Mār Pēqīda was appointed bishop by his teacher Addai. Tatian, who around 170CE created the gospel concord known as the *Diatessaron* (τὸ διὰ τεσσάρων εὐαγγήλιον), is thought to have come from Adiabene. This work soon appeared in Syriac and its existence presupposes a significant Christian audience. There is no evidence for persecution of Christians by the Parthians.

Christians were a widespread presence in the third century CE. Mani had access to accurate Christian knowledge about Jesus. For example, in his Persian work *Šāhbuhragān* he quotes from *Matthew* 25, 31ff¹⁴⁵. There were sixty Christian tombs on the Persian Gulf island of Khārg in the middle of the third century¹⁴⁶. As Harnack¹⁴⁷ notes, the dialogue of Philip, pupil of Bardesanes, assumes the spread of Christianity well into Persia¹⁴⁸. Kartīr's inscription shows that by the Sasanid era Christianity was enough of a presence to be taken seriously¹⁴⁹. Two separate terms are used for them (Nazaraeans *n'cl'y* and Christians *klstyd'n*) which could denote

142 Back, M., *Die Sassanischen Staatsinschriften*, Acta Iranica 18, (1978); also Boyce, M., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, (Manchester 1984), 112-113

143 J. Neusner, "Jews in Iran" in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, volume 3(ii) (1979), 923

144 C.K Barrett (*The Acts of the Apostles Volume 1*, London 1994) notes that the list is an odd one and probably intended to convey in an impressionistic way that the whole world was represented at Pentecost.

145 J.P. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature*, (New York 1975), 103

146 E.E. Herzfeld, *Archaeological History of Iran*, (London 1935)

147 A. Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, (Leipzig 1902), 442-3

148 Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.* Vi. 10. 46. It is noted with approval that Parthian Christians are not polygamists, Medians do not expose their dead to the dogs, nor do Persian Christians marry their daughters. These are precisely the criticisms made in martyrologies against Zoroastrians.

149 Boyce, M., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, (Manchester 1984), 112-113

theological diversity within the Christian population. Martyrologies attest to a Marcionite presence within the empire¹⁵⁰.

The creativity of fourth century church life is reflected in the *Homilies* of Afraat, a Syriac monastic writer living at the very time when the Persian state was expressing more hostility towards Christians¹⁵¹. Afraat was, according to tradition, head of St Matthew's convent at Mosul¹⁵². His writing reflects a Christology uninfluenced by contemporary Greek controversies about the person of Christ and expressing a characteristically Syriac strict asceticism (he does not regard marriage as a sacrament and asserts that only celibates should be baptised).

Large Christian communities were deported from Roman territory during the wars of Šâpûr I (240-70), as well as under Šâpûr II and Xusrô I to be forcibly resettled in the new cities of Gundêshâpûr or Veh-Ardashîr which required a skilled population¹⁵³. Later silk workers from private factories ruined by the state monopoly in the days of Justinian migrated voluntarily to the Persian Empire in search of employment, after industry based around Beirut and Tyre suffered as a result of the economic impact of war with Persia from 540¹⁵⁴.

Zoroastrianism became a state religion for the first time with the arrival of the Sasanid dynasty, under whose patronage the cult of temple fires was promoted, the calendar was reformed and a canon of scripture was established. The dynasty's backing of a resurgent Zoroastrianism eventually impacted upon state relations with other faiths. But the Sasanids' relationship to minorities was not driven only by religious motives. Šâpûr III freed Christian prisoners because the state gained if they worked and paid taxes¹⁵⁵.

150 O. Braun., *Ausgewählte Akten Persischer Märtyrer*, 189-90

151 This is sometimes transliterated as Aphraates, Aphrahat or Afrahat. According to Dodgson and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, (London 1991) f. page 382, the name is Persian and Afraat himself was probably the son of a Roman Christian captive. The *Homilies* are twenty two texts written 334-7CE. A further homily, *On the Cluster*, is assigned to 345CE.

152 W.F. Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Churches*, (Edinburgh, 1908), 471

153 *The History of Al-Tabarî*, trans.C.Ei. Bosworth, (New York, 1999) page 29; *Chronicle of Se'ert*, 1 (1) II, in *PO* volume 4

154 Procopius, *Secret History* xxv 13-26

155 *Chronicle of Se'ert*, 1 (2), XLIII, *PO* 5

Šâpûr I collected Zoroastrian scriptures from as far as India and the Byzantine Empire and reformed the clergy. According to the inscription of Kartîr, Šâpûr's conquests (even if ephemeral) in Roman territory allowed Kartîr to reorganise Armenia¹⁵⁶. This indicates how political frontiers did not match religious boundaries. Šâpûr instituted more charters for fires and more *magoi*, arranged kinship marriages and won back apostates.

But Šâpûr I also granted freedom to Mâni, was tolerant towards Jews and did not persecute his Christian subjects. The deportations from Antioch during his reign were arguably not specifically anti-Christian acts but a strategic military action to strengthen his empire. Indeed, an unintended consequence of the large numbers of prisoners brought from Antioch and elsewhere by Šâpûr I, and settled by him in areas such as Khūzistân, was an increase in the numbers and activities of Christians in the empire.

Significantly, the dogmatic and powerful Kartîr, was not given a free hand until the reign of Bahrâm II (276-93). The persecution of non-Zoroastrians is recounted in his inscription's boast that Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nasoreans, Christians, Maktaks (either Mandaeans or Manichaeans) and Zandiks (Mazdaean heretics) were all "assailed in the land"¹⁵⁷. Kartîr was alone among commoners in being allowed to have royal-style inscriptions carved in his honour. The fateful imprisonment of Mâni, who had successfully evangelised eastern Iran and made Khurāsân a Manichee stronghold, is attributed to him. There is other evidence for persecution of Manichees at this time¹⁵⁸.

Christians and Manichees shared persecution but remained bitter rivals of each other. Addai (a disciple of Mâni) led a mission in 261-2 towards Karkā də Bēt Selōk in the province of Bōt Garmai, east of the Tigris. The Syriac *Acts of the Martyrs* testify unwittingly to the success of this mission when they denounce Manichean teachings or show the rivalry between the two faiths¹⁵⁹. Virtually all Sasanid sources deal with

156 Inscription of Kartîr 5-8, cited in A.D. Lee, *Pagans and Christians*, (London 2000) , 170-1

157 Boyce, M, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 112

158 *Chronicle of Se'ert*, 1 (1), IX in *PO*, volume 4

159 *The Passion of Mâr Simon and Companions*, 12; *The Passion of 'Akebshemâ and*

the western part of the empire, therefore regrettably little is known of the encounter between Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.

International politics had shaped the Sasanid approach to Christians even before Constantine. Valerian's persecution had led Shāpūr I to favour Christian deportees from Syria in 260, and Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* refers to the "barbarians" (sic) allowing religious freedom to refugees from the persecution of Diocletian¹⁶⁰. But with a Christian emperor their situation worsened, although Christianity never faced a complete ban.

Šāpūr II (309-79) is the first persecutor to feature in the *Acts of the Martyrs*. Ruling longer than any other Sasanid king, he initiated about forty years of persecution of Christians and Manichees. According to the *Acts of the Martyrs*, Šāpūr II doubled his taxes on Christians to provide extra revenues for his army to attack the Romans in the wars of the 340'CE^E. Christian objections led to savage, but localised persecutions, whose scale, as reported in the *Acts of the Martyrs*, indicates how much Christianity had spread in the Persian Empire.

The three centres of Christianity, Ctesiphon, Adiabene and Khūzistān, suffered the most in this persecution. The martyrologies from the reign of Šāpūr II form a large part of the *Acts of the Martyrs*. Though there were persecutions under other monarchs there is nothing quite as sustained and widespread as the martyrologies from that era.

Under Yazdgard I things were quieter. Christian bishops and other clerics held a council at Seleucia in 410CE, which accepted the provisions of the Council of Nicaea (325) which itself had condemned Arianism. In the Sasanid empire there had been no unanimity about this as churches had not formally subscribed to Nicaea. After 410 there was unanimity and a better ecclesiastical structure, with the bishop of Seleucia as head of the church. A subsequent synod took place in 424 at the obscure town of Markabta leading to *de facto* canonical emancipation from Antioch and initiating the

Companions, 19; *the Martyrs of Karkâ*, 11 in O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten Persischer Märtyrer*, (Munich 1915)

160 S. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties", *Religion and National Identity: Studies in Church History XVIII* ed. Stuart Meuz (Oxford 1982) p. 7; Eusebius, *Vita Constanini*, ii, 53

establishment of a national church, with the *catholicos* of the Orient (*qatolīqā dāmadnhā*) not accountable to any Byzantium-based hierarchy.

A small cluster of martyrologies from the *Acts of the Martyrs* suggests further persecution under Bahrām V (420-38) though not on the scale of those recorded for the reign of Šâpûr II. However, in the *Martyrdom of Pêrôz* under Bahrām V Christians are deported and their property confiscated. A purple passage describes the destruction wrought to Christian towns, including to churches and martyrs' shrines¹⁶¹. Church roofing material was used for the construction of canal bridges; wood from church and martyrdom doors and (possibly) columns¹⁶² were converted into steps for canal bridges. Specific mention is made of the "Caravan Church", possibly at Maškenâ on the west bank of the Tigris opposite Ukbarâ, richly decorated at the time of the previous ruler, Yazdgard, being robbed of its beautiful decoration, much of which found its way into fire temples. The great church at Seleucia was likewise plundered.

For the reign of Yazdgard II (438-57) the *Acts of the Martyrs* only furnishes us with the fantastical *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk*. Yazdgard II's successor, Pêrôz, who also tackled revolts in Christian Armenia and Georgia, (457-484) executed *catholicos* Bâbôê under suspicion of espionage towards the end of his reign (he had previously imprisoned this convert from Zoroastrianism from 463-4, though we cannot be sure of the exact reasons for this)¹⁶³.

By the end of Pêrôz's reign Nestorianism had become the dominant form of Christianity in the empire and had broken with other Christians at the synod of Beth Lapat (Gundêshâpûr) in 483. Christianity was losing its associations with Byzantium. By now the church was well established in Persian territory, despite the turbulent episodes to which the martyrologies attest. Nestorian sees included Ctesiphon, Gundshâpûr¹⁶⁴, and Bîshâpûr, though Monophysite Christianity became a significant

162 *The Martyrdom of Pêrôz* 3 in O. Braun, *Ausgewählten Akten Persischer Märtyrer*

163 Braun is unsure of the translation from Syriac at this point.

164 J. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans L'empire Perse*, (Paris 1904), 129

165 Gundshâpûr is a corruption of "Veh Antiok Shâpûr", which means "better than Antioch has Shâpûr built this". Ctesiphon, on the plains of Mesopotamia, was the main, administrative capital of the Sasanian empire, while in the summer the court moved to the cooler highlands of the Iranian plateau. Ctesiphon was in reality a group of towns, called collectively Mâhōzē in Syriac or al-Madā'in

presence too and Tikrit was a Monophysite stronghold¹⁶⁵. During the sixth to seventh centuries some members of royalty were Christian and so were many senior officials. According to Brock, when the Muslims overran north Mesopotamia it is likely that the majority of the population there were Christian, while in many other areas they would have constituted a sizeable minority¹⁶⁶.

Often accounts of martyrdoms in the later years, right up until the end of Sasanid rule, portray individual cases rather than the pogrom-like activity that we hear about under Šâpûr II. These mostly involve high-born converts from Zoroastrianism who were denounced by *magoi*.

Another significant move for the development of Christianity in the Sasanid Empire had come in 489, when the Roman emperor Zeno closed the theological “School of the Persians” at Edessa. This anti-Nestorian decree shifted the intellectual and spiritual centre of Nestorian Christianity to Nisibis. Through the school of Nisibis the extensive theological writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, accepted as orthodox by the Council of Chalcedon, but condemned by the Fifth Oecumenical Council and considered the fountainhead of Nestorian theology, were translated into Syriac along with other Greek philosophical and scientific works.

In 562 (under Xusrô I, 531-79) religious freedom for Christians was fixed by treaty with Justinian, although proselytising on their part was forbidden¹⁶⁷. The Zoroastrian orthodoxy familiar from the Pahlavi books of the ninth century appears to have become fixed by this time.

Xusrô I’s successor Hormizd IV (579-90) continued the war against Byzantium, though this did not lead to persecution of Christians. Zoroastrian clergy disapproved of his perceived indulgence towards other religious groups, including Christians. Al-

in Arabic, both meaning “the cities”. One was called Veh Antiok Xusro (or Rūmagān), built by Xusro I and settled with war prisoners from Antioch, just as Šâpûr I had built Gundshâpûr

165 The advance of monophysite Christianity is plotted by E. Honigmann, *Évêques et évêchés monophysites d’Asie antérieure au VIe siècle* (Louvain 1951).

166 S. Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties”, 3

168 Menander frg.1.398-407 in G. Greatrex and S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, London 2002, 134

Tabari cites a letter from him replying to Zoroastrian clergy who urged him to persecute the Christians.¹⁶⁸

His son and successor, Xusrô II “Parvêz” (the victorious) had good relations with the Byzantine emperor Maurice, who had assisted in him gaining his throne from rebels. He had a Monophysite Christian wife called Šîrîn. Something of the mood of the time is reflected in a brief celebratory reference in the ecclesiastical History of Eustratius¹⁶⁹.

Xusrô II allowed freedom to Christians. Al-Tabarî goes so far as to say that he allowed anyone, apart from Zoroastrians, to convert to Christianity¹⁷⁰. Xusrô gave money or presents to Christian shrines. In the early part of his reign Xusrô was tolerant towards Christians, and during his reign Christianity spread across the empire. At the end of his reign, however, once the war with Byzantium was at its height, Xusrô sanctioned the persecution of Christians. Frye’s overall verdict is that by the end of his reign Christians in the empire were sharply divided between Nestorians and Monophysites (just as they were in Byzantium itself between Chalcedonians and Monophysites) and, while Christianity had made many conversions in the empire at the expense of Zoroastrianism, it was far from becoming the religion of the majority¹⁷¹.

During the long and bitter war between Byzantium and Persia in the early seventh century both sides made major incursions into each others’ territory. Initially, however, the Persians had overrun and occupied the Byzantine Near East including Palestine, with some Jewish support¹⁷². A letter of Antiochus, Abbot of Mar Saba to Eustathius refers to the martyrdom of forty monks at the monastery of Mar Saba by raiders in the early seventh century a week before Jerusalem fell to the Sasanids (a similar fate befalls the monastery at the end of the eighth century and forms the basis of the *Passio of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*, to be considered below)¹⁷³.

168 *The History of al-Ṭabarî*, trans. C.E. Bosworth, (New York 1999) Volume 5, 298

169 Eustratius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 201-21 trans. Michael Whitby (Liverpool 2000)

170 *The History of Al-Ṭabarî*, volume 5, translated by C.E. Bosworth, 314-315 and footnote 737

171 R.N. Frye, “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3 (i) (Cambridge 1983), 174

172 C. Müller-Kessler and M Sokoloff (trans.), *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert* (Groningen 1996)

173 PG 89, columns 1021-1024

Although there is little evidence of continued persecution of the local population after the conquest, apostasy from Zoroastrianism remained punishable, as is shown by the story of Anastasius, who converted from Zoroastrianism, became a monk and after several years resolved to become a martyr and confessed his faith to a Sasanid official¹⁷⁴. Within decades of the end of the war the Sasanid Empire fell to the advancing Muslim forces even more completely and dramatically than Byzantine territory did. Byzantium eventually recovered; Sasanid rule came to an end and Zoroastrians now joined Christians, Jews and other religious groups in living under Muslim rule. One consequence was that a legal obstacle to apostasy from Zoroastrianism to Christianity was now removed, leading to an increase in conversions to Nestorian Christianity in upper Iraq in the late seventh century, possibly for reasons of self-advancement. There were, of course, also conversions to Islam¹⁷⁵.

Sasanid Martyrologies

In the clutch of martyrologies from the Sasanid period (many of which are to be found within the Syriac *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*) there are many continuities from pagan late antiquity. There is evidence that *Maccabees* is still a source of inspiration (e.g. the reaction of Jacob's mother to his death in the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*). The Passion of Christ is as consciously evoked throughout the *passios* from this period as it is in the *Passion of Polycarp*. The *imitatio Christi* to which Ignatius referred is evident here too. By the end of the Sasanid period there had been a clear break between the Church of the East and Chalcedonian Christianity. One influential Patristic writer, Origen who had shaped the development of martyrdom theology in Byzantine Christianity, is denounced heavily in the Nestorian text of the *Martyrdom of George the Monk*¹⁷⁶. But there was some theological continuity too. Tertullian would have concurred with the sentiments of the preface of the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, which sees persecution as something sent to the Church by God, lest its

174 Bernard Flusin, "Saint Anastase Le Perse et Histoire de la Palestine au Début du VIIe Siècle", *Le Monde Byzantin*, (Paris 1992). Another version in Greek of the *passio* is found in Agostino Pertusi, "L'ecomio de S. Anastasio martire persiano", *AB* 76 (1958), 5-63

175 The process is charted and analysed in Michael Morony, "Effects of the Muslim conquest on the Persian Population of Iraq", *Iran* 14 (1976), 41-59.

176 *The Passion of George the Monk*, 30 (in O. Braun, *Ausgewählten Akten Persischer Märtyrer*)

progress be seen as being for worldly reasons. A high stress on the themes of virginity and monasticism is prevalent in martyrdoms from both periods.

If handled with caution, the *Acts of the Martyrs*, like other contemporary martyrologies, offers a window onto the Sasanid Empire from the reign of Šâpûr II until the fall of the empire. Traditionally it was thought that most works in the *Acts of the Martyrs* were the work of Bishop Mârûtâ of Maiferqat (who was from 399?/408 at the Persian court as a Roman delegate, presided at the synod of Seleucis in 410 and brought back many martyrs' relics of the persecution under Šâpûr)¹⁷⁷. But study of the twenty-nine martyrologies of variable quality and different style suggests that this must be the work of various hands. The last work, the *Passion of George*, is attributed to a prolific early seventh century Syriac Nestorian writer, Bâbhai the archimandrite¹⁷⁸. Some accounts are highly rhetorical. Others are shorter, simpler and less polished. Some lack reports of wonders; others are dominated by them.

Martyrologies such as the *Acts of the Martyrs* can reveal valuable information. Sometimes this information is revealed almost accidentally – for example, on the position of other faith communities. The *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ* refers to a Manichee who denied his faith under torture – a backhanded acknowledgement by a Christian source that Manichees were persecuted too¹⁷⁹. Historians like Frye have found references such as the mention in the *Acts of the Martyrs* of Ardašîr, king of Adiabene and brother of Šâpûr useful, as it suggests that there may have been two factions in the family of Hormizd II¹⁸⁰. The relative scarcity of surviving written material sources for Sasanid Persia underlines the importance of martyrologies as historical material. Among recent scholars that have investigated these texts, albeit cautiously (mindful that martyrologies are hardly objective sources) is Christelle Julian, who looks at the *Acts of the Martyrs* in the light of the Persian MHD (*Book of a Thousand Judgements*), a seventh century legal text reflecting the position at the time of Xusrô II and stressing the seriousness of apostasy or making another

177 O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten Persischer Märtyrer*, introduction pages XII-XIII ; R. Duval, *Anciennes littératures chrétiennes syriaques*, (Paris 1900), 132-3

178 W. Wright, *History of Syriac Literature*, London 1894, 167

179 Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ 19, (in O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten Persischer Märtyrer*)

180 R.N. Frye: "the Political History of Iran under the Sasanians", in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3 (i) ed. E. Yarshater, 133

apostasise.¹⁸¹ This is reflected in martyrologies concerning high-born Zoroastrian converts in the later Sasanid period. Jullien also argues that hagiographic literature provides a “micro-geography” on a cantonal scale from which one can deduce the relative importance of different communities and the relations between them¹⁸².

The *Acts of the Martyrs* is a *magnum opus*, spanning almost three centuries. As Irfan Shahid observes, it stands comparison with a work from the first half of the sixth century, the *Book of the Himyarites* (which he says could almost be called the *Acts of the Arab Martyrs*) as well as Eusebius’ *Martyrs of Palestine*¹⁸³. All of these *Acts* are regional collections rather than individual martyrologies. The *Book of the Himyarites* has some special features however, being, like *Maccabees*, both a martyrology and an epic – the Najrân martyrologies are followed by a “Christian saga”, an Ethiopian epic that tells of the overthrow of the Jewish Himyaritic persecutors¹⁸⁴. Shahid argues that the Judaism of the persecutors gives the work a special feature, with the continuation of the Jewish-Christian struggle binding it even more closely than other martyrologies to the New Testament as an inspirational source¹⁸⁵.

Many martyrologies from this period indicate that Zoroastrian priests instigate persecution of Christians. The *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr of Bêt Nikator and Companions* states that Zoroastrian priests initiated the persecution by complaining to the king that they could no longer serve the sun, brighten the air, lighten the water or purify the earth because the Christians defamed the sun, despised the fire and did not honour the water. After Zoroastrian priests complain about church-building, the king told Christians that as “seed of the gods” he prayed to the sun and so should they. No god was better than Hôrmîzd or angrier than Ahriman¹⁸⁶. In the *Martyrdom of*

181 Christelle Jullien, “Peines et Supplices Dans les Actes des Martyrs Persans et Droit Sasanide : Nouvelles Projections”, *Studia Iranica* 33 (2004)

182 Christelle Jullien, “Contribution des Actes des Martyrs Perses à la Géographie Historique et à la Administration de L’Empire Sasanide”, *Res Orientales* XVI (2004)

183 Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrân*, (Brussels 1971, 178-9)

184 Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrân*, 176

185 Another work from this period and originally in Syriac, where a Christian is martyred at the hands of Jews is found in: Paulus Peeters, “La Passion Arabe de S. ‘Abd al-Masih”, *AB* 44 (1926)., where a shepherd boy is martyred by his own father before the household eventually converts to Christianity. In this *passio* the local Zoroastrians are neutral bystanders.

186 *Martyrdom of Bishop Šapur of Bêt Nikator*, 1-3

Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai the *magoi* are affected badly by the Christian psalm singing of the captives and complain¹⁸⁷.

The *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions* relates how the *mobeds* accuse the Christian “shepherds” of teaching people to worship one God only and eating animals indiscriminately, burying the dead and attributing the creation of scorpions and snakes to God, not to “Satan” and teaching “sorcery that they call scripture”, while not praying to the sun, respecting fire or water, marrying or having children or going to war for the king. ‘Akebšemâ does not deny accusations made by the *mobed* that he preaches against the king of kings – and denounces the foolishness of Persia for worshipping creation rather than the Creator¹⁸⁸.

In the *Martyrdom of 'Abdâ and Companions* under Yazdegird I (399-420) the *magoi* complain of Christians who disrespect the king, mock fire and water, blaspheme the gods, despise the laws and damage fire temples¹⁸⁹. In the *Martyrdom of Narsê* the *mobed* complains to the king that nobles were becoming Christians and asks to be allowed to force their return after the conversion one of them, Adârparwâ, who has sought healing from a Christian priest¹⁹⁰.

In the *Martyrdom of Pêrôz* the *mobedan mobed*, Miršâpûr, is concerned that Christians favour the Romans and reports Pêrôz to Bahrâm V¹⁹¹. The *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary* mentions Miršâpûr’s fear of Christians too¹⁹². Jacob, brought before Bahrâm responds to this by telling him how his father Yazdegird was blessed with peace and security when for twenty one years he built churches and respected Christians, but adds that when at the end of his reign he became a persecutor he vanished to his doom and his remains were unburied (presumably a reference to the inability to give the corpse a Zoroastrian sky-burial)¹⁹³.

187 *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai*, 3

188 *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions*, 1 and 4

189 *Martyrdom of 'Abdâ and Companions*, 1

190 *Martyrdom of Narsê*, 2

191 *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, 5

192 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 3

193 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 12

There is evidence that (e.g. in the case the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ* in 552) the king did his best to protect the victim from the clergy. He frees Abâ from prison and when he falls ill even sends doctors, albeit to no avail¹⁹⁴. Intriguingly, there is a rare positive portrayal of a *magos* in the *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions* where a sympathetic Zoroastrian priest covers an imprisoned deacon martyr's nakedness because he is too weak to do so himself. He is beaten for this: ("maybe he receives some mercy for this" writes the martyrologer)¹⁹⁵.

These martyrologies can offer some historical insight into the background of contemporary Christian-Zoroastrian clashes, even though they misread Zoroastrian theology. Zoroastrians did not worship fire as a divinity, but only revered it in temples as the image or representation of Ahura Mazda. Christian texts speak of Christian rejection of sun, (*šemšâ*), fire (*nûrâ*) and water (*mayyâ*) as objects of cult or cultic reverence. They portray this as worship of creation and therefore blasphemy. Otherwise there is less evidence of the need for the kind of defensive theological polemic against Zoroastrianism that is found in the corpus of Christian theology produced against Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries, which will be referred to again below. However, the sixth century treatise writer of the school of Nisibis, John, pupil of Narsê of Ma'althâyâ is known to have written anti-Zoroastrian polemics¹⁹⁶.

Occasionally in the *Acts of the Martyrs* there are attacks on Zoroastrians who turn time (*Zurvân*) into a deity. But the texts should be treated with caution. Asmussen notes that whereas in one of the *Acts of the Martyrs* Christian criticism takes the form of anti-Zurvânistic polemic (Ahura Mazda as Satan's i.e. Ahriman's brother) "it is obvious even in the Syriac text that the argument is completely misplaced"¹⁹⁷. Nevertheless, in attacking Zurvânist theology the Christian martyrs were attacking the form of Zoroastrianism upheld by the Sasanids as the true state religion. Šâpûr II was a Zurvanite. One of his daughters was named Zurvândôkt ("daughter of Zurvân"). The *Martyrdom of Pûsai* maintains that Zoroastrians believe heavenly bodies to be the

194 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, 28 and 38

195 *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions*, 19

196 W. Wright, *History of Syriac Literature*, (London, 1894), 115

197 *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr and Companions*, 1: J.P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran" in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3 (2) 939.

children of Ahriman (“the brother of Satan”)¹⁹⁸. In the *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, while debating with the king, Pêrôz says there is only one God, whereas the king maintains that sun and moon are the children of God¹⁹⁹.

Some of the *Acts of the Martyrs* describe martyrs who met their fate through vandalising fire-shrines. The *Martyrdom of ‘Abdâ and Companions* at the end of the reign of Yazdgird I (399-420) begins with complaints by *magoi* about Christian destruction of fire temple foundations. The king orders churches and monasteries to be destroyed and the clergy brought to his court. He asks bishop ‘Abdâ why he has let this happen. In reply he accuses the *magoi* of lying. The priest Hâšû backs him up and cites *Luke 21,15* admitting that he himself destroyed the fire temple because it was not God’s house²⁰⁰. Unfortunately the fragmentary account peters out shortly after that point²⁰¹.

The *Martyrdom of Narsê* tells of a church built by a convert which is confiscated and made into a fire temple. Narsê enters it, not knowing this and extinguishes the fire (a serious political and religious provocation in Sasanid Iran). He is arrested, refuses to rebuild the furnace, citing *Isaiah 56,7* & *Psalm 68, 10*²⁰².

In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ’ê* the king offers Simon his life if he will pray to the sun and fire. Simon refuses to pray to “mortal fire” or the sun. In the same martyrology a *mobed* initially misunderstands the martyrs’ intention to pray to the King of Kings as a reference to the Persian monarch²⁰³. In the *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, Pûsai stresses that Christians will obey the king in lawful things, but not if the king opposes God, citing *Exodus 20,4* to oppose the worship of created things. He is executed after a debate about the difference between worshipping the creator and the created. Pûsai gives his clothes to his followers, who tear them in a tumultuous scene

198 *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, 9

199 *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, 6

200 *Martyrdom of ‘Abdâ and Companions*, 1-3

201 Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5, XXXIX refers to the persecution in Persia arising from this incident. He attributes the destruction of the temple to bishop “Abdas” himself and is critical of it, citing the apostle Paul’s use of argument against paganism rather than destruction. But he admires the resolution of ‘Abdâ and considers him worthy of a martyr’s crown.

