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A prophet like Jesus? Christians and Muslims debating Muḥammad’s death
A PROPHET LIKE JESUS? CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS DEBATING MUḤAMMAD’S DEATH

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Scholars commonly accept that medieval Christian polemicists based much of their representation of Muhammad’s life on ignorance and misunderstanding, even willful distortion of the Muslim tradition. This has also become the standard interpretation of the legend of Muhammad’s death that circulated among the Christians of the Islamic world. This polemical story recounts Muhammad’s death and its immediate aftermath. It claims that Muhammad foretold that he would be resurrected three days after his death, yet while his followers delayed the burial in anticipation of his resurrection, his body started to exhibit signs of decay. As a scholar of medieval Latin Christendom asserts, in this legend “Muhammad’s death is described in a manner that has nothing to do with Muslim tradition.”

A careful examination of the Muslim tradition, however, suggests otherwise. The purpose of this paper is to show that, although the full story fundamentally differs from the classical Islamic narrative of the Prophet’s death, each of its motifs save one appears in Muslim literature. Often they occur independently but sometimes also in combination with each other, suggesting that Christians borrowed most of the narrative directly from the Islamic tradition. I therefore argue that, rather than being ignorant, some Christians had sufficiently deep knowledge of the Muslim tradition to make a sophisticated selection of hadīths that were suitable for their polemical purposes. The first part of the paper surveys and analyzes the surviving versions of the Christian legend, while the next two examine their Muslim sources. The fourth part attempts to trace the interrelationship of these narratives against the background of the polemical milieu of the eighth century.

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1Tolan, Saracens, p. 92. For more similar opinions about the legend, see below, p. 138, n. 25.
Muḥammad’s death according to the Christians

The oldest extant Christian texts containing the Christian legend of Muḥammad’s death date from the ninth century. Their authors lived in distant parts of the Islamic world, belonged to different Christian communities and spoke different languages. In the East, the narrative appears in the Syriac recensions of the Christian Bahrāʾ legend, a popular Christian counterhistory of the rise of Islam.\(^2\) The oldest version of the Christian Bahrāʾ legend was most probably written by a West-Syrian monk in Iraq in the 810s; the story of Muḥammad’s death occurs in two recensions, a West-Syrian and an East-Syrian. They should probably be dated to the middle of the ninth and to the tenth century, respectively.\(^3\) Another text, the Apology of al-Kindī, an Arabic polemical treatise against Islam, has a detailed biography of Muḥammad which includes the legend.\(^4\) Its author was probably an East-Syrian courtier of al-Maʾmūn (813–33), a Christian Arab belonging to the tribe of Kinda, and it seems that he wrote the Apology in the 820s in Baghdad.\(^5\) A

\(^2\)On the Christian Bahrāʾ legend, see Roggema, The legend of Sergius Bahrāʾ, pp. 11–208.

\(^3\)For the two versions, see ibid., pp. 302–303 (East-Syrian, Syriac and English text), pp. 334–335 (West-Syrian, Syriac and English). The two Arabic recensions omit the episode. The dating of the Christian Bahrāʾ legend to the reign of al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–33) is now generally accepted; see ibid., pp. 86–87. For an attempt to date the individual recensions more precisely, see Szilágyi, “Muḥammad and the monk,” p. 191. The story of Muḥammad’s death in the East-Syrian recension does not strictly belong to the Christian Bahrāʾ legend, since it is found in an appendix with a separate heading; therefore, its date is uncertain (see ibid., pp. 177–178, 192). Its proximity to the version in the West-Syrian recension (see below, pp. 133–134) nevertheless justifies the discussion of these two together.

\(^4\)About the Apology of al-Kindī, see Samir, “Apologie d’al-Kindī;” Koningsveld, “The Apology of Al-Kindī;” Landron, Attitudes nestoriennes, pp. 78–88. There is no critical edition of the text; the most readily available printing, based on two manuscripts, is Tien, Risāla; another one, based on four manuscripts, is Tartar, Dialogue islamo-chrétien. For the Apology’s discussion of Muḥammad’s death, see Tien, Risāla, pp. 109–110; and Tartar, Dialogue islamo-chrétien, pp. 92–93.

The Apology was translated into Latin in 1142. This translation sometimes reflects an earlier stage of the text than the published Arabic versions that are based on manuscripts copied in the seventeenth century or later. The Latin rendering of the story of Muḥammad’s death is, however, very similar to the Arabic text. For the relationship of the Latin and the Arabic texts, see Koningsveld, “The Apology of al-Kindī,” pp. 70–75; Samir, “Apologie d’al-Kindī,” pp. 48–74; for the most recent critical edition of the Latin translation, see González Muñoz, Exposición y refutación del Islam.

\(^5\)The dating and the authorship of the Apology are controversial (for a recent overview of the arguments for the various positions, see Samir, “Apologie d’al-Kindī,”
lesser-known text that contains the legend is the Qashun document. The Qashun document, although extant only in Armenian translation and first attested only in the thirteenth century, appears to preserve a Christian account on Muhammad’s life and the rise of Islam from the late eighth- or early ninth century Iraq. Its original language was probably Syriac or Arabic. The legend was known in Spain too. Eulogius of Córdoba (d. 859), learned priest, supporter of the Córdoban martyrs, and eventually one of them, included a brief Latin life of Muhammad, *Istoria de Mahomet*, in his *Liber apologeticus martyrum*. Eulogius remarks that he found the *Istoria* in the monastery of Leyre beside Pamplona, during his travels in Northern Spain in 849–50. The *Istoria* ends with the Christian legend of Muhammad’s death, its longest extant version. Finally, a note on Muhammad’s life, *Adnotatio de Mammet* that also mentions the story, appears in the letter of John of Seville, addressed to the Córdoban Paul Albar (d. ca. 861). John probably wrote the letter before 851.

The legend as given in the West-Syrian recension of the Christian Bahirä legend is a typical example of the shorter versions:

He [Ka’b al-Ahbär] said to them, “...There will be a sign to you: When Muhammad dies he will ascend to heaven like ‘Isa, son of Maryam, and will be resurrected after three days.”

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6 The Qashun document has been translated into English in Thomson, “Muhammad,” pp. 846–853; the story of Muhammad’s death is told on p. 850, to be read with notes y–z. On the dating and provenance of this text, see the Appendix, pp. 159–162.


8 Roggema, *The legend of Sergius Bahirä*, p. 335 (modified).
It happened that when Muhammad died his kinsmen assembled, embalmed him, and laid him in a house with great reverence. They sealed the door on him to see what would become of him.

Three days later they opened the door, but nobody could enter the house because of the stink of Muḥammad’s body. No one needs to investigate what happened to it.

The version of the story in the West-Syrian recension of the Christian Bahirā legend attributes the prophecy of Muḥammad’s resurrection from the dead to Ka’b al-ʿAḥbār. No other version does so. The East-Syrian recension of the Christian Bahirā legend leaves the prophecy’s origin unspecified, and the rest ascribe it to Muḥammad himself. Both the Syriac recensions of the Christian Bahirā legend and the Apology of al-Kindī speak of an expectation of ascension;9 the other Christian texts mention resurrection instead. The version of the Istoria, the most elaborate one, includes the unique detail that the Muslims expected “the angel Gabriel” (later in the text “angels”) to come and revive Muḥammad. The anticipated resurrection is explicitly compared to Christ’s story in all versions, with the exception of the two Latin texts. His followers secure Muḥammad’s corpse in a locked house in both Syriac recensions of the Christian Bahirā legend, and they lay it out in his garden in the Qashun document. The remaining versions do not specify a place. Guards watch over the body according to the two Latin versions; “disciples” do the same according to the Qashun document. In both Syriac recensions of the Christian Bahirā legend and the Apology of al-Kindī, the Muslims realize the futility of their expectation on the third day when they notice that the decomposition of the corpse had already started. In the other texts, their hopes come to an end when dogs devour the decaying cadaver. As we read it in the Istoria, “. . . dogs followed his stench and devoured his flank. Learning of the deed, they surrendered the rest of his body to the soil. And in vindication of this injury, they ordered dogs to be slaughtered every year. . . ”10 A yearly massacre of dogs was instituted also according to the Qashun document; it is, the text claims, observed “up to the present day.”

This comparison of motifs shows that the five early Christian versions of the legend fall into two subgroups. The first includes the versions that appear in the two Syriac recensions of the Christian Bahirā legend and in the Apology of al-Kindī; the former two being more closely related to

9 The resurrection, since it is referred to only after the ascension, appears to be secondary in the West-Syrian recension.
each other than to the latter. The second comprises the two Latin texts and the Qashun document. The former two of this group are also more similar to each other than to the latter.

The wide dissemination of the Christian story by the middle of the ninth century indicates an older origin. The texts of the second subgroup show roots earlier than the ninth century. But there is reason to believe that the legend circulated already in the first half of the eighth century. The Qashun document, although attested only in later Armenian versions, is likely to go back to a Syriac or Arabic text on the origins of Islam compiled in Iraq during the first decade of the ninth century at the latest. Its author probably relied on several written and oral sources of various ages and provenances, and one of his written sources might have been produced as early as the seventh century.\(^\text{11}\) It is not possible, however, to establish the origin of the individual parts of the text with certainty. The two Latin texts, the *Istoria* and the *Adnotatio*, are more helpful in this respect. Their comparison shows that both drew on the same Latin source written in Spain. Their Latin source, in turn, is probably based on an Eastern one. In view of the remarks of the *Istoria* and the *Adnotatio* related to Byzantium, the Eastern source seems to have been of Melkite provenance. Since the *Istoria* refers to Damascus as the capital of the Arabs, either its Spanish Latin source or the Melkite source of the latter was written before the end of the Umayyad caliphate. Also, the Spanish Latin source dates the appearance of Muhammad to the seventh year of the reign of Heraclius (610–41), similarly to the Hispanic chronicles of 741 and 754, which again points to its origin in the first half of the eighth century.\(^\text{12}\) We can thus conclude that the Christian story of Muhammad's death was, in all probability, known among Christians in the Near East during the first half of the eighth century.

In addition, Muslim authors occasionally quote a brief reference to the story from an Egyptian Christian in their discussions of the punishment of non-Muslims who commit the crime of slandering the Prophet. According to the earliest extant citation, in the *Shifā* of al-Qaḍī ‘Iyād,\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{11}\)See Appendix, pp. 159–162.


Ibn al-Qāsim said, “We asked Mālik [b. Anas] about a Christian in Egypt against whom there was testimony that he said, ‘Poor Mūḥammad! He is telling you that he is in Paradise [but] his wealth did not benefit his soul when dogs were eating (ta’kūlu) his legs. Had he been killed, the people would have found rest from him.’ Mālik answered, ‘I think he should be executed.’”

In response to further inquiry from Ibn al-Qāsim, whether the corpse of the executed Copt should be burned, Mālik agreed that it should, and the sentence, al-Qādī ‘Iyāḍ continues to quote his source, was carried out.

Several Mālikī works cite the story in full, and sometimes they name their source as the Shifā’. Many curtail it, giving only the Copt’s words and Mālik’s decision, in a long series of non-Muslim slanders of the Prophet and their recommended punishment, collected for the edification of future generations. With two exceptions, their authors display no knowledge of the incident apart from what could be gleaned from the Shifā’.

The first of the two exceptions, al-Wansharīṣī perhaps used a different source, but gives no further indication of the participants or information about the circumstances. The second, Ibn Hājar al-Asqalānī gives a better version of the Copt’s outburst than al-Qādī ‘Iyāḍ, and identifies his source as al-Ḥārith b. Miskūn, a ninth-century Mālikī qādī of Egypt (d. 250/864) who in turn quotes it from Ibn al-Qāsim, his teacher. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim (d. 191/806) was the most prominent disciple of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), studied with him for twenty years in Medina, then settled in Egypt and died there. Ibn Hājar furthermore identifies the qādī who carried out the punishment as al-Muḥammad b. Faḍā’ila (d. 181/797), a contemporary of Mālik. It is possible that all these three quotations go back to a single earlier source, but the reference to several contemporary locals in the last version ascertains that the incident indeed took place in the second half of the eighth century in Egypt. It thus constitutes the only datable attestation of the story before the ninth century, when it first appears in Christian sources, and the only one in Egypt.

A Mālikī judge would hardly have invented this lurid story. At the same time, the similarity of the quotations of

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14See, for example, Qarā𝑓ī, Dhakhīra, vol. 12, p. 20; Șālīhī, Subūl al-hudā, vol. 12, p. 34; Ḥāshiyyat al-Dasūqī, vol. 2, p. 205.
17I did not find it in the relevant sections of the Mudawwana.
this incident and the lack of remarks by any later Muslim scholar makes it clear that the Christian story was unknown among medieval Muslims.

By contrast, the legend did not lose its popularity among Christians after the ninth century. Sundry versions of it are known from European Latin lives of Muhammad, especially from texts written from the twelfth century onwards, when European settlement in the Outremer accelerated the flow of Oriental Christian legends about Muhammad and the rise of Islam to Europe. In them, Muhammad’s end becomes ever more ghastly; in many versions, his corpse is devoured by pigs instead of dogs, and in some, he dies torn apart by pigs.18

Although no anti-Islamic polemical writings produced by Christians living in the central Islamic lands after the ninth century included the story (the two later Arabic translations of the Christian Bahirah legend tacitly omitted it) we can be fairly certain that it remained part of the Oriental Christian oral tradition. First, a distant but recognizable variant of the legend, which appears in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, a Christian Arabic text that probably originated in late ninth-century Syria or Mesopotamia in the Syriac tradition, is also attested in the Judaeo-Arabic commentary that Yefet ben ‘Eli, a Karaite Jew who lived in Palestine in the late tenth century, wrote on the book of Isaiah.19 “Peter, verily I say to you that after the death of the Son of Perdition I will send the loathsome beast to him to dig him out from his grave and devour his flesh,” said Jesus to Peter according to the *Apocalypse of Peter*.20 In Yefet’s commentary we read, “They removed him from his grave, and the lions ate him. Nothing remained from him save his heel. They took it and buried it, and said, ‘This is the grave of the man of the spirit’.”21 The most probable explanation of this similarity is that the legend was part of both Christian and Jewish lore about the rise


21 Vajda, “Un vestige oriental,” p. 178. Yefet’s commentary on Isaiah remains unedited; the passage in question (part of his exegesis of Isaiah 14:19) is transcribed ibid., p. 178, n. 5. For the “man of the spirit,” see Hosea 9:7 (ibid., p. 178, n. 4). Although Yefet wrote his commentary in Judaeo-Arabic, most of this passage is in Hebrew, probably out of cautiousness.
of Islam in the medieval Islamic milieu. Second, from the twelfth century onward, some authors of European Latin lives of Muḥammad who included the legend in their works refer to Oriental Christians as their informants on Muḥammad’s life. Second, from the twelfth century onward, some authors of European Latin lives of Muḥammad who included the legend in their works refer to Oriental Christians as their informants on Muḥammad’s life.22 Third, modifications of the narrative in late manuscripts of the ninth century Christian works exhibit variants that attest to the copyists’ familiarity with the story independently of their Vorlage.23

Whichever version one is acquainted with, the failed-resurrection legend at first sight seems but a malicious slander invented by Christians. Most writings that contain it are polemical, their tone often acrid and scathing. It reads as the inversion of the Christian story of Christ’s resurrection. The legend appears to have been assembled from literary topos, suitable for the polemical purposes of the Christian authors. It comes as no surprise that all scholars discussing the story have dismissed it in its entirety as a malignant Christian fantasy.24

However preposterous the Christian legend of Muḥammad’s death appears, the Christians did not invent it: they borrowed almost all of its motifs from the early Islamic tradition. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss each motif separately, and show that three out of four25 of them were known among Muslims in the middle of the eighth century, the probable terminus ad quem of the formation of the Christian narrative.

22For example, Adelphus (see Tolan, Saracens, pp. 138, 142). Note also Gautier de Compiègne’s ultimate source, the “Saracen convert to Christianity” (ibid.). These versions of the legend are, as mentioned above, often at variance with those known from the ninth-century Middle East, and it cannot be ascertained which motifs originated among Oriental Christians, and which among Europeans. Beginning with the Crusades, the European Latin versions exercised their own influence in the Middle East, which further complicates the question of sources. For example, see the twelfth- or thirteenth century Armenian abridgement of a Latin text (“Extrait de l’Histoire des Latins”) in Macler, “Un document arménien,” pp. 287–295.

23One of the five manuscripts used for the edition of the West-Syrian recension of the Christian Bahirā legend (Mingana Syr. 71; undated) exhibits several significant variant readings. For instance, the copyist inserts that guards were placed by Muḥammad’s corpse (see Roggema, The legend of Sergius Bahirā, p. 334, n. 32); a detail unattested in any other version of the Christian Bahirā legend, but familiar from the Istitoria and the Adnotatio. Mżitʿar of Ani (see Appendix, pp. 159–162) might also have known the legend independently from his source. The Qashun document blames “the drowsy disciples” for the dogs’ defilement of the corpse; Mżitʿar charges “the guards” instead. Guards are never mentioned in the Qashun document (see Thomson, “Muḥammad,” p. 850).


25The four motifs are the following: (1) Muḥammad’s resurrection and ascension to heaven after his death, (2) the three-day delay in his burial, (3) the putrefaction of his corpse, (4) the dogs’ mauling of his corpse.
I will begin with discussing hadiths about Muḥammad’s resurrection and ascension to heaven after his death, continue with the debate among early Muslims about the time elapsed between Muhammad’s death and burial as well as the state of his corpse by the time of his burial. Of the four motifs of the Christian legend, only the dogs’ mauling of Muhammad’s corpse appears to be unattested in the early Muslim tradition.

Muḥammad’s ascension after his death in the Islamic tradition

Regarding the first motif of the story, Muhammad’s foretelling of his own resurrection, it is beyond doubt that the Christian polemicists borrowed it from the Muslim tradition. A comparison of two texts will show this. The first is Christian: “Furthermore, even more hideous and revolting than this was that he (Muḥammad) used to say to them in his life and commend to them that when he died they should not bury him because he would ascend to heaven as Christ, Lord of the World, ascended, and that he is so precious to God that He would not leave him on the earth for more than three days (wa-annahu akramu `alā Allāhi min an yatrukahu ‘alā ‘l-ardī akthara min thalāthī ayyāmin),” begins the story in the Apology of al-Kindī. The second text is Muslim: “I am so precious to God that He will not leave me in the earth after three (days) (anā akramu ‘alā Allāhi min an yatrukānī fi ‘l-ardī ba’da thalāthī),” said Muhammad according to a rare hadith. Although the Christian and the Muslim traditions differ in the time of the anticipated, the former putting it before the burial (“on the earth”), and the latter after it (“in the earth”), such a close correspondence in both content and wording can hardly be accidental. The author of the Apology clearly refers to a version of this hadith.

