CHAPTER 9

A Christian Iberian Attack on Twelfth-Century Medina? Keys to Understanding an Unusual Story

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According to the Muslim sources that report the story, in 557/1162 two Christians from al-Andalus (here taken to mean the Iberian Peninsula as they are said to have been sent by their kings), attempted to steal the remains of the Prophet Muḥammad from his grave in Medina. Their plot was foiled by the Sunni ruler of the Levant, Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī (d. 565/1174), the predecessor of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, the Saladin of the Christian sources (d. 589/1193). The story is first attested in a history of Medina written in the first half of the 8th/14th century, almost two centuries after the event was supposed to have taken place. It continued to be quoted in later histories about the city of the Prophet, with one author expressing doubts as to its historicity. It was also mentioned in an 8th/14th-century Egyptian polemical tract against Christians, and later in a general historical work written in Egypt between the 9th/15th–10th/16th centuries, in which the culprit was said to have been a Shīʿī. The story is not unknown to western scholars, as we shall see: it was first quoted (to my knowledge) by Eldon Rutter (1894–*ca*. 1956) in his *Holy Cities of Arabia*, and later by scholars dealing with Mamlūk anti-Christian polemics (Moshe Perlmann, Barbara Längner), the history of the Prophet's grave in Medina (Emel Esin, Shaun Marmon), and Fāṭimid history (Yūsuf Rāġib, Paul E. Walker). It is not mentioned in the most extensive study on the reign of Nūr al-Dīn (Nikita Eliséeff).[1] While the contributions of these scholars are extremely valuable to understand specific aspects of the story, there is still room for inquiry into its genesis, and especially into its connection with al-Andalus.

The questions that this paper aims to answer are: how the story came into being, how it relates to other stories dealing with attempts at stealing the Prophet's body and Christian attacks on Muslim holy sites, and why in the earliest extant source the protagonists are Iberian Christians. It forms part of a broader interest in the shape of relations between Muslims and Christians in Medieval sources, and also in how al-Andalus and the Maghrib (North Africa, west of Egypt) and its people were represented in the central regions of Islam

1 The references are given below.

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(the Mashriq or Islamic East). With this paper I wish to honour Simon Barton, a generous colleague and an inquisitive scholar who left us much too soon, and whose interest in the Medieval history of the Iberian Peninsula included the different ways in which Jews, Christians and Muslims viewed themselves and reacted to each other.

1 The Dream of Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī (d. 565/1174): Al-Maṭarī's (d. 741/1340) Text

The Zengid emir al-ʿĀdil Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī (d. 565/1174) achieved notoriety for his fight against both the Christian enemies, the Crusaders and the Byzantines, and the Fāṭimids, considered heretics as Ismaʿīlī Shīʿīs. He is the man who sent Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin) to Egypt, where the latter eventually put an end to the Fāṭimid caliphate in the year 567/1171.[2] Ten years earlier, in 557/1162, Nūr al-Dīn is said to have travelled to Medina.[3] His journey was motivated by a vision he had in his sleep wherein the Prophet asked for his help to fend off two fair-haired men, who were also present in the dream.[4]

This story was first recorded by the Ḥanafī scholar of Egyptian origin Jamāl al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Abī Jaʿfar Aḥmad b. Khalaf al-Khazrajī

2 Nikita Elisséeff, "Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5988. Accessed April 29, 2020; Elisséeff, *Nūr al-dīn, un grand prince musulman de Syrie au temps des Croisades 511–569 H./1118–1174*, 3 vols (Damascus, 1967). On Nūr al-Dīn's performance of jihad see Yaacov Lev, "The Jihad of Sultan Nur al-Din of Syria (1146–1174). History and Discourse," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 35 (2008): 227–284; Yehoshua Frenkel, "Muslim responses to the Frankish dominion in the Near East, 1098–1291," in *The Crusades at the Near East. Cultural Histories*, ed. Conor Kostick (London-New York, 2011), pp. 27–54; Javier Albarrán, "'He was a Muslim knight who fought for religion, not for the world'. War and religiosity in Islam: A comparative study between the Islamic east and west (12th century)," *Al-Masaq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* 27, no. 3 (2015): 191–206.

3 In Arabic, Medina is short for Madīnat al-nabī, 'the City of the Prophet'. Originally called Yathrib, it was given the name Madīnat al-nabī since the Prophet settled there after fleeing his birthplace, Mecca, and because it was there that he acted not only as a prophet but also as a statesman.

4 Nūr al-Dīn is known to have performed the pilgrimage in the year 556/1161: according to Elisséeff, "Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Zankī", he restored the defences of Medina, ordering the construction of a second perimeter wall with towers to protect its inhabitants from the Bedouins' raids. See also Nikita Élisséeff, "Les monuments de Nūr al-Dīn: inventaire, notes archéologiques et bibliographiques," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 13 (1949–1951): 5–43, 34.

al-Anṣārī al-Saʿdī al-ʿIbādī al-Maṭarī al-Madanī (d. 741/1340).[5] Al-Maṭarī was the descendant of one of the Sunni muezzins sent by the Mamlūk Sultan Baybars (r. 658/1260–676/1277) to Medina to counter the influence of the families of Shīʿī religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*)—the so-called Sharīfī emirs—who had controlled both Medina and Mecca since the late fourth/tenth century, and who had initially pledged obedience to the Fāṭimid caliphs in Egypt.[6] Al-Maṭarī, who became the chief of the muezzins in Medina, wrote a history of the city of the Prophet entitled *al-Taʿrīf bimā ansat al-hijra min maʿālim dār al-hijra* ('Information on the landmarks of the Abode of Emigration—i.e. Medina—that have fallen into oblivion because of neglect'), in which he included the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream,[7] specifically in discussing when and why the city walls were erected. The authority that al-Maṭarī cites is Shams al-Dīn Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), a famous Shāfiʿī jurist and judge of Damascus, author of the biographical dictionary *Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān* ('Obituaries of celebrities and news about the [author's] contemporaries') which is the only preserved work of the many he is said to have written.[8] But although Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt* does include a biography of Nūr al-Dīn, its account does not include the story of the dream. Al-Maṭarī indicates that Ibn Khallikān, or perhaps he himself (text is unclear), heard the story from the jurist ʿAlam al-Dīn Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr, whose father had died when the mosque of Medina caught fire.[9] Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr had in turn heard the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream from

5 The Maghribi traveller Ibn Baṭṭūta (d. 770/1368 or 779/1377) met al-Maṭarī during his stay in Medina and records that he was then the chief of the muezzins. On him, see Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur + Supplementband*, 2 vols + 3 vols (Leiden, 1943–1949), II, 171, SII, 220; ʿUmar R. Kaḥḥāla, *Muʿjam al-muʾallifīn*, 4 vols (Beirut, 1414/1993), III, 62.

6 On the control of Mecca and Medina by Shīʿī rulers see Esther Peskes, "Western Arabia and Yemen (Fifth/Eleventh Century to the Ottoman Conquest)," in *The Western Islamic World, Eleventh-Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 2 of *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Maribel Fierro, gen. ed. M. Cook (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 285–98; Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Societies* (New York, 1995), p. 138, note 159.

7 The *Kitāb al-taʿrīf* has been edited by Sulaymān al-Raḥīlī (al-Riyāḍ, 1426 H). The story is found on pp. 208–209 and referred to on p. 104. I first encountered it in the ms. of *Kitāb al-taʿrīf*, Lala Ismail Efendi, 62, preserved in the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, fs. 75a–75b. Al-Raḥīlī's edition is based on four mss. that do not include Ms. Lala Ismail Efendi, where I initially encountered the story.

8 Gerhard Wedel, "Ibn Khallikān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Available at https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ibn-khallikan-COM_30945. Accessed April 29, 2020.

9 The father of Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr, called Abū Bakr b. Awḥad al-Farrāsh, worked at the mosque of Medina, and himself accidentally started the fire in 654/1256 (al-Maṭarī, *Kitāb al-taʿrīf*,

someone who reported to have heard it recounted by prominent men from the emir's entourage (*jamāʿa min akābir al-khidam*).[10] Given that Nūr al-Dīn died in 565/1174 and Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr's father in 654/1256, Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr must have lived between the first and the second half of the 7th/13th century, that is, more than fifty years after the reported event took place. This makes it more likely that he was the source of Ibn Khallikān and not of al-Maṭarī himself. But if so, Ibn Khallikān's original text has not been preserved independently.

As mentioned above, al-Maṭarī records the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream in a section devoted to the construction of the walls of Medina. He quotes Ibn Khallikān to explain that the oldest wall was built during the reign of the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Ṭāʾiʿ (r. 363/974–372/983). When it fell into disrepair, it was restored by Nūr al-Dīn's vizier Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Abī Manṣūr al-Iṣfahānī,[11] at which point the number of inhabitants living outside the city walls began to grow. At this point, the focus of al-Maṭarī's narrative shifts to Nūr al-Dīn himself.

Nūr al-Dīn saw the Prophet three times in the same night. Each time, the Prophet told him: "Oh, Maḥmūd! Save me from these two people," meaning two fair-haired men (*ashqarayn*) who faced him. Nūr al-Dīn summoned his vizier before daybreak and informed him of his dream. The vizier told him: "This is a matter related to Medina that only you can solve." Nūr al-Dīn got ready and departed quickly with one thousand caravan camels (*rāḥila*) and their retinues of horses and so on. He arrived in Medina without its inhabitants having been alerted of his arrival. The vizier went with him. Nūr al-Dīn visited the Prophet's tomb (*wa-zāra*)[12] and then sat in the mosque without knowing what to do. The vizier asked him: "Would you recognise the two people if you saw them?" Nūr al-Dīn answered that he would. The vizier then summoned all the people of Medina and distributed among them great quantities of gold and silver. The vizier said: "Everybody in Medina is obliged to make

p. 82). In that same year there was an earthquake in the vicinity of Medina that caused much destruction.

10 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Societies*, p. 132, note 93 (quoting another version) remarks that this chain of transmission is "atypically vague."

11 This construction, according to al-Maṭarī, was begun around 540/1146. Cf. note 4.

12 The verb indicates that he performed *ziyāra*, that is, the pious visitation or pilgrimage to a holy place, tomb or shrine: J. W. Meri, Ende, W., Doorn-Harder, Nelly van, Touati, Houari, Sachedina, Abdulaziz, Th. Zarcone, M. Gaborieau, Nelly van Doorn-Harder, R. Seesemann and S. Reese, "Ziyāra," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Available at https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/*-COM_1390. Accessed April 29, 2020; Harry Munt, *The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 123–147. In the case of Medina, the most important sacred place was the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad.

himself present." Everybody did, except two men who had taken up residence in Medina (*mujāwarāni*)[13] and who were from the people of al-Andalus.[14] They lived in the area adjacent to the south-eastern (*qibla*)[15] wall of the Prophet's tomb (*ḥujra*),[16] outside the Mosque, near the residence (*dār*) of the family of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, known today as *dār al-ʿašara* (the House of the Ten). They were convened to receive the alms (*ṣadaqa*) [that were being distributed], but they refused saying: "We are well served (*naḥnu ʿalā kifāya*), we are not in need of any help."

But the vizier insisted on convening them and they were brought [before Nūr al-Dīn and the vizier]. When Nūr al-Dīn saw them, he told the vizier: "These are the ones." They were asked about their circumstances and what had brought them to Medina, to which they answered: "To live near the Prophet (*li-mujāwarat al-nabī*)". Nūr al-Dīn retorted: "You must tell the truth!" They were subjected to intense interrogation (*wa-takarrara al-suʾāl*),[17] which revealed that they were guilty and deserved punishment. They confessed that they were Christians and that they had travelled [to Medina] to steal the body of the one who was buried in that 'holy tomb' (*al-ḥujra al-muqaddasa*) [i.e. the Prophet] with the agreement of their [Christian] kings.[18] They were found to have excavated an underground tunnel that went beneath the south-eastern wall of the mosque in the direction of the 'noble tomb' (*al-ḥujra al-sharīfa*).

13 The term *jiwār* refers to pilgrims who settle in a holy place in order to lead a life of asceticism and religious contemplation, and to receive the *baraka* of that place: W. Ende, "Mudjāwir," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5307. Accessed May 1, 2020.

14 The term al-Andalus refers to the whole of the Iberian Peninsula and not only to the territory under Muslim rule: Alejandro García Sanjuán, "El significado geográfico del topónimo al-Andalus en las fuentes árabes," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 33, no. 1 (2003): 3–36. Thus, it encompasses both those regions under Muslim rule and those under Christian rule.

15 The *qibla* is the direction towards which Muslims pray, i.e. facing Mecca.

16 The term *al-ḥujra* refers to the room, or dwelling, of ʿĀʾisha, Muḥammad's favourite wife, and daughter of his Companion and first caliph Abū Bakr. It was adjacent to the mosque of Medina. Both the Prophet and ʿĀʾisha were buried within the confines of that dwelling, and later Abū Bakr and the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, were buried in their vicinity. When the mosque of Medina was enlarged during the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd (r. 86/705–96/715), the Prophet's grave was included within the new perimeter. Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York, 2004), pp. 188–189, 192–196; Munt, *The Holy City of Medina*, pp. 107–110, 116–117.

17 There is no explicit indication in al-Maṭarī's text that they were tortured, a specification that appears in al-Asnawī's and al-Samhūdī's works, to be dealt with below.

18 The term is *mulūkihim* (their kings in plural, not dual) instead of *mulūkihimā* (the kings of the two men), thus a reference not to the two men but to *al-naṣārā* (Christians) generally. It means that the attempt resulted from a combined effort of the Christian rulers.

They had disposed of the soil in a well[19] that was inside the house where they were staying. This is what Yaʿqūb b. Abī Bakr told me from those who told him. The two men were decapitated near the lattice screen (*al-shubbāk*), that is, on the eastern side of the tomb of the Prophet (*ḥujrat al-nabī*) outside the mosque. Afterwards, they were burnt in a fire towards the end of the day. Nūr al-Dīn left in the direction of Syria and, as he was leaving, the people who lived outside the walls of Medina cried out for help, beseeching him to build a wall that would protect their children and their livelihood. Nūr al-Dīn ordered the building of the wall that can be seen today. It was built in the year 558/1163. He had his name written on the gate of al-Baqīʿ,[20] which is still standing at the time of writing this book. God knows best!

One element in al-Maṭarī's narrative that may come as a surprise is that the Christian kings would have chosen two fair-haired men for the mission. The Maghribī geographer al-Ḥimyarī (d. after 726/1325) said of the *ifranj* (i.e. those inhabiting the area now corresponding to Catalonia and France) that "the majority are white and blonde (*shuqr*), although sometimes there are those who are brown-skinned and with black hair."[21] Why, then, did they not choose swarthier conspirators, who would therefore be less conspicuous? However, in the Iberian context, it was not just Christian northerners who had fair hair. Indeed, it is said even the Cordoban Umayyads inherited fair hair through their mothers, slave-concubines who came from the northern regions of the Peninsula, as well as from Slavic countries.[22] The outcome of these mixed

19 The houses of Medina are known to have had wells for the domestic supply of water: W. Montgomery Watt and Winder, R. B., "al-Madīna," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0603. Accessed May 1, 2020.

20 The area where the cemetery stood, with the graves of the Prophet's wives, his daughters, his son Ibrāhīm, many of his descendants, and also the graves of his Companions and Successors. Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), the Medinese jurist considered to be the founder of the Maliki legal school that prevailed in the Maghrib and al-Andalus, was also buried in this cemetery. The graves were destroyed by the Wahhābīs in modern times: A. J. Wensinck and Bazmee Ansari, A. S., "Baḳīʿ al-G̲harḳad," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1101. Accessed May 1, 2020.

21 Al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Rawḍ al-miʿṭār fī khabar al-aqṭār*, partial edition and French translation by E. Lévi Provençal, *La péninsule ibérique au Moyen-Age, d'après le Kitāb ar-rawḍ al-miʿṭār fī ḫabar al-akṭār d'Ibn ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Ḥimyarī* (Leiden, 1938), s.v. Ṭurṭūsha.

