

Article

The Long Ninth Century: Christian Reactions to Islamization and Islamication in Palestine and Al-Andalus

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Abstract: Christian communities in Palestine and Al-Andalus faced similar challenges during the ninth century. Although Muslim authorities tolerated Christianity and enshrined a certain degree of religious freedom, they downgraded these communities and encouraged conversion to Islam. In the long span, Christian communities decreased because many of their leading members emigrated or converted. Moreover, many of those that remained adopted the Arabic language, dressed like Muslims, and became increasingly assimilated into the ruling elite Muslim culture. This article suggests that the contacts and reciprocal influence between Christian communities from Palestine and Spain during this period were more substantial than hitherto perceived. Thus, they used the same methods with some local adaptations to tackle their critical situation. They introduced a growing use of Arabic in religious life, established and upgraded important pilgrimage shrines, and some extremist monastic communities fostered and encouraged martyrdom.

Keywords: conversion; Islamization; Islamication; pilgrimage; Arabization; martyrdom



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1. Preface

This article deals with the reactions to the Islamization and Islamication of different groups of Christian communities in Palestine and Al-Andalus during the ninth century. At this time, local Christians realized that Islam would not disappear, and these former ruling communities began to adapt to the new reality. They enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, but their status was downgraded compared to the previous period when Christian regimes ruled Syria and Spain.

Christian communities across the Muslim caliphate decreased because some, especially elites, emigrated to Christian areas, whereas others converted to Islam. Furthermore, those that stayed in their parishes became increasingly Islamicate. They adopted the Arab language and became involved in the culture of the new elites.

This article examines Christian reactions to Islamization and Islamication in Palestine and al-Andalus in ritual, pilgrimage, and martyrdom. There are striking similarities in the Christian reaction in these two zones, both in method and timing, which suggest that events and practices in one region inspired Christians in the other, which faced similar challenges.

2. Historical Background

The Islamization and Islamication of Syria began in the 630s when the Muslims conquered the region. However, the Muslims were few, and many local inhabitants remained in their homes. Therefore, as the local population vastly outnumbered the conquerors, they had no reason to change their language, culture, and religious practices due to the conquest.

At the end of the century, caliph ‘Abd al-Malik introduced an extensive reform that included changing the administration language to Arabic. This was a necessary yet insufficient condition for disseminating the Arab language within the local population. ‘Abd al-Malik was also the first to build magnificent mosques in the central locations of the

conquered cities (Borrut and Cobb 2010). These eye-catching buildings changed the urban landscape of the once-Byzantine cities in a process coined by Frenkel and Luz as “Landscape conversion” (Frenkel 2001; Luz 2002).

However, the spreading of the Muslim religion, the Arab language, and the Muslim culture mainly depended on the arrival of Muslim Arabophone immigrants. Therefore, along with the administration language reform, Muslim authorities initiated immigration of the Muslim Arabophone population to various central locations in the conquered regions. At the end of the ninth century, the geographer al-Ya’qūbī described the population of the districts of *Filastīn* and *Urdunn*:

From the city of Damascus to the military district of Jordan is four stages. The first is Jāsīm, a dependency (‘amal) of Damascus; then Khisfīn, also a dependency of Damascus; then Fīq, with its well-known pass. One goes from there to the city of Tiberias which is the main city of (the military district of) Jordan . . . The people of the city of Tiberias are tribesmen of Ash’ar, who are the majority there. The military district of Jordan has the following rural districts: Tyre which is the main city of the coast [. . .] is inhabited by a mixture of people [. . .] The city of Acre is also on the coast. Qadas is one of the most majestic of rural districts. Then come Baysān, Faḥl, Jarash, and al-Sawād. The people of these rural districts are a mixture of Arabs and non-Arabs (‘Ajam) [. . .] The rural districts of Jordan were conquered in the caliphate of ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb by Abū ‘Ubayda b. al-Jarrāḥ, except for the city of Tiberias, whose people sued for a treaty of peace [. . .]

