Monks, Martyrs, and Masculinity: rethinking Christian authority in early Islamic Palestine[1]

Abstract: This article seeks to reassess monasticism within Abbasid Palestine, arguing that monasteries experienced decline and insecurity in the eighth and ninth centuries. It focuses on the *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas* by Leontios of Damascus, arguing that Leontios feels compelled to defend monasticism from accusations of irrelevance within Islamic society. It also argues for a new interpretation of the Melkite neo-martyrologies associated with Mar Sabas, suggesting that these texts sought to consolidate monastic identities at a time of crisis. They redefine martyrdom as a monastic practice, and in the process narrow the bounds of martyrdom, excluding women.

Key words: Monasticism, martyrdom, hagiography, Palestine, Islam, gender

Text:

In the late 770s, Stephen, a middle-aged ascetic from the famous monastery of Mar Sabas in Palestine, consulted a fellow monk, Martyrios, about his career. Stephen, according to his hagiographer, Leontios of Damascus, confided in Martyrios that he desired to withdraw completely from the world into the deep desert in order to be free from the troubles of mankind. He trusted that Martyrios, who was blessed with divine insight and foresight, could reveal to him whether this was God's desire. Martyrios immediately responded that God did not want Stephen to withdraw completely from the world, but to spend half the year in the desert and half in the monastery. God loved mankind too much to want them to be deprived of Stephen's

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support. 'Do not,' Martyrios continued, 'ask Him about this any longer, since after you the desert will scarcely be walked on by visible anchorites.'[2]

Martyrios's words suggest that Stephen's life marked the end of an era; Stephen was to be perhaps the last solitary ascetic to walk the Judaean desert, a major centre of eastern Christian monasticism since at least the days of the renowned monastic founders Euthymios and Sabas in the fifth and sixth centuries.[3] Leontios later comments, still more firmly, 'After [Stephen]… that land would no longer be walked on by visible anchorites, as the marvellous Martyrios had prophesied.'[4] This is a particularly noteworthy statement given that, since Peter Brown's seminal article of 1971, the miracle-working holy ascetic has been seen as one of the emblems of late antiquity.[5] The *Life of Stephen* is full of laments for the decline of monasticism: 'Who does not now acknowledge that the monks lack virtue?'[6] From Leontios's vantage point in the early ninth century, the golden age of Palestinian monasticism seemed to have finished.[7]

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[2] Greek *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas* I.2: Μηκέτι τοίνυν παρακάλει αὐτὸν περὶ τούτου, ὅτι μετά σε σχεδὸν οὐ πατηθήσεται ὑπὸ τῶν φαινομένων ἀναχωρητῶν ἡ ἔρημος. The *Life of Stephen* was edited by J. Pien in the *Acta Sanctorum* under July, volume III (Antwerp, 1723). I accessed the text through the online database, Chadwyck-Healey, 'Acta Sanctorum Full Text Database' (Cambridge 2001). Translations from the Greek *Life* are my own. As discussed below, the Life also survives in Arabic translation, edited and translated by J.C. Lamoreaux, *The Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas,* 2 volumes (Leuven, 1991). The passage quoted here corresponds to the Arabic *Life*, 18.6.

[3] On late antique Palestinian monasticism, see for example J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: the Monasteries of Palestine 341-631* (Oxford, 1996). The main source for Sabaite monasticism is Cyril of Scythopolis, on whom see B. Flusin, *Miracle et histoire dans l'œuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis* (Paris, 1983).

[4] Greek *Life* I.3 (Arabic *Life* 19.2): Οὐκ ἔτι γὰρ μετ᾽ αὐτὸν…ἐπατήθη ἡ γῆ ἐκείνη ὑπὸ τῶν ὁρωμένων ἀναχωρητῶν, οἷα προείπεν ὁ θαυμάσιος Μαρτύριος.

[5] P. Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp.80-101. In more recent publications Brown has suggested limitations on the prominence of holy men; see e.g. P. Brown, 'Holy Men', in A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume 14 Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors AD 425-600* (Cambridge, 2000), p.806.

[6] Arabic *Life,* 5.4 (trans. Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.6).

[7] B. Flusin, 'Palestinian Hagiography (Fourth-Eighth Centuries)', in S. Efthymiadis (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography,* 2 vols (Farnham 2011-14), I, pp.217-8.

Leontios was writing approximately two centuries after the dramatic events of the seventh century, when the nascent armies of Islam had suddenly and spectacularly conquered the former Persian empire and much of the eastern Roman empire, including the Middle East and Palestine. The hagiographer's comments seem to fit well with one scholarly paradigm for interpreting the position of the Christian monks of Palestine in the aftermath of the Islamic conquests. This view sees the 'Abbasid revolution' of the mid eighth-century (when the Abbasid dynasty overthrew the Umayyad caliphs who had been in power since the 660s), and in particular the political instability after the death of caliph Harun al-Rashid in 809, as a key turning point.[8] It is now generally agreed that the seventh-century conquests themselves did not mark a sudden change or drastic decline in living conditions or security for the Christian-majority population of Palestine, nor did they immediately spark mass conversions to Islam.[9] Bradley Bowman has recently argued that early Muslims were generally very favourable towards Christian monks.[10] Archaeologists tend to depict a broad picture of continuity at least into the eighth century.[11] One historiographical approach, generally adopted by scholars focusing on Greek texts, has in fact seen the eighth century as a high-point in Palestinian monastic literary culture: most famously, Cyril Mango commented that 'the most active centre of Greek culture in the eighth century lay in Palestine, notably in Jerusalem and the neighbouring monasteries.'[12] Authors such as John of Damascus and Kosmas the Melodist

[8] For a general history of Palestine after the Islamic conquests, see M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099,* translated by E. Broido (Cambridge, 1992); for Christian communities, see R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule* (Princeton, 1995).
[9] Schick's important study, *Christian Communities,* paints a picture of slow and gradual decline.
[10] B. Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam* (Edinburgh, 2021), passim.
[11] For recent surveys see esp. G. Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: an Archaeological Approach* (Oxford, 2014); J. Magness, *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine* (Winona Lake, 2003).
[12] C. Mango, 'Greek Culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest', in G. Cavallo et al (eds.), *Scritture, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali di Bizanzio: atti del seminario di Erice (18-25 settembre 1988)* (Spoleto 1991), pp.149-50.

exemplified this flourishing of Sabaite literature (although John's traditional link to Mar Sabas has been questioned).[13] Scholars focusing on Greek have tended to see the ninth century, in contrast, as representing a significant decline in monastic activity.[14] Much has been made of comments in the Byzantine chronicle of Theophanes suggesting that in the year 812/3 the monasteries of the Palestinian desert had been destroyed and the monks had fled to Cyprus and the West:

> In the same year many of the Christians of Palestine, monks and laymen, and from all of Syria arrived in Cyprus, fleeing the excessive misdeeds of the Arabs. For, as a result of the general anarchy… murders, rapes, adulteries, and all manner of licentious acts that are abhorred by God were committed in villages and towns by that accursed nation. In the holy city of Christ our God the venerable places of the holy Resurrection, of Golgotha, and the rest were profaned. Likewise the famous *lavras* in the desert, that of St Chariton and that of St Sabas, and the other monasteries and churches were made desolate.[15]

Theophanes continues to report that some of the Palestinian refugees made it to Constantinople, where they were received welcomingly. Historians of Greek literature have noted the influence

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[13] M-F. Auzépy, 'De la Palestine à Constantinople (VIIIe-IXe siècles): Étienne de Sabaïte et Jean Damascène', *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994), pp.183-218.

[14] This is expressed perhaps most clearly by R.P. Blake, 'La littérature grecque en Palestine au VIIIe siècle', *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), pp.367-80 (published posthumously and presumably without final revisions).

[15] AM 6305: ed. C. de Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig, 1883), p.499; trans. C. Mango, R. Scott and G. Greatrex, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, A.D. 284-813* (Oxford, 1997), p.683. This text is quoted by, for instance, M. Levy-Rubin and B.Z. Kedar, 'A Spanish Source on Mid-Ninth-Century Mar Saba and a neglected Sabaite martyr', in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven, 2001), p.65. Schick ends his study of Christian communities in Palestine with the year 813, noting that, although '813 did not form a major watershed, it roughly marks the point after which the available historical and archaeological data for the history of the Christian communities of Palestine largely dries up': Schick, *Christian Communities*, p.2.

of these Palestinian émigrés on the Byzantine literary revival of the ninth century.[16] Palestine itself, however, is no longer treated as important to either Greek literature or to Byzantine history.[17] It became a neglected backwater, where, with the monasteries devastated after 813, Greek and by extension literary culture were in seemingly terminal decline.

This picture of ninth-century decline has, however, been strongly challenged by historians focusing on Arabic sources, led by Sidney Griffith.[18] Griffith and others have pointed out that Theophanes' claims must have been severely exaggerated, as there is considerable evidence of continued literary activity at the monasteries of Palestine throughout the ninth century.[19] This activity took place, however, not in Greek but in Arabic, now the dominant language of the Melkite Palestinian community. This Arabic literary production included the copying of texts by scribes such as Anthony David of Baghdad.[20] It also involved widespread translation (often

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[16] See e.g. Mango, 'Greek Culture'; J. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (London, 1989), pp.404-6; M. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres Volume 1* (Vienna, 2003), esp. pp.134-8.

[17] See for instance A. Kazhdan, *A History of Byzantine Literature, 650-850* (Athens, 1999) pp.152, 381, 397-8: he argues that literature of the 'Dark Ages' (650-775) was produced predominantly in the provinces, especially Palestine, rather than Constantinople, but that in the period of revival (c.775-850) Constantinople and Asia Minor became increasingly central. Bernard Flusin's recent survey of late antique Palestinian hagiography end at the turn of the eighth-ninth centuries, on the basis that at this date Greek hagiography 'lost its dynamic': Flusin, 'Palestinian Hagiography', p.200. See also S. Efthymiadis, 'Hagiography from the 'Dark Age' to the Age of Symeon Metaphrastes (Eighth-Tenth Centuries), in Efthymiadis (ed.), *Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, I, p.97.

[18] Griffith has published extensively on this topic: see e.g. his articles collected in *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (Aldershot, 1992), as well as his 'The Church of Jerusalem and the 'Melkites': the Making of an 'Arab Orthodox' Christian Identity in the World of Islam (750-1050 CE)', in O. Limor and G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms* (Turnhout, 2006), pp.175-204.

[19] See e.g. Griffith, 'Greek into Arabic: Life and Letters in the Monasteries of Palestine in the Ninth Century; the example of the *Summa Theologiae Arabica', Byzantion* 56 (1986), reprinted as article VIII in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*, pp.117-8, and Griffith, 'Anthony David of Baghdad, scribe and monk of Mar Sabas: Arabic in the Monasteries of Palestine', *Church History* 58 (1989), reprinted as article XI in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*, pp.7-19.

[20] On this scribe see Griffith, 'Anthony David of Baghdad'; A. Binggeli, 'Les trois David copistes arabes de Palestine au 9^{e}-10^{e} S', in A. Binggeli, A. Boud'hors and M. Cassin (eds.), *Manuscripta Graeca et Orientalia: mélanges monastiques et patristiques en l'honneur de Paul Géhin* (Leuven, 2016), pp.79-117.

a creative, active, process involving adaptation as well as literal translation), typically from Greek into Arabic and thence into Georgian. Other patterns of translation, such as Greek into Syriac, are attested but much more rarely.[21] The *Life of Stephen* itself is one example of this: it was translated from Greek into Arabic in 903 by Yannah b. Iṣṭafan al-Fākhūrī.[22] Finally this period also saw the composition of new texts in Arabic by authors such as the theologian Theodore Abū Qurrah (although Theodore's once assumed link to Mar Sabas monastery has been strongly challenged).[23] It witnessed in particular a flurry of compositions in the genre of neo-martyrdoms, accounts of new Christian martyrs to Islam, written in both Greek and Arabic; many of these texts were also associated with the Sabaite monasteries.[24]

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[21] On translations from Greek to Arabic, see e.g. M. van Esbroeck, 'Le codex rescriptus Tischendorf 2 à Leipzig et Cyrille de Scythopolis en version arabe' in S. Khalil Samir (ed.), *Actes du deuxième Congrès International d'Etudes Arabes Chrétiennes* (Rome, 1986), pp.81-91; A. Treiger, 'Christian Graeco-Arabica: Prolegomena to a History of the Arabic Translations of the Greek Church Fathers', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 3 (2015), pp.188-227; A. Binggeli, 'Early Christian Graeco-Arabica: Melkite Manuscripts and Translations in Palestine (8th-10th centuries AD)', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 3 (2015), pp.228-47. On translations into Georgian, see e.g. M. Nanobashvili, 'The Development of Literary Contacts between the Georgians and the Arabic speaking Christians in Palestine from the 8th to the 10th century', *ARAM* 15 (2003), pp.269-74; for Syriac, S. Brock, 'Syriac into Greek at Mar Saba: the Translation of St Isaac the Syrian', in Patrich (ed.), *Sabaite Heritage*, pp.201-8.

[22] The colophon supplying this information is edited by Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen* I, 82.2 (pp.147-8). On this translator, see also Treiger, 'Christian Graeco-Arabica', p.197.

[23] Griffith again has led scholarship on Abū Qurrah: see e.g. his 'Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985), pp.53-73, and 'Free Will in Christian Kalām: the doctrine of Theodore Abū Qurrah', *Parole de l'Orient* 14 (1987), pp.79-107. These are reprinted as articles V and VI in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*. Lamoreaux has challenged the assumption that Abū Qurrah was a monk of Mar Sabas monastery: J.C. Lamoreaux, 'The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002), pp.25-40.

[24] On the neo-martyrologies, see Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs: Saints' Lives and Holy Land History', in A. Kofsky and G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1998), pp.163-207; D.H. Vila, 'Christian Martyrs of the First Abbasid Century and the Development of an Apologetic Against Islam', Unpublished PhD thesis, Saint Louis University, 1999; C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton, 2018); R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Piscataway, NJ, 2019), chapter 9; A. Binggeli, S. Efthymiadis and S. Métivier (eds.), *Les Nouveaux martyrs à Byzance* (Paris, 2021), esp. pp.18-27.

At one level, this picture drawn by Griffith and others cannot be challenged. Theophanes evidently did exaggerate the destruction wreaked on the monasteries of the Judaean desert: they were not fully abandoned, and monastic and literary life continued, at least in a few major centres. But the pessimism about the state of monasticism evinced in Leontios's *Life of Stephen* gives us pause for thought. Why did this monk, although writing about a glorious ascetic hero of his monastery, claim that monasticism was in terminal decline? How do we reconcile this picture with that brought to life by scholars of Arabic literature? What implications might this have for our understanding of cultural transformation in Palestine in the aftermath of the Islamic conquests and Abbasid revolution? This article will use the *Life of Stephen* as an entryway to rethink monasticism in this period. Leontios repeatedly presents the current age as a dark age for monasticism, and implies that Stephen's level of holiness will never again be witnessed. But although Leontios appears very pessimistic about the future of monasticism, he certainly does not want it to come to an end. Indeed, the hagiography has a strong apologetic note, seeking to defend the ongoing importance of monasticism in response to contemporary concerns about the utility of monasticism in the changed realities of an Islamic-ruled society.

Several factors contributed, I suggest, to this crisis of confidence in monasticism in Palestine. First, the Palestinian monasteries were part of the Chalcedonian Melkite church; that is, they had belonged to the official church of the eastern Roman empire and had held a privileged role in society as a result. After the Islamic conquests, the Melkite church lost this special position, becoming only one among several rival Christian communities in the Islamic caliphate.[25] This had particular implications for monks. While monks had always filled diverse and complex roles in society, the Palestinian Melkite monasteries' primary role had been to pray for the good fortune of the eastern Roman Christian empire (drawing upon their special relationship with

[25] See e.g. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.233-4; P. Wood, *The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, c.750-850* (Princeton, 2021), p.109; Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life,* pp.125-6.

