On Relics and Mausoleums: The Death of the Prophet Muḥammad between History and Legend in the Mediterranean Context

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Abstract

This contribution analyses some motifs related to the death, relics, and tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in some of his medieval Latin legendary biographies, namely the dismemberment of his body, the keeping of his relics in the Ka'ba, and his suspended reliquary-sepulchre. It argues that these motifs, rather than resulting from a bi-polar dialectical approach to the life of the Prophet (Muḥammad vs. Jesus; Mecca vs. Jerusalem; Islamic way of life vs. Christian way of life) for polemical purposes, originate from a reflection on Arabic terms, Islamic practices, and recent history.

1. Introduction

According to the Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad died on the 13th day of Rabī' al-Awwal in the 10th year from the Hijra (8 June 632). He passed away in the arms of his beloved wife 'Ā'isha, in her dwellings adjacent to the mosque of Medina, where he was buried[2]. His tomb was incorporated into the mosque in 707-710[3] and subsequently it became the destination of the *ziyāra* (visitation) after the *ḥajj* (obligatory collective annual pilgrimage) or '*umra* (spontaneous individual pilgrimage) to the *ḥaram* (holy enclosure) of Mecca.

As it is well known, only a few Western medieval texts dealing with Islam and his Prophet correctly locate Muḥammad's tomb in Medina. On the contrary, most of them locate it in Mecca and associate the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba with the veneration of the Prophet's relics, which are considered as evidence of the dismemberment of his body. Another group of texts variously locate Muḥammad's tomb and relics in an unidentified place in Arabia or Africa, or in *Babel* or *Baldach*, namely Cairo and Baghdad. Some texts also describe the wonder of the reliquary-sepulchre suspended in the air by means of a magnet.[4]

1. This study was undertaken as part of FFI2015-63659-C2-1-P, MINECO-FEDER, EU, and 2017 SGR 1787 at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, whose principal investigator is Cándida Ferrero Hernández.
2. Buhl, F., [Welch, A. T. (1993), « Muḥammad», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. VII, Leiden, Brill, pp. 360-374, esp. p. 376.
3. Sauvaget, Jean (1947), *La mosquée Omeyyade de Medine*, Paris, Vanoest.
4. On the numerous Latin accounts of Muḥammad's death, the location and description of his tomb, see D'Ancona, Alessandro (1889), «La Leggenda di Maometto in Occidente», in *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana* 13, pp. 199-281, esp. 274-279 (repr. ed. by Andrea Borruso, Rome 1994); Eckhardt, Alexandre (1947),

The mutilation or dismemberment of the body/corpse, which the sources most often ascribe to pigs or dogs, has been explained as an anti-hagiographical and anti-Christological strategy meant to emphasise the antithesis between the Prophet's life and that of the saints and Jesus, along with the intent to denigrate and ridicule Muḥammad and Islam. The identification of Mecca as the location of the Prophet's tomb would compare the destination of the Islamic pilgrimage to the most important destination of the Christian pilgrimage, Jerusalem, thus creating another antithesis between Muḥammad and Jesus through the contraposition of their respective sepulchres, in addition to evoking the eschatological contrast between Babel and Jerusalem. Likewise, the veneration of the relics and the description of the suspended reliquary-sepulchre would allude to an idolatrous cult and be intended to represent Islam as a pagan religion.[5]

Certainly, the opposition between Muḥammad and Jesus, Mecca and Jerusalem, Islamic and Christian ways of life pervade these narratives. This is obvious in a cultural context that considers Christianity to be the only true religion and therefore perceives other religious phenomena according to Christian hermeneutical categories. This does not necessarily imply, however, that all the elements featured in Muḥammad's biographies produced in such a context result from applying this bi-polar dialectical approach, thus ignoring or manipulating the Islamic historical tradition in order to create a negative and ridiculous image of the Prophet and Islam.[6] Through the analysis of several motifs occurring in the description of the death, relics, and tomb of the Prophet found in legendary biographies,[7] this

«Le cercueil flottant de Mahomet», in (Ed) the editor's name is not mentioned on the frontispiece, *Mélanges de philologie romane et de littérature médiévale offerts à E. Hoepffner*, Strasbourg, pp. 77-88; Daniel, Norman (1960), *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh, pp. 125-129; Tolan, John V. (1998), «Un cadavre mutilé: le déchirement polémique de Mahomet», in *Le Moyen Âge* 104, pp. 53-72; Van Acker, Marieke (1998-1999), *Mahomet dans ses biographies occidentales du Moyen Age: Entre Anti-Saint et Antéchrist*, Lic. diss. in Romaanse Talen, Universiteit Gent, ch. 3, par. 10; Kohlberg, Etan (2000), «Western Accounts of the Death of the Prophet Muḥammad», in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, John Scheid (Eds.), *L'Orient dans l'histoire religieuse de l'Europe. L'invention des origines*, Turnhout, pp. 165-195; Tolan, John V. (2002), *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, New York, pp. 142-144; Reichert, Volker (2005), «Mohammed in Mekka», in *Speculum*, 56, pp. 17-31; Vanoli, Alessandro (2008), «Tra cielo e terra: Idoli e immagini nel Mediterraneo medievale (Between Heaven and Earth: Idol and Pictures in Medieval Mediterranean)», in *Revista Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebreos*, sección Hebreo, 57, pp. 247-278; Rotter, Ekkehart (2009), «Mohammed in der Stadt. Die Kenntnis um dies Stadt Medina und das dortige Prophetengrab im mittelalterlichen Europa», in *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 36, pp. 183-233; de la Cruz Palma, Óscar (2017), *Machometus. La invención del Profeta Mahoma en las fuentes latinas medievales*, in *Medievalia*, 20/2, Barcelona, Institut d'Estudis Medievals, pp. 555-576. For cartographical depictions of the Prophet's tomb in Mecca see Sáenz-López Pérez, Sandra (2007), «La peregrinación a la Meca en la Edad Media a través de la cartografía occidental», in *Revista de poética medieval*, 19, pp. 177-218; Di Cesare, Michelina (2015), «The Dome of the Rock in Mecca: A Christian Interpretation of Muḥammad's Night Journey in a Fourteenth-Century Italian Map (Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, ms. parm. 1612)», in *Le Muséon*, 128, pp. 203-228.

