

The “Feigned Conversion of Constantine” in Early Islamic Literature

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Abstract

This article focuses on the literary motif of Constantine’s artful conversion to Christianity in the context of Early Islamic literature. While it is reasonable to expect that this particular way of presenting Constantine’s approach to religion would have proven useful in the context of polemical literature against Christianity, this article aims to show that his conversion also appeared in literary settings different from a strictly theological one. Alongside the polemical work of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, the article presents the terms in which the figure of Constantine and his conversion were appropriated within the works of al-Mas‘ūdī and Miskawayh. In these two particular authors the story of Constantine’s conversion is relevant to problems peculiar not to the apologetic but rather to historiographical and ethical discourses. Constantine therefore stands as a representative case in point for the diversified reception and adaptation of Late Antiquity’s legacy within the emerging Islamicate world.

Key words: Constantine, conversion, ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, Miskawayh

Introduction

Legends about the first Christian emperor circulated in all languages of the Late Antique Mediterranean world, becoming thus part of the cultural world inherited by Islamic civilization. In these different contexts the legacy of Constantine found new forms of re-interpretation and re-appropriation. A specific literary trope which can be identified in Islamic literature on Constantine is what we may tentatively call the “feigned conversion of Constantine.” We will give examples of this from three authors representing the fields of historiography, apologetics, and practical ethics. The analysis therefore provides a good example of how a given set of historical narratives could be functionalised in different ways, according to a specific work’s aims and the conventions of its genre, and become the object of varied interpretations and strategies of appropriation. This paper therefore offers a further contribution to the study of how the imaginary world of Late Antiquity was integrated into the Islamic world.¹ As we will see, the narrative of Constantine’s feigned

¹ Recent contributions in this field include DI BRANCO 2009; DOUFIKAR-AERTS 2010; WOOD 2013 and 2017.

conversion can be seen as an echo of several narratives developed in Late Antique historiography about Constantine, above all the legend of the vision of the Cross and the Sylvester legend, which we will present in the first section below before tracing some distinguishing features of the literary motif of Constantine's feigned conversion as exemplified by the Muslim writers 'Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamadānī, al-Mas'ūdī, and Miskawayh.²

1. The Miraculous Conversion: Christian Legends of Constantine

The most famous legend of Constantine's conversion, and the one which for most of us springs first to mind, is the so-called account of the apparition of the Holy Cross. This is first attested in the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea and was then relayed by later Church historians and hagiographers. It tells the story of Constantine's military campaign against the tyrannical ruler of Rome, Maxentius. Distinguishing features of this account include the heavenly appearance of a cruciform sign (the Chi-Rho symbol, interpreted as the first two letters of Christ's name) accompanied by the famous inscription "In this sign you will conquer" and a dream wherein Constantine is told by Christ how to use the sign as a charm to ward off his enemies. With this sign on his army's *vexillum* he was able to defeat the army of Maxentius and free the city of Rome from the latter's tyranny.³ This particular story still enjoyed popularity among Arab Christians and even among Muslim historians, who also tended to embellish it further, as testified by al-Mas'ūdī:

When the war had remained undecided for a year, the course of events turned unfavorably for him for some days and many among his companions were killed, making him fear for the end of his own life. In such circumstances he saw in his sleep lances descending from heaven, adorned with banners and flags. At their tops were fastened crosses of gold, silver, precious metals, bronze, and divers kinds of jewels. A voice told him: 'Take these lances, fight against your enemies, and you will be victorious!'⁴

On the issue of Constantine's baptism, however, Eusebius left a somewhat problematic legacy. Most likely offering a reliable account of the actual events, he narrates that Constantine was baptized on his deathbed by the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia.⁵

2 The two latter authors are discussed in detail in STUTZ 2017: 153-182 and 208-218, respectively. This paper builds upon and expands a communication on the same theme given at the conference *Religious conversion then and now*, organized at the Center for the Study of Conversion and Interreligious Encounters (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev), 28-31 May 2018.

