

Encounters of Christian power and Islamic truth? Two stories of divine intervention on behalf of Islam

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Polemical discourses tied to the ‘sectarian milieus’ of the Greater Mediterranean constitute an important part of the shared legacy that was appropriated by Medieval and Early Modern Islamic and Christian cultures in the Iberian Peninsula. One of the defining features of such sectarian milieus of ‘appropriated truth’ lies in an acute awareness of the influence of political dominance on the outcome of encounters: Ultimately, political dominance decides whether polemical victory will be propagated, while good arguments of the ‘other’ are relegated to the obscurity of partisan traditions.

Awareness of this tension between rhetorical and argumentative brilliance and political dominance over the places where such polemical encounters took place gave rise to a striking genre of demonstrations of Islamic superiority in face of Christian political dominance by means of divine interventions on behalf of Islam. In my contribution, I will focus on two particularly striking stories from the Arabic-Islamic historiographical tradition where material and intellectual legacies of Classical Antiquity are appropriated to demonstrate the supremacy of Islam. The first story is recounted by the early Islamic historian Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, who, in his *Conquests of Egypt and the West*, narrates how a sealed chamber inside the Visigothic realm holds a prophetic likeness of the Arabs and the inscription “When this chamber is opened, this people will come into the land!”. Accordingly, the opening of the room by the last Visigothic king heralds both the imminent Arab-Islamic invasion and the divine support of this invasion. The second story is found in the eleventh volume of the modern edition of the *Standard of Demonstration and the Collector of the West*, a collection of fatwās and anecdotes compiled by Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Wansharīsī. Here, Ibn Rashīq the elder tells how, during protectorate status Múrcia enjoyed between 1243 and 1264, he met a certain monk well versed in Arabic language and philological tradition who argued that the inimitability or *i’jāz* of a particular text did not constitute proof of its divine origin, as maintained by the Islamic tradition of the Qur’ānic *i’jāz*. Thus, he challenged Ibn Rashīq to come up with a matching third verse to two particularly complicated verses of the (uncontestedly man-written) *Maqāmāt* of the Arabic poet al-Ḥarīrī. Ibn Rashīq, who according to his own presentation was but a young boy at this time, spontaneously came up with a matching verse and thereby showed both the validity of the Islamic dogma of *i’jāz* and the divine support of Muslim participants in polemical encounters under Christian political dominance.

While both stories reflect favorably on Islam and – by extension – on the Muslim community, I argue that their plausibility to an Arabic-reading, majority-Muslim audience stemmed precisely from the political dominance of Christianity over both ‘places’ where the ‘encounters’ took place. Ultimately, both Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and Ibn Rashīq answer a critique of “preaching to the convinced” by situating their respective stories among non-Muslim audiences. As in any encounter, they knew how relevant it is to keep in mind who controls the place where it takes place.

Introduction: Framing the Place of Encounter

The framing of the pre-modern Greater Mediterranean as a field structured by dynamic processes of transmission, translation and transformation of the legacies of pre-medieval civilisations does not exclusively hold for medieval textual cultures (Wallis, Wisnovsky, 1). In contrast, pre-modern material and intellectual cultures can to a certain extent also be approached as fundamentally influenced by dynamic processes of appropriation, rejection and reframing

engaging with the material and intellectual heritage of earlier civilisations. This approach opens the way for inquiry into the trans-cultural and trans-religious connectedness that is much too often disregarded in modern interpretations of pre-modern cultures of the medieval Greater Mediterranean.

A good sense of the scope and depth of these trans-regional and trans-cultural connections is given by anecdotes such as the following:

[A tree growing in Sudanic Africa yields white fibers that are immune to fire.] Similar to this is a stone in the Wādī Dar‘a, which they call in Berber Tāmghast, which crumbles under the hand into fine threads that are like linen. It is used to produce reins and bits for horses, which also resist fire.

Someone once produced a piece of cloth of this material for some of the kings of [the Berber tribe] Zanāta in Sijilmāsa. I have heard testimony from trustworthy sources that a trader made a handkerchief from it, which he sold to Fardaland the lord of the Galicians (*ṣāhib al-jalāliqa*), claiming that this was the handkerchief of some of the Apostles, which therefore was not affected by fire. When he demonstrated this, Fardaland was highly impressed and spent all his riches on it. Later, Fardaland sent it to the lord of Constantinople, who put it into their greatest church. As a reward, the lord of Constantinople sent him a crown and authorized him to wear it. (al-Bakrī *Masālik* II, 368.)