From the military district of Jordan to the military district of Palestine is three stages. The old main city of Palestine was a city called Ludd (Lydda). However, when Sulaymān ibn ‘Abd al-Malik became caliph, he had the city of Ramla built; he destroyed the city of Ludd and transferred the people of Ludd to al-Ramla [. . .] The people of the city are a mixture of Arabs and non-Arabs, and its non-Muslims are Samaritans . . . Palestine has the following districts: ʿĪlyā, which is Jerusalem; Amwās; Nablus [. . .] its people being a mixture of Arabs and non-Arabs, and Samaritans; Sebastia, which is a dependency of Nablus; Caesarea a city on the coast, one of the most impregnable cities of Palestine, and the last of the region’s cities to be conquered . . . and Yubnā which is an old city on a hill . . . The people of this city are a group of Samaritans . . . Jaffa on the coast, which the people of al-Ramla use as a port [. . .] Bayt Jibrīn, an old city whose people are a group of Jūdhām [. . .] ʿAsqalān on the coast; Gaza on the coast [. . .] The populace of the military district of Palestine is a mixture of Arabs from Lakhm, Judhām, ‘Āmila, Kinda, Qays, and Kināna. (al-Ya’qūbī 1892; Gordon et al. 2018)

This source indicates that people of Arab origin settled in specific locations. Namely, a hidden hand organized this venture, probably the Umayyad caliphate. Since non-organized immigrants tend to settle in ports or cities with suitable employment opportunities, the fact that, in this case, they did not settle in important Roman-Byzantine cities, such as Caesarea, Gaza, and Ascalon, indicates that this was an orchestrated venture. Furthermore, this description indicates that although emigrating Byzantine elites from principal cities left behind their luxurious properties, Muslim immigrants did not occupy them, an impression corroborated by archaeological findings (Arnon 2008).

Wherever these Arab-speaking Muslim migrants settled, they became the new local elite that facilitated the Islamization and Islamization of Syria. Furthermore, some of the tribes mentioned in the paragraph’s last phrase migrated to Syria before the beginning of the Islamic period. These migrants, merchants, and some indigenous tribes were Arab-speaking before the Muslim conquest. Namely, although Arabic was not Syria’s primary language during the Byzantine period, it was neither a foreign language (Shahīd 2003; Ehrlich 2022).

In 749, merely a year before the Abbasid revolution, a significant earthquake hit Syria. This event facilitated the de-urbanization of Syria because the Abbasid government decided to rebuild only some central cities, leaving others without financial support. This

policy expedited the Islamization and Islamication of the region during the Abbasid period (Ehrlich 2022).

During the ninth century, the Abbasid caliphate began to decay. Although its economic deterioration was only one manifestation of the caliphate's feebleness, the caliphate invested more in trade with central and eastern Asia than Europe (Pashazanous et al. 2014). Subsequently, the Abbasids invested their limited funds in these regions rather than in Syria and other Mediterranean provinces.

One of this policy's results was that the caliphate's western provinces began to detach themselves from the central government. Thus, gradually, the provinces from al-Andalus in the west to Egypt in the east became increasingly independent.

Likewise, the Abbasids invested fewer funds in Syria. A striking manifestation of this policy is the building of *ribatāt*, i.e., guarding posts on the Levantine coast. These humble fortifications protected small- and medium-sized towns, once central Roman hubs, such as Caesarea Maritima, Acre, and Tyre. Namely, the coast became a hostile border instead of a central commercial area (Elad 1982).

There are various descriptions of the hardships the non-Muslim communities suffered during the ninth century. For example, Theophanes the Confessor described the events of the years 812–813 CE as follows:

In the same year (812–13), many of the Christians of Palestine, monks and laymen, and from all Syria arrived in Cyprus, fleeing the excessive misdeeds of the Arabs ... (Mango and Scott 1977)

The situation of minorities continued to deteriorate during the following decades. Under the caliph al-Mutawakkil (847–61 CE) and later under Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn (878–84 CE), there were persecutions of minorities. These events fostered conversion to Islam and encouraged those that wanted to continue living as Christians to emigrate from the region (Ehrlich 2022; Levy-Rubin 2002).

Despite the sheer differences between Palestine and the Iberian Peninsula, the processes of Islamization and Islamication in the latter were similar to those in Syria. The Muslims conquered the Iberian Peninsula in 711, about seventy-five years after the conquest of Syria. The Muslim army that occupied the peninsula included a significant segment of Berbers. Namely, the Arabs constituted a minority not only among the local population but also among the conquerors.

