

## Embrico of Mainz

### *Retelling Muhammad in the Wake of the Christian Simony Controversy*

In 'Co-produced Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam,' Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg state that 'co-production' is a term that is helpful for understanding how 'many and varied Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities are forming, re-forming and transforming themselves by interacting with, thinking about, and imagining each other.'<sup>1</sup> This might sound like a bit of a vague generalization at first glance. It offers the possibility, though, of understanding how these respective religions developed their own convictions in part as a mirror of that of other. This will be exemplified in the following by a life of Muhammad, composed in the twelfth century and versified into 'rhymed leonine hexameters' by an unknown Christian author.<sup>2</sup> According to John Tolan, the leading expert on this text, it is 'perhaps the earliest and certainly the most elaborate twelfth-century portrayal of Muhammad' and 'also the first coherent theological response to Islam by a Latin writer outside of Spain.'<sup>3</sup> The poem obviously deserves to be interpreted in light of its

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- 1 Heyden and Nirenberg, 'Co-produced Religions'.
- 2 Tolan, 'Anti-Hagiography', p. 26. Tolan actually mentions 1149 lines, but Al-Tamimi, 'Medieval Christian Depictions of Islam', rightly counts only 1148 lines. In the following, I will use Al-Tammini's translation for rendering the text of the *vita* in English. The critical standard edition of the original can be found in: Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, ed. by Cambier. A handier edition is *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, ed. by Yolles and Weiss, where we find the Latin text without apparatus together with a translation which does not, like Al-Tammini's, try to follow the poetical organization of Embrico's text. I will give the respective passages in this work in the following, too.
- 3 Tolan, 'Anti-Hagiography', p. 26. The editors of *Medieval Latin Lives* even praise it as the 'first extensive work about Muhammad from Western Europe' (p. xiii). In his collection of essays on Christianity and Islam, Tolan explains why it is so important that Embrico was situated in Central Europe: 'While authors north of the Pyrenees created an imaginary Islam that they

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historical context, but knowledge about the author is sparse. Accordingly, in the following I will first identify the author posited by a recently published hypothesis which might have finally solved the long-standing riddle. Then, after giving an overview of the poem's particular depiction of Muhammad, I will take advantage of this newly-established hypothesis about the author's identity to shed light on the text and its purpose. While the text is obviously about Muhammad and written against Islam, I suggest that it should also be read in light of contemporary Christian debates about simony and investiture occurring in the German lands of the Holy Roman Empire. In other words, the author is writing a 'history' of Islam in part to define the orthodox and the heretical within Christianity, which can be defined as a form of co-production.

### Embrico, the Known but Unknown Author

While the manuscript tradition indicates that the poem was transcribed no later than the first half of the twelfth century,<sup>4</sup> its style, according to experts in the field, points to a composition no earlier than the last third of the eleventh century.<sup>5</sup> Although we do not know much about the author, we can begin to piece together a probable biography using what we do have: that is, his name and town of origin. These two details are derived from another poem linked to the Muhammad text in the manuscript tradition. Captioned '*vita auctoris*', the other poem is basically an encomium of our mysterious author containing a few biographical details.

Embrico, quem mores, genus exaltant et honores. /  
 Forsitan et natus unde sit iste catus /  
 queritur: hoc mente describam non metuente. /  
 Moguntinus erat, mater ut eius erat

Embrico, who is exalted in his manners, lineage, and honours.  
 Perhaps one might ask where this clever one  
 was born? I can say without fear that he  
 was from Mainz, as was his mother.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the name Embrico was quite common in Mainz at this time, so common even, that researchers speak of a family of 'Embrichones' (*Embrichonen*) who, like the Carolingians and Ottonians, shared a preference for a certain given name, in this case Embric(h)o. The family belonged to the growing

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could safely hold in contempt, those in Spain were forced to confront the real Islam'; see Tolan, 'Introduction', pp. xi–xxi, xv.

4 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 595.

5 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 595, with reference to the analysis of rhythms in that time by Von den Steinen, 'Literarische Anfänge in Basel', pp. 279–83.

6 The Latin text is to be found in Muñoz, 'La datación', pp. 591–92.

and socially ascendant class of ministerials (*ministeriales*).<sup>7</sup> Although they were legally defined as unfree in the feudal hierarchy, their habits and ways of life increasingly mirrored those of the nobility such that, functionally, in the end they attained the status of nobles and were even raised to episcopal sees.

Given the widespread use of the name Embrico around 1100, and its many ties to the Archbishopric of Mainz,<sup>8</sup> the search for the author of the *Vita Mahumeti* has produced a good number of candidates. John Tolan and others have found the most convincing candidate to be an Embrico, who served as treasurer in the archdiocese of Mainz between 1090 and 1112.<sup>9</sup> This is a certainly good guess, but others have to be considered as well. A fitting match could also be an Embrico who acted as the proxy of Archbishop Ruthard in 1092 and 1108–1124 and might have been the prelate's brother.<sup>10</sup> And yet, because the *vita auctoris* names Mainz only as the place of Embrico's birth, which does not suggest that he spent his entire active life there, two bishops who sprang from this family but settled elsewhere, namely Embrico of Augsburg (1064–1077) and Embrico of Würzburg (1127–1164),<sup>11</sup> must also be taken into account. In fact, the most recent attempt to identify the author presents reasonable arguments in favour of Embrico of Würzburg.

In his concise essay devoted to determining the author of the *Vita Mahumeti*, and by extension the poem's exact chronology, Fernando González Muñoz has settled upon the latter, the bishop of Würzburg. Taking into account the chronology suggested by the poem's manuscript tradition and literary style, the former bishop of Augsburg can be excluded because his episcopate would have been too early, given that the *vita auctoris* mentions that the author wrote the *Vita Muhamati* while still a student.<sup>12</sup> While the other Embricos mentioned may remain in contention, Muñoz has produced a convincing argument for the authorship of the bishop of Würzburg. Another extant poem titled *Confessio Imbriconis episcopi Wirzburgensis* definitely comes from his hands, written in leonine verses like the *Vita Mahumati*. And yet, that the two poems have a similar style is not enough to prove a common author. More evidence is needed, and Muñoz has produced it. He identified three passages in which the wording and rhythm of the two poems are so similar that we either have to assume that one copied the other, or that both texts are from the same

7 For the not too common use of the English term 'ministerials', see Freed, 'The Origins of the European Nobility', pp. 211–42. Arnold, *German Knighthood 1050–1300*, pp. 53–75, gives a good account of the social status of the ministerials.

8 Gensicke, 'Ministerialität', p. 83.

9 Tolan, 'Embrico of Mainz', p. 592. A brief sketch of our knowledge about this figure is to be found in Schaab, *Geschichte der Stadt Mainz*, p. 222. On the identification dating back to the forties, see Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 596.

10 Gensicke, 'Ministerialität', p. 83.

11 Gensicke, 'Ministerialität', p. 84, for Embrico's time as a bishop in Würzburg, see Wittstadt and Weiß, *Das Bistum Würzburg*, p. 14. Rotter and Staab, 'Anhang: Der Autor Embrico', p. 125, discuss Embrico of Würzburg, too, but refuse this option.

12 Muñoz, 'La datación', pp. 594–95.

author.<sup>13</sup> Given that we know that both poems were written by an Embrico, it seems very likely that Muñoz has found the author of the *Vita Muhamati*, unless further evidence brings this into question again. We can also follow Muñoz with respect to the short sketch that he gives of this Embrico's life:

Member of an aristocratic family of the diocese of Mainz, he had a relationship in his youth with the poet Hugo Metellus (c. 1080–1150), which leads us to think that he was formed in the cathedral school of Toul in Lorraine. His career, sponsored by the bishop of Mainz, Adalbert I (1111–1137), began with a position as provost at St Mary's Cathedral in Erfurt (1118–1127), but at the same time, between 1125 and 1127, he was a member of the royal chancellery under Emperor Lothar III von Supplinburg (1125–1127). The support of Archbishop Adalbert and the emperor promoted him to the bishopric of Würzburg in 1127, a position he retained until his death in Aquileia in 1146.<sup>14</sup>

The most important detail in this account, with respect to our purposes, is Embrico's close connection to Adalbert I, Archbishop of Mainz and one of the leading figures of the imperial church in the beginning of the twelfth century,<sup>15</sup> a time when the final scene of the Investiture Controversy was at hand, marked by the Concordat of Worms in 1122. If it is indeed true that the *Vita Mahometi* was composed while the author, in this case Embrico of Würzburg, was still a student, one would guess that it would have been during his time in Toul, although Muñoz does not rule out the possibility that he continued to work on the text during his time in Erfurt.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a period between 1110 and 1127 seems to be the most likely for the composition of the poem. Muñoz suggests an even more precise date around 1120, although he admits that this is hypothetical.<sup>17</sup>

While we still do not know all that much about Embrico himself, we need to think about the historical circumstances in which he wrote the Muhammad poem. Muñoz has suggested a somewhat obvious background for Embrico's writing, namely the Crusades.<sup>18</sup> The First Crusade was famously proclaimed by Pope Urban II in 1096, and was carried out in the following years. Waging

13 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 598.

14 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 597: 'Miembro de una familia aristocrática de la diócesis de Mainz, tuvo relación en su juventud con el poeta Hugo Metellus (c. 1080–1150), lo que hace pensar que se formó en la escuela catedralicia de Toul, en la Lorena. Su carrera, patrocinada por el obispo de Mainz Adalberto I (1111–1137), comenzó con un puesto de preboste en la catedral de Sta. María de Erfurt (1118–1127), pero al mismo tiempo, entre 1125 y 1127, fue miembro de la cancellería regia, bajo el emperador Lothar III von Supplinburg (1125–1137). El apoyo del arzobispo Adalberto y del emperador lo promovió al obispado de Würzburg en 1127, puesto que conservó hasta su muerte, en Aquileia, en 1146.'

15 Speer, *Kaiser Lothar III*.

16 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 599.

17 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 601.

18 Muñoz, 'La datación', p. 601.

war in distant lands, Europeans learned about the beliefs of the Near Eastern world, especially Islam. One might add that Mainz was severely impacted by these times of war, as the outset of the campaign caused pogroms against Jews in the Rhineland. While the First Crusade helps us to understand why an author located in this part of Europe might make up his mind to write a life of Muhammad, we might also be left wondering if it is enough to contextualize his writing. For example, crusading zeal tells us little about why Embrico wrote his biography exactly the way that he did.

Now that Muñoz's work has given us a probable chronology, however, we can shed light on the particulars of the poem with a closer look at the author's historical circumstances. We have to imagine an author in the entourage of Adalbert I of Mainz, one of the most prominent but ambiguous figures in the Empire of his day. In the beginning of his career, Adalbert supported Henry V in his struggle against his father Henry IV, a conflict which famously ended with the son forcing his father to abdicate in his favour.<sup>19</sup> Yet, after being elected archbishop of Mainz, Adalbert switched sides and joined the papal reform party against the emperor.<sup>20</sup> He would end up imprisoned by Henry V in 1112,<sup>21</sup> with his confinement ending no earlier than 1115.<sup>22</sup> Released from prison, Adalbert became the leading figure in the opposition against the emperor, aligning with his rival Lothar of Saxony, later Lothar III.<sup>23</sup> In terms of Church politics, he embraced the heritage of Gregorian reform to such a degree that he even detested the Concordat of Worms, signed in 1122, with the rationale that it granted the emperor too much power.<sup>24</sup> We might rightly call him a radical proponent of episcopal power against emperor and king. In effect, however hypothetical the poem's proposed chronology might be, it points to a time when the likely author was protected by one of the leading figures of the Investiture Controversy, a bishop who fiercely fought for episcopal rights against the last heir of the Salian dynasty.<sup>25</sup> Moving forward, I will show that Muñoz's convincing proof is decisive in this respect; for the first time, we can definitively assign the historical context of the Investiture Controversy to the text of the *Vita Mahumeti*. To accomplish this, we first need to understand the poem's content and the particular ways that it depicted the life of Muhammad.

19 Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 210.

20 Schroe, *Mainz*, p. 28; Büttner, 'Erzbischof Adalbert von Mainz', pp. 395–410; Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 211.

21 Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 213.

22 Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 217.

23 Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 217; cp. Speer, *Kaiser Lothar III*.

24 Stroll, *Calixtus II*, p. 225.

25 The same is true for the diocese of Würzburg, over which Embrico would reign after his election. His predecessor Adalbero was a strong supporter of the Papal side in the Investiture Controversy (see Fischer, 'Bischof Adalbero von Würzburg', pp. 45–72).

## Muhammad the Deceived, and Muhammad the Deceiver

In the poem's prologue, Embrico leaves little room for doubt that the text is a polemic against Muhammad, whom he accuses of having removed polytheistic cults in order to be venerated himself.<sup>26</sup> And yet, only eighteen lines after Embrico has introduced Muhammad by name, and has blamed him for holding 'the throne of perfidy as his own',<sup>27</sup> he raises the spectre of 'a certain man consecrated in wickedness, washed in baptism', who 'lived full of perfidy in the Church'.<sup>28</sup> An unprepared reader might interpret these verses to be about the same figure who was attacked before, namely Muhammad. Embrico, however, plays with the reader's expectations, inviting them to read the text not as a straightforward polemic, but rather as complex composition comprised of riddles, allusions, and surprises. For example, while 'perfidy' characterizes both figures, the second one cannot be said to describe Muhammad, but rather a figure later identified as a mage (*Magus*).

Those who are familiar with biographies of Muhammad in the Latin Middle Ages will recognize that the mage figure, as new as it might seem, is tied to a traditional element of Muhammad's origin story among Christian writers. As early as John of Damascus's (d. 749) writings on heresy, we find an Arian monk who is said to have converted Muhammad to monotheism.<sup>29</sup> The Arian monk is a critical element of the story, making it possible to explain why Islam exudes obvious similarities to Christianity on the one hand, and on the other differs from orthodox Christianity in its denial of Christ's divinity. Regardless of whether or not the story makes sense historically, the important issue is that it made sense for Christian readers and was transmitted in several versions to the West.<sup>30</sup> Connecting Islam to the ancient and well-known heresy of Arianism helped Christians situate Islam within their extant mental frameworks.

Regarding the Arian monk, the Damascene Christian writers settled upon two names for Muhammad's converter, the Latin one being Sergius and the Syriac one, used in Arabic as well, Bahīra.<sup>31</sup> The latter appeared in Islamic sources as a 'true Christian' who 'knew that a prophet was to

26 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 68–70 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 50; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 28).

27 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 87–88. (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 50; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30): *male deuotus quidam, baptisinate lotus, / Plenus perfidia uixit in Ecclesia*; trans. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi.

28 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 111 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 52; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30); Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi in his translation here uses the term 'Magus', while he later on would speak of a 'mage'.

29 John of Damascus, *Liber de haeresibus* 101 (John of Damascus, *Liber de haeresibus*, ed. by Migne, col. 765A).

30 See in particular the *Tultusceptra* and the Chronicle of Theophanes in Yolles and Weiss, *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, pp. 10–13, and pp. 16–21.

31 Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīra*.

appear in Arabia, and when he came in actual fact' was 'among the first to recognize him'.<sup>32</sup> Guy Cambier has rightly pointed out that this figure serves as a prototype for Embrico's mage.<sup>33</sup> However, this paper is less concerned with identifying Embrico's sources, and more concerned with exploring the significance of what he did with the material at hand. For example, while Embrico draws upon the traditional Christian conception of this figure, calling him baptized and stating that he was expelled by the church for his perfidy like a heretic,<sup>34</sup> he also deviates from this tradition in labelling the converter a mage. And yet, the text does very little to ground his identification as a mage in the skillful practice of magic. He seems more like a crafty charlatan than a sorcerer, for when he attempts to practice magic he does so awkwardly and inefficiently. Embrico tells us that the mage came to Libya after being expelled by — rather surprising for those who know this emperor's time of flourishing! — Emperor Theodosius from Jerusalem, where he had aspired to become a bishop.<sup>35</sup> In Libya, he meets a rich man whose slave was none other than Muhammad, or 'Mammutius' in this account.<sup>36</sup>

Driven by sanctimony, the mage not only gains the rich man's admiration, but also Muhammad as his personal servant.<sup>37</sup> Despite already having won over the rich man, he considers Muhammad a more suitable (*aptus*) tool for his nefarious purposes.<sup>38</sup> Expecting the gift of freedom in return, the slave shows himself ready to serve the mage alone.<sup>39</sup> In order to free his new servant, the mage curses Muhammad's master with a fatal illness.<sup>40</sup> Embrico then uses all of his poetic skills to mock the mage with an elegant pun: *Cumque moraretur nec tam subito moreretur*, that is, 'And as he delayed, he did not die so suddenly'.<sup>41</sup> With his magic spell having failed to kill the master outright,

32 Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā*, p. 37.

33 Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, pp. 6–7; Rotter, 'Embricho von Mainz und das Mohammed-Bild seiner Zeit', p. 97, guesses that Embrico did not know of this name, which allowed him liberty in reshaping the story.

34 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 196 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 56; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 36).

35 Tolan, 'Anti-Hagiography', pp. 31–32 on the unclear political status of Libya in this account.

36 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 219–20 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 57; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 38).

37 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 224 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 57; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 38).

38 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 229 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 57; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 38).

39 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 253–54 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 58; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).

40 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 255–58 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 57; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).

41 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 260 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 59; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).



the mage resorts to brutal murder by suffocation, further demonstrating his immorality and incompetence.<sup>42</sup>

Still, he continues to attempt magical tricks, like the deception of an entire kingdom with a mysterious calf. At a certain point in the poem, Embrico introduces the calf, which the mage then hands over to Muhammad without an explanation.<sup>43</sup> This produces a moment of tension in the story, as the reader has no clue what the calf is for. The mage's advice to hide it from the public is highly suspicious, however. The story later satisfies anyone who was expecting something sensational, for the calf in fact plays an important role in Muhammad's ascent to power, and in his ability to spread false doctrines provided by the mage.

Echoing Muhammad's real-life marriage to the widow Kadija,<sup>44</sup> upon gaining his freedom the poem's main figure marries his former master's widow.<sup>45</sup> The next plot point occurs years later, when the calf has grown into a monstrous bull secretly fed and known only to the mage and Muhammad.<sup>46</sup> Following the death of the pious King of Libya who, like Theodosius, is described as a 'son of the Church' (*filius Ecclesiae*),<sup>47</sup> the mage and Muhammad see their chance to take over. Muhammad, now well established and respected in Libya, recommends to the leaders that they ask the mage for advice about who should accede to the throne, describing his master as wise like Solomon and full of the spirit of prophecy.<sup>48</sup> According to plan, the mage releases the monstrous bull, which endangers the whole kingdom. To solve the very problem that he had secretly concocted, the mage proposes an ordeal: whoever is able to subdue the bull shall be the new King of Libya.<sup>49</sup> Muhammad, having fed the bull for years, gains the throne.<sup>50</sup>

We have read the calf episode as part of Embrico's stylistic habit of creating tension in the story. Indeed, at this point the *vita* seems to turn into a novel, if not a fairy tale or legend. Reading the story against the background of

42 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 261–62 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 59; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).

43 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 331–32 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 61; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 46).

44 <<https://www.aymennjawad.org/25612/medieval-christian-depictions-of-islam-embrico>> [accessed 1 May 2023].

45 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 310–14 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 61; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 44).

46 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 372 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 63; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 48).

47 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 388 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 63; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 50).

48 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 467–74 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 66–67; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 54).

49 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 563–64 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 70; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 60).

50 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 660–66, 680 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 74; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 68).



medieval cultural knowledge, however, the allusion to the biblical golden calf will appear obvious. Of course, the story of hiding and revealing the animal to the people is different from the story of people asking Aaron to fabricate the calf in order to worship it, but they bear a certain resemblance in so far as the calf performs a deceptive role in the people's relation to God. The other source seems similarly obvious. As Dante's use of the '*infamia di Creti*' in the *Inferno* of his *Divina Commedia* shows,<sup>51</sup> the story of Theseus and the Minotaur had not been forgotten in the Middle Ages.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Embrico drew from both biblical accounts of idolatry and tales from pagan antiquity.

The calf episode is a thrilling example of a medieval legend that integrates elements of pagan literature in order to strengthen suspense. It also shows the mage at his most effective as far as magic tricks (*magicae fraudes*) are concerned.<sup>53</sup> Theurgy is not the mage's only deception, however, as he also gives himself the false air of a holy man, thereby deceiving the gullible.<sup>54</sup> Embrico goes as far as to describe him as a wolf (*lupus*),<sup>55</sup> an obvious allusion to Matthew 7.15 in which Jesus warns of 'false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves'. Not only does he perform deceptive magic tricks, but he also masquerades as a pious man deceiving 'the people under the title of faith'<sup>56</sup> with gestures and prayers that seem holy (*sanctus*).<sup>57</sup>

Compared to traditional Christian legends about the origin of Muhammad, Embrico places much more emphasis on the agency of the mage than on the leadership of Muhammad. In his account, as the episode of the calf has shown, it was clear that Muhammad was not the driving force behind his own rise, but rather a pawn or puppet in the mage's play for power. Embrico expresses this clearly when he complains about people following Muhammad, but then adds: 'The cause of such evil was that special mage.'<sup>58</sup> In another place, Embrico even calls Muhammad 'material for his [the mage's; V.L.] intended crime.'<sup>59</sup>

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- 51 Dante, *Divina Commedia: Inferno* 12.12; see Digital Dante <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-12/>> [accessed 22 December 2023].
- 52 Courley, 'The Minotaur', p. 198.
- 53 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 89 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 51; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30).
- 54 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 91 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 51; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30).
- 55 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 92 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 51; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30).
- 56 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 94 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 51; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30): *Blanditur populo sub fidei titulo*. Yolles and Weiss seem to be right here to follow the text tradition, which has *blanditus* instead of *blanditur*.
- 57 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 97–100 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 52; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30).
- 58 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 195 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 56; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 36): 'Causa mali talis Magus iste fuit specialis'.
- 59 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 230 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 57; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 38): 'Materiam (...) proposito sceleri'.

The text was written too early to be strongly influenced by Aristotelian terminology, which would introduce the notion of mere passivity to the concept of matter or material. A more fitting idea would be the notion of the mage using Muhammad as an instrument who, as he himself admits, 'could not be freer than in serving him'.<sup>60</sup>

## Christianizing Muhammad's Story: A Possible Historical Context

There are stumbling blocks in the text which we can treat as obstacles to a good understanding or, alternatively, as hints toward a better understanding. It begins with the depiction of the Arian monk, or Bahīra in the Syriac and Arabic tradition, as a *magus*. If we see this *magus* as an aspiring bishop, as Embrico did,<sup>61</sup> the biblical figure of Simon Magus immediately comes to mind.<sup>62</sup> Like Embrico's mage, Simon was baptized (Acts 8. 13), but then fell into error by asking the apostles to confer unto him their gift of transmitting the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Once we appreciate this biblical allusion, its medieval impact is more than obvious. Simon of course lent his name to the practice of simony, the legal issue around which the Investiture Controversy developed. As is well known, simony could take different forms, not only the overt one consisting of purchasing an ecclesiastical office, but also the more subtle one of transferring such an office through the hands of laypeople, what Humbert of Silva-Candida defined as simony, and the main vice of the Salian dynasty.<sup>63</sup> Returning to Embrico's story, however simony was defined in the real world, it was manifested in the mage's unjust aspiration for a bishopric. Embrico's text on Muhammad contained an obvious subtext that concerned pressing Christian debates, especially if we take into account that the text seems to be more interested in the agency of the mage than in Muhammad himself. The mage is the primary agent of their deception, and his episcopal ambition is the starting point for the entire story. A contemporary reader could not have helped but see Christian infighting over simony mirrored in Embrico's story. This is even more obvious when we recall that Embrico's protector, Adalbert of Mainz, led bishops against the emperor and despised the Concordat of Worms for favouring the rights of kings over those of bishops. Even if Embrico

60 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 253–54 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 58; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).

61 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 111 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 52; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 30): *pontificari*.

62 Cf. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, p. 187.

63 S. Humbert von Silva-Candida, *Adversus Simoniacos*, III. 6: *Quid enim ad laicos pertinet personas sacramenta ecclesiastica et pontificalem seu pastorem gratiam distribuere, camyros scilicet baculos et anulos, quibus praecipue perficitur, militat et innititur tota episcopalis consecratio?* (S. Humbert de Silva-Candida, *Adversus Simoniacos*, ed. by Pertz, p. 205, ll. 11–14).

wrote the poem before the Concordat, the milieu in which he wrote favoured episcopal rights over regal ones, and the liberty of the Church.

Embrico's *Life of Muhammad* therefore directs us to debates about investiture occurring around 1100 in Central Europe. At first glance, this connection might be surprising. And yet, we are not the first to suggest it, even if it has never before been considered the key to understanding the text. John Tolan has at least considered that Embrico's view of Muhammad as a heresiarch might answer the widespread suspicion of heresy, raised even against the bishop by some temporal authorities.<sup>64</sup> This idea leads to the Investiture Controversy as a context for the text. It accords with the now-identified author's overall tendency in Church politics. It is no wonder, therefore, that Embrico's Muhammad story has more Christian elements than a modern approach to the history of religions would admit, let alone accept. His reading was obviously a way of Christianizing the story of Islam, which had been the case since Christians first began to think about Muhammad. John of Damascus exemplified this tendency in not only introducing an Arian monk as Muhammad's converter, but also in subsuming the entire story of Islam under the umbrella of Christian heresy. It might have been the only possible way that he could have understood the rise of another monotheist religion after Jesus Christ, in contrast to Judaism, whose roots obviously lay in a time long before Christianity emerged. And so, working within this hermeneutic tradition, there was nothing really unusual about Embrico framing the Muhammad story like a Christian one.

The same applies to his use of the term bishop, which was still applicable in a Muslim society seen through Christian eyes. This is a particular important point with respect to the poem's author. Once again, while we do not know all that much about this Embrico, we at least have his other poem to help us, the *Confessio Imbriconis episcopi Wirzburgensis*. W. Wyttenbach has edited this text from a manuscript in which Embrico's poem tellingly precedes another author's writing against simoniacs.<sup>65</sup> Embrico himself complained in his confession about joining the ranks of those who administer the sacraments 'with a bloody mind'.<sup>66</sup> The entire text shows a zeal to reform a morally corrupt episcopacy that has lost sight of Jesus Christ. And yet, the poem seems a bit outdated, with its strong emphasis on the sins of the episcopacy, bearing the impetus of Gregorian reform in a time usually seen as one in which the reform had already put down roots across the entire episcopacy. Obviously, even by this time it had not, but this is not why the text is of concern to us. It shows that Embrico was not neutral in the Investiture Controversy, but that during his time as a bishop he still embraced the Gregorian ideal that he had learned alongside Adalbert. This allows us to further assert that his Muhammad poem

64 Tolan, 'Anti-Hagiography', pp. 26–27.

65 Wattenbach, 'Bericht', p. 407.

66 Embrico, *Confessio*, l. 38 (Wattenbach, 'Bericht', p. 405): *mente cruenta*.

was not solely about the Prophet of Islam, but also about issues of reform in the Christian Church. It not only concerned simoniac bishops, who were to be blamed for wrongdoing in Embrico's eyes, but also temporal rulers whom he held up as righteous examples of good governance, namely Theodosius and the King of Libya. In his extensive eulogy, Embrico instructed his readers in how the pious King 'defended everywhere the just as though he were a guardian' and 'was wherever he could be, the enemy of impiety'.<sup>67</sup>

The story's connection to contemporary Christian debates also helps to explain what has up to now been seen as a strange chronological mistake, namely Embrico's setting the story of Muhammad at the time of Theodosius at the end of the fourth century.<sup>68</sup> Placing the life of Muhammad at the end of the fourth century was so obviously wrong that we might be puzzled, but only if we see Embrico as someone who, like modern historians, writes with an eye towards historical accuracy.<sup>69</sup> The chronology makes sense, however, if we understand him to be concerned not only with an imagined Islamic past, but also with the contemporary Investiture Controversy. Only then does the invocation of Theodosius make perfect sense, especially when paired with that of Ambrose of Milan (d. 397).<sup>70</sup>

Embrico's medieval readers well knew that the struggle over investiture had its origins in conflicts between the Church Father Ambrose and a Roman Emperor who had encroached upon the Church.<sup>71</sup> There were reasons why the struggle began in Milan, a part of the Empire where the emperor had less power than in the regions north of the Alps. Milan's relevance was not only a political one, as the actors in the Investiture Controversy knew. The city was deeply tied to Bishop Ambrose, who was venerated as a Church Father and a propagator of ecclesiastical liberty against the emperor. Thus, he could serve as an example of a bishop fighting for the independence of the Church against an overbearing emperor. Pope Gregory VII himself reminded Bishop Hermann of Metz of a famous episode from antiquity:

Nec pretermittant, quod beatus Ambrosius non solum regem, sed etiam re vera imperatorem Theodosium moribus et potestate non tantum excommunicavit, sed etiam, ne presemueret in loco sacerdotum in ecclesia manere, interdixit, quod beatus Ambrosius non solum regem, sed etiam re vera imperatorem Theodosium moribus et potestate non

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67 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 397–98. (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 61; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 50): *Ille uelut custos defendens undique iustus, / Hostis, qua poterat, impietatis erat.*

68 Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 12.

69 Rotter, 'Embricho von Mainz', p. 96 tries to explain historically why Embrico chose Theodosius. The first reason Rotter assigns is Theodosius' well-known anti-pagan politics in general, the second a conflation with Theodorus, who indeed fought against the Arabs.

70 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 121–24 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 53; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 32).

71 Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy*, pp. 95–98.

tantum excommunicavit, sed etiam, ne presemueret in loco sacerdotum in ecclesia manere, interdixit.

Let them not forget that blessed Ambrose not only excommunicated Theodosius, who was not just a king but really a true Emperor in his bearing and power, but also forbade him from presuming to take the place of the priest in the Church.<sup>72</sup>

Gregory was obviously threatening his adversaries in referring to the power a bishop had over an emperor through excommunication. Ambrose had exercised this power while successfully urging Theodosius to repent after the Massacre of Thessalonica (c. 390). For Gregory, his actions showed that a bishop was superior to an emperor in spiritual matters, while for Embrico the lesson was that the bishop had successfully fought for the liberty of the Church against temporal authorities. Embrico's chronological 'mishap' was therefore no mistake; it alluded quite deliberately to the time in which the Investiture Controversy had begun, and the place where the tomb of Ambrose, a symbol of clerical resistance to imperial overreach, was situated. Placing Muhammad in the time of Theodosius and Ambrose meant placing him at the start of the conflict between the episcopacy and the emperor.<sup>73</sup>

Embrico was not coy in his allusion to this highly charged time and place. And yet, in evoking Theodosius and Ambrose, he did not directly refer to Ambrose's brave resistance to the emperor, but rather tells another story. When Ambrose passed away, so Embrico tells us, Theodosius asked Christ to 'show him who he might worthily make a bishop',<sup>74</sup> using the same word (*pontificare*) which he had used before to denote the mage's unjust ambitions. Christ's answer was quite clear: he should 'not trust the crowd'.<sup>75</sup> Soon, the oracle becomes clear, as the crowd asks the emperor to install the mage, which Theodosius refused to do on account of the rogue's tricks.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to the Salian Emperors of Embrico's time, Theodosius protects the Church by rejecting an unworthy candidate for the episcopacy, a commentary on both the past and present state of the Church.

Embrico's chronological 'mishap' turns out to be the elegant conceit of an author who led his readers to understand their own time through an imagined

72 Gregory to Hermann of Metz, 25 August 1076 (*Quellen zum Investiturstreit*. vol. 1, ed. by Schmale, p. 226).

73 To me, this explanation seems more obvious than the suggestion of Tolan, 'Anti-Hagiography', pp. 31–32 that Embrico thought here of an 'Early Christian East', which does not make much sense if we think about where Milan is located geographically.

74 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 129 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 53; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 32): *Vt sibi monstraret quem digne pontificeret*.

75 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 131 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 53; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 32).

76 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 164–66 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, pp. 54–55; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 34).

past, one that only seemed distantly remote in time and place, but in actuality came quite close to the contemporaries of the Investiture Controversy.<sup>77</sup> We might even add that in light of this conceit, the more novelistic or mythical parts of Embrico's poem, like the strange episode about a calf becoming a monster, make more sense. They distanced the text from what was historically known about Muhammad and encouraged the reader's imagination through creative anachronism.

These arguments might be enough to conclude that the *Vita Mahumeti* was not solely about Muhammad, but also about the Latin Church and the problems that it dealt with in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. If we begin reading it this way, other aspects of the text also take on a deeper meaning, like the use of the terms 'freedom' and 'liberty'. The most telling instance might be the verse in which Muhammad promises to serve only the mage in exchange for his freedom:

Si tibi seruus ero, non altera munera quero;  
Nam bene liber ero tibi seruiero.

If I am to be your slave, I seek no other gifts,  
For I will be free if I serve you.<sup>78</sup>

The compelling hope of bettering one's life by following someone else is all too well known from the biblical story of Adam and Eve following the serpent's false promise of knowledge and divinity. Indeed, Embrico makes it clear that we should understand the mage as a kind of reincarnation of the deceitful serpent. When Muhammad was elected King of Libya, for example, his deceiver reminded him that 'through me you will be made a God',<sup>79</sup> going even further than the serpent, who told Adam and Eve that in following him *eritis sicut deus* (Genesis 3. 5).

In the context of Embrico's time, moreover, his use of the term 'freedom' echoed Gregorian calls for *libertas ecclesiae*, which meant nothing other than freeing the Church from the influence of temporal authorities. If the mage, as I argued before, bore his designation not solely by chance, but deliberately to evoke the practice of simony, then Muhammad's hope for freedom would have sounded deeply ironic. In particular, he hoped to gain his freedom from someone who sought to undermine ecclesiastical liberty by gaining an ecclesiastical office through the hands of laypeople. Moreover, he gains the honour of freedom, *libertatis honor*, by marrying his former master's wife.<sup>80</sup>

77 Rotter, 'Embricho von Mainz', p. 102 even relates some moral issues to Henry IV, without seeing the Investiture Controversy in general as an issue Embrico might have had in mind when writing his Life of Muhammad.

78 Embrico, *Vita*, ll. 253–54 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 58; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 40).

79 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 709 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 75; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 70): *per me Deus efficeris*.

80 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 309 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 61; *Medieval Latin Lives*



This serves as an addendum to the false freedom promised by the mage, for only a few lines later Muhammad declares, using the same word, that his honour and the mage's are one and the same, which leads him to pledge once again that he will follow the mage's precepts.<sup>81</sup>

*Libertatis honor* might even mean more. Only at first glance does it seem far-fetched to see in it an allusion to the issue of sexual libertinage which, under the term 'Nicolaitism', was a target of the Gregorian reform movement. While Muhammad was not depicted as a priest, and cannot be blamed for breaking the rule of celibacy, sexual libertinage was nevertheless an issue throughout a text informed by standardized prejudices concerning the polygamic culture of Islam. For example, after Muhammad accedes to the throne, the Mage advises him about how to change religion, and his message can be distilled in two sentences:

Nam tu mechandum statues uenerique uacandum;  
Luxuriet penus sitque soluta uenus!

For you will permit adultery and the freedom to devote oneself to carnal lust. Let the provisions be luxurious and let carnal lust be unleashed!<sup>82</sup>

This sexual licentiousness turns out to be the peak of what the mage has to offer in securing Muhammad's liberty, and every so often the term *libertas* or *liber* was used to recall it.<sup>83</sup> Once again, the notion of liberty in the text encompassed more than just breaking celibacy, but the issues it evoked resonated with the reform movement of the eleventh century, which demanded clerical chastity in addition to freedom from temporal authority. No wonder, then, that Muhammad, according to Embrico, followed the mage's advice. And so, being himself deceived, he then deceived not only the people of Libya but the whole of the *gens Affrorum*.<sup>84</sup> Embrico drew upon another ethnic prejudice that ascribed sexual incontinence not only to another religion, but also to the whole population of another continent.<sup>85</sup> This observation holds true even when, as this essay has argued, the author was directing his polemics not only against the foreign Other, but perhaps even more so against fellow Europeans, whom he no longer considered to be real Christians, but rather traitors to Jesus Christ and his Church.

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of Muhammad, p. 44).

81 Embrico, *Vita*, I. 325 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 61; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 44).

82 Embrico, *Vita*, II. 717–18 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 76; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 70).

83 Embrico, *Vita*, II. 735, 779 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, pp. 76, 78; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, pp. 72, 76).

84 Embrico, *Vita*, I. 767 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 77; *Medieval Latin Lives of Muhammad*, p. 74).

85 For a recent study of the relationship between religious prejudice and the emergence of racism in the Middle Ages, see Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*.



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It is by no means novel to argue that an author writing about someone in the remote past in a distant land did so within the context of their own time and place. It might be interesting to put this into the framework of the idea of co-production. Taken this way, the argument evolved here does not mean that Embrico did not intend to provide his readers with a biography of Muhammad; he definitely wanted to, and obviously included material from other biographies. The last two words of the poem, in fact, make his polemical intentions quite clear: *Mahumet pereat!* or 'Let Muhammad perish!'<sup>86</sup> The final words remind us of the crusading zeal that inspired the poem, and help us to imagine it as part of a broader intellectual endeavour to combat Islam. And yet, as we have seen, this particular animosity does not tell us everything about why the poem was written the way that it was, as an example of producing religious conviction through the perception of another religion. When we consider that not only was Christianity reshaped here, but the other religion also was denounced as a danger for Christianity and thus itself shaped in a way, we recognize an example of co-production of religions. In Embrico's hands, Muhammad's story became a vehicle not only for the intellectual war against Islam, but also a means to critique a Christianity that had fallen short of its ideals. Embrico, fighting for Christianity against Islam, also took up arms in defence of the Church's liberty against overbearing emperors and kings. Through the examples of Theodosius and the King of Libya, he demonstrates what the proper role of temporal authorities should be in relation to the Church. The mage, on the other hand, symbolizes the beginning of all sin and deception, the serpent in Paradise. He overshadows Muhammad, rendering him no more than a pawn or puppet for his own designs. In making the simoniac mage stronger than Muhammad, Embrico suggests that the real enemy of Christianity was not only an Islam located far away in distant lands, but rather and even more so the episcopal aspirations of unworthy hypocrites closer to home.

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86 Embrico, *Vita*, l. 1145 (Embricon de Mayence, *La Vie de Mahomet*, p. 92).

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