22 Gabriel Martinez-Gros, *Identité andalouse* (Paris: Sindbad, 1997), p. 70; D. Fairchild Ruggles, "Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty: Race, Genealogy and Acculturation in al-Andalus," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (2004): 65–94; Simon Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia, 2015).

marriages may have given rise to the idea that Andalusīs in general—and not just *ifranj* from the Christian north, were fair-complexioned.

Another interesting element is that there is no indication of what the Christians intended to do once they had reached the grave of the Prophet. If their aim was to steal the body, where did they intend to take it? And how? Or was their intention simply to destroy it? No clues are given regarding their ultimate aim.

2 Nūr al-Dīn's Dream in al-Asnawī's (d. 772/1370) Expanded Version

An expanded version of this same story was subsequently recorded by the Egyptian Shāfiʿī Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥasan al-Umawī al-Qurashī al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370),[23] in his work *al-Kalimāt al-muhimma fī mubāsharāt ahl al-dhimma* ('Important words about the treatment of the People of Protection,' i.e. Jews and Christians), written after 750/1349, and possibly between 755/1354 and 761/1359.[24] This is one of many tracts dealing with anti-Christian polemics written in Mamlūk Egypt during the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries.[25] Al-Asnawī attacked the Copts who worked in the Mamlūk administration, accusing them of making illicit profits from the Egyptian treasury and thus enriching their churches and monasteries, as well as amassing personal wealth. They aimed, al-Asnawī said, at taking revenge on the Muslims, who they claimed had stolen Egypt from the Christians. Al-Asnawī also suspected the Copts of co-operating with foreign non-Muslim powers against their Muslim rulers. While they bought Muslim Turkish slaves from Muslims in order to convert them to Christianity, they objected to Christians converting to Islam and also to the building of mosques. However, not content with this, he alleges that their hatred of Muslims even induced them to acts of arson aimed at destroying Muslim holy sites.

23 On al-Asnawī see Alex Mallett, "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnawī," in David Thomas et al., *Christian-Muslim Relations 600–1500: A Bibliographical History*, 5 vols (Leiden, 2009–2013). Available at https://brill.com/display/serial/HCMR1BP. Accessed April 28, 2020.

24 It was edited by Moshe Perlmann, "Asnawī's Tract Against Christian Officials," in *Ignace Goldziher memorial*, ed. S. Löwinger, A. Scheiber and J. Somogyi (Jerusalem, 1958), vol. II, pp. 172–208.

25 On these writings from Mamlūk times, including al-Asnawī's work, see Moshe Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* X (1942): 843–861; Luke Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir: Non-Muslim State Officials in Premodern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 250–253. See also Barbara Längner, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Volkskunde Ägyptens nach mamlukischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1983), pp. 70–71.

Al-Asnawī's text in fact contains a section dealing with different episodes of Christian-sponsored anti-Muslim arson, in particular mosque burning. Al-Asnawī mostly concentrates on those that took place during his lifetime, and which caused anti-Christian rioting. He starts by mentioning that in the year 700/1301 an "ambassador from the Maghrib was an amazed witness of a Christian official's insolence. He asked himself: 'How can Muslims win a war if at home they have in their midst the infidels at the head of the state?' This was the origin of the outburst".[26] Although some scholars refrained from stirring up the passions of the populace, others did the opposite, insisting on the Christians' mischief, treachery and moral depravity. In 721/1321 there was another anti-Christian riot, when, in the wake of several fires, a group of monks were accused of having organised a plot, and were subsequently tortured. The authorities who tried to defend the Christians were also stoned. The Mamlūk sultan, unwilling to antagonize the masses, decided to leave the Christians at the mercy of their persecutors. In 740/1339, when the Christians of Damascus were accused of having set the Umayyad mosque on fire, one Christian confessed under torture, telling "of a secret meeting of several Christians of the administrations, headed by two monks who were expert incendiarists, and who came from Byzantium a little while before. A plan of campaign was drawn up. The monks set about carrying it out. They prepared seven bombs (*kaʿkāt*) filled with *barūda*, naphtha, and coaldust, etc. These they 'planted', and a series of fires broke out. Messages were sent, bribes distributed, communication with officials of other towns maintained."[27] In 749/1348, the year of the Black Death, there was another case of arson. Christians were caught and confessed, but eventually managed to escape, and instead a noble *sharīf* (descendant of the Prophet) was charged and tortured. Later incidents in 755/1354 and 759/1358 are not mentioned by al-Asnawī, nor another fact that enraged some jurists: that the Frankish merchants in Egypt enjoyed special status exempting them

26 Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," pp. 852–853. See also Donald P. Little, "Coptic conversion to Islam under the Baḥrī Mamlūks, 692–755/1293–1354," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XXXIX, no. 3 (1976): 552–569 and "Coptic converts to Islam during the Baḥrī Mamlūk Period," in *Indigenous Christian communities in Islamic lands eighth to eighteenth centuries*, ed. M. Gervers and R.J. Bikhazi (Toronto, 1990), pp. 263–288; Linda S. Northrup, "Muslim-Christian Relations during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn (A.D. 1278–1290)," in *Indigenous Christian communities in Islamic lands*, ed. Gervers and Bikhazi, pp. 253–62; Tahar Mansouri, "Les dhimmis dans les documents de chancellerie de l'époque mamelouke," in *La cohabitation religieuse dans les villes Européennes, X^e^–XV^e^ siècles. Religious cohabitation in European towns (10th–15th centuries)*, ed. John V. Tolan and Sphéna Boissellier (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 55–62.

27 Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," p. 854.

from the limitations imposed on the native Christian community.[28] He likewise does not mention older episodes. For example, in ca. 634/1236, under Ayyubid rule, a college (*madrasa*) with a brick minaret was attached to the Cairene shrine housing al-Ḥusayn's head,[29] and a few years later, in 640/1242–3, fire (in this case rumoured to have been set by Jews) nearly consumed the building. It was saved by the emir Jamāl al-Dīn b. Yaghmūr, deputy of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ in Cairo, who was said to have extinguished the fire with his own hands.

It is in connection with these accusations of arson against Christians that al-Asnawī reports Nūr al-Dīn's dream about the Christian plot against Muḥammad's tomb in Medina:

> During the reign of al-Malik al-ʿĀdil Nūr al-Dīn al-Shahīd,[30] the Christians had devised a major plot that they thought would turn out perfectly, but God insisted on "perfecting His light, though the unbelievers be averse."[31] What happened was that this sultan used to spend the night performing voluntary prayers (*tahajjud*) and reciting the corresponding sections of the Qur'an (*awrād*). When he finished, he went to sleep. He saw the Prophet during his sleep pointing to two fair-haired people and saying: "Rescue me from these two men!" Nūr al-Dīn woke up alarmed, made the ablutions, prayed and went back to sleep. He saw the same dream before his eyes, woke up, made the ablutions, prayed and went back to sleep. He saw the same dream for a third time. He woke up and said: "I cannot go back to sleep". He had a vizier who was a pious man called Jamāl al-Dīn al-Mawṣilī.[32] He had him called in during the night, and told

28 Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," pp. 852–856.

29 Al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī, the grandson of the Prophet, was killed by the Umayyads in the year 61/680. Najam I. Haider, "al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30572. Accessed May 2, 2020. The Fāṭimids brought the remains of his severed head from Hebron to Cairo: Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Religious Culture of the Medieval Islamic Middle East* (Edinburgh, 2020). This was part of the movement of relics that characterised the Fāṭimids' practices of self-legitimization: see below, note 69.

30 Nūr al-Dīn died of fever, which entitled him to be considered having died as a martyr (*shahīd*). Etan Kohlberg, "Medieval Muslim views of Martyrdom," *Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Mededelingen van de Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks*, 60, no. 17 (1997): 281–307.

31 It is a reference to Qur'an 61:8: "They desire to extinguish with their mouths, the light of God; but God will perfect His light, though the unbelievers be averse" (translation by A. J. Arberry).