It would be interesting to trace the transmission history of the hadith in order to learn when and where it circulated, and thus to gain a better understanding of its reception by both Christian and Muslim communities.
understanding of its relationship with the *Apology*, but I was unable to recover it. The *ḥadīth* is attested only in a few relatively late writings; none of them quotes it with *isnād*. The oldest surviving works which mention it were written by the Imāmī Shiʿī al-Karajī (d. 449/1057), and two Sunnis, ‘Abd al-Malik al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).28 Al-Juwaynī ascribes it to Abū ‘Ali al-Sinjī, a scholar of the previous generation,29 and says that it was related also with the phrase “more than two days (*akthara min yawmayni*)” (see previous note). Al-Rāfiʿī (d. 623/1226) also cites the *ḥadīth* in his *al-Sharḥ al-kabīr*.30 The authors of later compilations about the traditions in *al-Sharḥ al-kabīr*, al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), Ibn al-Mulaqqin (d. 804/1401) and Ibn Hajar (d. 852/1449), unsuccessfully tried to trace its *isnād*.31 They could only refer to the *ḥadīth* in older works; the earliest scholar named in this connection is al-Azraqī, possibly ʿAbd al-Muhammad b. Ṭalha b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Abd Allāh b. Ṭalha b. ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Abū Ṭalha b. ʿAbd al-Rahmān Ibn Ṭalḥa bi-r-Riḥāna, d. 148/765–6, see al-Suyūṭī, *al-Laʾāli al-masnūʿa*, vol. 1, p. 285. Ibn al-Mulaqqin refers, without name, to a fourteenth century author of a work on the prophets’ lives in their graves as mentioning the *ḥadīth*, also without an *isnād* (*wa-dhakarahu baʿda man adraḥkahu... fa-łam يَا zūhū*); see al-Badr al-munṣir, vol. 5, p. 283. Even later authors, such as al-Suyūṭī or al-Zurqānī, refer to the *ḥadīth*, but they merely reiterate what the earlier ones said.32 All we can conclude from the information they give is that the tradition once circulated in at least two versions, and was possibly known in the early ninth century.33

There are further *ḥadīths* (I will call them “ascension traditions”) that corroborate an early Muslim belief in Muḥammad’s ascension to...
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They clearly express the same belief as the anā akramu tradition, but differ in significant details. All of them refer to the ascension of prophets in general to heaven, not specifically to Muhammad’s. It is, however, likely that early Muslims created and circulated these hadiths out of interest in Muhammad’s, and not an earlier prophet’s, postmortem fate. On the one hand, the contexts in which some of the ascension traditions are quoted directly connect them to Muhammad’s destiny; on the other hand, many other hadiths that make general statements about prophets clearly intend to say something primarily about Muhammad. Also, their wording shows less resemblance to the Christian texts. Not all of them speak about ascension to heaven three days after death: according to some of them, the ascension took place forty days (one variant does not specify the time the prophets remain in the grave). Instead of having Muhammad speak in first person, they are ascribed to later generations of Muslims. But the ascension traditions are somewhat better documented than the anā akramu tradition, insofar as they are at least quoted with isnāds. Although all except one are attested with a single isnād which limits the extent to which their transmission history can be reconstructed, some of it can be traced with certainty.

“It is well-known,” says Ibn al-Mulaqqin in his discussion of the anā akramu tradition in al-Badr al-munir, “that the wall of the Prophet’s tomb collapsed during the caliphate of al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān and the governorship of ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz over Medina, [and] a foot appeared to them. They dreaded that it might be the foot of the Messenger of God. Its matter appalled them, and they were overcome with fear, until Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyab related to them, ‘The corpses of the prophets, may God bless them, do not remain in the earth more than forty days, then they ascend.’ Sālim b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al-Khattāb also came, and recognized in it the foot of his grandfather, ‘Umar.’ As far as I know, this is the only version of the story about Muhammad’s collapsed tomb that interweaves an ascension tradition,

34Compare, for example, the following hadiths, “Each and every prophet tended sheep (mā min nabiyyin illā qad ra‘ā ‘l-ghanama),” “No prophet dies until he is given the choice (between this world and the hereafter) (mā min nabiyyin yamātri hattā yakhbarrarna),” and “No prophet is buried except where he dies (mā tawaffā Allāhu nabīyyan qaṭtū illā dufina ṣaḥība taqbaṣu rūḥu) in Ibn Sa‘d, Ṭabaqāt, vol. 1/1, pp. 79–80; vol. 2/2, pp. 28, and 71.

and it is clearly a composite of the two different stories. It is not the only version of ascension traditions connected to Muḥammad’s presence in his grave, however. Two further variants are attributed to Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab who utters them, disapprovingly, when he observes people visiting Muḥammad’s tomb. “Prophets possessing fortitude do not stay [in the earth] beyond forty days before they ascend [to heaven]; the Prophet of God did not stay in the earth longer than forty days before he ascended,” said Saʿīd according to one of these. “No prophet remains in the earth for more than forty days,” he said according to the other. A very similar variant of the last one appears, without connection to Muḥammad’s grave or the pilgrimage to it, in al-Bayhaqī’s (d. 458/1066) Kitāb mā warada fi ḥayāt al-anbiya’ ba’d waḥḍatihim. All four versions are associated with Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab, the famous Medinan scholar of the late seventh and early eighth century.

If we trusted the attribution of these sayings to Saʿīd, possibly their only common link, we could conclude with certainty that in the late seventh or early eighth century some Muslims, at least in Medina, believed that Muḥammad had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. We should not, however, rush to ascribe this opinion to Saʿīd, since elsewhere he is said to have been holding that Muḥammad lives not
in heaven, but in his grave.\footnote{\textit{It is related that Sa'îd b. al-Musayyab heard the \textit{adhîn}, or the noise of somebody praying, or mumbling (\textit{hamhama}) inside Muhammads's tomb during the battle of \textit{Harrâ} (63/683); see Dârimî, \textit{Sunan}, vol. 1, pp 227–228; Abû Nu'aym, \textit{Dalâ'il al-mubawwan}, p. 496; Ibn Sa'îd, \textit{Tabaqât}, vol. 5, pp. 97–98.} Even if the attribution of the ascension \textit{hâdîth\textit{s}} to Sa'îd is apocryphal, their circulation can still be dated as early as the mid-eighth century because al-Bayhaqi says that his version was included in the \textit{Jâmî\textit'} of Sufyân al-Thawrî (d. 161/778).\footnote{\textit{On him, see \textquoteright\textit{Sufyân al-Thawrî},\textemdash\textit{EI} 2, s.v.}} Whichever of Sufyân’s \textit{Jâmî\textit{'s}} of al-Bayhaqi meant (he wrote a large and a small one), it is lost today, but there is no reason to doubt al-Bayhaqi’s statement. As Sufyân al-Thawrî was a Kûfan scholar, the \textit{hâdîth} must have circulated in Kûfa. Its association with the town is strengthened by the two traditionists mentioned in the \textit{isnâd} of other versions as transmitting from Sa'îd b. al-Musayyab, Abû l-Miqdâm and al-Minhâl b. ‘Amr. Both of them were Kûfans.\footnote{\textit{For Ibn Abî Laylâ see above, note 32; for Thâbit b. Aslam al-Bunâî, Abû Muhammads’s servant, who later settled in Başra, the second Thâbit al-Bunâî (Basran, d. 120s/740s), and the third Ibn Abî Laylâ (Kûfan, d. 148/765–6). Since this is the only known \textit{isnâd} of the tradition, its origins cannot be identified with any certainty. Still, Ibn Abî Laylâ belonged to the same generation.}}

As we saw, the earliest transmitter mentioned in connection with these four ascension traditions is Sa'îd b. al-Musayyab, a Successor although their attribution to him is dubious. I found only one Sunni \textit{hâdîth} expressing the same idea with a fuller \textit{isnâd}. “The prophets are not left in their graves after forty nights, but are praying before God, may He be exalted and glorified, until the horn is blown,” said Muhammad according to a tradition quoted in al-Bayhaqi’s tract.\footnote{\textit{On Abû l-Miqdâm al-Hâdîd, Thâbit b. Hurmuz, Kûfan as Sufyân (dates unknown), and on al-Minhâl b. Amr al-Asadî, also a Kûfan (dates are also unknown), see Mizzi, \textit{Tâbqât al-kâmâl}, vol. 4, pp. 380–381, and vol. 28, pp. 568–572.} Its first transmitter is said to have been Anas b. Mâlik, Muhammads’s servant, who later settled in Başra, the second Thâbit al-Bunâî (Basran, d. 120s/740s), and the third Ibn Abî Laylâ (Kûfan, d. 148/765–6).\footnote{\textit{For Ibn Abî Laylâ see above, note 32; for Thâbit b. Aslam al-Bunâî, Abû Muhammads’s servant, see Mizzi, \textit{Tâbqât al-kâmâl}, vol. 4, pp. 342–349. The identity of the fourth transmitter, Ismâ’îl b. ‘Abî Yazed, might also be relevant, but I was unable to identify him.}} Since this is the only known \textit{isnâd} of the tradition,\footnote{\textit{The only author who may have given the \textit{hâdîth} independently from al-Bayhaqi is al-Daylâmî (see \textit{Firdaws}, vol. 1, p. 222), but he ascribes it only to Anas b. Mâlik, omitting the full \textit{isnâd}. Later authors always quote the \textit{hâdîth} from al-Bayhaqi.}} its origins cannot be identified with any certainty.\footnote{\textit{Another similar tradition, “No prophet dies and remains in his tomb except for forty days (\textit{mâ mun nabûyin yamûtu fa-yawqimu fi qabrissi sâla arba’ina sabîkhun),” is attested in a tenth-century and in an eleventh-century work, but the latter adds, “until his spirit is returned to him (\textit{hatta yuradda ila’ha rûhu),” fundamentally changing the meaning. Since the early transmitters in the \textit{isnâd} are identical in both}}
of Kūfan scholars as Sufyān al-Thawrī which supports the link of the ascension traditions to eighth century Kūfa.