5. See n. 3.
6. This is clearly stated or implied in most of the contributions mentioned in n. 3.
7. For the distinction between pseudo-historical, legendary and eschatological biographies of the Prophet in Medieval Latin Literature see, Di Cesare, Michelina (2012), *The Pseudo-Historical Image of the Prophet*

chapter aims to demonstrate that they originated from a linguistic, aetiological, and historical reflection on Arabic terms, Islamic religious practices, and recent Islamic history, respectively. This points towards a more complex scenario where the genesis of such motifs can be traced back to a precise knowledge of the Islamic world and its culture, gathered from written and oral sources circulating throughout the Mediterranean regions.[8] Consequently, the bi-polar dialectical approach to the life of the Prophet (Muḥammad vs. Jesus; Mecca vs. Jerusalem; Islamic way of life vs. Christian way of life) appears instead to be the result of this knowledge processed from a Christian – but also Jewish, as we shall see – point of view.

2. Ka‘ba and *ka‘b*

The earliest mention of the relics of the Prophet's dismembered body kept in a tomb is found in the commentary on Isaiah by the Karaite Jew Yafet ben ‘Elī, written in the late 10th century in Arabic and Hebrew[9]. In relation to Isaiah 14:19 ("But you are cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch; you are covered with the slain, with those pierced by the sword, those who descend to the stones of the pit. Like a corpse trampled underfoot"),[10] Yafet writes that someone said that ‘*ish ha-ruaḥ* was taken out from his tomb (*miqqibro*) and devoured by lions, leaving aside only its heel (*‘aqev*), then it was buried and that was said to be the ‘*ish ha-ruaḥ*'s tomb (*qever* ‘*ish ha-ruaḥ*). ‘*Ish ha-ruaḥ* (lit. "the man of spirit", here "one inspired by the spirit of prophecy") is an expression found in Hosea 9:7 ("The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this. Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired person a maniac") used in Jewish sources to identify Muḥammad.[11] The intervention of the lions recalls some passages from the Book of Kings (1:13; 1:20, 35; 2:24ff.) and on the opposite the episode of Daniel in the lions' den (Dn 6), whereas, the dismemberment of the corpse recalls the end of the idolatrous Queen Jezabel, who died after falling from a window and was dismembered and devoured by dogs, which only spared her head, hands, and feet (2 Rg 9:30ff). These allusions stress that this was the

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*Muḥammad in Medieval Latin Literature: A Repertor*y, Berlin, Boston, pp. 1-10; Ead. (2013), «The Prophet in the Book: Images of Muḥammad in Western Medieval Book Culture», in Avinoam Shalem (Ed.), *Constructing the Image of Muḥammad in Europe*, Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, pp. 9-32.

8. A similar result was achieved by Fierro, Maribel (2012), «La visión del otro musulmán: el Liber Nicholay y la revolución almohade», in Juan Martos Quesada, Marisa Bueno Sanchez (Eds.), *Fronteras en discusión*, Madrid, pp. 143-161.
9. See Vajda, George (1976), «Un vestige original de "anti-biographie" éco de la tragédie de Karbalā», *Revue des religions*, 189, pp. 177-180.
10. Biblical quotations in English translation follow The New International Version (see biblehub.com under the corresponding passage).
11. Vajda, (1976), p. 178 n. 4.

appropriate end for a false prophet.[12] However, in the story told by Yafet, the lions spare Muḥammad's heel, a quite singular relic. Exactly this singularity may be at the origin of the story, since it appears to be an aetiology for that which was reputed to be the '*ish ha-ruaḥ*'s tomb. Indeed, the Hebrew *'aqev* and the corresponding Arabic *'aqb* are synonyms of the Arabic *ka'b*, which is the masculine form of Ka'ba.[13]

Therefore, it is probable that Yafet's exegesis of Isaiah 14:19 offers an aetiology for the pilgrimage and cult at the Ka'ba originating from a linguistic reflection on the meaning of the sanctuary's name. Being the Ka'ba considered as the repository of the Prophet's heel, it could be identified as a reliquary as well as a tomb containing what remained of his corpse, thus the destination of Islamic pilgrimage.

3. Aqdām

Something similar is found in the narrative of *Mathomus*'s death in the *Gesta Dei per Francos* by Guibert de Nogent, composed in 1109, the earliest Latin text mentioning the dismemberment of the Prophet's body and the preservation of his relics.[14] Guibert sets the story in recent times in an unidentified place located not far from Alexandria, in Egypt. A youth called *Mathomus* is approached and set into the path of error by a hermit who, inspired by the devil, wants to take revenge for not having been elected as Patriarch of Alexandria. *Mathomus* marries a rich widow, becomes powerful and concocts an anti-Trinitarian heresy restoring circumcision and encouraging immoral and licentious practices. This heresy rapidly spread in almost the entire East and Africa and the Mediterranean up to Spain (*per orientis pene uniuersi, Affricae*, *Egypti*, *Ethiopiae*, *Libiae et iuxta nos Hispaniae remotissimos sinus*).[15] Exactly when *Mathomus* is enjoying power and success, he dies in a very shameful way. One day, he succumbed to an epileptic seizure while walking alone and was dismembered by a herd of swine; only his feet are left (*in tantum* […] *ut nullae eius preter talos reliquiae inuenirentur*).[16] Guibert observes that this death appears appropriate – as a sort of contrappasso[17] – to

