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Lives of Patriarchs, Lives of Qadis: Reading the Abbasid Sources of the “History of the Patriarchs” as Islamicate Texts

Cecilia Palombo | ORCID: 0000-0003-4856-0595

Assistant Professor of Early Islamic History, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
cpalombo@uchicago.edu

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Abstract

This article discusses the literary representation of religious leadership in the *Siyar al-bīʿa al-muqaddasa*, also known as “History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria”. It suggests reading accounts on early Muslim rule within the frameworks of Islamicate literature from the Abbasid and the Fatimid periods, when the collection was created, also considering successive layers of redaction. This approach contrasts with a more conventional way of reading such texts as historical sources on Christian-Muslim relations and as witnesses of the early Islamic period. By comparing stories of patriarchs and rulers with stories about qadis and rulers, the article highlights the importance of framing early Islamicate Christian sources in relation to a broader cultural context and historical developments, without exaggerating their early dating. Finally, it proposes that there is historical meaning to be found in the display of linguistic and narrative anachronisms.

Keywords

Abbasid sources – historiography – “History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria” – *akhbār al-quḍāt*

Introduction

Christian texts composed in Islamicate societies contain many stories about the encounter of Christian religious leaders and Muslim rulers. They tell us about debates, dinner parties, and interrogations since the beginnings of Muslim rule. Overall, modern scholars have treated such accounts as embellished yet reliably early representations of the relationship established between two “macro-groups”: the Muslims, represented by conquerors and rulers, and their non-Muslims subjects, represented by religious figures like patriarchs or monks. The literary meetings between Muslims and non-Muslims in the early Islamic period have been often used as a lens through which the history of minorities, sectarian relations, or the transformation of Christian communities under Muslim rule are reconstructed and evaluated. However, the picture emerging from this exquisitely modern and historicizing reading of early Islamicate texts tends to overlook some important features of their existence as literary works.¹ In this article I attempt to bring forth a historical argument about the representation of religious leadership in early Islamicate texts based on their *literary* features. My case-study is the *Siyar al-bīʿa al-muqaddasa* (henceforth *Siyar*), also called “History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria”, a well-known collection of Christian religious texts in Arabic, which has often been searched for information about the condition of Christians under Muslim rule. I read the stories narrated in the *Siyar* not as first-hand witnesses of intercommunal relations but rather as narrative iterations of a developing discourse concerning the status of religious leaders. I understand such a narrative to be prescriptive, targeting restricted Christian audiences, and informed with Islamicate literary themes.²

In Islamic studies there is a strong tradition of source-critical studies stressing the later contexts in which narratives of the early Islamic past

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- 1 This prominent approach has been inspired by orientalist scholars like Otto Meinardus and Louis Massignon. A discussion of Christian-Muslim relations and minorities studies about the Middle East falls beyond this article's scope and I reserve it for another study. I contend that those fields of study underline the historical and philological interpretation of many non-Muslim sources. For an overview of such sources, I refer the readers to the successful series *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, published by Brill. My criticism of “macro-groups” is based on Roger Brubaker's definition of “groupism” in Brubaker, *Ethnicity*.
 - 2 To study the relationship between literary and prescriptive, I find the approach adopted by Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir*, Ch. 6, especially helpful. On the *Siyar* and religious leadership, see especially Swanson, *Coptic Papacy*. Some of the arguments developed in this article were already presented in Palombo, “Islamic Local Government”.

were recast.³ Islamic texts have been subjected to careful and often excessively skeptical scrutiny; in comparison, the composition of early Islamicate Christian texts has not been analyzed with the same critical lens. While we do have Christian sources from around the time of the early Muslim conquests, there is a false impression that even much later texts may be included in the body of non-Muslim witnesses of the first/seventh and early eighth century, driven by interest in that early period and by a quest for “authentic” accounts on early Islam.⁴ I follow the critical scholarly tradition of Islamic studies in pointing the reader’s attention to the historical contexts in which texts like the *Sīyar al-bīʿa* were composed. The first part of this article presents the early Islamicate sources of the *Sīyar* and discusses various reasons why these are not only remarkably later than the conquest-period but also inseparable from each other. However, in contrast to many studies on source criticism, my goal is not to establish the chronological order of accounts about early Muslim rule, let alone their reliability. The creation of the *Sīyar al-bīʿa* started with a deliberate act of rewriting and the collection is made of textual and editorial layers that it is neither possible nor desirable to separate. The second part of the article focuses on anachronisms that were created by adding layers. Rather than interpolations, I read those anachronisms as meaningful expressions of the authors’ understanding of the past, including ideas about the role of Christian religious leaders in Islamic history. It was only through several layers of redaction that the Christian patriarchs came to be represented as counselors to the Muslim rulers, as state appointees, and as saints whose tribulations were both inflicted and resolved in an Islamic juridical setting. Moreover, I point out that layering extends beyond chronology. Multiple genres found place in the collection. Miraculous and historical events were coterminous. Hagiographical and autobiographical episodes were written together.⁵

Finally, throughout the article I make the case that the memory of early Islamic times transmitted in Christian writings such as the *Sīyar* is better understood when it is read in dialogue with other Islamicate texts. Recent studies have argued that Islamic history should integrate non-Muslim sources more fully. Similarly, it is important not to isolate those sources from the cultural

3 The bibliography is extensive. For an introduction, see the classical Donner, *Narratives*; Noth, *Historical Tradition*.

4 This is a methodological pitfall that will be familiar to those working on Eastern Christianity and is evident from collections of non-Muslim sources in translation. These are too often dated to the first/seventh or eighth century, even when their material and textual transmission suggests otherwise. I discuss the implications of misdating at length elsewhere. On the quest for the first/seventh century, see Hallaq, “Quest”.

5 See Papaconstantinou, “Historiography, Hagiography”.

context in which they were produced.⁶ While others have examined stories of rulers and patriarchs from within the *Siyar*'s own tradition or by comparing it to other Christian texts, here I consider their possible relationship with Islamic literature.⁷ A comparison between stories of patriarchs and stories of qadis suggests that the literary character of the Christian leader under Muslim rule developed in parallel to the character of the Muslim judge. Stories about, respectively, qadis and patriarchs tell us that the creation of historical memory in different confessional milieus accommodated shared literary motifs. Authors from different groups used similar narrative devices to build an incrementally compelling representation of leadership, one that spoke of their fears and aspirations by also writing them into the past. I have found inspiration in studies on historical memory, the poetics of historical writing, and literary texts as archival sites in Islamicate cultures.⁸

A Fatimid Collection with an Abbasid Layer

Siyar al-bī'a al-muqaddasa, "Lives of the holy church", is the title of a collection of texts about the Miaphysite Severan patriarchs of Egypt and their non-Chalcedonian ancestors, including those who lived before the schism of Chalcedon.⁹ In Western scholarship it is better known as the "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria" after its twentieth-century editions.¹⁰ Born and

6 See especially Tannous, *Making*.

7 For example, Mikhail, "Evolution of Lent"; Ramzi, "Sulṭat"; Simonsohn, "Muslim Involvement"; Swanson, "Reading". See also the programmatic remarks in den Heijer, "Coptic historiography".

8 These include Bora, *Writing History*; Borrut, *Mémoire et Pouvoir*; El Hibri, *Reinterpreting*; Qutbuddin, *Oration*; Shoshan, *Poetics*; Toral-Niehoff, "History in *Adab*".

9 The schism of Chalcedon in the fifth century CE was a defining event for many Christian churchmen and came to define the boundaries of later literary traditions within Eastern Christianity. For an introduction, see Wipszycka, "Insurmountable"; Tannous, "You Are What You Read".

10 Other titles including the word *Siyar* are also attested in the manuscripts. The edition and translation by Basil Evetts, *History of the Patriarchs (HP)*, was published in the *Patrologia Orientalis* starting in 1904; this was continued by A. S. Atiya, Yassa 'Abd al-Masih, and O. H. E. Burmester, with volumes published by the Société d'archéologie copte between 1943 and 1974. Another edition by Christian Seybold was published in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* starting in 1910. In 1912 Seybold published the text of a thirteenth-century Arabic manuscript in Hamburg. This is deemed to preserve portions of the earliest (Fatimid) version of the *Siyar*. Throughout this article, *HP* indicates that I am citing from the *Patrologia Orientalis*; "MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile" indicates that I am citing from Seybold's printed transcription of the Hamburg manuscript.

transmitted as an Arabic collection, it includes translations from hagiographical and homiletic texts in Coptic and Greek. It also contains accounts about political and natural events.¹¹ But the *Siyar al-bī'a* is not simply a collection of juxtaposed texts: Johannes den Heijer has called it a “historiographical tradition”, pointing to its incremental composition, with new texts being added over time.¹² What was included in the collection concerned only the Severan church, which the authors considered the only “holy church” and the lives of whose patriarchs alone they wished to tell. Texts produced in other religious circles were not included, although there is evidence that they were consulted, as mentioned below. Yet, in modern studies the *Siyar* has been often used to discuss interreligious relations, writ large. While most studies have focused on the Coptic church and Muslim-Christian relations, various scholars have used it as a historical source on Islamic Egypt.¹³ Mark Swanson, one of the major experts of this collection, has pointed out its importance for Copts in modern Egypt.¹⁴

All these features make the *Siyar* a Pandora box of methodological troubles. Its creation raises historiographical questions, starting with its dating. Scholars have identified two main moments of redaction. The first one is attributed to Mawhūb b. Maṣṣūr, a Christian notable in Fatimid Egypt, and to his team of editors.¹⁵ No manuscript dating from the Fatimid period is known; however, experts have suggested that the Fatimid version is preserved in a few later copies.¹⁶ Mawhūb's enterprise was so successful that later Christian scribes kept copying and reworking it. The second redaction dates from the Mamluk period. This version circulated more widely, was preserved in several manuscripts from the seventh/thirteenth to the thirteenth/nineteenth centuries, and is better known to modern readers.¹⁷ Finally, parts of the *Siyar al-bī'a* were

11 In this article I do not discuss the late-antique sources: see Pilette, “*Histoire des Patriarches*”; Orlandi, *Storia*.

12 den Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr*; Pilette, “*Histoire des Patriarches*”.

13 Orientalist Alfred Butler was among the first ones to use it as a source from the Muslim conquests, influencing later studies, such as Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*. Studies drawing on the *Siyar* as a historical source include Atiya, *Eastern Christianity*; El Leithy, “Coptic Culture”; Mikhail, *Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*; Swanson, *Coptic Papacy*.

14 On Christian piety in modern Egypt, see Heo, *Political Life*.

15 den Heijer, “Petit essai”.

16 MS Hamburg Ar. 304; MS Paris arabe 303; and MS Cairo Copt. Patr. hist. 12. See Pilette, “Recension primitive”, 147; den Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr*, 23–27.

17 MS Paris arabe 153, 301–302; MS Paris arabe 4773 (reproducing MS Cairo Patr. copt. 503, as I learned from Perrine Pilette); Lond. O3. 1338. See Pilette, “*Histoire des Patriarches*”; den Heijer and Pilette, “Murqus Simaika”. Some wonderful copies were turned into digital

transmitted under the name of a Mamluk-era bishop in a later work called *Ta'riḫ al-abā' al-baṭārika*, probably from the eleventh/seventeenth century.¹⁸ The passages preserved in this work do not always coincide with the Fatimid or the Mamluk versions mentioned above and may be considered a sort of third strand.

Such details about the *Siyar*'s creation are important to my argument because they underscore that its redaction as a collection cannot be abstracted from the historical interpretation one may build on its individual parts. Relying on the *Siyar* to write about early Islamic history requires that we bear in mind all those various threads. In fact, there are reasons to be skeptical that the *Siyar* may bring us back directly to the time of the Muslim conquests and the early Umayyads. On the other hand, there seems to be an important Abbasid layer underlying the collection as we have it. By "Abbasid layer" I am referring to a group of texts composed between the second/eighth and the fourth/tenth centuries which were selected for inclusion into the Fatimid and all later versions of the *Siyar al-bī'a*. Some may have been written directly in Arabic; others were translated by Mawhūb and his team, but all that is left of the original language (either Coptic or Greek) is a few Greek glitches in the Arabic versions. Moreover, I think it is likely that some texts composed in Coptic or Greek were already transmitted in Arabic by the time Mawhūb's team found them; in other words, they might have had access to older translations. It seems significant that, before den Heijer's studies on Mawhūb, another Christian scholar, the fourth/tenth-century writer Sāwirus b. al-Muqaffā, was conventionally identified as its author. Even if that attribution was incorrect, its persistence and the fact that he is mentioned inside the *Siyar* suggest that the collection might have incorporated a fourth/tenth-century Arabic version.¹⁹

In short, this is an Arabic collection created in the Fatimid period, and revisited and expanded in later centuries, which was built on an Abbasid layer and relied on various late-antique sources. It connects seamlessly the life of the apostle Mark to the patriarchs of Fatimid Egypt, and later. Once we leave the oldest late-antique sources about the church in the Roman period, we find a group of texts about early Muslim rule composed in the Abbasid and the Fatimid periods. My interpretation of these texts' chronology relies on studies by Kamil Nakhla, Johannes den Heijer, and David Johnson.²⁰ However,

replicas thanks to the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library; these include a copy in Arabic Gharshuni from Mardin: <https://hmmml.org/collections/eastern-christian/>.

18 Pseudo-Yusāb of Fuwwa, *Ta'riḫ*. See Moawad, "Yusāb of Fuwwa"; al-Suriyān, "Manuscripts".

19 See Swanson, "Sāwirus b. Muqaffā".

20 Nakhla, *Ta'riḫ wa-Jadāwil*; den Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Manṣūr*; Johnson, "Remarks" (based on the unpublished PhD dissertation, "Coptic sources of the 'History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria'", Catholic University of America, 1974).

in contrast to other studies, I propose that the earliest Islamicate texts we can read in the collection are Abbasid and I am skeptical that we may reconstruct the reality of the first/seventh century based on the *Siyar*'s stories. Instead, I focus on the Abbasid layer to study how the authors contributed to shaping an account of early Islamic history that was at once narrative and prescriptive for the future.²¹ It is worth pausing for a moment on this group of texts.

The *Siyar*'s Early Islamicate Texts

The oldest Islamicate text (i.e., postdating the Muslim conquests) in the *Siyar* dates probably from the second/late-eighth or early ninth century. Narratively, it covers the lives of patriarchs from the schism of Chalcedon, in the fifth century CE, until the end of the Umayyads. The author, sometimes called Yuḥannā “the deacon”, wrote in the first person and was alive at the time of the transition to Abbasid rule, a political event that he welcomed.²² He mentions having consulted the writings of an “archdeacon” who was either the “companion” or the “spiritual child” and the “secretary” (*kātib*) of the patriarch Shim‘ūn (d. 76/695), with variations in the manuscripts. From older texts he learned about the patriarchs from Cyril (d. 444 CE) to Alexander II (d. 111/729), from the time of the emperor Marcian (d. 457 CE, the emperor of Chalcedon) to the caliphs Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 99/717) and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 102/720).²³ Yuḥannā’s predecessor has raised interest in recent studies. He is often called “George the archdeacon” and is treated as a witness of early Muslim rule.²⁴ However, very little can be known about this lost source. The archdeacon’s name is either Jirja, Marqa, or Murqus, depending on the manuscript. Various archdeacons appear in the *Siyar* and it is hard to say whether we are dealing with one or more characters.²⁵ The dating of this source is also uncertain. While modern scholars often place it during or soon after the Muslim conquests, there are hints that Yuḥannā “the deacon” consulted a later Marwanid source. In fact, he mentions the Marwanid caliphs Sulaymān and ‘Umar, and praises for Hishām

21 A discursive approach has been already suggested by Stephen Davies and Mark Swanson in the series *The Popes of Egypt*, published by the American University in Cairo Press. My approach takes on their suggestion but shifts the focus away from the history of the church under Muslim rule and towards Islamicate literature.

22 See Nakhla, *Ta’rīkh wa-Jadāwil*, 15; Swanson, “John the Deacon”; Swanson, *Coptic Papacy*, pp. 18–26.

23 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, p. 152.

24 See Nakhla, *Ta’rīkh wa-Jadāwil*, 13; Swanson, “George the Archdeacon”.

25 Scholars have attempted to harmonize these characters: Nakhla, *Ta’rīkh wa-Jadāwil*; Johnson, “Remarks”.

b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 125/743).²⁶ Be it as it may, the lost Marwanid source meshed with accounts of the Marwanids’ defeat and cannot be easily disentangled from Yuḥannā’s own writings and from other texts he might have used.²⁷

The author we call Yuḥannā “the deacon”, in turn, was included in the *Siyar* together with other texts. Editors working in the Fatimid period, presumably Mawḥūb’s assistants, tell us that they translated various texts found at monastic libraries.²⁸ In arranging the collection, they put the life of patriarch Shim‘ūn at the end of one section; this roughly coincides with the end of the second *fitna*, an interesting periodization choice, even if perhaps coincidental. Moreover, they found two sets of “Lives” about the patriarchs living under the early Abbasids and the Tulunids.²⁹ Modern scholars have identified at least one large group of “Lives”, covering a hundred years of Miaphysite patriarchs, which might be attributed to a single pen from the third/late-ninth century. This pen is sometimes called Yuḥannā “the writer”.³⁰ Based on the contents, particularly the description of al-Ma’mūn’s caliphate (r. 170–218/813–833), it seems likely that this author consulted writings of the Syrian patriarch Dionysius of Tell Mahre, who was in the retinues of the caliph al-Ma’mūn and his governor Ibn Ṭāhir and visited Egypt twice in the third/ninth century.³¹ In the text we find the names of four more unknown writers: two monks called Makare, one called Yuḥannā, and one “archdeacon” related to the patriarch Kōsmas (d. 111/730 CE).³² Finally, the Fatimid bishop Mikhā’il of Tinnis has been identified as the author of “Lives” of patriarchs from the third/ninth to the fifth/eleventh centuries, including the Ikhshidid period, when Egypt was substantially autonomous from Abbasid rule.³³

A few things may be said about these writers. They were churchmen and secretaries working for the Severan clergy and, in some cases, at lay chanceries. They were associated with the influential monasteries of Apa Makare and the Wadi Habib but the stories they tell us suggest that they belonged to a wealthy urban class based in Alexandria, Wasim, Nikiou, and Fustat-Misr.³⁴ In a way,

26 E.g., MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 145, 152.

27 See MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 184 and ff.

28 In *HP*, the year is “796 of the Martyrs Era” (1080 CE). However, in the Hamburg manuscript, written in the thirteenth century, we find twice the year “476 of the Martyrs” (760 CE). Perhaps the copyist was more used to the hijri calendar and hyper-corrected the date: MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, p. 132.

29 More precisely, from Khā’il (d. 150/767) and Mīnā (d. 159/776) to Sānūtyus (d. 267/880).

30 See Nakhla, *Ta’rikh wa-Jadāwil*; Swanson, “John the Writer”.

31 Wood, *Imam of the Christians*, pp. 175–85.

32 *HP*, p. 360.

33 See Swanson, “Michael of Damrū”.

34 See Mikhail and Moussa, *Wadi Natrun*; Anba Epiphanius, “Monastery of St. Macarius”.

these writers partook of two literary worlds at once. On the one hand, they were immersed in Coptic religious literature. They read and wrote monastic texts combining hagiographical and belles-lettres elements. On the other hand, they did not live in isolation and frequently mentioned lay notables and chanceries. Books left and found in the Wadi Habib's libraries became sources for Christian writers of the Abbasid and later periods. Such books are hard to identify. Differently from Islamic texts, Christian hagiographies do not use chains of transmission. The *Siyar*'s authors and editors were vague when referring to books they had seen or read. Only a few (such as a *History of the Church* based on Eusebius of Caesarea) are recognizable. Others (like the Marwanid sources mentioned above) were consulted without citing or meshed with later texts. No manuscript of the *Siyar* allows us to step outside the Fatimid rewriting of an Abbasid layer.

Even if they invite us to move away from the earliest decades of Islamic history, these interesting features allow us to place the *Siyar* within Islamicate Arabic literature. Taken together, the Abbasid and the Fatimid redactions help us explain the way in which the *Siyar* depicts the role of Christian religious leaders since the Muslim conquests. When it comes to stories about Muslim rule, it is therefore in Islamicate literature that we should look for comparisons.

