

Introduction

The city of Córdoba was the setting for an unusual historical drama that unfolded between the years 850 and 859, when forty-eight Christians were decapitated for religious offenses against Islam. More striking than the number of executions were the peculiar circumstances surrounding them. For one thing, as the sources unambiguously demonstrate, the majority of the victims deliberately invoked capital punishment by publicly blaspheming Muḥammad and disparaging Islam. Moreover, though some Cordoban Christians applauded the executed Christians as martyrs, others regarded them as self-immolators whose unwarranted outbursts served only to expose the community as a whole to the emir's suspicions.

Our information about this historical anomaly comes almost entirely from the works of two men who lived in Córdoba during the time of the martyrdoms. Eulogius, a priest, and Paulus Alvarus, an educated layman, reacted to the scorn that the martyrs elicited by composing apologetic treatises on their behalf, extolling their fortitude and defending their memories from the attacks of unsympathetic Christians. Eulogius even went a step further, composing a martyrology through which he transformed the executed Christians into holy martyrs worthy of cultic veneration. His treatises and martyrology, combined with a few letters, make Eulogius the key source of information for what has come to be known as the “Cordoban martyrs’ movement.”

Previous treatments of the martyrdoms have attempted to lay bare the motives of the participants themselves. Since the martyrs never expressed themselves in writing, such reconstructions have relied almost entirely on Eulogius’ depiction of the events, under the assumption that his involvement in the movement was

intimate. But to conflate the motives of any hagiographer with those of his protagonists can be very misleading. Writing a book about a saint is not the same as being a saint. In Eulogius' case, though he, too, ultimately suffered the same kind of death, he never in his life actively sought execution in the manner of the martyrs he praised. As useful as Eulogius' works are for recreating the events of the 850s, then, they can really only provide direct information about the thoughts and perceptions of one person: Eulogius.

Our intention is to approach Eulogius' writings more critically and thus more narrowly, using them to answer questions about Eulogius himself. In the first place, we will seek to determine what prompted a priest like Eulogius to lend his literary support to something as unusual and controversial as a series of unprovoked martyrdoms. Rather than assume that he and the martyrs were inspired by the same visions and moved by the same forces, we will be treating Eulogius in isolation, reconstructing his biography and gleaning from it the most likely reasons for his support of the martyrs.

Once we have determined why Eulogius defended the martyrs, we will turn to the question how. For it was clear to everyone, even Eulogius, that the martyrs of Córdoba were not martyrs of the ancient Roman cast. The inconsistencies between the classical paradigm and the circumstances surrounding the executions in ninth-century Córdoba provided the unsympathetic Christians with a way of justifying their opinion of the confessors. In addressing these specific discrepancies, Eulogius not only probed, in an unusually self-conscious manner, the definition of sanctity, but inadvertently provided a window through which we can observe how some Cordoban Christians justified their conciliatory attitudes toward the Muslim authorities.

Using Eulogius' writings to assess his motives and methods not only represents the most reliable use of the sources but it also constitutes the first step toward any accurate understanding of the martyrs. Only when we know who Eulogius was and what he was attempting to do can we begin to extract his influence from his martyrology and proceed, with proper caution, to assess the motives of the Cordoban martyrs themselves.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-63481-7 - Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain
Kenneth Baxter Wolf
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

Background

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-63481-7 - Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain
Kenneth Baxter Wolf
Excerpt
[More information](#)

1

Christians in Muslim Córdoba

In late summer of the year 711 a small Muslim contingent under the command of Mughīth ar-Rumī found its way to the bank of the Guadalquivir river opposite Córdoba.¹ There, in a stand of pine trees safely out of sight of the city's sentries, they set up camp and began to reconnoiter the area around the city. Some of the scouts came upon a shepherd, whom they apprehended and brought to Mughīth for questioning. From him the commander learned that the bulk of the Cordoban nobility had already fled north in anticipation of a Muslim assault, leaving the town with a depleted garrison of no more than four or five hundred men. The shepherd also informed him of a large fissure in the otherwise sound and formidable wall that girded the city.

When darkness came it brought with it an unseasonably cold rainstorm which not only helped to obscure the Muslim forces as they crossed the river, but compelled the Cordoban sentries to abandon their posts in search of temporary shelter. With the shepherd as his guide, Mughīth found the aperture and sent a handful of men through it with instructions to open the south gate adjacent to the old Roman bridge. The surprised soldiers fled as the locks on the gate were smashed, allowing the rest of Mughīth's men to ride into the city. Mughīth proceeded to occupy the abandoned palace, enlist the aid of the local Jews to help guard the city,² and compose a letter describing his success to his superior, Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād. The only threat to his control of the city was removed some three months later when, after capturing the commander of the Cordoban garrison as he attempted to flee north to Toledo,³ Mughīth led a successful assault on the soldiers who still held out in the church of St. Acisclus.

The *Akhbār Majmū'a*, the anonymous source that describes this

first encounter between the Muslim conquerors and the peoples of Córdoba, says nothing about Mughīth's subsequent dealings with the vast Christian population that chose not to follow its leaders into exile. We can only surmise, based on the chronicler's silence as well as the general pattern of Muslim conquest, that the Christians who remained offered no resistance. Fortunately the independent account of the historian ar-Rāzī allows us to fill in some of the gaps. In the course of his description of the founding of the famous Cordoban mosque, the chronicler explained that the conquerors appropriated half of the local church dedicated to St. Vincent for use as a mosque. This was not an uncommon stopgap measure for dealing with the religious needs of the victorious armies. Syrians in the town of Hims had experienced similar divisions in the wake of their conquest.⁴ But with the steady influx into Córdoba of Arab immigrants over the next two generations, the Muslim worshippers found their quarters increasingly cramped. During the reign of the first ʿUmayyad emir, ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān I (754–88), negotiations began between the emir and the leaders of the Christian community to resolve the problem. Finally, after a promise of a large cash payment as well as permission to rebuild one of the extramural churches that had been leveled at the time of the conquest, the Christians relinquished their half of St. Vincent's. The emir then ordered the demolition of the church to make way for the construction of the mosque that occupies the site to this day.⁵

For our purposes, the most significant fact about this episode is that the Christians specifically appealed to a capitulation agreement, worked out between their grandfathers and the original conquerors of Córdoba, as the legal basis for their claims to the church. Unfortunately the only stipulation of this lost treaty about which we have any direct knowledge is the one to which ar-Rāzī referred: that the Christians would relinquish control over half of the church of St. Vincent's. But by reviewing the capitulation agreements that survive from other parts of the Islamic empire, we can reconstruct the basic components of the original pact offered to the citizens of Córdoba.

Every such agreement reached between Muslim leaders and the peoples they subjected was based in principle on two passages from the Qur'ān:

Fight those who believe not
 In God nor the last Day
 Nor hold that forbidden
 Which hath been forbidden
 By God and His Apostle
 Nor acknowledge the Religion
 Of Truth (even if they are)
 Of the People of the Book,
 Until they pay the *ḡizya*
 With willing submission,
 And feel themselves subdued.

Those who believe (in the Qur'ān),
 And those who follow the Jewish (scriptures),
 And the Christians and the Sabians, –
 Any who believe in God
 And the Last Day,
 And work righteousness,
 Shall have their reward
 With their Lord: on them
 Shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.⁶

The militant monotheism that infused the Islamic concept of *jihād* could not tolerate the existence of religious alternatives that recognized neither God's unity nor the inevitability of his judgment. Thus polytheists were given no real choice by their Muslim conquerors but to embrace Islam. The Christians and the Jews were, however, a different matter. Having met the basic monotheistic criterion, their only failure in the eyes of the Muslims was their misinformed, but ultimately tolerable, reluctance to accept Muḡammad as the most recent in the long line of prophetic successors to Abraham. This ambiguity in the religious status of the scriptuaries or "peoples of the book" led to a certain ambiguity in their legal position within Islamic society as well. Though tolerated and protected on the basis of their monotheism, they suffered political subjection and the stigma of a special tax, the *ḡizya*, as a penalty for their rejection of Muḡammad's prophethood.

The Qur'ān was not the only, or even the most significant, factor influencing Muslim policy toward subject religious communities. The fact that the Muslims were vastly outnumbered by the Christians in the Mediterranean basin limited their options. They could not, even if their scriptures had demanded it, effect a mass

conversion of local populations. On the contrary, their early policies suggest that the Muslim rulers and jurists were more concerned about protecting their own people from the potentially polluting effects of close contact with large Christian populations. Limited by their numbers and wary of cultural absorption, the Muslims had every reason to allow a great deal of autonomy to any Christian community that recognized their authority and paid the *jizya*.⁷

The earliest examples of the “covenant of protection” (*dhimma*) which Muḥammad and his generals used to encourage Christian cities to surrender illustrate the confluence of religious, economic, and strategic concerns. In the year 630 the Christians of Ayla received a promise of complete protection of person and property in exchange for the payment of a yearly tribute amounting to one dinar per adult male citizen.⁸ In 632 Muḥammad offered the same terms to the Christians of Najran in exchange for their promise to provide clothing and silver in amounts which varied according to the town’s yearly production, horses and shields in the event of a local war, and hospitality to any Muslim envoy who might request it.⁹