In the Iberian Peninsula, Arabic was a foreign language. Presumably, nobody in this area knew Arabic prior to the Muslim occupation. Moreover, even among the conquerors, of which Berbers constituted the majority, the knowledge of Arabic was limited.

However, it seems the Muslims used similar methods to foster Islamization and Islamication in the peninsula. Al-Ya'qūbī also described the population of this area:

Before reaching the city of Cordoba from Tudmīr, the traveler arrives at a city called Elvira, which was settled by Arabs who had come from the military district (jund) of Damascus [...] To the west (of Cordoba) is a city called Reygo, which was settled by (men from) the military district of Jordan ... West of Reygo there is a city called Sidonia, which was settled by (men from) the military district of Ḥimṣ. West of Sidonia is a city called Algeciras which was settled by Berbers, with a few Arabs of mixed origins. West to the city of Algeciras is a city called Seville [...] West of Seville is a city called Niebla which was settled by Arabs who first entered the area with Ṭāriq, the client (mawlā) of Mūsā b. Nuṣayr al-Lakhmī. (al-Ya'qūbī 1892; Gordon et al. 2018; Kennedy 1996; Manzano-Moreno 1993, 2021; Carvajal López 2021)

Presumably, these settlers from various districts of Syria arrived in Umayyad al-Andalus shortly before the fall of this dynasty in Syria and probably also after 750 CE. Syrian local inhabitants and immigrants that arrived there during the Umayyad period were supporters of this dynasty, and its falling threatened their future. Therefore, those who could afford the journey to the other side of the Mediterranean considered this option seriously. The fact

that immigrants from various Syrian districts settled in al-Andalus in groups according to their origin indicates that they arrived in relatively large numbers. Moreover, as in Syria and al-Andalus, the local government decided which district to allocate to each group of newcomers.

Al-Andalus was the most western province of the Abbasid caliphate. Moreover, in 754 CE, only four years after the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate, al-Andalus came under Umayyad rule. The combination between the remoteness from the caliphate's center and the embedded hostility between the Umayyad provincial and Abbasid central authorities led to the practical separation of al-Andalus from the caliphate. Although the Andalusian Umayyads unhappily acknowledged until 929 the Abbasid caliph as the only caliph, they acted independently. The Abbasids did not remain idle and made several unsuccessful attempts to intervene in Andalusian affairs.

However, the main problems of the Umayyads stemmed from various segments of Andalusian society. Thus, during the ninth century, there were several uprisings across the amirate, accompanied by the increasing, though slow, progress of the Christian kingdoms in the north of the peninsula.

In Syria, the reality was different. The Muslims succeeded in appeasing the local population that did not have significant stimuli to revolt. Nevertheless, the economic and administrative crisis and the subsequent disintegration of the caliphate affected primarily the minorities that became increasingly vulnerable. Nevertheless, the caliphate's weakness stimulated local leaders to usurp its powers. The caliphate managed to control the area, and external powers did not threaten it.

Nonetheless, there was another significant difference between the two regions. While the caliphate declined from the middle of the ninth century, al-Andalus emerged as a new cultural center of the Muslim world. As such, it became an attractive migration destination. A clear example of these occurrences is the transfer of the Jewish spiritual center from Iraq to al-Andalus. Until the ninth century, the most important Jewish center was in Iraq (Babylon). From the ninth century, and increasingly during the tenth and eleventh centuries, this center declined and was gradually replaced by al-Andalus. Although there were Jews in Spain before the Muslim conquest, they constituted a marginal community. The status change of the local community stemmed from the incoming immigrants to al-Andalus and the emigration from the Middle East, especially from Iraq (Grossman 1996). Immigration from Iraq and Syria to al-Andalus was a serious undertaking; therefore, only wealthy people or those whose travel was paid for by others could afford it. Namely, the migrants from Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East to al-Andalus belonged to economic, social, religious, and intellectual elites. These phenomena certainly were not limited to Jews. Most immigrants were probably Muslims attracted by the glamour and opportunities al-Andalus offered them. These immigrants should have maintained contact with family members and colleagues that remained in the Middle East. As such, they became an important information channel between these two regions.