12. Vajda, (1976), p. 179-180, proposed to identify the protagonist of the story either as Muḥammad or al-Ḥusayn. The latter interpretation was precisely based on the dismemberment of the body, since during the battle of Kerbalā' Ḥusayn's head was cut off.
13. This brilliant intuition is due to Henri Pérès and was quoted in Ricard, Robert (1932), «Sûr les fêtes de 'Moros y Christianos' au Mexique», in *Journal de la société des américanistes*, 30-32, pp. 375-376. Pérès explained that the zancarron (a bone of Muḥammad's body which is described as suspended in the air in the Mexican morismas) originated from a misunderstanding of Ka'ba (cube) as its correspondent masculine form. Therefore, he concludes: "Adorer la ka'ba c'etait, pour les Chréstiens du moyen âge, adorer l'os de la cheville (et par extension de la jambe) de Mahomet" (Ricard [1932], p. 376).
14. On Guibert's biography of the Prophet and recent bibliography on this subject see González Muñoz, Fernando (2015), *Mahometrica. Ficciones poéticas latinas del siglo XII sobre Mahoma*, Madrid, pp. 75-78, 243-257 (text, translation and notes).
15. Ibid., p. 252.
16. Ibid., p. 254.
17. D'Ancona (1889), p. 278.

one who attempted to revive Epicureism (*epicureum* […] *porcum resuscitare molitur, immo prorsus resucitat, porcus ipse porcis deuorandus exponitur, ut obscenitatis magisterium obscenissimo, uti conuenit, fine concludat*) and impressed the footprint of wickedness and depravation on the souls of his followers (*talos iure reliquit, quia perfidie ac turpitudinis uestigia deceptis miserabiliter animabus infixit*).[18] As a worthy retribution, when they kiss his relics, they have to stand the stink left by the pigs (*Cum talos ori, tum quod sus fudit odori,/digno qui celebrat cultor honore ferat*).[19]

However, Guibert also adds that these stories are meant to ridicule *Mathomus*'s followers, since in truth they do not worship him as a god, but rather consider him to be a just man and bearer of a divine law; they believe that he was taken up into Heaven and left his feet as relics, which they go to worship (*Hunc celis assumptum astruunt, et solos talos relictos ad suorum fidelium monimentum, quos etiam infinita ueneratione reuisunt*).[20] They do not eat swine meat because pigs were responsible for his death. Moreover, in this narrative, the dismemberment of the body recalls Jezabel's end according to 2 *Rg* 9:30ff,[21] but the reference to Epicureism through the allusion to Horace, *Epist*. 1,14:16 (*Epicuri de grege porcus*)[22] evokes *Apc* 2:20, where Jezabel appears as the model of the self-styled prophetess who invites her followers to give themselves over to pleasures and to consume the sacrificial victims as well. Therefore, the allusion to *Apc* 2:20 and Horace *Epist*. 1,14:16 symbolises the licentiousness ascribed to the law given by the false prophet *Mathomus* and explain as a kind of para-aetiology that Muslims are forbidden to eat swine meat. The implicit antithesis between Mathomus's stinking relics and the fragrant relics of Christian saints, proposed by Guibert, also associates the Prophet's tomb to a *martyrium* and recalls the custom of pilgrimage, thus implicitly contraposing Mecca to Jerusalem. Actually, Guibert does not state where Mathomus was buried, but some details of his narrative seem to identify this place as the *ḥaram* of Mecca.

Indeed, the feet spared by the pigs are not rendered in the text with the term *pedes*, but through a synecdoche: that *tali*, lit. heels, has to be understood as feet emerges from the following analogy to the footprints of moral abjection left by *Mathomus* on the soul of his followers. The lexical and stylistic choice of *tali* could not be by chance and therefore it could allude to the para-etymology of the term Ka'ba which, as mentioned above, is the feminine of *ka'b*, which means heel. Moreover, it is possible to detect another allusion to the *aqdām* (feet) impressed in the stone block named *maqām Ibrāhīm* (Abraham's place), which some Islamic traditions identify as the place where Abraham stood when building the Ka'ba[23]. This block was originally kept inside the Ka'ba, then moved outside and currently is kept in a *qubba*

18. González Muñoz (2015), p. 254.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 256.
21. Ibid., p. 255 n. 8.
22. Ibid., n. 9.
23. Kister, Meir Jacob (1991), «Maḳām Ibrāhīm», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. VI, Leiden, Brill, pp. 104-107.

(domed aedicule) in front of the Ka‘ba’s door.[24] Pilgrims used to kiss and stroke it in order to receive the *baraka* (blessing), and even perform a kind of circumambulation around it.[25] According to Ṭabarsī (m. 1154), the footprints impressed on the *maqām Ibrāhīm* had the same dimensions as the Prophet Muḥammad’s feet.[26]

A footprint of the Prophet Muḥammad is kept in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is called *al-qadam al-sharīf* (the noble foot) and, according to the Islamic tradition, it was the footprint left by Muḥammad soon before the *mi‘rāj* (the Prophet’s Ascension to Heaven).[27] However, though Guibert mentions the Prophet’s Ascension he cannot allude to *al-qadam al-sharīf* for chronological reasons. Indeed, though the *mi‘rāj* had been located in the Dome of the Rock since the ninth century,[28] the identification of the footprints kept there as Muḥammad’s only occurred after the Islamic re-conquest of Jerusalem in 1187.[29] Other footprints ascribed to the Prophet