202 *Martyrdom of Narsê*

203 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ’ê* 17 and 38.

which makes the Zoroastrians wonder at this veneration of relics²⁰⁴. In the *Martyrdom of Šādōst* the bishop speaks for the martyrs when he welcomes death in defiance of the call to worship sun and fire²⁰⁵. In the *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women* the martyrs defy the call from the *mobed* to worship the sun as they are led out to their deaths²⁰⁶.

The *Martyrdom of Barba'smin and Companions* relates the fate of Bishop Barba'smin, nephew of Simon, and sixteen priests, deacons and monks, for allegedly dishonouring sun, fire and water²⁰⁷. In The *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, Pêrôz debates with Bahrâm V saying there is only one God, whereas the king maintains that sun and moon are the children of God²⁰⁸. In the *Martyrdom of 'Akebsemâ and Companions* the *mobeds* accuse the Christian “shepherds” of teaching people to worship one God only, not praying to sun, or respecting fire or water, not marrying or having children, not going to war for the king, eating animals indiscriminately, burying the dead and attributing the creation of scorpions and snakes etc to God, not Satan and teaching “sorcery that they call scripture”²⁰⁹. In the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, on a dull winter day the imprisoned Jacob asks where is the sun to which they want him to pray. He is asked where his God is – he replies that he is hidden but accessible through grace and dwells in believers’ hearts. He is told to pray to the visible fire instead. He replies that he will do so if it remains once they put it outside in the rain²¹⁰. In the *Passion of Šîrîn* the convert martyr provocatively and defiantly proclaims her monotheistic faith in the Creator God and accuses Zoroastrians of polytheism and worshipping created things²¹¹. In the *Martyrdom of George*, after he is denounced by a heretic to the Persian king, a disputation follows around whether Zoroastrian adoration of fire is the same as Christian adoration of the cross. The Zoroastrians are forced to acknowledge that fire is the same nature as their god²¹². In the *Passion of Anastasius* the martyr, a convert from Zoroastrianism, upbraids his

204 *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, 9 and 14

205 *Martyrdom of Šādōst*, 3

206 *Martyrdom of Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*

207 *Martyrdom of Barba'smin and Companions*, 1

208 *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, 6

209 *Martyrdom of 'Akebsemâ and Companions*, 1

210 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 9-11

211 *Passion of Šîrîn*, 20. Paul Devos, “Sainte Šîrîn, Martyre sous Khusrau 1er Anosarvan”, *AB* 64 (1946) pages 87-131) for an introduction and the Greek text, with a further comments and a French translation in: Paul Devos, “La jeune martyre Perse Sainte Šîrîn (+ 559)”, *AB* 112 (1994), pages 5-31

212 *Martyrdom of George*, 57, but regrettably the disputation in this chapter contains a gap in the text.

former co-religionists for their practices. Interestingly, he is temporarily released (by a Christian jailer) to attend celebrations associated with the sacred cross²¹³.

Various martyrologies include references to Zoroastrian attempts to get Christians to “consume blood” (i.e. eat meat that had been killed according to Zoroastrian religious ritual). In the *Martyrdom of the priest Jacob and his sister Maria* Narsê Tamšâbôr, tries to force the martyrs to do this²¹⁴. In the *Martyrdom of ‘Akebšemâ and Companions* the deacon refuses when asked to pray to the sun, drink blood or consume the meat of sacrificial animals, or even to counterfeit doing these things in public²¹⁵.

Martyrdoms often end with Zoroastrian attempts to dispose of the remains of the martyrs in Zoroastrian fashion thwarted by natural or supernatural means. In the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, the *magos* Miršâpûr puts guards over the torso and head until the dogs eat his remains, but Christians disguise themselves as *magoi* to get them. They say they are taking them for birds, not dogs, to eat, but then throw stones at the birds too²¹⁶. In the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ* there is nearly a riot at his funeral when the Zoroastrians demand that his body be given to the dogs. Nevertheless, he is laid to rest with honour²¹⁷. At the end of the *Passion of St Šîrîn*, her body is locked up with dogs to devour it but faithful Christians manage to bury it²¹⁸.

Zoroastrianism did not have the ascetic spirit of Syrian Christianity. Zoroaster had taught the *spenta* nature of physical creation, and that God’s kingdom would reign on earth²¹⁹. Zoroaster himself was believed to have married three times, and *magoi* needed to be married. In the *Martyrdom of Marta, daughter of Pûsai* the great *mobed*

213 Bernard Flusin, “Saint Anastase Le Perse et Histoire de la Palestine au Début du VIIe Siècle”, *Le Monde Byzantin*, (Paris 1992)

214 *Martyrdom of the Priest, Jacob and his sister, Maria*, 1

215 *Martyrdom of ‘Akebšemâ and companions*, 18 & 20

216 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 14-15

217 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Mâr Abâ*, 39

218 *Passion of Šîrîn*, 27

219 According to Mary Boyce, *spenta*, with various overtones of meaning, is hard to define. She considers “holy” to be the closest rendering, while acknowledging that is not always adequate for the task (Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, (London 1979), 22.

tries unsuccessfully to get Marta to marry, but she is the “bride of Christ”²²⁰. In the *Martyrdom of Tarbo and female Companions* Tarbo is brought before the great *mobed* and two nobles, each of whom “lusted after her secretly” and wanted to save her to take as a wife. The *mobed* proposes this to her but is rebuffed as she will keep defiantly to her virginity²²¹.

Kinship marriage²²², regarded as pious practice by the Zoroastrians, is especially bitterly attacked by Christians. The *Martyrdom of George the monk*, dated to 615CE, concerns a high born convert, Mihrângûšnasp, well versed in Zoroastrianism, who served in the royal household and married his sister. When he questions Zoroastrian religion, he is told merely that it is custom and tradition. Impressed by fasting Christians, he has their scriptures read to him. He and his sister divorce. She is baptised Maria and becomes a nun at Nisibis²²³. In the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, Abâ argues well but the king gives him the impossible ultimatum to allow kinship marriage as well as the consumption of meat from sacrifices, before sending him into internal exile²²⁴.

Apostasy is a theme in many of the martyrologies. In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, a eunuch, Gûhashtazâd, is accused with them, but apostasises initially. Gûhashtazâd repents and is beheaded²²⁵. The *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr of Bêt Nikator and Companions* implicates nominal Christians in the execution of the martyrs²²⁶. In the *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions* a bad Christian priest, Paulâ, is used by the Zoroastrian, Narsê Tamšâbôr, to kill the martyrs²²⁷. In the *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai* there are a few cases of apostasy²²⁸. In the *Martyrdom of the Priest Jacob and his sister Maria* the martyrs are executed by a nominal Christian, Mâhdâd²²⁹. In the

220 *Martyrdom of Martha*, 2

221 *Martyrdom of Tarbo and female companions*, 4-6

222 Cyrus' successor Cambyses was the first Persian ruler known to practice kinship marriage. It is then attested among princes, priests and commoners alike as a marriage of parent and child and siblings too from the sixth century BCE down to the tenth century CE, after which it survived in Iran as a marriage of first cousins.

223 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 9-19

224 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, 28

225 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, 14-15 & 23-27

226 *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr of Bêt Nikator and Companions*, 6

227 *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions*, 1-7

228 *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai*, 6

229 *Martyrdom of the Priest Jacob and his sister Maria*, 2

Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary one of Jacob's companions betrays him t²³⁰. The *Martyrdom of Pêrôz* tells of a Christian apostate, who recover his faith and dies for it²³¹. In addition Christians are sometimes forced to participate in the execution of martyrs. This happens in the case of the execution of the deacon in the *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions* and in the *Martyrdom of Narsê*²³².

The high regard of Christians for martyrs is brought out in the *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*. Yazdândôcht ("daughter of God") supported them during their imprisonment, serving them a final meal, dressing them in wedding clothes, encouraging them, urging them to pray and sing psalms through the night. In the early morning she asks them to pray for the forgiveness of her sins. They assure her of God's mercy. She kisses the hands and feet of all as they are led out²³³. The wedding metaphor is brought out in the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary* too. His widowed mother was going to get him married, but then was told of his "witness". She was brave like Šâmûni (in Syriac legend the mother of the seven Maccabean martyrs) and confuses the bishop by dressing in white. She explains that it is for Jacob's "wedding"²³⁴.

Regarding reasons why martyrdom was necessary, the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê* begins with a discourse on reasons for persecution just after it had ended at Rome. Persecution came from God, so that no-one could attribute the Church's success to worldly reasons (which would be a denial of *Job* 1, 9-11) and was for Satan's defeat. Comparisons are made with the sale into slavery of Joseph and the Passion of Christ²³⁵.

Jews appear in Christian martyrologies from this period in as negative and stereotyped a light as they do in texts from late antiquity. In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê* Simon warns the faithful against Jews, who are portrayed as working, through a Jewish queen, against the Christians and accuse Simon of being an agent for the

230 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 8

231 *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, 1-9

232 *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions*, 20 & *Martyrdom of Narsê* 12-13

233 *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*, 1 & 3

234 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 16-17

235 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, 2-3

Roman emperor²³⁶. The subsequent violent fate of Jews at the hands of the Persians is compared to the fate of Jews who betrayed Jesus to crucifixion by the Romans and ultimately lost their Temple to Roman swords²³⁷. The martyrology reports that Jews fall in thousands to the Persians because they support the attempted rebuilding of the Temple ordered by Julian the Apostate²³⁸ and try to return to Palestine²³⁹. In the *Martyrdom of Tarbo and Female Companions* Jews accused the Christians of making the queen ill as revenge for the martyrdom of Simon²⁴⁰. Twice in her *passio* Šîrîn is handed over to be mocked and maltreated by Jews. When they question if God will rescue her she prays and her chains fall off²⁴¹. In the *Martyrdom of George*, at his execution Jews seize the discarded clothes “for greed”. The Jews protest that unless George is bound by the head he will move when shot at. Soldiers shoot at him reluctantly; he is hit in the liver but does not cry out (to shame the Jews)²⁴². In the *Passion of Anastasius*, set in Palestine during the early seventh century Persian occupation Jewish executioners are thwarted in their attempts by the Christian *sellarios* to preserve the corpse of the martyr. But the martyrology contains a rare, more positive portrayal of a Jewish prisoner, who while Anastasius spends the night in prayer, sees a vision of him surrounded by illuminated, white-clad bishops²⁴³.

Discourses against heretics are a major theme in these texts. In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê* Simon urges the faithful to resist association with heresies such as Manichees and Marcionites²⁴⁴. In the *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions* the

236 According to G. Wiessner, *Untersuchungen zur Syrischen Literaturgeschichte I*, (Göttingen 1967), this refers to friendship between Jews and Šhāpūr's mother, 'Ifra Hormizd. Neussner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia IV: The Age of Shahpur II* (Leiden 1969) page 39, cites Talmudic sources that preserve a memory of her presenting gifts to the Jews.

237 *John* 19, 15

238 Ammianus Marcellinus XXIII, 1 reports the unsuccessful attempt to rebuild the Temple by Julian, ascribing it to his eagerness to extend the memory of his reign by great works, but does not mention the Jews in this context. He reports that the attempt was foiled when terrifying balls of flame kept bursting forth near the Temple foundations and even killed some workmen.

239 Wiessner, (Göttingen 1967), page 46, note 2, finds nothing to support this statement but does not rule the possibility out fully. According to Neussner, (Leiden 1969) page 47, “the silence of the Talmudic sources on Julian's invasion is striking”. He argues that Babylonian Jews had no reason not to support Šhāpūr

240 *Martyrdom of Tarbo and Female Companions*, 1

241 *Passion of Širin*, 19 & 21

242 *Martyrdom of George*, 67-69

243 Bernard Flusin, “Saint Anastase Le Perse et Histoire de la Palestine au Début du VIIe Siècle”, *Le Monde Byzantin*, (Paris 1992)

244 O. Braun, *Ausgewählte Akten Persischer Märtyrer*, 19-20

deacon Aitillâhâh dances for joy, when a Manichee apostasises²⁴⁵. In the *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk* Tahmyazdgard orders pagans and Manichees to plunder Christians' goods²⁴⁶. In the *Passion of Golandôkht* the protagonist goes to Jerusalem, is refused communion by a non-orthodox monastery and distances herself from contact with Severians. An angel shows her a vision of two chalices – one filled with light and another with darkness, representing orthodoxy and heresy²⁴⁷. The *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ* tells how he converts heretics. His adventures include disputes with Arians²⁴⁸. The *Acts of the Martyrs* emphasises that the Marcionites in their mistaken belief called themselves “Christians” (*krestyânê*) as opposed to the genuine Syriac expressions *nâsarâyâ* and *măšihâyâ*. The *Martyrdom of Mar Aba* refers to this specific issue of nomenclature²⁴⁹. The *Martyrdom of George the Monk* recounts how George opposes Hannânâ Hdayâbâyâ who teaches a heresy according to which God is prone to mortal passions, and which denies bodily resurrection and judgement (because behaviour is decreed by fate). Hannânâ Hdayâbâyâ asserts, like Origen, the “pagan of pagans”, that all will share in divine nature²⁵⁰. Subsequently, when heretics approach the Persian king to influence the appointment of a *catholicos*, George opposes this. The heretic Šiggarener then denounces him as a former *magos*²⁵¹.

The chronological span of these martyrologies is vast. *The Passion of Candida*²⁵², an incomplete Syriac work considered to be late fourth or fifth century and possibly intended for an audience outside the Persian Empire tells of a beautiful Christian captive made queen to Bahrâm II (276-293). The *Chronicle of Se'ert* says that initially

245 *Passion of 'Akebshemâ and Companions*, 19

246 *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk*, 11

247 Paulus Peeters, “Sainte Golindouch, Martyre Perse, *AB* 62 (1944), 74-125

248 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, 6, 9, These may be Gothic German mercenaries, who were often among the many barbarian contingents to be found serving under Byzantine command at that time.

249 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, 3

250 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 40. Hannânâ Hdayâbâyâ (of Adiabene), whose bitter controversy with Giwargis seems to have happened between 577-580, was accused of being a “Chaldaean” and “Origenist” heretic for rejecting the doctrines of Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose teaching had been elevated at the 484 Synod of Beth Lapat/Laphat. Episcopal protection meant that despite monastic opposition, he was able to continue teaching at the School of Nisibis where he had become head in 570, though eventually he left followed by 300 pupils (W. A. Wigram, *The Assyrian Church*, London 1910, pp243-5).

251 *Martyrdom of George*, 53

252 S. Brock, “A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida”, *AB* 96 (1978), 167-81. That the intended audience might be outside Sasanid territory is hinted at in the opening chapter's reference to the martyrdom taking place “in the country of the Persians”.

Bahrām was favourable to Christians but when Manichees masqueraded as them he became hostile, killing his wife Qandîrâ (Candida) among others²⁵³.

But a far greater number of martyrologies are set in the reign of Šâpûr II (309-379). The *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr of Bêt Nikator and Companions*, the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, the *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, the *Martyrdom of Marta, daughter of Pûsai*, *The Great Battle in Bêt Hûzâjê*, *Martyrdom of Tarbo and Female Companions*, *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*, *Martyrdom of the Priest Jacob and his Sister Maria*, *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions*, the *Martyrdom of Šâdôst*, the *Martyrdom of Barba'smin and Companions*, the *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai and the Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions* all are set in the second half of his reign.

The fragmentary *Martyrdom of 'Abdâ and Companions* occurs towards the end of Yazdgard I's rule (399-420). The *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*, the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary* and the *Martyrdom of Jacob* happen under his successor, Bahrâm V (420-439). The *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk* is from the reign of Yazdgird II (439-457). The Armenian and Georgian *Passions of St Šušanik* are set in the reign of Pêrôz I (459-484)²⁵⁴. The *Passion of Šîrîn* takes place under Xusrô I (531-579). The *Passion of Golandôkht* is set in the reigns of Xusrô I and his successors, Hormizd IV (579-590) and Xusrô II (590-628)²⁵⁵. The *Passion of Anastasius* and the *Martyrdom of George* also take place under Xusrô II.

Martyrs are drawn from a wide social, ethnic and gender background. Many martyrologies concern young women, often high born. The *Passion of Candida* tells of a Christian captive made queen to Bahrâm II. From the reign of Šâpûr II there is the *Martyrdom of Marta, daughter of Pûsai*. Women of various ranks also feature in other martyrologies from that reign: the *Martyrdom of Tarbo and Female Companions*, the *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*, the

253 Chronicle of Se'ert, 1 (1), IX in *PO* volume 4"

254 Paulus Peeters, "Sainte Sousanik, martyre en Arméno-Georgie (+ 13 Décembre 482-484)", *AB* 53 (1935) 5-48 and 245-307;

255 Gerard Garitte, "La Passion Géorgienne de Sainte Golindouch", *AB* 74 (1956) 405-440 ; P. Peeters, "Sainte Golindouch, Martyre Perse", 74-125

Martyrdom of the Priest Jacob and his Sister Maria and the *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions*. From Caucasian martyrologies there is the *Passion of St Šušānik*. Šîrîn's father is a high-ranking Zoroastrian δεκανός (Old Persian *dikhān*), who tries to keep his daughter from contact with Christians. The *Passion of St Golandôkht* concerns a relative of Xusrô I converted by Christian prisoners of war²⁵⁶. In the *Martyrdom of George the Monk* his sister-bride rejects her Zoroastrian faith in a doubly contemptuous fashion by trampling a sacred fire while menstruating (we are not told that she is martyred for this provocation)²⁵⁷.

Many male martyrs are converts from high social backgrounds too. Yazd-bûzîd was a high-born Persian convert-martyr, of whom accounts are preserved in Armenian as well as in a fragmentary Syriac account²⁵⁸. Converts feature in the *Martyrdom of Narsê* too. As Christensen notes, the Christians in this account all have Persian names, which suggests that they are former Zoroastrians²⁵⁹. The *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ* tells of a high status Zoroastrian who converts and goes to Nisibis after a desert sojourn. The *Martyrdom of George the monk* concerns a high born convert, Mihrâmgûšnasp, well versed in Zoroastrianism, who served in the royal household. And another martyr, Anastasius, martyred in Palestine in the early seventh century, is a high-ranking convert from a prominent Zoroastrian background. So total is his rejection of his cultural background that he refuses to speak Persian to an officer sent by Xusrô to interrogate him²⁶⁰.

Some stories concern captives. Among such martyrologies are the *Passion of Candida*²⁶¹; and, from the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, the *Martyrdom of Pûsai* (recounting the fate of a craftsman, a Roman prisoner of war who had married a Persian, catechised and baptised her and their children); *the Great Battle in Bêt*

257 P. Peeters, "Sainte Golindouch, Martyre Perse", 74-125; G. Garitte, "La Passion Géorgienne de Sainte Golindouch", *AB* 74 (1956) 405-440

258 *Martyrdom of George*, 16

259 Paulus Peeters, "Une Légende Syriacque de S. Iazdbozid" *AB* 49 (1931), 5-21

260 A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sasanides*, (Copenhagen 1944) 272-3

261 Bernard Flusin, "Saint Anastase Le Perse et Histoire de la Palestine au Début du VIIe Siècle"

262 S. Brock, "A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida", *AB* 96 (1978), 167-81

Hûzâjê and the *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabda* (which begins when Šâpûr storms the city in 360CE and takes nine thousand men, women and children²⁶²).

Both clergy and laity feature in these martyrologies, but it is significant, when comparing these martyrologies with those from the early Islamic period, that bishops are among the protagonists in the Sasanid period. Bishops are martyrs in the *Martyrdom of Bishop Šâpûr of Bêt Nikator and Companions*, the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, the *Martyrdom of Šâdôst*, the *Martyrdom of Barba'smin and Companions*, the *Martyrdom of the Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai*, the *Martyrdom of 'Abdâ and Companions*, the *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk* and the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*.

Many of the accounts are full of *topoi*, which resemble those found in martyrologies from classical antiquity. These include raging inquisitors (the king rages in the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*)²⁶³. There are combinations of threats and blandishments to shake the martyrs' resolve, but the martyr cannot be broken (in the *Martyrdom of Marta, daughter of Pûsai* the martyr outwits her interrogator with her eloquence, goes defiantly to her death before a vast admiring crowd and perishes "like a lamb")²⁶⁴. There are martyrdoms before awe-struck crowds, as in the *Great Battle in Bêt Hûzâjê*, where other Christians and even soldiers join the martyrs to die with them²⁶⁵. Death is often by beheading, as it is for Gûhashtazâd in the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, the *Martyrdom of Šâdôst*, the *Martyrdom of One Hundred and Eleven Men and Nine Women*, the *Martyrdom of Barba'smin and Companions*, the *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions*, the *Martyrdom of Narsê* and the *Martyrdom of Pêrôz*.

Miracles occur, often around the time of the martyr's death. In the *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, hail drove off the guards placed over his body²⁶⁶. Grisly tortures precede death – for example the mutilation of Candida's breasts or the "nine deaths" (gradual amputation) meted out to both Jacob and Jacob the Notary in their respective

263 R. Duval, *La Littérature syriaque*, (Paris 1900) 139-140, dates the actual martyrdom to 362 and asserts that it would have followed a revolt by locals who were hoping for Roman support, though regrettably he cites no primary sources.

264 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, 24

264 *Martyrdom of Marta, daughter of Pûsai*, 4

265 *Great Battle in Bêt Hûzâjê*, 5

266 *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, 16

martyrologies²⁶⁷. These tortures find their echo in caliphate martyrological writing in those meted out to the martyr in the *Passion of Peter of Capitolias*²⁶⁸. But martyrs are strengthened by visions. In the *Martyrdom of Šādōst* the martyr sees a vision of a ladder to heaven with Bishop Simon at the top calling him up²⁶⁹. In the *Martyrdom of George the monk*, George's sister Maria shares with him a vision she sees of him and her surrounded by white-clad monks²⁷⁰. In the *Passion of Šīrīn* the saint is strengthened by visions of an angel and of Moses, Elijah, Peter and other saints.²⁷¹

A frequent stylistic feature, as in patristic martyrologies, is a conscious *imitatio Christi*. The details of the martyr's death conform as much as possible to the Passion of Jesus. Some recurring themes and motifs are listed by Asmussen²⁷²: a traitor ("another Judas"); Friday as the day of martyrdom; death by crucifixion; the significance of the sixth to ninth hour; the reaction of nature including untimely darkness and the retrieval of the corpse by followers. Asmussen sees no distinction after the manner of Clement of Alexandria in many of these Syriac texts between the martyr, μάρτυς, who paid with his life, and confessor, ὁμολογητής who witnessed but did not die. Here *sâhdâ* ("martyr") and *mawdyânâ* (confessor) are synonymous. In the *Martyrdom of Prisoners of War of Bêt Zabdai* Bishop Heliodorus is not executed but is still regarded as a martyr, along with the patriarch in the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Mar Abâ* and St Gollandôkht in her *passio* too.

In the *Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions* the murderous Christian priest, Paulâ, who under pressure from Zoroastrians, in order to save himself, kills the female martyrs in this martyrology, is compared to Judas and is hanged before leaving the prison. For the narrator his fate evokes *Luke* 12, 20²⁷³. In the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary* tells Jacob and his companions are brought to the king at Seleucia. One of them, "Judas-like", denounces him. In the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ* attempts by a "second Judas"

267 *Passion of Candida*, 13 in S. Brock, "A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida"; *Martyrdom of Mâr Jacob*, 7-11 & *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 13

268 Paulus Peeters, "La passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias (+ 13 janvier 715)", *AB* 57 (1939) 299-333

269 *Martyrdom of Šādōst*, 1

270 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 33

271 *Passion of Šīrīn*, 13

272 J.P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran" in *Cambridge History of Iran* Volume 3 (2), 937

273 *The Martyrdom of the Covenanted Daughter Thecla and Forty One Female Companions*, 7

(Peter of Gurgan) and the *magoi* to kill Mâr Abâ fail²⁷⁴. In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê* the martyrs are executed on Good Friday. Simon himself is beheaded at the ninth hour; it falls dark suddenly²⁷⁵. In the *Passion of Šîrîn*, the *magoi* say that she is worthy of death (echoing *Matthew* 26,66) and cast their votes²⁷⁶. In the *Martyrdom of George the Monk* George is imprisoned, tortured and eventually crucified in the straw market on a crossroads. He is pierced with arrows and does not cry out²⁷⁷.

Topoi also include the descriptions of the collection and veneration of martyrs' remains. In the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê* the bodies are buried secretly by Roman prisoners of war and relics taken²⁷⁸. In the *Martyrdom of Pûsai* hail falls on non-Christian guards placed over his body, but Christian guards put it on a donkey which mysteriously takes it to an ascetic's house for burial²⁷⁹. In the *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions*, when the priest Joseph is executed, a supernatural storm scatters the guards after three days and the body mysteriously vanishes in the morning of the fourth day. Following the execution of the deacon Aitillâhâh, after three days his body is taken in the night by Christians for burial. A healing myrtle tree appears and angels are seen²⁸⁰. In the *Martyrdom of Mâr Jacob*, the martyr's remains are taken away at the ninth hour; mysterious fire comes down and consumes the blood²⁸¹. In the *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, Miršâpûr places a guard over his remains but Christians reclaim them and Jacob is interred with honour²⁸². In the *Bloodless Martyrdom of Mar Abâ*, following his death he is interred honourably according to Christian custom, despite the best efforts of the *magoi* to have his remains fed to the dogs in Zoroastrian burial fashion²⁸³. In the *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, the martyr is left on the cross for three days without decomposing; a light hangs over him; he is buried in a martyrrium²⁸⁴.

274 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Patriarch Mâr Abâ*, 25

275 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, 33 & 49

276 *Passion of Šîrîn*, 23

277 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 69

278 *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbâ'ê*, 49: the account says) that they were living in Karkâ de Lêdân, but there is no other explanation as to how they came to be there.

279 *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, 16

280 *Martyrdom of 'Akebšemâ and Companions*, 20-21

281 *Martyrdom of Mâr Jacob*, 12

282 *Martyrdom of Jacob the Notary*, 15

283 *Bloodless Martyrdom of Mar Abâ*, 39-40

284 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 70

Martyrologies from the Sasanid period show continuity with Christian texts from pagan antiquity insofar as many of the same literary motifs and *topoi* recur. As historical sources they are especially valuable. They provide information about the Sasanid Persian Empire, for which there is less surviving literary material than there is for Rome and Byzantium. They are indeed sources often hostile to Sasanid rulers and even more so to Zoroastrianism, but at least they are voices (often Syriac) from within the Persian Empire. Martyrologies from this period constitute a significant body of literature with a wide range of subjects spanning a broad period of history – a point to be noted when setting them alongside the relatively narrow scope of the texts from the caliphate period to be considered below.

The evidence from martyrologies is that there were times when, under Sasanid rule, Christians were under pressure from a resurgent Zoroastrian priesthood which sometimes was able to draw on royal support. Bishops are among the martyrs. Yet there is a difference between the sort of large-scale martyrdom described under Šâpûr II, and that which is described for subsequent centuries, where the focus is predominantly on the martyrdom of individual, high-born converts, or on martyrdoms in response to provocative acts by Christians – i.e. the destruction of fire temples²⁸⁵. Despite references to apostasy from Christianity in the martyrologies, there are also several accounts of high profile male and female converts from Zoroastrianism to Christianity. By the end of the Sasanid Empire the Church (whether Monophysite or Nestorian) had survived, developed its own distinctive structures, theology and spirituality. Unlike Zoroastrianism, Christianity was not the Persian state religion and as such was better prepared to adapt itself to the new challenge of life in the Caliphate that lay ahead.

285 An exception to this pattern is the events described in the *Acts of the Himyarite Martyrs*, which refer to a separate sixth century development outside the Sasanid Empire.