3. Pilgrimage

Saint James was beheaded in 44 CE by King Agrippa in Jerusalem and buried somewhere nearby (Acts, 12: 2). Around 570 CE, an anonymous pilgrim saw his burial place in the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem (Milani 1977). However, since the eighth century, traditions began to spread about Saint James preaching in Spain (Baliñas Pérez 2013). At the beginning of the ninth century, the saint's tomb was miraculously discovered in north-western Iberian Peninsula, where today is the famous cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. A charter from 1077 mentions that during the reign of Alfonso II of Asturias (791–842 CE), an angel revealed the tomb's location to a hermit called Pelayo, who told about his vision to bishop Theodomir of Iria. They went to the site where they found the tomb. Consequently, they informed the king, who ordered to erect a church on the site (Herbers 2020).

There are many unanswered questions about the *inventio*, the *translatio*, and the documentation of these events. However, this article deals only with two fundamental problems: “Why then” and “Why there”.

These questions have no conclusive answer. However, there are two main explanations: that the saint’s cult emerged as a response to the Muslim challenge or that it was part of a conflict between northern and southern Spain’s Christians (Herbers 2020). Nonetheless, the saint’s tomb discovery gives the humble Christian kingdom a famous and vigorous patron (Kennedy 1996).

Interestingly, in Jerusalem, far away from the Iberian Peninsula, a somewhat similar event occurred. In 870 CE, Bernard, also known as Bernard the Wise, a Frankish monk, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Among other phenomena, he was the first to describe the miracle of the “Holy Fire” in the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

But, it worth saying what happens on Holy Saturday, the Vigil of Easter. In the morning the office begins in the church. Then, when it is over, they go on singing *Kyrie eleison* till an angel comes and kindles light in the lamps which hang over the sepulchre. The patriarch passes some of this light to the bishops and the rest of the people, and thus each one has light where he is standing. (Tobler 1874; Wilkinson 1977)

In this case, the question of “Why there” is superfluous—however, the question of “Why then” is most relevant. When Bernard and his companions made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the church of the Holy Sepulchre had existed for more than a half millennium and had been under Muslim rule for nearly 250 years. Assuming the Holy Fire was a regular occurrence in the church for centuries, someone should have described it centuries earlier. Nonetheless, the absolute silence of sources about the miracle clearly indicates that it did not occur before the ninth century. Bernard’s description provides only the miracle’s *terminus ad quem*. Due to the paucity of early Islamic period Holy Land descriptions, it is impossible to determine when precisely this miracle occurred for the first time. However, it is unlikely that it happened before the ninth century (Jotischky 2011).

Fire descending from the heavens is a mega miracle. Probably Bernard crossed the sea to witness this specific occurrence. However, miracles occur in times of necessity, when folks need proof that they believe in the true religion. Thus, according to the Bible, the Red Sea split when the Israelites running from Egypt needed it (Exodus 14: 21–22). Fire descended from heaven when Elijah asked God for proof of his religious attitude veracity (1 Kings, 18: 33–39). Therefore, when Christianity reached its zenith in the Holy Land during the Byzantine period, such a miracle was unnecessary. Mases converted to Christianity, and pilgrims arrived in large numbers. However, during the early Islamic period, the situation changed dramatically. The new victorious religion challenged Christianity both theologically and practically. From the 630s, people converted to Christianity only seldom, whereas an increasing number of Christians converted to Islam. Flourishing Christian cities decayed, and others became Islamicate. The pilgrimage during the Byzantine was a major occurrence, which attracted people from near and far and became less popular after the Muslim conquest. The decreasing number of pilgrims not only had religious outcomes but also affected the land’s economy. Furthermore, the Byzantine Empire that once built churches, built pilgrim lodges, and maintained the road system ceased to act in the area. Consequently, the economic situation of the local church throughout the Muslim period became increasingly difficult.

Moreover, in Jerusalem, the Muslims built two magnificent buildings that exist to this day, the Dome of the Rock and the al-al-Aqṣā mosque. Although the Muslims paid little heed to Jerusalem from the 830s onward, they were omnipresent in the city, and the pressure they exerted on the local Christian community demanded a reaction.

Local Christian communities could not rely on significant external support, both military and economic. Therefore, the local Christian community came under increasing pressure of Islamization and Islamication. In these conditions, a miracle, such as the

Holy Fire, perfectly suited the local Christian community's needs. It encouraged the local believers and increased pilgrimage from distant countries.