Since only four additional ascension traditions are attested, two Sunnī and two Imāmī Shāīṭāʾī ones, it is worth quoting all of them here. One of them is connected to Kūfa, similarly to the previously cited ones, while the transmission history of the rest cannot be reconstructed. One of the two Sunnī ascension traditions is a variant of Anas b. Mālik’s ḥadīth, which extends the privilege of early ascension to heaven to more groups of people and leaves the number of days to be spent in the grave unspecified. It is quoted in Daylamī’s Firdaws: “Ten [groups of people] are not left in their graves, but are praying before God, may He be exalted and glorified, until the horn is blown: the prophets, the martyrs, those who call to prayer, those who obey [the call to prayer], the one who dies on the way to Mecca, the woman who dies in childbirth, those who repent their sins, the one who serves the Muslims in obedience to God, may He be exalted and glorified, and those who have mercy over the poor of my community.”

Its transmission history cannot be reconstructed. The other Sunnī saying, “God does not leave a prophet in his grave for more than half a day” was cited by the Hanbali Abū ‘l-Ḥasan Ibn al-Zāghūnī (d. 527/1132), but I was unable to trace further information about it. Al-Shawkānī (d. 1255/1839) might have been familiar with other variants of the ascension traditions too; he refers to them in one of his works, and his wording is different from other authors. Perhaps further Sunnī traditions of this cases, it is impossible to decide which version is the original. For this ḥadīth, see Abū Nuʿaym, Ḥiṣaṣat al-aʿwālīyaʿ (with typographical errors), vol. 8, p. 333; and Ibn Hibbān, Kitāb al-majrūḥān, vol. 1, p. 285.


49The ḥadīth is ascribed to ‘Abd Allāh b. Jaʿfar (b. Abī Tālib); according to the footnote, another manuscript attributes it to ‘Abd al-Ḥaṁbān b. Jaʿfar (ibid.). None of this helps to trace the origins of the tradition.

50So it is said in Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥaḏī, al-Ṣārin al-munkī, p. 273, and in Suṣūṭī, al-Laʿātī al-muṣnīʿī a, vol 1, p. 285 (‘inna Allāha lā yatraku nabiyyan fī qabrīhi akhārā min niṣīḥ yuṣallīnī). Ibn al-Zāghūnī’s ʿĪdāb (apparently his only work published so far) does not contain the tradition.

51Al-Shawkānī, Naṣīṣ al-aʿwāṭīr, vol. 5, p. 178 (“...it has come down that the prophets are not left in their graves beyond three [days], and it was also related [that] beyond forty [days]” (qad warada anna l-‘anbiyāʿa lā yutrakūna fī qubīrīhim fawqā thalāṯan wa-rwaṣyā fawqā arbaʿīna). Only al-Samhūdī quotes an ascension tradition with fawqā arbaʿīna instead of the usual baʿda arbaʿīna (see above); the
kind also circulated once, but were subsequently forgotten.

An Imāmī Shīʿī hadīth, “No prophet or legatee remains in the earth for more than three days before he ascends to heaven in his spirit, his bones and his flesh,” ascribed to the sixth imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), appears in four late ninth- and tenth-century writings, with identical isnāds. The two earliest transmitters, Ziyād b. Abī ‘l-Halāl and ‘Alī b. al-Hakam, were both Kūfans, providing further support for the circulation of the hadīth in Kūfa in the late eighth and early ninth century. Another Imāmī Shīʿī hadīth, also attributed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, claims that “the corpse of a prophet or of a prophet’s legatee does not remain in the earth for more than forty days.” The information I found about its early transmitters is insufficient and cannot support any conclusions about its circulation.

Although only a small corpus, the ascension traditions indicate a belief in Muhammad’s ascension to heaven after his death in some circles in pre-classical Islam. The isnāds point to Kūfa as a place where this belief might have been more widely accepted than elsewhere, but the available information is too scarce to associate it exclusively with this town. The bulk of all recorded Islamic traditions are of Kūfan, Basrān and Medinan provenance. Therefore, while the isnād pattern of the ascension traditions might be understood as evidence that the belief in Muhammad’s ascension to heaven was held by more Muslims in Kūfa than in Basra or in Medina, it does not say anything about its diffusion in other regions of the Islamic world. The dating of the ascension traditions is similarly problematic. On the basis of the isnāds, we can be fairly certain that such a belief was held already in the middle of the eighth century, but it is hardly possible to trace when it first appeared, or how
long it continued to be accepted, and just how popular it was at any time. With so many eighth-century works lost today, it could have been more widespread than it now seems to us.\(^{55}\)

The ideas expressed in the ascension traditions resemble the Christian stories about Muhammad’s expected resurrection and ascension to heaven. The anā¯ akramu tradition was directly quoted by the author of the Apology of al-Kindī. There is, however, a crucial difference: according to the Islamic traditions the resurrection and the ascension were supposed to happen and did indeed happen after burial, while according to the Christian stories they were meant to take place without burial, and eventually failed to do so. Were it for only the ascension traditions it could be argued that the Christian legend of Muhammad’s death originated as the rejection of the eighth-century Muslim belief. There circulated, however, further hadīths that the Christians drew on when constructing their account of Muhammad’s death.

Muhammad’s belated burial in the Islamic tradition

According to Ibn Hishūm, Muhammad died in the late morning of a Monday in Rabī’ al-Awwal, and was buried “in the middle of the night of Wednesday,”\(^{56}\) that is, on Tuesday night, according to our reckoning of time. Islamic tradition, both Sunnī and Imāmī Shi‘ī, agrees about the day of Muhammad’s death, but is divided over the day of his burial. Some Sunnī hadīths claim that Muhammad was interred yawma ‘l-thulāthā (between the sunsets of Monday and Tuesday), while other Sunnī and apparently all Shi‘ī hadīths maintain that it happened yawma ‘l-arbi’ā (between the sunsets of Tuesday and Wednesday).\(^{57}\) There

\(^{55}\)The terror that seized ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz when he thought that he saw Muhammad’s foot behind the collapsed wall of his grave might also be related to this belief. Even though only one version connects Muhammad’s ascension to the story, the question remains as to why would ‘Umar be awed to see Muhammad’s foot, but calm down when told it is ‘Umar’s, unless the former was not supposed to be in the grave at all.

\(^{56}\)Ibn Hishām, al-Sīra al-nabawiyā, vol. 1/2, pp. 1009–1011, 1020 (waṣaṭa ‘l-kaqil laylata ‘l-arbi’ā or jawfa ‘l-kaqil min laylati ‘l-arbi’ā’).

\(^{57}\)See the remarks of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr to this effect (Ṭabarī, Taʿrīkh, vol. 1/4, pp. 1815, 1830; Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa-l-nahāya, vol. 5, pp. 193, 206); and the lists of traditions in Ibn Sa`d, Taḥaqqāt, vol. 2/2, pp. 57–59, 78–79; Tabarī, Taʿrīkh, vol. 1/4, pp. 1831–1832, 1832–1833, 1837 (two hadīths); and Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa-l-nahāya, vol. 5, pp. 193–194, 205–206. The section of Maǧlis, Biḥār al-awwār on Muhammad’s death (vol. 22, pp. 503–549), on the other hand, only quotes traditions that refer to yawma l-arbi’ā’ as the day of burial, and mentions one tradition that places the death on a Friday (ibid., p. 521).
circulated at least one tradition placing Muḥammad’s burial *yawma 'l-khamis* (between the sunsets of Wednesday and Thursday).\(^{58}\) Traditions further vary with regard to the time of the day when Muḥammad was interred.

The first two opinions are both attested in the middle of the eighth century; although the *yawma 'l-arbiʿā* tradition seems to have gained wider currency by that time, the other one was also known.\(^{59}\) Muḥammad b. Iṣḥāq (d. ca. 150/767) is a firmly supported common link in the *isnāds* of the *yawma 'l-arbiʿā* tradition; several traditionists transmitted it from him.\(^{59}\) An older common link, Makhūl al-Šāmī (d. 112–8/730–7), supported by two transmitters from him, makes it likely that the *yawma 'l-arbiʿā* tradition circulated in Syria already in the first decades of the eighth century or earlier.\(^{61}\) I did not find a similarly old common link for the *yawma 'l-thulāthā* tradition, but it cannot be excluded that it was disseminated just as early as its rival. I could not trace the origins of the *yawma 'l-khamis* tradition.

A small group of Iraqi traditions claiming that Muḥammad was interred only when the decomposition of his corpse became visible appears to correspond to a later day of burial. According to a Kūfī *ḥadīth*, by the time Muḥammad’s body was committed to earth, its color had changed.\(^{62}\) According to another Kūfī tradition, Muḥammad

\(^{58}\) Al-Diyārbakrī, the only biographer of Muḥammad who mentions the tradition, quotes it from the *Tafsīr al-Zāhidī* and the *Kanz al-ībād*, two thirteenth century works (see Diyārbakrī, *Ṭurṭūkh al-khamis*, vol. 2, pp. 172), if indeed the author of the first is Mūkhtar b. Māhmūd al-Ghazmūnī al-Zāhidī (d. 658/1259–60). I did not find any *tafsīr* attributed to him.

\(^{59}\) See the remarks of Ibn Khaṭīr, *al-Bidāya wa-'l-nihāya*, vol. 5, pp. 205–206. In addition to Ibn Iṣḥāq, he refers to Sulaymān al-Ta’īmī, Ja’far al-Ṣādiq and Mūsā b. ‘Uqba by name as deciding for *yawma 'l-arbiʿā*, and mentions al-Awzā’ī and Sūfīyān al-Thawrī as holding the other opinion.