3. Martyrologies from the Caliphate

The nine *passios* considered below fall into three or four categories. These are the three military martyrdoms (*Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, *Florianus and Companion* and the *Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*); the *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*, and texts with an Arabic provenance (the Passions of *Romanus*, *Peter of Capitolias* *Anthony Ruwah*, *ʿAbd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī* and *Michael of Mar Saba*). The military martyrdoms share some features with each other and stand apart from most of the other texts. Martyrdom comes to the monastery of Mar Saba itself in the *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*. The *Passion of Romanus*, with its preoccupation with Byzantine iconoclasm stands apart from the other four texts with an Arabic origin, and those four texts are best seen alongside each other, as part of an Arabic Christian theological response to Islam emanating from the Mar Saba monastery.

The Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza, the Legend of Saint Florianus and his Companions and the Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem

The probably derivative relationship between *the Legend of Saint Florianus and his Companions* and the possible derivation of *the Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* from the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* makes it appropriate to consider these texts all alongside each other.

The *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* concerns troops captured at the city's fall during the Arab conquest²⁸⁶. The events are dated to the twenty seventh year of Heraclius' reign, when Gaza fell to the "*atheis Sarracenis*". The soldiers are captured. Ambrus seeks to persuade them to apostasise. They are separated from their wives and families and spend thirty days in prison. The narrative then says that they are sent to prison in Eleutheropolis for several months. They then are transported to the Jerusalem where Sophronius visits them by night and further stiffens their resolve. Their leader is named as Callinidus. After ten months Ambrus writes to Ammiras, the Saracen "leader" in Jerusalem, ordering that the prisoners be freed if they apostasise, otherwise the senior among them and nine others are to be beheaded.

287 Delehay, H. "Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum", *AB* 23 (1903) 289-307

Patriarch Sophronius urges the prisoners fervently to hold to their faith. They do so and Ammiras angrily has the ten beheaded (though the text actually gives twelve names). Sophronius buries them where there is an oratory to St Stephen, protomartyr. Their names are listed.

Ammiras informs Ambrus of what has happened and is told to take the remaining martyrs out again after thirty days and, in the presence of their wives and children, to offer them honours if they convert, otherwise execution. They choose the latter and are buried in a church. They are named (fifty one names are listed).

The Legend of St Florianus and his Companions is more elaborate. The sixty Christian soldiers are introduced as being brave men who defended “*consiliis et armis*” many towns and cities from the Saracens, who therefore offered bounty for their capture, so that they could either make them apostasise or put them to death. Undeterred the soldiers go to Gaza and kill many Saracens there before they are captured with the fall of the city. Having been thrown into prison they pray.

An angel of comfort appears to them. They are not to fear Ambrus. They will die first. They ask that Florianus be made known of their fate. The angel informs Florianus that he, as their leader, will have a greater contest and a greater crown. He prays further and sees a vision of the sixty as martyrs and a crown being offered to him.

Ambrus tries to tempt the sixty with bribes. Refusing, they spend thirty days in prison before being sent to Eutropolis for two months. Here their prayers are answered by a vision of Florianus reassuring them. After two months Ambrus sends them to Amiras in Jerusalem. He tells them to apostasise, otherwise he will kill Climacus and nine others. They remain adamant and the ten are killed.

After another thirty days in prison, the remainder are taken back to Ambrus on his orders. Still defiant, they are tortured to death, upon which there is a vision of doves (one for each martyr) led to heaven by an angel. Florianus buries them in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Eutropolis.

Ambrus, learning that Florianus was their leader and “like a patriarch”, tries to get him to deny his faith. Florianus is defiant and miraculously the soldiers of the appointed execution squad kill each other. Ambrus then leads Florianus to his “temple”, which then collapses. He is led back to prison, but a mysterious light and fragrance cause Ambrus’ servants to seek baptism from Florianus. Ambrus has them beheaded. Next day Florianus is to be led through the city bound and naked on a cart for mockery before execution. An angel strengthens him for this trial, as does a vision of the sixty martyred soldiers and twenty baptized servants. Finally he sees Christ and the saints beckoning him.

Dating from the tenth to eleventh centuries, the manuscript of the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* is of unknown provenance and in crude Latin. Grammatical constructions transposed from Greek, such as *Christo amabilis civitas, petere verbum, dare verbum, in carcerem inferratos duci, mensi novembrio/decembrio* suggest that it was translated from Greek by a scribe better versed in that language. A gap in the narrative around the return of the prisoners to Eleutheropolis suggests the account is incomplete, though it keeps technical details lost in the embellished *Passion of St Florianus* – notably the names of the military units²⁸⁷.

Setting this martyrology alongside those from earlier periods, it is clear that some of the features of the literary genre have remained remarkably consistent. Even this rudimentary and possibly summarised *passio* shows something of the customary pattern – the martyrs remain steadfast under pressure, and the impotence of their Muslim tormentors, who can neither bribe nor intimidate them, is brought out. Their remains are gathered and placed in a site linked with the protomartyr. As military martyrs the sixty martyrs of Gaza follow a long tradition of martyrologies concerning troops who resist pressure to apostasise²⁸⁸. However, these other accounts concern Christians in the Roman imperial army at times of pagan persecution within the empire. This account is unique in that it describes a garrison martyred during a Byzantine-Islamic conflict. There do not appear to be any parallels from the many years of Roman/Byzantine conflict with Sasanid Persia (a period rich in

288 *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* 2 and 4 (David Woods’ online translation also reads the names Cithom and Sciton as referring to the Scythii).

289 A wide selection of these, including the Sixty martyrs of Gaza, has been collected and translated by David Woods on the website <http://www.ucc.ie/milimart>

martyrological literature but without a sub-genre of military martyrologies). Features germane to the account itself stand out in further relief – for example the involvement of Sophronius as an encourager of the martyrs, as well as the menace directed towards the soldiers but not their dependents, although the text refers to their “wives and sons”.

The simple account is unadorned by miracles, unlike the fifteenth century *Passion of St Florianus*, which is written in a much smoother literary Latin. The latter account seems derivative and an example of medieval hagiographers getting around the silence of history by adapting one saint’s life to another. Florianus seems to have been “parachuted” into an already extant narrative. The account echoes the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* but there are differences. Sophronius is not mentioned and the leader of the martyrs, who dominates the story, is Florianus. Signs and wonders adorn the narrative, including angels, visions, the destruction of a mosque and the mutual slaughter of Muslim executioners²⁸⁹. The narrative culminates in Florianus’ own execution at which he sees a vision of Christ²⁹⁰.

The more embellished account of Florianus and his companions is replete with *topoi* – again we see endurance under pressure and the failure of bribes and threats alike to induce apostasy. Again we see emphasis on the interment of the martyrs’ remains. There is stress on the mockery of Florianus before his execution – a classic martyrology theme with powerful echoes of the Passion of Christ in that the martyr is exalted though apparent degradation²⁹¹. The story is especially rich in the sorts of signs and wonders and visions that are a feature of some such texts. Visions at the moment of death are particularly reminiscent of the death of Stephen the protomartyr in *Acts*.

The martyrology describes events for a period for which there is a dearth of good contemporary information – sometimes very little information at all. Many of the earliest responses to the Arab conquest of the Near East are Christian and Jewish apocalypses in which the coming of the Arabs is sometimes seen as a sign of the

290 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 2-4

291 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 6

292 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 6

end²⁹². As Hoyland observes, apocalypses provide popular “mood music” regarding current events, even if they contain little hard information. An example is the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, originally written in Syriac and ascribed to the martyr, prolific writer and bishop of Olympus in Lycia who died in 312CE. The actual author, considered by Sidney Griffith to be probably a Jacobite priest (but possibly Chalcedonian), wrote it in northern Syria around 691 as an eloquent indictment of Muslim rule²⁹³. It never advocates that the Christian subjects fight back; instead, God will intervene.

Byzantine sources for the period generally postdate the conquest greatly. The oldest are ninth century monastic chroniclers like Theophanes the Confessor. Such texts are of interest as much for what they indicate about early Christian assessments of Islam as for the information they give. The ninth century also produces the first polemical and apologetic texts written by Byzantine Christians against Islam – Nicetas of Byzantium, writing mid-century, is the prototype²⁹⁴.

To what extent was the Christian population of the near east welcoming, opposing or fatalistically indifferent to the Islamic conquest? Jan van Ginkel questions the assertion that anti-Chalcedonian Christians welcomed the Muslims as liberators from Byzantine oppression and that their attitude contributed towards a successful Arab invasion²⁹⁵. He cautions that Syrian Orthodox historiography close to the time of the conquest is limited in volume and fragmentary or mutilated in nature. He argues that later compilers may only have preserved elements of these sources that supported their own arguments²⁹⁶. Surviving contemporary accounts are bald, offering no explanation for the invaders’ success. Only from the eighth century are there more

292 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton 1997), 308-12 and 526-8

293 Sidney H Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, (Princeton 2008), 33

295 Other important works include theoretical treatises, whether military - the *Tactics* of Leo VI and the treatise on ambush (tenth century) and the *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos (eleventh century) or geographical, diplomatic, administrative and cultic (*De Administrando Imperio* and *the Book of Ceremonies* by Constantine Porphyrogenetes).

295 Jan J. van Ginkel: “The perception and presentation of the Arab conquest in Syriac historiography: How did the changing social position of the Syrian Orthodox community influence the account of their historiographers?” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, eds E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas (Leiden 2006), 171-184

296 Ginkel, Jan van, “The perception and presentation of the Arab conquest in Syriac historiography: How did the changing social position of the Syrian Orthodox community influence the account of their historiographers?”, 174

sources. The late eighth century *Zuqnīn Chronicle*, which describes the war in a detached fashion – seeing it as between armies rather than peoples or faiths – is the first extant major Syrian Orthodox historiographical work written after the conquest.

Gaza fell in late June/early July 637CE after the decisive defeat at Yarmūk the previous year. Jerusalem was among the cities that fell around 638²⁹⁷. After the evacuation of Syria, Byzantine garrisons in places like the Palestinian ports of Gaza and Caesarea, and dispersed forces in Egypt and Mesopotamia, were cut off from each other, though capable of being reinforced by sea. The capture of Gaza, an important city in late antiquity, was a significant event in the Muslim conquest of Palestine. At the capture of Ba’labakk a treaty allowed Greeks to evacuate to Byzantine territory. They were to leave at a specified time and were not to occupy fortified places²⁹⁸. This arrangement stands in stark contrast with what the *passio* says happened to the garrison at Gaza.

It is impossible to harmonise the disparate sources for this campaign, as Donner demonstrates with a range of possible reconstructions²⁹⁹, but Gaza may have seen combat and intrigue earlier in the campaign. Al-Ṭabarī says that one of the first battles of the campaign took place at Dāthin, twelve miles from Gaza, where the Muslims defeated the local governor³⁰⁰. Sergios, a *κωνδιδάτοϛ*³⁰¹, had assembled a force at Caesarea to respond to Muslim harassment in the Gaza region. Kaegi³⁰² identifies him with the commander named in a Syriac source as Vardan/Wardān, which may indicate an Armenian origin. Details of the clash at Dāthin are unclear, but it seems the Byzantines fled and the Arabs slew their commander. The death of a *κωνδιδάτοϛ* was a blow to Byzantine prestige. Jewish reaction at Sycamina, near Caesarea, was jubilant.

297 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6127, says Jerusalem was besieged for two years after Yarmūk and that patriarch Sophronius, “died of sorrow” shortly after it fell.

298 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992), 152

299 F. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, (Princeton 1981)

300 *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, volume XI, translated by Khalid Yahya Blankinship (New York 1993), 108

301 An honorific office, whose holders wore special white uniforms and had direct access to the Emperor; it had once been a title for the emperor’s personal bodyguard

302 W. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 88-9

Eutychius reports that the Byzantine commander at Gaza tried to capture ‘Amr b. al-Ās during a parley³⁰³. Al-Tabarī reports that there was an unsuccessful plot to kill him by a Byzantine commander known as al-Aṛtabūn at Ajnādayn³⁰⁴.

So was the martyrdom of the soldiers an act of revenge? Woods is sceptical that the same Byzantine soldiers would still have been at Gaza and also notes that the force described in 634 was much larger³⁰⁵. However, regarding the likelihood of the continuity of garrisons in the area, one of the few details that the *passio* gives about the troops is the presence of their families at the time of martyrdom, which could indicate a settled garrison, unless the reference is purely a literary device to show the resolute, uncompromising faith of the martyrs (putting the gospel before one’s family is a recurring theme in martyrologies). Regarding the fate of the families, Kaegi notes that there is no suggestion of danger from the Muslims to the families of the martyred troops³⁰⁶.

The main Muslim figure referred to in this account is ‘Amr b. al-Ās, a key player in the genesis of Islam and the early history of the caliphate for whom there is much evidence from Islamic Arabic sources³⁰⁷. He had traded with Gaza before the coming of Islam, fought victoriously with the Quraish against the Muslims at Uhud and was one of the Quraishi emissaries sent to the Negus of Ethiopia in an unsuccessful mission to get the Muslim refugees from Mecca in 615CE deported. He converted after Muhammad’s peaceful pilgrimage of 629. When the campaign against the Byzantine Near East began, Abu Bakr directed ‘Amr to southern Palestine towards Gaza. After taking Gaza he advanced into Egypt.³⁰⁸ On November 8th 641 a surrender agreement for Egypt was signed; a poll tax was fixed and the Byzantine army had eleven months to evacuate. The Jews could remain and the Muslims would not seize

303 Eutychius, 276 in *das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien*, ed. M Breydy, (Louvain 1985)

304 *The History of al Tabarī* volume XII translated by Yohanan Friedmann (New York 19) 186-7. the name Arttabūn could mean tribunus or maybe Aretion according to Friedmann in footnote 681, page 183

305 D Woods, “The 60 Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem” *ARAM Periodical* 15 (2003), 129-50, Reprinted in M. Bonner (ed.), *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times* (Aldershot, 2005)

306 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 95

307 The other Muslim commander referred to in both accounts is Ammiras/ Amiras (Ἀμῖρας means simply “emir”), who could be Amr ibn Ghailān, who died in Syria in 639CE, though Gaza was seized by ‘Algama ibn Muyazziz.

308 *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, ed. P.M. Forster, (Oxford 1978) , 221-237

more churches or interfere with Christian worship, though Copts in the delta towns continued to resist until July 642. The role of the Copts during the invasion remains controversial and unclear, but it seems to reflect a mixed response by the population. John of Nikiu wishes God's judgement on the "Ishmaelites"; but he also gives evidence for apostasy and co-operation by Egyptians³⁰⁹. 'Amr served under Caliph 'Uthman until Egypt was safe from a Byzantine attempt to retake it in 645. Later he played a significant role as a supporter of Muawiya against Ali before dying in 663. He had repaired and developed irrigation work in Egypt, re-dug Trajan's canal from the Red Sea to Fustat as far as the Nile, and protected the Copts from extortion. He is generally regarded as being an astute, worldly politician. He does not seem to be a man keen to force apostasy on people. As such he is hardly recognisable in the sparse *passio* references. As governor of Egypt at that time he would have presided over a province of which most of whose inhabitants were Coptic Christian. The overriding impression is of a political survivor, unafraid of being ruthless when necessary. This could be significant when considering if a garrison at Gaza really was executed due to a grudge.

Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem at the time of the conquest, is known from various sources including some of his own writings. These include a letter which expresses the fear and impoverishment of religious life on the part of Christians who were being attacked unexpectedly. It shows how Sophronius and others had underestimated the Arabs³¹⁰. In his Christmas sermon for 634CE he laments that Bethlehem is in Arab hands. He expresses hope that they will be defeated³¹¹. There is also an epiphany sermon for 637CE³¹². Sophronius, born in Damascus in 550, had been active in Alexandria as a staunch representative of orthodox religiosity against the patriarch Cyrus, a supporter of monotheletism³¹³. Sophronius travelled to Constantinople, failed to get the support of patriarch Sergios (who instead supported Cyrus) but was, at the age of eighty-three, elected patriarch of Jerusalem by the monks and populace. After

309 John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, page 184, 200, 186, 179, 188, 182, 195, 182, 181

310 *PG* vol. LXXXVII cols 3148-3200

311 Christmas Sermon (634CE) ed. H. Usener in *Rheinisches Museum NF* 41, 1886, 500-16 ; repinted in *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen I*, Bonn, 1889, 326-30

312 Epiphany Sermon (637CE January 6th) ed. A. Papadopolous-Kerameus, *Analekta Hierosolymitikes Stachylogias*, vol V, Brussels, 1963 (1888), 151-68.

313 a doctrine which Emperor Heraclius had hoped to use to restore theological unity in the Byzantine Church. This creed quietly ignored the problematic subject of Jesus' natures, and spoke of God's unity of will and action (hence its name).

Sophronius' death the patriarchal seat remained unoccupied for some sixty years. Eutychius provides an account of Sophronius' famous meeting with the caliph 'Umar on his entry into Jerusalem in one of the earliest Christian-Muslim encounters³¹⁴. But as Sahas notes with caution, Eutychius is writing three centuries after the events he describes³¹⁵. His presence in the *passio* is problematic because, if the unclear, puzzling chronology of the martyrs' long imprisonment is followed, then Sophronius, who did not long survive the fall of Jerusalem, should have predeceased them, dying, allegedly of sorrow in March 638³¹⁶. But Muslim tradition shows 'Umar as a model of piety and humility when he entered Jerusalem, riding a camel and dressing simply³¹⁷. The tradition that he refused to accept Sophronius' invitation to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is preserved in Eutychius³¹⁸.

Woods argues that between the two accounts of the Gazan martyrs we are given a possible account of the martyrdom of Sophronius, but that somehow this martyrdom has been hidden by history. Sophronius plays a key role in the first recension. Woods' reasoning is that, apart from the fact that sources preserve little of Sophronius' life, there were no historical accounts of his martyrdom because neither of his theological opponents, the monophysites nor the monothelites, would have preserved it. But would such a significant event as the martyrdom of a patriarch in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem really have been forgotten so completely and never revived by sympathetic writers subsequently? Is martyrdom really a more plausible cause of death at this date for the elderly Sophronius than natural causes, possibly exacerbated by exhaustion and despondency brought on by major religio-political upheavals? Woods' argument is that whereas the second recension does not mention Sophronius by name, Florianus could be Sophronius. It is certainly significant that each figure occurs in one recension only, and that in the second one Florianus takes on Sophronius' role of encourager as well as burier of the soldiers. Especially

314 Latin translation is in *PG* vol. CXI, 907-1156

315 Daniel J. Sahas, "The Face to Face Encounter Between Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb: Friends or Foes?" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. E. Grypeou, M.N. Swanson and D.R. Thomas, Leiden 2007, 38-9

316 Le Quien, *Oriens Christianus* III, 278 gives opinions on dates of Sophronius' death from 636-644 (also 264ff. & 272 for further details on him). Gil (Cambridge 1992), 51-2.

317 Theophanes records this too, but in a more derisive way in AM 6127.

318 Eutychius, 280 in *das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien*, ed. M Breydy, (Louvain 1985)

noteworthy are the references to Florianus, whose exact relationship to the troops is not spelled out but is described as being *dux* and *quasi quidem patriarcha*³¹⁹.

Woods considers that Sophronius was executed after the collapse of the first mosque built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem had heightened religious tension. The second recension indeed describes the destruction of a mosque. Theophanes dates it to AM 6135 (643/644CE)³²⁰. Earthquakes struck Palestine in 634 and 659, so it is possible there was a third that destroyed a mosque. However, the narrative at this point is extremely weak on detail and, as is the case generally throughout both of the accounts, demonstrates no real interest in Islam, referring to the building in *topos* language as a *templum deorum* containing *idola*³²¹. It would be dangerous to argue that this vague hagiographical scene refers to a historical event that precipitates the otherwise unrecorded martyrdom of a high-profile church leader.

At the time of the Muslim conquest the Melkite church in the Near East had only recently survived the disruption of the early seventh century Persian conquest. By comparison damage suffered by Melkites during the Muslim conquest was mild. Though there was a twenty-nine year gap after the death of Sophronius in 638, there was an almost uninterrupted succession of patriarchs between early Islamic times and the coming of the crusaders. Again, firm evidence for the causes of this long *lacuna* are hard to come by, but Kennedy posits that this could be connected with the rejection by Palestine of a Byzantine Monothelite position, rather than Islamic interference, though he accepts that Arab-Byzantine warfare would have disrupted communications between Jerusalem and Constantinople³²². Later on the iconoclast controversy would also weaken links between Constantinople and the Melkite Church.

The martyrs in the Melkite martyrologies of the Near East from this period do not contain among their number any bishops or patriarchs, so if Woods is correct in his assertion that the *Passion of Florianus* is really about Sophronius, then his martyrdom

319 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 2 and 5

320 Theophanes, *Chronographia*

321 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 5

322 Kennedy, H. "The Melkite Church from the Islamic Conquest to the Crusades" in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, Ashgate (Variorum) 2005, 329

is quite exceptional. The absence of episcopal martyrs here is a marked contrast with the turbulence evident at times in the history of relations between the Sasanid authorities and the Christians, notably under Šâpûr II.

Some other tantalising glimpses of information hint at a historical basis for these martyrdoms. Names are given in the first recension for those martyred – though Hoyland notes that there is also an air of unreality about the list of names of martyrs given³²³. Sixty percent share just five names³²⁴. But there is more reality about names given in the first recension for the martyrs' units – a *bandon of Scythi* and *Voluntarii* – showing that these units survived into the seventh century³²⁵. These may be units from the Legio IV Scythica at Oriza in Syria and *Cohors viii Voluntaria*, originally under the *dux Arabiae*, according to John Haldon, who sees no reason to suppose that there was a major reform of military organisation during Heraclius' reign³²⁶. The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists among its shield decorations that of the *Scythae* (different units had different shield colours to identify them in the absence of other uniform regulations)³²⁷.

Other references to the troops are extremely scanty and seem to be driven more by hagiographical style than any desire to reflect historical accuracy. The first recension is so bald that it gives the impression of being merely a summary. The second recension portrays in heroic terms the troops' fighting record prior to surrender but gives no detail about where they fought. They merely defended *multa oppida et civitates ab impiis Saracenis obsessas* – the rhetorical flourish of a writer several centuries later with no knowledge of the military history of the campaign³²⁸.

323 R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*, 347-351

324 *Passio sanctorum sexaginta martyrum* 2 & 4

325 Another military unit present in Palestine in the early seventh century was a *bandon* of the Illykryrianoi, referred to in "Récit des Miracles du Saint et Glorieux Martyr Anastase", *Saint Anastase Le Perse et L'Histoire de la Palestine au Début du VIIe Siècle*, Tome Premier, ed. B. Flusin, (Louvain 1992), 144-5

326 John Haldon State, *Army and Society in Byzantium* (Variorum 1995): "Administrative Continuities and Structural Transformations in East Roman Military Organisation ca. 580-640". He wrongly dates the taking of Gaza to 635 and refers to a *Passio* of 40 Martyrs.

327 *Notitia Dignitatum* Or. 6.,43.44. Hoffmann, D., *Das Spätromische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum*, Epigraphische Studien 7/I and II (Düsseldorf 1970)

328 *Legenda sancti Floriani*, 1

Other evidence paints a less inspiring picture. Before the invasion there were salary problems afflicting the Byzantine army – and not for the first time. In 588 Emperor Maurice had tried to get troops to accept arms issues instead of pay, but they mutinied³²⁹. Payment problems in Palestine are indicated by the appointment of Theodore Trithourios, a treasurer (σακελλάριος) to command the Byzantine troops in Syria at the time of the Muslim invasion. Kaegi thinks that this shows the Byzantine need to reassure troops³³⁰. Moreover, the Muslims had wrong-footed Byzantine strategy, leading to defeats, notably at Yarmūk, where some Byzantines ceased to fight and were slaughtered by the Muslims on the field the next day. Thereafter the Byzantines apparently had no opportunity to implement a fall back plan.

Kaegi is sceptical about the role played by religion in this campaign on the Byzantine side but the Byzantine army at Yarmūk consisted of Greeks, Armenians and Ghassanid Arabs³³¹. Alongside linguistic and cultural diversity, religious divisions between monothelites, monophysites and Chalcedonians were reflected in the army, as Kaegi concedes³³². Moreover, the local Palestinian Aramaic-speaking Christian population (from whom few of the troops seem to have been drawn) were mostly monophysites. And Jews and Samaritans were among the most disaffected and had supported the Persians in their invasion only decades before. From the provenance of the *passio* we are meant to understand that the sixty soldiers at Gaza are Chalcedonian Greeks. Kaegi notes that the local population play no part in their story³³³.

The *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* is a crude account, possibly a summary, yielding few details. The names of the units could reflect a memory of the actual garrison at Gaza at the time. Other accounts of the conquest furnish background information of an earlier Byzantine attempt against ‘Amr that would explain the untypical execution of the Byzantine garrison after surrender, providing the raw material for later hagiographical embellishment. Evidence to suggest that the later recension preserves a suppressed memory of an otherwise unknown martyr’s death for Sophronius is less convincing.

329 Warren Treadgold: *Byzantium and its Army 284-1081* (Stanford 1995), 147-8

330 Theophanes (AM 6123) reports that an anonymous eunuch haughtily refused to pay irregular Arabs who guarded “the entrance of the desert” as there was not enough money for those “dogs”.

331 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 173-4.

332 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 132

333 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquest*, 266

The third text considered in this group, *the Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* begins with an assault on Constantinople by the caliph Sulaymān (715-20), son of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān, which Leo III thwarts³³⁴. Leo III, (described as *beatae memoriae*) arranges for the invaders to be surrounded by water diverted from springs near and far. A sly and crafty eunuch in the service of the caliph negotiates a seven year treaty that enables commercial activity and pilgrims to travel to the Holy Land (“like deer to springs of water”). In the seventh year seventy officers came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a large bodyguard, giving alms, visiting holy places and desert monasteries before setting off home, but the truce was already over. Envious Arabs imprisoned them in Caesarea. They are told to convert or die. They are defiant in the face of inducements and threats alike. Their execution is decreed and George, John and Julian ask to be taken back to Jerusalem, where they want to be buried in a plot bought by a priest, Father John. Three of the sixty died of natural causes en route. Seven apostatized, only to fall ill the same day and die wretchedly soon after. The other sixty, faithful under torture, were martyred (their anniversary being October 21st). Father John has them removed from their crosses and buried at St Stephen’s, outside the gates of Jerusalem. Their feast was celebrated on October 21st and their relics effected cures, according to the hagiographer, “humble” John, the monk who had the work translated from Syriac into Greek.

Topoi in this account include the stress on the martyrs’ resistance to bribes and threats as well as a link through burial with the protomartyr St Stephen (at his church outside the walls of Jerusalem)³³⁵.

Greek versions survive, along with a Latin translation of the earlier of the two recensions. The author of the lost original Syriac version, who probably wrote mid eighth century, is unknown. He is certainly writing before the proscription of iconoclasm at the Oecumenical Council of 787 and probably before the synod of Hiereia convened by Constantine V in 754. Given the lack of martyrologies from this period known to have been written in Syriac, the text is therefore an interesting phenomenon, even though it no longer survives in Syriac. Symeon, priest and monk

334 A Latin transcript of the passio is in AASS Oct. IX 360-362 (21 October).

335 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* 7 and 12

of the cave of Lent in Jerusalem, later composed a longer version³³⁶. Hoyland discusses the differences between the two recensions³³⁷. Where John's version is relatively plain, Simeon's is more literary and laced with more Biblical quotations and miracles. John's version recounts the 717 siege of Constantinople by the Arabs, whereas Simeon speaks about the beginnings of iconoclasm³³⁸. John's version speaks of Leo as "most dear to God and most pious", whereas in Simeon's version he is a "new Balthasar" and a "Mōameth"³³⁹. Simeon has sixty three martyrs (their spokesmen are Theodoulos, Eusebius and David) whereas John has sixty whose spokesmen are George, Julian and John³⁴⁰. Simeon gives more detail – they were from Iconium and were charged with illegal entry – i.e. they had not been granted safe conduct (*amān*). In Simeon's version the Governor of Caesarea writes to the prince (ἄρχηγός) of Egypt for orders, but Palestine only became subject to Egypt under the Fatimids in the tenth century, so this recension is a late one.