The miracle not only encouraged the Christian community but also challenged Islam. After all, not every day fire descends from the heavens in Easter in the place of Christ's resurrection. It is impossible to evaluate the precise impact of the miracle on the everyday life of the Christian community in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, more than a century after Bernard visited Jerusalem, the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasī described the city:

'Jerusalem is a golden basin filled with scorpions' . . . Few are the learned there, many are the Christians, and these make themselves distasteful in the public places . . . The jurispudent is in solitude, and the man of letters disregarded. Schools are unattended, and there is no instruction. The Christians and Jews are predominant here, and the mosque is devoid of congregations and assemblies. (Al-Muqaddasī 1906; Al-Muqaddasī 1994)

Evidently, this description indicates that in al-Muqaddasī's time, the Christians had the upper hand in Jerusalem. Many occurrences happened between 870 and 985 CE when al-Muqaddasī wrote his book, and the scarcity of information about this period prevents determining which was more instrumental than others in this transformation. Nevertheless, shortly after al-Muqaddasī published his book, the Fatimid caliph, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (996–1021), ordered the destruction of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, reportedly because he was outraged by the Holy Fire miracle (Ousterhout 1989). In other words, during this period, the miracle's occurrence substantially impacted life in Jerusalem and probably revitalized the formerly decaying local Christian community.

4. Arabization

The change in an entire population's everyday language in a historical period is challenging to trace. The authors of most of the written surviving documents belonged to elite groups. Therefore, texts in a language other than the vernacular do not necessarily indicate that the population changed its language. Moreover, when immigrants live within an indigenous populace, they usually adopt their language.

The situation is different in the case of Arabic in Syria, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula. The Arab-speaking immigrants constituted a tiny minority; nevertheless, Arabic became increasingly popular in these areas during the early Islamic period. While in Syria, a considerable percentage of the population was familiar with Arabic, in the West, Arabic was a new language spoken exclusively by few conquerors. Moreover, both Syriac, the vernacular language in the western Middle East, and Arabic are Western Semitic languages and are similar in various aspects.

In the Iberian Peninsula, the situation was different. Arabic was virtually unknown among the local population, and the local languages had nothing in common with Arabic. Nevertheless, despite its strangeness, Arabic became increasingly popular in al-Andalus relatively quickly.

The dissemination of a foreign language among grassroots in everyday affairs is far from obvious. In normal conditions, people do not change their native tongue to a foreign language. Thus, for example, during nearly a millennium of Greek-speaking authorities and elites in Syria, the population's acquaintance with Greek and Latin was restricted to administrative and intellectual elites. There is a vast surviving literature corpus written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Moreover, after the Muslim conquest, local cities' names reappeared. Namely, there were enough people that still used the local names, despite the many centuries during which a Graeco-Roman name appeared in all official documents (Ehrlich 2022).

In al-Andalus, the situation was different. The surviving literature composed in vernacular languages is scarce and includes almost exclusively numismatic and epigraphic evidence. Cities' names such as Qadiz, Cordoba, Zaragoza, and Cartagena survived throughout the Roman period and still exist today (Belrán Lloris 2011).

The difference between the two regions indicates that the population that inhabited the eastern cities included a much more significant percentage of the indigenous population, or at least of non-Hellenized or non-Romanized folks.

The best indication of the local population's Arabization is Christian religious books in Arabic. There are two principal relevant genres of religious literature: theological books that usually served the religious elite for polemics and liturgical, namely, for the use of ordinary believers in everyday religious practices. This article deals primarily with the latter.

The earliest Arabic manuscripts from the Santa Catharina monastery in Sinai are from 859 and 867 CE. The first includes an Arabic text of one of the Evangelion, and the second includes Epistles of St. Paul. Griffith emphasized that although these were the earliest dated translations, there are many indications that there were earlier translations, which did not survive (Griffith 2013).

The earliest partial translation of the Bible into Arabic in al-Andalus, which includes a rhymed translation of Psalms, is from 889 CE. Also in this case, there are clear indications that there were also earlier translations, but again, the earliest surviving is from the second half of the ninth century (Koningsveld 1994).