32 Previously mentioned as Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Abī Manṣūr al-Iṣfahānī. As noted by Perlmann in the notes to his edition, this vizier died in prison in 559/1164. He had ordered restorations in Medina (where he was buried) and Mecca. Ibn Khallikān

him all that had happened to him. The vizier told Nūr al-Dīn: "What are you doing sitting here? Leave now for the City of the Prophet, but keep what you have seen a secret." The sultan spent the rest of the night getting ready, and left with agile female riding camels and twenty men. The abovementioned vizier went with him, bringing along great amounts of money. They arrived in Medina in sixteen days. The sultan performed the major ritual ablution (*ghusl*) outside the town and then entered, praying in the *rawḍa*.[33] Then he made the visit to the Prophet's grave (*wa-zāra*) and those of his two Companions [i.e. Abu Bakr and ʿUmar] who are confined with him forever, and afterwards sat down, not knowing what to do. The vizier said, having gathered the people of Medina[34] in the mosque: "The sultan came to visit the Prophet's grave (*ziyārat al-nabī*) and brought with him money to give as voluntary alms (*ṣadaqa*). Write down who is in your houses." The people of Medina did as they were told, and the sultan ordered that everybody be brought before him. Each one who came before the sultan was looked over attentively to check if he responded to the image that the Prophet had shown to the sultan. If he was not found to match up with the image, he was given his alms and ordered to leave, until everybody had been checked. The sultan then asked: "Is anybody left who did not take any alms?" They said: "No." He insisted: "Think about it and think it over." They answered: "Nobody is left except two Maghribī men who do not partake of anything with anybody. They are two pious rich men who give abundantly in alms to those who are in need." The sultan rejoiced and said: "Bring them to me." When they were brought before him, he saw that they were the two men the Prophet had signalled to him saying: "Rescue me from these two!" He asked them: "Where are you from?" They answered: "From the country of the Maghrib. We came as pilgrims and decided to perform *mujāwara* near the Prophet this year." The sultan said: "Tell me the truth!" But they persisted in their story. The sultan asked: "Where are their lodgings?" He was informed that they were in a lodge (*ribāṭ*) near the 'noble tomb' (*al-ḥujra al-sharīfa*). They were detained and brought to their residence. There they saw a great

devoted an entry to him in his *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*: Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Societies*, p. 131, note 89.

33 Perlmann explains in his annotation that it is "a pillared area over the prayer place of the Prophet in a palm grove later turned into a mosque," this location being the starting point of the ritual visitation (*ziyāra*) performed in Medina.

34 In Arabic, ahl al-Madīna. It seems to refer to specifically to the heads of households.

amount of money, two copies of the Qur'an and books on *raqāʾiq*.[35] They did not find anything else in their dwelling. The people of Medina praised them for the many good works they had done, saying: "They fasted during the day, attended the prayers in the noble *rawḍa*, visited the Prophet's tomb and [the cemetery of] al-Baqīʿ every day, and visited Qubāʾ every Saturday.[36] They never rejected anyone who asked for help in any matters that might solve the needs of the Medinese in this year of drought." The sultan said: "God be praised!" He could not find anything of what he had seen in his dream. The sultan stayed in the house wandering about on his own. He lifted a carpet and saw below it a plank made of wood or something of that sort. He lifted it and saw an excavated underground passageway (*sirdāb*) that led in the direction of the 'noble tomb.' The people were alarmed by this, and the sultan told [the two men] as a result of what he had found: "You must tell me the truth about yourselves!" The two men were beaten severely until they confessed that they were Christians sent by the Christians under the guise of Maghribī pilgrims. They had been given great amounts of money, and were ordered to travel there to carry out the terrible plan they had devised, but had deluded themselves into thinking that they were empowered by God to do such a thing, this being to reach the noble lordship (*al-jināb al-sharīf*) and do with it what Iblīs [Satan] had made them believe they could do: to steal it, and what would follow.[37] They had settled in the *ribāṭ* that was nearest to the Prophet's tomb, showing themselves to be religiously observant and generous in their alms and so on. During the night they started excavating. Each of them had a leather bag (*miḥfaẓa*) of the sort the Maghribīs usually wear, and in it they deposited the soil they excavated. Then, whenever they left with the excuse of visiting al-Baqīʿ cemetery, they threw it among the graves when they were alone. They did this for a long period. But when they got near the 'noble tomb', the sky thundered, lighting appeared, and the earth shook so hard it seemed as if mountains were going to be

35 Literally, 'subtleties,' meaning morally inspiring anecdotes and other written pieces intended to soften the hearts from a religious point of view, leading to intense emotional reactions such as weeping. Perlmann, in his "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," pp. 856–857 was unsure about the meaning and suggested the possibility that it could indicate 'explosives,' a reading he substituted later for 'parchment, vellum,' also incorrect.

36 Qubāʾ is a shrine outside Medina, the place where Muḥammad prayed before entering Medina during his emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca.

37 Perhaps to destroy the Prophet's remains?

> uprooted. The sultan arrived the morning after that night, and it was then that their capture and confession took place.
>
> Once they had confessed and acknowledged their true intentions in front of him, the sultan thanked God for having bestowed upon him the merit of solving the issue, started weeping intensely, and ordered the two men to be beheaded. They were executed below the lattice screen (*shubbāk*) that is adjacent to the 'noble tomb' on the side of al-Baqīʿ cemetery. He then ordered to bring in great quantities of lead and to excavate a ditch—deep enough to reach water—around the noble tomb in its entirety. The lead was melted and used to fill up the ditch. In this way walls of lead surrounded the noble tomb from the level of the water table.[38] The sultan then returned to his reign, and ordered the power of the Christians to be diminished and prohibit them from having any say [in the matters of his kingdom]. He then forbade the employment of infidels in state service, and also put an end to illicit taxes (*mukūs*), writing about it to Syria, Egypt, and Diyarbakir. This situation lasted until his death.[39]

While in the case of al-Maṭarī the reason for recounting the tale of Nūr al-Dīn's dream was to explain how the second wall of Medina was built (with no mention of the lead 'belt' around the Prophet's tomb), al-Asnawī is not interested in Medina's urban planning, but in depicting Christians in the worst possible light, including general charges of arson. The case of Nūr al-Dīn's dream is just one (albeit a very important one) of the long list of Christian attempts at destroying Muslim holy sites. Al-Asnawī's narrative does not contradict al-Maṭarī's text, but enriches it with details that make the story more thrilling and entertaining. A noteworthy difference is that the two men in al-Asnawī's narrative are said to come from the Maghrib and not from al-Andalus. In al-Maṭarī's text it is possible to read 'al-Andalus' as a geographical term and thus as a reference to the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. As regards the Maghrib, during Nūr al-Dīn's time the Almohad caliphs (r. 524/1130–668/1269) were busy consolidating an empire that spanned North Africa (except Egypt) and part of the Iberian Peninsula. All these territories integrated into the Almohad empire were referred to as the Maghrib.[40] However, al-Asnawī—who is writing

38 As noted above (note 19), the water supply in the houses of Medina consisted of wells that reached down to the underground deposits of water.

39 Perlmann, "Asnawī's tract against Christian officials," pp. 14–18 (Arabic text); Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," pp. 856–857.

40 As highlighted by Víctor de Castro, "Historiography and geography" and Luis Molina, "The integration of al-Andalus in Islamic historiography: The view from the Maghrib and the

specifically against the *dhimmīs*, non-Muslims living in territories ruled by Muslims—is not interested in Christians living outside Islamic territories. His narrative conveys the impression that the two men were Christians living in the Maghrib under Muslim rule and, thus, there is no mention of any Christian king. This difference with al-Maṭarī's version served al-Asnawī's agenda, shifting the story's focus from Christians living outside the Islamic world to Christians living within Islamic societies.

What al-Asnawī seems not to realize is that the Almohads had in fact eliminated the *dhimma* system throughout their empire: Jews and Christians were obliged to convert to Islam, and in particular to the Almohads' peculiar understanding of Islam.[41] That the Almohad period had seen the disappearance of *dhimmī* communities in the Maghrib[42] was known in Egypt,[43] so that al-Asnawī's rendition of Nūr al-Dīn's dream would probably have been read as a reference to crypto-Christians. To sum up, al-Maṭarī's text was the source for al-Asnawī's narrative, which he expanded and adapted to better serve his specific needs.

3 Later Versions of Nūr al-Dīn's Dream in the Histories of Medina

After al-Asnawī, the story was quoted by two authors of works having to do with the Holy Places of Islam. One of them was a student of al-Asnawī, the Egyptian Shāfiʿī Abū Bakr b. al-Ḥusayn b. ʿUmar al-Marāghī (727/1327–816/1414), who settled in Medina[44] and wrote *Taḥqīq al-nuṣra fī faḍl Makka al-muḥarrama wa-l-Madīna al-munawwara* ('The most proficient assistant on the merit of

Mashriq," in *The Routledge Handbook of Muslim Iberia*, ed. Maribel Fierro (London, 2020).

41 Maribel Fierro, "A Muslim land without Jews or Christians: Almohad policies regarding the 'protected people,'" in *Christlicher Norden—Muslimischer Süden. Ansprüche und Wirklichkeiten von Christen, Juden und Muslimen auf der Iberischen Halbinsel im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter*, eds. Matthias M. Tischler and Alexander Fidora (Münster, 2011), pp. 231–247 and the studies by Maribel Fierro, David Wasserstein and Alain Verskin in *Forced Conversion in Christianity, Judaism and Islam: Coercion and Faith in Premodern Iberia and Beyond*, eds. M. García-Arenal and Jonathan Glazer-Eytan (Leiden, 2019), respectively pp. 111–132, 133–154, 155–172.

42 While the Christian communities never re-emerged, strong Jewish communities did, lasting into modern times.

43 See above, note 26 about the Maghribī ambassador who visited Egypt in post-Almohad times and complained about the existence there of dhimmī communities.

44 Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, II, 172, SII, 221; Kaḥḥāla, *Muʿjam al-muʾallifīn*, I, 437.

Sacred Mecca and Luminous Medina').[45] Al-Marāghī's text closely follows al-Maṭarī's, adding the name of Nūr al-Dīn's vizier who went with him to Medina (Khālid b. Muḥammad b. Naṣr al-Qaysarānī al-Shāʿir)[46] and a sentence not found in his source (underlined in the following translation):

> They confessed that they were Christians. They were found to have excavated an underground tunnel that went below the south-eastern wall of the mosque in the direction of the 'noble tomb' (*al-ḥujra al-sharīfa*), with the agreement of their [Christian] kings, as these kings had conceived the absurd idea of initiating something that God would stop.[47]

The other author is Nūr al-Dīn Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAfīf al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh al-Samhūdī (844/1466–911/1533), also an Egyptian Shāfiʿī who settled in Medina, where he wrote a tract that called for the rebuilding of the Prophet's mosque, which had for the second time been badly damaged by fire.[48] He also wrote an extensive history of Medina that was lost in this same fire. A shorter version completed in 886/1481 survived, with the title *Wafāʾ al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā* ('The Fulfilment of faithfulness regarding the reports about the House of the Chosen One'). In it, al-Samhūdī quoted the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream.[49] His source was al-Asnawī, whose tract he mentions under the title of *al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmiyya* ('The Islamic Victories'):

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45 I first encountered the story preserved in this work when consulting the Ms. Reisülkuttab 121, fs. 64b–65a. The work has been edited by ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm ʿUsalyān (Riyadh, 1422/2002). Available at https://backend.ketabonline.com/uploads/2020/04/4475128581836464424.pdf. Accessed March 20, 2023.

46 On him see Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām*, II, 240. Elsewhere al-Maṭarī mentions Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Abī Manṣūr al-Iṣfahānī as Nūr al-Dīn's vizier who had started building a new wall around the Mosque of the Prophet around 540/1146. However, he does not name the vizier in the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream. Al-Asnawī does identify him as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Mawṣilī (who corresponds to the vizier mentioned by al-Maṭarī in relation to the walls), but he was not vizier to Nūr al-Dīn in Damascus, but rather to his father and brother in Mosul. Later, al-Samhūdī noted this problem, concluding that Jamāl al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī al-Mawṣilī must also have served Nūr al-Dīn.

47 Al-Marāghī, *Taḥqīq al-nuṣra*, p. 240. In al-Marāghī's text we find *mulūkihimā* instead of *mulūkihim* (cf. above note 18).

48 C. E. Bosworth, "al-Samhūdī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6578. Accessed April 28, 2020. See also Ḥāmid al-Jāsir, "Manuscripts in the history of Makkah and Madīnah," in *The significance of Islamic Manuscripts. Proceedings of the Inaugural Conference of al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation 1991*, ed. J. Cooper (London, 1992), pp. 107–113.

49 Al-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. Qāsim al-Sāmarrāʾī, 5 vols (Muʾassasat al-Furqān li-l-turāth al-islāmī, 1422/2001), II, 431–6. Eldon Rutter, in his

> Know that I found an *Epistle* written by the scholar Jamāl al-Dīn al-Asnawī prohibiting the employment of Christians in administrative positions entitled by some *al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmiyya*. But I have seen in a copy of this work, written by the hand of his student and teacher of my teachers, Zayn al-Dīn al-Marāghī, the following title: *Naṣīḥat ūlà al-albāb fī manʿ istikhdām al-naṣārā kuttāb*. Our teacher … did not give it any title, but I gave it this one in his presence and he confirmed it.[50]

Al-Samhūdī was also familiar with al-Maṭarī's text, which he mistakenly thought was an abridged version of al-Asnawī's story,[51] whereas, as explained above, my view of the relationship between the two texts is the opposite.

Al-Samhūdī's text differs very little from that of al-Asnawī. But al-Samhūdī, contrary to al-Asnawī, expresses doubts as to the story's authenticity, since he has never seen it mentioned by Nūr al-Dīn's biographers:

> I find it strange that I have not found this story in the texts of the biographies of Nūr al-Dīn, despite its significance. For this story serves as witness to what al-Imām al-Yāfiʿī says in his biography of Nūr al-Dīn, that Nūr al-Dīn … was one of the forty saints and that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn was his deputy among the three hundred saints.[52]

This critical view was not shared by the famous Mamlūk historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), whose *Imtāʿ al-asmāʿ*,[53] on certain aspects of the biography of the Prophet, quotes al-Maṭarī's text verbatim, without any critical comment about its historicity.

4 The Shīʿī Link: Ibn Iyās's (d. ca. 930/1524) Version

A contemporary of al-Samhūdī, the Egyptian historian Abū l-Barakāt Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nāṣirī al-Jarkasī al-Ḥanafī, known as Ibn Iyās

The Holy Cities of Arabia (London-New York, 1928), II, 201–3, partially translated al-Samhūdī's text.

50 Al-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ al-wafā*, II, 431 and 435.

51 Al-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ al-wafā*, II, 434.

52 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Societies*, p. 37. The Arabic text is al-Samhūdī, *Wafāʾ al-wafā*, II, p. 436. This remark was already noticed by Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," p. 857.

53 Ed. Maḥmūd Shākir (Cairo, 1941), p. 627.

(d. ca. 930/1524),[54] included the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream in his multi-volume chronicle of Egypt entitled *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duhūr* ('Wonderful flowers in the events of the ages'). His version is as follows:

> It was said that Nūr al-Dīn saw the Prophet while sleeping. The Prophet told him: "Oh, Nūr al-Dīn, come to my rescue! A member of the Rāfiḍa[55] intends to steal my corpse." Nūr al-Dīn showed him the appearance [of the Rāfiḍī man] in his dream.
>
> When Nūr al-Dīn woke up the next morning, he set out for noble Medina, although it was not the usual time for the pilgrimage. When he arrived in Medina, he summoned its inhabitants and made them believe that he was going to distribute money among them. When they were in front of him, he asked: "Is someone missing?" They answered: "The one missing is a pious man who lives in retirement devoted to God and does not mix with anybody." Nūr al-Dīn ordered that he be brought before him.
>
> When that man was in front of him, he was the same one that the Prophet had shown him in his dream. When Nūr al-Dīn saw him, he ordered him to be crucified, and this was done. Then he raided his house, which was nearby, not far from the 'noble tomb' (*al-ḥujra al-sharīfa*), and found that he had excavated an underground tunnel that had come close to the grave of the Prophet. Nūr al-Dīn al-Shahīd (the Martyr) had a ditch excavated around the 'noble tomb' and filled it up with huge stones, interlocking them with lead. This is a well-known story about Nūr al-Dīn.[56]

The culprit in this version, instead of two fair-haired men, is a person with no salient physical features but who, similarly to the two men in the variants of the other version, had a reputation in Medina as pious and well-regarded. Instead of being discovered to be a Christian, he turns out to be a Shīʿī; he is crucified (in al-Maṭarī's story the two men were decapitated and then burnt). There is reason to suspect this in fact might be the original version of the story, especially if the Shīʿī belong to the Ismaʿīlī sect, which during this period was associated with violent attacks against both individuals and buildings with

54 W. M. Brinner, "Ibn Iyās," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3225. Accessed April 29, 2020.

55 This term refers to the Shīʿīs in general, and may target any of its sects; it can also refer exclusively to the proto-Imāmiyya and, subsequently, the Twelver Shīʿa: E. Kohlberg, "al-Rāfiḍa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6185. Accessed May 2, 2020.

