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Why did the Christian Shrine-Keeper Poison the Muslim Astronomer? The Co-Production of Theology and History in al-Wathiq's Expeditions to Confirm the Truth of the Qur an

The Seven Sleepers. Byzantine Manuscript Illumination in the Menologion of Basil II. Ms Vat.gr.1613, fol. 131 (circa 985 AC, Constantinople)

Around the middle of the ninth century a man named Muhammad ibn Musa "The Astronomer" was poisoned by the wicked keeper of a Christian shrine. It happened (if it happened) deep inside a figcaption mountain somewhere near the ancient city of Ephesus, on the southwestern coast of modern Turkey, in what was then the territory of East Rome. Thankfully for the history of science, Muhammad vomited up his poisoned lunch and survived the ordeal."

Muhammad—eldest of three famous brothers whose father Musa started his career as a highway robber, became an astrologer, and died an intimate friend of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma ʾmun—was perhaps the most famous scientist of his day. At home in Baghdad, he and his brothers Ahmad and Hasan were experts in astronomy, astrology, mathematics and mechanics. The brothers were reputed to have correctly calculated the circumference of the earth, and some scholars have suggested that Muhammad himself might be none other than the inventor of algebra: Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi. Successive generations of Abbasid caliphs recognized Muhammad's genius by entrusting him with fantastic sums to act as a patron of the sciences. He spent out

his political and financial capital wisely, sponsoring, among many other things, the seminal labors of the Christian scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq, who translated much of the ancient Greek corpus of the physician Galen into Arabic. Like Hunayn himself, Muhammad was known to travel widely in search of ancient manuscripts. But this trip was different. The Abbasid caliph al-Wathiq had charged his most trusted scientist with a unique mission: to find empirical 'proof' of a story from the Qurʾan, the tale of the 'Companions of the Cave', known in Christian tradition as the story of the 'Seven Sleepers'. Muhammad's poisoning marked the failure of that mission. The great Muslim polymath realized that the shrine he had come to visit was run by a murderous fraudster.

Yet this was not the only expedition that al-Wathiq dispatched to confirm the truth of the Qurʾan. If Muhammad's expedition was destined to become a famous failure, the expedition of Sallam 'The Interpreter' to find the "Barrier of Dhu al-Qarnayn", known in Christian tradition as the tale of 'Alexander's wall', was a famous success. The stories that surround these expeditions open some fascinating insights into how attempts to find historical 'proofs' of scripture between Muslims, Jews and Christians have also been dogged by the suspicion of fraud, misrepresentation, and even murder.

Surat al-Kahf (Q 18)

The background for al-Wathiq's expeditions lies in the Qurʾan's *Surat al-Kahf*, which includes the stories of the "Companions of the Cave," and the "Barrier of Dhu al-Qarnayn" as two mighty signs of God's power and providence. Both of these tales had precedents in Jewish and Christian tradition at the time when the Qurʾan emerged. But they are particularly close to stories found in the literature of sixth and seventh century Syriac Christians.

The first of these stories is the tale of the "Companions of the Cave" (Q 18:9–26). These 'companions' were a group of right-believing youths who fled the persecution of their own polytheist society, fearing that they would be stoned for their monotheist convictions or forced to worship idols. Retreating to a hidden cave, they fell into a miraculous sleep which lasted for hundreds of years, guarded all the while by a faithful dog sitting patiently at the grotto's entrance. When they awoke, they had no idea how much time had passed. It was only when they sent one of their number into the city to buy provisions with their now-ancient silver coins that they realized how long their sleep had lasted. The people of the city (long since converted to monotheism) exulted at this proof that "God's promise is true," and when the youths returned to their cave to resume their long slumber, the citizens resolved to build a place of worship (*masjid*) above them.