3 See HOLLOWAY, *Constantine and Rome* 2004: 3-4.

4 al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb Murūġ al-ḡahab* (ed. PELLAT 1966-1979: §737).

5 While Eusebius *Vita Constantini* 4.62.1 (ed. SCHWARTZ & WINKELMANN 1991: 145-146) and Socrates *Hist. Eccl.* 1.39.2 (ed. HANSEN 1995: 90) only mention that Constantine has been baptized in Nicomedia before his death, we read in Eusebius's *Chronicle*, which has been transmitted to us in a

This version soon became highly contested, as we can still see from the testimony left by Theophanes Confessor (d. 818), who expresses his disapproval of the opinion of some “easterners” who made this claim.⁶ Only an alternative narrative which bypasses the problematic aspects of this tradition could put the image of Constantine in a correct—that is orthodox—light. This is what was accomplished in the so-called Sylvester legend, which is usually transmitted in the context of the *Acts of Sylvester* and which originated in Rome as early as the 5th century.⁷ The account narrates how Constantine, while still a pagan, was afflicted with leprosy. Seeking help from the pagan priests, he was advised to kill the newborn children of Rome and to bathe in their blood; but, taken by compassion, he refused to do so. In the following night he saw in his dream the apostles Peter and Paul advising him to call for Sylvester, the fugitive bishop of Rome. As Sylvester appeared at the court and was told by the king about the dream, he asked that an icon of the two saints be brought to him in order to reassure Constantine about the identity of the two men from the dream. He then instructed the emperor in the Christian faith and baptized him. As soon as Constantine was immersed in the waters of baptism his skin was healed again and the leprosy fell like scales from his body.

This legend circulated not only in Latin and Greek but in Syriac, as witnessed for example by a Syriac version of the *Church History* of Zacharias Rhetor,⁸ by the Chronicle of Zuqnin,⁹ and in homiletic literature by Jacob of Sarug.¹⁰ The compiler of the Syriac version of Zacharias’s *Church History* is keen to stress that he came across this legend through the mediation of a certain Isaac of Antioch, a visitor to Rome, where this story would have been depicted in several places.¹¹ In Arabic the legend is first attested by Agapius of Hierapolis (Maḥbūb al-Manbiḡī), a Melkite compiler writing in the middle of the 10th century.¹² In this particular case the legend of Sylvester directly follows the account of the vision of the Cross in the context of the battle against Maxentius. He thus presents two different conversion stories, a fact explained by the compilational character of Arab historiography. The fact that an extensive account of the legend is also attested by the *Chronicle of Seert*, an anonymous compilation of East Syriac origin from the end of the 10th century, shows that this narrative already enjoyed wide circulation across the lands under Islamic rule.¹³

Latin continuation of Hieronymus, that the baptism was administered by the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia. See Hieronymus, *Chron.* ad 337 (ed. HELM 1956: 234).

6 Theophanes, *Chronographia* A.M. 5814 (ed. DE BOOR 1883: 17); translation from MANGO & SCOTT 1997: 31.

7 For the Sylvester legend see AMERISI 2005, CANELLA 2006, and STUTZ 2017: 17-20.

8 See Ps.-Zacharias Rhetor, *Historia ecclesiastica* (ed. BROOKS 1953, CSCO 83: 56-93).

9 See *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (ed. CHABOT 1927, CSCO 91: 151-154).

10 See Homily on the Baptism of Constantine (ed. FROTHINGAM 1883).

11 See Ps.-Zacharias Rhetor, *Historia ecclesiastica* (ed. BROOKS 1953, CSCO 83: 5-6).

12 See al-Manbiḡī, *Kitāb al-Taʿrīḡ* (ed. VASILIEV 1911, PO 7: 541-542).

13 See *Chronicle of Seert* (ed. SCHER 1908, PO 4: 268-269).

2. Deceitful Conversion: ‘Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamaḍānī

‘Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamaḍānī (d. 1025), a Mu‘tazilite theologian from Rayy, wrote a refutation of Christianity in his larger work on the proofs of Muhammad’s claim to prophecy.¹⁴ An entire section of his refutation transmits a detailed critique of Christian history which aims at detecting its inconsistencies and thus at dismissing Christianity’s truth-claims. A recurring theme in his elaboration is the accusation that Christianity retained several aspects of the former pagan religion and that such were simply reeled in a new Christian lore. The main figures responsible for this process were the apostle Paul and the Roman emperor Constantine. In this way it would not be possible to speak of a Christianization of the Roman Empire but rather of a paganization of Christianity.

This pattern becomes most evident when ‘Abd al-Ġabbār writes about the conversion of Constantine. He writes that the Roman emperor was stricken with leprosy. This concerned him, as the Romans would not allow someone with leprosy to be emperor. Constantine, however, quickly found a way out of this dilemma while at war with the barbarians. He allowed his troops to fight with the signs of their respective gods on their banners, yet took secret measures to weaken them by not granting them the provisions they needed; when his troops returned in defeat, Constantine expressed his contempt for the pagan divinities, saying that their worship would not benefit the Roman empire. As a consequence, he ordered the removal of the signs of the pagan gods from the banners and began to spread the word about a woman who had allegedly been granted a divine vision. This woman would have seen the sign of the cross in the sky and heard in her dream someone telling her that with this sign the Romans would be victorious. So Constantine replaced the signs of the pagan gods on the banners of his army with the sign of the Cross and led his troops to victory.¹⁵

In its central tenets this account of Constantine’s conversion blends together different legends already introduced in the previous section. While the bulk of our account relies on the one hand on the legend of the vision of the Cross, the mention of raiding parties which Constantine had to fight against even points to the Syriac version of the Judas Cyriacus legend. This particular account is probably drawn from the Syriac version of the Judas Cyriacus legend, which, although presenting the story of the discovery of the Cross by Constantine’s mother Helen, also relates the account of the conversion of the Roman emperor after experiencing God’s assistance on the battlefield against the barbarians.¹⁶ Constantine’s leprosy, on the other hand, echoes the Sylvester legend. As we saw in the previous chapter, the combination of different traditions of Constantine’s conversion into a single account can already be seen in works of Christian historiography. The lack of integrity ascribed to Constantine, however, may suggest that ‘Abd al-Ġabbār drew from a non-Christian source. Although the list of Muslim anti-Christian polemics which ‘Abd al-

¹⁴ For an edition of this part of the work see ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taḥḥūt* (ed. REYNOLDS & SAMIR 2010). See also REYNOLDS 2004.

¹⁵ ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, *Taḥḥūt* (ed. Reynolds & SAMIR 2010: 106-107). The passage on Constantine is also translated in REYNOLDS 2004: 110-112.

¹⁶ See DRIJVERS & DRIJVERS 1997: 54-56.

Ġabbār mentions in his work includes important names such as Ġāhiz and Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq, none of these seems to have offered him this specific account of Constantine. Previous research on ‘Abd al-Ġabbār has also pointed out the existence of refutations of Christianity from a Jewish-Arabic origin to which he had access.¹⁷ We know for example that the now-lost writings of Dā’ūd b. Marwān al-Muqammiṣ (d. 9th century) knew Constantine as “the Leprous, son of the innkeeper Helena[.]”¹⁸ The derogatory mention of Constantine’s illness demonstrates how it (not to mention his humble origins) could already be exploited for polemical purposes. It has been convincingly suggested by Stern, however, that ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s passage on Constantine’s conversion was drawn from the *Kitāb Luṭf al-tadbīr*, attributed to Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Alī b. al-Ḥātīb al-Iskāfī (d. 1030), a contemporary and probably personal acquaintance of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār.¹⁹ This work cannot be ascribed to apologetic literature but was intended rather as a mirror for princes. It would therefore be misleading, as we will see below, to suppose that al-Iskāfī’s story of Constantine’s conversion would serve primarily as polemic. The polemical usefulness of the latter still had to be demonstrated, and this seems to be one of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s intentions. And so, while earlier works devoted to the refutation of Christianity were especially interested in the story of Constantine because of his role in the Council of Nicaea, one of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s own contributions seems to have been the adaptation of the account about Constantine’s conversion into an elaborate theme of anti-Christian polemic.²⁰