\(^{60}\) Most versions mention Ibn Iṣḥāq as their transmitter. For these, see Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawīyya*, vol. 1/2, p. 1020; Balādhurī, *Anṣāb al-ashrāf* (1), vol. 1, pp. 657, 661–662; Taḥṣīl, *Ṭurṭūkh*, vol. 1/4, pp. 1832–1833, 1837; and elsewhere.\(^{59}\)

\(^{61}\) Abū Allāh Makhūl al-Šāmī, a Damascene transmitter who died three or four decades earlier than Ibn Iṣḥāq (ca. 112–8/730–7). Ibn Khaṭīr and al-Balādhurī give two *yawma 'l-arbiʿā* traditions. Makhūl is their oldest transmitter and their only common link. For the first tradition, see above, n. 57; for the second, Balādhurī, *Anṣāb al-ashrāf* (1), vol. 1, p. 657; on Makhūl, see Mizzū, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 28, pp. 464–475.

\(^{62}\) See Balādhurī, *Anṣāb al-ashrāf* (2), vol. 1, p. 568 (*da’ifina yawma 'l-thulāthā*’ī bīna zāyha μ al-šamāwu wa-laghayyara lānawku). This tradition is ascribed to the Kūfī Abū Mīkhāl (d. 154/774); on him, see “Abū Mīkhāl,” *EI*², s.v. Not all editions of *Anṣāb al-ashrāf* contain the last phrase. In the one published in Damascus in 1996, the words are missing from the main text, and the editor explains in the footnote that the phrase is effaced in the manuscript “because nobody transmitted that” (see Balādhurī, *Anṣāb al-ashrāf* [1], vol. 1, p. 657, n. 4).
was interred only when “death was apparent on him,” and his fingers turned greenish. Still another Kūfān tradition claims that by the time of Muhammad’s burial his corpse was bloated and his little finger bent. A Basrān ḥadīth similarly mentions the commencement of bloating before burial. Finally, a Kūfān ḥadīth begins as follows, “when the Prophet died, Abū Bakr was absent, and he came after three (days). No one dared to uncover his face until his abdomen became ashen-colored. Abū Bakr uncovered his face...”


64 See Ibn Sa’d, Taḥqīq, vol. 2/2, pp. 58–59. (Turska rasūlu Allāhā ba’da waftāthi yawman wa-laylatan hattā rabā qamūšuha wa-rū’iṣa fi khnāsirīrhi mishinā). The transmitters are ʿAbd Allāh al-Bāḥi, ṯawelā of Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr (no dates or places are known for the Bahi, but Muṣ‘ab, the governor of Iraq, died in 72/691); Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ismā‘il b. Abī Khālid al-Ḍabjālī al-Ḥāmasī (Kūfān, d. ca. 145–6/762–4); and Abū Sufyān Wākī b. al-Jarrāḥ b. Mālīḥ al-Ru’asī (Kūfān, originally from Persia or Sogdia, d. ca. 196–7/811–3). For the three transmitters, see Mizzī, Tahdīb al-kamāl, vol. 16, pp. 341–342; vol. 3, pp. 69–76; and vol. 30, pp. 462–484; for Wākī, see also “Wākī” b. al-Djarrā, EI², s. v.; on Muṣ‘ab, see “Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr,” EI², s. v.


66 See Taḥqīq, Ta’rīṣh, vol. 1/4, p. 1817. (Laṃma qubīda al-nabīyyu kānā Abī Bakrīn ghā‘išan fa-jā‘a bi-ba’da thalāthi wajhihi wajhihi hattā rabā bāṭuθu...). The transmitters are al-Ḥasan al-Ḍaṣṣār (d. 710/1318); Abū Sahl Awf b. Abī Jamila al-Ḍabjālī al-Ḥāmasī (Kūfān, d. 787/1385); Abū Nāṣr ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḍabjālī b. ʿAṭi‘ al-Khāfīḥ al-Īlī (Baṣra, originally from Persia or Sogdia, d. 206/822). For the first, see “al-Ḥasan al-Ḍaṣṣār,” EI², s. v.; for the latter two, see Mizzī, Tahdīb al-kamāl, vol. 22, pp. 437–441; and vol. 18, pp. 509–516.

67 See Taḥqīq, Ta’rīṣh, vol. 1/4, p. 1817. (Laṃma qubīda al-nabīyyu kānā Abī Bakrīn ghā‘išan fa-jā‘a bi-ba’da thalāthi wa-lam yajtari hattā rabā bāθuθu...). I am not sure why The history of al-Taḥqīq (vol. 9, p. 185) translates baθuθ as “exterior,” and interprets ba’da thalāth as referring to hours. In view of the context and the ḥadīths quoted above, it seems more likely that the expression refers to days. See also Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd who had no doubt that al-Taḥqīq’s ba’da thalāth here means “after three days” (see Sharḥ, vol. 13, pp. 35–37). The transmitters are ʿĪrāḥīm al-Nakha‘ī (Kūfān, d. ca. 96/714–5); a certain Abū Ayyūb; Abū Ma‘ṣhar Ziyādī b. Kulayb al-Ṭamīmī al-Ḥanẓāli (Kūfān, d. 110/728–9 or 119/737); Abū Hishām al-Ḍabjālī al-Ḥāmasī (Kūfān, d. ca. 132–6/749–54); Abū ‘Abd Allāh Jābir b. Abī al-Ḥanẓāli al-Dabjālī al-Ḥāmasī (originally from the region of Isfahān, grew up in Kūfā, then settled around Rayy; d. 188/804); and Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Abī Ṣayd al-Ṭamīmī al-Ḥāmasī (d. 248/862–3). For the first transmitter, see “ʿĪrāḥīm al-Nakha‘ī,” EI², s. v.; for the rest, see Mizzī, Tahdīb al-kamāl, vol. 9, p. 504–506; vol. 28, pp. 397–403; vol. 4, pp. 540–551; and vol. 25, pp. 97–108. I was unable to identify Abū Ayyūb.
The oldest transmitter named in the *isnāds* of the foregoing traditions is ‘Abd Allāh al-Bahī who probably died in the late seventh or the early eighth century. The earliest transmitters mentioned in three others died in the early eighth century: Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī (d. ca. 96/714–5), al-Qāsim b. Mūhammad (a grandson of Abū Bakr; d. ca. 101–12/719–31), and al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). The fifth tradition is ascribed solely to Abū Mikhnaf (d. 154/774). That none of the *isnāds* goes back to a supposed eyewitness is trust-inspiring. The earliest traditionists mentioned, or at least most of them, probably indeed transmitted these hadīths, thus indicating a circulation of these narratives in Iraq by the beginning of the eighth century or earlier.

The contents of these Islamic traditions resemble the Christian legend of Mūḥammad’s death. Both mention that Mūḥammad’s burial took place on the third day following his death, and that during this time his followers were anxiously waiting for something to happen. Both claim that when Mūḥammad was finally interred, his body was in the process of decomposition. The Christian legend therefore did not invent, but borrowed from an Islamic narrative of Mūḥammad’s death, both the outline of events (the delayed burial and the putrefied corpse) and part of the explanation for it (from the *ana akramu* tradition). These hadīths, however, each contain only one motif of the Christian narrative. Another Islamic tradition, a version of the story about ‘Umar’s denial of Mūḥammad’s death, presupposes a conjunction of several elements that also occur in the Christian legend.

After Mūḥammad’s death, says Ibn Hishām, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb addressed the Muslims and denied Mūḥammad’s death. He accused of hypocrisies those who claimed that Mūḥammad died, and threatened them with severe punishment after Mūḥammad would return. He compared the situation to the story of Exodus 32, and asserted that Mūḥammad “has gone to his Lord as Mūsā b. ‘Imrān went and was hidden from his people for forty days, returning to them after it was said that

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67 See above, n. 64.
68 For the traditionists, see above, nn. 62–63, 65–66.
69 Al-Taḥārī, when summarizing the two opinions about the day of Mūḥammad’s burial, contrasts the view that he was buried *yawma ‘l-thulāṭa* with the one that “he was buried three days after his death (ṣufna ba’da waṣafātihi bī-thalāṭhati ayyāmin),” clearly referring to the *yawma ‘l-arbi* tradition (*Ta’rīkh*, vol. 1/4, p. 1830). Al-Fasawi also quotes a tradition according to which Mūḥammad “remained for three days without burial (makatha thalāṭhatu ayyāmin lā yudfanu)” (*al-Ma‘rifa wa-l-ta’rīkh*, vol. 3, pp. 289–290). Some did not agree with calculating the period from *yawma ‘l-ithnayn* to *yawma ‘l-arbi* as three days. Ibn Kathīr rejected this part of the tradition with indignation, adding that the right expression is that “he remained [unburied] for the rest of *yawma ‘l-ithnayn*, the entire *yawma ‘l-thulāṭa*, and was buried on the night of *yawma ‘l-arbi*.”
he had died. By God, the apostle will return as Moses returned…” While ‘Umar was speaking, Abū Bakr arrived and immediately proceeded to the house of ‘Ā’ishah to ascertain Muḥammad’s death. He then tried to draw ‘Umar aside, but the latter would not listen to him. Abū Bakr nevertheless commenced his own speech. The Muslims, says Ibn Hishām, immediately came to listen to him, “People! If anyone worshiped Muḥammad, Muḥammad is dead; if anyone worshiped God, God is alive, does not die.” He then recited a passage from the Qurʾān, “Muḥammad is naught but a Messenger; Messengers have passed away before him. Why, if he should die or is slain, will you turn about on your heels? If any man should turn about on his heels, he will not harm God in any way; and God will recompense the thankful.”70 According to Ibn Hishām, the Muslims reacted as if they had never before heard this passage.71

Several versions of the ‘Umar story appear in biographies of Muḥammad and hadith collections. The protagonists of most versions are ‘Umar and Abū Bakr. The speech of both men is heavily couched in Qurʾānic idioms, and Abū Bakr quotes Qurʾānic passages to prove that Muḥammad had to die like any other man. The story, as told by Ibn Hishām, creates the impression that ‘Umar alone believed that Muḥammad did not die, and his attempt to convince other Muslims about this was nipped in the bud by Abū Bakr who arrived at an opportune moment. Most versions paint a similar picture;72 at least one version, however, presents the events differently. In it, ‘Umar does not act alone, but with many Muslims sharing his opinion.73

In this version of the story, it is ‘Abbās b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib who opposes ‘Umar. His speech strikingly differs from that of Abū Bakr. It alludes to a prolonged disagreement over the burial of Muḥammad, the distressing physical symptom of his death, and the expectation of Muḥammad’s resurrection among the Muslims. ‘Abbās says, arguing against ‘Umar, “The Messenger of God has died. He is a mortal, and, as

70Qurʾān 3:144 (Arberry’s translation).
73See Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabarī, vol. 2/2, p. 53.
it is with mortals, his odor changes. People, bury your Master. He is so precious to God that He will not let him die twice. Would He let you die once, him twice? He is too precious to God for that. People, bury your Master. If it is indeed as you say nothing can prevent God from digging him up from the earth. By God, the Messenger of God did not die until he left the path plain and clear, allowed the lawful and prohibited the unlawful, married and divorced, warred and made peace... People, bury your Master.”