Presumably, the translation of the Holy Scriptures into Arabic reflects their necessity. In other words, as long as Christians barely spoke Arabic, translations were useless and, therefore, scarce. When an increasing number of Christians became Arabic-speaking, translations became widespread. Therefore, the growing number of Bible translations from the ninth century onward indicates that Arabic became popular among Christian grassroots in Syria and al-Andalus. Evidently, clergies across the Arab-speaking world were aware of the fluency of their folks in various languages and acted accordingly.

5. Martyrdom

Martyrdom was a well-known phenomenon in pre-Constantine Roman Empire Christianity. Martyrdom stories were disseminated at the grassroots by various church authorities as an example of devotion to foster conversion to Christianity. Many martyrs were canonized, and people made pilgrimages to churches where they were buried or otherwise related to their martyrdom.

Under Islam's rule, the situation was dramatically different. Generally speaking, being a Christian in a Muslim-ruled country was perhaps inconvenient but not risky. Muslim authorities did not oblige Christians to apostate. Therefore, although the government in Syria after 634 and in Spain after 711 was not Christian, martyrdom was a relatively rare but not unthinkable occurrence in these two areas.

During the great Muslim conquests, Muslims enshrined religious tolerance to the conquered minorities. This attitude is manifested in *Amān* agreements that survived in various literary sources. These documents included stipulations that guaranteed religious freedom in return for submission and regular payment of *jizyah* (Levy-Rubin 2011).

However, while the Muslims conquered hundreds of cities and towns from Syria in the east to Spain in the west, there are records of only thirty-two *Amān* agreements. This study does not deal with the question of the agreements' veracity. Muslim authorities and city representatives could have signed those records. They could likewise be a late literary explanation for the prevailing situation in the Muslim Empire more than a century after most of the conquests took place. In one way or another, these agreements reflect a Muslim strategy to avoid sieges and frontal encounters rather than decisions made by various Muslim commanders on the ground.

The Muslims wanted to conquer as many territories as possible in minimum time. They likewise aspired to convert the conquered population. However, when they began their campaign, their forces were extremely limited, and therefore, they offered generous terms to cities that encouraged them to submit peacefully. Interestingly, they did not use this policy only in places that submitted but also in places where no documentation about their occupation method survived. Moreover, archaeological evidence suggests that even in places that, according to narrative sources, were conquered after a siege, life continued

peacefully shortly afterward (Arnon 2008). This policy enabled the Muslims to save human resources and time during the conquest and required smaller garrisons to ensure the conquered population's obedience (Ehrlich 2022). As a result, religious persecutions were rare. In these circumstances, martyrdom became unusual (Shaner 2018). However, despite Muslim tolerance, during the ninth century, there were several cases of martyrdom in Syria and al-Andalus.

The 'Martyrs of Cordoba' is probably the best-known martyrdom story from the ninth century. One of these martyrs was George of Bethlehem, a monk from the monastery of Mar Saba near Jerusalem. Sidney Griffith indicated that 'there was a route linking Christian speakers of Latin with their Arabic-speaking brothers in the east, running wholly within the territories of *dār al-Islām*' (Griffith 1985).

Milka Levy-Rubin and Benjamin Z. Kedar wondered why George, a monk whose mission was to collect alms for his monastery, became a martyr in a foreign country he was barely familiar with. They indicated that many of the known Palestinian martyrs were connected with the Mar Saba monastery and that the monastery was instrumental in disseminating their narratives. Therefore, George's action did not come out of the blue. He was a well-educated Mar Saba monk that made exactly what was expected from him (Levy-Rubin and Kedar 2001; Shaner 2018).

As written above, although martyrdom was relatively rare in the Muslim world, it happened occasionally. Griffith mentioned additional reports about Christians in Palestine that became martyrs during the eighth and ninth centuries (Griffith 1985). The main reasons for these martyrdoms were conversion from Islam to Christianity, proselytizing among the Muslims, and seeking martyrdom at the hands of Muslim authorities, as happened in Cordoba (Shaner 2018).

Here again, the question is not why people became martyrs but why martyrdom histories became more popular during the ninth century. Evidently, those who wrote and disseminated them believed that martyrs provided an inspiring example of devotion and piety. They presumably understood that no more than a few people would follow this example and become martyrs themselves. Moreover, they probably were not interested in encouraging people to become martyrs. Nevertheless, they believed that the educational message of the martyrs deserved publicity.