56 Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá (Wiesbaden, 1960–1975), I/1, p. 241. I wish to thank Anne-Marie Eddé for this reference.

symbolic importance. For example, in January 317/930, Mecca was sacked by the Carmathians (considered by some to be a branch of the Ismaʿīlīs) who took away the Black Stone, causing a great scandal and much sorrow among other Muslims. It was nearly a decade later, in 327/939, when the Carmathians finally allowed a pilgrims' caravan to enter Mecca again, eventually returning the Black Stone.[57] Later, a branch of the Ismaʿīlīs, the Nizārīs, became closely linked to murderous violence against their enemies, to the extent that they constitute the origin of the European term 'assassin.'[58] There are many legendary aspects in the image of the Nizārīs constructed in medieval and later sources. For example, it was said that in Isfahān, an underground chamber was discovered in the house of a blind man who lured young men into it by asking them for help, only to torture and kill them. The blind man was said to have been an Ismaʿīlī, and those in the city who were accused of being Ismaʿīlīs were killed along with him.[59] While many such tales are the stuff of legend, there was nonetheless also some historical truth to this reputation.[60]

The Nizārīs had at their origins the teachings of the Ismaʿīlī missionary Ḥasan-i-ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124). They expanded into Syria, Persia, Central Asia and India, having as their main fortress Alamūt, in the mountainous south-western region of the Caspian Sea, until it was destroyed by the Mongols in 654/1257.[61] Especially during the 6th/12th century, the Nizārīs used murder as a means to achieve their political-religious aims. They were especially feared because the 'assassins' charged with carrying out the killings of the group's political-religious opponents were considered to be unafraid of death. These men, the *fidāʾīs*, offered themselves up for missions that were generally suicidal, as their targets were often armed and surrounded by armed guards, and the murderers did not try to safeguard themselves. Thus, their fanatical devotion indicates a high degree of personal motivation and an intense group sentiment.[62] The conspiratorial secrecy attributed to the Nizārīs included arousing suspicion that certain Sunnīs were actually Ismāʿīlīs, creating a climate of

57 Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fāṭimids* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 255–257, 381–382.

58 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizârî Ismâʿîlîs Against the Islamic World* (The Hague, 1955); Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins* (London, 1967).

59 Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*, pp. 77–8.

60 Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismaʿilis* (London-New York, 1994) and cf. its review by J.-P. Guillaume and A. Chraibi in *Arabica* 43 (1996): 369–375.

61 Farhad Daftary, "Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30361. Accessed May 3, 2020 and idem, *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 301–402.

62 V. Ivanow, "An Ismaili Ode in Praise of Fidawis," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, XIV (1938): 63–72.

confusion, fear and tension. For all these reasons, the Nizārīs were feared and detested as few other 'heretics' have been.

The Seljuqs were one of the foremost targets of the Nizārīs' attacks. After the Seljuq ruler ordered an attack against Alamūt, the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk was stabbed to death in 485/1092. His murderer—who had disguised himself as a Sufi and was immediately killed—was thought to have been an emissary of Ḥasan-i-ṣabbāḥ, although it was most probably an 'internal' affair of the Seljuq empire.[63] The list of victims of the Nizārīs (real or alleged) grew to include important members of the political and religious elites (military commanders, judges and scholars). There were even two failed attempts against Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn himself, after which he is said to have slept in a wooden tower especially designed for him, and would no longer allow any stranger to approach him. The Nizārīs also targeted the Crusaders from their base in the mountainous regions of Syria, their most famous murder being that of Conrad of Montferrat, king of Jerusalem, killed in Tyre in 1192 by two assassins disguised as monks (as in the case of Niẓām al-Mulk, other possible culprits have been proposed).[64] Ultimately, it did not really matter who had actually carried out these murders, because the Nizārīs were always suspect, and this widespread fear gave them power. Their targets were not only men but also buildings: the fire that burned down the mosque of Aleppo in the year 564/1169 was attributed to the Nizārīs.[65]

That the Nizārīs carried out selective murders of their enemies made sense in societies in which political and social power was held by "a host of essentially equal and autonomous military and religious leaders, on a personal basis." In Hodgson's words:

> Already the Sunnī society had become accustomed to seeing upstart individuals, robbers or rich rebels, appropriate whole areas and force the paramount power to recognise them as 'loyal' but independent vassals. The policy suitable for conquering such a society was to take it over piece by piece, winning or destroying it stronghold by stronghold, leader by leader.[66]

63 H. Bowen and C. E. Bosworth, "Niẓām al-Mulk," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam. Second Edition*. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5942. Accessed May 3, 2020; Carole Hillenbrand, "1092: A Murderous Year," in *Proceedings of the 14th Congress of the Union Européene des Arabisants et Islamisants* (Budapest, 1995), pp. 281–296.

64 Patrick A. Williams, "The Assassination of Conrad of Montferrat: Another Suspect?", *Traditio* XXVI (1970): 381–389.

65 Élisséeff, "Les monuments de Nūr al-Dīn," p. 14.

66 Hodgson, *The order of Assassins*, p. 81.

But what could have been the aim for a Shīʿī—be he Ismaʿīlī or Ismaʿīlī/Nizārī—to steal the remains of the Prophet Muḥammad from his grave in Medina, the city where he died and which had become one of the Holy Places of Islam? As strange as it may seem, two Ismaʿīlī/Fāṭimid imam-caliphs had indeed espoused this very idea.

The first was al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 386/996–411/1021).[67] Among the many bizarre acts attributed to this intriguing Fāṭimid imam-caliph was the attempt to steal the body of his ancestor, the Prophet, in order to bring it to Cairo. This story was first recorded by the Andalusī geographer al-Bakrī (432/1040–487/1094),[68] who alleged that al-Ḥākim sent agents to secretly tunnel under the grave of the Prophet, as well as the adjacent graves of the first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, in order to steal their remains and transfer them to Cairo. His intention was to build for each of them a sanctuary (*mashhad*) along the road between Fusṭāṭ and Cairo.[69] The historicity of this accusation has been brought into question by historians such as P. Walker, who has identified two particularly dubious elements in the account. Firstly, despite the Fāṭimids' well-known interest in turning Cairo into a centre of worship, they do not seem to have envisioned doing away with the pilgrimage to the Ḥijāz, as shown by their efforts to control the Sharīfī emir who ruled over Mecca and Medina. The second is that Abū Bakr and ʿUmar were hated by the Shīʿīs, who considered them "Great Satans." Walker asks: "Of what use could their remains be in this situation?"[70] To the first argument, it can be objected that the pilgrimage may have continued even after the transfer of the Prophet's body to Cairo: after all, Medina's sacred topography has no lack of places for veneration and visitation, and of course Mecca would have not been affected. To the second, the Fāṭimids are well known for the inventiveness and ingenuity of their ceremonies, and they may have thought of a special type of ritual for such *mashāhid* to reflect their rejection of the first two caliphs. For the Fāṭimids, the veneration for their imams was paralleled by their hatred of their enemies, whose punishment involved a striking public display of their

67 The most recent study on him is Paul E. Walker, *Caliph of Cairo: Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, 996–1021* (Cairo, 2010).

68 Al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, 2 vols (Beirut, 1992), II, 609–610. He does not mention his source.