On the basis of its isnād, the ḥadīth probably circulated in Basra, in the middle of the eighth century at the latest.75 ‘Abbās’s speech in this ḥadīth assumes an expectation of Mūhammad’s resurrection on the part of ‘Umar and other Muslims instead of a denial of Mūhammad’s death. If it assumed only Mūhammad’s death it would not argue that God would not allow his Prophet die twice.

A few unique traditions similarly hint that disbelief in Mūhammad’s death are missing from from Shīrī’s edition of Ibn Asākir’s Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq (apparently missing from all the extant manuscripts; see vol. 4, p. 394). For other variants of the ḥadīth, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq, Muṣannaf, vol. 5, pp. 300–301; Ibn Sa’d, Tabaqāt, vol. 2/2, pp. 53–54; Dārīmī, Sunan, vol. 1, pp. 220–222; and Baladhurī, Ansāb al-ashrāf (2), vol. 1, p. 567; ibid. (1), vol. 1, pp. 655–656 (this edition replaces al-‘Abbās with Ibn ‘Abbās). Although much later than the others, I chose to translate Ibn Manzūr’s text because it contains the same ideas as other longer versions of the ḥadīth, and presents them in a more logical order.

Ibn Manzūr does not give a full isnād, only attributes the ḥadīth to the Medinan Ikrima (d. ca. 105/723–4). ‘Abd al-Razzāq has Abū Bakr Ayyūb b. Abī Tamīma al-Sakhtiyānī (Baṣra, d. 131/748–9), and then Abū ‘l-Nu’mān Mūhammad b. al-Fadl al-Sadūsī (Baṣra, d. 223–7/837–42); and a certain Zayd b. Yahyā al-Anmāṭī. Al-Baladhurī has Abū Zayd ‘Umar b. Shabba al-Numayrī (Baṣra, d. 262/876) as the last transmitter, and inserts Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687–8) as the first transmitter before Ikrima, surely an instance of the backward growth of isnāds. For Ikrima and Ibn ‘Abbās, see “Ikrima,” and “Abd Allāh b. (al-)‘Abbās,” s.v.v. For the other transmitters, see Mizzūr, Tahdīb al-kamāl, vol. 11, pp. 384–393 (Sulaymān); and vol. 21, pp. 386–390 (‘Umar). I did not find any biography of Zayd b. Yahyā al-Anmāṭī, but he is listed in Mizzi’s biography of ‘Umar b. Shabba as one of the traditionists from whom the latter transmitted (see ibid., vol. 21, p. 387).
death was rampant in the Muslim community. A Medinan tradition depicts the Muslim community as divided into two parties over the question whether Muhammad had died or not. According to a Baṣrī hadīth, when Muhammad died, his Companions (aṣḥābuhu) assembled and decided to wait with the burial because “perhaps he ascended” (la’alāhu ‘urija bihi). According to another tradition, ‘Uthmān also asserted that Muhammad did not die. Unlike ‘Umar, however, ‘Uthmān claimed that Muhammad ascended to heaven just as Jesus did (raḥ’ā karnā raḥ’ā ‘Īsā bnu Maryama). According to still another (possibly Medinan) hadīth, “the people” (al-nās) denied that Muhammad died, and they believed that he temporarily ascended to heaven similarly to Jesus (raḥ’ā karnā raḥ’ā ‘Īsā bnu Maryama). These people, claims the tradition, threatened those who claimed that Muhammad died, and demanded that Muhammad not be buried.

**Conclusion: le cadavre exquis?**

We can thus conclude that most motifs of the Christian legend of Muhammad’s death were present in the Islamic tradition in the early eighth century, and it was not the Christians who invented them. The creativity

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77 Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabaqāt, vol. 2/2, p. 57; for the full text and the transmitters, see above, note 65.

78 Balādhurī, Ansāb al-ashrāf (1), vol. 1, p. 655. The hadīth is ascribed to al-Wāqidī (wa-raqā al-Wāqidiyyu fi isnādīn lahu). I did not find it with a more detailed isnād.

79 Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabaqāt, vol. 2/2, p. 57. The first transmitter is Abī Salāma b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Awf al-Qurashi al-Zuhri (Medinan, d. ca. 94–104/712–23); followed by Zayd b. Abī ‘Attāb (n.d.); then the unknown Maslama b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr; and al-Wāqidī. For the first two transmitters, see Mīzī, Tuhdhib al-kamāl, vol. 33, pp. 370–376; vol. 10, pp. 85–89; for Maslama, see Abī Ḥajār, Lisān al-mīzān, vol. 6, p. 715; and for al-Wāqidī, see above, note 63.
required of the Christians in developing it amounted at most to connecting the available motifs to each other. Even this might not have been necessary; countless hadiths, once well known, must be lost today, and among them might have been a story more similar to the Christian legend. Indeed, most of the relevant Islamic traditions are poorly attested. Were it not for the extensive collection of hadiths about Muhammad’s death in Ibn Sa’d’s al-Tabaqat al-kubra, most traditions describing its widespread denial in the Muslim community and the state of the corpse when committed to earth would not have survived.

Not only were the motifs used in the legend present in the Islamic tradition, but they were available at the right time and place. While the yawma ‘l-arbi‘a’ traditions and the hadiths about the early Muslims’ widespread reluctance to admit Muḥammad’s death apparently circulated in the entire Caliphate from the early eighth century onwards, the hadiths about the decaying corpse of Muhammad at the time of the burial are attested by the turn of the seventh and eighth century in Kūfa and Basra, and the ascension traditions by the middle of the eighth century only in Kūfa. In view of the small number of extant traditions we cannot exclude the possibility that the latter traditions circulated earlier and elsewhere too. It is significant, however, that they did circulate at the same place, in Iraq, where most versions of the Christian legend were recorded, and at the time, during the early eighth century, to which its earliest traceable version can be dated.

The oldest traces of the Christian legend of Muḥammad’s death and of the Muslim narrative from which they borrowed are, then, mostly datable to the first half of the eighth century, and they all vanish from our sight as we push back into the seventh century. This makes it all the more intriguing to consider how old the story might be, or, to put it differently, to what extent it might reflect the events that took place in Medina when Muḥammad died. It is not uncommon among scholars to regard unorthodox traits of Muḥammad’s image in the Islamic tradition as going back to the early seventh century in cases when they can be contrasted with later features that became the classical Islamic position. This method, however, does not seem easily applicable to the reconstruction of a sequence of events; after all, not all of their episodes became matters of doctrine and controversy in the Muslim community. The only elements of the narratives discussed above that are likely to

80See above, pp. 146–147, 150–152.
81See above, pp. 147–149.
82See above, pp. 139–146.
reflect historical reality to some extent are therefore those that became contentious issues: the belated burial of Muhammad, the disagreements it aroused in the Muslim community, and perhaps 'Umar’s role in the controversy.

As would be expected in hot climate, in the Arabian Peninsula it was both customary and necessary to inter the dead soon after their death. Although the date of Muhammad’s death varies in the Muslim sources, it may be worth noting that all the dates I have encountered fall in May, June or July. The 24-hour average temperature in Medina during these months is ca. 32–36 C (90–96 F). The burials of some early Muslims are said to have taken place shortly after their death. Abū Bakr, for example, died on a Tuesday night (or evening) about two years after Muhammad and was interred on the same night. Also, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) refers to the late burial of Mūḥammad as one of his special characteristics, so the delay was regarded as exceptional in the Islamic tradition itself. In view of the general implausibility of anyone in the Arabian Peninsula not being buried on the day of his death or at the latest on the day following it, it is improbable that traditions about Mūḥammad’s late burial were invented. Also, it can be easily imagined that before somebody as important as Mūḥammad was interred, his followers wanted to ascertain that he had indeed passed away, and before modern medical facilities were available, only signs of decomposition could serve as infallible evidence of death. Muslims, in Iraq or elsewhere, had no reason to invent such traditions. No party in early Islam could have gained anything by inventing the delay in the burial of Muhammad in order to blame some of the protagonists: one way or another, the heroes of all of them were involved in it. Once they were in circulation, however, some traditionists could as well continue to transmit them. After all, nobody doubted that Mūḥammad was a mortal, and should accordingly have died as one. The yawma 'l-thulāthā传统 might have been put into circulation in order to contest this version of events.

84 See www.worldclimate.com (Madinah, Saudi Arabia). The average temperature during daytime would naturally be much higher than this. The data was collected between 1956 and 1990. It should be mentioned, however, that the average temperature could have been different in the seventh century CE.