While this story amply demonstrates the economical connectedness and trans-cultural and trans-communitarian awareness that made the trader’s enterprise feasible, it is also informed by anti-Christian polemics. The polemical claim that Fardaland and the Byzantine emperor believed the smart claim of the trader that “this handkerchief resists fire and therefore must be a relic belonging to the immediate vicinity of Jesus” echoes the polemical debates of what Wansbrough (98) has termed the “sectarian milieu”. As Reynolds (245) has noted, this sectarian milieu, in which communitarian “truth” was exclusively thought in opposition to the “heresies” of other communities, has even influenced the development of theological positions. In this way, some doctrinal positions were taken up by particular “sectarian” groups due to their strategic value for inter-religious controversy.

Regardless of the factual truth of the story told by al-Bakrī, it combines intimate knowledge of the religion of “others” with a triumphalist polemic that implicitly demonstrates the superiority of Islam over Christian superstition and cult of relics. This polemic is validated by the political dominance of Fardaland over the setting of the encounter between him and the trader, which clearly signals to the Arabic-speaking and presumably Muslim audience of al-Bakrī that Fardaland was not forced to his decision by political or other considerations but rather acted upon information he intrinsically found to be persuasive.

In interpreting the medieval cultures of the Greater Mediterranean as a shared space structured by sectarian milieus, Wansbrough (115) has more systematically drawn attention to the importance of political dominance over the places where encounters between various communities took place. In his analysis, Wansbrough underlines the importance of political dominance over the places of encounter, designating the recurring narrative pattern of the sectarian “out-group” dominating the place of encounter in stories recounted to an audience composed of the sectarian “in-group” in the concept of what he terms the “dialogue devant le prince”. As he shows, this pattern had evolved during antiquity and continued to be employed by various communities inside the sectarian milieus of late antiquity and various medieval contexts to demonstrate the independence of the truth of their respective position from political power.

Important as this “setting a story at a place dominated by unbelievers” was to the inter-communitarian debates discussed by Wansbrough, political dominance no less forms a crucial

factor in polemical narratives such as the one translated above. While the political dominance of Fardaland and the Byzantine emperor frames the presumable Muslim trader in the above story as all the smarter, it also constitutes an important part of polemical narratives explicitly demonstrating the truth of Islam over Christianity (Shoshan, 134-153). This pivotal role of political dominance over the place of encounter exercised by the “other” is also apparent in the stories in which the Byzantine emperor Hirqil and other Christian notables confess the truth of Islam in secret to Muslim Arab envoys at their court.

‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣāmit is said to have narrated: [The first calif] Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, may God be satisfied with him, sent me to the king of the Byzantines (*rūm*) in the year of his accession to invite him to Islam or declare war. Thus I went out until I came to Constantinople, where the ruler of the Byzantines called us to him. When we entered, we were seated and did not greet. Then he asked us some things about Islam and we went away for this day. He called for us on another day and [when we were with him] he called for one of his servants, talked to him and sent him away. Then he [the servant] brought him a chest with many compartments, each of which had a small door.

He [the Byzantine emperor] opened a door and took a black rag out of it in which there was a white statue, shaped like a man with the most beautiful face of all people, like the circle of the moon when it is full. He asked: Do you know who this is? We answered: No. He replied: This is our father Adam, peace be upon him. Then he put him back and opened another door. He took a black rag out of it in which there was a white statue, shaped like an old man with a handsome face that was distorted by pain, as if he was sad and worried. He asked: Do you know who this is? We answered: No. He replied: This is Noah.

Then he opened another door and took out a black rag with a white statue in it, which had the shape of our prophet Muḥammad, God bless him and all the prophets and grant them peace. When we saw it, we cried. He asked: What’s the matter? We replied: This is an image of our prophet Muḥammad, God bless him and grant him peace. He asked: By your religion, is this a likeness of your prophet? We replied: Yes, this is an image of our prophet, as if we saw him alive. Thus he rolled it in [the rag] and put it back. [He shows statues of Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, Dāwud, Sulaymān, and ‘Īsā.] Then he said: These images were in the possession of Iskandar [Alexander the Great]. Later they were handed down among the kings until they came to me. (al-Dīnawarī *Akhbār*, 22-23.)