24. Kister, Meir Jacob (1971), «Maqām Ibrāhīm. A Stone with an Inscription», in *Le Muséon* 84, pp. 477-491; Id. (1991), pp. 106-107.
25. Kister (1991), p. 106.
26. Ibid., p. 105.
27. Arnold, Thomas W. (1990), «Ḳadam al-sharīf», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. IV, Leiden, Brill, pp. 367-368.
28. The earliest identification of the Rock as the place where the Prophet laid his feet during the mi‘rāj is found in al-Ya‘qūbī (Tā’rīkh, vol. 2, pp. 177-178) in a famous passage reporting the alleged reasons for the building of the Dome Rock in 691/2. On the dating of this tradition see Kister, Meir Jacob (1969), «‘You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques’: A Study on Early Muslim Tradition», in *Le Muséon*, 82, pp. 73-96. For the association of isrā’ and mi‘rāj with the Dome of the Rock see Elad, Amikam(1994), *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, Leiden, New York, Köln, pp. 48-50. On the location of the mi‘rāj in Jerusalem as following the isrā’ (the Night Journey) see Schrieke, Bertram (1915-1916), «Die Himmelreise Muhammeds», in *Der Islam*, 6, pp. 1-30; Bevan, Anthony Ashley (1924), «Mohammed’s Ascension to Heaven», in Karl Martin (Ed.), *Studien zur semitischen Philologie und Religionsgeschichte Julius Wellhausen zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet, Giessen*, Verlag von Adolf Toppelmann, pp. 46-61; Busse, Heribert (1991), «Jerusalem in the Story of Muḥammad’s Night Journey and Ascension», in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam,* 14, pp. 1-40; Schrieke, Bertram, Horowitz, Joseph (1993), «Mi‘rādj in Islamic Exegesis and in the Popular and Mystical Tradition of the Arab World», in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* New Edition, vol. VII, Leiden, Brill, pp. 97-100; Neuwirth, Angelika (2003), «From the Sacred Mosque to the Remote Temple: Sūrat al-Isrā’ between Text and Commentary», in McAuliffe, Jane Dammen; Walfish, Barry D.; Goering, Joseph G. (Eds.), *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Spiritual Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Oxford, pp. 376-407; Rubin, Uri (2008), «Muḥammad’s Night Journey (isrā’) to Al-Masjid Al-Aqṣā. Aspects of the Earliest Origins of the Islamic Sanctity of Jerusalem», in *al-Qanṭara*, 29, pp. 147-164.
29. Di Cesare, Michelina (2016), «The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as a Medieval Christian Pilgrimage Site», in Herbers, Klaus; Lehner, Hans-Christian (Eds.), *Unterwegs im Namen der Religion II / On the Road in the Name of Religion II: Wege und Ziele in vergleichender Perspektive – das mittelalterliche Europa und Asien / Ways and Destinations in Comparative Perspective – Medieval Europe and Asia*, Stuttgart, pp. 55-74; Ead.(2015), «The Qubbat al-Ṣaḫrah in the 12th century», in *Oriente Moderno*, 95, pp. 233-254. During the Crusader period, the footprints in the Dome of the Rock had been identified by Christian pilgrims as those of Christ. It is possible that the polarity between Jerusalem and Mecca had favoured the identification of the relics kept in the Ka‘ba as Muḥammad’s feet by Thietmar (fl. 1217), see De Sandoli, Sabino (1978-1984), *Itineraria Hierosolymitana Crucesignatorum (saec. XII-XIII)*, Jerusalem, Franciscan Press, vol. 3, p. 288. This may also be the case of the identification of Muḥammad’s relic as one of his feet in the later accounts discussed in González Muñoz, Fernando (2004), «Liber Nicholay. La leyenda de Mahoma y el cardenal Nicholás», in *al-Qanṭara*, 25, pp. 5-43, esp. pp. 35-36.

are currently kept in several places of the *dār al-Islām*, but those attested before the 15th century are found in the oratory of Sitt Ruqayya in Damascus: they were seen by al-Harawī in the madrasa al-Mujāhidiyya at the end of the 12th century.[30] Therefore, if *Mahomet*'s feet are linked to the *aqdām Ibrāhīm* it is also possible that the association of these relics to his Ascension, proposed by Guibert, is due to an analogy with the footprints on the rock kept in the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem. These footprints were – and still are – considered by Christians as left by Jesus when he ascended to Heaven and the Church of the Ascension was included in Christian pilgrimage since the 4th century.[31]

4. The Fāṭimid context I

However, the story recounted by Guibert does not take place in Mecca nor Jerusalem, but in a place not far from Alexandria in Egypt (*Alexandrinum, quo nescio tempore, patriarcham obisse constiterat* […] *haud procul inde heremita manebat*).[32] It is exactly to the almost coeval Egypt that Guibert seems to allude.[33] In his text, the heretical monk who desired to become Patriarch of Alexandria finds his disciple not far from there, in a place from which the new pernicious doctrine spreads in the *Oriens*, *Affrica*, *Egyptus*, *Ethiopia*, *Libia*, *Hispania*. Precisely in Egypt, between 974 and 975 – a period not far from Guibert's times – the Patriarchal see of Alexandria had been vacant until the council gathered in Cairo elected the unwilling Abraham, a Syrian merchant destined to become a saint, who later performed an extraordinary miracle with the intervention of Simon the Tanner: the relocation of al-Muqaṭṭam Hill in the presence of *imām* al-Mu'izz (953-975).[34] Thus, Guibert's story seems to be set in Fāṭimid Egypt and this context also appears to fit some other details. Firstly, the expansion of the heresy in the Mashriq (*Oriens*), Maghrib (*Affrica*), Miṣr (*Egyptus*), Ifrīqiya (*Libia*), Bilād al-Sudān (*Ethiopia*), and al-Andalus (*Hispania*) overlaps the magnitude of the conquests by the *Rāshidūn* and Umayyads to the most