God, derived from their piety and asceticism).[26] Sabas, the renowned founder of Mar Sabas monastery, visited Constantinople several times and his monasteries were granted various privileges by emperor Justinian 'so that they may pray for the state entrusted to our care'.[27] This mutually beneficial relationship between the Palestinian monasteries and the Christian Roman emperors disappeared with the Islamic conquests. Further political marginalisation was to follow with the 'Abbasid revolution' of the 750s; whereas the Umayyad caliphate had been based in Damascus, the Abbasid caliphs moved the centre of their government eastwards, ultimately to the new capital of Baghdad. Palestine concomitantly declined in importance within the caliphate.[28] The area administratively labelled as Palestine shrunk considerably from the late Roman empire (whose administration included three provinces of Palaestina prima, secunda, and tertia) into the Islamic period, when only the territory of the former Palaestina prima and some parts of Palaestina tertia were still known as the jund Filasṭīn.[29] It is harder to assess how far, if at all, imagined conceptions of Palestine shrunk, but certainly the focus of many of the hagiographies considered in this article is restricted to Mar Sabas monastery, the Judaean desert, the area around the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem.[30] While monasteries elsewhere

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[26] On the increasing association between holy men and the eastern Roman empire, see L. Parker, *Symeon Stylites the Younger and Late Antique Antioch: From Hagiography to History* (Oxford, 2022), pp.207-9.

[27] Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, ed. E. Schwartz, *Kyrillos von Skythopolis* (Leipzig, 1939), p.175; translated R.M. Price, *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo, 1991), p.184.

[28] D. Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage in Early Islamic Palestine c.614-c.950', PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013, pp.428-9.

[29] Second Palestine became the jund al-Urdunn, while third Palestine was divided between the jund Filasṭīn, the jund Dimashq, and Miṣr. See Gil, *History of Palestine*, pp.110-2.

[30] Palestine certainly remained a meaningful concept for authors in this period; Leontius of Damascus reports that Stephen of Mar Saba was Palestinian by descent, being from the village of al-Julis, near Ascalon (Arabic *Life of Stephen*, 6.1). The *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas* (on which see below p. xx), reports that in in 796/7, 'a great civil war arose in the land of Palestinians among the Saracen tribes… they laid waste to numerous sizable cities, for they left Eleutheropolis entirely uninhabited, sacking it completely, and Ashkelon, Gaza, Sariphaea, and other cities were horribly plundered' (*Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas*, 2-3, trans. S.J. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms from Early*

in the empire remained prosperous for longer, many even gaining a reputation among Muslim poets as centres of comfort and relaxation (and often sensual indulgence), the Palestinian monasteries seem to have lost status and prosperity.[31] Certainly the tenth-century scribe Al-Shābushtī's gossipy and salacious *Book of Monasteries,* while providing a thorough gazetteer of monasteries in the caliphal heartlands of Mesopotamia, and giving some attention to Egypt, only mentions two Palestinian monasteries, none in the region of Jerusalem.[32]

Many monasteries may have lost the support of the patrons and communities that used to support them. The most recent non-literary analyses suggest striking shrinkage in Palestinian monasticism in the later eighth and ninth centuries. Michael McCormick has published the sparse but precious documentary record associated with Charlemagne's envoys' fact-finding mission to the Holy Land in the early 9th century (Charlemagne wanted to investigate the condition of the churches and monasteries of Palestine before bestowing alms on them). He

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Islamic Palestine (Provo, Utah, 2016), pp.71-3. These locations all fell within the jund Filasṭīn. One reference in the *Passion of Michael of Mar Saba* (on which see below, pp. xx) might seem to support the view that 'Palestine' now meant the jund Filasṭīn; Michael, when asked by ʿAbd al-Malik where he was from, reported that he was 'First a Galilean from the city Tiberius; but now a Palestinian from the city of Jerusalem, and the lavra of St Saba' (*Passion of Michael of Mar Saba,* 6, trans. M.J. Blanchard, 'The Georgian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Michael, Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery', *ARAM* 6 (1994), p.152). Michael's words seem to suggest that Tiberias was not in Palestine, which could reflect Islamic-era administrative divisions, as Tiberias became the capital of the jund al-Urdunn (formerly Palaestina secunda). On Tiberias in this period see Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition,* pp.71-88. Other authors used archaising terminology; the author of the *Martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias* (on which see below pp. xx) reports that Capitolias was 'in the province of Jordan, which was in second Palestine', which seems to combine the Islamic jund al-Urdunn with the older Roman Palaestina Secunda (*Martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias,* 2, trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.5). It is thus difficult to determine what exactly 'Palestine' meant to Christians of this period, and its significance may have varied between different authors.

[31] Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian pilgrimage', p.290; Campbell, 'Heaven of Wine', p.48. On possible anti-Christian satire in these representations, see below note 124.

[32] The text has recently been edited and translated by H. Kilpatrick, *Al-Shābushtī: The Book of Monasteries* (New York, 2023). The two Palestinian monasteries mentioned (The Fīq Monastery and Mount Tabor) are in the north, near the Sea of Galilee (see ibid. pp.270-8). Mount Sinai also receives an entry (ibid. pp.418-21). One poem from a section on an Iraqi monastery also mentions monks in Jerusalem in passing (ibid. pp.38-9).

notes that, according to these documents, only nine of the approximately sixty-five monasteries from the pre-Islamic period were still active in the ninth century, a 'breathtaking' drop.[33] The precise statistics cannot necessarily be trusted, since it is impossible to know how thorough the envoys' work was, but the picture is backed up by archaeological analysis suggesting a significant reduction in the scale of Palestinian monasticism in the later eighth and ninth centuries. Daniel Reynolds in his 2013 doctoral thesis argues that in some localities Palestine monasteries saw difficulties in the late eighth century, followed on a larger scale by 'fairly rapid patterns of contraction and abandonment among monastic foundations and pilgrimage cult centres during the ninth century.'[34] While major centres with transregional links and international appeal, most notably Mar Sabas itself, survived, many smaller monasteries did not. Reynolds avoids any simplistic monocausal explanation of these changes, pointing to a complex web of issues of patronage, investment, political developments, and broader economic trends. Again, however, marginalization seems key; both the broader marginalization of Palestine and a reduced tendency among Christians to invest in monasteries. Throughout his thesis, he presents the archaeological evidence as offering a corrective to the hagiographic literary sources. Yet this picture of decline from the later eighth century in fact correlates closely with the sense of intense anxiety about the purposes and future of monasticism in the written record. And hagiographic texts offer unique insights into the particular anxieties and tensions that may have affected monasteries' relationships with the broader Christian community. Leontios's *Life of Stephen*, as we will see, addresses a question which struck at the heart of monasticism: was isolated life in the desert still the best way of promoting Christianity in a world when Christians had to deal with oppressive taxes and hostility from some of their

[33] M. McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey of the Holy Land* (Washington DC, 2011), pp.34-8.
[34] Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage', quote at p.52. Some of his findings are published in Reynolds, 'Monasticism in Early Palestine: Contours of Debate', in R.G. Hoyland (ed.), *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean* (Princeton, 2015), pp.339-91.

Muslim neighbours and rulers?[35] He seems deeply afraid of monks renouncing their habits and returning to life in the city because, at least in part, they felt that they were achieving nothing productive in isolation from society.

Leontios was not alone in his anxieties about monasticism. Other hagiographic texts from this Palestinian context, and in particular the neo-martyrdom accounts, which have rarely been brought into dialogue with the *Life of Stephen*, also show signs of defensiveness about the value of monasticism. The neo-martyrologies have been read as evidence of an 'anti-assimilationist' tendency among monks (that is, monastic opposition to Christian lay people and clergy becoming increasingly involved with Muslims), or as a defence for Christianity at a time of increasing conversions to Islam.[36] I will argue, however, that they should be read as an apology for the monastic way of life, presenting monks, however irrelevant their lifestyle might seem to the struggles of the average Christian, as the ultimate defenders of the Christian faith. A gendered reading of the texts supports this conclusion. Martyr texts produced in other contexts often included female as well as male martyrs, as was very appropriate for texts intended to influence lay behaviour. In contrast, the martyr accounts produced in Palestine in this period valorise male, overwhelmingly monastic, martyrs, a sign of their internal focus on strengthening monastic resolve. In a world where praying in the desert for the fate of the empire no longer served as adequate justification for spiritual authority, monks redefined their position, eschewing the inclusive early Christian vision of the martyr, redefining martyrdom as a male monastic practice, and depicting monasteries as training centres of martyrdoms across the centuries.

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[35] Flusin, in his brief analysis of the *Life of Stephen* as part of a broader survey of Palestinian hagiography, perceptively identifies this as one of the key concerns of the hagiographer: Flusin, 'Palestinian Hagiography', pp.217-8.

[36] See especially Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* chapter 5.

This article seeks to make three main contributions to our understanding of the transition from Christian to Islamic rule in the Middle East. First, it hopes to offer a new perspective on scholarly interpretations of decline or continuity in Christian communities. We tend to focus on binary oppositions such as prosperity or decline, which we treat as largely economic terms, measurable by markers such as archaeological remains. It is much harder to assess literary production in this way, however, and to a certain extent this approach risks oversimplifying the ideological and cultural resonances of dramatic political change.[37] Hagiographic production may be, and perhaps usually is, as much a reflection of tension, disagreement and criticism, as of success, prosperity and stability.[38] Literary production certainly does not straightforwardly reflect the size of the community which created it.[39] Overall, the economic and social condition of Palestine may well have been characterised by continuity throughout this period. Yet some subsections of society faced unprecedented challenges to their way of life, which, in the case of monks, can only be glimpsed through the still often-underutilised corpus of hagiographic material. Some groups in Christian society may well have flourished, while others struggled to maintain their authority in a changing world. By exploring the fate of the 'holy man' in Islamic

[37] For a nuanced discussion of continuity and change in Islamic Palestine, see A. Shboul and A. Walmsley, 'Identity and Self-Image in Syria-Palestine in the Transition from Byzantine to Early Islamic Rule: Arab Christians and Muslims', *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), pp.255-87.

[38] The constant presence of scepticism in Byzantine hagiography is emphasised by A. Kaldellis, 'The Hagiography of Doubt and Scepticism', in Efthymiadis (ed.), *Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, II, pp.453-77. Many hagiographies are shaped by polemical concerns: even Athanasios's *Life of Antony*, often regarded as the prototypical saint's *Life*, reflects Athanasios's desire to subject Antony's charismatic powers to the ecclesiastical hierarchy: M.A. Williams, 'The *Life of Antony* and the Domesticisation of Charismatic Wisdom', in M.A. Williams (ed.), *Charisma and Sacred Biography* (Chambersburg, PA, 1982), pp.23-45.

[39] As noted perceptively by J. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, 2018), pp.494-5.

Palestine, this article offers a new perspective on debates surrounding the end of late antiquity.[40]

Second, this article hopes to address recent calls for a rethinking of early Islamic society. Jack Tannous has argued that historical scholarship still neglects the Christian-majority population of the Islamic-ruled medieval Middle East.[41] Cecilia Palombo contends that we should move beyond 'community-centred' narratives which treat different Christian confessions as distinct groups with homogenous interests, and should instead acknowledge the diverse ways in which different Christians reacted to, and participated in, Islamic society.[42] The *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas* offers a window into the anxieties of a particular group of Christians, the monks of the Sabaite monasteries of the Palestinian desert, at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries. The text itself is clearly addressed to fellow Christians and deals with internal concerns within the monasteries. Leontios, the hagiographer, paints a nostalgic vision of Stephen following in the footsteps of the great ascetic heroes of the Christian Roman past. But Stephen and Leontios were born into an Islamic-ruled Palestine, and the concerns at the heart of the *Life* are fundamentally shaped by the context of Muslim rule. Its value to the historian lies in large part in revealing the challenges which Islamic rule posed to the traditional position of monks as spiritual leaders within Christian society. It thus shows how Islam reshaped and redefined authority within Christianity. It is well known that early Islam was strongly influenced by

[40] On which see e.g. A. Marcone, 'A Long Late Antiquity? Considerations on a Controversial Periodization', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.1 (2008), pp.4-19, esp. pp.11-14. For an important study of attitudes towards holy men and miracles in Byzantium in this period, see M-F. Auzépy, 'L'évolution de l'attitude face au miracle à Byzance (VII^{e}-IX^{e} siècle)', in *Miracles, prodigies et merveilles au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1995), pp.31-46.
[41] Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East,* passim but esp. pp.497-8.
[42] C. Palombo, 'The Christian Clergy's Islamic Local Government in Late Marwanid and Abbasid Egypt', PhD dissertation, Princeton University (2020), passim; C. Palombo, 'The View from the Monasteries: Taxes, Muslims and Converts in the "Pseudepigrapha" from Middle Egypt', *Medieval Encounters* 25 (2019), pp.297-433.

Christianity (as well as other late antique religions). But Islam equally shaped the ongoing development of Christianity in the Middle East (and beyond).

Third, this article will offer a gendered perspective on the transition from Christian to Islamic rule. Strikingly, relatively little scholarly attention so far has been paid to the question of gender and the Islamic conquests of the Middle East, at least from the perspective of the majority non-Muslim population.[43] Recently, several groundbreaking studies have considered the importance of marriage and the household in establishing community boundaries for non-Muslim groups, but in general gender has not been thoroughly integrated into analyses of this period.[44] This is particularly noteworthy given that in other fields of medieval historiography, gender has played an important role in recent interpretations of topics such as the dissolution of the western Roman empire and the transition to 'barbarian' rule.[45] The neglect of gender in discussions of the early Islamic period may partly be explained by the silence of the sources on obviously gendered topics. But the absence of women from sources can say as much as their presence. Why do women almost disappear from Christian hagiography of the early Islamic

[43] Studies on gender and eastern Christianity after the rise of Islam are very few: one outstanding early study is E.A. Doumato, 'Hearing other voices: Christian Women and the Coming of Islam', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1991), pp.177-99. For some recent studies on marriage in Islamic-era Christian communities, see the following note. Scholarship on early Islam and gender is more well established, if still perhaps not integrated into the mainstream of early Islamic studies: Nabia Abbott was one pioneer of this field, for instance in her 'Women and the State in Early Islam', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1.1 (1942), pp.106-26; for further bibliography, see J. Bray, 'Men, women and slaves in Abbasid society', in L. Brubaker and J. Smith (eds.), *Gender in the Early Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2004), p.122.

[44] L. Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph: Law, Marriage, and Christian Community in early Islam* (Philadelphia, 2018); Wood, *Imam of the Christians,* Chapter 6; U. Simonsohn, *Female Power and Religious Change in the Medieval Near East* (Oxford, 2023); Simonsohn considers Christian, Jewish and Muslim women together.

[45] J. Smith, 'Did Women Have a Transformation of the Roman World', *Gender & History* 12.3 (2002), pp.552-71; G. Halsall, 'Gender and the End of Empire', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (2004), pp.17-39; K. Cooper, 'Gender and the Fall of Rome', in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Chichester, 2009), pp.187-200.

period? In answering this question, this article hopes to offer a new perspective on a transformative period of middle eastern (and world) history.

Stephen of Mar Sabas: The Last Holy Man of Late Antiquity?