There is no other evidence for the truce referred to here and no historical sources refer to a massacre of pilgrims. Huxley argues that the original hagiographer, whom he sees as being "a Palestinian *dhimmī*, full of hatred towards the Saracens and their "tyrant" Sulaymān", invented the truce, anniversary and martyrdom, drawing on the *Passio of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*³⁴¹. This *passio's* account of the campaign between Sulaymān and Leo is extremely vague and seems to have no basis in any knowledge of actual military operations in the campaign. All we get by way of a description of the campaign is a list of arms and armour stockpiled by the caliph. Nor is it made clear how Leo defeats the invaders³⁴². By beginning with Sulaymān's invasion of the empire the *passio* provides an echo of the pressure that Byzantium was under during the Umayyad period. But here the echo is distorted, as the defeated caliph seeks peace³⁴³. In particular, the account's vagueness about Byzantine handling of the siege is further evidence for Gero that the account originated in Palestine rather than on

336 *Passion of the Sixty Three*, A. Papadoupoulos-Kerameus, *Pravoslavonii Palestinskii Sbornik* 19 (1907), 136-63

337 Hoyland, R., *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 360-363

338 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 4-5

339 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 5

340 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 8

341 Huxley, G. L. "The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 18, (1977), 369-74

342 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 4

343 *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 5

Byzantine soil³⁴⁴. Nevertheless, even though he concedes that the martyrdoms described here are not recorded in any Byzantine source, he is willing to see it as an authentic document, possibly a hagiographic embellishment of an execution of Byzantine *agents provocateurs* (rather than of innocent pilgrims)³⁴⁵. He does not examine possible links with the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* in his analysis.

In fact the Umayyad caliphate was then demonstrating signs of great cultural confidence. Indeed, Sulaymān's father, 'Abd al Malik (685-705) ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock in 692. Its design was a powerful proclamation of Islam in a place of central importance to Judaism and Christianity. Built over a rock, its domed design overshadows the nearby similarly-sized dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which itself was built over a rock. The Dome of the Rock was and still is, able to take advantage of an uncluttered skyline by comparison with its older Christian rival. It also asserts Islamic theology over and against Christianity through epigraphy from the Qur'ān challenging Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity³⁴⁶. It had been constructed by the time of the events in this *passio*, if they happened at all. But it is notable that there is no reference to that project, despite the *passio*'s setting in Jerusalem.

Maybe it is a literary derivation from *the Passio of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*³⁴⁷. Common details include the martyrdom of around sixty Byzantine soldiers, after being removed from one town to another and having contact with a cleric who supervises their interment in a spot in Jerusalem associated with the protomartyr, St Stephen. Yet there are differences too, including the absence (apart from Sulaymān and Leo at the beginning to set the events in a historical context) of any historical figures. Here there is no 'Amr or Sophronius. And whereas the fall of Gaza actually happened, there is no corroboration for either the war or truce referred to in this *passio*.

344 S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III with Particular Reference to the Oriental Sources*, (Louvain 1973), 176-81

345 S.Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Leo III with Particular Reference to the Oriental Sources*, 178-9

346 Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, London 1999, 24-25

347 Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 360-363

It is difficult to argue that this text has an independent basis in history and is anything other than a derivation from another *passio* – perhaps the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*. As has been argued above, that *passio*'s own basis in history may be real but heavily filtered by the demands of the genre through which it has been transmitted to us. The alternative would be to accept the text as an original composition.

However, it is not devoid of historical worth. It may not provide much data for the time of Leo III and 'Abd al-Malik or Sulaymān but, as Huxley observes, it has value because of what it says about the world of the original Syriac author whose attitude to Leo the iconoclast was so different from the Hellenophone, John of Damascus:

Through it we look into the embittered world of the *dhimmis*, who a century or so after the conquest still hoped for a Christian liberator to come from Romania. The anonymous pseudigrapher lived in a harsher and more truculent society than St John Damascene, who had enjoyed the patronage of caliphs and served them before he retired to a monastery³⁴⁸.

He notes caustically that, for some Palestinian Christians, hatred turned to fanaticism – e.g. Peter of Capitolias. “Our anonymous hagiographer, however, did not seek a martyrdom for himself; instead he borrowed one for the benefit of his readers:”³⁴⁹

Neither version sheds direct light on Christian-Muslim relations of the period, as the accounts provide no real data and seem to be derived from another martyrology. However, both recensions, written at different times, demonstrate the rise and fall of iconoclasm – and the reputation of iconoclast emperors along with it – within Byzantine Church history. The provenance of the account in eighth century Syrian Christianity possibly sheds some light on the mentality of some Melkite *dhimmis* towards their Muslim overlords as they looked towards Byzantium for rescue.

This collection of military martyrologies reflects a variety of situations. The *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, set during the seventh century conquest, is a unique (for this period) account of a captured garrison in the conquest period that faces

348 Huxley, “The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem,” 373-4.

349 Huxley, “The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem,” 374.

conversion or death. The *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* is a document with a source dating from the mid eighth century – near the time when the ‘Abbāsids replaced the Umayyads. It has been argued that this martyrology lacks credibility as a historical document. However, one detail with an echo in Islamic law is the description of the Byzantine officers and their companions overstaying their welcome when the treaty between Byzantium had expired. A non-Muslim who was not protected by a treaty was called *harbī* – in a state of war, an enemy alien. Without a temporary safe-conduct (*amān*) his life and property were unprotected by law³⁵⁰. But there is a lack of supporting evidence for the truce referred to in the story. As Huxley remarks:

If there was a seven-year truce, it is odd that the pilgrims travelled so heavily armed. If, however, they were caught on a raiding expedition, there was no truce. In fact...there was no truce.³⁵¹

Huxley dates the composition of the earlier, shorter Greek version of this *passio* to a time after 740CE, but it still could have been set down before the systematic codification of Islamic law. And as it purports to describe events set in the 720’s it, along with the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, is set in a relatively early period in the history of the caliphate.

These military martyrologies feel very different from the group of martyrologies associated with the martyrologists of Mar Saba, to be considered below. This is not just because the works from Mar Saba are mostly focussed on individuals rather than a group of men. It is more to do with their lack of geographical and historical rootedness. The works describe the martyrdom of Byzantine soldiers rather than Christians from the indigenous population. Although *the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* is regarded as emanating from the pen of a Syriac language scribe, it does not seem to be rooted in the life of the churches of Palestine. And the textual history of the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* and the derivative Florianus story are even further removed, despite the presence (in one of them) of Sophronius. The surviving manuscripts in Latin, from no earlier than the tenth century in the case of the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, remove them

350 *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Joseph Schacht (Oxford 1964) page 131

351 George Huxley, “The Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem”, 369-374

in time as well as in space from the events that they describe. Yet it is not impossible to see behind them the memory of an event so exceptional in the context of the conquest of Palestine that it left a historical imprint from which could be created a martyrology that would spawn others.

Apart from these accounts there is relatively little else by way of martyrologies from the period of the conquest or indeed from the Umayyad caliphate. There is a bald and relatively brief account concerning the death of a Christian Arab at Sinai who, at a time when other Arabs apostasised during the conquest, “sacrificed” his family at his wife’s request before dying after a vision at the Monastery of the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai³⁵². Otherwise documentary records from the Umayyad period paint a very different picture of Christian life in Palestine. The Nessana Papyri³⁵³ are a notable example, being a valuable resource for demonstrating daily life in a small³⁵⁴ community in Palestine in the late seventh century. They suggest normal relations and are an important witness given meagre archaeological evidence from that area for the period. A frequent ecclesiastic presence is Abbot Sergius, who is also apparently a local landowner. Many papyri (more than forty definitely postdate the conquest) are requisitions. Over half are administrative. Fifteen others concern business and farming. Two are personal and two religious (though literate clergy would probably have been involved in writing most of the others). A few are written in Arabic.

The documents reflect social changes since the conquest, highlighting taxation and the provision of compulsory services. Kraemer observes that there is no evidence of conflict with the new settlers, some of whom were Christian anyway³⁵⁵. The church at Nessana remained until the end of the community. Archaeological data ends by 750CE and papyrology abruptly by 700CE. The community seems to have declined when, under the Abbasids, the centre of power moved eastwards.

Document 56 is a release from a labour contract. Christians, including a cleric as scribe, and Muslims, including a *qādī* as one of the witnesses, collaborate in a

352 *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902) 58-9 “Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinai” publié par F. Nau”, pages 87-9

353 Kraemer, C. J., Jr, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri (Princeton, NJ, 1958)

354 Document 76 indicates that the population of the community could not have been more than 1500.

355 Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, 31

bilingual document about routine business. Document 57 is a divorce document that, as Kraemer points out, could compare with Islamic practice and appears to have been undertaken to avoid using courts³⁵⁶. Document 59 is a partial payment for tax. As Kraemer observes the mention of *επικεφάλιον* is significant, proving that a poll tax was in effect in Syria at the time³⁵⁷. Documents 72 and 73 are orders from the governor for a guide for travellers probably on pilgrimage to St Catherine's and the site of the burning bush. *Τουρσινά* is most likely a transliteration of the Arabic for Mt Sinai, *Tūr Sīnā*. The travellers appear not to have been born Muslims (the wife of the governor may have been Christian). Document 75 concerns a tax protest organised by local landowners. Document 76 is a list of tax payers that shows that clergy paid the poll tax. Documents 79 and 80 concern normal church life. 79 is an account of offerings to the church of St Sergius and 80 is an account of wheat offerings. Document 89, the accounts of a trading company, though maybe from the pre-conquest period, shows the relationship of the traders of Nessana with the Arabs. It refers to offerings connected with a visit to the Holy Mountain, a place that, as Kraemer observes, became holy to Christians and Muslims³⁵⁸. Document 92 is an obscure Arabic payment account, possibly from Nessana, containing the Arab names of a small local force, which to Kraemer suggests a police post³⁵⁹. They are fascinating because of the timeless nature of their sheer ordinariness and the picture they paint of daily life continuing against the backdrop of a new power structure. They describe a very different world from that reflected in martyrologies from this period. They are "occasional" documents with no particular theological agenda and as such are a valuable historical counterweight to more polemical religious texts such as the martyrologies under consideration here.

The three military martyrologies under consideration here suggest that the Islamic conquest of the Near East and the early years of Islamic rule did not engender much martyrdom. However, although the accounts seem to be rich in *topoi* and poor in historical detail, the *Sixty Martyrs of Gaza* stands out, not just because of the unpolished nature of its rough text, but because of its tantalising proximity to historical personages and events related, however confusingly, in other historical

356 Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, 163

357 Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, 173

358 Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, 255

359 Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, 291

sources. The execution of a garrison for perceived violation of the rules of war could perhaps be the historical grain of sand around which a little string of three martyrological pearls grew.

The Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks

In a prologue to the account the narrator, Stephen, describes himself as an eye witness. The account is written predominantly in the first person plural. He states that he wants to preserve the memory of these martyrs so that inspiration may be drawn from their example.

We are told that war flared up among the Arabs. There was much slaughter, destruction and plunder. Many people fled to Jerusalem, which itself was under threat. The monastery of St Chariton was plundered and monks were roughly treated. The author marvels at God's protection of Mar Saba in the midst of all this, as an initial attempt to destroy Mar Saba was thwarted by God, who led the barbarians to fight each other instead. Another attack was foiled when the robbers found wine and got drunk instead. However, there remained fear of an attack. Lookouts were posted to warn of approaching trouble. Fervent prayer was offered.

The faith of the monks was such that, despite the danger, they stayed at Mar Saba rather than leave for safer places. The monks were determined not to go back to the city, preferring to put their faith in spiritual, rather than physical protection. They were determined not to abandon the monastery and see it destroyed. The author wonders rhetorically how he is to celebrate the martyrs – comparing their ordeals with the trials of Job. He then describes how about sixty robbers armed with bows surrounded the monastery. The abbot sought to calm them with words, stressing that the monks are men of peace who show hospitality and have harmed no-one. The robbers demand money. On being told there is none they wound thirty monks with arrows. They attack the doors with rocks while the wounded monks are taken to their cells. Abba Thomas, the doctor, later the *hegumen*, cares for them. The raiders start to burn the cells and the monks fear for the monastery, but the raiders withdraw, thinking that help is on the way.

The monks console each other. Two monks from the “old monastery” come, warning of an impending attack. In trepidation, the monks pray and place lookouts. Then another warning comes from two monks from St Euthymius' monastery and the fear increases. The monks pray and the attack begins. The monks are driven into the

church or try to hide in caves. Father John, the *hegumeniarch* is attacked and beaten. Monks are rounded up. At this point Sergius of Damascus is killed. Seven monks hide in a cave but are almost spotted. They fear capture but the monk Hadrian saves the others by telling his captors that he is the only one there. The robbers' leaders demand forty thousand gold coins. The monks stress that all that they have is their robes. Angrily the robbers (among whom there are Ethiopians) threaten to shoot the *oeconomos* with their bows. They demand that the monastery valuables be brought out. The monks deny that there are any. Again the demand is made and denied. The monks are beaten and abused. The robbers demand to be told who the leaders of the monastery are, as they would know where the treasure was, but the monks will not name them. The raiders take archdeacon Anastasius but he does not yield to their threats.

The monks are led into a cave, of which a full description is given. They are locked in and a fire is lit. They are forced to go through the fire to escape the smoke. Again they are interrogated as to the whereabouts of the valuables. They give nothing away and are forced back into the burning cave again. Nineteen die. The robbers load up their camels with whatever they can plunder from the cells and go. Monks tend the wounded and at night when the fire dies down they enter the cave and find the dead monks. The horrors of suffocation are vividly described. The nineteen are buried with Abbot Sergius.

A long eulogy follows in praise of the monks who died for Christ, the monastery and for their brothers. One old monk later dies of his wounds. The writer says that even those who did not die but were prepared to do so have been martyrs of a sort – there are witnesses in the Old Testament who were not killed.

There were apparitions and miracles. One monk, while enduring the suffocating smoke, saw Cosmas standing happily before the altar, not realising that he was dead. Another, old Sergius, on another occasion, saw him emerging from the church. Later, a miraculous rain fell to end the dry spell. A Syrian monk was cured, by an apparition of the martyred Anastasius, of his inability to speak Greek. The robbers are soon smitten by divinely-inspired plague and do not even receive proper burial.

The author praises the monks for their mortification and for the death by temporal fire that will enable them to escape the eternal fire. He also praises Mar Saba itself, recalling the monastic martyrs there from the time in the seventh century when the Persians captured and sacked Jerusalem. The piece ends with a poetic eulogy.

The text survives in one tenth century Greek manuscript, on which the first and second editions are based³⁶⁰. Two Georgian recensions also exist, the older and more complete of which facilitates the filling in of two gaps in the Greek narrative³⁶¹. The *passio* may have been translated from Greek into Georgian via Arabic³⁶². The author is Stephen Mansūr, hymnographer, hagiographer and relative of John of Damascus. He demonstrates an elegant rhetorical style and cites scripture frequently. He is a Greek purist, referring towards the end of the narration to how a Syriac speaking monk unable to pronounce Greek well was cured of his “barbaric” tongue by a vision of one of the twenty monk-martyrs³⁶³!

Raids on monasteries, such as the one described here, were far from unknown in the pre-Islamic centuries too. John Moschos writes of the beheading of a monk, near the Dead Sea by Arabs, one of whom is then killed by a giant bird; of the miraculous foiling of another Arab attempt on a monk’s life; and of a raid, where three Arabs take a young captive for sacrifice but miraculously fight each other to the death instead³⁶⁴. Pseudo-Nilus’ *Narrations*, probably a fifth century work, written in Greek and translated into Syriac, describes vividly an attack on the monks of Mount Sinai by Saracens³⁶⁵. Another attack on the monasteries on Mount Sinai and at nearby Rhaithou is described in the *Ammonius Report*, which is possibly a sixth century document relating events from the fourth century. Versions of it survive in Greek, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic and Georgian³⁶⁶. A letter of Antiochus,

360 AASS XX Martii, pp166-179

361 Robert Blake, “Deux lacunes comblées dans la Passio XX monachorum Sabaitarum” *AB* 68 (1950), 27-43

362 Robert Blake, “Deux lacunes comblées dans la Passio XX monachorum Sabaitarum”, 28

363 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter VII, 73

364 John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, chapters 21, 99, 155

365 Pseudo-Nilus, *Narrations IV*, in Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai* (Liverpool 2010), 103-109

366 The Ammonius Report is translated from Greek in Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, 149-171. The Christian Palestinian Text is translated in C. Müller-Kessler and M Sokoloff, *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert* (Groningen 1996).

Abbot of Mar Saba to Eustathius refers to the martyrdom of forty four monks there by raiders in the early seventh century a week before Jerusalem fell to the Sasanids³⁶⁷.

Ibn ‘Asākir reports that around 800CE, after Hārūn al-Rashid became caliph, the insurrection of the Transjordanian Jew, Yahyā b. Irmiyā happened. Gil disputes Ibn ‘Asākir’s assertion that Yahyā and his Muslim confederates were highway robbers. The pro-Umayyad confederates who surrendered were pardoned³⁶⁸. After refusing to surrender, convert to Islam or pay the *jizya*, Yahyā b. Irmiyā fell in battle. Gil links the events of the *passio* to this time, but if Blake’s amendments of the dates in the account are correct, then the insurrection must have lasted almost a decade for the attack on the monastery to have occurred against the backdrop of that particular uprising³⁶⁹.

The attack takes place against a backdrop of major upheaval. According to Stephen, as well as the attack on Mar Saba itself, Eleutheropolis (Bet Guvrin), Ascalon, Gaza and Sariphaea (maybe Sarafa in southern Transjordan, or else Sarafand) were destroyed and the St Chariton monastery was robbed. There was concern for the safety of Jerusalem. It is not clear from this *passio* who sacked those towns. Stephen just gives us a general and frightening picture of anarchy. If the events of this *passio* take place before 797 they occur in the patriarchate of Elias II (770-797), not long after he sent representatives to the Seventh Oecumenical Council in Nicaea (787CE) at which Abbot Peter of Mar Saba participated.

There were other disturbances in the region at that period. In 807 a rebellion broke out in Eilat under Abū’l Nida. Next year he was caught, taken to Raqqa in Northern Syria and executed. As the uprising was caused by the *kharāj* (land tax), Gil considers that it may have been a non-Muslim rebellion. In 809, at the outset of the great ‘Abbasid civil war of 809-833, the inhabitants of Ramla attacked the *kharāj* caravan from Egypt to Iraq and took the money³⁷⁰. Theophanes refers twice to sackings of Mar Saba (along with other monasteries) and his reference to martyrdoms for the year 812-3 reflects what is described here, though martyrdoms in the years 812-3 would postdate

367 PG 89, columns 1021-1024

368 Gil, M., *A History of Palestine 634-1099* (Cambridge 1992), 282-3

369 Gil, M., *A History of Palestine 634-1099*, 283, footnote 7

370 Gil, M., *A History of Palestine 634-1099*, 292

the death of Stephen Mansūr and would mean that he could not be the author³⁷¹. It is possible that Theophanes' chronology is wrong, as many events are misdated in Theophanes, though the later sections tend to be more accurate.

One of the many monks portrayed favourably in this narrative is Thomas, who became patriarch Thomas I of Jerusalem (807-820). His eventful patriarchate saw another schism over icons in which the Jerusalem patriarchs sided with the iconophiles³⁷². Euthychius credits Thomas with restoring the dome of the Holy Sepulchre under Caliph al-Ma'mūn³⁷³.

This *passio* has a fine literary style. Earlier writings on desert martyrdom had also shown a level of literary sophistication. Pseudo-Nilus' *Narrations* was a work that drew its narrative structure from Greco-Roman romance and also drew on the theological and philosophical themes of *4 Maccabees*, in which the hero's spiritually-inspired physical endurance overcame human passions, as Caner states³⁷⁴. Pseudo-Nilus offers a sophisticated literary work but offers little wider historical detail. Likewise, the *Twenty Martyrs of Mar Saba* refers to civil war among the Arab tribes and does so in the most general of terms (families and tribes divided against each other). There is no reference to any Jewish rebels; indeed no protagonists are named at all. It is not clear which, if any, army the raiders are linked to. The attacks could be opportunistic crimes committed by a bunch of bandits during a general breakdown in law and order. As Caner notes, attacks on the Sinai monasteries in earlier centuries coincided with outbreaks of major hostilities that provided nomads with an opportunity for raiding with impunity³⁷⁵. Maybe the victims themselves did not know the precise origin of their attackers. They are just referred to as "barbarians". Stephen is more interested in the theological allegiance of the robbers than their political

371 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6301 (808/9CE), where he is not specific about what happened, but says that Christians as well as Muslims suffered; AM 6305 (812-13), where he mentions martyrdoms and also says that some monks fled to Cyprus as refugees

372 "This derived, not a little, from the fact that it was the monks who were the spinal chord of the official Church of Palestine, and they persisted in their fanatical support of the worship of icons and crosses" Thus says Gil (Cambridge 1992) 459. The reference to fanaticism is unfortunate and comes across as a "loaded" comment. The reference to worship, rather than veneration, of icons and crosses is misleading.

373 Euthychius 286 in *Das Annalenwerk des Euthychios von Alexandrien*, trans. M. Breydy, CSCO vol 472, (Louvain 1985)

374 Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai* (Liverpool 2010), 77-80

375 Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, 48-9

affiliation. For him they are agents of the devil³⁷⁶. We are only told that the group carrying out the first attack contained several archers and that the second attack was carried out by a group involving some “Ethiopians” among their number³⁷⁷. The attackers took their booty away on camels³⁷⁸.

Overall this narrative stands out from other Caliphate martyrologies. It is vivid and on the face of it seems packed with eye-witness detail. It is very tempting to see this as a straightforward, plausible historical document, as although the account is literary, the writer could be describing something that he witnessed. There is, for example, more stress on the human fear of the monks in the face of danger, even if they display the stubborn steadfastness of martyrs³⁷⁹. The monks, having moved to their desert monastery, may have chosen the world-renouncing life of what since the days of Anthony of Egypt had come to be seen as the next best thing to martyrdom, renouncing the world and dying to it. However, they are not actively seeking violent self-immolation. It is true that that they stay and pray rather than flee to the relative safety of Jerusalem, but they are not without fear. This is not an emotion that is recorded in martyrologies where the author is historically removed from the events that he is describing. There the martyrs are described in terms that can seem hard to relate to, so great is the martyr’s saintly zeal and constancy and desire to win the precious crown.

This account lacks the sort of supernatural interventions in the drama that we find in other martyrological texts, including some from this period – such as the poison that fails to kill Michael but kills another, or Florianus’ executioners despatching each other instead of him that are the hallmarks of embellished hagiography³⁸⁰. Insofar as this technique is deployed at all in this *passio*, such happenings are not at the heart of the story and can be explained by other means – for example there was an earlier thwarted raid on the monastery in which the would-be attackers found a store of wine instead³⁸¹. There are apparitions and a miracle at the end of the story, when individual

376 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter I, 3 & 9

377 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter II, 23-4; chapter IV, 43

378 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter V, 51

379 E.g. in Robert Blake, “Deux lacunes comblées dans la Passio XX monachorum Sabaitarum”, lacuna 1, 38

380 *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*, 10; *Passion of Florianus*, 5

381 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter I, 10

monks claim to have seen an apparition of Cosimas and Anastasius, but they do not intervene in the main body of the narrative³⁸². The same is true of the theologically convenient account of robbers' divine punishment, in which it is possible to imagine a certain amount of *Schadenfreude* on the part of the narrator³⁸³.

One glaring difference between this account and other Caliphate martyrologies is the absence of any pressure to convert to Islam. The attackers may indeed be Muslims (after a fashion) but their faith background is not relevant to the story. They are simply robbers, interested in looting valuables from the monastery. This means that this account, unlike the *passio* of Michael of Mar Saba, contains no elements of *disputatio*. The *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba* stands apart from other examples of the genre from the Caliphate period.

Also, whereas so many ancient martyrologies tell a story of a martyr's witness in a public arena (such as Polycarp's death in an amphitheatre before baying crowds) at an event presided over by a high public official, where the contrast between the kingdom of God and the rulers of this age is brought out in a manner that evokes comparison with the trial of Christ, this passion describes the sufferings of monks in the remotest location conceivable – a desert monastery where there are no witnesses, no crowds and where the executioners are more like bandits exploiting the collapse of civil order rather than the temporal authorities. Another interesting feature of this account, in the light of earlier patristic teaching, is the stress it puts on the witness of those who were not martyred. The account also dwells on the monks who were injured and survived and much use is made by the narrator of the first person plural. Reference is made to witnesses in the Old Testament who suffered for their faith but who were not killed³⁸⁴. As happens in Pseudo-Nilus' *Narrations*, a particular comparison is made to the sufferings of the righteous Job³⁸⁵. Moreover, in a line of argument that Clement of Alexandria could have made, the author of the martyrology attaches importance to steadfast witness of those who suffer but do not die, while also exalting those who gave their lives³⁸⁶.

382 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter VII

383 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter VII, 72

384 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter VI, 66

385 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter II, 19; Pseudo-Nilus, *Narrations*, IV.12

386 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapter VI

But the *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*, still displays some of the classic hallmarks of the martyrology genre. The unflinching steadfastness of the monks in the face of threats and torture is highlighted throughout, along with their vulnerability in the face of an allegedly demonically-inspired threat (it is hardly surprising that anything, whether spiritual or physical, that tempts, threatens or seeks in any way to deflect ascetics in the desert should be seen as demonic). The account pays due attention to the gathering and interring at the monastery of the remains of the monks, as well as to wonders and apparitions³⁸⁷.

It is interesting to find echoes of earlier writings about Saracens in this martyrology – “Saracen” being a piece of late antiquity terminology to describe nomadic Arabs previously known as scenites³⁸⁸. “Ishmaelite” was another term deployed in this way³⁸⁹. Events here described as occurring at the Mar Saba monastery are not dissimilar from the descriptions of bandit raids on Sinai monasteries in earlier centuries – and they are described in similar theological language. As Caner remarks, it is tempting to take an account of such an attack as it stands, as being a purely descriptive account of an actual, plausible event, and some historians have done precisely that. But once one sets a few of these accounts alongside each other one is struck by the ways in which the accounts of different events at different times in different places echo each other. Even the suspiciously recurring numbers and multiples are a commonplace – forty martyrs on Sinai and Rhaitou (*the Ammonius Report*), forty four martyrs at Mar Saba (the *Letter of Antiochus to Eustathius*) and the *Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*. Caner sees the deployment of the number forty as an invention to fortify Christians during the forty days of Lent³⁹⁰. Prominence is given in the Sinai accounts to fear and despair in the face of danger and the way to conquer it³⁹¹.

Nevertheless, however much this *passio* may have been shaped by literary antecedents, it is not utterly unreasonable to see this account as reflecting an actual

387 *Passion of Twenty Sabaitic Monks* chapters VI and VII

388 Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, 40

389 “Letter of Antiochus to Eustathius”, *PG* 89 1022

390 Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, 62-3

391 Pseudo-Nilus, *Narrations* V.14-15; *Ammonius Report*, 20-23

historical happening. If so, it is an interesting irony that the fate of these *dhimmis* in the most vivid and, surely, historically well-founded of all the martyrologies of the period is brought about because of a collapse in the Muslim *umma*, at a time when, if the tax paid by subject peoples was being collected at all, the contract of which it was a part appears to have broken down catastrophically. The greatest physical threat to the monks came not from any caliph trying to force conversion, but from a bunch of lawless brigands who were not interested at all in promoting Islam at the expense of Christianity, and who were able to flourish in conditions where the authority of the caliph had disintegrated. This appears to have been a story of martyrdom brought about not by the application of Islamic law, but because of the very absence of the rule of any kind of law.

St Romanos the Neomartyr

The events of the *passio* are set in the reign of the eighth century iconoclast emperor Constantine (741-75). Romanos is introduced to us as a Galatian of exceptional piety. His spirituality is shaped by the monastery at a place that the Georgian text calls *Tomantion*. We are given a glowing description of the monastery. We are told of his ascetic practices there when young and there follows a *catena* of scriptural quotations on the theme of humility.