30. Arnold (1990), p. 367.
31. Pringle, Denys (2007), *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus, Vol. 3: The City of Jerusalem*, Cambridge, pp. 72-88, on the 4th-century structure p. 72.
32. González Muñoz (2015), p. 244.
33. A similar attitude to refer to the present recent but not coeval events of Islamic history is also found in Latin texts describing the dār al-Islām as divided between the Sunnī 'Abbāsid empire and Shī'ī Fāṭimid empire, for which see Di Cesare, Michelina (2016), «From 'Alī to Dante's Alì: A Western Medieval Understanding of Shī'a», in *Medievalia*, 19, pp. 173-199.
34. Atiya, Yassā; Burmester, Khater (1948), *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church, Known as the History of the Holy Church of Sawirus ibn al-Mukafa', Bishop of al-Asmunin, 2, 2: Khael III – Shenouti II (A.D. 880-1066)*, Le Caire, Publications de la Société d'archéologie copte, pp. 91-100 (Arabic text), 135-146 (English Translation); for other versions of the story and their analysis see Den Heijer, Johannes (1994), «Apologetic Elements in Coptic-Arabic Historiography: The Life of Afrahām ibn Zur'ah, 62th Patriarch of Alexandria», in Samir, Samir Khalil; Nielsen, Jørgen (Eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, Leiden, New York, Köln, pp. 192-202.

recent conquest by the Fāṭimids (*Ismā'īlī*s), who established their capital in Egypt by founding al-Qāhira (Cairo) in 969.[35] Secondly, the name of the protagonist of the story, *Mathomus*, does not conform to the usual Latin forms of the name of the Prophet, namely *Mahumet*(*us*)/*Mahomet*(*us*) – from Muḥammad, with a metathesis and sonorisation of the dental – and the Middle French *Mahum* and Middle English *Mahon* – from Muḥammad, with a metathesis and apocope. The term may be interpreted as a crasis of *Mahdī* > *Mati* and *Mahon* – Guibert was French –, thus alluding to the first Fāṭimid imām 'Abd Allāh (r. 909-934), who took on the *laqab* of *al-Mahdī* (the Rightly Guided) when he became *amīr al-mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful). His coming to Ifrīqiya had been prepared by the *da'ī* (missionary) Abū 'Abd Allāh b. al-Ṣan'ānī, who preached the coming of the Mahdī, the messianic reformer of Islām expected to appear at the end of times.[36] The preaching of a reformist movement, seen by Sunnī Muslims as heterodox, and the pair formed by 'Abd Allāh and al-Ṣan'ānī could correspond to the endeavours of *Mathomus* and the heretical monk. Moreover, an anti-messianic reading of the *laqab* borne by 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī's figure perfectly overlaps with the anti-Christological interpretation of Mathomus (Muḥammad)'s figure in Guibert's text.

5. The Fāṭimid context II

This very spatial and temporal overlapping of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad with Fāṭimid history also seems to be found in the *Vita Mahumeti* by Embrico of Mainz, which was probably composed between 1118 and 1127.[37] In this poem the earliest description of the tomb housing the hanging reliquary-sepulchre occurs. The story takes place in *Libia* during the reign of Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379-395). There a heretical magician attends to take his revenge for not having been elected as Patriarch of Jerusalem. He pretends to be a holy man and takes into his care *Mamutius*, a servant to the local consul. The magician kills the consul and manages to marry *Mamutius* to his widow. Then, after the king dies, he succeeds in having *Mamutius* recognised as the king's successor by having him appear to tame a wild beast. The magician and *Mamutius* start to proclaim a lustful law and to justify the epileptic fits of the latter as the effect of journeys to Heaven, where he is equal to

35. For the rise of the Fāṭimids, their conquests, their history see: Halm, Heinz (1991), *Das Reich des Mahdi: Der Aufstieg der Fatimiden (875-973)*, München; Brett, Michael (2001), *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Fourth Century of the Hijra, Tenth Century CE*, Leiden, Boston, Köln; García-Arenal, Mercedes (2006), *Messianism and Puritanical Reform. Mahdīs of the Muslim West*, Leiden, Boston, pp. 62-95; Daftary, Farhad (2007), *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrine*, Cambridge, first edition 1997, pp. 87-300; for the early Islamic conquest see Donner, Fred McGraw (1981), *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton.
36. On Islamic "messianism" and the concept of Mahdī see García-Arenal, Mercedes (2006), pp. 1-28 and references given there.
37. On Embrico's biography of the Prophet and recent bibliography on this subject see González Muñoz (2015), pp. 33-60, 97-167 (text, translation and notes).

God and rules together with Him. Therefore, *Mamucius* is sanctified as *Mahumet* and his name invoked in ritual purification formulas. One day, *Mamucius*/*Mahumet* goes out at dawn and while he is busy thinking up new tricks, he falls to an epileptic fit and is prey to a herd of swine, which tore his body apart. His remains are found by the magician, who recompose and anoint them with aromatic fragrances. He then announces that *Mahumet* has been taken up into Heaven, from where he would continue to guide his people to salvation and forbid the consumption of swine meat. In order to make this version credible, the magician built an imposing temple made of marble and other precious materials, which looked like a mountain of gold. On its door he had carved an inscription stating that *Mahumet* would grant whatever should be asked for in that place. The building was covered by a dome made of magnet, which held suspended in the air the sepulchre containing *Mahumet*'s remains. The gullible people thought that it was a miracle performed by *Mahumet* and believed in him, but the wise people knew that it was the effect of magic.

The location of the story in Libya has been explained as a confusion between Yathrib – the original name of Medina, namely *Madīnat al-nabī* (the town of the Prophet), and Tripoli in Libya.[38] However, such a confusion could also have originated a dislocation of the story in the *Syria Libanica* (Lebanon) where the homonymous town of Tripoli was found. According to another explanation, this location would be reminiscent of previous narratives referring to Muḥammad preaching in North Africa and Spain.[39] Moreover, Libya was a desert region like Arabia, and this may have recalled the Thebais Desert – in Southern Egypt –, where the heretic Nestorius was relegated or the Numidia – in Maghreb – where, according Sallustius, polygamy was practiced.[40] Actually, in the poem *Libya* often appears as a synonym of *Africa*.[41] This could be understood as *Ifrīqiya*, the central area of northern Africa lying between *Maghrib* (currently Morocco and Algeria) and *Miṣr* (Egypt). This region, as already mentioned, had been the propulsive centre of the Fāṭimid expansion. Thus, it is probable that the location of the story in *Libya*/*Ifrīqiya* hints to an overlapping of the early Islamic history to the almost coeval Ismā'īlī history.