The narrative presented by ‘Abd al-Ġabbār emphasizes, on the whole, Constantine’s detachment from any form of sincere conversion. While the Christian legends emphasize God’s miraculous intervention in giving Constantine a powerful sign for the truth of the Christian faith, ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s account questions Constantine’s integrity, presenting his conversion as a mere device to keep himself firmly in power. In doing so he attempts to demonstrate that Christianity was able to spread among the Romans only after the transferral of pagan practices and beliefs into its teaching and that the original teachings of Jesus had been altered by the arbitrary decisions of individual rulers with no legitimate call from God to do so. Later apologetic writers such as Ibn Taymiyya will follow this pattern.

17 REYNOLDS 2004: 232-241.

18 The relevant passage is transmitted by the Karaite Jewish scholar Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf al-Qirqisānī (d. 10th century). See REYNOLDS 2004: 238. See also the anonymous *Qiṣṣat muġādalat al-usquf*, which names “Constantine the Little” in the context of the refutation of the Christian veneration of the Cross. See REYNOLDS 2004: 240-241.

19 See STERN 1968: 173-174. See also REYNOLDS 2004: 174.

20 On the Church Councils in Muslim apologetic literature against Christianity see GRIFFITH 1993: 282-83. For the case of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī see EBIED & THOMAS 2016: 123-125. On al-Muqammiṣ see REYNOLDS 2004: 238.

3. Contended Conversion: al-Mas'ūdī

The story of Constantine's supposed leprosy was also known among Muslim historiographers, the earliest one in our knowledge being the historian al-Mas'ūdī, who lived during the 10th century and traveled between Iraq and Egypt. For al-Mas'ūdī the relevance of Constantine's conversion is not only in its confessional dimension (his moving from one creed to another) but also in its historical implications and its marking the beginning of rule of Christian Roman emperors. Already in the chronicle of al-Ya'qūbī the conversion of Constantine had been the beginning of a chapter on the Christian emperors of Rome (*mulūk al-rūm al-mutanaṣṣira*), which follows a section on the (pagan) Roman emperors (*mulūk al-rūm*) and a section on the Greek kings (*mulūk al-yūnāniyyīn*).²¹

Only two of al-Mas'ūdī's several historiographical works survive.²² In the earlier of the two surviving works, the *Kitāb Murūğ al-dahab*, he transmits an account close to the Christian legend of the vision of the Cross:

This is the reason behind the conversion of Constantine, son of Helen, to Christianity and his desire to do so: he went out to war against the Bulgarians or other peoples. When the war had remained undecided for a year, the course of events turned unfavorably for him for some days and many among his companions were killed, making him fear for the end of his own life. In such circumstances he saw in his sleep lances descending from heaven, adorned with banners and flags. At their tops were fastened crosses of gold, silver, precious metals, bronze, and diverse kinds of jewels. A voice told him: "Take these lances, fight against your enemies, and you will be victorious!" In the same dream he saw then how the army of the enemy was put to flight and how he defeated them, putting them to rout. As Constantine awoke he ordered that the lances be brought to him and that crosses be fastened upon them, as we have mentioned. He had them carried at the vanguard of his army and attacked the enemy troops. He put them to flight and smote them with the sword.²³

The account echoes by and large that of Constantine's military campaign against the barbarians on the eastern front as attested to by the Syriac Judas Cyriacus legend. This version is also attested in al-Ya'qūbī, another author from that region, who wrote some decades prior to al-Mas'ūdī and who shares the particular detail of the lances descending from heaven—a detail also presented by the East Syriac Katholikos Išō'bar-nūn (d. 828) and referred to, once again, by the *Chronicle of Seert*.²⁴

In the second of al-Mas'ūdī's surviving works, which was probably also his last, the *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa'l-išrāf*, we find two similar but separate accounts which he attributed to

21 al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīḥ* (ed. HOUTSMA 1883: 161-64, for the Greek kings: 164-171, for the pagan kings, and 171-178, for the Christian kings of Rome). See also KÖNIG 2015: 123-125.

22 For a list of al-Mas'ūdī's works see PELLAT 1991: 785-787.

23 al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb Murūğ al-dahab* (ed. PELLAT 1966-1979, §737). Translation BARBIER DE MEYnard & PAVET DE COURTEILLE 1861-1877, II: 314-316 and STUTZ 2017: 157.

24 See al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīḥ* (ed. HOUTSMA 1883: 171) and *Chronicle of Seert* (ed. SCHER 1908, PO 4: 266), respectively.

certain pagan writers (*hunaḥā*). I present here only the second of these accounts, the first being quite sparse:

Others (among pagan historians) claim that he kept his sickness hidden and that he only informed one of his ministers about it. This minister practiced Christianity in secret and Constantine confessed to him that he feared an uprising against him. The minister then recommended that he use the following device to remain in power (*bi-kifāyatihi ḍālik*). He sent one contingent after another, in order to fight against the enemies who were surrounding them. He put them under the name of the seven divinities which are assigned to the seven stars of heaven—meaning the two luminaries and the five planets (the Sabaeans used to bring offerings to them and practice their cult with great devotion). As he weakened the army, they were beaten and suffered terrible losses. The minister then revealed all his contempt for these divinities and rebuked those who worshipped them. He then suggested to the emperor that he convert, which he eventually did.²⁵

Al-Mas‘ūdī presents Constantine’s conversion as a device to stay in power, though he presents Constantine’s minister as the sole agent of the entire plan. Novel to al-Mas‘ūdī is the fact that the Muslim historian attributes this account to pagan writers. As we know from Byzantine historiography, there were some pagan writers such as Zosimus who had a polemical attitude towards Constantine. Zosimus, however, presents his conversion as a means to ransom his afflicted soul after condemning his son Crispus and his wife Fausta to death.²⁶ We may conjecture that the narrative presented by al-Mas‘ūdī was already known to some of the earlier Muslim historians whom he lists, in the first of his two surviving books, in a lengthy index of sources known to him; this index gives us invaluable insight into the range of historiographical sources available at his time,²⁷ but it is unfortunately not possible to determine how many of these works already presented an elaborate section on Roman history. A possible candidate, among all the names mentioned in the list, may be the *History of the Torah and the Events of Kings and Prophets* written by Abū ‘Īsā ibn al-Munaḡḡim.²⁸ We may also mention, among the sources mentioned by al-Mas‘ūdī, the Sabaeen writer Sinān ibn Tābit ibn Qurra. As a member of the Sabaeen community he would probably be included in what the Muslim historian speaks of as “pagan” middlemen, but all that al-Mas‘ūdī reveals is that he composed a work on Plato with no particular historiographical value.²⁹ In any case, for none of the authors mentioned in the list are we

25 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa’l-iṣrāf* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 138). French translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1896: 190-191 and STUTZ 2017: 164.

26 Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 2.29 (ed. PASCHOUD 1971: 101-102).

27 See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb Murūḡ al-ḍahab* (ed. PELLAT 1966-1979: §§8-14). Translation in BARBIER DE MEYNARD & PAVET DE COURTEILLE 1861-1877, I: 10-20.

28 See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb Murūḡ al-ḍahab* (ed. PELLAT 1966-1979: §10). Translation in BARBIER DE MEYNARD & PAVET DE COURTEILLE 1861-1877, I: 14 and STERN 1972: 455-456.