The treaties offered to the scriptuaries of the cities and territories conquered after the prophet’s death reflect his emphasis on tribute in exchange for the protection of traditional liberties. The only such agreement that has survived from the conquest of the Iberian peninsula is no exception. In it, Count Theodemirus of Murcia agreed to recognize the overlordship of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and to pay tribute consisting of a yearly cash payment supplemented with specific agricultural products. In exchange, Theodemirus received ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’ promise to respect both his property and his jurisdiction in the province of Murcia.¹⁰

Even though we lack a copy of the Cordoban *dhimma*, then, we know, on the basis of the pattern established by Muḥammad and followed by his successors, that it must have stipulated the payment of an annual tax, whether in kind or in cash, in exchange for a pledge on the part of the authorities to preserve the personal and proprietary liberties of the *dhimmīs*.¹¹ Here the certainty ends. Yet on the basis of the special circumstances of the Muslim settlement in Córdoba, we can speculate a bit further about the contents of the lost covenant.

Ar-Rāzī, as we have seen, explicitly recorded that the Muslims appropriated half of the principal Visigothic church for use as a mosque. This, along with Mughīth's occupation of the Cordoban palace, strongly suggests that from the very beginning the Muslims took up residence in the city itself. Though this arrangement may have become the norm in Spain, it contrasted with the settlement patterns in the east, where the Muslim armies preferred to establish garrisons apart from the subdued cities.¹² Such segregation made sense for both strategic and, as we have seen, religious reasons. Later, as Muslim political control grew more secure and the booty and tribute oriented economy gave way to one based more on commerce, the garrison and city began to merge. When this happened the original succinct covenants governing the relations between the *dhimmī* population and the Muslims required significant elaboration in order to salvage some of the social distance that the garrison system had achieved by simple physical segregation. In the generations that followed the early conquests, Muslim rulers promulgated new statutes in an effort to keep the line that separated Muslim and *dhimmī* from being erased.

The fact that Córdoba did not fall to the Muslims until the second decade of the eighth century, a time when Muslim jurists in the east were already implementing such regulations, may explain why its Muslim conquerors did not hesitate to settle within the city itself.¹³ The same chronological connection allows us to hypothesize about the types of social limitations under which Christians in Spain lived on the basis of what we know about the better documented legal situation in the eastern Islamic world.

Much of this new legislation aimed at limiting those aspects of the Christian cult which seemed to compromise the dominant position of Islam. ^cUmar II (717–20), whose caliphate produced the first full series of laws designed to keep *dhimmīs* in their place, forbade the construction of any new churches.¹⁴ The so-called pact of ^cUmar I, that came to be considered normative by the legal schools emerging in the eighth century, went even further, forbidding the repair of dilapidated, pre-existing churches.¹⁵ The caliphs and jurists also prohibited rituals and activities that drew too much public attention to Christianity, such as bell ringing or excessively loud chanting in church.¹⁶ Restrictions on processions and funerals were common for the same reasons. The most severe penalties,

however, were reserved for those Christians who showed disrespect for Islam: its prophet, its tenets, or its adherents. Any attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity or to prevent Christians who so desired from adopting Islam was considered an act of *lèse majesté*.

Aside from such cultic restrictions most of the laws were simply designed to underscore the position of the *dhimmīs* as second-class citizens. ʿUmar II issued a series of sumptuary laws prohibiting *dhimmīs* from adopting certain characteristically Arab clothing and hair styles.¹⁷ He also seems to have been the first caliph to order all non-Muslim subjects to wear what would later come to be known as the *zunnār*, a distinctive type of belt or girdle, for identification purposes.¹⁸ The pact of ʿUmar also included restrictions on Christian use of arms and saddles as well as characteristically Arabic seals and onomastic structures.¹⁹

Although from the beginning Christians were given virtual autonomy to govern the affairs of their own religious communities, their subordinate position theoretically restricted their access to government positions which entailed exercise of authority over Muslims. Slaves of Christians could, on the basis of this same principle, win their freedom simply by converting to Islam. Similarly the social position of the *dhimmī* precluded certain types of marital relationships. Sexual relations between a male *dhimmī* and a female Muslim were absolutely forbidden, though a male Muslim could legally marry a Christian or Jew. Muslim jurists may have borrowed this restriction from the Byzantine law books which frowned on the intermarriage of Christians and Jews.²⁰ Or it may have been a more autochthonous product of the tribal milieu from which Islam emerged. Traditional Bedouin society, which placed great weight on endogamous marriage, considered it a sign of weakness for a clan to lose its female members in marriage to the men of another.²¹ If this tribal convention had any impact at all we might expect female members of the Islamic “tribe” (*umma*) to be considered off limits to Christian outsiders.

This proliferation of legal restrictions on Christian activity did not necessarily mean that the actual situation of Christians living under Islam deteriorated to any appreciable degree. For the same inexorable movement toward physical integration that occupied Muslim legal minds inevitably proved stronger than the laws they