This context could also explain the double name of the protagonist: *Mamucius* and *Mahumet*, which have a different prosodic value (*Māmŭcĭūs* vs. *Măhŭmēt*). Moreover, while the former is used to identify the character before his sanctification, the latter identifies him after that.[42] While the form *Mahumet* is transparent, the form *Mamutius* has been explained as an attempt to latinise "an Arabic name of the type *Maḥmūd*."[43] However, though both terms share the Arabic root *ḥamada* – *Muḥammad* is *ism al-maf'ūl* of the second verbal form, *ḥamida*; *Mamḥūd* is *ism al-maf'ūl*

38. Tolan, John V. (1996), «Anti-Hagiography: Embrico of Mainz's Vita Mahumeti», in *Journal of Medieval History* 22, pp. 25-41, p. 31 n. 25.
39. González Muñoz (2015), p. 44.
40. Ibid., pp. 44-45.
41. See for example Ibid., p. 110 vv. 200-201; p. 122, vv. 409-410; p. 144, vv. 785-786.
42. Ibid, p. 111 n. 8.
43. Ibid.

of the second verbal form, *ḥamida* – the name of the Prophet is always expressed in Arabic as *Muḥammad*. Moreover, the derivation of *Mamucius* from *Maḥmūd* does not explain the transformation of the voice dental [d] to the voiceless sibilant [s] – as the digraph *ti*/*ci* is pronounced in the French-German area – rather than to the voiceless dental [t] as in *Muḥammad* > *Mahumet*. On the contrary, *Mamucius* could be a rendering of *Maḥmūḍ*, *ism al-ma'fūl* of *maḥaḍa*, identifying one who has a pure descent.[44] The concept of purity applied to genealogy is very important in the shī'ī context – to which the *Isma'īlī*s belonged to – where the *imāma*, the right to guide the Islamic community, was strictly related to the descent from the Ahl al-Bayt – Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima, her husband 'Alī and their sons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. The Fāṭimids claimed to descend from the Holy Family, but this was refuted by the 'Abbāsids, who accused the founder of the dynasty, 'Abd Allāh, to have Jewish ancestors as well to descend from a slave in the service of Ziyād b. Abīhi, step-brother of the most hated Umayyad *amīr al-mu'minīn* Mu'āwiya (r. 661-780).[45] Though *Mamucius*'s exordia as a servant and his deeds before becoming king of Libya seem to be a narrative strategy meant to emphasise the low status of the protagonist and the role of the heretical magician, they seem to allude to this polemic, in the light of which *Maḥmūḍ* could have an ironical meaning.

Moreover, the figures of the consul and the king, which have seemed an inconsistency due to the redoubling of the figure of a sole sovereign,[46] could allude to the *amīr*s of Ifrīqiya vanquished by the Fāṭimids: al-Yas'a, the Midrarid *amīr* of Sijilmasa, which was conquered in 909, and Ziyādat Allāh, Aghlabid *amīr* of Ifrīqiya vanquished in the same year in Raqqāda, where 'Abd Allāh proclaimed himself *al-Mahdī* and *amīr al-mu'minīn*[47].

The accusation of faking their genealogy was attributed to the Fāṭimids in 1011 by the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Qādir (r. 991-1031) in Baghdad when *imām* al-Ḥākim reigned in Cairo. During this period occurred some events analogous to those found in the *Vita Mahumeti*. The *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, attributed to Sawīrus b. al-Muqaffa', recounts that the Patriarch of Alexandria, Zachariah, was defamed by a monk who had failed to become bishop. Al-Ḥākim punished Zachariah by offering him to ferocious lions, which, however, by divine intervention, did not devour him. Therefore, the jailors were accused of having been bribed by the Christians and having tamed and satiated the beasts. Al-Ḥākim would have used this event as a justification for the destruction of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (between 1006 and 1010).[48] There, in this very period, the Patriarch Orestes was journeying on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople and his See was admin-

44. Lane, Edward William (1968), *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Beirut, vol. 7, p. 2692.
45. See Jiva, Shainool (2017), «The Baghdād Manifesto (401/1011). A Re-Examination of Fatimid-Abbasid Rivalry», in Daftary, Farhad; Jiwa, Shainool (Eds), *The Fatimid Caliphate: Diversity of Traditions*, London, pp. 22-79 Available on [iis.ac.uk/academic-article].
46. González Muñoz (2015), p. 45.
47. See references given in n. 33 above.
48. Atiya, Yassā, Burmester, Khater (1948), pp. 193-194.

istered by his brother Arsenius, Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria; their sister had been a concubine of ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz, al-Ḥākim's father.[49] These episodes respectively recall the pretended taming of the wild beast by *Mamucius* and the crisis related to the Jerusalem Patriarchate, which causes the heretical monk's rancour.

Around 1017 the *dāʻi* al-Darazī was welcomed into al-Ḥākim's court. He began to preach the *imām*'s superiority over the Prophet Muḥammad and identifying the former as the cosmic intellect (*al-ʻaql al-kullī*).[50] Later al-Darazī was substituted by Ḥamza b. ʻAlī, who became the official preacher of a new theological and cosmological vision according to which al-Ḥākim was the embodiment in time of the creating principle, the only God. A disciple of his even altered the *basmala* (*Bi-smillāhi-r-raḥmāni-r-raḥīm*: In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) by substituting the name of al-Ḥākim for God.[51] This blasphemous equivalence between the *imām* and God could be echoed in Mahumet's account of his journey to Heaven, where he states that there he is equal to God and rules together with him, as in the formula used to invoke *Mahumet* in order to attain absolution from sins and eternal salvation.