29 See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb Murūḡ al-ḍahab* (ed. PELLAT 1966-1979: §14). Translation in BARBIER DE MEYNARD & PAVET DE COURTEILLE 1861-1877, I: 19.

able to verify how extensive an account of Roman history, let alone the conversion of Constantine, they offered.³⁰

Even if we are not able to trace back the source which our Muslim historian used for his account of Constantine,³¹ we *can* ask why al-Mas‘ūdī used this particular story in his last work. Two reasons may be adduced. The first regards the historiographer’s interest in displaying a wide range of sources for a specific event, while the second regards his quest for the reason behind the event.³² First, al-Mas‘ūdī repeatedly shows his interest in giving a broad variety of different, mutually-complementary sources. Presenting for example the theological debates which had affected Eastern Christianity up to his own day, he took care to include historiographical works from the relevant branches of Christianity, including Melkite, Maronite, West Syrian, and East Syrian authors, in order to be as objective as possible on the matter.³³ This is also reflected in the list of Arab Christian sources with which he concludes the section of Roman history: besides the two Melkite writers Agapius and Eutychius, al-Mas‘ūdī also mentions “Qays the Maronite,” who wrote a chronicle from the creation of the world to the caliphate of al-Muktafi; the Nestorian Ya‘qūb ibn Zakariyyā’ from Kaskar; and the Jacobite Abū Zakariyyā’ Dinḥā, author of a *History of the Emperors of the Romans and of the Greeks*.³⁴

These systematic references to authorities from all major Christian branches cannot therefore be understood merely as an attempt to show historiographical erudition, but also testifies to his willingness to integrate different perspectives into his history in his effort to be as objective as possible in referring to events of the past. In an analogous way, he introduces his section on Persian history with the observation that he would give priority to accounts of Persian origin, thus bypassing those sources which may have a more biased perspective on pre-Islamic Persia.³⁵ We may ask, therefore, if al-Mas‘ūdī felt the need to resort to an alleged pagan source in order to complement the predominantly Christian sources on this event by the perspective of a religious group which was also affected by the transformations which the conversion of Constantine inaugurated. In any case, we must consider that our perception of al-Mas‘ūdī’s source-critical behavior is already informed by the fact that we lack most of his historiographical works, where his reliance on Christian sources may have been more evident, as we can infer from the observations concluding his account of Constantine’s conversion:

30 Commenting on the account of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, Stern notes the important role played by the pagans of Ḥarrān in the description of how Constantine handled pagan beliefs, arguing that we can thereby assume a Harranian origin for this account shared between ‘Abd al-Ġabbār’s source, al-Mas‘ūdī, and Miskawayh. See STERN 1968: 171-176.

31 For a more elaborate discussion see STUTZ 2017: 164-171.

32 KHALIDI 1975: 39.

33 For the Council of Ephesus see al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 148-149), translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1986: 204-206; for Chalcedon see al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 150-152), translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1986: 207-209.

34 See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 154-155) and GRAF, *GCAL*, II: 94 (for Qays al-Mārūnī), 155 (for Ya‘qūb ibn Zakariyyā’), and 250-251 (for Abū Zakariyyā’ Dinḥā).

35 See al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 105), translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1986: 149-150.

And [we mentioned in our previous works], that according to the Christians the reason of his conversion was a glooming cross which he saw in the sky as he was at war against the king of the Bulgars. [...] And there are also other opinions [of the Christians] which differ from each other in this issue.³⁶

Al-Mas'ūdī therefore does not seem to discount the contribution of his Christian historians as such but, on the contrary, acknowledges their importance for the outlining of Roman history. His choice of sources is motivated by his own historical methodology. The verification and heuristic systematization of historical events must be based on the testimonies with firsthand experience; otherwise, historiography would degenerate into imitation (*taqlīd*) of previous authorities: "His [al-Mas'ūdī's] insistence, for example, that information must be derived from its sources or from those who were expected to be in the best position to know the facts, is a case in point. This method of establishing truth in history and science is clearly the reverse of imitation."³⁷

The second reason for the fact that al-Mas'ūdī seems to give priority to this allegedly pagan source in his last work has to do with what historiography itself should be about. Unlike the Christian accounts, which tend to point out the miraculous intervention of God in history, al-Mas'ūdī was more interested in the rational causes responsible for the origin, evolution, and decline of human civilization. As Khalidi points out in his seminal work on al-Mas'ūdī, historiography has to prove to be a scientific discipline able to detect rational patterns of behavior in human history.³⁸ It goes without saying that al-Mas'ūdī did not deny divine agency in human history. But the category of divine intervention should not, at the same time, obscure the need for scientific research or force the historian to abdicate his duty.³⁹ A revealing example in this respect is al-Mas'ūdī's psychological analysis of the phenomenon of fortune-telling (*kahāna*), which was known to both Greeks and Arabs and which he too could consider a divine gift.⁴⁰ Nor does the quest for a rational explanation end in the face of the historical events narrated by the Quran: for example, with the mention of the story of the Sleepers of the Cave (Sura 18), he indulges in a lengthy discussion about the movements of the sun relevant for the understanding of the account.⁴¹ So his acceptance of both divine agency and the need for a rational explanation may explain why al-Mas'ūdī was able to consider various sources for the conversion of Constantine which also contemplated the reality of supernatural intervention (although from a Christian perspective), without losing sight of the rational causes behind the emperor's adoption of Christianity.

36 al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 138), translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1986: 191.

37 KHALIDI 1975: 36-37.

38 See KHALIDI 1975: 29-54.

39 See KHALIDI 1975: 44 and 48-49.

40 See KHALIDI 1975: 45.

41 See al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh* (ed. DE GOEJE 1894: 134-135), translation in CARRA DE VAUX 1986: 186-187 and KHALIDI 1975: 38.

4. Artful Conversion: Miskawayh

The presentation of conversion as a political device also finds an echo in Miskawayh, a contemporary writer of ‘Abd al-Ġabbār and at the service of the court of the Būyid dynasty, which since 945 had ruled over Iraq and Persia.⁴² Although more famous for his work on philosophical ethics (the *Kitāb Tahdīb al-aḥlāq*), he also composed a historical work, the *Kitāb Taġārib al-umam*. As the title suggests, this work is aimed at collecting practical examples from the historical experiences of several peoples of the past, focusing especially on deeds of their kings which could be used as examples for present-day rulers, and so presents itself as a mirror for princes. For this purpose Miskawayh draws in most cases on Persian and Islamic history. With Constantine, however, he also found a reason to glean from Roman history:

A story about the stratagem/ruse (*ḥīla*) of Constantine: when Constantine became the king of the *Rūm*, he was already advanced in years; his character became ever more evil and his body was stricken with leprosy. The *Rūm* wanted to depose him and came to him saying, “Lay your kingdom aside. You possess great wealth and will lose nothing from what has been bestowed upon you from God.” So he went to his counselors to seek their advice. They told him, “You have no power over your people. They have rallied together to depose you.” So Constantine asked, “What ruse (*ḥīla*) should I make use of?” They answered, “Use the following device (*ḥīla*) with religion—Christianity has appeared and has (till now) been practiced only in secret. Ask permission to visit Jerusalem and to remain there for some time before your return (to Rome). As soon as you get there, convert to Christianity and convert also many people to this religion. In this way (those who follow you and those who oppose you) will split in two. Fight together with those who follow you against those who oppose you, for the fight for a religious cause has always led to victory.” So Constantine did as he was told and became victorious over the *Rūm*.⁴³

A key element for the interpretation of this account is the Arabic word *ḥīla*, which can be translated both as “trickery” or “ruse,” the first option having a more negative and the second option a more neutral or even positive connotation. Accordingly, the whole account can be read in two opposite directions, making Constantine a deceptive ruler (in the sense presented by ‘Abd al-Ġabbār) or contrariwise a politically well-informed king who knows how to act in order to maintain control over his dominion in a time of war. Two considerations may speak for the second option: first, the setting of this story within a series of accounts of exemplary rulers already raises the expectation in the reader that the story of Constantine will also serve as useful example. Second, the repeated use of the Arabic word *ḥīla* in the course of Miskawayh’s work may also hint at a positive evaluation of Constantine’s strategy. This term in fact seems to be programmatic for the entire work, as we can already see in Miskawayh’s introduction:

42 On Miskawayh and his work see ARKOUN 1970.

43 Miskawayh, *Taġārib al-umam* (ed. CAETANI 1917, I: 135-36). For a translation see STUTZ 2017: 212.

We shall also discuss political affairs which are of concern for the building of cities, for peace among the citizens, for the morale of the troops, for the strategies (*hiyal*) of war, and for the artfulness of the leaders, including both the artfulness of those who are victorious over their enemies and of those who suffer from its consequences.⁴⁴

The concept of *hīla* (pl. *hiyal*) therefore becomes a key term to describe the success or failure of any political action. In this way the reader is not taken by surprise when he finds the concept of *hīla* also in the accounts of other great leaders of the past such as Alexander the Great or even the Islamic prophet. As with Constantine, this term is employed to show an individual’s ability to gain the upper hand over an intricate military situation, be it during the siege of an enemy’s city as in the case Alexander or in the context of the battle of the trenches in the case of Muhammed. As we see, the different historical figures are here judged by their “human abilities” (*al-hiyal al-insāniyya*) to check out military threats against their rule and, in the case of Constantine, to leverage the unifying power of religion in order to preserve the integrity of his dynasty. This interpretation is also confirmed by the employment of this concept in another work on the art of rulership, the *Kitāb Lutf al-tadbīr* of al-Iskāfī, where almost the same but a slightly longer account of Constantine’s conversion is transmitted.⁴⁵ The term *hiyal* is also found in titles of later works on military art, so for example in ‘Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī’s *Kitāb al-Tadkīra al-Harawīyya fī ‘l-hiyal al-harbiyya* (d. 611/1215).⁴⁶ Unlike Miskawayh or al-Iskāfī, this work opts not to include exemplary stories from rulers of the past and gives instead practical pieces of advice for the maintenance of the army, the tactics to use during war, and measures to take in order to keep the hearts of the soldiers inclined to the ruler. The positive virtues which the concept of *hīla* seems to be associated with in books on the art of war is not questioned but, on the contrary, highlighted by the observation that it has a more ambiguous meaning in Islamic discourse on jurisprudence. Here *hīla* can be understood as ‘the use of legal means for extra-legal ends’ and became a matter of some debate among Muslim jurists, with especially Ḥanbalī jurists objecting to the openness of the Ḥanafīs towards the validity of *hiyal*.⁴⁷ The less controversial connotation of this term in political treatises, such as the one discussed here, can therefore mirror the author’s stand within this juridical debate, but it may also reflect Miskawayh’s perspective from within the life of Islamic courthouses of his time, whose stability was unsure, and the steady fear of upheaval and therefore in need of examples from the past for firm guidance.⁴⁸

44 Miskawayh, *Taḡārib al-umam* (ed. CAETANI 1917, I: 2).

45 al-Iskāfī, *Kitāb Lutf al-tadbīr* (ed. ‘Abd al-Bāqī 2013, 63-64); translation in REYNOLDS 2004: 174. On the author see also BROCKELMANN, *GAL*, I/2: 331.

46 See SOURDEL-THOMINE 1961-1962.

47 See SCHACHT 1971: 510b-513a.

48 See on this ARKOUN 1967: 108. For a larger discussion on political ethic in early Islamic literature see ARJOMAND 2013.

5. Conclusion

The comparison of three different accounts of the same literary trope, “Constantine’s feigned conversion,” is a highly satisfactory endeavor in that we can observe therein some of the dynamics of interpretation and re-interpretation present in early Arabic literature dealing with the cultural heritage of Late Antiquity. It is possible to observe that the same account concerning Constantine’s supposedly feigned conversion could serve different functions. The apologetical use of this account in ‘Abd al-Ġabbār may be the most prominent, but it is not the only one. Other writers, such as al-Mas‘ūdī or Miskawayh, demonstrate on the contrary that Islamic literature was flexible enough to appreciate this theme under other aspects as well, integrating it into other discourses proper to the intellectual traditions of the Islamicate world and thus “converting” the legacy of Constantine into a truly Islamic legacy.

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