We are told that Romanos wanted to be a martyr. The events that lead to that outcome are set in train when Arab raiders seize Romanos and an old monk on their travels and take them to Baghdad, where Abd'allah is caliph. The old monk soon dies, leaving Romanos disconsolate.

However, God provides consolation in the form of John and Symeon, two Byzantine monks and deacons, to whom we are now introduced. Constantine's persecution of iconophiles becomes savage. He destroys images, encourages secular entertainment, erects statues of himself, exiles, tortures and laicises monks and even has Patriarch Constantine killed. John and Symeon leave Byzantine territory, are received into the caliphate but soon arrested and sent to Syria. Arabs who had captured an iconoclast, Prince George of the Byzantine royal household, despatched them with him to the caliph in the guise of royal retainers to make their prisoner haul look better. The iconoclast George hopes to kill the monks. The caliph's chamberlain, Rabī, imprisons the monks with Romanos. Prison now becomes a place of fervent worship. George now incites the Greek prisoners to violence, but (after a digression in iconoclasm and on the role of John the Baptist as a founder of Christian asceticism) a bilingual Arab learns of the plot and thwarts it with Frankish and Syrian prisoners. After the governor restores order a pious old Christian persuades him to release the monks into his care. They worship at his house.

The caliph dies and is replaced by al-Mahdī. Five iconophile monks are captured on Cyprus and brought to Baghdad where they join Romanos and his companions. In Mahdī's third year Jacob, one of the five, apostasises and reports that Romanos is a

spy. He denies the charges but is beaten. The accuser is brought back, recants his accusation and is evicted ignominiously.

Mahdī intends to travel to Jerusalem, to pray and to see Judaea. At a place called “Baradin” he still wishes to interrogate Romanos, who is brought from prison. Again he is accused of espionage and again he denies it. But he does not flinch at the prospect of martyrdom. Mahdī tells Rabī to take him to Syria. At al-Raqqā Romanos prays, converting some apostate Greek prisoners back from Islam to Christianity. Rabī reproaches Romanos, beats him and informs Mahdī. He offers Romanos the choice of conversion or death. A defiant Romanos considers the options during a night of prayer. Resisting more promises and threats he is beheaded and his body cast into the Euphrates. It floats; his body and head are rejoined and fished out by Christians at Baghdad and interred in the church there.

Authorship of this has been attributed to John of Damascus’ nephew, the hymnographer and Sabaïtic monk, Stephen Mansūr, who died in 794 or 797. It only survives in Georgian, into which it was translated from Arabic. If the Arabic version was a translation from Greek, Peeters wonders why no trace of the cult of Romanos remained in Byzantine hagiography³⁹². Proper names are retained in their Arabic form along with titles (from Peeters’ Latin translation) such as *princeps fideliorum* (*amīr al-mu’minīn*)³⁹³. In this connection the *senex* who shows such kindness to the monks would be “sheikh” in Arabic, which might explain his status and influence in the story³⁹⁴.

Peeters dates the composition to before 787CE because it refers in positive terms to the creation of double monastic foundations, proscribed at Nicaea that year by the Seventh Oecumenical Council³⁹⁵. Gero qualifies this by noting that the text would have originated outside the Byzantine Empire, though its lack of reference to the triumph of the iconophiles may argue for an early dating³⁹⁶. The Georgian text’s title proclaims that this *passio* originates from Mar Saba, the source of much Christian

392 Peeters, “S. Romain le néomartyr (+ 1 mai 780) d’après un document géorgien”, *AB* 30 (1911), 393-427

393 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 17

394 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 16

395 Peeters, “S. Romain le néomartyr (+ 1 mai 780) d’après un document géorgien”, 393-427

396 S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V*, (Louvain 1977), 5

writing in Arabic. Contemporary polemics against the iconoclast Constantine may have been safer in Arabic than in Greek. The iconophile John of Damascus' first biographer wrote in Arabic.

The *passio* contains several items of historical interest and references to persons, places and events identifiable from other sources. Among them is Anthusa, known from the Greek Synaxary, whose festival is July 27th ³⁹⁷. She confessed the faith under the iconoclast emperor Constantine Copronymos and founded two monasteries, including τὰ τοῦ Μαντινέου (from which *Tomantion* in this Georgian text seems to have been derived).

Abu'l Fadl ar-Rabī' bin Yūnus is named in al-Tabarī³⁹⁸. In the Georgian text he has the title of *mehele*, translatable as “chamberlain” (in Peeters' Latin text it becomes *cubicularius*), rendering the Arabic *hājib*³⁹⁹. A centralising tendency in the 'Abbasid era, especially in the reign of al-Mahdī, meant a growth in the number of *kuttāb* and palace servants led by a *hājib*⁴⁰⁰. Rabī' was on al-Mahdī's expedition against Syria (779-80CE) – he accompanied the caliph's son, the future caliph Harūn ar-Rašīd.

The caliphs who imprison the monks are the second and third 'Abbāsīd caliphs, al-Mansūr (754-775) and al-Mahdī (775-785). Theophanes lists several discriminatory measures that took place at this time. In AM 6248 (756/7 CE) the patriarch of Antioch was exiled and there was a prohibition on new church construction, audible chanting outside churches, and initiating discussion with Muslims. In 6249 (757/8) taxes intensified; even monks, solitaries and stylites were now taxed and church treasuries appropriated, with Jews brought in to sell the contents. In 6251 (759/60) Christians were expelled from government treasuries (but recalled as, according to Theophanes, the Arabs were “innumerate”). In 6258 (766/7) the caliph removed crosses from churches and forbade night vigils and instruction in their own language. In 6264 (772/3) the order was given that Christians and Jews were to be marked on their hands. The *Chronicle of Zuqnān* also lists increasing financial burdens on local

397 *Synax Eccl. CP.*, pages 848-52

398 *The History of al-Tabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, (New York 1990), 7, 10, 94, 101, 125, 128, 138, 199-202, 215, 250

399 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr* 10

400 plural of *kātib*, meaning “secretary”

Christians for those years and the surviving account ends by recording the martyrdom of Cyrus of Harran against a backdrop of apostasy by Christians⁴⁰¹. Fiey comments that such measures seem to have been directed against Melkites and driven by a fear that in frontier regions they could be a pro-Byzantine “fifth column”⁴⁰². For similar reasons there was displacement of population in frontier regions. Al-Mansūr’s reign was period of centralisation and consolidation, securing the Byzantine frontier rather than launching major campaigns, and establishing Baghdad as the capital and al-Raqqa from 772 onwards as a strategically important site.⁴⁰³

Al-Mahdī, (775-785) son and successor of al-Mansūr features heavily in this story. He sought to heal the rift between the ‘Abbasids and ‘Alids and restore the unity of the family of the Prophet. Keen to make the caliph leader of the whole Muslim community, he projected his Islamic credentials not only through waging *jihād* against Byzantium, but by building or enlarging mosques such as at Mecca and the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and improving the water supply for pilgrims making *hajj* to Mecca.⁴⁰⁴ His younger son, Hārūn became Caliph al-Rashīd. The Nestorian Patriarch Timothy, who had translated Aristotle’s *Topics* from Syriac for al-Mahdī, had regular conversations with him.

Al-Mahdi liberated prisoners, including the Jacobite Syrian patriarch, George of Qennesrīn, who had spent the last nine years of al-Mansūr’s reign imprisoned at Baghdad⁴⁰⁵. Maybe the “Greeks” in this *passio* were excluded from any prisoners’ amnesty because of the ongoing war with Byzantium. Certainly a notable feature of this narrative is Romanos’ long imprisonment. The description of Romanos being brought to the caliph blindfolded, if it is more than an author’s imaginative flourish, could indicate the seriousness of the espionage charge⁴⁰⁶.

401 Amir Harrak, trans., *Chronicle of Zuqnān*, (Toronto 1999), 276

402 J.M Fiey: *Chrétien syriaques sous les Abbasides* (Louvain 1980), 27

403 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* volume 6 (Leiden 1986), pages 428-9

404 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* volume 5 (Leiden 1986), pages 1238-9

405 *The History of al-Tabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, (New York 1990), 462 refers to an amnesty for prisoners, though he does not mention the patriarch. He also mentions that the amnesty was not universal.

406 In the *Life and Passion of St Anastasius*, the martyr, a Persian convert to Christianity, is accused of espionage by Sasanid occupiers in Palestine.

Al-Mahdī's expedition against Byzantine held parts of Syria (779-80CE), referred to in the text, is recorded elsewhere by al-Tabarī and Theophanes⁴⁰⁷. "Baradin" in this narrative seems to be al-Baradān, where the caliph concentrated his troops at a confluence of two rivers. In addition, al-Tabarī reports that the caliph also made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, bearing out the intention referred to in this *passio*. Before this he had crucified a number of *Zindīqs* near Aleppo and destroyed their books⁴⁰⁸. The nature of *Zindīq* teaching is not specified – Kennedy thinks they could be pagan Sabians⁴⁰⁹.

This martyrology gives a glimpse into prison life. It portrays the governor as liberal; prisoners have religious freedom⁴¹⁰. A local Christian is able to get access to the monks and eventually obtains their release. This Baghdad Christian, possibly a sheikh, seems to have favoured Melkites over Nestorians and Jacobites⁴¹¹. According to Peeters, there were Christians (probably Arabic speaking) in Baghdad at this time, whose sympathies were more towards the Orthodox than the Jacobites⁴¹². Fiey says that Christian settlements were established there – Jacobite, Nestorian and Melkite⁴¹³.

The prison has a cosmopolitan population. There are several references in the narrative to prisoners from Byzantine territory (and in the case of the Frankish prisoners, from beyond it too)⁴¹⁴. As well as references to the capture of Romanos and his elderly companion, there is the capture of the iconoclast George, the five monks taken from Cyprus to Baghdad and the Greek prisoners who apostasise from Christianity but are reconverted by Romanos.⁴¹⁵ Their presence testifies to the

407 *The History of al-Tabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, (New York 1990), 499-500; Theophanes AM 6271-3

408 *The History of al-Tabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, 499

409 *The History of al-Tabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, 499, footnote 686

410 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 11

411 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr* 16

412 Peeters, "S. Romain le néomartyr (+ 1 mai 780) d'après un document géorgien", 399

413 Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbasides*, 18-22

414 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 15

415 A.I Dikigoropoulos. "The Political State of Cyprus A.D. 648-965", Cyprus (1958), records that there were at least three punitive raids between 723 and 965. In 743 Walid ibn Yazid forced Cypriots that he had suspected of violating their treaty to migrate to a coastal site between Tyre and Sidon. In 806 Al-Rashid sent Humaid ibn Ma'yuf on a raid that involved killing and seizing captives. In 911/12 the Muslims made a four month expedition to the island on the grounds that the Cypriots had violated the treaty terms that stipulated not helping the Byzantines and paying taxes half to them and half to the Muslims. Byzantine sources report these raids but do not concede that the Cypriots violated any treaty. He records much evidence to argue that Cyprus was a hotbed of opposition to iconoclasm.. Theophanes, 445 reports that iconophile monks were exiled to Cyprus.

ongoing state of war between Byzantium and the caliphate, which manifested itself in the raids that took place from caliphal territory into Byzantine territory – especially into Anatolia during the eighth century. Raids took place during the summer months, when the passes thawed, and were often significant military operations led by caliphs. The raids are a feature of some other martyrologies of this era too – especially the *Passion of ‘Abd al Masīh al-Najrāni*.

Romanos is accused more than once of being a spy, something that put a *dhimmī* clearly outside the law. The reasons for the original imprisonment of Romanos, seized in a raid on Byzantine territory (and the imprisonment of some of the many other captives from different places referred to in the story) are not so clearly delineated and it is hard to see how they match what is known of the Islamic legal position regarding non-Muslims. An interesting feature of this account is the response of the caliph to the initial false accusations against Romanos – the accuser is driven out ignominiously, though Romanos is still held captive⁴¹⁶. However, his eventual execution follows his successful conversion back to Christianity of some Greek prisoners who have apostatized from Christianity. Even though the captives were originally Christians, under Islamic law this would have been seen as encouraging Muslims to apostasise – a serious matter indeed since apostasy was punishable by death⁴¹⁷. Initially Romanos is beaten and encouraged to convert to Islam in an account with all the hallmarks of a martyrological *topos*⁴¹⁸.

In the eighth century CE, as this martyrology was produced, Islamic law was still evolving. The age of the caliphate martyrologies that have a probable Mar Saba connection was also the age of the development of the Islamic law schools, but this martyrology reflects some things that came to be part of that legal tradition. Under it, a *dhimmī* became outside the law for such things as: blasphemy of God, his book, his religion and his Prophet. Shāfi’i records a tradition of the Prophet where he said that eight deeds made a *dhimmī* an outlaw; they are an agreement to fight the Muslims; fornication with a Muslim woman (if a Muslim man fornicated or committed adultery with a *dhimmi* woman, she was handed to her own community for treatment as they

416 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 20

417 Tritton, A.S., *The Caliphs and their Muslim Subjects* (London 1930), 181-5

418 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 23

saw fit); an attempt to marry a Muslim woman; an attempt to pervert a Muslim from his religion; robbery of a Muslim on the highway; acting as a spy for unbelievers or sending them information or acting as a guide to them; and the killing of a Muslim man or woman. Although the Prophet said that anyone who killed a *dhimmi* would not enter paradise, the balance of opinion was against the execution of a Muslim for the murder of one. According to Abū Hanīfa one should not be too harsh with *dhimmis* who insulted the prophet. Shāfi'i said that one who repented of having insulted the prophet might be pardoned and restored to his privileges whereas Ibn Taymīya taught that the death penalty was unavoidable in such cases⁴¹⁹. Romanos seems to fall into the category of potential outlaw due to the suspicion that he might be a Byzantine spy.

Islamic legal writers were concerned with legal challenges thrown up by conversion to Islam – for example if a convert was already married to more than four wives. Change of religion was a bar to inheritance (a *dhimmi* who converted to Islam lost property and inheritance rights). They also spelled out penal sanctions for apostates from Islam. The law schools agreed that death was the appropriate penalty for apostasy from Islam by males. The fate of those whom Romanos converts is not dwelt on in this martyrology. Tritton notes that some held that the apostate was to be killed under any circumstances; others argued that one who had returned to Islam, and did not persist in his apostasy, did not deserve to be put to death⁴²⁰. There was room for further disagreement with regard to the death penalty, as to whether it should follow sentence immediately or whether there should be time for allow for possible repentance⁴²¹.

The town where Romanos' fellow captives, Symeon and John, were monks seems to be Seleucia Sidera in Phrygia (known in the Georgian text as *Pharḡani*. Kallinikos-Nicephorium (called al-Raqqa by the Arabs) was an ancient city on the left bank of the Euphrates and was strategically important, commanding one of the routes into the Jazira. A citadel there was built on the same design as the round city of Baghdad (it is also the scene of the last act of the *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*).

419 Al-Sha'rāni, *Kitāb ul mīzān*, 2, 162 Shāfi'i, *Kitāb ul-umm*, 4, 118, Bukhari, *Sahīh* 4, 119, 120; Shāfi'i, *Kitāb ul umm* 7, 291, cited in Tritton, A.S., *The Caliphs and their Muslim Subjects*, 16-17

420 Tritton, A.S., *The Caliphs and their Muslim Subjects*, 181

421 Tritton, A.S., *The Caliphs and their Muslim Subjects*, 182

Like the second recension of the *Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, the *Passion of Romanos* opposes iconoclasm. Originating from the Mar Saba monastery and possibly penned by a relative of John of Damascus, the story reminds us that Christian polemic under Muslim rule was not simply directed at Muslims, but at Christians too, and that the Mar Saba monastery was at that time a safe place in which to produce it. Although the text is about a Christian monk martyred by a Muslim caliph, it portrays some Muslim characters in a positive light – notably in the prison scenes – and shows iconoclast Christians plotting against other Christians⁴²². Martyrologies often reflected intra-Christian theological concerns. This had begun to happen as early as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which includes a critical reference to those who over-hastily sought martyrdom⁴²³. The *Passion of Romanos* is a striking example of a Christian martyrology that is as keen to deal with perceived Christian heresy as it is to offer a theological *apologia* in the face of Islam. This means that, unlike some martyrologies of this period, the account includes a fair amount of narrative detail before moving to the actual martyrdom of Romanos.

But the account is a classic one insofar as it describes an “athlete” (to use the term, inspired by the language of Paul, Ignatius, and *4 Maccabees*, often applied to Christian martyrs). Romanos is portrayed as someone who sought martyrdom in God’s time rather than his own and who endured the customary trials, resisted threats and enticements alike and who witnessed, before the highest worldly authority, before being martyred by beheading.

The *Passion of Romanos* is a well-crafted story by a writer with literary skills. It contains classic hagiographical features – an idealised portrayal of a strong ascetic who is defiant in the face of persuasion and threats alike. But it also interesting for its historical detail in the form of people (such as Anthusa and the Franks), places (e.g. the caliph’s military base at Raqqa) and events (iconoclast upheavals and *ghazwa*). It is a useful source for information regarding Byzantine iconoclasm⁴²⁴. It could

422 *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr*, 14-15

423 *Passion of Polycarp*, 4

424 S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V*, (Louvain 1977) includes the text in his sources.

plausibly have roots in the execution of a Melkite monk suspected of espionage at a time of hostility. It is set in the caliphate, but for the most part it is a story about a captive rather than the Melkite church and the iconophile narrator has at least one eye trained on Byzantium. That distinguishes it from the next four texts to be considered.

Four Sabaitic Texts

The following four texts should be considered alongside each other. All were set down in the eighth century, were associated with the Christian Arabic writing of the Mar Saba monastery and concern Christians who lived in the caliphate (rather than captives like Romanos). Even if the *Passion of Romanos* was also originally written in Arabic, these four texts still mark a new departure because of their focus of interest.

Mar Saba's activity included the development of Christian literature in Arabic as well as translations into Georgian in a period which saw the progressive displacement of Greek and Syriac by Arabic as an administrative and even ecclesiastical language. The accounts also reflect a hardening in official attitudes to Christianity on the part of Muslim authorities, as a confident Islamic culture asserted itself, especially under the Abbāsids from the middle of the century onwards. Christians found themselves on the defensive against a faith that saw itself as superceding their religion, and which regarded its temporal successes as a vindication of theological truth. As Griffith observes, "the narratives themselves became an important part of the effort on the part of the churchmen of the time to strengthen the faith of Christians tempted to convert to Islam"⁴²⁵.

1. Peter of Capitolias

The following summary is a bald précis of Peeters' own summary in French of the Georgian text⁴²⁶. An acknowledged limitation in working with this martyrology is the requirement to study it at such a remove.

The martyrology begins with a prologue introducing the virtues of this saint who voluntarily sought death. We then learn that Peter was a married priest with a son and

425 Sidney H Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 149-5

426 Paulus Peeters, "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias", *AB* 57 (1939), 299-333. Regrettably this article does not contain a full translation of the martyrology.

two daughters, who then opted to live as an ascetic and who committed his family into the care of monastic houses too. His daughters (the youngest only two years old) went to the monastery of St Savinianus. A digression takes us forward in time and tells of the death of the older daughter aged thirty after a life of extreme asceticism. Peter's son lives in a cell near his father, who receives and aids the poor, offers hospitality to visitors and monitors the spiritual progress of his daughters five miles away. Ten years after this change of lifestyle, his wife dies. Then Peter falls mortally ill. He appoints a certain Quaiouma as his nurse. He sends him to the "temple des Arabes", as Peeters' French summary puts it, to invite prominent Muslims to his bedside, where he professes his faith to them in a polemical manner. They want to kill him but refrain from this because of his severe illness.

Peter recovers and blasphemes again in public. The Muslims write to 'Umar, son of the caliph Walid. 'Umar arranges for Peter to be examined by his local agent, Zora. He interrogates Peter and reports to 'Umar. Peter distributes alms while in prison as a spiritual exercise.

A messenger brings orders that Peter be taken in handcuffs and chains to Mount Kasia, near Damascus. Peter is to meet Walid at an Arab palace, formerly the monastery of St Theodore. There is an account of Peter's emotional farewell from the people of Capitolias, who follow him for two miles to Maro, where he dismisses them with a blessing. He is allowed by his guard to pray at a church en route.

On arrival 'Umar allows Peter the chance to recant. He forcefully rejects this, appears before the caliph and they engages in an eloquent disputation. Walid sentences Peter to be returned to Capitolias for a protracted public execution involving amputations, crucifixion and cremation. 'Umar sends Zora instructions in writing. The people are gathered, with Peter's surviving children at the front. Peter recites the last verses of Psalm 96 and the whole of Psalm 121. His tongue is cut out but he continues to speak. His son traces the cross on himself with Peter's blood and is beaten. Peter is taken through the streets while Zora has the blood washed. No-one dares to touch it. We are told that the Jews and Ko'barites are reduced to silence by Peter⁴²⁷.

428 Peeters thinks that this reference is probably a misreading of *Samaritans*.

Peter's right and left foot are amputated. Peter mocks his torturers by prayer and discourse. After a day's pause Peter is taken before the whole population of the three districts of Capitolias, Gadara and Abila on Sunday. He is not allowed to enter the Church of the Theotokos as he passes it but he is able to receive the sacrament. His remaining hand and foot are amputated and he is blinded with a branding iron. He is crucified after his final prayer at Turlipara near the monastery of St Savinianus. As an insult to the Trinity he is pierced three times with a lance. His body is guarded on the cross for five days by soldiers who drive off spectators and light a fire to protect themselves from unnatural cold. Then the body, cross and clothes are all utterly destroyed in a lime-kiln. Nothing, not even blood, is to remain to become a relic. Christians are kept back and Jews are deployed to destroy the remains – the ashes are thrown into the Yarmūk. The account ends with praise of this saint who is comparable with Gordian and many others who voluntarily delivered themselves to their persecutors.

There is an entry for October 4th in a Constantinople synaxary for Peter of Capitolias (Bayt Ras north of Irbid) in Transjordan⁴²⁸. Theophanes refers to his martyrdom in the year 742 – but his account places it in the Gazan port of Mayūmas⁴²⁹. The outline of both accounts is expanded in a *passio*, preserved in a Georgian version. Theophanes and the synaxarist compress the story, whereas the *passio* has undergone hagiographical revision. Peeters queries authorial links with John of Damascus⁴³⁰. John, whose public attitude to the Umayyads was the opposite of Peter, had loyally served under the caliph portrayed here.

This *passio* is set at the end of the caliphate of al-Walīd I (705-715), son of and successor to 'Abd al-Malik (685-705). Al-Walīd's building projects included the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. His reign saw the furthest geographical extension of the Umayyad state, from Spain to Sindh. Kennedy notes that the Umayyad caliphate was in general marked by an absence of rebellion against Muslim rule⁴³¹.

428 *Synaxary CP*, 106 (4 October, no. 5)

429 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6234.

430 Peeters, P. "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias", 299-333

431 Kennedy, H., *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, (London 1986), 117

Other sources corroborate some of this account's topographical details, including the convent of St Theodore on a mountain overlooking Damascus. The convent also features in the *passio* of Anthony Ruwah; the Umayyads, who built palaces there, confiscated the convent. According to al-Ṭabarī, Walīd spent his last months at a monastery on the plateau of Mt Qāsiūn, north of Damascus, where he died on February 23rd 715⁴³². The monastery of Daīr Murrān (monastery of ash trees) was set on the plateau of mount Qāsiūn north of Damascus⁴³³.

‘Umar ibn al-Walīd, before whom Peter is brought, was a governor of Jordan, though not a well-known historical figure. He was one of Caliph al-Walīd's many sons (he may have had between fourteen and nineteen children)⁴³⁴. Capitolias, Gadara and Abila are all portrayed as being in the *Trichoro* – possibly from a Greek term such as τριχώρα for “three places/villages”⁴³⁵.

Narrative details in this martyrology hint at incipient changes in the Muslim-Christian relationship. Although conversions to Islam from Christianity were more a feature of the Abbāsīd than the Umayyad caliphate, this narrative interestingly features a character whose name could indicate a conversion. ‘Umar's lieutenant Z'urā has a name that suggests an Arabized Syrian – maybe a Christian convert to Islam, or a descendant of one. If so, he belonged to a group of “early adaptors” of Islam, as can be seen from reference to the work of Bulliet on conversion rates under the caliphs⁴³⁶.

Theophanes, in dating the martyrdom to 742CE, refers in the same year to Metropolitan Peter of Damascus having his tongue cut out for blasphemy and being exiled to Arabia⁴³⁷. But here **ptr** could mean patriarch rather than Peter. Hoyland thinks that the anonymous Syriac chronicler who is Theophanes' source is too close to the event to get details wrong⁴³⁸. Both were punished under a Walīd (Walīd I ruled 705-15 and Walīd II ruled from 743-44) hence Theophanes' probable mistake.

432 *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Volume XXIII, trans M. Hinds, (New York 1990), 1270

433 Guy LeStrange, *Palestine Under the Moslems* (London 1890), 239

434 *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Volume XXIII, trans M. Hinds, (New York 1990), 1270

435 Paulus Peeters, “La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias”, *AB* 57 (1939), 306

436 R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (London 1979), especially 108-9

437. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6234. Oddly, Theophanes says that he is condemned for denouncing the Manichees as well as Muslims, when in reality the Manichees suffered historically from a lack of government toleration for most of their history.

438 Hoyland, R., *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 354-60

However, Hoyland thinks that Theophanes was right to refer to Peter as a government official. The martyrologist may have been confused by the existence of two Peters or disliked the idea of him working for the Muslims (this argument helps to undermine any connection between the story and John of Damascus) and opted for Peter as “teacher of Christians” instead. Regarding the role of Christians in government employment, it had been necessary since the conquest to employ officials who had served in earlier administrations, though, at the time of this narrative, the cultural confidence of the Umayyad caliphate was growing and Arabic was replacing Greek as a language of government, rendering Greek-speaking Christians less useful to their Muslim overlords. If Peter of Capitolias was the Syriac chronicler’s government official, he was being one at a time when his role was becoming redundant. The crisis following the caliph Mu’āwiya’s death had convinced al-Walīd’s father and predecessor ‘Abd al-Malik to centralise to create a more effective state. This included replacing Byzantine and Sassanian coinage with a standard Arabic one as well as conducting administration in Arabic, not Persian or Greek, though as Trombley demonstrates, there is evidence from such sources as the Egyptian Apollōnos Anō papyri and the Aphrodito papyri that Greek remained in use after ‘Abd al-Malik’s death⁴³⁹.

Other contemporary events find no echo in this narrative. Though set in the first half of the eighth century the martyrology makes not even a passing reference to the iconoclastic controversy (in striking contrast to Simeon’s later version of the *Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* or the *Passion of Romanos*). This too hardly supports the argument that John of Damascus was the author.

Given that events described in the *Passion of Peter of Capitolias* apparently fall in the first half of the eighth century, at a time of Umayyad Arab self-confidence and cultural energy and that the text is thought to have been written soon afterwards, this could date it to around the middle of the eighth century, at the end of the Umayyad or beginning of the ‘Abbāsīd period. Peter provokes his own martyrdom and the

439 Frank R. Trombley, “The Greek Communities of Umayyad Palestine (661-749A.D.)”, *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Hellenic Diaspora from Antiquity to Modern Times, Volume 1: Antiquity – 1453* (Amsterdam 1991, ed. Fossey, J. and Morin, J.)

Muslims are reluctant to prosecute. He is not arrested when he is believed to be gravely ill. He subsequently provokes the authorities again by blaspheming against Islam⁴⁴⁰, is given opportunity to recant and is allowed some religious freedom as a prisoner. His case predates the more prescriptive rulings of the law schools, but his actions are just the sort of things that would have provoked strong judgement from them and put him outside the law – blaspheming against Islam in a public place. An interesting feature of the story is that he is given leeway at first by Muslim officials as he is believed to be terminally ill.

The narrative suggests no familiarity with Peter's life – his family's names are unknown. Both Hoyland and Peeters see lifelessness in much of the characterisation, especially in the early part of this story⁴⁴¹. Yet for Peeters the story is founded on some recollection of an actual event, however embellished⁴⁴². An interesting feature of this martyrology, however is the leeway given to Peter by the Muslims, who do not kill him immediately upon blasphemy and who allow him to pray en route to his trial and even to receive the sacrament prior to execution, even if Peeters raises serious questions about the plausibility of the latter two events.