The narrative of Mahumet's death overlaps with that of al-Ḥākim's end. In one of the versions of the latter, the *imām* left the city early in the morning and approached the Muqaṭṭam hill to meditate, and then disappeared. His servants found his donkey with its hocks cut and his clothes covered with blood.[52] Al-Ḥākim's disappearance was interpreted by some as the Mahdī's occultation (*ghayba*).[53]

In addition, the description of how the magician recomposed, anointed and dressed Mahumet's remains[54] recalls the rules on the cleansing of the dead's body established by the *qāḍī* al-Nuʻmān (m. 974), according to which the body had to be bathed in water and various disinfectant and perfuming substances, then dried and anointed with aromatic balms.[55]

49. Kellner, Max Georg (1993), «Orestes», in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon*, vol. 6, Bautz, Herzberg, cols. 1252–1253.
50. Hodgson, Marshall G. S. (1991), «"al-Darazī" and "Durūz"», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. II, Leiden, Brill, pp. 136-137 and 631-634. On the Druzes see Abu-Izzeddin, Nejla M. (1993), *The Druzes. A New Study of Their History, Faith and Society*, Leiden, New York, Köln.
51. Madelung, Wilfred (1986), «Ḥamza b. ʻAlī"», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. III, Leiden, Brill, p. 154. On al-Ḥākim possible averse attitude towards the extremism reached by al-Darazī, Ḥamza b. ʻAlī and their followers, see Assaad, Sadek (1971) *"The Reign of al-Ḥākim bi Amr Allāh (386/996 – 411/1021), A Political Study"*, Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of London, pp. 243-266.
52. Assaad (1971), p. 270-271, for other versions and a possible historical reconstruction of the event see ibid., pp. 267-282.
53. Ibid., p. 270.
54. González Muñoz (2015), p. 162.
55. Fyzee, Asaf A. A. (2002), *The Pillars of Islam: The Daʻāʼim al-Islām of al-Qāḍī Nuʻmān*, completed, revised and annotated by Ismail K. H. Poonawala, New Delhi, pp. 283, 286.

Another hint to Fāṭimid Egypt may be gathered from the proclamation of Mahumet's *dies natalis* as a feast day by the magician.[56] Indeed, though the antithesis with the Christian celebration of the day in which a saint passed away is quite evident, there may also be an allusion to the fact that the commemoration of the *mawlid al-nabī* (the birth of the Prophet) on the 12th day of Rabī' al-Awwal was institutionalised in Fāṭimid Cairo along with the celebration of the birthdays of 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn and the ruling *imām*.[57] This celebration consisted in a court ritual which involved the trustees and the guardians of the mausoleums of the descendants of the Ahl al-Bayt.[58]

6. The Fāṭimid context III

Other references to Fāṭimid Cairo in Embrico's narrative are found in the description of *Mahumet'*s tomb. It is described as an unholy temple (*fanum, immo profanum*), made of precious materials, provided with a monumental inscription carved in marble, stating that *Mahumet* would grant any request made there by his devotees.[59] One of the Fāṭimids' achievement in architecture was a new conception of monumental inscriptions, which were disseminated in the public space, thus allowing the political and religious message of the dynasty to reach all of its subjects.[60] In particular, the sources recall that al-Ḥākim had golden epigraphs placed on the doors of the houses, in the bazaar, and in the interior and exterior of the mosques.[61] The earliest evidence of this public display of inscriptions is found in al-Anwar mosque, also known as "the mosque of al-Ḥākim", adjacent to Bāb al-Futūḥ in Cairo. Its building was commenced by Ya'qūb b. Killis, vizier of al-'Azīz (r. 975-996), al-Ḥākim's father, and completed in 1012-1013[62]. The furnishing included precious matting, brocade curtains, and four silver chandeliers. The decoration included stucco and wood carving. The epigraphical programme is developed at the interior and exterior of the mosque. The former consists of large bands in kufic script carved in stucco and running below the ceiling of the prayer hall according to its special arrangement – i.e. along the base of the dome in front of the miḥrāb, along the arcades of the central nave perpendicular to the qiblī wall, along the qiblī wall and the arcades parallel to it. The content of these inscriptions consists of a sequence composed by the initial verses of Qur'ān 48, 3, 7, 6, 8, 1, 36, 2, 4, which do not seem to convey

56. González Muñoz (2015), pp. 162-163.
57. Kaptein, Nico J.G. (1993), *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival. Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century*, Leiden, New York, Köln, pp. 7-30. For these mausoleums see below.
58. Ibid.
59. González Muñoz (2015), p. 164-166.
60. Bierman, Irene A. (1998), *Writing Signs*: *The Fatimid Public Text*, Berkeley.
61. Ibid., p. 76.
62. Ibid. pp. 3-4 and 75-95; Creswell, Keppel Archibald C. (1978), *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, vol. I: Ikhshīds and Fāṭimids, A.D. 939-1171, New York, pp. 65-106; Bloom, Jonathan M. (1983), «The Mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo», in *Muqarnas* 1, pp. 15-36.

a specific message. The inscriptions at the exterior, large bands in Kufic script, are located on the two minarets. Those on the western minaret consist of Qur'ān 11:73 and Qur'ān 9:18, both followed by a foundation text; those on the northern minaret consist of Qur'ān 9:128, 24:35-38, 5:55, 17:80, 3:198. However, in 1011 both minarets were encapsulated into cubic salients, which totally hid the inscribed surfaces, but others were added to the new structures. Only those on the salient of the northern minaret are preserved, which consisted of Qur'ān 33:56, 9:107, 24:26-28, 62:9. On the main entrance to the mosque was originally located a foundation inscription on a marble slab, now lost, containing Qur'ān 28:4. While the new inscriptions placed on the salients just invoke blessing on the Prophet, condemn unbelievers, the corrupt men and women, encourage the believers to behave well with each other, and state the importance of the Friday prayer, those belonging to the previous program had a very different tone. Indeed, the Qur'ānic verses celebrated the heirs of the divine favour appointed to guide the believers (*a'imma*), the Ahl al-Bayt, God as light, the Messenger and the *walī* (friend) of God, the rightly guided, the virtuous innocents, purity. These are all key words of the Fāṭimid language applied to the *imām*, recipient of the divine light bestowed on the descendants from the Ahl al-Bayt, pure, faultless, friends of God and his Prophet, the rightly guided.[63]