85 See the traditions quoted, for instance, in Ṭabarî, Taʾrîkh, vol. 1/4, p. 2130, and in Ibn 'Asākir, Taʾrîkh madīnat Dimashq, vol. 30, pp. 431–434. Another example for the custom of quick burial is that of Sukayna bint al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī who also died in Medina, in 117 AH (736 CE). She died on a summer day, and since her funeral had to be postponed until the evening (or night, depending on the variant), frankincense (tīb, bukhūr, aʿwād) was burnt by her corpse to dispel the smell (or fearing that the corpse might smell) (see Balādhurī, Ṭasāb al-ashrāf [1], vol. 2, pp. 141–142).


That a relatively new community would split after the death of its leader is not surprising. The array of the versions of the ‘Umar story can be plausibly explained with an underlying attempt to trivialize a split that Muhammad’s death caused, and that might have involved the entire early Muslim community, including its leaders. The most widespread version of the ‘Umar story probably developed as a result of ascribing the belief of many to one, thus representing the division as inconsequential and saving other Companions from what soon proved to be a disconcertingly mistaken view. In addition to the split of the community itself, ‘Umar’s association with the wrong party was likely not invented either. I am not aware of any group in the early eighth century, when versions of the ‘Umar story already circulated, that was interested in presenting Abū Bakr or ‘Abbās as superior to ‘Umar. The events, therefore, might be reconstructed as follows. The Muslim community, including its leaders, split as a result of Muhammad’s death, with the more powerful group, led by ‘Umar, denying that Muhammad’s death was irreversible, and opposing his burial. Due to their influence, Muhammad’s interment was postponed. As nature started taking its course on the corpse, however, the position of this group was exposed as fallacious.88

Whether the events took place as suggested above cannot be proven. But regardless of what really happened in Medina when Muhammad died, the Christian legend largely agreed with what many Muslims in the eighth century themselves told about Muhammad’s death. It was not the contents that made the story polemical, but the difference between the religious worldview of its first, Muslim audience and that of the new, Christian one. Early Muslims saw Muhammad as a mere mortal with a divine message, and apart from the misguided judgment of their leaders after Muhammad’s death, they probably did not find anything embarrassing in his ordinary death. But soon after the dead Prophet’s followers conquered the Near East, the predominantly Christian inhabitants of these lands compared the story of Muhammad’s life and death to the stories of the life and death of those whom they believed he should have resembled: the biblical prophets, Jesus and Christian saints. Comparing Muhammad’s death to that of the biblical prophets was not detrimental to his standing; apart from Enoch and Elijah who, according to the Bible, were translated to heaven alive, the rest were believed to have died the ordinary death of a mortal. But Muhammad, in Christian eyes, did not fare well in comparison with Christ. One of the most significant contrasts between their stories was the end of their lives: the one disintegrating in the earth, the other being resurrected from the dead.

88 For a different reconstruction of the events, see Madelung, *Succession*, pp. 356–360.
and ascending to heaven. When compared to the saints, Muhammad also failed the test. According to his own followers, Muhammad’s body putrefied in death; the corpses of the saints, according to their vitae, resisted decay, emitted sweet fragrance, and their complexions remained fresh. The all-too-human death of Muhammad, according to the religious worldview of the Christians, did not fit his claim to divine authority. The eighth-century Muslim narrative of Muhammad’s death, as understood by Christians, made him look inferior to Jesus and the saints, and was thus a useful polemical argument.

It is tempting to believe that some Islamic traditions were invented in order to eliminate direct comparison between the stories of Muhammad’s and Christ’s death. According to the Christian legend, the Companions’ expectation of Muhammad’s resurrection on the third day after his death was the reason that they did not bury him. The yawma ’l-thulāṭa’ tradition might have been devised to contest the legend’s factual basis. Had Muhammad been buried yawma ’l-thulāṭa’, on the second day, not yawma ’l-arbi’a’, on the third day after his death, nobody would have believed the Christians that the Companions waited for Muhammad’s resurrection.

Other traditions that might have been invented in response to the Christian legend adopted a different strategy. They maintained that Muhammad’s resurrection, which the Companions had expected according to the Christian story, indeed took place. One group of these comprises the hadiths about Muhammad’s resurrection and subsequent life in his tomb. According to these traditions, Muhammad, instead of rising from the dead while not yet buried, was resurrected later, in his grave, and continues to be alive there. Moreover, the ascension traditions acutely resonate with Christ’s story. According to some of them, Muhammad ascended to heaven three days, according to others, forty days after his death. Three and forty days were not selected simply because they are topoi; in this case we would encounter traditions about Muhammad’s ascension after seven days too. They were selected in order to create a parallelism with the resurrection and ascension of Christ as told in the Gospels: Christ rose from the dead on the third day after his burial, ascended to heaven from his tomb, then appeared to his disciples, stayed with them for forty days, and ascended to heaven again.

90For the yawma ’l-thulāṭa’ tradition, see above, pp. 146–147.
91Another reason for the invention of the yawma ’l-thulāṭa’ tradition could have been an attempt to bring Muhammad’s burial into harmony with Islamic law. In the late eighth century, Islamic law prescribed quick burial; see Halevi, Muhammad’s grave, pp. 158–159.
92See, for example, some of the traditions collected in Bayhaqi, Ḥayāt al-anbiyā’.
Traditions countering the claims that Muhammad’s corpse putrefied before burial also circulated. A hadith quotes ‘Ali exclaiming while washing Muhammad’s corpse, “You are dearer to me than my father and my mother! How fragrant you are alive and dead.” The hadith ends with the words, “Nothing was observed on (the corpse of) the Messenger of God of what is (usually) observed on the dead.”

Showing its popularity, many variants of this tradition circulated; no biography of Muhammad fails to include at least one of them. The pleasant aroma of the dead body of the holy man is a common motif in Christian saints’ vitae. For example, Antonius, the biographer of Simeon Stylites (d. 459), writes about the holy man’s corpse, “throughout his body and his garments was a scented perfume which, from its sweet smell, made one’s heart merry.”

About a century ago, Carl H. Becker suggested that Christian polemic against Islam in the eighth century influenced the formation of Islamic theology. More recently, Sarah Stroumsa proposed that the genre of dalâ’il al-nubuwwa developed in response to the non-Muslim communities’ probing into Muhammad’s prophethood. A comparison of the various ways the Muslim community remembered Muhammad’s death also reveals an impact of Christian polemic on Islam. As we saw above, Christian polemic, and the Christian legend of Muhammad’s death itself, might have influenced the formation of Islamic narratives about Muhammad’s death. Although none of the aforementioned Islamic traditions contains any hint to the Christian legend (or to Christian polemic, in their presence.

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93 So at least in the writings of Luke; see Luke 9:22, 18:33, 24:7, 21:46; Acts 1:3, 9–12, 10:40. Only the Book of Acts refers to Jesus’ ascension to heaven after forty days. The resurrection on the third day is, of course, mentioned also elsewhere in the New Testament; see, for example, Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, 27:64; Mark 9:31, 10:34, and 1 Corinthians 15:4.

94 Ibn Hishâm, al-Sīra al-nabawiyya, vol. 1/2, pp. 1018–1019; translations from Guillaume, The life of Muhammad, p. 688 (modified) (bi-âbi anta wa-ummî mà afyâbaka hâyyan wa-mayyitan, and wa-lam yara min rasâlî Allâhi shay’un mimnâ yarâ min al-mayyiti). These are the last sentences of a hadith about the washing of Muhammad’s corpse. Most of the other passages quoted in this paragraph are also parts of longer traditions. See also Ta’barî, Ta’rîkh, vol. 1/4, p. 1831; Ibn al-Jawzî, Muntazam, vol. 2, p. 479.

95 Doran, Lives, p. 98. A common Islamic tradition, “God has forbidden the earth to eat away the bodies of the prophets (mna Allâha [qad] harrama ‘ala ‘l-ard al-ta’kula ajsâda al-anbiyâ’i)” appears in several hadith collections; see, for example, Ibn Mîja, Sunan, vol. 1, pp. 524, 345; Nasâî, Sunan, vol. 3, pp. 63–64; and Dārîmî, Sunan, vol. 2, p. 981. Probably this too developed under the influence of Christian saints’ lives.


even to Christians), it is suggestive that they all circulated at the same time and the same place. While intra-Muslim debate, triggered by converts from Christianity who probably imported their religious worldview into Islam, did certainly contribute to the development of the foregoing traditions as well, the concentration of the relevant traditions in southern Iraq (and not in the Hijāz where a similarly great proportion of Islamic traditions were recorded) points to polemic as the more important factor. The polemical milieu of southern Iraq was more likely to create polarized opinions than the more uniform society of the Hijāz.