We are reasonably well informed about the compositional history of the *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas.*[46] The text was written in Greek by Leontios, a monk of Mar Sabas. All of our information about Leontios derives from his own account in the *Life of Stephen*; he tells us that he was originally from Damascus but after a visit to Jerusalem at Easter he enrolled as a monk at Mar Sabas.[47] He records in detail the spiritual anguish he experienced after joining the monastery, anguish which almost caused him to take his own life. He was only cured of this distress by Stephen, to whom he became a disciple for the last four years of the saint's life. Stephen died in 794. Leontios does not tell us the precise date at which he wrote the *Life*, but it can be roughly dated to the early ninth century: Leontios refers to a massacre at Mar Sabas, which took place in 797, and also reports that at the time of writing a certain Thomas, a former deacon, was patriarch of Jerusalem. He must therefore have been writing after 800, when Thomas's predecessor as patriarch George was still on the throne.[48]

[46] My discussion of the composition of the *Life* is based on the introduction by Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, pp.ix-x.
[47] Leontios's autobiographical material comes in the last section of the *Life,* from X.115 of the Greek *Life of Stephen* (57.1 of the Arabic *Life*) to the end.
[48] Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.x. Leontios refers to the massacre in chapter XV.177 of the Greek *Life of Stephen* (77.5 of the Arabic Life); on this event see below pp.xx-xx. The reference to Thomas as the patriarch at the time Leontios was writing is found in chapter XI.136 of the Greek *Life* (The Arabic translator of the *Life* has in c.64.6 misinterpreted the Greek original: See Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.101, n. 260). On the date of the text, see also A. Treiger, 'Unpublished texts from the Arab Orthodox Tradition (2): *Miracles of St. Eustratius of Mar Saba (written c.890)', Chronos, Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand* 33 (2016), p.7 n.4.

The Greek *Life* does not survive in full: the sole known surviving manuscript, the tenth/eleventh-century Coislin 303, is missing about the first quarter of the text.[49] The Greek text was edited in the eighteenth century by Jean Pien in *Acta Sanctorum,* with a Latin translation, but has not received a modern edition or English translation.[50] Because of this, and the loss of its beginning section, most discussions of the *Life* have drawn predominantly instead on its Arabic translation, made in 903 by Yannah b. Iṣṭafan al-Fākhūrī.[51] This text survives in two complete manuscripts, both from St Catherine's monastery at Sinai, and has received two modern editions, by Pirone and Lamoreaux, with Italian and English translations respectively.[52] The Arabic version of the *Life* was also translated into Georgian.[53] The Arabic translation in general follows the Greek very faithfully, so it seems reasonable to assume that the first part of the Arabic life reflects the material contained in the lost Greek section of the text.[54] Since the Greek is the original, I will cite it in the following discussion, except for the initial section

[49] On this renowned manuscript, see A. Binggeli, 'La reception de l'hagiographie palestinienne à Byzance après les conquêtes arabes', in A. Rigo et al (eds.), *Byzantine Hagiography: Texts, Themes and Projects* (Turnhout, 2019), pp.265-84.
[50] See above note 1. I have unfortunately been unable to consult C. Carta and B. Bagatti, *Vita di S. Stefano Sabaita (725-794)* (Jerusalem, 1983), which provides an Italian translation of the text.
[51] See above note 21. On this translator, see also Treiger, 'Christian Graeco-Arabica', p.197.
[52] B. Pirone, *Leonzio di Damasco: Vita di Santo Stefano Sabaita (725-794)* (Cairo/Jerusalem, 1991). For Lamoreaux's edition, see above note 1. See also G. Garitte, 'Le Début de la Vie de S. Étienne le sabaite retrouvé en arabe au sinai', *Analecta Bollandiana* 77 (195), pp.332-69.
[53] G. Garitte, 'Un extrait géorgien de la vie d'Étienne de sabaïte', *Le Muséon* 67 (1954), 71-92; Garitte, 'Début', pp.341-3.
[54] The Arabic translator does sometimes makes small changes or additions to passages in the Greek: for example, the Arabic *Life*, 19.5, specifies that Stephen's hesychasterion was to the south of the lavra, a detail not found in the equivalent Greek *Life,* I.5 (see Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.30 n.114); the Arabic *Life,* 77.5, identifies the author of the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas* as Anba Stephen son of Manṣūr, of Damascus, whereas the Greek *Life,* XV.177, merely names him as Abba Stephen (see Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.126 n.320); the Arabic *Life* 20.9 adds 'as saint Paul said' to a biblical reference in the Greek *Life* I.10. Occasionally the Arabic translator seems to misunderstand small points in the Greek: For example, Arabic *Life* 64.6 (compare Greek *Life* XI.136; see Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.101 n.260); Arabic *Life* 75.7 (compare Greek XIV.173; see Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.123 n.314).

which is only available in Arabic. I record in the notes any significant differences between the Greek and Arabic versions of the text.

In many respects, the *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas* resembles a typical late antique saint's life. Leontios draws on many *topoi* of late antique hagiography, from his claim in the preface that he has combined information from trustworthy eyewitnesses and from his own personal experience, to his account of Stephen's foreseeing of his own death.[55] The *Life* seems to offer a vivid window into eighth-century Palestinian monasticism, showing as it does Stephen's mixed lifestyle between solitude in the desert and participation in the life of the lavra, his encouragement of his monastic disciples, his links to clergy in Jerusalem, and his performance of miracles. It has sometimes thus been interpreted as evidence for continuity in monasticism after the Arab conquests, at least in Mar Sabas.[56]

Two scholars have, however, adopted a rather different approach to the text, shedding light on its more polemical elements. Marie-France Auzépy has highlighted evidence in the *Life* for conflict between Stephen and some members of the lavra of Sabas; she suggests that he was a controversial figure who positioned himself as a critic of 'laxness' in the monastery, probably on the subject of innovations in the liturgy.[57] While the evidence is perhaps insufficient to support this argument about conflict over the liturgy, Auzépy is certainly right to draw out more conflictual aspects of the *Life*. Bernard Flusin has briefly discussed the *Life of Stephen* in a recent survey of Palestinian hagiography; his insightful comments highlight the sense of decline that permeates the *Life*, as well as Leontios's anxieties about the ongoing relevance of

[55] Arabic *Life of Stephen* 2.3, 3.1; Greek *Life* XV.180 (Arabic *Life* 78.2).
[56] B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, 'Monasticism in the Holy Land', in Limor and Stroumsa (eds.), *Christians and Christianity*, pp.289-90; Bartolomeo Pirone, 'Continuità della vita monastica nell'ottavo secolo: s. Stefano Sabaita', in Patrich (ed.), *Sabaite Heritage*, pp.49-62; Patrich, 'Impact of the Muslim Conquest', pp.210-11; Mango, 'Greek Culture', pp.150-1; Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life*, p.103 n.9.
[57] Auzépy, 'Palestine à Constantinople', pp.183-218.

monasticism.[58] As these remarks suggest, when read closely, the *Life of Stephen* does not present a straightforward picture of continuity with the pre-Islamic past.

Leontios's pessimistic assessment of contemporary monasticism emerges strikingly from the remarkable opening to the *Life*. After a brief preface praising Stephen, Leontios provides a lengthy interpretation of Stephen's career in terms of two late antique prophecies. The first is attributed to the fourth-century Egyptian coenobitic founder Pachomios, the second to the fathers of the desert of Scetis. Both are attested elsewhere; Leontios has drawn upon recorded early Christian visions and applied them to his own age, depicting Stephen and his generation as the fulfilment of these holy fathers' prophecies.[59] In the first case, Leontios recounts at some length a revelation which was made to Pachomios after the monk appealed to God to learn what would happen to his monastic brethren.[60] Pachomios saw a vision of a dark wadi (desert ravine) in which monks were walking and running around; many of them tried to climb out but failed to escape; some were falling over; some lamented; they failed to recognise their companions. Very few managed to climb out and encounter a light. Pachomios discerned from this:

> 'what would befall the brethren in the end, and the neglect and lassitude in those times and the great blindness, as well as what would happen on account of the inferiority of

[58] Flusin, 'Palestinian Hagiography', pp.217-8.
[59] The first prophecy comes from the Pachomian *Paralipomena*, edited by F. Halkin in *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae* (Brussels, 1932), c.17-18, pp.140-3. On the *Paralipomena*, see A. Veilleux, *La Liturgie dans le cénobitisme pachômien au quatrième siècle* (Rome, 1968), 21-4; idem, *Pachomian Koinonia: volume two* (Kalamazoo, 1981), pp.1-2; on the Syriac translation J. Bousquet and F. Nau, 'Histoire de saint Pacôme: une redaction inédite des ascetica', *Patrologia Orientalis* 4.5 (1908), pp.409-11, 415-6. The second prophecy, attributed to the fathers of Scetis, comes from the *apophthegmata patrum*, under the name of Abba Ischyrion, and is edited in *Patrologia Graeca*, 65 (1864), cols.241D-244A.
[60] Arabic *Life of Stephen*, 3.2-4.9.

> the shepherds who were ruling over them… At that time, monasticism would be but an image, with the result that evil men would rule over the brethren…'[61]

Pachomios was greatly distressed and appealed to God, who rebuked him for his pride, but Christ then appeared to the monk, promising that Pachomios's seed would last until the end of the earth, and that some would be saved through their virtue from the darkness. This, Leontios claims, was a 'vision confirming and bearing witness to the perfection of the blessed Stephen.'[62]

The prophecy from the fathers of Scetis is very similar.[63] One elder foretold that while his generation had attempted to keep all the commandments, the second generation would only keep half, and subsequent generations would have no virtue, but only great tests and sufferings. Anyone who came through these tests, however, would be even greater than the fathers of an earlier age. Leontios then explains that this certainly applied to the present generation, rhetorically asking,

> Who does not now acknowledge that the monks lack virtue?... Who of our generation and who of those who wear monastic garb does not recognise this decline? Not one of you, my beloved, disbelieves this, saying that the holy fathers prophesied this not of our generation, but of some generation to come after us… Truly they predicted that of our generation.'[64]

Leontios in his exposition of this prophecy (according to the surviving Arabic translation), uses the word *nuqṣān* (lack/decline/inferiority) seven times. Drawing upon these prophecies

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[61] Arabic *Life* 3.4 (trans Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.4; I have made some small changes to Lamoreaux's translation).
[62] ibid. 4.9 (trans. Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, p.6).
[63] ibid. 5.1-5.5 (trans. Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, pp.6-7).
[64] Arabic *Life*, 5.4-5.5 (trans. Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen,* II, pp.6-7. I have made some small changes to Lamoreaux's translation).

attributed to saints from the foundational period of Christian monasticism and applying them to his own age, Leontios presents Stephen as an exceptional light in a very dark age of decline and loss. Some lamenting of the sins of the present generation is not new in hagiography.[65] But this lengthy recourse to earlier prophecy, combined with the specific sense of current decline in monasticism, is to my knowledge unique.

This exceptional preface to the *Life* establishes its tone throughout. Monasticism is in decline and under threat, but God still chooses a select few servants, who are particularly venerable because of the darkness of the age. Stephen himself makes similar comments towards the end of the *Life*. In a speech to his disciples, he urges them to imitate the great monks of the lavra of the past, before exhorting them also to look for role-models in the present day:

> For God has not ceased to have genuine servants in every generation, even if in these present times the monastic way of life has been altogether lessened, [since] 10 years after the great earthquake, and still little by little it will [continue to] dwindle, because of the multiplication of laziness and negligence.[66]

The passage probably refers to an earthquake which took place between 746 and 749, described in the chronicle of Theophanes.[67] Leontios, through Stephen, therefore ascribes a quite

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[65] These laments are usually in the specific context of explaining particular difficulties. For example, a drought in the *Life of Euthymios* is blamed on general sinfulness (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymios*, ed. E. Schwartz, *Kyrillos von Skythopolis*, p.38 line 15 ff). These laments, however, are typically much less extensive and more generalised than that found in the *Life of Stephen.*

[66] Greek *Life of Stephen* XIV.173: οὐ γὰρ διέλειπεν ὁ Θεὸς ἔχων γνησίους δούλους κατὰ γενεὰν καὶ γενεὰν, εἰ καὶ πάνυ ἐν τούτοις τοῖς ἐνεστῶσι καιροῖς ἠλαττώθη ἡ μοναχικὴ πολιτεία μετα δέκα ἔτη ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγάλου σεισμοῦ, καὶ ἔτι κατὰ βραχὺ καὶ βραχὺ ὀλιγωθήσεται, διὰ τὸ πληθυνθῆναι τὴν ῥαθυμίαν, καὶ ἀμέλειαν. The Arabic translator mistranslates this passage, stating that the earthquake happened ten years ago (Arabic *Life*, 75.7; see Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen*, II, p.123 n.314).

[67] AM 6238: ed. de Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia,* p.422. The precise date of the earthquake is debated: see Y. Tsafrir and G. Foerster, 'The Dating of the 'Earthquake of the Sabbatical Year' of 749 C.E. in Palestine', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African*

particular date, the mid eighth century, roughly coterminous with the beginning of Abbasid rule, to the onset of this decline in monasticism. This again suggests that Leontios is not simply repeating tropes about the sins of the present generation, but has a specific situation in the monasteries in mind. His fears correlate well with Reynold's archaeological analysis, which sees decline in Palestinian monasticism beginning in the mid eighth century and accelerating in the ninth.[68]

Stephen's statement that current monasticism is in general decline, but that there are still a few 'genuine servants' of God, echoes Leontios's interpretation of the prophecies by Pachomios and the fathers of Scetis. Both parts of this proposition seem equally important to Leontios. For, while he repeatedly acknowledges the declined state of monasticism, he is also very keen to show that sanctity does continue in the Judaean desert. In large part Stephen's own life demonstrates this. But Stephen, evidently, was an exception: Leontios both directly and through various characters in the *Life* repeatedly state that his achievements are almost unparalleled in the present generation and that apart from him no wonderworkers are known.[69] As discussed above, he also states very clearly that after Stephen no comparable ascetics will emerge—but qualifies this, on both occasions, by saying there will be no more 'visible' ascetics.[70]

This introduces one of the more striking features of the *Life*, its repeated insistence on the continued presence of *invisible* and hidden holy ascetics in the desert. During his interpretation

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Studies 55.2 (1992), pp.231-5; N. Ambraseys, *Earthquakes in the Mediterranean and Middle East: a multidisciplinary study of seismicity up to 1900* (Cambridge, 2009), pp.230-8.

[68] Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage', esp. chapter 4.

[69] See e.g. Greek *Life of Stephen* VI.70 (Arabic *Life* 40.4). There are a few references to other holy ascetics, notably Martyrios, who features prominently towards the start of the *Life* (Arabic *Life*, 17.1-17.7), and two unnamed monks of Mar Sabas praised by Stephen (Greek *Life* XIV.171-173; Arabic *Life* 75.1-75.7). All seem, however, to have predeceased Stephen, supporting Leontios's claims that Stephen would be the last visible holy anchorite.

[70] Greek *Life* I.2: τῶν φαινομένων ἀναχωρητῶν; I.3 τῶν ὁρωμένων ἀναχωρητῶν (Arabic Life 18.6; 19.2).

of Pachomios's prophecy, Leontios states 'we believe that there are in our generation men who are not seen by bodily eyes, who have attained the levels of the holy fathers, their divine gifts, and the multitude of their grace.'[71] Indeed, secretive or even fully invisible ascetics appear repeatedly throughout the *Life*. In perhaps the most striking such episode, a monk, John, was walking with Stephen and some other monks. Stephen led his companions into a cave, where they saw signs of grasses and footprints; they guessed that an anchorite must live there.[72] They also saw an ancient date palm about the height of a man near the cave. They refrained from asking Stephen about this, but John later returned, and heard a conversation between two people. He was only able to see Stephen, however, and not his interlocutor, and was greatly astounded. John later begged Stephen to explain this to him, whereupon Stephen revealed that he had been talking to an anchorite who lived in the desert and ate grass. When John and the other monks had first appeared, the anchorite had been leaning on the date palm, invisible:

> He had not gone away, but was glued invisibly to the date tree, in no way visible to you, just as he was not [visible] to you, when he was sitting together with me. For this is the first request of the anchorites to God, which they make to God in the beginning, when they withdraw from the monasteries, and leave their brethren, that they will not be visible to anyone, except anyone they want.[73]

Stephen therefore suggests that the ability to become invisible, to withdraw completely from the human world, is a key desideratum of ascetics; significantly, they do not wish to disappear

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[71] Arabic *Life* 5.5 (trans. Lamoreaux, *Life of Stephen*, II, p.7).
[72] Greek *Life* IV.42-3 (Arabic *Life* 32.1-32.7).
[73] Greek *Life* IV.43: οὐκ ἀπέστη, ἀλλὰ τῷ φοίνικι ἀοράτως παρεκεκόλλητο, οὐδαμῶς ὑμῖν ὀπτανόμενος, ὡς οὐδέ σοι, ἡνίκα μοι συγκαθεζόμενος συνετύγχανεν. Αὕτη γάρ ἐστιν ἡ πρὸς Θεὸν πρώτη τῶν ἀναχωρητῶν αἴτησις, ἣν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ποιοῦνται εἰς τὸν Θεὸν, ἀπὸ τῶν μοναστηρίων ἐξερχόμενοι, καὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἐξιστάμενοι, ἵνα μηδενὶ ὁραθῶσιν, εἰ μὴ ᾧ ἂν βούλωνται (Arabic *Life* 32.6).

only from lay people, but even from most other monks. Two other stories in the *Life* similarly revolve around invisible anchorites.[74]

Leontios does not entirely innovate in these stories. They share features with other hagiographies, particularly those set in Palestine, which repeatedly refer, for instance, to *boskoi,* ascetics who live off grasses and other desert plants.[75] The miracle collections of the seventh-century hagiographer Anastasios of Sinai refer to holy ascetics transforming into date palms and disappearing in other ways in order to pass unseen.[76] Nonetheless, Leontios's insistence that this was a key desire of ascetics, together with his repeated statements that visible ascetics will no longer appear, seem exceptional. In context, these stories of invisible ascetics seem designed to show that God's holy workers are still present among the monks of the Judaean desert, even if the ordinary monks are not aware of their holy companions. This thus serves to refute anyone who, like one of Stephen's interlocutors in another passage of the *Life,* states that monasticism is losing its value, and cites, as proof of this, the fact that no monk in this generation apart from Stephen is able to perform miracles.[77] Leontios's *Life* serves as a retort to this argument, providing reassurance that, despite appearances, the desert is still alive with sanctity, and will be even after Stephen's death.

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[74] Greek *Life* IV.41 (Arabic *Life* 31.7-31.10); Greek *Life* XI.139-142 (Arabic *Life* 65).
[75] On *boskoi,* see J. Wortley, '"Grazers" (βοσκοι) in the Judaean desert', in Patrich (ed.) *Sabaite Heritage,* pp.37-48.
[76] See for instance Anastasios of Sinai, *Tales of the Sinai Fathers,* 22, 23, 25, 26, 30, 31, ed. F. Nau, 'Le texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinaï', *Oriens Christianus* 2 (1902), pp.73-9 (I did not have access to A. Binggeli's 2001 dissertation ('Anastase le Sinaïte: *Récits sur le Sinaï* et *Récits utiles à l'âme.* Édition, traduction, commentaire', Paris 2001') with his edition and translation of Anastasios's works). On Anastasios's hagiographic works, see esp. B. Flusin, 'Démons et Sarrasins: l'auteur de le propos des *Diègèmata stèriktika d'Anastase le Sinaïte', Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991), pp.381-409; J. Lee Ehinger, 'Revolutionizing the Status Quo: Appeals to Pre-Christianity in the Writings of Anastasius of Sinai', *Studies in Late Antiquity* 3.1 (2019), pp.17-35.
[77] Greek *Life* VI.70 (Arabic *Life* 40.4)

Another story recounted by Leontios is perhaps relevant here.[78] The hagiographer reports a story told to him by a priest, Theodegetos, who had encountered two young girls in the desert who looked like anchorites; their hair was so long that they used it as their clothing. They were accompanied by their mother, also dressed like a monk. Bedouin attacked them, but God rescued the girls and punished one of the Bedouin who was trying to assault their mother with blindness and other ailments. Theodegetus asks Stephen about these women and Stephen reveals to him a romantic and fantastic tale about their 'Roman' (presumably Byzantine) origin. Later the Bedouin appear, bringing their sick companion and asking Stephen to pray to God to cure him. Stephen retorts stridently that the man will never be cured because he had tried to defile a holy servant of God. 'Now go on your way and learn from what you've suffered', he asserts: 'no longer lay hands on the Lord's anointed ones, nor act wickedly towards his saints; for he is their protector and companion and champion.'[79] This story reinforces the picture of a desert filled with marvellous ascetics. Stephen's words also serve, however, to make a clear point: God is still guarding his holy ones in the desert. While the teaching may be voiced as a rebuke for the Bedouin, it is very unlikely that the Bedouin were a target audience for this text. Rather, Leontios seeks to reassure his monastic readership that God is actively protecting his devotees, even those wandering alone in the desert.

All of this is important because the *Life of Stephen* is highly apologetic in bent, defending monasticism in a time when it appears to have suffered something of a crisis. Although Leontios acknowledges that monasticism is in a dark age, that sins are widespread, and that visible holy monks are few and far between, he certainly does not wish to discourage people from monasticism. Rather, the text is full of cautionary tales about people who abandon the

[78] Greek *Life* VIII.94-7 (Arabic *Life* 50.1-50.10).
[79] Greek *Life* VIII.97: Λοιπὸν πορευθέντες παιδεύθητε, ἀφ' ὧν ἐπάθετε, μηκέτι ἅπτεσθαι τῶν χριστῶν κυρίου, μήτε ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ πονηρεύεσθαι· σκεπαστὴς γὰρ αὐτῶν ὑπάρχει, καὶ συνοδίτης, καὶ ὑπέρμαχος (Arabic *Life* 50.10).

monastic life to return to the lay world, and of exhortations about the value of monasticism. In one episode, a monk had despaired and wanted to renounce his monastic habit and return to the city. Stephen reprimanded his decision to 'wallow in worldly filth' but could not persuade him to abandon his plans until he performed a miracle, whereupon the other monk marvelled and reembraced monasticism.[80] In another story Stephen has a vision of a black dragon with bloody eyes pursuing one of the brethren; the monk ends up living sinfully in Jerusalem.[81] Elsewhere, Stephen rebukes a monk who has spent too much time in the world outside the monastery, saying that 'you have become half-dead – or rather wholly dead.'[82] A monk who has spent much of his life wandering around realises that he has become even worse than a wild beast.[83] Again, some pre-Islamic hagiographies also contain stories warning against monastic wandering and contact with the lay world, a topic of contention since the earliest years of monasticism.[84] But the *Life of Stephen* seems particularly preoccupied with the dangers of leaving the monastery.

A series of stories suggest that even virtuous monks who mean well will meet unfortunate fates if they become entangled with the troubles of the world. A pious monk called Christopher tells Stephen that he wishes to go to 'Persia' (presumably Baghdad) to intercede on behalf of the beleaguered patriarch of Jerusalem, Mar Eliya.[85] Stephen, although very favourable to Eliya, tells Christopher that he should not go, since has no *parrhēsia* (freedom of speech) with the emir; monks, rather, have *parrhēsia* with God.[86] Christopher, according to Stephen, can best

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[80] Greek *Life*, VII.83-4: τοῖς κοσμικοῖς ἐγυλινδεῖσθαι [κυλινδεῖσθαι] βορβόροις (Arabic *Life* 45.1-45.7).
[81] Greek *Life* XII.153-4 (Arabic *Life* 68.1-68.5).
[82] Greek *Life* XII.155: ἡμιθανὴς, μᾶλλον γὰρ ὁλοθανὴς γεγονώς (Arabic *Life* 69.2).
[83] Greek *Life* XIII.164 (Arabic *Life* 73.1-73.2).
[84] On earlier disputes about monastic travel, see esp. D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2002).
[85] Greek *Life* II.19-23 (Arabic *Life* 23.1-23.11; the Arabic gives 'Baghdad' in lieu of the Greek 'Persia').
[86] Greek *Life* II.21 (Arabic *Life* 23.6).

serve the patriarch by staying in the desert, fasting, and praying—that is, by living a traditional ascetic desert lifestyle. Christopher fails to heed Stephen's advice, goes to Baghdad, cannot help Eliya, and dies in the city without being able to return to Mar Sabas. Later, a monk, Abba Basil, whom Leontios again depicts in positive terms, consults Stephen.[87] Stephen urges Basil not to accept ordination as a bishop. He recounts a lengthy vision to him in which he saw himself and Basil with other monks in a remote and beautiful fortress. Below the castle he sees a sea in which men are tossed and turned around; some of the men try to escape and call on Basil to help them. The monks in the fortress begin to beg Basil not to leave. Basil, however, keeps listening to the people who want him to help them. Stephen interprets this vision:

> the very light, conspicuous, and most unbreakable fortress, was an image of the excellent way of life of the pure monastic life; and the very disturbed and wave-tossed sea was a form and likeness depicting the care-beset disorder of men, and the ceaseless storm of worldly affairs; and that that moderate/poor group, the one calling you to them, and begging you to stretch out your hands, was a group of Christians.[88]

Stephen and the other monks beseech Basil not to leave the monastery, though Stephen predicts, rightly, that Basil will not listen to them and will become a bishop. This is not presented as a case, as we also encounter in the Life, as well as in other hagiographies, of a flawed monk seeking ordination as a priest or bishop out of vainglory and desire for power. Rather, Basil is depicted as a good but misguided monk, who listens to the appeals of Christians who need help, and fails to follow Stephen's advice. Stephen wishes Basil to ignore the appeals

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[87] Greek *Life* V.53-8 (Arabic *Life* 35.1-35.12).

[88] Greek *Life* V.57: τὸ μὲν πολύφωτον καὶ περιφανὲς ἀῤῥαγέστατον κάστρον τῆς τοῦ εὐαγοῦς μονήρους βίου ἀρίστης διαγωγῆς εἰκὼν καθέστηκεν· ἡ δὲ πολυτάραχος καὶ κυματώδης θάλασσα τοῦ κόσμου ἴνδαλμά τε καὶ ὁμοίωμα πέφυκεν ἐξεικονίζων τὸν πολυμέριμνον τῶν ἀνθρώπων φυρμὸν, καὶ τὸν τῶν βιωτικῶν πραγμάτων ἀκατάπαυστον χειμῶνα·τὸν δὲ μέτριον ἐκεῖνον σύλλογον, τόν σε πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἐγκαλούμενον, καὶ τὴν τῶν σῶν χειρῶν ὄρεξιν ἐξαιτούμενον, Χριστιανῶν εἶναι μέρος (Arabic *Life* 35.9).

of the Christian laity, and to stay in the isolated monastic castle. The implication seems to be that, while a clerical career in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, with its more direct involvement in society, might seem the best way to help fellow Christians, in fact it is better to stay in the monastery and live a traditional ascetic lifestyle.

The pointed morals of these stories, and their social context, become more evident in view of the most openly defensive section of the Life.[89] In this episode, we are told that Stephen urged a pious layman from Moab, who repeatedly visited him for spiritual guidance, to become a monk. The man retorted:

> I suppose, father, that it is [more] possible for men to please God today in the world, rather than in the desert, and it seems preferable to me to suffer together with the people of God, in great affliction and difficulty, and to help the needy, and to defend widows and orphans, and to be hospitable, and to visit those experiencing pains and bodily sickness…rather than to attend to myself in solitude, and to help nobody… As the Lord declared, the road which leads to the kingdom of heaven is narrow and straitened: but now the way of life in the world is more narrow and more straitened, as everyone testifies: for we see the monks prospering in great relaxation and enjoying a lack of cares, but people living in the world spending their time in misery, and hardship, and poverty, and constantly changing constraints and griefs. A most manifest sure sign for the confirmation of our words is the fact that in this generation there is no monk who works miracles, or can prophesy, or is famous, and shines out with divine sparks, except for your Holiness alone.[90]

[89] Greek *Life* VI.69-72 (Arabic *Life* 40.2-40.9).
[90] Greek *Life* VI.70: Ὑπολαμβάνω, πάτερ, ὅτι δυνατόν ἐστι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τῷ Θεῷ εὐαριστῆσαι σήμερον, ἢ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, καὶ ὅτι αἱρετώτερόν μοι φαίνεται συγκακοπαθῆναι τῷ λαῷ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν πολλῇ θλίψει, καὶ στενοχωρίᾳ ὑπάρχοντι, επικουρῆσαί

The man argues that in these times (presumably, although it is not specified, in the time of Islamic rule) monasticism is not the best way to serve God. Monks have an easy life; in contrast, Christians in the cities are suffering and need help. The narrow road, which pious Christians must take, is thus in the cities, not the monasteries. Leontios, unsurprisingly, claims that Stephen managed to convince this man with citations from the scriptures and fathers that he was greatly deceived, and that the way of monasticism was much superior. The man became a monk and was perpetually grateful to Stephen.

This episode of doubt about the value of monasticism should not be dismissed as mere hagiographic trope. It is true that stories about sceptics about holy men and their miracle working powers are not rare in hagiography, but while these may sometimes be tropes, they usually do represent trends of sceptical thinking within a society that did not accept all holy men's claims uncritically.[91] In particular, unusual or extended refutations of scepticism should not be dismissed as tropes, but recognised as responses to real current concerns. In this case, the criticism of monasticism attributed to the man from Moab does not seem to reflect earlier tropes. Rather, it should be interpreted as representing genuine concerns which Leontios had encountered, perhaps from external critics, perhaps from fellow monks, about the value of monasticism in his contemporary setting. The whole *Life* could indeed be read as a refutation of these very concerns. Thus Stephen shows Christopher and Basil that they were wrong to

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τε τοῖς δεομένοις, καὶ χηρῶν καὶ ὀρφάνων προΐστασθαι φιλοξενῆναί τε, καὶ τοὺς ἐν ὀδύναις καὶ σωματικαῖς ἀσθενείαις ἐπισκέπτεσθαι.…ἢ ἑαυτῷ προσέχειν ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ, καὶ μηδενὶ βοηθῆσαι..... καθὸ ὁ κύριος ἀπεφήνατο, στενήτε καὶ τεθλιμμένη καθέστηκεν ἡ ὁδὸς, ἡ ἀπαγοῦσα εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν· νῦν δὲ στενωτέρα καὶ θλιβερωτέρα ἡ ἐν κόσμῳ διαγωγὴ, ὡς πάντες μαρτυροῦσι· πολλῆς γὰρ ἀνέσεως εὐμοιροῦντας καὶ ἀμεριμνίας ἀπολαύοντας τοὺς μοναχοὺς καθορῶμεν, τοὺς δὲ ἐν κόσμῳ διατρίβοντας ἐν πολλῇ κακουχίᾳ, καὶ ταλαιπωρίᾳ, καὶ ἐνδείᾳ, καὶ ἐν ἀλλεπαλλήλοις ἀνάγκαις καὶ λύπαις διάγοντας. Πρὸς πίστωσιν δὲ τῶν ἡμετέρων λόγων τεκμήριον ἐναργέστατον, τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἐν τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ τινὰ τῶν μοναχῶν ζημειοφόρον [r. σημειοφόρον], ἢ προορατικὸν, ἢ περιβοητὸν, καὶ ταῖς θείαις μαρμαρυγαῖς περιλάμποντα, εἰ μὴ μόνην τὴν σὴν ἁγιωσύνην (Arabic *Life* 40.4).

[91] See esp. G. Dagron, 'L'ombre d'un doute: l'hagiographie en question, VIe-XIe siècle', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992), pp.59-68; Kaldellis, 'Hagiography of Doubt'; M. Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2012).

think that they could serve God better by going to Baghdad, or by becoming a bishop, than by living as monks. Both were well intentioned, hoping to help their fellow Christians, but ultimately deceived. Leontios seems more concerned about this problem of pious monks deciding that they should break monastic rules, or even worse, abandon monasticism, than about wicked or avaricious monks renouncing the monastic order. It seems possible that the monasteries were encountering a recruitment problem, struggling to convince lay people of the value of taking monastic oaths in the Islamic environment; or that Leontios was concerned about abandonment, of monks renouncing their vows and returning to the lay world (or pursuing clerical careers). This may well reflect the increased isolation—perhaps even irrelevance—of Palestinian monasteries in the changing religious environment and political geography of the Abbasid caliphate. It fits into the picture of a decline of monasticism attested archaeologically in the later eighth and ninth centuries (and although Mar Sabas itself survived, and indeed retained some international appeal, attracting monks from a range of backgrounds, its monks must surely have been aware of the abandonment of monasteries elsewhere in the region).[92] Leontios's concerns also seems to reflect a challenge to the traditional balance of Christian authority, as monks' established (if sometimes contested) position within the hierarchy of Christian leadership came under threat since they could offer little help to lay Christians in dealing with the challenges of Islamic society.

Certainly when Leontios recounts his own struggles as a novice in the monastic life he claims that he had considered returning to the world to help his fellow Christians. Stephen miraculously discerns Leontios's thoughts, saying to him, at one point,

> Did you not often [say to yourself]: 'Would that I were in the world, and involved in worldly affairs, and enduring adversity with the afflicted Christian people?... so I shall

[92] On this decline, see Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage', Chapter 4; on Mar Sabas's survival see esp. pp. 297-303.

> return to the world, and strip off this monastic habit… for [from monasticism] there has been no benefit to me, but rather damage and ruin.'[93]

Leontios uses his own experiences, whether real, or a narrative construction, as a vivid didactic method of expounding for fellow monks the dangers of despair and the kinds of deceptive thoughts that can occur to novices. Stephen, of course, protects Leontios from these thoughts, re-establishing him in his commitment to monasticism. But these repeated stories about monks and lay people who think that their best path to serve God lies in the world, until they are refuted by Stephen, should not be seen as straightforward reportage of events that had taken place. Rather, they are didactic episodes intended to reassure Leontios's monastic readers of the ongoing value of monasticism in a difficult time.

The *Life of Stephen* at one level, therefore, serves as an apologetic in defence of the ongoing value of monasticism in Abbasid-ruled Palestine. Leontios acknowledges that monasticism has entered a period of sinfulness and darkness, and that holy ascetics are few and far between; Stephen, indeed, will be the last visible ascetic to walk the desert. Against critics who point out the lack of great wonder-working monks, however, he emphasises that the desert remains populated with invisible ascetics who serve God and in turn are protected by him. Against those who doubt whether monks are best positioned to help the struggling Christian people, he reasserts the value of monastic prayer, and shows ill ends coming to those who abandon monasticism. Leontios's account only makes sense, in my view, in a context in which there were real social concerns about the value of monasticism. What is more, Leontios was not alone in his efforts to respond to these concerns. If we turn to other hagiographic literature

[93] Greek *Life* X.125: Οὐ πολλάκις· εἴθε ὤφειλον ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἶναι, καὶ τοῖς κοσμικοῖς ἐγκυλινδεῖσθαι πράγμασι, καὶ τῷ θεοσεβεῖ λαῷ κακουμένῳ συγκακουχεῖσθαι.…Ὑποστρέψω οὖν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καὶ τουτὶ τὸ μοναχικὸν ἀποδύσομαι σχῆμα… οὐ γάρ μοι γέγονεν ὄφελος, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ζημία καὶ ὄλεθρος (Arabic *Life* 60.3).

produced in eighth- and ninth-century Palestine, we see similar themes emerge, further suggesting that monasticism in this period was undergoing something of a crisis of confidence.

Martyrs and monks: Defending monasticism in Abbasid Palestine

The *Life of Stephen* stands alone as the only lengthy Melkite biography of a non-martyred holy man surviving from Palestine in the Abbasid period. A few brief miracle collections and fragmentary excerpts from saints' Lives do exist, including the *Life of John the Desert-Dweller* and the miracles of Eustratios of Mar Chariton.[94] Far more common, however, are the neo-martyrologies, new martyr accounts of Christians killed in the time of Islam. A not insignificant corpus of these texts survives, many of them difficult to pin down precisely in terms of date, place, and sometimes even language, of composition. It is therefore difficult to define the boundaries of the corpus and to know which texts should be considered in parallel. I focus here on a core group of texts which can plausibly be linked to eighth/ninth century Palestine, many of them evincing a monastic connection, often to Mar Sabas, sometimes to St Catherine's on Mount Sinai.[95] These consist of the Passions of Michael of Mar Saba (d. under Abd al-Malik, caliph from 685-705), Peter of Capitolias (d.715), the 60 Martyrs of Jerusalem (d.c.724),

[94] The *Life of John* is discussed below. For the Miracles of Eustratios, see Treiger, 'Unpublished Texts'.

[95] See Sahner, *Christian Martyrs*, pp.213, 222-3. To what extent Mount Sinai was seen as part of Palestinian monasticism in this period deserves further exploration. Many of the texts focused on Mar Sabas pay little attention to monasticism beyond the Judaean desert/Jerusalem area, but other evidence does suggest an ongoing connection. Leontius's *Life of Stephen* refers to Leontius's pious aunt going to Jerusalem and Mount Sinai to pray (Greek *Life of Stephen* XI.133; Arabic *Life* 64.1), suggesting an association between the two in pilgrimage. The closest link between Mar Sabas and St Catherine's appears in the *Martyrdom of Abd al-Masīḥ al-Najrānī al-Ghassānī* (on which see below note 133); the future martyr becomes a monk at Mar Sabas for five years, visits the other monasteries near Jerusalem, and then moves to Mount Sinai, ultimately becoming the abbot of St Catherine's. Beyond the hagiographic corpus, scribal evidence suggests that ties existed between the two centres of monasticism; for example, Antony David of Baghdad copied at least two manuscripts at Mar Sabas for Mount Sinai, at the request of Abba Isaac (Griffith, 'Antony David of Baghdad', Binggeli, 'Les Trois David', pp.80-100).

Romanos (d.780), the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas (d.797), Antony Rawḥ al-Qurashī (d.799), and Abd al-Masīḥ al-Najrānī al-Ghassānī (d. uncertain).[96] I therefore do not consider earlier martyr accounts (such as the seventh-century passion of the 60 monks of Gaza), or Syrian/Byzantine/Georgian martyr accounts (such as the Syrian Life of Elias of Helioupolis and the Byzantine-authored Passion of Bacchus the Younger).[97]

Importantly, the martyr accounts from Palestine do not seem to reflect a widespread persecution of monks. Bowman has recently argued that the Abbasid caliphs were less favourable towards monks than their Umayyad predecessors, and specific situations may have resulted in harsh punishments, but nonetheless it does not seem that there was a sustained campaign of violence against monasteries.[98] Some of the martyr stories may have a historical core; others are almost certainly fictional. Rather than reflecting sustained persecution of monks, the production of these texts should be seen primarily in terms of the polemical and ideological interests of their authors. In his groundbreaking study, Christian Sahner has interpreted these martyrologies as evidence for an 'anti-assimilationist' agenda among rural monks, that is to say, they were encouraging Christians to resist processes of Islamicization at

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[96] Bibliographic details of these texts, and information about their dating, are given in the discussion below when each first appears.

[97] On the 60 martyrs of Gaza, see D. Woods, 'The 60 Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem', *Aram* 15 (2003), pp.129-50; the text is edited in H. Delehaye, '*Passio Sanctorum Sexaginta Martyrum', Analecta Bollandiana* 23 (1904), pp.289-307. On Elias of Damascus, also known as Elias of Helioupolis, see S. McGrath, 'Elias of Heliopolis: The Life of an Eighth-Century Syrian Saint', in J.W. Nesbitt (ed.), *Byzantine authors: literary activities and preoccupations; text and translations dedicated to the memory of Nicolas Oikonomides* (Leiden, 2003), pp.85-107; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam,* pp.283-5; Vila, 'Christian Martyrs', pp.267-78; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.53-9. The martyrdom is edited in A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Syllogē palaistinēs kai syriakēs hagiologias,* volume 1 (St Petersburg, 1907), pp.42-59. On Bacchus, see Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs', pp.196-8; Vila, 'Christian Martyrs,' pp.287-96; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.62-8; Binggeli et al, *Nouveaux martyrs,* part 1; this last includes an edition and translation. For the authorship of *Life of Bacchus* by the Constantinopolitan Stephen the Deacon, see Binggeli et al, *Nouveaux martyrs,* esp. pp.46-55. It is possible that the story of Bacchus does have a Palestinian origin.

[98] Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life,* p.129; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.3, 5-7; Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage', pp.313-4.

a time when many Christian lay people and secular clergy were willing to compromise with their Muslim neighbours and rulers, and when, perhaps, Christian conversions to Islam were accelerating.[99]

The martyrologies may well, however, also have had a more apologetic goal. When read in view of the defence of monasticism in Leontios's *Life of Stephen,* the martyr accounts also reveal certain defensive tendencies. This paper will argue, therefore, that the martyrologies seek to defend monasticism against its external critics, and perhaps more importantly against monks whose resolve was failing. They present monks as the last defence for Christianity in an age of danger, and highlight the ongoing sanctity present in the desert monasteries. The hagiographies associated with this eighth- to ninth-century Melkite Palestinian milieu are suffused with concerns about the state of monasticism. Different texts reveal a range of concerns: some are more concerned with the practical difficulties of monasticism in the context of political instability and reduced security in the Palestinian deserts (notably, monasteries seem to have been most endangered when centralised authority was weak and raiding widespread), while others are more worried, like Leontios, about the moral challenges facing monasticism in this period.[100] These differing concerns reflect the volatile political and security situation of the Palestinian desert. But the texts are tied together by anxiety about the present and future of Palestinian monasticism in the context of Islamic-ruled society. At a basic level, they all sought to show that monasticism still received God's favour; that God had not abandoned monks or monasteries, and thus that monks themselves should remain resolute in their vows despite physical dangers or criticisms from other Christians. Some are very clearly preoccupied with discouraging monks from abandoning their monasteries and returning to the world. Some authors went so far as to redefine monasticism in terms of martyrdom, presenting

[99] Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* passim ('anti-assimilationist' at pp.200, 213, and elsewhere).
[100] On the importance of protection by a strong government, see Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life,* pp.7, 128-9.

monasteries as training centres for martyrs, and heroic monks as frontline defenders of Christianity against Islam—a way perhaps of responding to criticisms like those found in Leontios's *Life of Stephen* that monks were failing to help lay Christians in the cities. In earlier centuries of Christianity monks had been presented as successors of martyrs, replacing the martyrs' persecutions and trials with spiritual and ascetic battles.[101] Now monks once again took up the direct crown of martyrdom, and in the process created a more restricted and exclusive vision of martyrdom, one which largely excluded female martyrs, so prominent in other Christian contexts.

Before turning to the martyrologies proper, it is worth also considering the fragment that does survive of what appears to be a seventh/eighth century Greek Palestinian hagiography, the *Life of John the Desert-Dweller*. The text clearly comes from the Islamic period, since it refers to the incursions of the 'Hagarenes'. Beyond this it is difficult to date precisely: its editor, Halkin, argued that it was written in the eighth century on the basis that it refers to one Nikodemos as the hegumen of Mar Sabas, but Hoyland has pointed that out that Mar Sabas also had a hegumen called Nikodemos in the seventh century.[102] One incident recounted in the surviving fragment reflects a striking attempt by the author to reinterpret the threat from the Arabs as a benefit for monasticism. John, the hero of the *Life*, tells a less experienced monk, Thomas, that he is planning to go to the monastery of St Anthony (in Egypt). Thomas excitedly asks John if he can come with him to the monastery of Anthony, since living in the Palestinian desert he is very oppressed 'by the most shameful Hagarenes.'[103] John refuses his request, saying that he does not have travelling supplies for two, and, more significantly,

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[101] See e.g. E.E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: the Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, 1950), and below, note 119.
[102] F. Halkin, 'Saint Jean L'Érémopolite', *Analecta Bollandiana* 86.1-2 (1968), pp.13-4; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, p.88.
[103] *The Life of John the Desert Dweller,* 4, ed. Halkin, 'Saint Jean', p.19 (English translations from this text are mine): ὑπὸ τῶν αἰσχίστων Ἀγαρηνῶν.

> It is not good to stigmatise the Hagarenes as most shameful and hateful. For it is written, 'Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you [Luke 6:27]' And so it does not befit us, brother, to stigmatise them as most shameful, but rather to honour and embrace them as our benefactors and to supplicate God zealously on their behalf.… So if you choose, brother, to become a perfect disciple of Christ, do not insult them. For had we not had them, better than our youthful mentors, teaching us to be poor, to endure hunger and thirst and to tolerate any kind of terrible thing, albeit unwillingly, it is clear that in this place too few would have been those who were saved. For like those in the world we too are living in great ease, and many of us have become a source of malignant joy for the demons.[104]

John's argument that Thomas should honour the Arabs rests on two points. The first, that the Gospels command Christians to love their enemies, is fairly straightforward. But John also urges Thomas to view the Arabs as their 'benefactors' and as their instructors, who teach the Christian monks to endure ascetic suffering and poverty. He thus reinterprets the Arab threat, which Thomas views only negatively, as a new version of the classic gospel-based form of ascetic renunciation. The Arabs are a new way of achieving old goals: poverty, suffering, renunciation in honour of Christ. Without the Arabs, indeed, very few of the monks would have been saved. John thus urges Thomas, who seems to serve as a textual vessel for any novice struggling with his commitment to monasticism, not to view the Arabs as an intolerable

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[104] *The Life of John the Desert Dweller,* 4, ed. Halkin, 'Saint Jean', p.19: Τὸ δὲ τοὺς Ἀγαρηνοὺς αἰσχίστους καὶ μισητοὺς ἀποκαλεῖν οὐ καλόν· γέγραπται γάρ· 'Ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν· καλῶς ποιεῖτε τοὺς μισοῦντας ὑμᾶς.'. Οὐ χρὴ οὖν, ἀδελφέ, τούτους ἡμᾶς αἰσχίστους ἀποκαλεῖν, ἀλλ' ὡς εὐεργέτας μᾶλλον καὶ τιμᾶν καὶ ἀσπάζεσθαι καὶ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐκτενῶς τὸ θεῖον ἱλάσκεσθαι … Εἰ οὖν αἱρῇ, ἀδελφέ, τοῦ Χριστοῦ τέλειος γενέσθαι μαθητής, μὴ ἔσο αὐτοὺς ὑβρίζων· καὶ γὰρ εἰ μὴ τούτους εἴχομεν ὑπὲρ τοὺς παιδαγωγοὺς ἡμᾶς τὸ ἀκτημονεῖν διδάσκοντας, τήν τε πείναν ὑπομένειν καὶ τὴν δίψαν καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι δεινὸν ὑποφέρειν καίπερ ἀκουσίως, εὔδηλον ὅτι καὶ ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ ὀλίγοι ἦσαν οἱ σῳζόμενοι· καὶ γὰρ ὥσπερ οἱ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐν εὐπορίᾳ καὶ ἡμεῖς διάγοντες πολλῇ, πολλοὶ καὶ δαιμόνων ἐπίχαρμα γεγόναμεν.

obstacle; rather, they should interpret the Arab threat as a route to salvation. Like Leontios, John's anonymous hagiographer seems to be urging his audience to persist in the monastic life, although his concerns, at least in this short surviving passage, are more with its practical difficulties than its moral anxieties.

Similar concerns emerge when we turn to the martyrologies written in the eighth and ninth centuries. The text closest to the *Life of Stephen* in terms of date and context is the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas.*[105] This was written by an abba Stephen (not to be confused with Stephen the Wonderworker, subject of Leontios's *Life*), perhaps Stephen b. Manṣūr of Damascus, the hymnographer.[106] Stephen records the date of the martyrdom of the twenty monks, 797, within the text, and he probably wrote the martyr account (which seems to be one of the most historical of the surviving martyrologies) shortly after this.[107] It was certainly written before Leontios's *Life of Stephen*, since Leontios refers to the martyrdom account.[108] Stephen provides a vivid account of an attack on the monastery of Mar Sabas by Bedouin raiders, who ended up massacring a group of monks after they refused to reveal to them the location of the monastery's treasures. Stephen does not, notably, present this struggle in terms of a clash between Christianity and Islam. The raiders do not try to force their religion on the monks; rather, the monks are killed for largely economic reasons.[109] The text thus does not fit into the model of an anti-Islamicization, anti-assimilationist monasticism which has been proposed to explain the other martyrologies of this period, and has, perhaps as a result of this,

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[105] I use the text edited by Papadoulos-Kerameus, as reproduced by Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms.*

[106] The Arabic translation of Leontios's *Life of Stephen* names the author of the martyrdom account as Anba Stephen son of Manṣūr of Damascus (Arabic *Life of Stephen* 77.5), but Leontios in the Greek text only refers to him as Abba Stephen (Greek *Life* XV.77): it is difficult to know whether the Arabic translator had additional information or simply elaborates to associate the text with a famous name. See Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*, pp.xxxi-xxxii; Auzépy, 'Palestine à Constantinople', pp.205-6.

[107] For fuller discussion, see Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*, pp.xxx-xxxiii.

[108] See above p.14.

[109] Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*, pp.xxxvi-xxxvii.

sometimes been neglected in discussions of neo-martyrologies. But it powerfully demonstrates the challenges faced by monasteries in this period, and monastic authors' efforts to reinforce monastic identities and to prevent monks from abandoning their monasteries.

First, Stephen strongly emphasises that Mar Sabas still had God's special protection, despite this horrific attack. Perhaps paradoxically, he begins the account with the report of several failed raids on the monastery, emphasising that God provided divine assistance to Mar Sabas.[110] On one occasion, for instance, the Old Lavra of Chariton and the surrounding areas are pillaged; Stephen reports that nowhere was spared except for Mar Sabas, 'as a grape in the vineyard after the harvest, which Christ God, stretching forth a strong hand, miraculously protected as a demonstration of his almighty and unvanquished power and his careful forethought and affection for it.'[111] On another occasion God thwarted a barbarian raid on Mar Sabas, causing the attackers to discover some wine and become too drunk to launch their attack.[112] Again elsewhere Stephen reports that potential attackers were dispersed by God 'through the prayers of our holy father Sabas.'[113] By prefacing his graphic account of the violent raid on the monks with this series of instances when the monastery was protected from comparable onslaughts, he implicitly reassures his audience that this episode, although horrific, was unusual; the monastery of Mar Sabas still had special divine protection. This is important, because Stephen, like Leontios and the hagiographer of John of the Desert, provides a long warning about the importance of staying in the monastery. This warning comes in the form of discussion between the monks of the monastery, who dismissed the idea of fleeing to the safety of the city:

> Let us not for fear of the sinful barbarians return to the clamour of the world, inviting suspicion from all that we suffer the most shameful affliction of cowardice…. As it is

[110] *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas,* 5-8.
[111] ibid. 5 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.75).
[112] ibid. 7 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.76-7).
[113] ibid. 8 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.78-9).

> wonderful to see those withdrawing from the world and following Christ go into the desert, so it is shameful and hideous and disgraceful to see those who have estranged themselves from the world and dwelled in the desert not for very long return and run back again to the world on account of mortal fear….We do not have walled and fortified cities in which we would be keeping watch, but we have Christ, the impenetrable wall.[114]

Stephen, in the collective voice of the monks of Mar Sabas, adopts a harsh line, stridently criticising the cowardice of anyone tempted to choose to abandon the monastic life of the desert.

In addition, like the author of the *Life of John the Desert Dweller*, he presents the Arab attacks as a form of ascetic teaching and training for the monks (although he is much less keen than John's hagiographer to urge his audience to be kind to the Arabs). He draws on the Old Testament model of Job, stating that Christ gave the Devil power against the monks so that the Devil could not claim that they followed Christ because He protected them, and would renounce Him in the face of struggles. 'Therefore,' Stephen notes, 'in order to deny the enemy the opportunity for any pretext and to teach his contestants by actions to be unvanquished and victorious in the horrors, Christ gave him authority as he wished to train his ascetics.' The devil recruited the 'barbarians' as his 'squires and attendants' in this mission.[115] In short, Christ had not abandoned the monastery of Mar Sabas; rather, he allowed the monks to be tested because they were his special and most devoted servants.

The last section of the account builds to a crescendo, celebrating Mar Sabas as a centre of martyrdom while at the same time striking a polemical note. Stephen is keen to defend the slain

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[114] ibid. 9 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.81).
[115] ibid. 11-12 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.85).

monks of the monastery from any accusation of not being true martyrs because they had not died in order to avoid renouncing Christianity.[116] In fact, he argues, their martyrdom is even more impressive because of this: anyone would die to avoid apostatising, since apostasy would entail the destruction of their soul. Rather, the monks died to preserve one of the lesser commandments of Christianity, to love your neighbour as yourself. Rather than giving up their leaders, they faced death. The monks therefore are martyrs less for Christianity in the face of Islam, than for the monastic ideal of brotherly love. Stephen implies that monastic training is essential for martyrdom: he notes that some of those who had died were novices and far from perfect in the monastic life, but nonetheless they had 'all been given preliminary training to master the passions and to subdue longing for pleasure and love of life.'[117] Monasticism is crucial to martyrdom: their life in the monastery, however short, had given them the tools to resist cowardice and to accept death for their fellows. Stephen goes on to say that even those who have survived the massacre are still worthy of the rewards of martyrdom, and that in some ways they have suffered more than those killed, since they must live with ongoing wounds. The monastery of Mar Sabas thus becomes a site of living martyrdom, of the ultimate sacrifice for Christian piety.

Stephen elides monasticism and martyrdom, presenting the two as inextricably linked. In an emotional description of the burial of the deceased, he weaves between discussing their ascetic practice and their martyrdom, showing that through both the monks have renounced temporal life for the sake of piety and Christ:

> They buried in their bloodstained clothes those who had been unjustly killed by the unjust barbarians; who were violently wrenched and driven from life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; who had renounced the whole world and abandoned all the

[116] ibid. 38-42 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.122-33).
[117] ibid. 40 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.127)

> pleasures and joys of the world for the sake of Christ; who spent their lives in a desert so harsh and severe and devoid of every bodily delight and comfort…who loved God and neighbour more than themselves and gave themselves over to a painful death for the sake of Christ and the love of their neighbours….who fought the good fight of piety, finished the race of asceticism, and kept their faith until the last breath.[118]

In Stephen's presentation, death by martyrdom becomes the ultimate fulfilment of the ascetic's race to master bodily weakness and to renounce the world. Asceticism and martyrdom are both ways of becoming Christlike; the martyrs 'shared in the sufferings of Christ through asceticism [ἀσκήσεως], and then through contest [ἀθλήσεως -i.e. martyrdom]'.[119] Martyrdom appears an innately monastic practice.

Stephen even reinterprets the memory of Sabas, the monastery's founder, presenting him as a trainer of martyrs, even though Sabas himself had lived in a period of no martyrdoms in the Roman empire (at least among Chalcedonians). In the last section of the martyr account the hagiographer addresses Sabas directly, saying that 'you were accustomed to prepare and train your disciples not only for asceticism but also for the contest [martyrdom].'[120] He states that Sabas had led more than forty of his disciples to martyrdom during the Persian conquest of Jerusalem, as well as training the more recent martyr Christopher, a convert from Islam to Christianity who had become a monk in Mar Sabas before being put to death by the caliph.[121] Hagiographers in the Christian Roman empire had long presented monks as the successors of the martyrs, sometimes even explicitly stating that ascetic self-inflicted suffering was more

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[118] ibid. 37 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.121-3)
[119] ibid. 48 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.139).
[120] ibid. 51 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.145).
[121] For exposition of these references, see the notes to Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.145.

noble than the martyrs' achievements.[122] Stephen almost in a sense inverts this, presenting martyrdom as the pinnacle of the monastic achievement, and Mar Sabas as the centre of martyrdom.

Overall, then, Stephen balances harsh condemnation of anyone who would choose to abandon the monastery with a strong reminder that God is protecting Mar Sabas. The tests it has recently endured are a sign of its special status and confirm its historic position as a centre of Christian piety. Monks, with their special training to set earthly life at naught, are the greatest martyrs, alive or dead, and will receive rewards in heaven. The text becomes a paean to the monastic ideal of brotherly love, seeking to reinforce the courage and self-belief of the monks of Mar Sabas after a time of considerable trauma. Written before, although set later than, Leontios's *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas,* the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs* provides another perspective on the anxieties of monasticism in this period. It also shows that the martyr accounts of the period cannot be reduced to a story of monastic resistance to Islamicization among the broader Christian population. Some, at least, were intended to shore up and reaffirm monastic self-confidence in the face of direct threats to their way of life.

Other martyr texts from this period do have a more explicitly anti-Islamic bent, presenting monks, and those of Mar Sabas monastery in particular, as the ultimate defenders of Christianity against Islam. This is perhaps seen most obviously in the life of Michael of Mar Sabas, a text with a complicated history: it survives in a Georgian version, presumably a translation from Arabic or Greek, as a story in the Greek *Life of Theodore of Edessa,* and in an

[122] David Brakke, for instance, explores how Athanasios depicted Antony as the heir of the martyrs: Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), chapter 2. For an example of a monk himself claiming that monks equal or surpass martyrs in virtue, see the 25th sermon attributed to Symeon Stylites the Younger (d.592), which begins 'the blood of the martyr is not more venerable than the way of life of the monk' (μαρτυρίου αἷμα οὐ τιμιώτερον τῆς τοῦ μοναχοῦ πολιτείας): ed. A. Mai, *Novum Patrum Bibliotheca* 8.3 (Rome, 1871), Sermon 25.1 (p.125).

Arabic translation thereof.[123] Griffith has argued that the standalone version preserved in Georgian was originally written in Arabic by a monk of Mar Sabas in the ninth century, and represents the earliest surviving version of the text.[124] The main part of the passion, dealing with Michael's life, is largely bereft of historically specific details and contains many legendary/biblical themes, including a variation on the Potiphar's wife trope.

During a dialogue with the caliph's wife, Michael asserts the value of monasticism: 'I was a captive of the world; now I am a free man of God. I was a slave of sin, but now I am the slave of the Most High.'[125] In a later episode, the caliph implies that monasticism has no biblical foundation, asking 'Where is it written in Genesis or in the Gospel that the eating of flesh and marriage is prescribed for you?'; Michael refutes the caliph's challenge.[126] This suggests an awareness, and perhaps a concern about, Muslim criticisms of monasticism. While Muslim attitudes towards monks were diverse, complex, and certainly not uniformly unfavourable, mainstream Islamic tradition did reject celibacy, and some authors of *diyārāt* literature in the ninth century mocked monasticism.[127] Michael confidently outwits and outargues the caliph, demonstrating the centrality of monasticism to Chrisitan spirituality.

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[123] On Michael, see Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs', pp.170-83; idem, 'Michael, the Martyr and Monk of Mar Sabas monastery, at the Court of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik; Christian Apologetics and Martyrology in the Early Islamic Period', *ARAM* 6 (1994), pp.115-48; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.127-30; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam,* pp.295-7; Vila, 'Christian Martyrs', pp.160-77.

[124] See the two articles by Griffith cited in the previous note. Lamoreaux has questioned the reliability and primacy of the Georgian text: Lamoreaux, 'Biography of Theodore', pp.26-32. I rely on Blanchard's translation of the Georgian: M.J. Blanchard, 'The Georgian Version of the Martyrdom of Saint Michael, Monk of Mar Sabas Monastery', *ARAM* 6 (1994), pp.149-63. The Georgian has also been translated into Latin by P. Peeters, 'Le Passion de S. Michel le Sabaïte', *Analecta Bollandiana* 48 (1930), pp.65-98.

[125] *Martyrdom of Michael,* 4 (trans. Blanchard, 'Georgian Version', p.151).

[126] ibid. 7 (trans. Blanchard, 'Georgian Version', p.152).

[127] On Muslim attitudes towards monks and monasticism, see E. Key Fowden, 'The Lamp and the Wine Flask: Early Muslim Interest in Christian Monasticism', in A. Akasoy, J.E. Montgomery, and P. Pormann (eds.), *Islamic crosspollinations: interactions in the Medieval Middle East* (Cambridge, 2007), pp.1-28; R. Durmaz, *Stories between Christianity and Islam:*

Most strikingly, after Michael's death, the text segues into a panegyric on Mar Sabas itself, including the statement: 'Just as Jerusalem is the queen of all cities, so too the lavra of Saba is the prince of all deserts. And if Jerusalem is the point of comparison for other cities, so too Saint Saba is the likeness for other monasteries.'[128] 'Blessed is every believer' living in Mar Sabas. The author then lists the ascetic and martyred heroes of the monastery of St Sabas from the fifth century to the present day, including the victims of the martyrdom of 797. He describes Sabas as 'the father of many martyrs', recalling Stephen's presentation of Sabas as a trainer of martyrs in the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs of Mar Sabas.* Michael, who is described in very generalised terms, is arguably only a narrative type intended to represent the diligence and constancy of a monk of Mar Sabas. As Griffith has argued, the lavra of Mar Sabas appears the real 'hero' of the story.[129] This passage could be read simply as a triumphalist statement of the glory of Mar Sabas. But when compared to the other texts originating in Mar Sabas in this period, it is tempting to view its valorisation of the monastery and its presentation of its monks as the defenders of Christianity as an apologetic assertion of the continuing importance of the monastery at a time of crisis.

The Sabaite monk Stephen, author of the *Passion of the Twenty Martyrs,* also seems to have been the author of another martyrdom, the *Passion of Romanos the Neomartyr* (d.780).[130] This

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Saints, Memory, and Cultural Exchange in Late Antiquity and Beyond (Oakland, 2022), pp.146-51; Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life,* esp. chapter 5; Campbell, 'Heaven of Wine', passim. On Islam and celibacy, see S. Bashir, 'Islamic Tradition and Celibacy', in C. Olson (ed.), *Celibacy and Religious Traditions* (New York, 2007), pp.133-50; Campbell, 'Heaven of Wine', pp.75-9. On anti-Christian satire in diyārāt literature, see J.W. Wright Jr. 'Masculine Allusion and the Structure of Satire in Early ʿAbbāsid Poetry', in J.W. Wright Jr. and E.K. Rowson (eds.), *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York, 1997), pp.15-16; Reynolds, 'Monasticism and Christian Pilgrimage', pp.226-7; Campbell, 'Heaven of Wine', pp.112-23, 132-54, 198.

[128] *Martyrdom of Michael,* 14 (trans. Blanchard, 'Georgian Version', p.158).

[129] Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs', pp.174-5.

[130] On Romanos, see Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.xxxvii-xliii; Griffith, 'Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs', pp.193-6; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.206-8; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam,* pp.285-7. I use Shoemaker's translation of the text in *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.150-97.

martyrdom, which was presumably written in Greek but now survives only in Georgian, is an exceptional text. One of its main themes is opposition to the iconoclast policies of the Byzantine emperors, in contrast with the other martyrologies, which are almost entirely focused on domestic affairs within the caliphate. Nonetheless, the text again valorises monasticism. Stephen presents Constantine V's iconoclastic policies as primarily targeted against monks: 'he desired and set his heart on eradicating and destroying the monastic schema [habit] entirely.'[131] Stephen notes 'this opponent of God did not know that this schema is from John the Baptist, and whoever is its enemy is the enemy of John the Baptist.' He recounts an incident demonstrating the untouchability of the monastic habit: the patriarch of Jerusalem catches a monk sinning, and to humiliate him he strips him of the monastic habit and puts the habit on a pig, which is paraded through Jerusalem.[132] John the Baptist, enraged, appears to the patriarch, telling him that he will accuse him on the day of judgement because he had mocked John's schema. The patriarch is terrified and builds John the Baptist a splendid church, begging for forgiveness, but John refuses to pardon him. The message is clear: anyone who insults the monastic habit commits an unforgiveable sin and will receive punishment after death if not on earth. This anecdote based in Jerusalem suggests that Stephen is not only criticising Byzantine iconoclasts, but any opponents of monasticism in the caliphate as well. The contents of the text have no direct link to Mar Sabas: Romanos was a monk of a monastery in Paphlagonia, and after his martyrdom his body was preserved at a church in Raqqa.[133] Nonetheless, the presentation of John the Baptist as founder and protector of the monastic order would resonate with an audience at Mar Sabas. Monks are presented as the heroic defenders of Christianity both in Byzantium, against the heretical iconoclasm of the emperors, and in the East, against the Islamic oppression of the caliphs (Romanos is ultimately put to death by the caliph).

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[131] *Passion of Romanos,* 12 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.171).
[132] ibid. 13 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* p.170-3).
[133] ibid. 27 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.194-7).

Other martyrologies probably deriving from this period and region similarly valorise monasticism. The martyrs ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Najrānī al-Ghassānī and Antony Rawḥ al-Qurashī are monks in Palestinian monasteries (as is Bacchus, though in its surviving form his hagiographic *Life* seems to derive from Constantinople; the story may however have a Palestinian and possibly Sabaite origin).[134] The martyr Peter of Capitolias, according to his hagiographer, adopted a rather informal form of asceticism, building his own cell rather than joining a monastery.[135] But the account certainly gives a special role to monks: the hagiographer describe Peter’s daughters joining a monastery in some detail, while the wicked caliph also insists that monks and ascetics witness Peter’s martyrdom, implicitly suggesting they are the most important among the Christians.[136] One text which perhaps challenges this model is the *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, which in its surviving version was recorded by a monk called John near Jerusalem. The heroes of the text are sixty Byzantine ‘nobles’ who were apparently killed in c.724 on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.[137] But even here,

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[134] On ‘Abd al-Masīḥ, see S. Griffith, ‘The Arabic account of Abd al-Masīḥ an-Naǧrānī al-Ghassānī’, *Le Muséon* 98 (1985), pp.331-74 (including an edition and translation), reprinted as article X in Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam,* pp.297-9; Vila, ‘Christian Martyrs,’ pp.140-60; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.46-9. On Antony Rawḥ, see Griffith, ‘Christians, Muslims and Neo-Martyrs’, 198-200; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.84-92; Vila, ‘Christian Martyrs’, pp.97-140; T. Sizgorich, ‘For Christian Eyes Only? The Intended Audience of the Martyrdom of Antony Rawḥ’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20 (2009), pp.119-35; and, for an edition, I. Dick, ‘La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwaḥ néo-martyr de Damas († 25 déc 799)’, *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), pp.109-33. On the Passion of Bacchus, see above note 94 and Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* p.62.

[135] On Peter of Capitolias, see Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.xv-xxx, and section 1, which contains the text and translation; Griffith, ‘Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs’, pp.184-7; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam,* pp.277-82; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.130-40; Vila, ‘Christian Martyrs’, pp.252-60. The Passion only survives in Georgian translation from a presumed Greek original; since I am unable to read Georgian, I am reliant on Shoemaker’s translation.

[136] On Peter’s daughters, see *Passion of Peter of Capitolias* 2-3 (Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.4-11); on the caliph’s targeting of monks, see ibid. 10 (Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* pp.42-5); Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* p.216.

[137] The text has recently been analysed and translated by C. Sahner, ‘The *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem* (d.ca.724) [*BHG* 1217]: Study and Translation’, in P. Booth and M. Whitby (eds), *Mélanges Janes Howard-Johnston (Travaux et mémoires* 26) (Paris, 2022),

monasticism plays a role. The sixty nobles seem, rather implausibly, to have adopted a quasi-monastic lifestyle, including virginity, from their youth: they are said to have 'advanced in virtues and dazzled with good deeds, adorning themselves with chastity [ἁγνείᾳ] as well as virginity of body [παρθενίᾳ σώματος].[138] In Jerusalem, they give away their possessions to impoverished locals, and visit the 'sacred monasteries of the desert'.[139] This group of virgin male companions surely has a quasi-monastic feel (in contrast to the early seventh-century *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza*, in which the martyred soldiers are taken away from their wives and children by their persecutors).[140] The point should not be pushed too far; this is not a unified corpus of texts, and not all are equally focused on monasticism.

Nonetheless, overall, monastic themes dominate. This is not to invalidate earlier interpretations of these martyrologies as 'anti-assimilationist' assertions of the importance of resisting collaboration with Muslims and conversions to Islam. This external message, targeted at Christian secular clergy and lay people, may well have been important. But the very fact that the heroes of almost all these texts are monks suggests that they had a special message for monastic audiences: monasticism remained the ultimate Christian calling, and monks had an ongoing role to play as defenders and leaders of the Christian faith. This might appear a triumphalist statement and a reflection of the strength of monasticism. But given the concerns revealed in multiple texts about monks abandoning their calling and returning to secular life (and given the archaeological evidence for monastic shrinkage in this period), it seems more likely that the martyrologies' strident defence of monasticism serves a defensive function at a

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pp.385-406. It is edited by A. Papadopoulos-Keramaeus, 'Μαρτύριον τῶν ἁγίων ἑξήκοντα νέων μαρτύρων...', in *Pravoslavny palestinsky Sbornik* 12 (1892), pp.1-25.

[138] *Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Jerusalem*, 2 (ed. Papadopoulos-Keramaeus, 'Μαρτύριον', p.2, trans. Sahner, 'Passion of the Sixty', p.398).

[139] ibid. 6 (ed. Papadopoulos-Keramaeus, 'Μαρτύριον', p.4, trans. Sahner, 'Passion of the Sixty', p.400).

[140] Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza (BHL 5672m), 1; ed. Delehaye, '*Passio Sanctorum Sexaginta',* p.301; trans. Wood, 'The 60 martyrs', p.144.

time of insecurity. Chalcedonian monks no longer enjoyed imperial patronage or a guaranteed place in the Christian hierarchy of the Roman Empire. They had to adopt new roles, defending their importance in the changed context of Islamic Palestine. Martyrdom became a powerful symbol of monastic strength, resistance, and leadership.

Narrowing the Boundaries of Martyrdom: Gender and Monastic Identity

A gendered reading of these texts supports the argument that they are primarily intended for an internal monastic audience. All of the lives of martyrs produced in Palestine in the eighth and ninth centuries seem to have treated male subjects. It is true that the term 'neomartyr' was first used to refer to a woman; the seventh-century hagiographer Anastasios of Sinai, in his collection of short 'edifying stories', applies it to a Christian Damascene slave Euphemia, beaten by her Muslim master for taking communion.[141] But this is a passing reference in a pre-Abbasid text not primarily focused on martyrdom. In the corpus of eighth to ninth century Palestinian martyrologies, the martyred heroes are all male. This provides a striking contrast to other instances of martyrological writing. The prototypical martyrologies, those of early Christian martyrs to pagan persecutors, feature many female martyrs.[142] Martyr accounts from third- to sixth-century Sasanian Persia included stories of female victims, as did the stories of the martyrs of Najran.[143] So too the ninth-century accounts of Christian martyrs in Islamic Al-

[141] A French summary of the text is provided by Flusin, 'Demons et Sarrasins', p.387 (Récit C12). I did not have access to the edition of this text in Binggeli's dissertation (see above, note 73). See also C. Sahner, 'Old Martyrs, New Martyrs and the Coming of Islam: Writing Hagiography after the Conquests', in A. Izdebski and D. Jasínski (eds.), *Cultures in Motion: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (Krakow, 2014), pp.95-6.

[142] See e.g., with extensive further references, L.S. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York, 2008); G. P. Streete, *Violated and Transcended Bodies* (Cambridge, 2021), esp. chapter 2; R.P. Seesengood, 'Martyrdom and gender' in P. Middleton (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom* (Chichester, 2020) pp.184-98.

[143] The Persian martyrologies have generally received much less scholarly attention than those from within the Roman empire; for discussion of Persian martyrology see J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*

Andalus, written by the priest Eulogios of Córdoba, feature women as well as men, both husband and wife pairings, and female virgins.[144]

There were several compelling reasons for including stories of female martyrs, particularly if writing for a lay audience. In particular, hagiographers used female subjects because of gendered assumptions about their weakness; it was particularly impressive for a woman to be able to achieve martyrdom, given their frailty.[145] Augustine, in a sermon on the birthday of the martyrs Perpetua and Felicity, commented that 'a more splendid crown…is owed to those of the weaker sex, because a manly spirit has clearly done much more in women, when their feminine frailty has not been undone under such enormous pressure.'[146] He noted in another sermon, that while men had also died on this day, it was Perpetua and Felicity who were remembered, not because the two women had behaved better than the men, but because 'it was

(Berkeley, 2006), esp. Part II, Chapter 1. Several accounts of female Persian martyrs, and of female martyrs from Najran, are translated into English and discussed in S. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syriac Orient* (Berkeley, 1998), chapters 3 and 4. On female martyrs from Najran see also R. Barrett, 'Sensory Experience and the Women Martyrs of Najran', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21.1 (2013), pp.93-109. Other female martyrs from Persia include the sixth-century Shirin and Golindouch: on Shirin see P. Devos, 'Sainte Shirin: Martyr sous Khosrau 1er Anosarvan', *Analecta Bollandiana,* 64 (1946), pp.87-131, and on a Constantinopolitan rewriting of Golindouch's Life, with further references, see M. Dal Santo, Imperial Power and its Subversion in Eustratius of Constantinople's *Life and Martyrdom of Golinduch* (c.602)', *Byzantion,* 81 (2011), pp.138-76.

[144] Female martyrs discussed by Eulogius include the virgins Flora and Maria, Columba, Pomposa, Aurea**,** the nun Digna, the elderly laywoman Benildus, and Sabigotho and Liliosa, married women who died with their husbands; Paul Alvarus also records the martyrdom of the virgin Leocritia three days after Eulogius himself was executed. On Eulogius and the Cordoban martyrs, see esp. K. Baxter Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain* (Cambridge, 1998), as well as the introduction to his translation of Eulogius's works: Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus* (Liverpool, 2019), with extensive further bibliography.

[145] Cobb, *Dying to be Men,* pp.116, 122; Seesengood, 'Martyrdom and Gender', p.193.

[146] Augustine, Sermon 281.1, ed. C.J.M.J. Van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis,* vol 1 (Nijmegen, 1936), pp.151*-152*, trans. E. Hill, *Sermons 273-305a: On the Saints* (New York, 1994), accessed online as part of the 4th online edition of Ramsey (ed.), *The Works of St Augustine (4th Release). Electronic edition.* On these sermons, see K.E. Milco, '*Mulieres viriliter vincentes:* Masculine and Feminine Imagery in Augustine's Sermons on Sts. Perpetua and Felicity', *Vigiliae Christianae* 69.3 (2015), pp.276-95.

a greater miracle for women in their weakness to overcome the ancient enemy'.[147] Women's victory is particularly deserving of praise, admiration, and emulation.

In ninth-century Al-Andalus, Eulogios of Córdoba made a similar point in a letter to the imprisoned virgins, and future martyrs, Flora and Maria:

> If the victory of men is worthy of proclamation, the palm of women should be extolled as something even more excellent. While the standard of victory may be great in men, and, generally speaking, males are the ones raised up magnificently with the triumph of such glory, when women do something that is normally done by men, it deserves to be honoured with the praise of greater admiration, for, oblivious to the fragility of their sex, [women such as these] are not afraid to seek the lofty heights of courage, where even the strength of the mighty can quickly grow weary.[148]

Women are worthy of additional praise for enduring martyrdom, because of their innate fragility. The male commentators seem to suggest: if a weak woman can endure martyrdom, so too can any Christian suffer for their faith. Accounts of female martyrs thus had a powerful didactic purpose, as models of emulation and incitements of piety.

In narrative terms, descriptions of the wounds inflicted on female martyrs and their delicate bodies could also serve as a way of heightening the brutality of the non-Christian persecutors. Eulogios describes touching the neck of Flora: 'I, a sinner, so rich in iniquity…touched with both of my hands the scars of her most reverent and delicate neck, where her virginal hair had been removed by the blows of the whips'.[149] The references to delicate flesh and virginal hair

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[147] Augustine, Sermon 282.3, ed. Van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum,* pp.153*-154*, trans. Hill, *Sermons 273-305a*.
[148] Eulogius of Córdoba, *Documentum Martyriale,* 1, ed. Gil, *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum* Volume 2 (Madrid, 1973), p.462, trans. Wolf, *Eulogius Corpus,* p.302.
[149] Eulogius of Córdoba, *Memoriale Sanctorum,* 2.8.8, ed. Gil, *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum* Volume 2, pp. 411-2, trans. Wolf, *Eulogius Corpus,* p.225.

provide a jarring contrast with the whips and scars. Eulogios goes less far in his focus on female bodies than some early Christian martyrologists; their interest in torture inflicted on women's bodies has been deemed 'disturbingly graphic', 'brazen voyeurism', and as offering 'real, if sublimated, titillation'.[150]

In didactic and narrative terms, then, the inclusion of female martyrs only strengthened martyrologies. In addition, there were pressing contemporary reasons to emphasise the importance of women resisting Islamicization. Recent scholarship has revealed intense anxiety among religious authorities in the Abbasid period about the role of women in community boundary maintenance, which might suggest that women would be an obvious target for texts aiming to discourage close interaction with Muslims and conversion to Islam.[151] Bishops from various churches in the eighth and ninth centuries were extremely concerned about Christian women marrying Muslim men.[152] Islamic law dictated that Muslim women could not marry non-Muslim men, but Muslim men could marry non-Muslim women, opening the way for Christian women to marry Muslims. In general it was assumed by Christian lawmakers that women who married non-Muslim men would convert to Islam, and that their children would be raised Muslim, as the man acted as determiner of the household's religion. Christian women marrying Muslims thus represented not only individual losses to the church, but the loss of potential future generations of Christians. Syriac Orthodox lawmakers were so concerned about this that they ruled that anyone involved in arranging the marriage between a Christian woman

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[150] 'Disturbingly graphic' (and 'gratuitously detailed'): S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, 1987), pp.24-5; 'Brazen voyeurism': Cobb, *Dying to be Men,* p.110*;* 'Titillation': Seesengood, 'Martyrdom and Gender', p.192.
[151] Simonsohn, *Female Power,* passim.
[152] Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph,* Chapter 8; U. Simonsohn, 'Communal Membership Despite Religious Exogamy: A Critical Examination of East and West Syrian Legal Sources of the Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Periods', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 75.2 (2016), pp.249-66; Simonsohn, *Female Power,* esp. chapter 3, Wood, *Imam of the Christians,* pp.152-60; Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East,* pp.437-56.

and a non-Christian would be excommunicated.[153] Some bishops did informally seek to support women who married Muslims in remaining Christian (and in practice non-Muslim women certainly did not always convert upon marriage, and could introduce non-Muslim practices into their households, leading to anxiety about maintaining Islamic orthodoxy on the part of Muslim lawmakers), but in general intermarriage was harshly discouraged.[154] In this environment, in which Christian women's rejection of non-Christian marriage was seen as vital to the survival of the Christian community, we might well expect stories of Christian women embracing martyrdom rather than converting to Islam or taking a Muslim husband.

But this is not what we find in the Palestinian martyrologies. The inherited tradition of early Christian martyrologies, the narrative and didactive demands of hagiography, and contemporary pressures, might all encourage stories of female martyrdom. The authors of the neomartyrologies were certainly well versed in early Christian martyr stories and indeed, in Christian Sahner's words, 'went to great lengths to establish a sense of continuity between martyrs past and present'.[155] And yet one striking feature of the early martyr accounts—the inclusion of women—has disappeared. The absence of these stories surely suggests that the Palestinian monastic martyrologists were not primarily preoccupied with an 'anti-assimilationist' agenda of discouraging Christian-Muslim interactions and conversions to Islam. Rather, in place of the inclusive model of martyrdom of the early Christian era, they narrowed their focus to valorise male, almost exclusively monastic heroes, who would be of the greatest relevance to their primary audience: fellow monks. This is not to say that the martyrologies were only intended to be consumed within the monastery's boundaries; they could be intended for wider audiences of Christians too. But for this audience the authors of

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[153] Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph,* p.211.
[154] Weitz, *Between Christ and Caliph,* pp.209-10. On Christian wives not converting to Islam, and Muslim scholars' anxiety about this, see Simonsohn, *Female Power,* esp. chapter 4.
[155] Sahner, 'Old martyrs, new martyrs', p.105.

the martyrologies still offered a restricted vision of martyrdom, one intended to show that monasticism had great value, and that monks still operated as the ultimate upholders and defenders of Christianity in an age of religious turmoil.

Strikingly, even one martyrology which might seem to fit less comfortably into the monastic model suggested here still maintains this male vision of martyrdom. The *Life of Peter of Capitolias* (d.715) may well be linked to Mar Sabas monastery, but this is not certain: in its surviving manuscript it is attributed to John of Damascus, but this may be a case of an anonymous text being (mis)attributed to a famous author, and, in any case, the association of John with Mar Sabas has been questioned.[156] Monasticism is very important in the text, but in a less institutional form than that which predominates in the other martyrologies discussed here. Peter entrusts his two daughters to the convent of St Sabinian, but he and his son adopt a more informal kind of asceticism; Peter builds them neighbouring cells outside a church.[157] The hagiographer greatly praises Peter's younger daughter as a fine ascetic.[158] Yet when Peter is martyred, it is only his son who in part shares in his martyrdom. We are told that when Peter is executed, his children are dragged from their cells to witness the event.[159] After Peter boldly proclaims his faith and publicly prays to God, his persecutors cut out his tongue, causing blood to spray forth from his mouth. At this point,

> The martyr's son, armed, as the child of the martyr, with a martyr's understanding, ignored the threats of the rulers and touched his father's blood and sealed his head with

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[156] On the authorship of the *Life of Peter*, see Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* xvi-xviii; Sahner, *Christian Martyrs,* pp.130-1 (suggesting that the text must come from the Melkite Palestinian context); Auzépy has questioned John of Damascus's traditional association with Mar Sabas; see above, note 12.

[157] *Passion of Peter of Capitolias,* cc.2, 4 (trans. Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms,* 5-7, 11-13).

[158] ibid. c.3 (trans. Shoemaker, pp.9-11).

[159] ibid. c.11 (trans. Shoemaker, p.45). His younger daughter has already died earlier in the text (c.3), but here we are told that his children are brought out with no details.

> it…. When the emir saw this audacity, he was troubled by the son's paternal blessings, and he ordered that he should be beaten.[160]

As the son of the martyr, Peter's son inherits the 'martyr's understanding', which bestows something of the martyr on him. Unlike his father, he does not die, but he endures beating and resists the persecutors' commands. Peter's surviving daughter (the other has died earlier in the narrative) has no comparable role in her father's martyrdom, even though she too was an ascetic.

This raises an important point: what had happened to female monasticism in this period? The vision of monasticism which emerges from most Palestinian hagiography in this period is overwhelmingly male. But, as the *Martyrdom of Peter of Capitolias* suggests, female monasticism had not ended with the Islamic conquests of the seventh century. From hagiography itself, it is hard to assess how widespread female monasticism was by the eighth to tenth centuries. If female monastics do appear, it is normally only through passing references. Leontios in the *Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas,* for example, portrays Stephen as part of a large network of male monks and clerics. The only female ascetics to appear in the text are the three wandering women, a mother and two daughters, apparently of a 'Roman' origin, whom Stephen protects from a Bedouin attack.[161] This story does acknowledge female monasticism: we are told that the mother had become a nun after her husband's death, and that the two younger women were 'dressed in the monastic habit [schema]'.[162] But the appearance of the women is exceptional within the text, and, as discussed above, they serve a powerful narrative function; God's protection of these three very vulnerable women from Bedouin attacks demonstrated that he could and would save his holy ascetics from dire situations. These

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[160] ibid. c.11 (trans. Shoemaker, pp.47-9)
[161] See above p.22-3.
[162] Greek *Life of Stephen,* VIII.94: τὸ μοναχικὸν ἐνδεδυμέναι σχῆμα (compare Arabic *Life of Stephen,* 50.2)

women ascetics thus serve a particular narrative role, but are not given a broader place within the organised monastic system of the Judaean desert.

More detailed information comes from the sparse but precious documentary record associated with Charlemagne's envoys' investigation of Palestinian Christianity.[163] The Basel Roll lists the churches and monasteries of Palestine in the first decade of the ninth century.[164] It is impossible to know how accurate and comprehensive the survey is, but it is surely indicative of trends. The roll lists the numbers of monks in different institutions and divides them by gender. Five institutions of the fifty-one mentioned in the Basel roll housed nuns; of these, four were located in Jerusalem, and one in the city of Tiberias. About 17 percent of the monastics documented in Jerusalem were women, and about 8 per cent of the total monastics across Palestine.[165] Women thus constituted a small, but not insignificant, proportion of monastic Christians at this date. Why, then, do they not feature more heavily in the monastic literature of this period? One reason may lie in the urban focus of female monasticism; all of the nunneries attested in the Basel roll were based in cities.[166] Urban monasticism (with the partial exception of Constantinopolitan monasticism) is often underrepresented in hagiography, which tends to prioritise the ideal type of the desert ascetic.[167] And it is not hard to imagine that the context of Islamic rule further heightened gaps between the desert monasteries like Mar Sabas—whose monks had to face periodic security collapses, as well as, somewhat

[163] See above p.8.
[164] For the provenance of the document see McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey,* pp.155-83.
[165] McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey,* pp.33, 36-7, 52, 63-6, 200-208, 214-5.
[166] ibid. pp.53, 65.
[167] On monasticism in Constantinople, see esp. G. Dagron 'Les moines et la ville: le monachisme à Constantinople jusqu'au concile de Chalcédoine (451)', *Travaux et Mémoires* (1970), pp.229-76; P. Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca 350-850* (Cambridge, 2007). On the city in hagiography, see H. Saradi, 'The City in Byzantine Hagiography', in Efthymiadis (ed.) *Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* II, pp.419-52. Muslim authors also tended to ignore urban monasticism and focus on its rural manifestations: see Campbell, 'A heaven of wine', pp.15-23.

paradoxically, apparent accusations that they were not helping the urban Christians living in close proximity to Muslims—and urban monasteries, who faced different pressures in the environment of a multicultural city. The hagiographers of Mar Sabas focused on defending the desert monastic lifestyle, and set up idealised male monks as representatives of this movement.

The Palestinian hagiographic corpus shows the importance of applying a gendered lens to literature of the early Islamic period. Consciously or unconsciously, monastic writers in this period created a new understanding of martyrdom, one restricted to men of a monastic background. This limited, narrow vision surely suggests that the neo-martyrologies were less concerned with reinforcing boundaries between Christianity and Islam than with upholding the spiritual authority of the desert monk in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

For Leontios of Damascus, Stephen of Mar Sabas was the last holy man of the great late antique tradition of the Judaean desert. His understanding of the current state of monasticism was bleak: all would concede that monasticism was in severe decline, and no known ascetics would follow in Stephen's footsteps. Nonetheless, Leontios takes care to reassure his readers that sanctity persisted: hidden ascetics continued to achieve marvellous feats, and to win God's favour and protection. Most importantly, monasticism, despite its failings, remained the ultimate way of serving the Christian faith. Monks should not feel that they could better help their fellow Christians by returning to the world and intervening in affairs in the cities. The superiority of monasticism could no longer be taken for granted: in a world of changing political circumstances, of increasing pressures on Christians, and, perhaps, of a serious reduction in the numbers of ascetics, monks had to reinterpret and renew understandings of the importance of their calling. These concerns resonate with a better-known genre from the period, the neo-martyrologies. The neo-martyrologies have normally been understood in terms of external concerns, as a way for monks to attempt to influence their fellow Christians among the laity

and clergy. But these texts also had an internal message to their fellow monks, encouraging them to persist and have confidence that God continued to favour and protect monks, who were the bulwark of the Christian people against the threat of Islam. They redefined the role of monasticism and monastic leadership in Islamic society, presenting monks as the ultimate champions of Christianity. Concomitantly, they presented a new vision of martyrdom, one less inclusive than in earlier martyr accounts; now the ideal martyr was a male monk, monasticism offering crucial training for martyrdom.

These findings encourage a reappraisal of the situation of monasticism in Palestine in the Abbasid period. Sidney Griffith and his followers have proven beyond doubt that monasticism did persist, at least in the great centres of Mar Sabas and St Catherine's. But monasticism at this date seems to have been marked by widespread concerns of various types: about the feasibility of monasticism at a time of increased raids, about its utility in the changing political context, and about its place in Islamic society. The texts produced do not reflect a coherent response to these pressures, rather revealing a series of attempts to redefine and restate the importance of monasticism. Martyrdom is, however, a consistent theme. Martyrdom served as a powerful symbol, in part because it gave monks a new leadership role in Islamic society, while also creating continuity with the earliest centuries of Christianity and its early heroes, the first martyrs.[168] Monks devised new traditions about long-revered saints: most notably, Sabas, famous in his day as a founder of monasteries, pious ascetic, and defender of orthodoxy, was now presented as a trainer of martyrs across the centuries.

This may have broader implications for our understandings of the effects of Islamic rule on Christianity. Archaeologists and historians have convincingly demonstrated broad patterns of

[168] On the parallels hagiographers drew between neo-martyrs and the first generation of Christian martyrs, see Sahner, 'Old Martyrs, New Martyrs', pp.89-112.

continuity. Christians converted to Islam only slowly.[169] This does not mean, however, that Islamic rule did not have profound effects on Christian society. More could be done to explore the ways in which Islam indirectly transformed the balance of power and authority within Christian communities. It is certainly true that Islam entailed a rebalancing of the different confessional communities: most notably, the Melkites lost their imperial protection and became only one among several competing Christian groups.[170] It is striking that non-Melkite Christians are almost entirely absent from the Palestinian Melkite hagiographic corpus; these hagiographers did not choose to engage in inter-confessional polemic or even to acknowledge the existence of other groups.[171] While it is always difficult to argue from silence, this silence may itself reflect Melkite insecurity in the face of their relative loss of status.

It is also possible that Islam indirectly affected the relative position of monks, secular clergy, and laity. The clergy and ecclesiastical hierarchy faced challenges too, but monasteries experienced distinctive problems.[172] Monasticism lost its imperial privileges, and seemingly, some of its prestige. In Palestine at least, it seems that monks may have faced a recruitment

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[169] See e.g. Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, pp.340-8.

[170] Sahner argues that this is one reason that neo-martyrologies proliferated primarily among Melkites: Sahner, *Christian Martyrs*, pp.225-39.

[171] The primary exception being Romanos's interactions with 'Greek' iconoclasts, who are clearly viewed as heretical; see e.g. *Passion of Romanos*, 9 (Shoemaker, *Three Christian Martyrdoms*, pp.162-5).

[172] Kennedy suggests that the ecclesiastical hierarchy, still generally prosperous at least in the early ninth century, faced difficulties from the tenth century onwards, at which time the Melkite church saw a retrenchment into monasteries like Mar Sabas: H. Kennedy, 'The Melkite Church from the Islamic Conquest to the Crusades: Continuity and Adaptation in the Byzantine Legacy', in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers* (New Rochelle, NY, 1986), pp.325-43, reprinted as article VI in H. Kennedy, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Aldershot, 2006), esp. pp.328-32. Mathilde Boudier's recent work is shedding new light on the continued functioning of the church hierarchy in Syria and Palestine in this period; unfortunately, I have not been able to consult her doctoral dissertation, 'L'Église melkite en Syrie-Palestine (VIIe-Xe siècle). Des chrétiens de Byzance à l'Islam', unpublished PhD thesis, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne (2020), but see M. Boudier, 'L'Église melkite au IXe siècle à travers le conflit entre David de Damas et Siméon d'Antioche: apports d'un dossier documentaire inédit' *Les Annales Islamologiques* 52 (2018), pp.45-80.

problem, surely reflective of their lessened importance in the local Christian landscape. Mar Sabas itself ultimately seems to have survived the crisis (perhaps in part because of this development of a powerful ideology of martyrdom), and continued to attract recruits; but numerous other monasteries in Palestine disappeared. This was in many ways a local phenomenon; the crisis in monasticism described here related to Palestinian Melkite communities. Elsewhere patterns were very different, and, especially in Iraq, monasteries gained a place within Umayyad and Abbasid culture.[173] In some areas monasteries developed special relationships with Muslim officials, in turn affecting their relationships with other Christians.[174] The neo-martyrologies could be seen as an intervention into an ongoing and often unspoken struggle for authority in a time of considerable change. The Palestinian hagiographic corpus also encourages us to think about the effects of Islamic rule on Christian conceptions of gender. This article has touched on only one aspect of this: the ways in which monastic authors narrowed their conception of martyrdom to preclude women (as well as most lay people). Far more remains to be written about the gendered dynamics of this period.

These polemical and apologetic texts also urge us to rethink any straightforward assumptions about the relationship of textual production to continuity and prosperity. The new texts written at Mar Sabas in this period show that monasticism continued, but they also reveal tensions and anxieties; we might see these texts as a product of crisis rather than prosperity. The same may apply to the manuscripts copied in this period containing older texts. The ninth century saw, for instance, translations into Arabic and copies of the Lives of Sabas, Euthymios, and other late antique Palestinian saints by Cyril of Scythopolis.[175] This has been interpreted as a sign of

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[173] See esp. Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life*, and Campbell, 'A Heaven of Wine'.
[174] This is a major theme in Cecilia Palombo's important recent dissertation on Egypt, 'Christian Clergy's Islamic Local Government'.
[175] See Griffith, 'Anthony David of Baghdad'; A. Binggeli, 'The Transmission of Cyril of Scythopolis' Lives in Greek and Oriental Hagiographical Collections', *Manuscript Cultures* 13 (2019), pp.50-6; A. Binggeli, 'Early Christian Graeco-Arabica', esp. p.239, Michel van

a prosperous Arabophone culture in the Palestinian monasteries.[176] The translations into Arabic certainly must reflect cultural and linguistic changes, but they may also reflect an attempt to preserve the memory of the monasteries' famous forebears at a time of great insecurity. The hagiographic Lives of Sabas and the other desert ascetics commemorated by Cyril served as a recollection of the lost glory days of the monastery, and a reminder of God's special devotion to Sabas's monastic confederation. Their translation and copying may thus reflect the same atmosphere that encouraged the authors of martyrologies to exalt Mar Sabas as a centre of martyrdom and site of God's special protection.[177] In Palestine as in so many areas with Christian populations, monasteries served as the primary sites of knowledge production and preservation. This can contribute to the impression that monks spoke as the voices and leaders of the Christian people, and as the determiners of Christian culture. But this was not always the case, and monastic production could be a sign of fragility and insecurity. With this in mind, it is essential for medieval historians to explore internal dynamics within monasteries, in order to understand the material which they produced and preserved, the material which brings these societies alive for us today.

Esbroeck 'Codex rescriptus Tischendorf 2'; T. Pataridze, 'Patristique et hagiographie palestino-sinaïtique des monastères melkites (IXe-Xe siecles)', in B. Roggema and A.Treiger (eds.), *Patristic Literature in Arabic Translations* (Leiden, 2019), pp.53-88.

[176] See esp. Griffith, 'Anthony David of Baghdad', p.15.

[177] A. Binggeli, 'L'hagiographie du Sinaï d'après un recueil du IXe siècle (Sinaï arabe 542)', *Parole de l'Orient* 32 (2007), pp.163-80, argues that manuscript collections of hagiographic texts from Sinai were intended to strengthen the Sinai monks' identity and present Sinai as a stronghold of Christianity in an Islamic world.