While this story gains much of its polemical persuasiveness from its attribution of political dominance and narrative agency at the place of encounter to the Byzantine emperor, it also exemplifies the importance of material culture in general and statues in particular to the shared space where pre-medieval legacies were negotiated in the sectarian milieus of medieval times. Returning to al-Andalus, I will now present and discuss two stories framing the Muslim presence in medieval Spain, which both turn on narrative spaces dominated by non-Muslims in al-Andalus. Building on the translation and analysis of the narratives, I will then analyse the impact of this political dominance over the places of encounter on the persuasiveness of the stories among Muslim audiences.

Even though I have chosen the narratives to be discussed so as to frame the impact of non-Muslim political dominance over the setting of the stories both at the begin and the end of Muslim presence in medieval Spain, I will not focus exclusively on this aspect. Rather, I will in my analysis of the narratives aim to include the detailed discussion of the impact of non-

Muslim political dominance in the broader context of the narrative implications of the stories. Ideally, political dominance over the places of encounter will be described in detail as one of the key aspects contributing to the effectiveness of the stories in the sectarian milieus of the medieval Mediterranean.

First narrative: An ill-boding statue at the Visigothic court

Some of the earliest extant Arabic-Islamic narratives of the Muslim conquest of Spain are contained in the history of Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam (died 257 H./871 C.E.). His historiographical compilation of reports constitutes one of the earliest extant collections of regional history written by Muslims and accordingly offers a fascinating and highly influential exposition of the western parts of the Islamic World of its day as seen by a Muslim jurist in Egypt.

As is customary in early and classical Arabic-Islamic historiography, Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam pays special attention to the framing of the regions treated by him as part of the Islamic World and of the divinely ordained structure of Salvation History. This is particularly obvious for instance in his narrative of Ibrāhīm and Sāra and their stay in the land of the Egyptian pharaoh, which serves to construct a genealogically founded claim of common descent uniting the Arabs as descendants of Ibrāhīm *via* his Egyptian maid Hājar with the Coptic population of Egypt, from whom Hājar came (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 30-31). This common descent of Arabs and Copts is then functionalized for the social context of early Islamic Egypt by means of *ḥadīths* attributed to Muḥammad himself, in which he commands his followers to treat the Copts fairly as both share a common descent (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 19-23).

This type of highly influential framings of the geography and history of the Islamic West, which are frequently attested in the work of Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam in their earliest extant form, circumscribes and structures a space for Islam in the western parts of the Islamic World, by simultaneously delineating external boundaries and proposing precedents and rules governing the management of the internal boundaries of the multi-religious societies living under Muslim rule. In this way, a divinely sanctioned border of the ecumene is constructed in the stories of the companion and early Islamic general ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ and his repeated question whether there „is anybody behind you?“, asked among the inhabitants of the Fezzān (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 222-223). The complete conquest of North Africa in early Islamic times is deployed by the story of ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘ riding into the water of the Atlantic Ocean to definitely prove that no further conquest is possible (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 226), and the exclusion of the land of the Nūba on the upper Nile from the sphere of Islamic political dominance is narrated in form of the early Islamic *baqt* or pact setting out the terms of trade and coexistence between the Muslims of Egypt and the Nūba (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 215-217).

As exemplified by the Latin origin of the Arabic term *baqt* used by Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam in his framing of a “status of truce” between the Muslims and the Nūba, the narrative framings of the various regions of the Islamic west in Islamic cultural memory frequently turn on the legacies of pre-Islamic civilisations. I would like to suggest that the statue playing such a pivotal role in the story translated below similarly reflects the ubiquitous presence of the material and intellectual legacies of antiquity in the medieval cultures of the Greater Mediterranean.

While Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam does only briefly touch upon the details of the Muslim conquest of Spain begun in 711, he does propose a most interesting framing for the divinely ordained inclusion of the Iberian Peninsula in the Islamic World in the following description of how the Visigothic rulers over what was to become al-Andalus first encountered the impending Arab invasion:

He [one of the transmitters of the historiographical collection of Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam] said: Abū ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abdalḥakam and Hishām b. Ishāq have told us that there

was a room (*bayt*) in al-Andalus, which was closed with numerous locks. Every king among them added another lock of his own to it, until the king, upon whom the Muslims came, began to reign. When they [his people] asked him to add another lock to it, as the kings before him had done, he declined and said: „I will not do anything to it until I know what is in it!“ Thus he ordered it to be opened. Inside, there was a statue of an Arab and a sign reading: „If this door is opened, this people will come to the land“ (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 234).