The outlines of this tale are almost identical to the Christian legend of the 'Seven Sleepers.' A poetic homily by the Christian Syriac author Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) provides a great deal of context that the Qurʾan lacks: the youths were Christians who lived during the reign of the persecuting emperor Decius (d. 251), who famously compelled all the inhabitants of his empire to sacrifice to the ancestral gods. Their long sleep concluded in the reign of the pious Christian emperor Theodosius II (r. 402–450), at a time when there was fierce debate over the issue of bodily resurrection at the end of time. The appearance of the sleepers (miraculously preserved) was taken as a clear proof of the truth of physical resurrection, and the emperor Theodosius himself came to observe the miracle and build a shrine over their bodies. Jacob's telling of the story is just one among dozens of others in Christian traditions written in many languages. These traditions vary widely in the names and number of the youths and other

figcaption details, a tendency that the Qurʾan specifically rebukes as an idle “guessing at the unknown” and reminds its readers that God alone knows their real number (Q 18:22).

The Qurʾanic narrative of Dhu al-Qarnayn, the “One with Two Horns” (Q 18:83–98), concerns a mighty and pious man of the past who believed in God and the Last Day and was given leave to travel to the ends of the earth. At the far term of one of his journeys Dhu al-Qarnayn encountered a community living under the shadow of a mountain pass, terrified by the savage peoples of Yuj and Majuj who lay beyond it. At their request, Dhu al-Qarnayn constructed a marvelous barrier from ingots made of iron, upon which he poured molten copper. Satisfied with his work, he warned the people of the land that the barrier could never be breached, but when “the promise of my Lord comes” it would crumble to dust (Q 18:98).

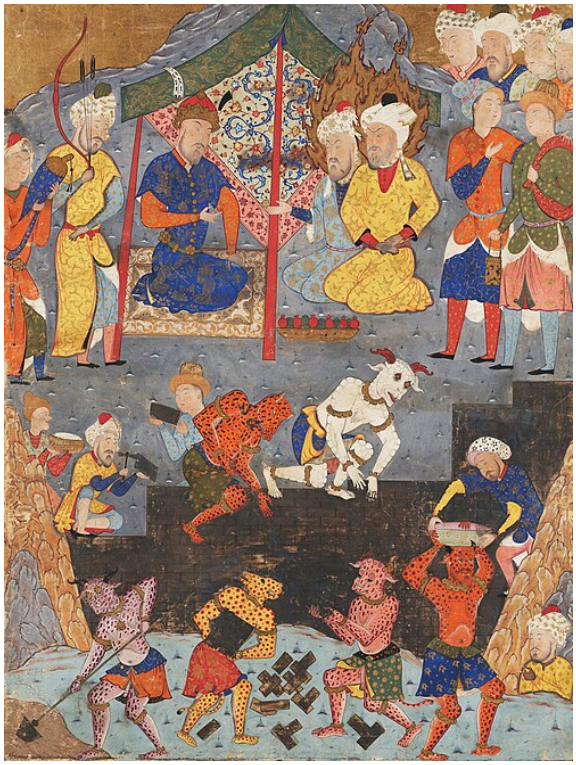
The Qurʾanic Yuj and Majuj are clearly the biblical Gog and Magog, prophesied in the biblical book of Ezekiel 38 as a terrifying horse-born people that will break with hideous force upon the land of Israel in the last days, only to be destroyed by God. As far back as the Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37–100 CE), Gog and Magog were identified with the ‘Scythians’ of Greco-Roman ethnology, a catchall term for the pastoral nomads of the great northern steppes that stretch between modern Ukraine and modern China. Likewise clear is that Dhu al-Qarnayn should be identified with Alexander the Great. The Christian Syriac *Alexander Legend*, probably written before the end of the sixth century, transforms Alexander into a pious king who built a great iron barrier against the peoples of Gog and Magog that will hold until the end of time, when God will permit them to burst forth and play their terrible part in the unfolding of the last things.