The martyrdom stories' target audience was the Christian community. The martyrs of Cordoba protested the Islamization and Islamization of their own community. During the ninth century, an increasing number of Christians converted to Islam in Syria and Spain alike. From the Christian point of view, those were usually 'lost cases', although few re-converted and subsequently became martyrs. However, many Christian elite members did not convert to Islam but became Islamicate in their everyday life. They refrained from using the sign of the cross in the public sphere, spoke in Arabic, adopted Islamic dress, kept Islamic food laws, and some of them even underwent circumcision (Patey 2015).

A common aspect of the martyrdom narratives in the East and West is the leading role of monks, both in the martyrdoms themselves and in their stories' dissemination.

Although the number of surviving reports is too low to create a reliable statistical model, the impression is that those who converted and became monks were relatively protected behind monasteries' walls. Monks were exposed as apostates when they reappeared in the public sphere, and acquaintances from their Muslim past identified them.

Ordinary Muslims suddenly attending the nearby church was an easy catch. Therefore, those who wanted to continue their lives emigrated or became monks or covert Christians.

Moreover, martyrdom narratives were composed by monks and circulated among Christian grassroots. It is impossible to know how popular these stories were. There are very few references to the martyrs of Cordoba in contemporary Spanish sources. The surviving contemporary manuscripts are from France. Instead, they became more popular many centuries afterward in very different circumstances (Pedrajas 1970).

6. Discussion

During the ninth century, different segments of the Christian society on both ends of the Mediterranean reacted similarly to the Islamization of their communities.

The church administration realized they had the lower hand in this struggle and were unlikely to reverse the situation. In the Middle East, they faced a perfect storm: some elite members emigrated to Christian-ruled countries, whereas others converted to Islam. Those that remained behind were not wealthy enough to finance the growing needs of their communities. Furthermore, the Byzantine Empire, which once generously supported the church administration and institutions, became a hostile entity of the caliphate. In these circumstances, the possibilities to support the communities in the caliphate were limited. Not to mention the empire's impoverishment following the great territorial losses it suffered during the first century of Islam reduced its income, so its financial resources became modest.

Furthermore, during the eighth and ninth centuries, the Roman urban system in the areas the Muslims conquered collapsed. Not only did the caliphate decide not to rebuild cities that were heavily damaged during the 749 earthquake but it also deemed to stagnation other cities that survived undamaged this crisis. This attitude dramatically impacted the church administration, whose venues were usually in Roman cities. Their disappearance provoked the subsequent fading of the local bishoprics.

In Spain, the situation was somewhat different. Additionally, a growing number of people converted, but presumably, Arabic became al-Andalus' leading language in a more gradual process. Unlike in Syria, Arabic was an unknown language among the Spanish population. Moreover, a good part of the conquerors was not Arabophone. Therefore, the diffusion of Arabic should have been relatively slow during the Muslim's rule first decades. Afterward, when more Muslims arrived from the Middle East, Arabic became more popular, first in elite circles and later among grassroots.

Likewise, Spain's cities' fate differed from their eastern parallels. Many cities survived, and the Muslims practically did not establish new cities during the first centuries of their rule. In other words, despite certain modifications, the Spanish urban network remained intact. Therefore, the ecclesiastical administration was less affected than its eastern counterparts.

Nevertheless, the Christian community's economic situation was also dire in this region. The story mentioned above about the journey of George, the monk from Mar Saba, indicates that he was on his way to the Frankish kingdom to collect alms. Presumably, when he arrived in Muslim-ruled North Africa and Spain, he realized that economic difficulties were not endemic to the Middle East. Therefore, he decided to continue to a Christian country, hoping he would be more successful there.

At the same time, Islam was winning ground all over the caliphate. An increasing number of people converted to Islam, and those that did not become increasingly Islamized in various aspects of their daily lives.

The church administration on both sides of the Mediterranean seems to use a similar attitude, namely, to adapt to the changing reality and, thus, to control damages.

The fact that parts of the Bible were translated into Arabic indicates that a growing percentage of the Christian community was more fluent in Arabic than other languages. Therefore, using Arabic to communicate with their parishioners seems a logical step. As a result, Christians did not only run their mundane affairs in Arabic but also a good part of religious life.

The pilgrimage was a popular way to struggle against assimilation. The arrival of Christians from various regions to a specific location on the same day has an encouraging effect on an embattled community.

The discovery of the tomb of Saint James and the Holy Fire miracle were two independent events that served similar challenges. The invention of the saint's tomb transformed The Iberian Peninsula generally and its region, particularly from a remote and holiness-lacking terrain into one of the medieval most important pilgrimage destinations. It likewise

became an important common segment of the Iberian Christian fragmented community. The road network to Santiago de Compostela from every place in the peninsula provides a vivid illustration of the unifying impact of this invention on the Christian community.

The pilgrimage also had an economic aspect. The increasing number of pilgrims, especially those that arrived from foreign countries, generated substantial income for pilgrimage-related institutions, fostered immigration, and increased Christian attention to the occurrences in Spain.

In some respects, the Holy Fire similarly affected the Christian community, especially in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, the Christians faced significant challenges: persecution and discrimination, the security and economic situations were at their ebb, people emigrated, pilgrims barely arrived, and so on. In these circumstances, a miracle of this sort was much required. Contemporaries should have considered fire descending from heaven on Easter on Christ's tomb crystal-clear proof of their religion's veracity. As written above, Bernard the monk, the first who recorded this miracle, probably came all the way from Mont Saint Michel to Jerusalem to see the occurrence of this miracle with his own eyes.

There were, of course, differences between these two occurrences. At the beginning of the ninth century, north-western Spain was *terra incognita* for Christians outside the region. Santiago de Compostela, which was yet to be established, was in an area that never was under Muslim rule. The saint's body discovery and the subsequent construction of the pilgrimage shrine at this site established the pilgrimage to north-western Iberian Peninsula that became significant for Western Christianity. The construction of the shrine in Santiago de Compostela coincides with significant advances of Alfonso II of Asturias during the earliest stages of the Spanish *Reconquista*.

On the other hand, Jerusalem was a venerated pilgrimage site for many centuries. When Bernard reported about the Holy Fire, the city was almost 250 years under Muslim rule. In Jerusalem, the miracle is a repetitious phenomenon that occurred every year at a specific time and place. Attracting a large number of pilgrims to Jerusalem on Easter was a manifestation of the Christian connection with Jerusalem. In this case, the miracle also encouraged the local Christian community (Coleman 2021).

Martyrdom apparently had a lesser effect on the respective communities. This was a controversial act of a few people, many of them monks isolated from urban communities. People probably admired their zeal and devotion but failed to understand the message the martyrs directed to the general Christian audience. Although manuscripts' survival also depends on chance, the fact that only a few contemporary documents survived, mostly in monasteries, indicates that these stories were unpopular with the popular audience. Not only did the grassroots find these actions extreme and excessive but the church administration also apparently did not cooperate and did not disseminate the martyrdom narratives. As a result, these stories survived for centuries behind monasteries' walls. There they were protected but also had very limited publicity.

7. Summary

Earlier studies indicated the connections between eastern and western Mediterranean Christian communities during the ninth century, especially between monasteries.

This study suggests that the similarity and contemporaneousness of the methods used by Christian communities on both shores of the Mediterranean during the ninth century were far more extensive. The church administration realized that translating holy scriptures to Arabic was a fair price for keeping contact with Arabophone grassroots. These ninth-century translations indicate that Arabic was already widespread enough to encourage the church's hierarchy to take this action.

Establishing and upgrading pilgrimage shrines were another aspect of fighting against Christians' massive conversion to Islam. The discovery of Saint James' tomb in The Iberian Peninsula and the Holy Fire in Jerusalem seems to be significant success stories.

As aforesaid, martyrdom occurred on both shores of the Mediterranean. However, although there are clear indications of the contact between monasteries in both regions, these stories were barely diffused among the public.

It seems plausible that most of the phenomena described above occurred first in the East and then were exported to the West by immigrants, merchants, and wandering monks, who, unlike George from Mar Saba, usually returned to their home communities. This suggestion stems from the fact that Islamization began in Syria many decades before Spain, and Islamization began there even later. Nevertheless, since the traffic between the regions was bilateral, it is possible that some occurrences originated in the West and were adopted by Eastern communities.

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