Lives of Patriarchs and Lives of Qadis

The relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim texts is often difficult to trace. On the surface, both groups of writers mostly ignored each other. Notable exceptions exist, especially in court milieus, but clear cross-references and personal exchanges are rare to come by.³⁵ Instead, *indirect* references to other religious elites and the texts they produced were frequent since the early Islamic period.³⁶ Cases such as Sa'īd b. Baṭrīq's, the Egyptian patriarch author of an Arabic chronicle in the fourth/tenth century, show us that Christian writers read Islamic historical texts already in the Abbasid period. Sa'īd's chronicle is a pertinent example: it used Muslim sources and, in turn, was consulted by the creators of the *Siyar al-bī'a*, who knew a Syrian recension of his work.³⁷

35 See Schmidtke, "Intellectual History".

36 Here, I am not referring to modes of intentional intertextuality but rather to allusions and even unintentional echoes. See, for example, Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 523–541; Penn, *Envisioning*; Palombo, "Monasteries".

37 See Buraidy, *Études*; den Hejjer, "Coptic Historiography".

Another example is Dionysius of Tell Mahre, who knew Islamic literature, seems to have read Arabic “mirrors for princes”, and probably was a source for the *Siyar*’s accounts about the third/ninth century.³⁸ Nonetheless, it is true that Christian writers often wrote anonymously or under pseudonym and frequently omitted their sources. In the case of the *Siyar al-bīʿa*, the comparison with Islamic literature is suggested by narrative themes and not by direct references.

The collection’s layered redaction both conceals and discloses its relationship with Islamic literature. First, recognizing the Abbasid layer helps us pinpoint the emergence of a discourse about religious leadership. In fact, the portrayal of religious leaders and rulers in the *Siyar* may be compared to other texts from the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, whereas it differs from earlier texts. I suspect that the transmission of accounts about the careers of qadis, the development of the *akhbār al-quḍāt* (accounts about qadis) as a genre, and the short-lived but impactful experience of the *miḥna* – the “trial” in which groups of Muslim officials were harassed and dismissed – influenced how Christian authors narrativized their religious leaders’ lives. Al-Maʾmūn’s reign, when the *miḥna* started, and al-Mutawakkil’s reign, when it was reversed, have been identified as critical moments for the condition of non-Muslim groups and, even more so, their leaders.³⁹ But rather than a crisis disrupting an established model, in which non-Muslim leaders would have lost their traditional status, the third/ninth century may be seen as the beginning of new models, in which they lost and were attributed different positions than before. Like Muslim scholars, non-Muslim writers became more preoccupied with defining the space of action of their religious leaders.⁴⁰ A new discourse hostile to the official employment of non-Muslims started taking shape.⁴¹ The qadi’s post became more clearly defined as well as more frequently narrated in written accounts.⁴² At the same time, Christian writers started painting their leaders as “qadi-like” figures.

The “qadification” of non-Muslim religious leaders seems to be a broad phenomenon of Abbasid literature. One example of how the language deployed

38 See Wood, *Imam of the Christians*, pp. 186–207.

39 The literature on the *miḥna* is too extensive to be cited exhaustively here. Two important studies are van Ess, *Theology and Society*, vol. 3, pp. 483–544; Nawas, *al-Maʾmūn*. The latter is especially pertinent, as it raised the question of a possible link between the *miḥna*’s end and the start of new policies against non-Muslims. The question was recently taken on by Yarbrough: *Friends of the Emir*, pp. 88–89.

40 See, for example, Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph* pp. 123–144.

41 See Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir* pp. 48–87.

42 See Tillier, *Invention* pp. 149–176.

by Christian writers changed in the Abbasid period comes from Philip Wood's study of Dionysius of Tell Mahre: at the court of al-Ma'mūn, the Syrian patriarch started using terms derived from Islamic political thought to affirm his authority.⁴³ Kayla Dang has studied changes in the representation of Zoroastrian priesthood in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, when "members of the priesthood used their position and proximity to Muslim elites to shape the narrative of their own tradition and history". Dang has pointed out that in that period Muslim writers started likening Zoroastrian leaders to non-Muslim qadis and extended such a characterization to the Zoroastrian priests of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times.⁴⁴ Thus, a new depiction of religious leaders as judicial authorities was both put to use in the present and given historical depth.

The *Siyar al-bī'a* speaks of these same developments through stories. As the examples below show, it repeatedly characterized its patriarchs as state appointees on a similar social standing as the qadi. Moreover, they often appear on trial. They are interrogated by the ruler or the qadi. Various narrative themes in the *Siyar* lend themselves to comparison with Islamic texts about the lives of qadis; only some are mentioned in this article. While I have not found direct quotes, some of the stories collected in the *Siyar* call to mind accounts from the *Kitāb al-quḍāt* (or *Akhbār quḍāt Miṣr*) by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Kindī, the *Futūḥ Miṣr* by Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, and the *Akhbār al-quḍāt* by Wakī'. On occasion, the *Siyar* and Muslim sources transmit similar pieces of information about a ruler or an event. What is more, they seem to presuppose a shared historical trajectory (regarding dynasties) and a vision of authority (regarding the role of religious scholars and some famous caliphs) that were taking shape primarily in Muslim intellectual circles in the Abbasid period.⁴⁵ In particular, it seems worthwhile comparing the *Siyar* with accounts transmitted by al-Kindī in the fourth/tenth century, despite the obvious differences, because al-Kindī's work was also redacted in the Fatimid period, also focused on northern Egypt, and was also arranged biographically, following qadis and governors in the province since the Muslim conquest.⁴⁶

43 Wood, *Imam of the Christians*, esp. Ch. 8.

44 Dang, "Priestly Authority" (cit. p. 100). I first learned about Kayla Dang's research on this topic thanks to her presentation "The Zoroastrian Priests of the Islamic Era" at the online workshop *Jews, Christians, and Muslims as Colleagues and Collaborators in the Abbasid Near East* (LMU University, 2020).

45 The role of Muslim scholars in Islamic government was a matter of debate: see Zaman, *Religion and Politics*.

46 See Tillier, *Histoire des cadis*, pp. 3–22.

“Qadification” is an imprecise term; I use it only to indicate the literary depiction of religious leaders as state appointees and as wise men who could both advise and be persecuted by the rulers. It seems likely to me that Christian authors were affected both by the growing prestige of Muslim judges and by a literary discourse about the status of Muslim religious scholars. We cannot use “patriarch” for the same wordplay – assuming, conversely, that Christian leaders served as a model for the *akhbār al-quḍāt* – because Muslim and non-Muslim writers mention the qadi as a model. Moreover, Christian writers adopted Islamic terms and complained about the prestige of Arabic and Arabic literature.⁴⁷ To be clear, by suggesting that in the Abbasid period Christian authors started writing about their religious leaders as judicial authorities and of judicial authorities as “qadi-like” figures, I do not mean that they copied stories about the qadi by replacing the qadi with a patriarch. Rather, they blended traditional Christian themes with themes derived from a growing body of accounts about caliphs, governors, and qadis. This blend allowed them to make claims about the patriarch’s authority and about their own social and professional position. Thus, the “Lives” of the patriarchs continued to rely on themes derived from late-antique texts, especially hagiography, while also adopting new themes, such as disputes before the qadi or the involvement of chancery secretaries in church affairs.