There is evidence in the narrative of hagiographical revision and expansion. Many scenes have close parallels in earlier texts, suggesting that they are *topoi*⁴⁴³. Some features closely resemble stories from the Sasanid period. A particularly striking example is the similarity of the grisly method of execution (amputation of body parts one after another) meted out to Peter of Capitolias, and his stylised response to it, to the types of martyrdom endured by both the Jacobs in their stories in the Syriac *Acts of the Martyrs*. Like Peter, they too uncomplainingly endure the amputation of their members one at a time⁴⁴⁴.

Familiar motifs include the opportunity of witnessing in prison; an especially stylised and grisly execution; parallels with the execution of Christ – including an opportunity

440 Regrettably Peeters' French summary of the Georgian text, "la Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias" in *AB 57* (1939), pages 299-333, does not go into detail about the precise nature of the blasphemy.

441, R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 360 ; P. Peeters, "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias", 317

442 Peeters, Paulus, "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias", 316

443 Peeters, Paulus, "La Passion de S. Pierre de Capitolias", 312-3

444 *Passion of Mar Jacob*, 6-8; *Passion of Jacob the Notary*, 13

to appear before a senior government figure (the caliph) for disputation and crucifixion and piercing with a lance. Peter's martyrdom is a very public martyrdom in the manner of the martyrdom of Polycarp, though the crowds here are friendly rather than hostile⁴⁴⁵. The editorial approach of the text is one that reflects some of the patristic theological discourse about martyrdom and praises those who voluntarily go to their deaths. Peter openly provokes the Muslims, just as some Christians in the Sasanid period had provoked religious confrontation. For example, in the *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, George's sister-wife rejects Zoroastrianism and thereby causes maximum offence and provocation by picking up a brazier of sacred fire while menstruating, flinging it to the ground and trampling the embers underfoot⁴⁴⁶. However, it will be seen later that this little group of caliphate martyrologies may reflect an intra-Christian debate about the rightness of provocation and voluntary martyrdom⁴⁴⁷. The sort of provocation shown by Peter is not seen again until the episode of the martyrs of Córdoba in the mid ninth century.

2. Anthony Ruwah

Ruwah is a noble young Quraish Arab living at a former monastery, dedicated to St Theodore, at Naïrab in Damascus. The monastery church is still in use and Ruwah steals offerings, drinks the communion wine, vandalises the building and harasses the clergy. Once he fires an arrow at an icon of St Theodore. It rebounds and pierces his hand. He removes the arrow but faints. Subsequently he sees, while observing the Eucharist for the feast of St Theodore, a vision of the Lamb and a dove. He is moved to go to the church and affirm how he has been moved by his visions. Ruwah spends the night in a vigil, where St Theodore appears in a vision and rebukes him for his past impieties and calls him to repentance and conversion. The next day, faith seizes him and he joins pilgrims heading for Jerusalem. He meets Patriarch Elias, who fears repercussions if he baptises him but sends him out to the Jordan. He spends the night at the monastery of Our Lady at Choziba, where he is reassured by a vision of her (and another unspecified woman). He goes on to the Monastery of St John the Baptist by the Dead Sea and is baptised with the name of Anthony by two monks. He returns

445 *Passion of Polycarp* 12

446 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 16

447 Mark N. Swanson, "the Martyrdom of `Abd al-Masīh, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī)" in David Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand Years*, (Leiden 2001), 107-129

to Damascus in monks' garb. His family hand him to the *qādī*, who rebukes and imprisons him for seven months, followed by a seventeen day spell in an underground jail, where he suffers at the hands of common criminals. He sees a vision of light and a voice of comfort. These strange events are reported to the governor, who then imprisons him with people of higher rank. He engages in disputation with them and is strengthened by a night vision of elders with lamps who give him a martyr's crown.

Anthony Ruwah is sent via Aleppo and the Euphrates to al-Raqqā, where he is imprisoned by Hartama the governor. He appears before Caliph Harūn al-Rašīd and is impervious to his offers of money. The order is given for him to be beheaded. He responds that this will be repentance for three particular sins – praying at Mecca, sacrificing there on the day of Adha and killing Christians while on anti-Byzantine *ghazwa*. So he hopes to be “baptised in his own blood”. He is beheaded and then crucified. A guard is mounted over his body and a heavenly fire is seen to descend upon his head. Many believe as a result and the body is taken down by order of the caliph and interred in the Monastery of the Olives near the Euphrates.

Dick dates Ruwah's martyrdom to 799CE⁴⁴⁸. There are three manuscripts from Sinai⁴⁴⁹. These enable correction of textual faults in the Ethiopian passion of St Anthony⁴⁵⁰. They also facilitate reconstruction of the primitive Arabic text. Before these were available Peeters commented on a Georgian account of the saint⁴⁵¹. Dick argues that Peeters' reliance on later versions of the text (Ethiopic and Georgian) misled him regarding its reliability⁴⁵². The Georgian version in particular is embellished and refers to Ruwah travelling to Egypt and Persia. This leads Peeters to misplace the monastery where Ruwah's remains were interred. The Ethiopian text refers to Ruwah's interment at the “olive column”, a monument built by the Christians over his body (for Dick this would have been unlikely under the caliphs anyway). This is a textual mistake; the Arabic text refers to him being interred near a monastery called the “olive convent”.

448 Dick, I., “La Passion Arabe de S. Antoine Ruwah, néo-martyr de Damas (+25 déc. 799)”, *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), 109-33

449 *Sinai ar.* 445 (C) from 1233; *Sinai ar.* 448 (B) from the 13th century (a slightly variant copy of C); *Sinai ar.* 513 (A) from the 10th century

450 P. Peeters, “S.. Antoine le néo-martyr” *AB* 31 (1912), 410-50

451 P. Peeters, *L' autobiographie de S. Antoine le néo-martyr* *AB* 33 (1914), 52-63

452 Dick, I., “La Passion Arabe de S. Antoine Ruwah, néo-martyr de Damas (+25 déc. 799) ”

St. Anthony Ruwah's cult did not survive the Arab caliphate – he never entered the Byzantine calendar, which eventually displaced the Syro-Palestinian one even in Syria. Anthony Ruwah is mentioned by other Christian sources. Michael the Syrian is one such source⁴⁵³. Bar Hebraeus is another⁴⁵⁴.

Harthamah b. 'Ayan, described in chapter nine of this passion as the governor of Raqqa, is known from other sources too⁴⁵⁵. He may be the person Michael the Syrian refers to concerning the taking of Baghdad for al-Ma'mūn in 819 after much fighting during the great Abbasid civil war from 809-833⁴⁵⁶.

The caliph before whom Ruwah appears is Hārūn al-Rashīd, whose caliphate (786-809) subsequently came to be seen as a golden age by Muslims, though in the troubles of the time something of the decline of the 'Abbasid caliphate was already evident⁴⁵⁷. He seems to have been pious, performing the *hajj* eight or nine times – more than any other Umayyad or Abbasid caliph – at a time when each expedition would have taken around two months. Hārūn also campaigned against Byzantium in *jihād*. In 806 & 807 he led massive campaigns, though the results were not spectacular. His religious policies were strict. Not only was he anti-'Alid and anti-*zandaka*, as his father had been; in 806-7CE he also tore down churches near the Byzantine frontier and ordered *dhimmi*s in Baghdad to wear different clothes from Muslims⁴⁵⁸. After him there was civil war, Seljuk mutiny, loss of control of provinces and general decline. Like Anthony Ruwah, Hārūn al-Rashīd was a Quraysh.

The *passio* contains a plausible reference to Patriarch Elias II (770-797) and his fear of openly baptising a noble Quraysh convert from Islam⁴⁵⁹. Elias had spent a long exile in Persia around 785. Elias sent a letter to Tarasius, patriarch of Constantinople in

453 *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* ed J.B. Chabot p. 487-488; trad. fran., t. III (Paris 1905), 18-19

454 Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography*, translated by E. Budge (Oxford 1932), 121

455 *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, Volume XXIX, trans H. Kennedy, 371 and 471) where he acts as executioner on behalf of the caliph al-Mahdi.

456 *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* ed J.B. Chabot p.487-488; trad. fran., t. III (Paris 1905), 30-31

457 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* volume 3, (Leiden 1971) pages 232-4

458 *The History of Al-Ṭabarī*, volume XXX, (New York 1989) translated by C.E. Bosworth, 713

459 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 6

787, complaining of the plight of Christians, and according to Dick, fear prevented him from taking part in the Seventh Oecumenical Council (Nicaea II) in 787⁴⁶⁰.

The *Passion of Anthony Ruwah* is one of two martyrologies in this group of Sabaitic texts that concern apostates (the other is the *Passion of `Abd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī*). Ruwah declares his apostasy from Islam in as provocative a way as possible (going home dressed as a monk)⁴⁶¹. He is sent before a *qādī* as a result of which he is initially imprisoned but eventually appears before the caliph himself. Having refused attempts to bribe him back to Islam, he is executed⁴⁶². His provocation (dressing as a monk to advertise his apostasy) clearly falls foul of Islamic law. His appearance before a *qādī*, who initially imprisons him, sounds like due process. The *qādī* allows a long spell in prison (seven months followed by seventeen nights in a worse prison, followed by another spell of subterranean captivity). This suggests that plenty of time was being allowed for this high-ranking young Muslim to recant. The account of him being referred to the caliph himself could be a *topos*, but could also be an indication of Ruwah's high social rank and family membership causing concern. There is a brief but fairly precise account of his journey to al-Raqqā to be presented before the caliph, who does not dither and soon executes Ruwah, for whom the *qādī* has already allowed plenty of time for repentance (in Bar Hebraeus' brief account, which stresses the caliph's involvement in the case, he is imprisoned for two years before being executed).

The Passion of Anthony Ruwah is topographically precise and the internal chronology is generally plausible⁴⁶³. The *Passion of Peter of Capitolias* also mentions a convent to St Theodore on the mountain overlooking Damascus, where Peter was brought before the caliph. It is interesting that the account mentions different types of prison – one for blacks (possibly Nubians or Ethiopians), bandits and thieves and one for nobles⁴⁶⁴.

460 But Gil, *A History of Palestine 634-1099*, 457-8, seems to contradict this, saying that he sent representatives to the Church Council in Nicaea in 787 and that Abbot Peter of Mar Saba also participated. He acknowledges that the evidence about his attendance is contradictory.

461 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapters 7-8

462 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 11

463 Guy LeStrange, *Palestine Under the Moslems*, 239

464 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapters 8-9

Another interesting detail is the description in the text of the pre-conversion Ruwah seated “at his post”, observing, as a Muslim, the martyr festival and Christian liturgy and procession⁴⁶⁵. This suggests some form of political monitoring of such public religious activity.

The incident where Ruwah fires an arrow at an icon, only for the arrow to rebound and hit him, appears to be a literary *topos*. As Hoyland notes, there are strong parallels with *A Muslim at Diospolis* and variations of the *Miracles of St George*. In one a Saracen throws a lance at the icon of George and he and his group are struck dead. In another a Saracen fires an arrow at the icon, is wounded and healed by a priest with oil from a lamp lit from the icon, becomes a Christian and is martyred for witnessing to Saracens. In a reference in *St Anastasius of Sinai* a Saracen fires an arrow at the icon of Theodore and he and his group are struck dead⁴⁶⁶.

The *Passion of Anthony Ruwah* falls into the category of martyrdoms that recount the deaths of young nobles – people who had the most in terms of worldly ambition, privilege and comfort to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. The Sasanid period in particular had spawned several such accounts. Several of the martyrs from the caliphal period are those of recent converts (often of high social status, like Anthony Ruwah or Abo of Tblisi⁴⁶⁷ or of returning apostates like ‘Abd al-Masih) who actively and eagerly sought martyrdom, and these are well represented in stories from the Zoroastrian period too. Examples include the *Passion of Candida*, *Passion of Golandokht* and the *Passion of Saint Šīrīn*, and from the *Acts of the Martyrs*, the returning apostate eunuch, Gūhashtazād in the *Martyrdom of Simon bar Sabbā’ê*, Jacob in the *Martyrdom of Jacob*, Pêrôz, Tahmyadegird in the *Story of Karkâ de Bêt Slôk*, the pagan who becomes patriarch Mâr Abâ and experiences “bloodless martyrdom” and another high born convert, Mihrâmgûšnasp, who becomes the martyr, George the monk.

465 *Passion of Anthony Ruwah*, 2

466 as compared by Robert Hoyland in R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, 385-6

467 The Georgian passion of Abo of Tblisi is translated into English by David M. Lang in *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1989). The passio is discussed in P. Peeters, “Les Khazars dans la Passion de S. Abo de Tiflis”, *AB* 52 (1934), 21-56.

Ruwah's fall from worldly nobility is brought out clearly when he is thrust into gaol with common prisoners. However, a classic *topos* unfolds when prison becomes a theatre of witness for him through his engagement in disputation, though we are not given details about the debates⁴⁶⁸. Like so many other martyrs he is beheaded but also – oddly, yet in a move that is of course very evocative of Christ – crucified. His remains become relics⁴⁶⁹. An interesting twist in this particular case is Ruwah's expression of a desire to be baptised in his own blood⁴⁷⁰. This seems to echo patristic thought – notably that of Tertullian who saw martyrdom as a baptism in blood. Ruwah sees his death in terms that Tertullian would recognise as a baptism for repentance of past sins (however, Tertullian's treatise on baptism referred to it as a baptism for the unbaptised, and the account makes clear that Ruwah had been baptised by water).

Other noteworthy features include the three reasons given very concisely at the end of the Passion for opting for martyrdom, indicating knowledge of Islamic *hajj* practices, inverting neatly the meaning of *haram* and referring to participation in *ghazwa* against Byzantines. Ruwah acknowledges the sinfulness of killing Byzantine Christians⁴⁷¹.

An interesting feature of this martyrology is the stress on Trinitarian formulation. The text opens with a Christian *bismillah* that would have been especially striking in the Arabic version, as an audible contrast to the Quranic formula. The Trinitarian formula is repeated twice in this text⁴⁷². This hints at the need at the time for Christians to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against the supersessionist Islamic argument that Christians were not true monotheists. Islam is referred to in the text as “error”, demonstrating that Christians at the time of writing still considered that they were arguing against a heretical offshoot rather than a separate religion. John of Damascus had addressed Islam in these terms in such texts as chapter 101 of *de Haeresibus* and the *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*⁴⁷³. Nevertheless, there is a sense in this *passio* of a Church that finds itself on the defensive against a politically and culturally powerful Islam.

468 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 9

469 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 11

470 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 11

471 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapter 11

472 *Passion of St Anthony Ruwah*, chapters 7 and 10

473 Daniel L. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden 1972)

3. `Abd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī

A young Christian Arab who wants to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem joins up with Muslim would-be raiders and instead spends thirteen years raiding with them, at which he excels. Then he stops at a church in Baalbek and is converted by an encounter with the priest. He goes to Patriarch John at Jerusalem, who sends him on to Mar Saba where he becomes a monk. After five years there he moves around other monasteries before settling at Mt Sinai as *oeconomos* for five years. A desire for martyrdom takes him to Ramlah with two other monks. Despite leaving a message in the mosque inviting the Muslims to find him, God conceals him from them. He goes to Edessa before returning to Sinai. He becomes the superior there for seven years.

Following unjust tax treatment he goes to Ramlah with other monks. A former raider recognises him as an apostate. He is seized and refuses to flee even when his companions make it possible. He refuses invitations from the governor to save himself by conversion and is beheaded. His remains are thrown down a well and burned. Nine months later monks from Sinai go to Ramlah and retrieve the well-preserved remains, which are divided between Sinai and Mar Cyriacus church at Ramlah. As in the Passion of St Anthony Ruwaḥ, Trinitarian formulae are prominent in this text – they begin and end it and the opening is a Christian *bismillah*.

This Arabic account was not known outside the Mt Sinai monastery until recently. It survives in four manuscripts, the oldest of which dates back to the ninth century. There are Greek words in the text (ἁγιασμός, οἰκονόμος and διακονικόν), but that does not necessarily imply a Greek original as these are ecclesiastical loanwords from Syriac⁴⁷⁴.

No memory of the martyr is preserved in Greek or Georgian material. The crude Arabic style, particularly of the first transcript, could suggest Syriac diction. For Griffith this indicates the first language of the author rather than the text⁴⁷⁵. If the patriarch John referred to in the text is John V (705-35) then, following the chronology of this *passio*, al-Masīh's martyrdom could be dated to the mid eighth

474 Georg Graf, *Verzeichnis Arabischer Kirchlicher Termini*, Louvain 1954, 121-3

475 Griffith, S.H., "the Arabic Account of 'Abd al-Masīh an Nağrānī al-Ghassānī", *Le Muséon* 98, 1985, 331-74

century. However, it seems more likely that he is John VI (839-43), which places the martyrdom in the 860's and dates the composition to the later ninth century, when Arabic writing flourished in Palestinian monasteries. This would make the MS nearly contemporary with events.

`Abd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī's name is pregnant with meaning⁴⁷⁶. As Swanson highlights, `Abd al-Masīh is a confessional name ("servant of the anointed one")⁴⁷⁷. It would explain his negative answer to the old raiding comrade who addresses him by his former name, as it is part of a past that he has now renounced. Griffith notes that `Abd al-Masīh was the name of the head of the delegation from Najrān to Muhammad⁴⁷⁸. Najrān was a well-known Christian area that experienced martyrdom in the pre-Islamic period under the Jewish king of Himyar, Dhū Nuwās⁴⁷⁹.

Two aspects of al-Najrānī's name point to a military heritage as well as a Christian background (albeit not Chalcedonian). Najrān was already an important centre of arms and armour manufacture during Muhammad's lifetime. Under caliph `Umar I (634-44) its inhabitants were dispersed to Iraq and Syria (possibly a strategic dispersal of militarily important armour-makers) where they established towns retaining the name of Najrān. The name *al Ghassānī* suggests al-Najrānī might have belonged to the Tanukhids who had settled in Syria and combined with the remnants of the Ghassanids, former allies of the Byzantines, many of whom had since migrated to Byzantine territory. They were regarded by the Orthodox as Jacobite heretics and their patron saint was St Sergius, whose church at Jabiya on the Golan heights, near Yarmūk, had been a place of pilgrimage. Jabala, last king of the Ghassanids had fought for Heraclius against the Sasanid invaders and against the Muslims at Yarmūk. He initially made peace with the Muslims, but after a quarrel with `Umar, either because his request afterwards to pay *sadaqa*, like the other tribes, was refused, or because Abū `Ubayda refused to execute or amputate the hand of a man who slapped him after his horse injured the man, Jabala and his followers left for Byzantine

476 It is given to a convert- martyr from Judaism in Sasanid Mesopotamian an Arabic version of another passio. See Peeters, P., "La Passion Arabe de S. `Abd al-Masih", *AB* 44 (1926), 271-341.

477 Mark N. Swanson, "the Martyrdom of `Abd al-Masīh, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī)", 107-129

478 Griffith, S. "The Arabic Account of `Abd al-Masīh An-Nağrānī Al-Ghassānī", 355

479 Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran, New Documents*, Bruxelles 1971

Cappadocia. It seems that other Christian Arabs acted likewise – some B. Tanūkh, B. Iyād and B. Salīh⁴⁸⁰.

It is interesting, given his warlike tribal background, that the young would-be pilgrim is so easily deflected from a trip to Jerusalem into thirteen years of *ghazwa*. Apart from remarking that he is adept at the use of sword, bow and spear, the narrative gives no detail about this. However, the reference to raids is notable, as these were a reality on the Byzantine frontier areas. Armenia was the only part of the long Byzantine-Islamic frontier not to be depopulated during the eighth and ninth century raids. Byzantine military reorganisation – with *theme* (regional armies) and *tagmata* (central armies) after the Islamic conquests meant scattered troop deployment and inadequate concentration, especially in Cappadocia, opposite the Cilician Gates, a pass through the Taurus that the Arabs often used in the summer (in winter the Taurus and Antitaurus mountains formed a natural barrier broken only by a few passes made hazardous by snow). The Anatolikon theme and Cappadocia were the most raided areas. Forts were sacked and inhabitants either fled or built underground shelters for themselves and their livestock. Larger raids penetrated the central Anatolian plateau. After defeat by a raiding force at the Cilician Gates in 708CE, the Byzantine response was a “shadowing warfare”. Unable to stop raids, they intercepted the Arabs on their way back to the passes (*kleisourai*) in the barrier regions of the Taurus and recaptured spoil – mainly animals and captives – from enemy laden with booty⁴⁸¹. Neither side succeeded in making the frontier (τὰ ἄκρα, ἑσχατίαι, *dawāhi al-Rūm*) impervious to penetration, even though the Muslims too wanted to prevent non-Muslim Arabs from fleeing to the Byzantines, until in 863 the Byzantines defeated the Arabs and Paulicians and stopped their most serious raids into Anatolia⁴⁸². But in the likely historical setting for this martyrology, raids were still very much a reality.

The text mentions patriarch John who, Griffith argues, is John VI⁴⁸³. He became patriarch during the seventh year of the caliphate of al-Mu‘tasim (833-842), who fought a bloody campaign against the Byzantines in which he sacked the city of

480 Donner, F., *The Early Islamic Conquests*, 154, footnote 303

481 Treadgold, W., *Byzantium and its Army 284-1081*, Stanford 1995, 207-8

482 The Paulicians were a heretical sect which had rebelled against Byzantium, founded a rebel principality at the city of Tephrike near the Armeniac theme and raided the frontier around the upper Euphrates

483 Griffith, S. “The Arabic Account of ‘Abd al-Masīh An-Nağrānī Al-Ghassānī”, 353

Amorion in 838. This was not an easy time for Christians. Bar Hebraeus reports that on Easter morning 835CE some churches were destroyed on the pretext that they were built recently, but he does not say where they were or much else about the circumstances⁴⁸⁴. From the context of his narrative they could be in Baghdad. Eutychius reports that patriarch John VI was effectively driven out from office by some sort of whispering campaign, though he is vague about protagonists, circumstances and reasons⁴⁸⁵. He is more precise in his criticism of John's successor, Mansūr, mentioning that, as the name suggests, he was a descendant of John of Damascus' grandfather who had assisted the Muslims in their takeover of the city during the conquest. Griffith thinks that if John had promoted individuals like 'Abd al-Masīh, it might explain his brief, unhappy patriarchate, but this cannot be proven.

The martyrology also casts some light on the operations of the tax system. In 'Abd al-Masih's case the tax that he collects on behalf of the local Christian populations of Pharān and Rā'yah, is taken to a Muslim official at Aylah. Al-Muqaddasī, writing around 985, describes it as an important port and commercial centre⁴⁸⁶. Griffith thinks that it is reasonable to conclude that the collection of taxes from local Christians was part of the role of monasteries at the time. Unless Melkite monks were expected to collect from Monophysite communities too, this suggests that Sinai was mostly Melkite.

The account refers to tax problems for Christians. The Nessana papyri show evidence of local protest back in the Umayyad period, but this martyrology is set down at a much later date⁴⁸⁷. Griffith mentions the reference to going to Ramla (the governor's residence) to deal with tax difficulties because "at that time their tax went to Palestine". This helps to date the text to a later time, when the area had been seized by Ahmad ibn Tūlūn, deputy governor of Egypt from 868, who in 869 quelled a revolt in Palestine and annexed it and Syria to Egypt, after which it would be natural to

484 Bar Hebraeus, *Chronography* Volume 1, translated by E.A. Budge, Oxford 1932 134

485 L. Cheiko et al., *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales* (CSCO. 51), Beirut & Paris, 1909, 60-61

486 Al Muqaddasī, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. B Collins, Reading 2001, 149

487 Kraemer, C. J., Jr, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. 3: Non-Literary Papyri, Princeton, NJ, 1958, document 75

assume that Sinai's tax went to Egypt, suggesting that the martyrology was written after 869CE.

Little can be said about the Church of St Cyriacus, to which some of al-Masih's remains were taken. Eutychius mentions a church of that dedication being one of two Melkite churches destroyed by rioting during the reign of al-Muqtadir (908-32)⁴⁸⁸. The church was rebuilt but no trace has been found to date. Nor is it known which Cyriacus it was dedicated to (either the martyr son of St Julitta or the 6th century monk of St Charitōn).

The *Passion of `Abd al-Masīh al-Najrānī al Ghassānī* is the second of two martyrologies in this group of Arabic Christian writings that concern apostates from Islam. It tells of a Christian who apostatises to Islam, then reconverts to Christianity and is eventually granted martyrdom, after refusing the offers to convert and save himself. He initially seeks voluntary martyrdom by tossing a message into a mosque in which he announces his apostasy, but is miraculously concealed from his pursuers. This provocative gesture would have led to prosecution under Islamic law – by violating a mosque and making a declaration of apostasy. He is later exposed as an apostate by an old acquaintance. Regarding his changes of religion, Islamic law would treat him as an apostate Muslim, even though he had been a Christian before accepting Islam, so his fate reflects a historical reality.

Though invitations to repentance seem to be encouraged by at least some of the Islamic religious lawyers (Mālik, Shāfi'i and – though more equivocally – Aḥmad ibn Hanbal), the *topos*-like nature of these references, and their presence in martyrologies from other periods, suggests that they have less to do with any process of Islamic law than with the nature of narration in the hagiographical genre⁴⁸⁹. Here, as often in martyrologies, there are echoes of the trial of Christ. Stress is placed on the resolution of the martyr in the face of the temptation to save himself. The account of the trial of `Abd al-Masīh by the governor is terse, but at two points he is invited to convert and be "saved". The trial of Christ is also echoed in the description of witnesses testifying against him "what they did not know". The spoken testimony of witnesses was

488 Cheikho et al, *Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales*, .82

489 Tritton, A.S., *The Caliphs and their Muslim Subjects*, London 1930, 182

important for Islamic lawyers, but the description of their role in this trial is bald and sketchy⁴⁹⁰. One of the most interesting details in this story concerns the three days delay before execution – it seems to echo some Mālikite and Hanīfī interpretations of the law regarding apostates and time allowed for return to the Islamic faith⁴⁹¹.

This martyrology is an unembellished account with almost no fantastic elements other than the miracles of ‘Abd al-Masih being hidden from the Muslims for a while and his remains being preserved from cremation. It is short but in some ways detailed. Swanson argues that it could be contributing to an eighth century intra-Christian debate. Its story of a Christian who reconverts could shore up the community at a time of apostasy; its stress on repentance could encourage apostates to return and its story of delayed martyrdom could provide a corrective to the provocative rashness of Peter of Capitolias and Anthony Ruwah⁴⁹². This would mark an Arabic Christian revival of an old patristic debate about voluntary martyrdom, a debate that was to take a much sharper form subsequently at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea in the martyrdoms at Córdoba (interestingly involving a monk from Mar Saba, George of Bethlehem)⁴⁹³. As will be shown below in more detail, events in Córdoba bitterly divided Christians in a way not reflected at all in martyrologies from the Near East.

4. Michael of Mar Saba

The narrator, a monk called Basil, tells other monks that he and others were going to a procession for the Annunciation and paused at Abu Qurrah’s cell. He told them about how caliph ‘Abd al Malik came to Jerusalem in a military procession, desiring to meet a Christian “knowledgeable about the law”. Michael, a monk from Tiberias, had gone to Jerusalem to sell monastery wares. He was taken by a court eunuch to Seida, the caliph’s wife. Her attempt to seduce him having failed, she had him beaten and falsely accused. The caliph saw through the accusation and arranged for a disputation involving himself and a learned Jew versus Michael. Michael is aware of an unseen, supernatural third opponent. Topics covered include the legitimacy of ascetic

490 N.J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law*, Edinburgh 1964, 125 states that written evidence was inadmissible.