69 Yūsuf Rāġib, "Un episode obscur d'histoire Fāṭimide," *Studia Islamica* 48 (1978): 125–132; Paul E. Walker, "Purloined Symbols of the Past: The Theft of Souvenirs and Sacred Relics in the Rivalry between the Abbasids and Fatimids," in *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, eds. F. Daftary and J. Meri (London, 2003; reprinted in *Fatimid History and Ismaili Doctrine*, Farnham, 2008), pp. 364–387, 368–369.

70 Walker, "Purloined Symbols of the Past," p. 369.

bodies.[71] In any case, importantly for our study, al-Bakrī's narrative includes key parallels with the story of the Andalusīs/Maghribīs: the excavation of a tunnel, the punishment of the culprits and the use of lead to seal the grave off from similar attacks in the future.

Writing a century-and-a-half later, Mamlūk historian al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) recounts a similar plan, here attributed to Fāṭimid imam-caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ (r. 526/1132–544/1149). Upset by the Abbasids' and Seljuqs' control of the Holy Places of Islam, al-Ḥāfiẓ sent forty men to Medina to dig a tunnel to the Prophet's grave. They started at some distance to avoid detection, but the tunnel collapsed while they were working in it, killing all those involved.[72]

These stories cannot be completely dismissed. They add to the well-documented Fāṭimid obsession with acquiring relics associated with their claimed ancestors, the Prophet and his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[73] After conquering Egypt in 358/969, the Fāṭimids moved their capital from Ifrīqiya to the newly founded city of Cairo, during which process the reigning imam-caliph al-Muʿizz (r. 341/953–365/975) took the remains of the first three imam-caliphs with him to be buried in their new capital. Cairo became the centre of the complex ceremonies and ritual practices developed by the Fāṭimids,[74] and also the place where an increasing number of relics were located, including, as mentioned above, al-Ḥusayn's head.[75]

The acquisition, through different means, of relics highly charged with symbolic meaning to uphold the Fāṭimids' lineage was meant to increase their legitimacy and to strengthen their claim to the inheritance of the Prophet Muḥammad's authority. Al-Ḥāfiẓ's attempt would have taken place in the 6th/12th century, as Fāṭimid power waned, but also as powers of intercession

71 On the punishment of the Berber rebel Abū Yazīd, discredited as the Dajjāl (Antichrist) by the Fāṭimids, see Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 318–325. His case was not unique.

72 Walker, "Purloined Symbols of the Past," pp. 369–370, quoting al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn and Muḥammad Ḥilmī Muḥammad Aḥmad (Cairo, 1992), p. 308.

73 Al-Ḥākim had sent one of his agents to open the house of the imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq in Medina and bring its contents to Cairo, an episode reported by both Ismaʿīlī and Sunnī sources. These contents were brought by Fāṭimid agents accompanied by a delegation of Medinese Ḥusaynid and Ḥasanid notables. Only part was given back, as al-Ḥākim considered himself the rightful heir of his ancestor's belongings. He had known exactly which objects were to be found in Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's house and where they stood, a memory that proved his claim to the imamate: Walker, "Purloined Symbols of the Past," pp. 368–9. On how the Fāṭimids acquired the sword of ʿAlī see ibid., pp. 364–7.

74 Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (New York, 1994).

75 See above, note 29.

were increasingly attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad,[76] and the visitation of graves became increasingly popular. The new importance of graves and bodies was such that the Seljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk—the one supposedly murdered by a Nizārī agent—allegedly led an attempt at transferring the body of al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), the founder of the Shāfiʿī legal school favoured by the Seljuqs, from Cairo to Baghdad in order to rescue it from Fāṭimid control.[77]

5 Why Were Christians from the Islamic West Made the Protagonists in al-Maṭarī's Version?

The first author to quote the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream, al-Maṭarī, was a fervent anti-Shīʿī, and thus one might expect him to have attributed the alleged attempt against the Prophet's grave to Shīʿī agents. After all, the story of Fāṭimid imam-caliph al-Hakim's attempted theft of the Prophet's body had been in circulation since the 5th/11th century. However, by al-Maṭarī's times the Fāṭimids had disappeared from the political scene, ever since Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn had deposed the last imam-caliph in Cairo and restored Sunnism in the former Fāṭimid territories. The Nizārīs' attacks had also stopped. Moreover, al-Maṭarī lived in Medina at a moment in which those in power were Shīʿīs, the aforementioned Sharīfī emirs.[78] But even though a Shīʿī plot would therefore have been unconvincing and politically inappropriate in al-Maṭarī's times, the same is not true for the times the alleged attack took place.

Both Nūr al-Dīn and his successor Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn were apparently indifferent to Shīʿī control of religious offices in Medina, something that later Mamlūk authors found disturbing, as they seem to have thought that such rulers should have taken care to 'Sunnify' Medina.[79] Outside the particular context of the Ḥijāz, however, Nūr al-Dīn was concerned about the Fāṭimids and fought against them. It was the Fāṭimids' ominous 358/969 conquest of Egypt that prompted the Buwayhid ruler ʿAḍud al-Dawla to build a wall around Medina's city centre in 364/974. This wall was later restored in 540/1145 under Zangid rule,[80] and less than two decades later, in 557/1162, Nūr al-Dīn built a second, longer wall equipped with towers and gateways.[81] Nūr al-Dīn is also one of the

76 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, pp. 34–35.
77 Walker, "Purloined Symbols of the Past," p. 368.
78 See above, note 6.
79 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, p. 139, note 169.
80 See above, note 11.
81 Montgomery Watt and Winder, "al-Madīna," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Élisséeff, "Les monuments de Nūr al-Dīn," p. 34.

rulers credited with establishing the guard of eunuchs who acted as custodians of the Prophet's grave,[82] and, as we have seen, he is said to have surrounded the tomb with a protective belt of stones and lead. It can therefore be concluded that Nūr al-Dīn was concerned about the safety of Medina, be it from attacks from the Bedouins or the Fāṭimids. But again, the fact that Medina was ruled by Shīʿīs—the Sharīfī emirs—may have made it inconvenient for al-Maṭarī's to accuse the Shīʿīs of any possible attack against the Prophet's grave.

Another possibility would have been to accuse the Crusaders: after all, in 1182–3 Reynald of Châtillon had managed to sail into the Red Sea to launch a raid on Mecca and Medina, before being defeated by the Ayyubids of Egypt.[83] According to the Andalusi Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) who performed his pilgrimage in 578/1183, the aim of the Crusaders was to enter Medina and remove the Prophet's body from his grave.[84] Here we have a Christian connection. However, this attempted raid took place in 578/1182, after Nūr al-Dīn's death, and therefore could not have been linked with the construction of the new wall and the sealing of the grave.[85]

Al-Maṭarī, our earliest source on the Christian attempt against the Prophet's grave during Nūr al-Dīn's reign, had a strong connection with a family of Maghribī origin, the Banū Farḥūn.[86] The founder of the line, Muḥammad b. Farḥūn, had left al-Andalus to settle in Medina, obeying what he thought had been a divine command. One of his descendants was the Maliki scholar Badr al-Dīn Ibn Farḥūn (d. 799/1397), author of a famous biographical dictionary of Maliki scholars, who said about al-Maṭarī: "After our father, we found no one like him in kindness to us and compassion for us. He took charge of our

82 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, p. 129, note 79. In one of the stories about the Shīʿī attempt to desecrate the Prophet's grave, the chief eunuch plays a major role, witnessing how the earth miraculously opens and swallows up the Shīʿī agents: Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, p. 38.

83 Gary Leiser, "The Crusader Raid in the Red Sea in 578/1182–3," *The Journal of the American Research Center in Cairo* 14 (1977): 87–100; A. Mallett, "A Trip Down the Red Sea with Reynald of Châtillon," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 18, no. 2 (2008): 141–153.

84 Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla*, trans. R. J. C. Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (London, 2020, first ed. 1952), pp. 72–73.

85 As pointed by Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, note 95, it was only in nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources that the Christian threat—whether the "fair-haired men" of Nūr al-Dīn's dream or an expedition by the Crusader Reynaud de Châtillon against Medina—was linked to the founding of the eunuch guard at the Prophet's tomb, referring to Emel Esin, *Mecca the Blessed, Madina the Radiant* (New York, 1963), p. 158.