The second feature revealing the *Siyar*’s relation to other Islamicate texts pertains to its language. When Fatimid writers selected, translated, and edited older texts to form the basis of the *Siyar al-bīa*, they often chose a technical vocabulary conveying the image of patriarchs as communal leaders and appointed officials. This process continued with the Mamluk version. A vision of religious authority that exaggerated the patriarch’s status and responsibilities may be recognized in some stories already in the Abbasid layer of the collection. However, it crystallized with the language chosen by successive generations of writers, who were familiar with communal structures and administrative practices inexistent in previous centuries: the Fatimid and Mamluk editors of the *Siyar*, or, as another example, Michael the Syrian and his use of Dionysius’ writings. I call these later interventions “meaningful anachronisms”.

47 See, for example, Papaconstantinou, “They Shall Speak”.

Meaningful Anachronisms

Historians have often noticed that the *Siyar al-bī'a* contains anachronisms. Some are linguistic; for example, we find titles that are not attested in early Islamic documents to describe early Muslim officials, like *ṣāhib al-kharāj*.⁴⁸ Others are narrative; they concern procedures that we associate with later periods. Both types have been part of the collection since its birth. This is the main reason why, in my view, we should neither ignore them nor attempt to correct or edit them. They reveal a process of narrativization through rewriting. Moreover, they reveal the editors' familiarity with Islamic administration, Islamic literature, and elements of Islamic political thought.

One example comes from episodes explaining how, after the conquests, the caliphate's first appointees were established in office. Writing in the third/ninth and the fourth/tenth centuries, Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam and al-Kindī report that the first qadis of Egypt were chosen by the caliph in Medina and appointed by the governor. Thus, the judge Qays b. Abī al-ʿĀṣ was nominated by 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and confirmed by 'Amr b. al-Āṣ, Egypt's first governor. The general 'Amr himself might have been appointed qadi by 'Umar upon the conquest. Other qadis appointed by 'Umar are Shurayḥ b. al-Ḥārith in Iraq and Ka'b b. Yasār in Egypt.⁴⁹ Putting aside the question of historical accuracy, these reports convey, first, that the legitimacy of post-conquest offices is ascribable to the will of the caliph 'Umar, and thereby normative for the future; second, that the governor dealt directly with local officials; and third, that the qadis had been state appointees since the beginning of Muslim rule.⁵⁰ The same narrative is found in the *Siyar al-bī'a*, where it is applied to the patriarch Binyāmīn (Benjamin), the first one appointed after the conquest.⁵¹ In this story, 'Umar is informed of Benjamin's misfortunes and dispatches 'Amr to help him. Upon meeting him, 'Amr writes to "all districts of Egypt" (*a'māl Miṣr*, an administrative phrase typical of Fatimid and later texts) to inform them of the situation.⁵² The saint is put under a pact of protection (*amān*) and made "head of the Christians" (*ra'īs al-naṣāra*). 'Amr listens to the saint's sermons and enjoins him

48 As pointed out by Frantz-Murphy, "Economics".

49 al-Wakī, *Akhbār al-quḍāt*, vol. 2, pp. 189–190, 408; al-Kindī, *al-Quḍāt*, vol. 1, pp. 217–218.

50 On the history of qadiship, see Tillier, *Invention*; Judd, *Religious Scholars*.

51 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 100–101. On this story, see Swanson, "Reading"; Ramzi, "Sulṭat".

52 While *'amal* with the meaning of "district" is found already in a few early Islamic documents, the phrase *a'māl Miṣr* becomes frequent only starting in the fifth/eleventh century. The Arabic Papyrology Database shows that most attestations are Fatimid and later. On the early instances, see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, pp. 138–139.

to take possession of the church (*dabaṭa*).⁵³ This story reveals some degree of familiarity with Islamic Arabic literature on the conquests: Benjamin's hagiography, which started circulating in writing in the second/eighth century, was enriched with references to 'Amr and his expeditions. Moreover, it suggests that, like the first qadis, Benjamin was appointed by the will of 'Umar and by the governor's decree. This basic message, contained in the story's outline, was amplified through the legal and administrative terms chosen by the Fatimid and later editors.

Texts composed in different confessional milieus deposited a sediment of knowledge and imagination about the past by creating or repeating similar accounts. They also adopted similar chronological and regional scopes. While focusing on Christian patriarchs, the *Siyar* never really departs from the chronology of dynasties established in Abbasid Islamic historiography.⁵⁴ It also provides a list of Egyptian governors, reflecting a regional focus that is typical of Arabic literature from Egypt since the fourth/tenth century.⁵⁵ Besides periodization, there are various examples of how the texts included in this collection added to the depiction of Muslim rulers. For instance, we find praises for Hishām as a just judge and a pious caliph, qualities that he was attributed in Umayyad poetry as well as later historical works. While Muslim sources make him a patron of Muslim scholars, in the *Siyar* Hishām is a friend of the Syrian patriarch.⁵⁶ As another example, stories about the governor of Egypt 'Abd al-'Azīz (d 86/705) recall what was transmitted by Muslim authors but emphasize the patriarch's powers.⁵⁷ Al-Kindī and Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam tell us that 'Abd al-'Azīz appointed his own officials and generals, including as many as eight qadis in Egypt. One of these was a renowned hadith transmitter, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥujayra.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the *Siyar* 'Abd al-'Azīz personally confirms the appointment of four patriarchs.⁵⁹ In another Fatimid text, he promotes the administrative and ecclesiastical career of the patriarch Isaak "the secretary". A relatively famous episode has Isaak and the governor debating during

53 I was unable to find this use of *dabaṭa* in the papyri before the sixth/eleventh century.

54 See Khalidi, "Periodization" and "Kitābat al-ta'rikh".

55 See, for example, Tillier, *Invention*, pp. 161–171; Antrim, *Routes*, pp. 108–142.

56 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 140–146. On Hishām, see Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, pp. 36–37; al-Duri, *Historical Writing*, Ch. 2; Borrut, *Mémoire et Pouvoir*, pp. 73–76.

57 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 127–128; Pseudo-Yūsāb, *Ta'rikh*, 53.

58 al-Kindī, *al-Quḍāt*, vol. 1, pp. 229–230; Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ*, p. 203. Joshua Mabra has interpreted this pattern in relation to 'Abd al-'Azīz's conflict with the caliph. See Mabra, *Princely Authority*.

59 *HP*, pp. 12–49.

a dinner party.⁶⁰ Narrative episodes in which ‘Abd al-‘Azīz meets the patriarchs have been studied to understand his attitude (negative or positive) towards the Christians. However, they are paralleled by Muslim accounts in which he interrogates or converses with qadis. If in the *Siyar al-bī‘a* and the *Life of Isaak* he debates religion with the patriarchs, in al-Kindī we find him conversing with the qadis Ibn Ḥujayra and ‘Ābis b. Sa‘īd.⁶¹ Thus, the *Siyar*’s authors added to the representation of the governor’s life, which we find in written texts from the third/ninth and later centuries, by integrating his character into hagiographical accounts, with the double effect of emphasizing the patriarch’s religious might and the legitimacy of his more secular powers over the faithful. The patriarchs emerge from these stories as authorities who might suffer because of the ruler but also accompany him on official trips, reside next to him, and be appointed by his decree.