491 Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Oxford 1964, 187

492 Swanson, M., “the Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīh, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al- Ghassānī)”, 121-2

493 Eulogius, *Memoriale*, II, X

practices (celibacy and avoiding meat) and the religious authority of Paul and Muhammad. Michael resists the offer of military power to be granted upon conversion and Christian officials present applaud him as he trounces both his opponents and states that the Messiah has come and that Muhammad is a deceiver. The caliph drives out the Jew ignominiously. He then states that Muhammad converted Persians and Arabs. Michael retorts that he did so with materialistic promises, whereas Paul was ascetic. The caliph questions how Paul can be an apostle when there are twelve apostles. Michael's reply speaks of the four gospels as the four parts of the earth and the twelve apostles as the twelve regions. The Muslims are only in one "island" of the earth.

The caliph offers Michael the choice of conversion or death. He undergoes the ordeal of standing on coals and is unharmed. Then he has to drink poison. All are weeping including the caliph who would like to spare Michael but is under pressure from his followers now. The Christians present are willing to die too. Michael is unharmed but the poison is fed to a murderer who succumbs to it. Michael is then taken outside the city for beheading by a weeping executioner. Monks are now present as well as citizens. They take his body back.

At the ninth hour the old teacher of Michael knows intuitively what has happened. A vision of light is seen at Siloam. A monk, Theodore, is healed of a disability. Michael is buried at mar Saba. His teacher's wish to die too is granted. The account ends with a panegyric to the Mar Saba monastery and its notable monks. These include Theodore Abu Qurrah.

This martyrology exists in a Georgian recension. There is also a Greek one in a Byzantine hagiography dating from the later tenth century when, under Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969) and John I Tzimisces (969-976), Byzantine power was asserted after the occupation of Antioch in 969CE. In the Greek version Michael's story is just a brief diversion⁴⁹⁴. Griffith's argument (admittedly on circumstantial evidence) is

494 The Georgian text was first published by S. Kekelidze in 1918. Peeters translated the text into Latin in 1930; an English translation was made by Monica Blanchard, "The Georgian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Michael", *ARAM* 6 (1994), pages 113-148. The Greek recension was published in 1892 but only the subject of serious study much later: Vasiliev, A., "The Life of St Theodore of Edessa", *Byzantion*, 16 (1942-1943), 165-225

that the author of the version surviving in Georgian was a ninth century Arabophone monk of Mar Saba, whose account was then translated into Georgian in the tenth century. The last names mentioned in the text (including Abū Qurrah who died circa 820CE) indicate a ninth century origin. The Georgian version focuses on the monastery, where the account begins and ends. As Griffith demonstrates, the monastery is the real hero of the story⁴⁹⁵.

Intriguingly, the anonymous writer says that at the time of ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705) there was peace and the caliph himself “harmed no-one”. But he undeniably introduced various Islamicising measures, including a new, very Islamic, form of coinage. He ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock in 692, according to its dedicatory inscription and it may have been completed by 702. It established the reign of Islam in the city of David and Solomon, also considered by Christians as their holy city. Christian writers responded. The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysus of Tell-Mahrê* mentions “Egyptian servitude” begun by ‘Abd al-Malik’s census⁴⁹⁶. His campaign for publicly displaying Islam might be reflected in his policy of demolishing or effacing any displayed crosses⁴⁹⁷. Griffith wonders if the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was composed in reaction to the construction of the Dome of the Rock on the site of the Temple, a view sustained by Reininck⁴⁹⁸. But it is only in the *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba* that ‘Abd al-Malik appears by name.

Martyrology and disputation were two literary forms prominent in the Christian response to Islam at this time. This martyrology contains an element of disputation. Mentioned in the martyrology’s concluding panegyric are Stephen the Sabaite (725-794), John and Thomas as well as Theodore Abū Qurrah⁴⁹⁹. The silence regarding John of Damascus, a towering figure associated with Mar Saba, may be because his

495 Griffith, S. “Michael, The Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period”, *ARAM* 6,1994, 127 and 148

496 Chabot, ed. (pt II, CSCO, vol. 104; Louvain, 133, reprint, 1952), 154

497 Chabot, J.B., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien: patriarche Jacobite d’Antioche 1166-1199*, 4 vols., Paris 1899-1910, Vol. II

498 C.J Reininck, “Early Christian Reactions to the Building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem”, *Ashgate Variorum* (2005), 227-41

499 John is probably John the Hesychast (d. 559), whose story Cyril of Scythopolis included in his *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. Thomas may be Patriarch Thomas of Jerusalem (807-821), hegumenos of Mar Saba at the time of the Passion of the Twenty Sabaitic Monks. As the *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba* does not mention his elevation to the patriarchate, Griffith wonders whether the text was composed between 797 and 807.

fame was at Byzantium and he wrote in Greek rather than Arabic, unlike Theodore Abū Qurrah, who thus overshadowed him in the Arabic world. As for Michael himself, he is known to us solely from this text.

Some minor textual details are plausible. The Georgian text refers twice to the *xenodochion* as a well-known location⁵⁰⁰. Presumably it is the hospice and guest house in Jerusalem. Michael is executed at St George's hill (Christian documents refer to a St George's church outside St David's Gate and this may have been known by Christians as St George's hill)⁵⁰¹. The descriptions of the caliph's court mention that there are Christian scribes and doctors in his service, a well attested fact⁵⁰². Christians held such senior posts in Abbasid as well as in Umayyad times, though when the centre of political gravity moved further east to Baghdad they were more likely to be Nestorians rather than Melkites. Some details are implausible – notably the attempted seduction by the Caliph's wife – which has echoes of the Biblical story of Joseph and the attempted seduction of him by Potiphar's wife⁵⁰³. There is something strongly theatrical both in the defeat of the Jew in the *disputatio* and the poisoning scene in the ordeal⁵⁰⁴.

The text contains some anachronisms. 'Abd al-Malik is referred to as king of the Persians, coming from Babylon⁵⁰⁵. The Abbasids founded Baghdad in 762, near to old Babylon. It attracted many Persian converts to Islam, and some became prominent. The name Babylon (also given to Rome in *Revelation* 17:5), would seem to suit the politically powerful rival religion to Christianity. The term "Persians" recurs in Byzantine texts as a polemical term (like Ishmaelites). According to Griffith, Persia was one of the four kingdoms which, in contemporary Christian apocalyptic literature, would make way for the coming of God's reign⁵⁰⁶.

500 *Passion of Michael the Monk of Mar Saba*, 3 and 11

501 *Passion of Michael the Monk of Mar Saba*, 11

502 *Passion of Michael the Monk of Mar Saba*, 10

503 *Genesis* 39

504 *Passion of Michael the Monk of Mar Saba*, 8 and 10

505 *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba*, 2

506 Griffith, S. "Michael, The Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period", 133

Griffith demonstrates that the importance of this text lies in its role as a literary response to a challenge from Islam⁵⁰⁷. Martyrology was part of this response. Martyrologies written under the caliphs were still modelled on the old hagiographic template from the Sasanid and ancient pagan periods, but the theme was given a new twist by the Islamic theological challenge, which was sharper and more serious than anything mounted by earlier pagan and Zoroastrian adversaries. Islam claimed to supercede Christianity just as Christianity claimed to supercede Judaism. Now there was more emphasis on apologetic and polemic. It is interesting that the works from Mar Saba highlight martyrs who were converts from or defamers of Islam (or both).

The presence of Theodore Abū Qurrah in this story is a reminder of the effort underway to set down Christian Melkite theology in Arabic at this time. Admittedly, Abū Qurrah's works are not simply about Christian-Muslim polemic; but Islam shapes the political and theological context in which he writes. The overriding theme of his work is how to identify true religion and the true Church, in a world where Melkite Christians were beginning to feel more adrift from Byzantium than had been the case even at the time of John of Damascus. John had written in Greek. Abū Qurrah, though some of his works survive in Greek, wrote a substantial body of work in Arabic. The challenge for Melkites in this environment was particularly acute, as they could not any longer point to the political dominance of Chalcedonian Christianity as demonstration of the theological truth of their claims. They had no political privileges now over and against their Monophysite and Nestorian opponents. Much of Abū Qurrah's energy went into challenging Monophysite theology. But some of his work also refutes Islam. He does so explicitly in *Theologus Autodidactus*. Other refutations of Islamic theology can be seen in *On the Characteristics of the True Religion* (where the marks of the true religion include the sending out of messengers to all the earth and the preaching of the message in all languages, an implicit criticism of Islam, where one messenger revealed the message in one tongue). Given Islam's refutation of the Holy Trinity it is significant that he defends that too in a treatise⁵⁰⁸.

507 Griffith, S. "Michael, The Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period", 115-148

508 *Theologus Autodidactus* D242.; also *On the Characteristics of the True Religion* M65 and *On the Trinity* in: *Theodore Abū Qurrah, Library of the Christian East, Volume 1*, trans. John C. Lamoreaux (Provo, Utah 2005).

Disputation was an important feature of this response. Encounters needed to be presented as debates rather than diatribes. Examples cited by Griffith include⁵⁰⁹:

- The Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (780-823) with caliph al-Mahdi (775-785), written in Syriac and then in a condensed Arabic version that was popular and well circulated in Christian communities. The work was intended to serve as a tool for Christians to respond to questions from Muslims
- Patriarch John III (d. 648) and *amīr* ‘Umayr ibn Sa’d (supposedly around Hims on Sunday May 9th 644
- A monk of Bēt Hālê and an Arab notable in the early 720’s
- Theodore Abū Qurrah and Caliph al Ma’mūn (813-833) in Harran in Mesopotamia in the year 829
- The monk Abraham of Tiberias and the *amīr* ‘Abd ar-Rahmān al-Hāshimi in Jerusalem around the year 820
- John debating with Phineas the Jew in the presence of Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd (786-809) in *the Life of John of Edessa*

The *disputatio* section in the *Passion of St Michael* is the shortest example of such a debate, but it contains in condensed form all the features found in fuller texts. The question as to whether Muhammad was a prophet appeared in the dialogue involving the monk of Bēt Hālê and an Arab notable and in the dialogue involving Abraham of Tiberias and the *amīr*. Michael’s declaration is more harshly polemical than that normally found in a *disputatio*. Michael lists reasons that people have accepted Islam – reasons which contemporary Christian apologists often claimed were base and unworthy⁵¹⁰. This *passio* gives an especially prominent place to defending the apostle Paul, reflecting a possible need to rebut the Islamic allegation that he was not an apostle and that his letters have no proper part in Holy Scripture.

509 Griffith, S. “Michael, The Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery, at the Court of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period”, 139-40

510 Griffith, S. H. “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians”, *Proceedings of the PMR Conference*, 4 (1979), 63-87

However, there is some evidence for an element of *disputatio* in martyrologies from the Sasanid period too, without overstating the theological sophistication of it. The disputations with Zoroastrian clergy revolve around certain stock themes, but the martyrologies give some indication of the points of theological dispute between Christians and Zoroastrianism, even if inevitably it is through a lens that only offers a sharply polemical Christian perspective. Sometimes the disputations included can illuminate theological concerns. For example, in the *Martyrdom of Pûsai* the martyr stresses that Christians will obey the king in lawful things, but not if he opposes God. He cites *Exodus* 20, 4 to oppose the worship of created things and refers to what he calls the Zoroastrian belief that heavenly bodies are the children of “the brother of Satan” (Ahriman)⁵¹¹. He says, in a polemic against Zurvanism (the form of Zoroastrianism promoted by the Sasanian dynasty) that Christians do not pray to the brother of Satan and therefore will not pray to the brother’s children – sun, moon and stars⁵¹². Another example of polemic is found in the trenchant disputation between Mihram-Gushnasp and a *magus* in the *Martyrdom of George the Monk*. George (the convert formerly known as Mihram-Gushnasp) is presented in the account as being something of a theological prize fighter. In his pre-conversion life he had been extremely well-versed in Zoroastrianism and the triumphalist account speaks of his refutation of Christian heresies too. In the disputation with the *magoi* he is spectacularly successful. The argument revolves around whether Zoroastrian adoration of fire is the same as Christian adoration of the cross. As this is a highly polemical Christian account, the Zoroastrians are inevitably forced to admit their belief that fire is the same nature as their god. The *magoi* are astounded at his ability to silence their counsellor in dispute. Respect for him grows and two of the Zoroastrians become Christians⁵¹³.

This sort of *disputatio* is not as sophisticated as the *Passion of Michael, Monk of Mar Saba*, which Griffith places in the context of a developing culture of theological disputation between Christianity and Islam. In doing so he contrasts the level of debate between Michael, the caliph and the Jew with the sort of mockery of paganism found in martyrologies located in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire. While

511 In Zoroastrianism Angra Mainyu (“Ahriman”) is a primal spirit, co-existing with Ahura Mazda, uncreated but, unlike Ahura Mazda, a malign force.

512 *Martyrdom of Pûsai*, 9

513 *Martyrdom of George the Monk*, 56-58

recognising that, it should also be noted that theological dispute with clergy is a feature of martyrologies of the Sasanid period too, which furnish insights into Christian perspectives (however distorted) on Zoroastrianism. Christianity may have been less on the defensive against Zoroastrianism than, as Griffith has identified, it was against among the confident, ascendant Islam that claimed to have superseded both Christianity and Judaism. It is much to be regretted that (aside from Sasanid official inscriptions) there is such an absence of literary evidence for the Zoroastrian response.

The nature of the trial, with its combination of disputation, trial by ordeal, intense personal involvement of the caliph himself in the attempted conversion of one monk, and stark choice of the embrace of Islam or death, is also dramatically engaging, but does it find an echo either in Islamic law at the time of writing under the ‘Abbāsids, or of any known Umayyad approach?

In this martyrology Seida, wife of the caliph, makes sexual advances towards a Christian monk. Under Islamic law any form of sexual relations between female Muslims and non-Muslim males was – and still is – strictly forbidden. Even though the story is widely regarded as a literary invention, it is worth noting that this particular detail reflects the reality that a key event in the plot concerns a sexual relationship that would be taboo on so many levels. From a Christian polemical viewpoint, it portrays the alleged worldliness of Islam in as negative a way as possible. Other details in the story are even less convincing than the seduction attempt and also have the feel of *topoi* about them – e.g. the caliph, Pontius Pilate-like, recognising the innocence of Michael but needing to appease a hostile crowd.⁵¹⁴ What is supposed to be a trial becomes instead a tripartite Abrahamic theological dispute in which questions such as celibacy, the apostleship of Paul and the respective status of Christianity and Islam as world religions are discussed between the caliph, Michael and an anonymous Jew. This is followed by ordeals involving hot coals and poison, which appear to have no place in Islamic justice. The account follows the old pattern of accounts that give pride of place to the confessional statement by the martyr, an important part of the martyrology’s role in edifying its audience. Michael has the most

514 *Passion of Michael the Monk of Mar Saba*, 12

public of platforms for his agonistic tasks of trouncing his theological opponents as well as enduring his trial by ordeal. The presence of a Jewish opponent in the disputation is an echo of the anti-Semitic tone of so many of the earlier martyrologies – including *Polycarp*. In writing in this tone it can be argued that the authors of martyrologies were taking their cue from the anti-Judaism present in the gospels themselves and particularly the passion narratives in the gospels. The unwillingness of the caliph to execute Michael is an echo of Pilate's unwillingness to condemn Christ. As in so many martyrologies, death is by beheading. The retrieval of relics and the occurrence of wonders are given due emphasis.

The *Passion of Michael, Monk of Mar Saba* evokes its era of composition, maybe the first decade of the ninth century – an age of intense literary activity at Mar Saba, when Arabic became an ecclesiastical language for the Melkites and when it was deemed important to take an theological stand against Islam and to highlight the strength of the indigenous Christian heritage.

Men, Melkites, (ex) Muslims, Milites and Monks

It is worth noting, when relating these martyrologies to Islamic Law as practiced under the caliphate, that all surviving caliphate martyrologies from the Near East concern male martyrs. This stands in sharp contrast with martyrologies from pagan late antiquity (and later Donatist martyrologies) or the Sasanid period, when female martyrs had sometimes played a significant role. This lack of gender diversity may reflect the smaller range of martyrologies for this period but could also be a reflection of the different approach of Islamic law to women. As has been shown above, capital punishment was reserved for male apostates, whereas female apostates were beaten. In this regard it is especially striking that Eulogius' Cordoban martyrologies, referred to in more detail in a subsequent section of this dissertation, contain references to, and indeed in many cases give narrative emphasis to various female martyrs.

All the martyrs in these four texts are Melkites too. Martyrdoms for this period do not come from Coptic Church sources. Hardships endured by the Church do not seem to have provoked martyrdom as a response at this time – or not martyrdoms that

generated martyrologies, even though that happened subsequently⁵¹⁵. Dennett sees little evidence for conversion to Islam from Egypt or anywhere else in the Umayyad period⁵¹⁶. He argues that at this stage the Arabs did nothing to encourage conversion, which did not exempt former *dhimmīs* from poll tax. *Dhimmīs* exempt from poll tax included women, males preceding puberty, monks and priests and the destitute, aged and infirm.

But Sawīrus (admittedly a late source looking back from the eleventh century) paints a picture of increasing fiscal oppression in the early eighth century⁵¹⁷. Travellers needed an official passport, which collapsed trade. From 717 onwards, Islamicisation increased – wine shops were shut and stocks destroyed, Christian village headmen were replaced by Muslims and the poll tax became a universal obligation, though churches and monasteries had earlier had fiscal privileges restored⁵¹⁸. Sawīrus saw caliph Hisham as just if strict, calling him a “god-fearing man according to the method of Islam” who “loved all men...and became the deliverer of the orthodox”⁵¹⁹. They disliked his unofficial “governor” (officially called a head of taxation), ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Ḥabhāb, who ordered men to wear numbered badges, was cruel to Patriarch Alexander until Alexander’s death, increased taxes and provoked the 725-6 Coptic tax rebellion⁵²⁰.

Papyri, ostraca and inscriptions, along with archaeology, reveal a wealth of information about Egypt⁵²¹. They paint a picture of continuity from before the conquest. At Jeme (opposite Luxor) the major new changes were new taxes and works imposed on the inhabitants and the documentation generated thereby. The Christian population seems to have been largely self-regulating.

515 Zabrowski, Jason R, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijōit: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth Century Egypt, The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol 3*, Leiden: Brill 2005

516 Dennett, D, *Conversion and Poll-tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 1950), 87

517 Sawīrus, *History of the Patriarchs 322-5*, PO, t. 5 trans B. Evetts

518 Sawīrus, 235-6

519 Sawīrus 327-8 & 340

520 Sawīrus 331-2

521 “The non-Muslim communities: Christian communities”, Terry G. Wilfong in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, volume, 1 Islamic Egypt 640-1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge 1998)

Literary evidence shows a decline in the use of Coptic and a switch to Arabic. Greek, as an administrative language, had vanished by the early ninth century. Coptic was a standard literary language for Christians but had never been the primary administrative language. Coptic continued but Christians had begun to use Arabic as a legal language by the ninth century. At this time more Arabs migrated from Syria to Egypt, settling beyond Fuṣṭāt and Alexandria. Throughout this period Egyptian Christians were able to interact with Christians beyond their borders. Old Nubian texts⁵²² show Nubian dependence on Egyptians for appointments and guidance.

The history of the Nestorians in the caliphate is also notable for an absence of martyrologies from the caliphal period, though there is some evidence for fiscal pressure. Under the first caliphs, the Nestorians remained strong enough to continue to send missions to South Asia and the Far East (as did the Jacobites). The main Syriac source for the period (apart from brief chronicles such as the *Chronicum maroniticum*) is the ninth century *Church History* of Patriarch Dionysus of Tel Mahrē (d. 845). It contains much valuable information about fiscal persecution of Christians. Much of it is preserved in the *Chronography* of Patriarch Michael the Great and an anonymous work known as the *Chronicle* of AD1234⁵²³.

Although, as shown above, Theophanes lists several events that suggest persecution against Christians and Jews, on balance it seems that discriminatory measures under al-Mansūr were directed more against Melkites and Jacobites than against Nestorians, according to Fiey. As he observes, the position of the Nestorians at this time was not unlike that under the Sasanid Persians, when the church represented the second religion of the empire⁵²⁴. The Nestorian Church was a body that had had experience of accommodating itself to a world where political power was wielded by another faith.

Some martyrologies (the oldest in terms of their historical setting) concern Byzantine soldiers rather than Melkite subjects of the caliphate. The military theme is in the

522 Gerald Browne, *Old Nubian texts from Qasr Ibrim I-III, Texts from Excavations 9-10*, (London 1988-91)

523 *The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian* (ed. with French translation by J.-B. Chabot, 4 volumes, Paris, 1899-1924)

524 J.M Fiey: *Chrétiens Syriaques sous les Abbasides* (Louvain 1980), 29

background and sometimes in the foreground in the *Passion of Romanos*, with its collection of captives from *ghazwa* and prisoners of war. *Ghazwa* features prominently in the martyrologies of two raiders who convert from Islam to Christianity – Anthony Ruwaḥ and ‘Abd al-Masīḥ (the latter reconverts to Christianity).

It is striking too that all the subjects of these martyrological texts are monks or quasi-monks (Peter of Capitolias and his family have adopted an ascetic lifestyle and Anthony Ruwaḥ puts on monastic apparel even though his swift post-conversion declaration of faith does not give him much opportunity to join a community). Romanos, ‘Abd al Masīḥ and Michael are all monks. Even without considering the *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba*, whose martyrdom occurred in different circumstances that seem to have nothing to do with a confrontation of faiths, it is striking how prominently monks feature in the martyrologies from the Near East. It is striking too how prominently just one Melkite monastery (Mar Saba) is in furnishing us with martyrological texts and subject matter. This must be highlighted as it shows the central role this particular monastery played as a centre for theological opposition to Islam during the ‘Abbasid caliphate. It is ironic that, as the *Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba* demonstrates, the monks of Mar Saba suffered the most violence when ‘Abbasid rule temporarily broke down.

4. The Martyrs of Cordoba

Although in the Islamic Near East Melkites, Jacobites and Nestorians each faced challenges over the historical period in question, evidence suggests that there were growing pressures on all of the Christian communities generally at this time, but that the pressures were predominantly fiscal (the burden of taxation) or cultural (with the development of Arabic as a language of administration to replace Greek as well as Coptic). The number of martyrologies inspired by martyrdoms seems to have been relatively small in comparison with those engendered by the clash between Christianity and Sasanid Zoroastrianism.

The growth of Islamic law under the ‘Abbāsids marks a significant step in the shaping of a confident religious and cultural identity expressed predominantly through the medium of Arabic. As Griffith has argued⁵²⁵, the literary activity at Mar Saba during this period is an example of Christians fighting back and asserting a Christian identity through the medium of Arabic (even if the texts were subsequently translated into other languages too). But in Spain the cultural challenge mounted by a confident and expanding Islamic world towards Christians was, if anything, even greater and provoked a much more radical Christian response in the mid ninth century. The story of the martyrs’ movement in Córdoba offers an interesting contrast to the collection of martyrologies from the Near East – but also demonstrates a fascinating connection that links, through George of Bethlehem, a monk of Mar Saba, the events at Córdoba with the monastery of Mar Saba, which played such a crucial role in the theological response of Melkite Christianity in the Near East to Islam at this time⁵²⁶.

Much of the Iberian peninsula had fallen to the Muslim advance in the eighth century. Apart from its geographical distance from the Near East it was politically and religiously different too. As Bulliet observes, it belonged to neither the Byzantine nor Sasanid Empire; its religion was Latin Christianity; its population was Hispano-

⁵²⁵ Sidney H Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, (Princeton 2008) , 17

⁵²⁶ But B. Z. Kedar, “Latin at Mar Sabas?” *Byzantion* 65 (1995) shows that the suggestion that George of Bethlehem knew Latin fluently is hard to sustain, and that Eulogius’ claim that Mar Sabas had 500 monks at the time should be questioned too.

Roman and German⁵²⁷. Arabic accounts of the conquest of al-Andalus (Spain and Portugal) are sparse and, like Arabic descriptions of the conquest of the Near East, not contemporary. Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam⁵²⁸ (a ninth century source) is the earliest. Christian sources include a short Latin *Chronicle of 754*⁵²⁹ (named after the year of the last dated entry), possibly penned by a Christian working for the Muslim government at Córdoba, which puts little stress on the different religion of the invaders. Evidence for massacres includes executions at Toledo of Christian lords captured there with the assistance of a collaborator called Oppa, according to the *Chronicle of 754*⁵³⁰. There is little information for the capture of Catalonia and Portugal, though there is more information about the conquest of Murcia, including a treaty recorded in Arabic, the Treaty of Tudmīr⁵³¹. Tribute was taken and the locals were given some autonomy. But resistance with a view to eventual liberation continued; unlike some of their co-religionists in the Near East, the Christians of northern Spain had access to an unconquered Christian hinterland. The *Chronicle of Alfonso III*⁵³², a late ninth century document, refers to the Christian rebel Pelayo successfully opposing the Muslims up in the Picos de Europa and even capturing the aforementioned Oppa (who is described as a bishop)⁵³³. It is interesting, given the controversy among Christians engendered subsequently by the episode of the martyrs of Córdoba, that there is such evidence of early high level Christian collaboration with the invading Muslims.

Umayyad rule in Damascus collapsed between 747-50. In 756 Abd al-Rahman I declared himself ‘*amīr*’ of al-Andalus in his own right and his successors held it in defiance of Abbasid caliphs until 1031. ‘Abd al-Rahman II (822-52) united al-Andalus under Umayyad rule. Córdoba had not been a Roman capital, but was at the hinge of various important routes (north to Toledo and the Ebro valley, east to the Levante and south and west to Elvira (Granada) and Seville. It had rich agricultural

527 Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Harvard 1979)

528 Abd al-Hakam, *History of the Conquest of Spain*, ed and trans. J.H. Jones, London 1858

529 *Chronicle of 754*, *Continuatio Hispana*, MGH Auct. Antiq., XI, *Chronica Minora*, II, 323-368

530 *Chronicle of 754*, 70

531 Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, 37-8 and translated from al-Dabbī, *Kitāb bughyāt al-multamis fī ta’rīkh rijāl ahl al-Andalus*, ed. Francisco Codera and Julian Ribera (Madrid, 1885), .259

532 Constable, *Medieval Iberia*, 39-42

533 *Chronicle of Alfonso III*, 10

hinterland. It now became the Muslim capital and was crucial to the politics of the period.

The Byzantines considered ‘Abd al –Rahman II an ally against Baghdad. He expressed a renewed enthusiasm for *jihād* and a programme of mosque building. As well as an extension for the mosque at Córdoba there were mosques at Seville and Jaen too. His reign saw poets, musicians and philosophers flocking to Córdoba. Coope demonstrates that this provided a context for subsequent Christian complaint – Christians were dazzled by the wealth of the Umayyad court and the opportunities it presented⁵³⁴. Asceticism was a reaction to this. Wolf comments succinctly: “a rejection of the world became indistinguishable from a rejection of Islam”⁵³⁵. Meanwhile many Andalusis visited Medina and Mecca on pilgrimage, even if the political situation limited their contact with the capital of the caliphate at Baghdad. The knowledge of Islamic law that they picked up was from Mālik b. Anas (d.795), founder of the oldest of the four law schools. It was this interpretation of law that would be applied when the martyrs’ movement made their stand against Islam.

Eulogius was a Cordoban priest, martyrologist and ultimately also a martyr. He and Paul Albar are the sole written sources for the story of the Cordoban martyrs’ movement. The Latin polemical writings of Eulogius and of his contemporary, Paul Albar, call the Muslims “gentiles” – by which they mean people living according to the body and knowing nothing of spiritual values. Tabanos, a remote double monastery established by Jeremias and his wife Elizabeth seven miles from Cordoba, was, until it was levelled in 853, a centre for a Christian martyrs’ movement– at least ten of the martyrs over the next decade were associated with it. It is unclear what rule its monks and nuns followed, but Tabanos was noted for unusually strict ascetic practices. Here, even more so than in the Near East (where the monastery of Mar Saba was so prominent), one single monastery was the focus for the creation of so much martyrology – and, more significantly, so many martyrs.

534 Jessica A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion* (Nebraska 1995) chapter 1

535 K.B. Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge 1988), 117

In al-Andalus no separate Arab garrison towns were built. *Dhimmīs* and Muslims therefore lived alongside each other. It seems from the accounts of Eulogius that priests attracted derision sometimes through their distinctive dress, but Wolf observes that the lack of evidence for laity being thus treated suggests that dress codes for *dhimmīs* were not being enforced⁵³⁶.

Christian-Muslim interchange in Cordoba meant more potential for cultural borrowing – but also for conflict. Bulliet⁵³⁷ suggests that by 850CE twenty or thirty percent of al-Andalus was Muslim, fifty percent by 961 and over ninety percent by 1200. The rate of conversion was uneven and the earliest conversions were in the cities, especially near centres of Islamic administration. The martyrs' movement occurred against this backdrop of conversion to Islam. Between 850 and 948 Christians were executed at Cordoba on two different charges – mostly denigrating Muhammad. Some were classed as apostates from Islam; most actively invited execution. Half were clergy or under a monastic vow, but some were civil servants. Prominent Christians saw them as troublemakers and spoke out against them. The accounts of martyrdoms were written by Eulogius⁵³⁸. He himself became a martyr on March 11th, 859, as recounted by his friend Paul Alvarus in the *Vita Eulogii*.

Eulogius wrote the *Memoriale Sanctorum* and the *Apologeticus Martyrum*. They are sharply apologetical and polemical works, addressed to the whole Church in a much more obvious way than is the case for any of the martyrologies from the Near East, or indeed than is the case for martyrologies from earlier periods. Each of Eulogius' works work divides into two parts: an apologia for the martyrs (preface and book I of the *Memoriale*; paragraphs 1-20 of the *Apologeticus*. The *Apologeticus*, a sequel to the *Memoriale* concerns itself with justifying the martyrs as genuine.

Book I of the *Memoriale* is less structured chronologically, with general references to events. Book II chronicles events before the succession of Muhammad I, including

536 K.B. Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge 1988)

537 Bulliet, R., *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge, MA, 1979, 124 graph 22

538 Eulogius of Córdoba, *Memoriale Sanctorum Libri, Documentum Martyriale, Epistolae, Liber Apologeticum Martyrium*, PL 115, 731-870

twenty nine martyrdoms. Book III chronicles the persecution of Muhammad's reign (another seventeen martyrdoms). Each book has a preface.

Eulogius begins humbly, aware of how he stands before judgement. He wants to nourish the faithful with good food, unlike the poisonous food offered by his enemies⁵³⁹. Soon he is plunging into a polemical refutation of Islam. Muslims see Christ as the "Word of God" and as a prophet – merely human – not divine and not equal with the father; moreover they say that there will be pleasures of the flesh in paradise and in doing so they blaspheme against Mary⁵⁴⁰. Here Eulogius quotes from a lost work of Abbot Esperaindeo⁵⁴¹. After referring to the martyrdoms of Perfectus and John, Eulogius answers the charge of a lack of miracles involving these martyrs⁵⁴². In doing so he cites St Gregory the Great's assertion that before the end signs would cease⁵⁴³. He responds to Christian leaders who criticise the martyrs, accusing them of twisting scripture⁵⁴⁴. He responds to the assertion that these voluntary martyrs were not true martyrs, citing arguments from Eusebius and Arnobius⁵⁴⁵. He answers the charge that they were not true martyrs (because there was no miraculous preservation of their remains) by saying that all flesh is mortal⁵⁴⁶.

Book II opens with the martyrdom of Perfectus, a Cordoban priest, who was pressurised by Muslims to take part in a debate and to make the case for Christianity⁵⁴⁷. He was unwilling, fearing violence, but agreed to do so under a promise of safety. He debated in Arabic and referred to Muhammad as a false prophet, who would burn in hell for instituting polygamy. Some time later he returned to town, was seized and taken to a *qāḍī*. After bearing imprisonment well he was

539 *Memoriale*, I, 1-2

540 *Memoriale* I, 7

541 Little is known of Abbot Esperaindeo, but he is one the most important Christians in Cordoba before Eulogius and Albar. They studied in his schools. He is credited with developing the monastic and ascetic fervour in Cordoba at that time. He wrote a vita of Adulphus and John, two early martyrs, that does not survive and a treatise against Islam (which Eulogius quotes). It seems that he died around 851-2 but there is no record that he himself was martyred.

542 *Memoriale*, I, 9-11

543 *Memoriale*, I, 13 (citing Gregory, Morales XXXIV, 2)

544 *Memoriale*, I, 19

545 *Memoriale* I, 21

546 *Memoriale* I, 26

547 *Memoriale* II, I, 1-6

executed. An interesting reference to the death of people attending his execution when their boat overturns sees a fulfilment of a prophecy in *Isaiah* 53, 9. The martyrdom of Isaac, the first voluntary martyr is then recounted⁵⁴⁸. He was a civil servant (*exceptor rei publicae*), well-trained in Arabic, who left office and went to Tabanos monastery for three years⁵⁴⁹. Pretending that he wished to convert, he went to the *qādī*'s court, blasphemed against Muhammad while the *qādī* was explaining Islam. The *qādī* struck Isaac but was reminded by his advisors that the law protected the accused from physical harm prior to sentencing. The *qādī* initially considered him drunk or insane, jailed him but subsequently had him beheaded. Isaac could have been publicly defining himself as a Christian for the first time – when as an official he may have kept a low profile before, rather than converting to Islam as the *qādī* may have expected him to do.

The martyrdom of Sanctus is covered very briefly before Eulogius records the voluntary martyrdoms of six men: Peter (priest), Walabonsus (deacon); Sabinianus and Wistremundus (monks); Habentius (monk) and Jerome⁵⁵⁰. Their bodies are posthumously burned after being displayed⁵⁵¹. Next follows the martyrdom of Sisenandus, who was inspired by the previous martyrdoms and then Paul (deacon) and Theodimirus (monk)⁵⁵².

Next are the first female martyrs Eulogius refers to – two apostate sisters, Nunilo and Alodia, martyred in October 851⁵⁵³. They were daughters of a Muslim father and a Christian mother and were brought up Muslim, but return to their Christian faith. At least twelve of the martyrs were from religiously mixed families. Of them nine were the children of mixed marriages. There follows a brief reference to the martyrdom of Gumesindus (priest) and Servus Dei (monk)⁵⁵⁴.

548 *Memoriale* II, II

549 “The exact nature of that office is a subject of debate, but it is certain that the exceptor was among the most important Christian officials and probable that he was in charge of collecting taxes; the official may be the same one identified in Arabic as qumis” Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba*, 19

550 *Memoriale* II, III

551 *Memoriale* II, IV, 1-3

552 *Memoriale* II, V

553 *Memoriale* II, VII, 1-3

554 *Memoriale* II, IX

In July 852 four relatives were martyred as apostates – Aurelius and his wife, Sabigotho and Felix and his wife, Liliosa. Aurelius had witnessed the beating of a Christian merchant, John, and was moved to a more intense expression of his own faith. Becoming celibate ascetics the two couples met George of Bethlehem, who arrived at Tabanos (while in North Africa to collect a donation for Mar Saba, George had heard about oppression in Spain and crossed to investigate)⁵⁵⁵. He expressed a desire to go to martyrdom with the two couples. He also requested that Eulogius send to Mar Saba an account of his last days. Unfortunately, if the account was ever written, it does not appear to have survived and one can only speculate about the reasons for this – would an account of voluntary martyrdom have been well received at Mar Saba? Or did the destruction of Tabanos and the martyrdom of Eulogius himself mean that some things were simply not written? George’s martyrdom is very voluntary indeed, as the authorities seem reluctant to execute him and only do so after he denounced Islam in the most virulent of terms by saying that the angel that appeared to Muhammad had a demon and that Muhammad and his followers were doomed to eternal punishment.⁵⁵⁶

These martyrdoms are followed by brief accounts of the martyrdoms of Christopher and Leovigildus (monks)⁵⁵⁷ and then Emila and Jerome, a deacon and a layperson respectively, who make their denunciation of Islam in pure Arabic⁵⁵⁸. They are followed by the interesting cases of Rogelius and Servius Dei (not to be confused with the above-mentioned Servus Dei). These are two eunuchs who enter a mosque to blaspheme Islam and are executed after having their limbs amputated⁵⁵⁹. Their story is an interesting echo of the martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias, who has his limbs amputated before execution. The book ends with a description of gathering tension both between Christians and the Muslim authorities and between Christians and each other as a result of the wave of martyrdoms, and with the death of the amir ‘Abd al-Rahman.

555 *Memoriale* II, X, 25

556 *Memoriale* II, X, 30 and 33

557 *Memoriale* II, XI

558 *Memoriale* II, XII

559 *Memoriale* II, XIII

Book III opens with a reference to the moves the new amīr, Muhammad, made against Christians, in which office holders lost their posts (the book recounts the martyrdom of one of these, Argimirus⁵⁶⁰). The wave of martyrdoms continues, following the usual pattern of Christians going before a judge, proclaiming their faith and being executed. Many of these are clergy or monks, such as Fandila⁵⁶¹, Abundius⁵⁶², Amator and Peter⁵⁶³. Some are listed with the briefest of mentions, such as Witesendum⁵⁶⁴, Helias), Paul and Isodorus⁵⁶⁵. Some accounts, concerning ascetic women, are dealt with in more detail, such as Columba, who in September 853 went to the *qādī* and denounced the Prophet⁵⁶⁶. She was beheaded, even though in the view of some Islamic jurists, following Abū Hanīfa, female apostates were only to be beaten (as indeed initially happened with Flora). There follows the martyrdom of another nun, Pomposa, who is inspired to emulate Columba⁵⁶⁷. The final martyrdom recorded in Book III is that in 856 of the female apostate from Islam, Aurea⁵⁶⁸. She was a Christian from a noble Mozarab family which produced various *qādīs* and was martyred as an apostate when she refused to profess Islam in an anti-Christian atmosphere generated by the martyrs' movement.

Eulogius' other martyrological work, the *Apologeticus*, opens with an appeal of authorial modesty (1-2). He then deals with objections based on a comparison with Early Church martyrs (3-6); justifies the absence of miracles (7-10); and attacks Islam (11-20). It is striking, when comparing this text with martyrologies from the Near East, how comparatively important the apologetic element of this Western text is. The need to defend the martyrs shows how the martyrs' movement was a divisive and traumatic episode in the life of the Cordoban church. There is no comparable evidence for a mass movement of voluntary martyrs in the life of the Melkite Church in the Near East under Umayyad or 'Abbasid rule. Only the final fifteen chapters deal with the martyrdoms of Rudericus and Salomon – and the narrative spotlight is mostly on Rudericus.

560 *Memoriale* III, XVI

561 *Memoriale* III, VII

562 *Memoriale* III, XII

563 *Memoriale* III, XIII

564 *Memoriale* III, XIV

565 *Memoriale* III, XV

566 *Memoriale* III, X, 1-12

567 *Memoriale* III, XI, 1-3

568 *Memoriale* III, XVII, 1-5

One argument that Eulogius has to counter from within the Christian community concerns the relative lack of grisly torture endured by Cordoban martyrs compared with the martyrs of antiquity⁵⁶⁹. His response is that the key issue is not the relative speed or slowness with which their deaths came, but the faith that they manifested in facing their deaths, which was as strong as the martyrs of old⁵⁷⁰. Scriptural arguments cited in support of his case include the penitent thief on the cross at Calvary and the parable of the labourers in the vineyard⁵⁷¹. Eulogius also feels it necessary to deal with the question of a relative lack of wonders associated with the deaths of these martyrs (something else that the martyrologies of the Near East are less defensive about). Eulogius puts faith on a higher pedestal than wonders and notes that even the unfaithful (such as the pagan sorcerers in *Exodus*) can produce signs⁵⁷².

The extended, crude polemic against Islam (*Apologeticus Martyrum* 11-20) is a fascinating feature of this work. It is more visceral than the type of *disputatio* found in accounts from the Near East. Eulogius states that he found in Pamplona an account of Muhammad, the “false prophet”⁵⁷³. He relates from it how Muhammad received his revelations from a spirit of error in the form of a vulture. The text also contains Old Testament prophecies about the Arab conquests (from *Habakkuk* 1, 6-8), a spurious reference to the killing of Heraclius’ brother during the conquest, and a mocking tale about dogs eating the corpse of Muhammad after he had allegedly claimed that he would rise again in three days, by way of explaining Islamic prohibitions against dogs. The account is a kind of anti-hadith⁵⁷⁴. This is followed by a string of Biblical texts prophesying the coming of false teachings and an explanation of those false teachings (Christ was the Word of God and spirit but not divine in nature and equal to God the Father)⁵⁷⁵. The section ends with a revealing account of how beleaguered and threatened Christians like Eulogius felt themselves to be. They used *Psalms* 83, 1-2 and 97, 7 as a verbal talisman on hearing the call to prayer from the minaret⁵⁷⁶.

569 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 3

570 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 5-6

571 *Luke* 23, 39-43; *Matthew* 20, 1-16

572 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 8-9

573 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 15

574 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 16

575 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 18-19

576 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 19.

Do not keep silent, God;
Be neither quiet, God, nor still,
For your enemies raise an uproar
And those who are hostile to you carry
Their heads high (Psalm 83, 1-2)

May those who worship images, those
Who vaunt their idols,
May they all be put to shame.
Bow down, all you gods, before him! (Psalm 97, 7)

The final martyrdoms Eulogius refers to are those of Rudericus and Salomon, martyred on March 13th, 857. Less detail is given about Salomon's background, but Rudericus, a priest, is wounded and almost dies after intervening in a fight between his two brothers, one Christian, the other Muslim. The latter falsely states that Rudericus converted to Islam while near death, thereby making his continued profession of Christianity a form of apostasy⁵⁷⁷. Thus usual blandishments by the *qādī* fail to weaken his faith and he is imprisoned, where he is strengthened by Christ and encouraged by his fellow prisoner, Salomon, in shared prayer and fasting⁵⁷⁸. After more *topoi*-like blandishments and threats, Rudericus is defiant and both prisoners are beheaded⁵⁷⁹. The *qādī*'s attempts to dispose of their remains in the river are thwarted when the bodies are washed up in turn on the coast, discovered by a priest and taken to a shrine by a fervently devout crowd. The description of Rudericus' miraculously preserved remains stands in stark contrast with the earlier account of the fate of Muhammad's corpse⁵⁸⁰. A large part of the account is given over to the discovery of the remains – perhaps because of Eulogius' reference to his own eye-witness of these events. Eulogius may elsewhere play down the importance of wonders in his martyrologies, but he will point to them if he can⁵⁸¹.

577 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 21

578 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 24-25

579 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 28-29

580 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 30-35

581 *Apologeticus Martyrum* 8-9 and 31-34

In general it is interesting to note that Eulogius' accounts are particularly attentive to women martyrs, whose stories he recounts at length. Virginity (or celibacy) is a feature of almost all the martyrs he deals with – even the married ones opt for celibacy. In this respect his martyrologies reflect a common pattern of the genre – virginity and celibacy as world-denying behaviour, death to the flesh, echo the ultimate world-denying behaviour that is the martyr's offer of him/herself to physical death. Most of the caliphate martyrologies concern monks or those like Peter of Capitolias who behave like monks. Celibacy was no more a feature of Islam than it was of Zoroastrianism and even when we put aside crude Christian polemic about Muslim sensuality it is clear that celibacy was something that differentiated the faiths.

Eulogius' lay friend, Paul Albar (Alvarus), wrote a pro-martyr polemic (aimed at other Christians) and a *Vita Eulogii*, which presents Eulogius as a preserver of Latin culture under attack⁵⁸². Albar himself had received the sacrament of penance, formerly a popular option in Visigothic Spain for lay people, while gravely ill in the mid 850's. After this once-only sacrament, often received only on the deathbed, the penitent was expected to live the rest of his life as an ascetic on pain of excommunication. It would be good to have similar works from the Near East to Albar's *Vita Eulogii* to help shed a little light on the authors of other Caliphate martyrologies, since, even when named, most are shadowy figures. But by the same token, in assessing the episode of the martyrs of Cordoba, it would also be good to hear the voices of Christians opposed to the martyrs' movement, since our written evidence for this period comes from Albar and Eulogius and not their opponents, as Christys points out, adding the caveat that Albar's work is written within early medieval literary conventions, where *topoi* abound⁵⁸³. Albar himself is known only from his own work. His *Confessio* (an examination of prayer and an act of contrition) is primarily a prayer intended for devotional use.

The *Indiculus Luminosus*, attributed to him, is the major Mozarabic polemical work against Islam. It also attacks Christians who would not support the martyr movement. The *Indiculus* defends the martyrs' right to preach. After explaining that he is

582 Alvarus of Córdoba, *Confessio, Epistulae, Indiculus luminosius, Carmina*, PL 121, 397-565; *Vita Eulogii*, PL 115, 705-720

583 Christys, *Christians in al-Andalus 711-1000*, (Curzon 2002), 55

defending the martyrs and not attacking the Church (1) Albar defends the confessors (2-3) and (3-7) refutes those who deny persecution existed; defends the cursing of Muslims (7-8) and criticises “lukewarm” Christians (9-10). He defends voluntary martyrs (12-13) and sees the source of persecution as Christian failings rather than martyrs’ provocation (14-19). He calls for praise of martyrs and justifies his work (19-20). As Colbert notes, the basic structure of the *Indiculus* resembles that of Augustine’s *City of God*.⁵⁸⁴ F.R. Franke argues that his polemic is influenced by anti-Muslim polemic brought by George of Bethlehem from the eastern Mediterranean to the Mozarabic Christians⁵⁸⁵.

Albar is the author of almost all the Spanish Latin poetry extant from the period. Colbert goes so far as to say that he “prefigures the universal man of the renaissance”.⁵⁸⁶ Albar and Eulogius’ writings in Latin, drawing on the literary as well as the theological heritage of earlier writers such as Augustine, stand in contrast to the approach taken by Melkite authors in the Near East, who adopted Arabic as their language of theological discourse. Coope notes that the primary influences on Eulogius and Albar were Western Latin ones, but she still wonders whether Albar and Eulogius were influenced by John of Damascus (the last theologian in that region to use Greek rather than Arabic)⁵⁸⁷. This influence is not proven, even though Eulogius had contact with George of Mar Saba, a monk who travelled to Spain via North Africa and was himself martyred in Córdoba. Syria in the 740’s and Cordoba in the 850’s were undergoing similar processes of Islamization.

Eulogius and Albar were bitter that Archbishop Reccafred of Seville, in an attempt to extinguish the martyrs’ movement, ordered the arrest of some clergy under pressure from Muslim authorities. The imprisonment of Christians by other Christians stands in sharp contrast with anything recorded in martyrologies from the Near East and shows the enormity of the schism in the Andalusian Church. Christys highlights

584 Colbert, E.P., *The Martyrs of Cordoba (850-859): A Study of the Sources* (Washington, 1962), 270.

585 F.R. Franke, “Die freiwilligen Märtyrer”, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kulturgeschichte Spaniens XIII, 1-170*, (Münster Westfalen, 1958)

586 Colbert, E.P. *The Martyrs of Cordoba (850-859): A Study of the Sources*, 149

587 Jessica A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion*, 40

perceived similarities between Christian anti-Muslim polemic from John of Damascus and other writers from the Near East and the Cordoban martyrs' movement, but apparently overlooks the absence of literary evidence for intra-Melkite schism in the face of Islamic cultural advance⁵⁸⁸. In other words, the diverse ways in which the Christians of Córdoba respond to Islam and the bitter quarrels that they have with each other about it are not paralleled in the history of the Church of the Near East at this time.

One interesting feature about this episode and the literature it generates is the division between Christians on the question of voluntary martyrdom. Intra-Christian disputation is a strong theme in the writings of a Melkite theologian like Abū Qurrah, who needs to engage with rival Christian theologies, but attitudes to martyrdom are not a significant theme in his works. It is interesting that such a strong intra-Christian debate about martyrdom should emerge among Western Christians when it seems to be absent from the churches of the Near East, aside from the inference that the *Passion of `Abd al-Masīh* is a subtle corrective to the *Passion of Peter of Capitolias*⁵⁸⁹. It is even more interesting in the light of the previous history of Christianity in the Western Mediterranean, in nearby North Africa, where Latin writers such as Tertullian had left a greater theological imprint, and where the Donatist Church had made its mark too. The rigorism and provocations of the martyrs of Córdoba have a strong echo of Donatism, about them, even though the martyrs' opponents are denounced for Donatism.

The martyrs' movement at Cordoba appears especially dramatic when set alongside the body of martyrological texts from the Near East. The provocation by radical Christians is openly acknowledged and the response that it engenders in the Muslims seems in line with Islamic legal teaching. It is a significant, albeit brief, eruption of violence, but it is one where the violence is provoked in a manner that caused divisions in the Christian community itself. The Christian approach to Islam in the Near East seems to have been more subtle. This could help to explain why the number

588 Christys, *Christians in al-Andalus 711-1000*, (Curzon 2002), 65-66

589 Mark N. Swanson, "the Martyrdom of `Abd al-Masīh, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī)", in David Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand Years* (Leiden 2001), 107-129

of martyrdoms, as recorded in eastern martyrologies, of Christians at the hands of Muslim authorities is fewer.

Conclusion

Behind the Melkite martyrologies of the seventh to ninth centuries stands an already old and rich tradition of martyrological writing. The inspiration for this is found not only in the New Testament but also in Jewish texts, notably *Maccabees*. The *Passion of Polycarp* became the prototype for a range of texts offering inspirational accounts of the deaths of adherents of a countercultural *religio illicita*. The phenomenon of martyrdom also generated much theological reflection across the centuries, with particular focus on the desirability or otherwise of voluntary martyrdom. Martyrological texts became a genre within the wider, burgeoning realm of hagiographic writings and an important tool for teaching and encouraging the faithful.

Even when the phenomenon of martyrdom largely ended in the Roman Empire, there were martyrdoms in the Sasanid Empire to inspire a fresh wave of martyrologies. Some contain polemical theological engagement with Zoroastrianism. The collection of martyrologies from this period is impressive in terms of the number of martyrdoms and the variety of people martyred. The experience of Christians under Sasanid rule offers an interesting comparison with their experience under Muslim rule. Many martyrologies were generated in the fourth century by conflict between the now Christian Roman Empire and Sasanid Iran. Nevertheless, theological schism between Nestorians and Chalcedonians seems to have aided the former and facilitated the advance of a form of Christianity that became used to surviving without the active support of the state.

When examining the caliphate martyrologies in the light of what was written beforehand rather than simply seeing them in relation to other material from their era, various things become apparent. Although the military martyrologies in places contain some interesting historical information, they reveal little about Islamic policy towards *dhimmī* (in any case they are about Byzantine troops rather than *dhimmī*). They have as much in common with earlier military martyrologies as with other texts from the caliphate period. *The Passion of the Twenty Monks of Mar Saba* is not about Christian-Muslim relations either. It is a text containing strong echoes of earlier writings about Christian monks martyred by “Saracens”. Ironically it points to the vulnerability of Christian monks when law and order in the caliphate broke down.

The *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr* is another text with useful historical information, but is more interested in anti-iconoclast polemic than *disputatio* with Islam. The other four texts with Christian Arabic roots and a Mar Saba provenance are far more rooted in the life of Christians in the caliphate. Although these martyrdoms are relatively small in number (especially in comparison with the number of such texts surviving from the Sasanid era, they point to a Melkite Christianity that found itself on the defensive against an increasingly confident and assertive Islam in the 'Abbasid era. In the production of these martyrologies we see the Melkite Church, in the form of the monks of Mar Saba, searching for a response to this theological and cultural threat. As the research of writers such as Bulliet and Dennett demonstrates, the threat took the form, not of violent persecution, but of the temptation for Christians to convert to Islam to escape *dhimmitude* and its poll-tax⁵⁹⁰. Moreover, in Islam Christians faced the challenge of a religion that claimed to supercede theirs with its own purer transmission of divine revelation.

The extent to which Islam was perceived in some quarters as such a great threat is demonstrated by the episode of the Cordoban martyrs. Although one monk of Mar Saba became embroiled in this extraordinary outburst of voluntary martyrdom, it is in many ways an episode far removed from the more nuanced theological response of Melkite writers. The intense events at Córdoba are a special episode in the history of al-Andalus in this period, and they throw into even sharper relief the different situation in the Near East, where recorded martyrdoms were rarer and isolated events rather than part of a movement and where Christians co-opted the Arabic language into serving their theological cause.

The world of late antiquity was characterised by great religious and political ferment. Empires fell or suffered great territorial losses (Rome, Byzantium, Sasanid Iran). New political powers emerged (the Islamic caliphate). Religions died or were weakened in some regions (Hellenistic paganism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity). Meanwhile new ones emerged and extended their influence in some places (Christianity and

⁵⁹⁰ Bulliet, Richard W., *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass. 1979); Dennett, Daniel C., *Conversion and Poll-Tax in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950)

Islam). Martyrologies were a product of that turbulent world of late antiquity and straddled its history. They even reach beyond it into the medieval period, demonstrating a historical continuity between the ancient and medieval worlds.

The martyrologies from the caliphate period are part of an ancient literary tradition. It is important to see them in the context of the complex literary tradition from which they spring, with its *topoi*, its didactic and polemical agendas and its own literary and theological conventions. It is important to be aware that these ancient texts may not be a simple factual record, but may instead be just as theologically nuanced as scriptures.

Some martyrologies are not widely read nowadays outside of academic circles. But in the sometimes highly charged religious and political climate of today, when there is talk of a clash of civilizations between the Judaeo-Christian West and the Islamic World, an uninformed reading of stories of martyrdoms of Christians at the hands of Muslims could lead to their use as propaganda to demonstrate that Islam can only be a force for cruelty, oppression and intolerance. To study martyrologies from the time of the early encounter between Christianity and Islam is to find oneself looking back into the world of late antiquity while at the same time being aware of contemporary religious controversy. Few areas of ancient or medieval history can seem so “live”. Some writers have controversially traced the roots of modern Middle Eastern problems back to the Islamic conquest of the Near East and its aftermath⁵⁹¹. Some campaigning religious organisations see deep historical roots to contemporary problems. For example the Barnabas Fund, a UK based Christian charity that supports Christian minorities in the Islamic world and elsewhere, asserts that “violence against Christians has been characteristic of Islam almost from the first”⁵⁹². It is essential that such statements are subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny.

Perhaps in this context it is important to be aware that the word “persecution” has a special resonance in the post-Holocaust world. Even when instances of religious persecution in the ancient world can be identified, they do not necessarily point to a process like a pogrom or ethnic cleansing, even if they do suggest a brutal *Realpolitik*. When one takes a “long view” of martyrologies one can see that the early centuries

591 E.g. Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi*, London 1985

592 *Barnabas Aid* (September/October 2011), 9

after the Islamic conquest of the Near East were not especially rich in them compared to earlier periods. By the end of the ‘Abbasid caliphate Christians in the Near East had become more beleaguered, but the evidence from martyrologies does not suggest that this process was inevitable from the outset. Nor does it suggest that the treatment of Christians (and other *dhimmi* peoples) by Muslim rulers was harsher than that experienced under Sasanid or pagan Roman rule. The difference was that Islam was – is – a missionary religion able to mount a more formidable theological challenge to Christianity than Zoroastrianism or late Greco-Roman paganism were able to. In the light of this challenge it is remarkable that communities of Jews and Christians remained in evidence in many parts of the Middle East and only began to disappear because of the changing politics of the region in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Martyrologies are not the most positive documents for study by anyone seeking to practice contemporary inter-faith dialogue. They show inter-faith relations at their very worst. But insofar as they are part of the story of the development of Christian-Muslim relations, an awareness of them in their broader historical context is helpful, not only for students of the world of late antiquity, but for Christians and Muslims exploring the challenges and opportunities facing both faiths as they relate to each other now. The question of how to relate to Islam, first grappled with by Christians in the Near East centuries ago, is a question now for Christians across the world. As Sidney H Griffith puts it:

It is time for westerners to consider the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Christians who have lived in the world of Islam for centuries⁵⁹³.

593 Sidney H Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 179

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