The Christians strove to preserve the account of Muḥammad’s ordinary death just as eagerly as the Muslims wanted to forget it. The various versions of the Christian legend in fact imply more contact with the eighth-century Islamic tradition than they would seem at first sight. It seems that they did not develop from a single original Christian legend; some of them are related to different hadiths independently from the others. The story of Muḥammad’s death in the Apology of al-Kindī is the richest of them. It gives four different accounts, probably all based on Islamic traditions.98 According to the Qashun document, the Istoria and the Adnotatio, the “disciples” were guarding Muḥammad’s corpse to see what happens to it. This echoes the ḥadith about the Companions deciding to lie in wait (tarabbāṣū) to see what happens to the body.99 The different versions of the Christian legend locate the events in two different places; some in a closed room, others in Muḥammad’s garden.100 The former parallels the usual scene of Muḥammad’s death and funeral in the Islamic tradition, the room of ‘A’isha, “The Messenger of God was in his house, his matter is not completed yet, his family closed the door on him,” as Ibn Hishām tells us, in the first episode of yawm al-saqīfa.101 The latter echoes a rare tradition according to which the Muslim community prayed over Muḥammad’s body in “the garden” (bi-waṣaṭi al-rawdātī).102

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98In addition to the one discussed above, pp. 132–134, 137–138 (unattributed), he quotes three others ascribed to various transmitters; one is attributed to Abū Najīd ʿIrāqī (Companion, later qādī in Baṣra, d. 52/672–3), another to a certain Dārnān (perhaps a corruption of Shuqrān, Muḥammad’s freed slave, n.d.), still another to “one of them” (see Tartar, Dialogue islamo-chrétien, pp. 92–93; and Tien, Risāla, pp. 109–110). About ʿIrāqī and Shuqrān, see Mizzī, Tahdhīb al-kamāl, vol. 22, pp. 319–321; and vol. 12, pp. 544–546.
100See above, p. 136.
102Samḥūdī, Khulāṣat al-wafāʾ, vol. 1, p. 236. Al-Samḥūdī does not name his source, and I was unable to trace it. Elsewhere the Muslims pray over the body in ‘A’isha’s room where Muḥammad died and was buried.
To conclude, the Christian legend exhibits intimate knowledge of the Islamic tradition, not the ignorance of it, as is usually supposed. The Christians, instead of inventing the story, borrowed it from the Muslims in the eighth century, and have tenaciously preserved it despite subsequent changes in the Islamic narrative of Muhammad’s death. Instead of misrepresenting Islam at will or out of ignorance, the Christians selected from the wealth of hadiths those that made it the least desirable for their coreligionists to convert to Islam. Of course, they did tell stories with no historical basis about Islam. One can hardly imagine, for example, any foundation for the episode appended to some versions of the legend in which dogs devour Muhammad’s corpse. But such inventiveness is rarer than it appears at first sight. It was not necessary. There were enough differences between the religious worldviews of Christianity and Islam, between their concepts of sanctity, to make some Islamic narratives function as polemical stories for Christians without modifying them. What the one saw as praiseworthy, the other regarded as despicable. What the one held acceptable, the other thought of as shameful. The story about Muhammad’s ordinary mortality is an example of such a narrative.

Appendix: The Qashun document

The Qashun document, a fascinating diatribe of an anonymous Christian author against Islam, deserves more attention than it has so far received in the study of Christian-Muslim relations. Its most prominent themes are episodes from Muhammad’s life, such as stories of a Christian and a Jew instructing him, his miracles, his death and his forging of a scripture. It also includes an unusually long account of the hajj and shorter ones of Muslim prayer and of Muslim attitude to Christ and Christianity. The author attributes this material to a Muslim convert to Christianity. Indeed, the text gives some astonishingly detailed and verifiably accurate descriptions of Muslim rituals which distinguishes it from most Christian writings on Islam and makes the contribution of an eyewitness conceivable. At the same time, it includes Christian narratives unattested in Muslim tradition. Some of these, such as the story of

\[103\] For the English translation of the text, see Thomson, “Muhammad,” pp. 846–853 (the main text is the translation of a later adaptation of the document; the footnotes give the variants of the Qashun document). Thomson calls the text “Karshuni document” which is probably incorrect (see below). Since I do not know Armenian, I fully rely on this English version. Macler, “L’Islam dans la littérature arménienne,” discusses the text briefly; I am not aware of other studies.

Muhammad’s instruction by a Christian monk, are widespread in Christian polemical literature, while others, like the description of the Ka’ba as a center of snake cult, are entirely unknown.

This work today survives only in a medieval Armenian translation. The date of rendering is unknown, but its *terminus ante quem* can be set to the twelfth century: although the oldest extant manuscript dates only from 1273, Mxit’ar of Ani, an Armenian historian who wrote at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, already used the document as his main source on the rise of Islam probably in the same translation. Despite this relatively late and solely Armenian attestation, I would like to suggest here that the Qashun document (or a substantial source of it) was originally written not on the fringes but in the center of the Islamic world, most probably in Iraq, in Arabic or in Syriac, and no later than the early ninth century. The main reason to think so is that the text contains many motifs unattested in Armenian texts on Islam, and several of these occur in Christian Arabic and Syriac writings produced in Iraq in the early ninth century. Furthermore, some details may indicate another source written much earlier by a Melkite monk in the Sinai. Disentangling the layers of the text, however, would require detailed comparison with a wide range of Muslim and Christian writings by an Armenian specialist. What follow are an amateur’s tentative suggestions, an attempt to draw attention to the value of this document.

Five episodes recall Iraqi Christian polemic against Islam: the stories of Muhammad’s instruction by a Christian monk, then by a Jew, his death, his forging of a holy scripture, and his enjoining of the Muslims to pray seven times a day. All these five episodes occur in the earliest Syriac version of the Christian Bahšar legend, and three of them also in the *Apology of al-Kindî*. The details are somewhat different in the various versions, but when datable, the Qashun document contains an earlier variant. For example, its author calls the Christian monk Sar-gis. This is the monk’s name in the *Apology* and in the ninth-century West-Syrian version of the Christian Bahšar legend; the name Bahšar for Muhammad’s Christian teacher appears only in the following century. Also, the Qashun document does not connect these episodes into a continuous narrative as the Christian Bahšar legend does, and thus probably reflects an earlier stage in its development. Since the earliest version of the Christian Bahšar legend was in all likelihood written in the 810s and the *Apology of al-Kindî* was probably written in the 820s,

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105 On the manuscript of the Armenian translation and its use by Mxit’ar, see *ibid.*, pp. 844–845.
106 For the first and the second episodes, see *ibid.*, p. 846 (cf. n. c), for the third, p. 850, for the fourth, pp. 852–853, and for the fifth, p. 853, n. tt.
Christians and Muslims debating Muhammad’s death

both in Iraq, the Qashun document or the source its author used for these episodes probably antedates it and originated in the same region.

The author’s description of his source also seems to point to the early ninth century as the terminus ante quem for either the composition of the document or for one of its major sources, “All this one of Mahmed’s disciples revealed to us, who had been himself an eye-witness of it all. And terrified by the appearance of the demons, he fled to the island of Crete; and there he became a Christian and believed in Christ.” As remarked above, it is conceivable that a Muslim convert to Christianity is responsible for the detailed information on Muslim rituals, and the idiosyncrasy of the reference to Crete as the site of the conversion makes the note sound authentic. Crete was occupied by Andalusian Arabs in 827, and it remained under Islamic rule until 961; in the intervening period no one would have fled there to convert to Christianity. Since the contents of the document make it unlikely that it was written in the second half of the tenth century or later, it must predate 827.

Other details perhaps point to another, earlier source from the Sinai. Apart from people and locations from Muhammad’s biography and the Bible, the geographical focus of a part of the Qashun document is in the Eastern Mediterranean: it mentions the Mt. Sinai, Egypt, Alexandria, the Egyptians, and the Damascenes. For instance, according to the text, Abraha’s campaign against Mecca (referred to as war between the Ethiopians and the Arabs of Mecca) is related “in Egypt by tradition down to today.” But since the campaign was a standard part of Muhammad’s biography and as such it was related everywhere in the Islamic world, this remark makes better sense if read as coming from somebody who knew about it only as an Egyptian tradition, i.e., who spent his life in Egypt or nearby and had no opportunity to become acquainted with Muslim traditions elsewhere. The note that Muhammad came to Mt. Sinai is best understood from the perspective of an author writing on Mt. Sinai or nearby. The author writes that Sergius, the monk who instructed Muhammad, was an Arian. The Arianism of Muhammad’s teacher is first attested among Syrian Melkites in the early eighth century, but remains unknown among the Christians of Iraq, even later. Also, the text presents Islam in general

107See above, p. 132.
108Thomson, “Muhammad,” p. 849, n. w; for two other similar notes, see ibid., p. 846, n. o, and p. 853.
109See “Ikritāš,” EI², s.v.
111Ibid., p. 848 (italics mine).
112Ibid., p. 846.
113Ibid., p. 846, n. c.
and the **hajj** in particular as demon worship. Three Christian writings from late seventh-century Syria refer to the Muslims as companions of demons: two Syriac ones written probably in Syria and one Greek text from the Sinai. Furthermore, the document refers to “Yathrib Medina” as the capital of the Arabs. Since after the mid-seventh century Medina never again became a noteworthy political center, this might be a residue of a seventh century source. Taken together, these details may point to a seventh-century Melkite source from the Sinai which could have been used by the ninth century Iraqi author whose work was in turn translated into Armenian some time prior to the end of the twelfth century.

Finally, it should be noted that Thomson’s dubbing the text “Karshuni document” is unlikely to be correct. With this appellation, he followed Macler who, reviewing the edition of the text and noting that the Armenian version refers to it as “extrait de Qachoun” or “recueil de Qachoun” (*i qachounen qaghadzou*), suggested that Qashun should be taken as a corruption of the word Karshuni. But this is unlikely, for two reasons. First, while dated Karshuni glosses are already attested in the twelfth century (only a few undated ones could be earlier), the oldest manuscripts containing texts copied in their entirety in Karshuni date from as late as the thirteenth century, after the earliest attestation of the Qashun document in Armenian translation. Second and even more importantly, the name Karshuni first appears much later, in the sixteenth century, and then in the form “Garshuni.” It is thus improbable that the Armenian translation, dating from the twelfth century at the latest, was made from a Karshuni text and referred to itself as Karshuni. A Syriac or Arabic **Vorlage** is much more likely.

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114 Ibid., pp. 846, 849.
118 This discussion owes much to the papers given in the session on Karshuni at the Eighth Conference of Christian Arabic Studies, held in Granada (Spain), September 26–27, 2008: Emanuela Braidà, “Garshuni manuscripts and Garshuni notes in Syriac manuscripts,” Gregory Kessel, “The importance of the manuscript tradition of the ‘Book of Grace’ (7th c.) for the study of Garshuni,” and Ray Mouawad “Maronites and the Garshuni script.”
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