While the emotional effectiveness of this type of “punishment of disregarding admonition” is amply borne out by the frequent inclusion of this narrative topos in contemporary horror films, the function of this story in firmly imbedding Spain in the lands of the west described by Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam is quite clear. Should anyone wish to object to the inclusion of the Iberian Peninsula in the Islamic World as created by means of the early Islamic conquests, this story implicitly plays upon some sort of predetermination which ultimately must go back to God himself. Who else could have been able to bring into being this peculiar room with its statue and sign, seeing that both indoubtably went back to pre-Islamic times as guaranteed by the succession of locks ensuring that the room had not been opened since?

Besides displaying the agency of this divine preordination that dates back so far that the contents of the room had been entirely forgotten, the story also fulfills an important role in the context of Muslim scepticism against further expansion, especially over sea. This scepticism echoes in the command of the second caliph ‘Umar not to allow any river or other type of water between his residence in the Ḥijāz in Western Arabia and the new-founded garrison-towns of al-Kūfa, al-Baṣra and al-Fuṣṭāṭ (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 115), as well as in his general ban on expeditions across the sea (al-Ṭabarī *Ta’rīkh* II, 581-582). That the conquest of Spain may have similarly provoked censorship among a Muslim audience may well be reflected in the report immediately preceding the one translated above, where make-believe cannibalism is described as a major factor enabling the conquest of Spain (Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam *Futūḥ*, 233-234). On a pragmatic level, the justification of the fall of the Visigothic empire as due to their last king’s failure to follow the example of his predecessors in relocking the room without asking why also reinforces the wider paradigm of the importance of following precedent. Had the last Visigothic king not opened the door, his empire might well continue to exist, which very much resonates with the Islamic concept of following established precedent, usually in the form of the *sunna* of Muḥammad. Here, similarly, the results of straying from the true path may well lead to catastrophic results, which would, however, equally ultimately be the result of divine providence.

In these multiple messages which this short anecdote conveys, it very much turns on the concept of a particular and innate agency of statues. As Liz James has shown, engagement with antique legacies in the form of images in Christian Constantinople is predicated on the importance of a “power” believed to emanate both from ancient and medieval images and statues (James, 15-16). Accordingly, the question is not whether images or statues are “good” or “bad”, but rather, whether one possesses the necessary knowledge to successfully manipulate the power of the image or statue in question. This notion of special “powers” residing in images and statues at the same time gains its particular relevancy for the cultures of the medieval Greater Mediterranean through the practical ubiquity of ancient statues in the legacy of Greco-Roman civilisations. The Visigothic king’s deployment of the agency of a statue in the story accordingly becomes a touch-stone for the “truth” of his ideological background, as the general setting of engaging with a particular statue must have been common enough in the medieval towns of the Greater Mediterranean to be shared by the Muslim in-group audience of the narrative or even members of various out-groups who might eventually hear of the story in the sectarian milieu of the pluralistic urban *literati* living under Muslim rule.

The peculiar way in which the Muslim conquest of Spain is brought about by the statue of an Arab in the anecdote translated above curiously resonates in Latin descriptions of the invasion. Already in one of the earliest extant histories of this event, the continuation of the history of Isidore of Seville known as the *Chronicle of 754*, the Muslim commander Mūsā b. Nuṣayr or “Muze” is said to have crossed the Columns of Hercules and marched into Spain “*quasi tomi indicio porti aditum demonstrantes*”, which may notwithstanding the slightly difficult grammar be translated *ad sensum* as “as indicated by the book he was shown the entrance of the port”. What this “book” could have been is at the same time by no means clear. In a note to this passage, the editor of the text refers to a passage in the *Book of St. James* of Pseudo-Turpin, where Mūsā is said to have destroyed all the idols in Spain but one holding an inscribed sign at Cádiz (*Crónica Mozárabe*, 226-227). While it is not quite clear how (or even if) these various mentions of the importance of a particular statue in the Muslim conquest of Spain are linked, they amply demonstrate that the notion of an agency exerted by statues formed part of the legacies of antiquity that were shared among both Muslims and Christians in the Western Mediterranean.

If, as James suggests, the crucial question in approaching a particular statue lies in whether one possesses the pertinent knowledge needed to successfully engage with it, a similar kind of knowledge is assumed among the audience of the story. While the anecdote does stand in the chapter detailing the Muslim conquest of Spain in Ibn ‘Abdalḥakam’s book, the particular strand of the narrative breaks off without detailing the reaction of the king and his retinue to the content of the room or even mentioning the invasion announced by the sign in the room. Accordingly, the narrative depends on the shared knowledge of the audience of the eventual success of the invasion, which is sharply contrasted by the utter ignorance of the Visigothic king regarding both the contents of the room and the possible consequences of his failure to follow the procedure of sealing it without checking. In a way, this informedness of the in-group audience of the story may serve to establish the truth of Islam in face of the political dominance of the Visigothic king over the setting of the story, as the power of the Christian king is brought to ruin by his utter ignorance both of how to deal with statues and how to follow precedent. As the medieval audiences of the story, be they Muslim or otherwise, would quite certainly have assumed that the Visigothic king was looking for treasure in this room bequeathed to him from his predecessors, we might even think about a more general interpretation of the parallel between his thwarted hopes and the ultimate fulfillment of the aspirations of the Muslims due to the support of divine preordination. In this way, the mistaken hopes of the Christian and the fulfillment of the Muslim conquest of Spain may have been understood to exemplify a general superiority of Muslim claims to divine reward as compared to the transient hopes of other religious communities.

Returning to the sectarian milieus of the Greater Mediterranean where this story circulated, the importance of the story’s setting at a place dominated by the Christian Visigothic king to the extent of the complete absence of Muslims or Arabs until he decides to open his (!) room is best understood by contrafactually recounting the story at a place dominated by Muslim political authority. If, for instance, we imagine that this sealed room stood in Muslim Egypt and that a Muslim governor of this province opened it to find a sign stating that “if this room is opened, this people will conquer Spain”, the story loses much of its power. Granted, the aspects of divine preordination of the inclusion of the Iberian Peninsula in the Islamic World and the divine justification of this risky and somewhat problematic expansion across the sea would still be equally forceful, however the ethical consequence of the importance of following precedent would be entirely lost. Moreover, the setting would be open to allegations of being fabricated by the Muslims from members of the various out-groups of the sectarian milieu, who would certainly claim that this particular room had been furnished by the same Muslim governor who eventually opened it. Accordingly, the force of the story derives much of its effectiveness in asserting the superiority of Islam precisely from the complete absence of Muslim agency (or,

for that matter, any Muslim at all) from the “place of encounter” until the Christian king utters his ill-boding command.

Second narrative: An inspired verse at the right time

While the narrative of the early 8th Century Visigothic king and the likeness of an Arab marks the beginning of a long period of Muslim ascendancy over the Iberian Peninsula, the political power of Muslim rulers over much of what had been al-Andalus of Muslim Spain had by the mid-13th Century passed to various Christian rulers. This political expansion was paralleled by an intellectual attempt of Christian scholars to learn Arabic and develop promising argumentative approaches to convert Muslims to Christianity, which continued the pre-medieval legacies of demonstrating the truth of particular positions through riddles and chains of argument. The effectivity of such riddles and chains of argument in the sectarian milieu of the medieval Greater Mediterranean results from the ubiquity of the legacy of the logical systems propounded by Aristoteles and others in the various religious and linguistic communities of medieval Mediterranean *literati*.

The following anecdote is recounted by Ibn Rashīq the elder and has been included in the monumental *Mi‘yār al-mu‘rib wa-l-jāmi‘ al-maghrib* or *standard measure of Arabic eloquence and collection of the Islamic west* of the 15th Century scholar al-Wansharīsī. In this collection of juristic opinion, witty repartee and guides for argumentation, the anecdote stands between some „questions of a Jew“ and a grammatical opinion on the grammatical interpretation of a Qur’ānic verse contained in the well-known Qur’ānic commentary of al-Zamakhsharī. The anecdote runs as follows:

A discussion between Ibn Rashīq and a priest

Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn b. Rashīq narrates in the *book of letters and means*: I was¹ in the town of Múrcia, may it be restored, in the days when its inhabitants suffered the trial of the tribute, a disaster of which God the highest may save them and from whose snares He may free them. From the side of the ruler of the Christians (*al-rūm*), there had come a group of their priests and monks to disrupt the worship by their false claims, to crane their necks after the sciences of the Muslims and to translate them into their language to criticize them. May God make their endeavors futile!