The message conveyed in the marble inscription carved on *Mahumet*'s tomb focuses on the divinised false prophet's ability to grant the requests of his followers, therefore to perform miracles. This is not mentioned in the epigraphic programme found in al-Ḥākim's mosque, nonetheless *karāmāt* (miracles) were requested from *walī*s, the friends of God – an epithet also applied to saints[64] –, and as we have seen, the *imām* is called there *walī* of God. In Fāṭimid Cairo, *karāmāt* along with the *baraka* (blessing) were requested by the faithful at the mausoleums (*mashāhid*: *martyria*) erected to honour and preserve the burials of the descendants of the Ahl al-Bayt or to commemorate them.[65] These were the destination of an institutionalised pilgrimage (*ziyārat al-qubūr*: visitation of the tombs), with specific rituals (*manāsik*), still performed today.[66] Indeed, the descendants of the Ahl al-Bayt were considered as mediators between God and humanity.[67] This very concept is expressed in one of

63. This section on the epigraphic program featuring in al-Ḥākim's mosque relies on Bloom (1983).
64. Radtke *et al*. (2002), «Walī», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. XI, Leiden, Brill, pp. 109-125.
65. Raghib, Yousef (1977a), «Les sanctuaires de la gens de Famille dans la cité des morts au Caire», in *Rivista di Studi Orientali, 51*, pp. 47-76; Id. (1977b), «Al-Sayyda Nafisa, sa légende, son culte et son cimitière», in *Studia Islamica*, 45, pp. 27-56; Id. (1981), «Les mausolées Fāṭimides du quartier d'al-mashāhid», in *Annales islamologiques*, 17, pp. 1-30; Williams, Caroline (1985), «The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fāṭimid Monuments in Cairo. Part II: The Mausolea», in *Muqarnas*, 3, pp. 39-60.
66. Massignon, Louis (1958), *La cité des morts au Caire*, Le Caire; El Kadi, Galila; Bonnamy, Alain (2007), *Architecture for the Dead: Cairo's Medieval Necropolis*, Cairo.
67. Madelung, Wilfred (1961), «Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre», in *Der Islam* 37, pp. 131-146; Makarem, Sāmī N. (1967), «The Philosophical Significance of the Imām in Ismacilism», in *Studia Islamica* 27, pp. 41-53; Madelung, Wilfred (1986), «Imāma», in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, vol. III, Leiden, Brill, pp. 1163-1169, esp. 1167 and 1168.

the probable models for the description of *Mahumet*'s suspended reliquary-sepulchre, namely Aristotle's tomb in Palermo as described by Ibn Ḥawqal.[68] The latter visited Sicily in 973, when the island was ruled by Abū l-Qāsim ʻAlī b. al-Ḥasan, second Kalbid *amīr* recognised by the Fāṭimids as governor. Ibn Ḥawqal, according to what he heard, writes that in the inner part (*haykal*) of the congregational mosque of Palermo, when it was a church, a wooden coffin containing the remains of Aristotle, the philosopher (*al-ḥakīm*) of the Greeks, was suspended in the air. Christians gathered there to ask for miracles. Ibn Ḥawqal also adds that his source reported that the coffin is suspended between heaven and earth so that people can request God's intervention, and that he himself saw a wooden coffin there.[69] It is clear that in this narrative the philosopher is considered as a *walī*, a mediator between God and mankind, and the suspension of his coffin seems to reflect this privileged condition. On the other hand, this narrative may also reflect a custom attested in Irān, which may explain why some funerary monuments are not built on graves.[70] Indeed, in the 14th century, Mustawfī Qazwīnī relates that when the Buyid vizier Ibn ʻAbbād died (in 975), his coffin was transported to a house of prayer and then hanged from the ceiling[71]. A similar account is reported by al-Jannabī, writing in the 16th century, in reference to the remains of the Ziyarid Qābūs b. Wushmagīr (977-1012), which were buried in a glass coffin suspended from the ceiling of his mausoleum by chains.[72] It may be that the custom of suspending coffins from the mausoleums' ceiling was a Ziyarid custom inherited by the Buyids. The latter were Shīʻī, though not Ismāʻīlī: is it possible that a similar practice was followed in Fāṭimid Egypt? If so, the description of *Mahumet*'s reliquary-sepulchre might reflect an actual Islamic custom.

7. Conclusion

Based on the texts analysed above, we have argued that some motifs related to the death, relics, and tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad as found in his Medieval Latin biographies, rather than originating from a calculated polemical strategy based on a bi-polar dialectic (Muḥammad vs. Jesus; Mecca vs. Jerusalem; Islamic way of life vs. Christian way of life), originate from (para)etymological reflections on Arabic terms, aetiological interpretations of Islamic practices, and reflections on recent events of Islamic history. This suggests that, if inserted in the broader Mediterranean context, the life of the Prophet appears as a hermeneutical space for understanding and narrating Islām.

68. For different interpretations of this passage see D'Alverny, Marie-Thérèse; Vajda, George (1951), «Marc de Tolède, traducteur d'Ibn Tūmart», in *Al Andalus*, 16, pp. 99-140, esp. 121-122, and Vanoli (2008), pp. 250-253.
69. Kramers, J. H.; Wiet, G. (1964), *Ibn Hawqal, Configuration de la terre (Kitāb ṣurat al-arḍ)*, Beyrouth, Paris, p. 117.
70. Blair, Sheila (1983), «The Octagonal Pavillion at Natanz: A Reexamination of Early Islamic Architecture in Iran», in *Muqarnas* 1, pp. 69-94, esp. 88-89.
71. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
72. Ibid., p. 88.