Al-Wathiq’s Expeditions

By the time of al-Wathiq’s reign (842–847 CE), Qurʾanic commentators associated the revelation of the *Surat al-Kahf* with a specific episode in the life of the Prophet Muhammad in which he was asked to ‘prove’ his gift of prophecy. One of our earliest testimonies to this idea comes from the commentator Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767 CE). The way Muqatil tells it, the Meccan polytheist Abu Jahl once asked some Arabian Jews for questions he might pose Muhammad that could debunk his claim to prophethood. The Jews replied that a true prophet would be able to tell any questioner three things: the story of the Companions of the Cave, the story of Dhu al-Qarnayn, and the nature of the spirit (*rūḥ*). The revelation of *Surat al-Kahf* by the angel Gabriel provided Muhammad with the answer to all three of Abu Jahl’s hostile questions. It is probably not a coincidence that al-Wathiq dispatched expeditions to find empirical evidence for two out of these three ‘proofs’. (Perhaps the nature of the spirit struck him as a less than promising candidate for scientific verification).

The quest for Dhu al-Qarnayn’s barrier is much the more famous of these two expeditions, and modern scholars are still spilling ink over whether it really happened. The story has it that al-Wathiq sent a man named ‘Sallam the Interpreter’—able to speak thirty languages—on a long journey north in a large and well-paid company. When he eventually returned, he told his story directly to the famous Persian geographer Ibn Khurdadhbih, whose day job was as a career bureaucrat in the caliphal post office and intelligence service. Sallam passed through Armenia (still largely Christian) and the territory of the Turkic Khazars (whose elite may have been converts to Judaism) before finding the marvelous barrier under the custody of a strange exclave community of believing Muslims, conversant in both Arabic and Persian and well supplied with madrasas teaching the Qurʾanic sciences. Not only did Sallam find the

barrier itself, which matched the description found in the Qurʾan down to its most minute details, he also found the cauldrons and other implements by which the copper-covered iron ingots had been smelted for the great work. Every Friday, the Muslim guardians of this place would strike a huge iron mallet on the lock within the gate to remind the peoples of Yuj and Majuj that the defenses were still manned and history had not yet come to its close.



Iskandar (Alexander) builds a wall against Gog and Magog, from the Book of Divination (Fālnāma) for Shah Tahmasp (d. 1576). Qazvin, c. 1555. Chester Beatty Library Per. 395.1.

Muhammad's expedition to find the Companions of the Cave is less famous, but no less interesting for the history of co-production. As with Sallam's journey, the story comes down to us through Ibn Khurdadhbih, who likewise claims to have heard it from Muhammad's own lips. By the time Muhammad set out, Muslim tradition had absorbed a host of details from the Christian legendarium. Of the many sites that had sprung up in both Christian and Muslim lands claiming to be the true location of the Companions of the Cave, the astrologer seems to have concluded that a shrine near the East Roman city of Ephesus was the most likely to be authentic. Al-Wathiq sent a letter to the East Roman emperor, who obligingly provided one of his notables to accompany Muhammad into the Thrakesion region where Ephesus was located. Four miles past a figcaption village in the territory of Ephesus, Muhammad reached a figcaption mountain with a tunnel bored up from its base to a chamber near its summit.

Here he found a columned hall cut into the living rock, abutted by many rooms. Within an elevated chamber, which could only be reached by clambering over a massive lintel, were the Companions of the Cave. The Christian keeper of the shrine and his suspiciously handsome eunuch attendants protested that they could not permit just anyone to see the sleepers, but Muhammad bluffed his way past. He may well have missed the hint by not handing over a bribe. Climbing into the chamber with the help of his slave-boy, the astronomer expected to find the sleepers perfectly preserved—a living proof of the truth of resurrection. Instead, their bodies reeked of aloe, myrrh and camphor and their hair was brittle and unliving. It was at this point that the keeper of the shrine appeared with his suspicious lunch. Muhammad must have been on high alert, because as soon as he tasted the food he detected something wrong and forced

himself to vomit it up. He became convinced that the wicked keeper of the shrine was profiting from a long-running scam, and told him so as he departed. It is tempting to see a ghostly implication that the scheme occasionally required fresh bodies. Perhaps the caliphate's most famous scientist, dispatched to empirically verify the truth of Muslim scripture, had only narrowly missed being embalmed as a fraudulent proof of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection.

Conclusion

Given the disastrous conclusion of Muhammad's expedition (the 11th century scholar al-Biruni described it as "a well-known story") one might expect later Muslim writers to reject the authenticity of any proposed sites for the Companions of the Cave in Christian territory. There were, after all, many active shrines in Muslim lands that proposed to be the real spot, from modern Spain to modern Jordan (a site already explored by Co-Produced Religions scholar Sarah Islam). But at least one later geographer, Yaqut al-Hamawi (d. 1229), seemed still inclined to believe that the true place of the Companions of the Cave was indeed in Roman Asia Minor. He anchored this identification in a story about the Prophetic Companion ʿUbada ibn al-Samit (d. 655) and his embassy to the East Roman emperor.

Supposedly, when ʿUbada was close to the East Roman capital of Constantinople, he encountered a "red mountain" with a tunnel bored into its base. The site was under the supervision of a Christian monastery, and the monks informed him that the tunnel led to a chamber where the Companions of the Cave were found. After meeting their demands for a sizeable bribe, ʿUbada was ushered into a mountain chamber, where he found the sight of which Muhammad had been disappointed: reclining youths with all the color of life in their cheeks, as though they really were just sleeping. Questioning the monks intently, ʿUbada found that they did nothing to these bodies but keep them clear of dust and trim their mustaches. Yet the monks had no idea of who the youths really were: their books told them only that they had been in this place since long before the coming of Christ, but they otherwise "knew nothing of the matter." In this story, the shared Muslim-Christian heritage of the Companions of the Cave is consciously scrubbed away. Looking closely at the long sleepers, ʿUbada was struck by the fact that they "had the look of Muslims."

ʿUbada's story recalls nothing so much as the successful expedition of Sallam the Interpreter, which discovered proof of the Qurʾanic tale of Dhu al-Qarnayn in the custody of a miraculously isolated community of believing Muslims, who read the Qurʾan in Arabic and yet had never even heard of the caliph in Baghdad. Sallam and ʿUbada's stories stand on one end of a rhetorical continuum whose opposite pole is found in the report of Muhammad the Astrologer. Muhammad's tale of the fraudulent Christian shrine-keeper represents a kind of archaeological doublet to the Muslim theory of *taḥrīf*, according to which the Torah and the Gospel—though sent down as true revelations from the one God—had been so maliciously and irreparably altered by their Jewish and Christian custodians that they could no longer be relied upon to disclose God's true intentions. Sallam and ʿUbada's stories, by contrast, represent an approach to history that makes Jews and Christians the unwitting preservers of a primeval truth that ultimately belongs to Muslims. It is as if Christians and Jews were only eligible to participate in the chain of custody for one of God's 'signs' if they had no idea what they really had.

None of which is to say that all medieval Muslims were incapable of taking an interest in the muddy plain of partial evidence, conjectural surmise, and interreligious encounter

that stretches out between these two extremes of falsification and ignorance. The famously rationalizing scholar al-Biruni treats both Sallam and Muhammad's stories with an amused reserve. Pointing out the historical implausibility of Sallam's miraculous Muslim community on the basis of existing evidence for Muslim exclaves likes the Volga Bulgars, al-Biruni drew a rather tart conclusion: "If the story rests on evidence of this kind, we can hardly expect to establish the truth of the matter."

References and Further Reading

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Images

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(2) Iskandar (Alexander) builds a wall against Gog and Magog, from the Book of Divination (Fālnāma) for Shah Tahmasp (d. 1576). Qazvin, c. 1555. Chester Beatty Library Per. 395.1.

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