Although ‘Abd al-‘Azīz might have really spent time with the patriarchs (it is hard to say), the latter’s portrayal as appointees is anachronistic. The anachronism is revealed to be intentional when one pays attention to the language. For example, saint Benjamin is called “head of the Christians” (*raʿīs al-naṣāra*), evoking a title that was introduced under the Fatimids for Jewish communal leaders (*raʿīs al-yahūd*) but that, as far as we know, was never given to Christians.⁶² An Umayyad Christian official is attributed the power “to command and to forbid” (*al-amr wa-l-nahy*), echoing the functions of the Muslim *muhtasib* as they were conceptualized since the Abbasid period. This is not unique to the *Siyar al-bī‘a*: Michael Cook has noticed that variations on the same Quranic phrase (*al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar*) are found in non-Muslim texts, such as Saʿādyā Gaon and Bar ʿEbrāyā, starting in the fourth/tenth century.⁶³ As another example, we read that the patriarch had the duty of taking care of the church as detailed in the *sijillāt*.⁶⁴ The editors chose a technical meaning of *sijill* as “state decree” which would be understandable to Fatimid or Mamluk audiences and which does not match the use of this term in earlier centuries.⁶⁵ These choices dress older practices in a later technical

60 In recent studies on Christian-Muslim relations the *Life of Isaak of Rakoti* is often cited as an Umayyad text. However, the manuscript, the language, and the contents place it safely in the Fatimid period, as first suggested by Émile Amélineau, who edited it in 1890.

61 al-Kindī, *al-Qudāt*, vol. 1, pp. 225–227.

62 See Cohen, *Self-Government*.

63 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, p. 137. See Ghabin, “*Muhtasib*”; Cook, *Commanding Right*, pp. 572–573, 600–603.

64 *HP*, p. 508.

65 In earlier centuries, *sijill* refers to the sealing or the recording of official documents, such as a type of travel permit and some types of tax receipts. For some examples, see

lexicon and convey the message that the patriarch had always been akin to a state official.

One episode about the third/ninth-century patriarch Yusāb makes the comparison between qadis and patriarchs more explicit. When Yusāb's position is challenged by a Chalcedonian competitor, the qadi Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh is asked to give a verdict. This figure's name might be a real pun: two members of the Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam family, Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh (d. 268/882) and Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh (d. 214/829), were famous religious scholars and legal experts in third/ninth-century Egypt. The latter was remembered as "chief of the Malikis in Egypt".⁶⁶ During the audit, Yusāb first argues that his election was divinely inspired, only managing to infuriate the qadi. In the end, however, Muḥammad agrees that Yusāb should keep his post: he is made to acknowledge that patriarch and qadi have a similar status because both were appointed by decree of the same caliph.⁶⁷

We find a similar message in passages affirming the Muslim ruler's authority over his officials. This view appears to be somewhat in line with the thought of Muslim writers of the early Abbasid period advocating a key role for religious scholars in administration and, simultaneously, the ruler's right to appoint them to official posts.⁶⁸ In the *Sīyar*, such claims are voiced only through stories. For example, the patriarch Mīnā says to al-Manṣūr, who had just replaced him with another official: "I will respect this decision with joy, so that I may fulfill the Law, which orders me to obey the ruler like obeying God. For it is written, he who rebels against and opposes the authority (*sultān*) is also rebelling against God".⁶⁹ The patriarch Shim'un says to the governor: "Command (*amr*) belongs to God and to you."⁷⁰ Such passages reflect a development in the use of classical Christian texts. While the focus stays on the saint's religious behavior, at every turn the patriarch is depicted as an appointee of the ruler. The election may not go on without the ruler's approval, and even though it is only God that allows him to recognize the right person, he often seems to understand God's intention better than the bishops.⁷¹

Frantz-Murphy, *Agricultural Leases*. According to Abbasid texts, the documents kept by the qadi were also called *sijillāt*. See Müller, "Power of the Pen".

66 Brockopp, "Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam family" and "Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam".

67 *HP*, pp. 523–27.

68 See Zaman, "Caliphs".

69 *HP*, p. 370. This passage echoes closely the *Letter to the Romans* and its commentaries but may also be compared to hadith about obedience and authority (*sultān*).

70 *HP*, p. 131.

71 For example, the Muslim administrators revert the bishops' initial decision by verifying documents and finding evidence in favor of a different candidate: ms Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 120–23.

In these stories we may recognize, first, the spontaneous use of technical words that were familiar to the *Siyar*'s editors and, second, a rhetorical strategy expressing the wish that the patriarch's prestige may be confirmed by association with the rulers. This might have been inspired by real cases in which non-Muslim religious figures were integrated into elite circles; examples are Dionysius of Tell Mahre at the court of al-Ma'mūn, studied by Philip Wood, or Ādurfarrbay ī Farrozzādān at the court of al-Mutawakkil, studied by Kayla Dang. However, these were individual careers, which we find narrated in literary sources starting in the third/ninth century and later. There is no contemporary evidence that in the first/seventh century or under the Umayyads the patriarchs would be appointed by decree. Instead, the early sources suggest that the clergy's involvement in the administration – an important phenomenon in Egypt especially in the late Marwanid and the early Abbasid period – was mostly informal, low-key, and contingent on local contexts. It is also important not to conflate Christian leaders, churchmen, secretaries, and subjects, all in one group. While we have clear evidence that Christians were employed in administrative roles since early on, it is hard to see any appointment by decree of non-Muslim religious leaders until the Fatimid period.⁷² In the case of the Miaphysite patriarchs, a relationship of patronage with the ruler (or antagonism, for that matters) might have developed in individual cases. The *Siyar*'s authors, however, turned it into a narrative pattern fitting their hagiographical concerns. Such concerns prevail in the narrative and religious elements like dreams and miracles define all the encounters of patriarchs and rulers.⁷³ In part, the same hagiographical concerns explain why the Fatimid and Mamluk editors often chose anachronistic terms related to communal and judicial leadership, as these helped them make claims about the patriarch's authority on the faithful. What is interesting is that such claims also found their way into the narrative of early Islamic history.

In the Judge's Presence

A striking feature of the phenomenon discussed in this article is that stories about patriarchs and rulers are often staged in a legal setting and deploy a legal language. In several episodes the patriarch is questioned by the authorities. There is often an external element endangering his relationship with the ruler, such as a whistleblower or a corrupt official. For example, after a tribunal

72 On the clergy's role in Islamic administration in Egypt, see Palombo, "Local Government".

73 For example, in a passage about 'Abd al-'Azīz, his wife, and the patriarch: *HP*, pp. 15–17.

presided by the governor Ibn Nuṣayr in the year 132/749 failed to mediate between the Miaphysite and the Dyophysite clergies, a series of betrayals and bribes led to the incarceration of the religious leaders of both factions.⁷⁴ Stories in which the patriarch is put on trial blend in traditional Christian themes, like the saint's endurance, and allusions to Islamic legal procedures. During trials that often start with accusations of corruption, we find churchmen being investigated and sentenced. Similar stories, it should be noted, are also found in accounts about qadis. Two examples are the investigation of the qadi Yaḥyā b. Maymūn, leading to the arrest of his assistant, and the story of the falsified Arab genealogies obtained with the qadi's help.⁷⁵

The use of legal terms in the *Sīyar al-bīʿa* extends beyond stories about interrogations or imprisonment. Doctrinal matters, too, are generally dealt with in the judge's presence. Various scholars have noticed that in Christian texts it is common to find early Muslim rulers intervening in church matters, giving the impression that they would be interested in meddling with the internal debates of other religious groups.⁷⁶ However, this impression might be exaggerated. Not only are these accounts expressed rhetorically and preserved in later sources than the events; they also frame the ruler's interventions in church matters in different ways, and not necessarily by evoking Constantinian images of a ruler presiding over Christian synods. In the *Sīyar al-bīʿa*, for example, they are represented as either audits or trials. The Muslim ruler seems often interchangeable with the qadi, figuring as an arbiter or a judicial authority.⁷⁷ Either the governor or the qadi might become involved in a dispute because of complaints; they receive petitions; they summon and interrogate the litigants; documents might be collected as evidence; and the verdict usually comes after cross-examination. For instance, when the governor 'Abd al-'Azīz gets involved, following complaints, in a dispute about the clergy's celibacy, he summons a group of bishops. The bishops ignore the reason for being summoned and the meeting (*ijtimāʿ*) looks like an official convocation.⁷⁸ In another episode, the governor Ibn Nuṣayr is asked to settle a dispute between Dyophysites and Miaphysites. During the meeting, which is called a "litigation" (*khuṣūma*), he reads aloud documents and "sheds light" on the situation by bringing out the parties' "right claims" (*kashafa 'an al-ḥaqq*).

74 *HP*, pp. 118–129.

75 Al-Kindī, *al-Qudāt*, vol. 1, pp. 246–247, 287–288. On this incident, see Bouderbala, "Mawālī à Fustāt".

76 See Tannous, "Search"; Simonhons, "Muslim Involvement".

77 This goes back to the complex problem of caliphal authority in Islamicate texts. See, among others, Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Turner, *Inquisition*; Zaman, *Religion and Politics*.

78 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, p. 126.

All these phrases have a legal meaning alongside a generic one. As a third example, a qadi is asked to give a verdict (*ḥakama*) to solve a doctrinal debate between Dyophysites and Miaphysites.⁷⁹

One possible explanation for the recurrence of trials in the *Sīyar al-bī'a* is that the theme was inspired by accounts of the *miḥna*. The influence of the *miḥna* is admittedly faint and diffused, rather than philological. Moreover, the interrogation of patriarchs is always accompanied by stories of corruption or disloyalty and is never motivated with doctrinal issues. However, if we read the *Sīyar*'s texts within the context of Islamicate literature from the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, as I have suggested, then it is worth bearing in mind that the *miḥna* played a significant role in the development of Abbasid historical writing and in the rise of the *akhbār al-quḍāt* as a genre centered on the lives and careers of religious leaders.⁸⁰ In other words, it is possible that the *miḥna* as a literary phenomenon – one that transformed historical experiences and memories – influenced the elaboration of Christian narratives about trials and martyrdom. While Muslim authors collected accounts about qadis who had been questioned, dismissed, or imprisoned during the *miḥna*, as well as about trials that had preceded the *miḥna*, Christian authors might have felt the need to portray their leaders as having been similarly subjected to scrutiny. We read, for instance, that al-Ma'mūn started loving the Christians after “making investigations” (*baḥatha*) about their “school” (*madhhab*, the same word used for Islamic juridical schools). Al-Ma'mūn was “a just man” (*ḥakīm*, and perhaps the echo of *ḥakama*, “giving judgment”, is not coincidental) in “his deeds” or “his religious knowledge”.⁸¹ His encounters with the patriarchs are called *mushāhadāt*, a verbal noun carrying the meaning of “being an eye-witness” as well as “inspection”.⁸² Surely, the theme had a late-antique precursor and Christian martyrologies provided a model.⁸³ But differently from the late-antique sources of the *Sīyar al-bī'a*, in which the patriarch may be depicted as a martyr, here the traditional theme gains additional layers: the patriarch is directly examined by the caliph or he visits the Islamic court alongside lay officials. Even when stories of trials are set in the early Islamic period,

79 *HP*, pp. 123–124.

80 See Tillier, “Qāḍīs” and *Invention*, pp. 150–176.

81 *HP*, p. 492. Similarly, in a passage attributed to Dionysius of Tell Mahre, this caliph is said to be knowledgeable about “the book and the law”; cit. by Wood, *Imam of the Christians*, p. 166. On al-Ma'mūn in literary texts, see El Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, pp. 108–26; Swanson, “al-Ma'mun Tradition”; Wasserstein, “Majlis”.

82 *HP*, p. 508.

83 Coptic martyrologies also spread in the Abbasid period. See Papaconstantinou, “Historiography, Hagiography”.

the *Sīyar*'s redaction process made them more contiguous with, and almost premonitions of, interrogations to come.

Leadership Disputes

We may interpret accounts of leadership disputes in a similar way. A recurring narrative scheme in Islamicate literary texts tells us that, during crises, when it was difficult to appoint a religious official, two or more factions could nominate a candidate and make their case with the ruler. This recurring theme – leadership disputes based on competition – has often been interpreted in the light of “Muslim-*dhimmi*” relations. It would demonstrate the need of non-Muslim factions to compete for the rulers’ favors because of their difficult existence as “minorities”. However, both the narrative theme and the procedure are found in various Islamicate texts, especially since the fourth/tenth century.

Various texts tell us that, before being appointed, the aspiring official might go through a selection process. The ruler may be presented with a candidate or may order an assistant to prepare a list of names. For instance, al-Kindī writes about the difficult election of ʿĪsā b. al-Munkadir, who was appointed qadi by the governor of Egypt Ibn Ṭāhir. Before the appointment, amidst disagreements, the Shāfiʿī scholar Abū Yaʿqūb al-Buwayṭī was asked to prepare a list of six names for the ruler. Eventually two candidates were audited, as they discredited each other with low blows.⁸⁴ Leadership disputes between factions might arise from doctrinal or political disagreements or because of doubts about the candidate’s pedigree or loyalty. In such stories, the ruler’s verdict comes after meeting the perspective appointee; though we also find episodes in which it took many years to make a decision, like after the death of the qadi Bakkār b. Qutayba (according to al-Kindī) or the death of the patriarch Shimʿūn (according to the *Sīyar al-bīʿa*), leaving the post vacant.⁸⁵

84 Al-Kindī, *al-Quḍāt*, vol. 1, pp. 311–317. A few years later, al-Munkadir was imprisoned and exiled: see Sijpesteijn, “Delegation”. On al-Buwayṭī’s involvement in this election, see El Shamsy, *Canonization*, pp. 119–124.