They were also eager to dispute with the Muslims and had the reprehensible intention to lure over the weak, for which they were paid by their ruler, to thereby obtain rank for the people of their community, may God the highest exterminate them!

I was at this time sitting between the hands of my father, may God the highest have mercy on him, writing documents and contracts, as my beard had not grown. One time, a Muslim had to take an oath against a Christian in a claim he had against him, so I and another witness were ordered to be present, so the Muslim could claim his dues from him, as was proper, because the Christian was held in great esteem due to his religion. Thus we went with both parties to an assembly of these monks in a house containing a church, which they venerated.

¹ I read *kuntu*, *I was*, instead of the *kataba*, *he wrote*, of the edition.

When we had finished our business, a priest from among them, who was from the region of Marrakesh, spoke correct Arabic and was an expert in argumentation, called to me, ready to discuss and tempting me to a disputation, saying: „You’re a student and smart. I’ve already heard about your father and you, as the Muslims have told me good deeds and wisdom about you both. I’d like to talk to you about something we both will profit from, as you’re not one of those who fear to be tricked by void arguments or who cannot understand the truth and oppose it when it becomes obvious. Sit with us so we can start to discuss some well-known problems!“

I was amazed by his speech and his fluency in the Arabic language, so I sat with them. [...] He started to speak of the matter of the [Qur’ānic] *i’jāz* [...], by which he hoped to trick me into listening to his argument. I had, praise be to God, already learned a bit about the foundations of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) with my father, may God the highest have mercy on him. Thus he said: „You say: One of the greatest wonders (*mu’jizāt*) of your prophet is the great Qur’ān that is in your hands.“

[They talk a bit about the Islamic dogma of *i’jāz*. The priest says:] „Notwithstanding my repeated queries, I have not found anybody who could answer me this question among those that seemed knowledgeable about this among the people of your community. The people of your community have agreed that the *literati* cannot replicate the book called the *Maqāmāt*, as nobody could find a matching verse to it or take up the meter. [...] The two verses in question stand in the 46th *maqāma*, [...] give us a third one to parallel them! [...] Is not the work of al-Ḥarīrī equally a wonder (*mu’jiza*)? [...] And still you do not call him a prophet, which of course I do not want you to call him, but rather I want you to confess that he, whom you praise, is not a prophet, for what is the difference between the two? By God, if you do not find another argument from the Qur’ān or other extra-Qur’ānic proof, then you disprove the Qur’ān as a confirmation of the prophecy of your prophet!“

[...] I said: „I will now recite a third verse to these two, even though I do not at present know its poet, nor do I intend to credit myself with it, as I believe that, if I did this, no effect or result would come from it. [Ibn Rashīq recites a matching third verse.]

When he heard it and I had repeated it to him so he understood it, he seemed to be hit by a stone and I saw him lose his confidence, which he had not lost when we had exchanged logical arguments and basic propositions. Thus he started to applaud me, while his companions asked him to explain what I had told him. Thus he explained it to them, they wrote the verse down and in their shattered delusions they were like Muslims when I left them, may God exterminate them! (al-Wansharīsī, *Mi’yār* XI, 155-158)

The historical context of this passage has been discussed at length by Fernando de la Granja. As he shows, it is quite difficult to narrow down the date of the story to anything more precise than the timespan between the establishment of a Christian protectorate over Murcia by Ferdinand III of Castile in 1243 and the death of the father of Ibn Rashīq in 1263 (de la Granja, 57). While he suggests a date at the earlier end of this timespan, a later date may in fact become more likely if one chooses to identify the Christian adversary of Ibn Rashīq with Ramon Martí (see below).

Regardless of the exact date of this anecdote from Ibn Rashīq's youth, the virtuoso intention of the Christian "priest from Marrakesh" is quite clear. In attacking the Muslim dogma of the *i'jāz* or *inimitability of the Qur'ān*, which continues to be seen as one of the main proofs of the divine origin of this text by contemporary Muslims, the Christian refers to the intricate verses of al-Ḥarīrī's 46th *maqāma* to show that human beings are indeed very capable of producing bound speech that is so complicated as to make its imitation impossible. Accordingly, the inimitability of the Qur'ān would be disproved as evidence of the divine origin of the Qur'ān.

As de la Granja notes, this argument appears to be closely connected with a curious passage of Arabic bound speech in Qur'ānic *saj'* or *rhymed prose* that is contained on some blank pages in the Arabic-Romance dictionary known as the *Vocabulista in Arabico* (de la Granja, 60-62). As argued by Leube, the argument of this curious form of Arabic text appears to lie in its form, which stilistically closely imitates the Qur'ān, rather than in the quite garbled content of the text (Leube, 166). This should be understood as an attempt to disprove the Muslim dogma of *i'jāz* "from the other side", namely by imitating it in a piece of Arabic rhymed prose or *saj'* that was not only written by a non-Muslim but into which this non-Muslim even inscribed the name of Ramon Martí in Arabic characters without breaking the meter of the Arabic rhymed prose. While de la Granja notes that rash claims of Ramon Martí's presence in Murcia during the time of the polemical exchange translated above do not rest on any documentary evidence (de la Granja, 60-61), he is very much inclined to admit that both challenges to the *i'jāz* are linked (de la Granja, 61-62).

While I am not aware of any further evidence than that which de la Granja discusses, a minor difficulty of chronology arises if we do wish to date the polemical exchange to the beginning of the timespan between 1243 and 1263, as it is not clear whether Ramon Martí was already fluent in Arabic and Arabic-Islamic learning before his stay at the Dominican chapter in Tunis, where he was sent in 1250 together with a number of other students to study Arabic (Berthier, 272, see also Bobichon, 407-408). Accordingly, identification of the Christian "priest from Marrakesh" with Ramon Martí may necessitate a later date than de la Granja is suggesting for the setting of the story.

In this context, the narrative function of the anecdote recounted in the form of a reminiscence to youth is to show that even if the non-Muslim side of the exchange possessed an overwhelming amount of political power and philological expertise, this Christian power is still overcome by the truth of the ultimately divine foundation of Islam. This stark contrast between power and truth is further enforced by the youthful age of Ibn Rashīq during the time of the polemic and his portrayal as single-handedly defeating a group of adult Christian monks and priests.

This contrast between Christian power and Islamic truth is expanded upon by Ibn Rashīq's hesitation to either name an author of the astonishing third verse or attribute the verse to himself. In this way, he downplays the eloquence and erudition of the "priest from Marrakesh" by hinting that any Muslim could have come up with a solution to the riddle when facing a similar situation, notwithstanding the Christian's statement that he had been unable to find any Muslim who could imitate the two verses of al-Ḥarīrī with a matching third. This topic is further explored by de la Granja, who traces attempts to supply a matching third to the verses in question in the Arabic-Islamic discourse of *adāb* or *rhetorical and literary learning* (de la Granja, 64-66). Simultaneously, Ibn Rashīq's humbleness and young age may also hint at the ultimately divine origin of this inspired solution to a riddle designed by the Christian to lure Muslims from their faith. In this way, the wondrous character or *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān is reflected in the stance of the Christian group, seeming to be "hit by a stone" and resembling Muslims in their tame eagerness to write down the verse and confess that their hopes had indeed been shattered.

This ultimate futility of efforts to imitate the Qur'ān is a common trope in the Arabic-Islamic discourses of *adāb*. As van Ess notes, regardless of the precise understanding of the dogma of the Qur'ānic *i'jāz* referring to people of all ages or exclusively to the contemporaries of Muḥammad, what is probably one of the most famous attempts to imitate the Qur'ānic style ended with the author who had embarked on this experiment, namely the famous scholar Ibn al-Muqaffa', tearing his draft to pieces in desperation (van Ess, 160-161). At the same time, van Ess notes that boastful claims to the effect of having imitated the Qur'ān did become somewhat of a standard phrase in Arabic poetry (van Ess, 163). Accordingly, Ibn Rashīq in a way locates himself as a Muslim scholar in the discourse of Arabic erudition and eloquence of *adāb*, which contained a certain amount of modestly advanced knowledge and mastery of poetry, while declining to advance further boastful claims of "being a poet". Accordingly, Ibn Rashīq narrates the whole episode as a curious attempt to turn around the "game" well known in the discourses of *adāb* of trying to imitate the Qur'ān, which is voiced by the Christian's challenge to either imitate the two verses of al-Ḥarīrī or admit to the possibility of an *i'jāz* of human poetry. As this challenge is promptly met with the matching third verse presented by Ibn Rashīq, the whole anecdote is not turned into a major polemical attack on Christianity but presented as more of an amusing instance of how Christian evil had been thwarted by a talented boy.

Returning to the setting of the story, the place of encounter is clearly framed as dominated by Christian political power. Not only is the Christian adversary of the Muslim in whose aid Ibn Rashīq is sent out attempting to draw unfair advantages from his religious affiliation, but the town of Múrcia is depicted as politically dominated by the Christians just as the "priest of Marrakesh" is confident that he can argumentatively dominate the young Ibn Rashīq notwithstanding his talents as a student and his well-known family. The origin of this Christian appropriation of Arabic-Islamic scholarly discourses is connected to the political interests of the Christian powers by Ibn Rashīq's statement that the priests and monks were paid by the Christian rulers to lure Muslims from their beliefs. The effectivity of this challenge is reflected in the erudition of the Christian in the Arabic-Islamic discourses of *adāb*, in the flawless and elegant Arabic he speaks throughout their disputation, and also in his regional affiliation to the Moroccan town of Marrakesh. As it appears most unlikely that there existed an Arabic-speaking Christian community in Marrakesh during the 13th Century, this affiliation frames the Christian adversary of Ibn Rashīq as a convert to Christianity. This may have signalled to the Muslim audience of the story the ethical message that even the material gains which conversion might entail could not offset the humiliation that waited for renegades when they attempted to challenge Muslims true to their faith. At the same time, in light of the great difficulty of identifying this "priest of Marrakesh" with any of the remarkably well-documented Christian scholars active in the study and debate with the Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula during the 13th Century, it may even be worth considering whether this affiliation to an Islamic town represents a deliberate exaggeration of Ibn Rashīq introduced to further demonstrate the philological erudition of his adversary and thereby underline the magnitude of his own victory. In both cases, the narrative of Ibn Rashīq confronts this sphere of ultimately politically founded Christian threats to the Muslims by delineating a sphere of divinely supported Islamic beliefs that overcomes the Christian challenge.

This superiority of the Islamic or "true" eloquence and Arabic-Islamic learning is further underlined by the consistent ascription of agency to the Christian in opening and guiding the debate. The "priest from Marrakesh" not only calls out to Ibn Rashīq, invites him to sit and lures him in by praising the wisdom and reputation of Ibn Rashīq and his father, he is also presented as guiding the debate along lines carefully prepared in advance to lead his Muslim opponent towards the supposedly unsurmountable challenge of finding a matching third verse. This dominating agency of the Christian side of the debate in turn highlights the divine support

of Islam, be it through the personal talents of this gifted student or through direct support in coming up with a solution to the riddle.

At the same time, the afterlife of these polemical arguments is somewhat counter-intuitive in light of the political dominance of the Christians over the setting of the encounter. In the sectarian milieu of Muslim-Christian rivalries over the discourses of Arabic erudition, neither Ibn Rashīq's solution to the riddle, nor the additional Qur'ānic *sūra* mentioning Ramon Martí appear to have convinced anybody from their respective out-groups to change their faith. In contrast, the Qur'ānic *sūra* merely survived by chance in an Arabic-Romance dictionary while Ibn Rashīq's splendid solution to the elaborate riddle designed to lure him from his faith ultimately amounts to nothing but an entertaining story told to an audience of convinced, who doubtlessly enjoyed hearing about this failure of Christian political and intellectual power.

Outlook: Political dominance over the „place of encounter“

The two stories presented in this contribution narrate polemical victories of Islam that doubtlessly were intended to encourage Muslims to strive for similarly inspired „victories“ over members of non-Muslim out-groups in the sectarian milieu of the medieval Greater Mediterranean. In this context, the dominance over the „places of encounter“ exerted by the Christian out-group adversaries of Islam in both stories ultimately highlights the divine support for Islam as the „true“ religion and ethically may have motivated Muslims to remain steadfast in their religious beliefs and practices even when facing great political challenges.

At the same time, both stories implicitly build on the ubiquity of the legacies of pre-medieval civilisations in the form of statues and polemical riddles. Somewhat paradoxically, it is precisely the effectivity of such sectarian challenges directed at members of the respective out-groups that attest to the astonishing permeability and mutual comprehensibility of the worldviews of the various religious and linguistic communities living in al-Andalus.

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