86 M. Aragón Huerta, "Ibn Farḥūn, Burhān al-dīn," in *Biblioteca de al-Andalus*, ed. Jorge Lirola Delgado and José Miguel Puerta Vílchez (Almería, 2004), vol. 3, pp. 141–149, no. 461. As noted above (note 5), the Maghribi traveller Ibn Baṭṭūta (d. 770/1368 or 779/1377) met al-Maṭarī during his stay in Medina.

upbringing and our education and concern for our welfare like our father".[87] In the 6th/12th–7th/13th centuries increasing numbers of Andalusī and Maghribī scholars were emigrating to Egypt and the central lands of Islam. Behind this phenomenon there was both a 'pull' factor (the Sunnitization of the former Fāṭimid territories that required, especially in Egypt, the presence of Sunni scholars) and a 'push' factor (the initial Almohad persecution of Mālikīs in al-Andalus and the Maghrib, and the Christians' territorial gains in the Iberian Peninsula). In the writings of some of these emigrants—especially those from al-Andalus, where territories had been lost to the Christians since the fall of Toledo in 478/1085—there is a noticeable desire to arouse an interest in the plight of their homeland. The Andalusī al-Yasaʿ b. Ḥazm (d. 575/1179) settled in Egypt and wrote for Saladin a historical work entitled *al-Mughrib fī akhbār maḥāsin ahl al-Maghrib* that was full of inventions and distorted materials.[88] Al-Yasaʿ b. Ḥazm, for example, sought in his writings to highlight the Iberian Christians' wickedness in hopes of inspiring Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn to intervene militarily in order to save al-Andalus from the Christian invasion. Later, in the 7th/13th century, after the main cities of al-Andalus had already fallen, including Córdoba, horrific stories were told about the Christians' treatment of such a venerated place. The king of Castile Alfonso VI (r. 1072–1109), the conqueror of Toledo, wanted his wife Constance to give birth in the mosque of Córdoba, on the advice of his priests and bishops who reminded him that in the western part of the mosque a church had stood before, and he sent a Jewish ambassador with the proposal to the king of Seville al-Muʿtamid (r. 461/1069–484/1091), who controlled Cordoba at the time. This story is presented as justifying al-Muʿtamid's decision to kill the ambassador.[89]

6 Conclusion: The History of a Story

In the mid-fifth/eleventh century, the possibility of an attack against the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina had been recorded by the Andalusī geographer al-Bakrī. The culprit was the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr

87 Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries*, pp. 138–139, notes 161 and 162.

88 Maribel Fierro, "La falsificación de la historia: Al-Yasaʿ b. Ḥazm y su *Kitāb al-mugrib*," *Al-Qanṭara* XVI (1995): 15–38.

89 Al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Rawḍ al-miʿṭār*, ed. and trans. E. Lévi-Provençal, p. 84 (Arabic text), 104–5 (French translation); ed. I. ʿAbbas (Beirut, 1975), p. 288; Maribel Fierro, "Christian success and Muslim fear in Andalusi writings during the Almoravid and Almohad periods," *Israel Oriental Studies* XVII (1997): 155–178; reprint in F. Micheau, ed., *Les relations des pays d'Islam avec le monde latin du milieu du Xᵉ siècle au milieu du XIIIᵉ siècle* (Paris, 2000), pp. 218–249.

Allāh, accused of attempting to steal the body of his ancestor, the Prophet, in order to bring it to Cairo. The Fāṭimids were known for their interest in gathering the remains of their ancestors in the city they had built in Egypt where they developed complex rituals to bolster their legitimacy and strengthen the belief in the truth of their doctrines and their right to rule. In the 6th/12th century, the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ would have carried out another failed attempt, as did the Crusaders according to the Andalusī Ibn Jubayr. It was in that same century that an alleged attack against the Prophet's grave was halted by the Zengid Nūr al-Dīn. More than two centuries later, the Egyptian historian Ibn Iyās included in his chronicle of Egypt how a Shīʿī who passed as a pious man in Medina was found to be the same about whom the Prophet, in a dream, had warned Nūr al-Dīn that he wanted to steal his corpse. Uncovered, that Shīʿī man was crucified. The Fāṭimid precedent may have been behind the protagonism given in this narrative to a Shīʿī who would have been most probably associated with an Ismaʿīlī and more specifically with a member of the Nizārī branch of Ismaʿīlism.

Nūr al-Dīn had reached during his own life great renown for his fight against both the Christian enemies, the Crusaders and the Byzantines, and the Fāṭimids. Other versions of Nūr al-Dīn's dream were in circulation before Ibn Iyās. As recorded earlier by al-Maṭarī and al-Asnawī, the culprits were not Shīʿīs but Christians either from al-Andalus or from the Maghrib. It is unclear which may have been the earlier version, although the precedence of the Fāṭimids' attempts suggests that Nūr al-Dīn's dream was probably initially associated with Shīʿī culprits. In any case, the earliest sources at our disposal about Nūr al-Dīn's dream record the protagonism of Christians. In the case of al-Asnawī's version, by accusing Christians from the Maghrib—to be understood as crypto-Christians as under the Almohads Jews and Christians had been forced to convert—the intention seems to have been to undermine the position of dhimmis in Egypt. Moshe Perlmann has, in fact, read in al-Asnawī's version of Nūr al-Dīn's dream a similarity with "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", the early-20th-century anti-Semitic forgery depicting the Jews as the masterminds of a worldwide conspiracy to seize power, in order to justify anti-Jewish violence on the ground.[90] The similarity does not hold in terms of the tangible global impact of the "Protocols"[91] compared with the very limited reach of the

90 A. Berlin and M. Grossman, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (Oxford, 2011), s.v.

91 Esther Webman, ed., *The Global Impact of the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion': A Century-old Myth* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon-New York, 2011).

story of the alleged Christian attack against Medina, at least in premodern times.[92] For Perlmann, the story of Nūr al-Dīn's dream was directed against the Christians as a way to legitimize the restrictions and persecutions against them implemented in Egypt, which al-Asnawī supported and wanted to see extended and intensified.

But al-Asnawī, as we have seen, was preceded by al-Maṭarī, for whom al-Asnawī's agenda would not have made any sense, since only Muslims were allowed to live in the Ḥijāz, meaning *dhimmīs* were a non-issue there.[93] Al-Maṭarī's version fits the context of the times with the fight against the Crusaders but also with the influx of emigrants and exiles from al-Andalus who had a vested interest in rallying Muslim opinion in favour of the plight of the Muslims. By accusing Christians coming from the Iberian Peninsula of trying to attack the Prophet's grave, the intention may have been to create an atmosphere favourable to a military intervention in support of the Muslims of al-Andalus. Thus, in al-Maṭarī's work, the story, with its Christian agents on the order of Christian Iberian kings, is better understood in the context of how Andalusīs tried—unsuccessfully—to influence the policies of rulers in the Mashriq to save their homeland from Christian conquest.

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92 Writing in the 17th century, the Ottoman scholar Evliya Çelebi recorded the story of Nūr al-Dīn, but in his version the protagonist on the Christian side is the Pope who wanted to get hold of the Prophet's body by sending to Medina twenty monks who could speak different languages and who pretended to be Muslims. What those men did in Medina follows al-Maṭarī's narrative in general terms. In this rendition of the story the Pope's initiative was motivated by the desire to take revenge for the Arab conquests and to force the Muslims to return to the Christians the territories they had lost; another version is that the intention was to divert the pilgrimage from the Arabian Peninsula to the Iberian Peninsula in order to profit from the taxes that the pilgrims would have to pay. See *Evliya Çelebi in Medina; the relevant sections of the* Seyāhatnāme, ed. Nurettin Gemici, trans. Robert Dankoff (Leiden, 2012), pp. 59–73.

93 Seth Ward, "A fragment from an unknown work by al-Ṭabarī on the tradition 'Expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula (and the lands of Islam),'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* LIII (1990): 407–420; Harry Munt, "'No two religions': Non-Muslims in the early Islamic Ḥijāz," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78 (2015): 249–269.

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