85 Bakkār’s career under Ibn Ṭulūn had been complicated, and so was finding his replacement: see Tillier, “Qāḍis”, p. 209 and fn. 21. As another example we may mention the polemics against the appointment, respectively, of the *mawlā* Ishāq b. al-Furāt and Aṣḥbagh b. al-Farraj: al-Kindī, *al-Quḍāt*, pp. 284, 310–311. On these episodes, see El Shamsy, *Canonization*, pp. 91–117. A passage in the *Sīyar* mentions that social rank (*al-daraja*) was essential for becoming patriarch in the third/ninth century: *HP*, pp. 473, 478.

I suggest placing stories of leadership disputes within a broader framework, one in which literary texts represented the ruler as an arbiter and a source of legitimacy for religious scholars. In this framework, a strand of accounts centered on the competition between aspiring officials and their respective supporters. If this theme describes a historical phenomenon, namely, competition for limited resources, it must have affected all religious groups.⁸⁶ In this sense, we should not isolate episodes of leadership disputes as representative of a specifically “*dhimmi*” experience. Both the phenomenon and its literary rendition may be read as growing out of historical changes during the Abbasid period. Starting in the third/ninth century, and more strongly in later centuries, stories of leadership disputes may be connected to practices of patronage and social mobility built on regionalized politics, in which the provincial governors played a big role and was often at odds with the caliph. Governors founded autonomous dynasties, patron-client relations became a more formal part of the administration, and a new sense of distinction between religious groups started being justified on juridical grounds.⁸⁷ All of this, arguably, conditioned not only the availability of social resources for religious scholars but also the palette of narrative themes available to Muslim and non-Muslim writers.

The ruler’s choice might, of course, stir jealousy in the defeated group. This is visible in the *Siyar*’s portrayal of the Chalcedonian patriarchs, whose elections are invariably explained with bribery or deceit. One example is the story in which the Umayyad caliph Yazīd is bribed to appoint a (fictive) Chalcedonian leader. The caliph’s decree is later annulled by the Marwanid governor and his secretaries, who prefer a Miaphysite patriarch.⁸⁸ The story’s outline echoes other accounts concerning Yazīd’s controversial election in which aspiring qadis got involved. We are told that various Muslim scholars and officials refused to pledge allegiance to Yazīd, and this fracture caused some to compete for the same posts.⁸⁹ We might even add that, to an extent, the pattern of alternating appointments between the two clergies in the *Siyar*,

86 On competition, with an approach inspired by Bourdieu’s ideas, see Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir*, pp. 3–23.

87 Roy Mottahedeh’s influential theory of patronage has led to a prolific flow of studies on institutions and administrative changes during the “Middle Period”, including legal institutions and communities; see Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*. On communal and juridical boundaries, see, among others, Simonsohn, *Common Justice*; Rustow, *Heresy*.

88 MS Hamburg Ar. 304, facsimile, pp. 113–14. There are several interesting elements in this story that puts it in dialogue with Muslim sources about qadis. For instance, the Chalcedonian’s visit to the caliph in Damascus to circumvent the governor’s decision calls to mind accounts about Muslim leaders traveling to Damascus to either renegotiate or quit their position. On the latter, see Judd, *Religious Scholars*, pp. 93–127.

89 al-Kindī, *al-Qudāt*, vol. 1, pp. 222–225.

with Dyophysite and Miaphysite churchmen competing for prestige, is paralleled by the competition of scholars from either Maliki or Hanafi circles in Muslim sources, with qadis being chosen irregularly from either school.⁹⁰

Finally, we may consider some other ingredients adding to the narrative of leadership disputes. First, these stories might reflect the rulers' own "pretensions of juridical power", which they could promote by intervening as patrons in the publication of literature.⁹¹ They do, after all, generally emerge as the ultimate arbiters over factions and disputes. Christian writers transmitted accounts about the deeds and qualities of caliphs and governors, and so they might have been influenced by imperial historiographical projects.⁹² Second, the authors of hagiographies and biographies might have turned into stories some contested topics – such as the ruler's privilege to confirm communal leaders or their privilege to be legitimized by the ruler – which were theorized primarily in other genres, like "mirrors for princes". We cannot exclude that the *Sīyar*'s authors and editors, who were monks as well as bishops, secretaries, and scholars, were aware of the discussion of such topics in urban circles. Third, in the absence of securely early texts stating otherwise, it is likely that the accounts of leadership disputes in the *Sīyar* reflect later developments even when the narrative is staged in the early Islamic period.

Conclusion

The stories of the *Sīyar al-bīʿa* concerning early Muslim rule are constellated with anachronisms. However, those anachronisms are embedded in the text and cannot be elided. Not only have they been part of the collection since its creation; they are also historically and narratively meaningful. The redaction of the *Sīyar*'s early Islamicate sources, in the Abbasid period, is contemporary with the spread of literary texts about the lives of qadis, on the one hand, and with the rise of a polemical discourse about non-Muslim officials, on the other hand, when Muslim rulers and scholars started questioning more strongly than before the privileges of Christian elites.⁹³ Although individual non-Muslim religious leaders did gain prestige in Muslim circles, the phenomenon described in the *Sīyar al-bīʿa* appears to be optative and prescriptive and

90 For example, al-Kindī, *al-Qudāt*, vol. 1, pp. 306–307.

91 El Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, p. 97.

92 See especially Borrut, *Mémoire et Pouvoir*.

93 Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir*, Ch. 1–4.

is better understood within the framework of Abbasid literature and its later reception. The *Sīyar*'s authors were able to use rhetorical tools and narrative themes partly derived from Islamic literature about Muslim rulers and qadis, as well as traditional Christian and hagiographical themes, in order to convey an impression of continuity in the way that appointments and leadership disputes had been handled over time. The image of the patriarch as a legitimate state appointee, one that was both close to and persecuted by the rulers, was first constructed in the Abbasid period and then reinforced through the linguistic choices made by the Fatimid and later redactors. The latter played a pivotal role in inscribing the administrative and juridical culture of their own time into the text of the *Sīyar*.

The phenomenon was not only literary. Under the Fatimids and later dynasties (some) religious leaders did become more clearly situated within a bureaucratic framework, as attested, for example, by the introduction of the title *ra'īs al-yahūd*, and their appointment could be decreed in writing. It is well possible that such developments had started earlier, namely, under the Abbasids; however, the authors of patriarchal "Lives" tended to flatten the graduality of such changes as they wrote later developments into the past. Modern readings of the *Sīyar al-bī'a* since the early twentieth century show that its creators were quite successful in guiding the reader's understanding of the past.

The *Sīyar*'s long redaction has allowed me to reflect upon the narrative construction of early Islamic history in literary texts as a layered phenomenon, and moreover, to go beyond the conventional use of Christian sources about early Muslim rule as potential witnesses of the events of the first/seventh century. The narration of early Islamic history in the *Sīyar* may be included within a broader Islamicate context and be put in relation to stories about the lives and careers of qadis. I hope this may help to make further comparisons across Islamicate texts composed in different social and confessional milieus.

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