

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb’s Encounter with an Unnamed Monk: From History to Legend

Ibrahim Zein  and Ahmed El-Wakil 

College of Islamic Studies, Hamad bin Khalifa University, Ar-Rayyan, Qatar

ABSTRACT

The Ambrosian Library in Milan has preserved thirteen very interesting folios written in an archaic semi-Kūfī Arabic script, describing an encounter between the second caliph of Islam ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and an unnamed monk. We demonstrate how the anonymous author of this manuscript was familiar with the *ṣulḥ* agreements, the covenants of the Prophet Muḥammad, and historical and anecdotal accounts of encounters between ‘Umar and ecclesiastical authorities. We postulate that our author composed his narrative on the basis of his own historical imagination from sources that probably belonged to monastic archives to which he had access. The author aimed to deliver a subtle political message, highlighting the archetypal relationship between a Muslim ruler and a Christian subject living under Islam. Two adaptations of our text have been found in Islamic sources, the first in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī’s *Al-zuhd wa- al-raqa’iq*, and the second in Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, which we argue reflect a later re-working of the original narrative.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 September 2022
Accepted 21 June 2023

KEYWORDS

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb; monk; asceticism; Christian–Muslim relations; covenant; monastic archive



Introduction

This article analyses a manuscript that records a lengthy conversation between the second caliph of Islam ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and an unnamed monk, which to the best of our knowledge has never been studied before. We argue that its legendary elements were inspired by historical texts that most probably formed part of monastic archives in the possession of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greater Syria (*al-Shām*) or St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai. The anonymous author of the short story seems to have consulted these archives to highlight the archetypal relationship between an ideal Muslim ruler and his Christian subjects.

The author’s historical imagination appears to have transformed historical material into legend, perhaps in order to give meaning to the political realities he was facing at the time. He therefore had in mind the theme of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians through mutual recognition of their shared spiritual ethos based on ‘Umar’s historical encounters with important ecclesiastical authorities.

CONTACT Ibrahim Zein  izain@hbku.edu.qa

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Ömer

150133

26 Ekim 2023

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN