Introduction

Muhammad was once speaking to a group of people in Mecca. He was narrating the stories of peoples of the past who vanished because of their disobedience to God. When Muhammad sat down after his speech, a man from the audience, al-Naḍr, stood up and shouted, "I can tell you a better story than he!" Al-Naḍr narrated the story of Rustam and Isfandiyār from the Persian tradition to the same crowd and asked, "How is Muhammad a better storyteller than I?"[1] The Islamic tradition thus remembers a moment in which Muhammad's knowledge of admonishing stories was challenged and contextualized in the world of storytelling in Late Antiquity. This book investigates that world through the lens of narrators of stories, their audiences, and the multigenerational memories that stories carry. It participates in three scholarly conversations, namely, performative hagiography, early Islam as a late antique religion, and narrative transmission in the context of Christian-Muslim relations.

At the intersection of all these conversations stands the phenomenon of saints' lives and the narratives they present. Interweaving these three strands of scholarship, I demonstrate the ways in which narratives gave conceptual texture to interpersonal and intercultural relations in the premodern Near East. The chapters of this book show, at different scales, that the knowledge of saints' stories often effectively destabilized the imperial and institutional structures of power, creating alternative sources of authority, memory, and identity across confessional boundaries.[2] While moving across expansive geographies and chronologies, the book examines the religious, historical, and literary aspects of the story.

As the contention between Muhammad and Al-Naḍr above exemplifies, late antique hagiographic literature—writings about the lives, miracles, pious deeds, and exhortative sayings of holy men and women—is replete with storytellers and audiences who contested and were amazed by the stories of prophets, saints, heroes, and villains. Many of these episodes would ultimately be relegated to the sidelines of historical reconstruction because of their deployment of stock tropes.[3] The complex relationship between myth, narrativity, and sociality in fact renders late antique hagiography a precarious source of historical information.[4] Yet, nothing in ancient literature should be disposed of as *merely* rhetorical, since, scholars have shown, rhetoric governs both text and context; it shapes and is shaped by practice, ideas, and ideals in a society.[5] The richness of tropes about storytelling in hagiographic texts testifies that narrating saints' stories in antiquity was understood as a performed and pietistic practice by the authors and consumers of these texts.

NARRATING STORIES

What can late antique hagiography tell us about how people orally narrated those stories in Late Antiquity?[6] In the scholarship on Christian hagiography, oral performances of saints' stories have often been conceptualized as pre-textualization phases of written texts. These studies have focused on two contexts to seek the oral *origins* of saints' stories: narrating saints' and martyrs' stories during liturgy,[7] and the folklore of the Egyptian desert.[8] It has been suggested that saints' stories, in their initial phases of composition, were orally narrated in these contexts before they were textualized and somewhat stabilized in the hands of hagiographers. This line of argument, in its theoretical scaffolding, follows the studies on ancient folklore and the Bible in affirming a binary between the oral phase of a narration and the canonized text.[9] As the possible oral origins of saints' stories are explored in scholarship, a growing number of works tackle the question of continued oral performances of those stories. Claudia Rapp, Stephanos Efthymiadis, and others have demonstrated that oral narrations were important aspects of saint veneration and hagiographic production after stories were put in writing.[10]

According to this line of scholarship on the performative aspects of saints' stories, reading stories out loud was among the most common methods of orally disseminating stories in antiquity,[11] with liturgical recitations as the other prominent method.[12] Such scholarship that destabilizes the oral-written

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binary in hagiography has greatly expanded our understanding of oral circulation and aural consumption of saints' stories. Yet, it has two crucial limitations. Firstly, the studies focus mostly on Byzantine and European hagiography, and much remains to be done on various other hagiographic traditions. The voluminous corpus of Syriac hagiography, for example, is understudied regarding its literary features and oral aspects.[13] Secondly, the practice of orally narrating a story, in the absence of a written text, *outside* liturgical contexts, remains underexplored. Paying attention to this form of storytelling allows us to ask the following questions: Who narrated saints' stories in Late Antiquity, where, and when? What were the external factors shaping the experiences of hearing a story? And how does our understanding of such performances complicate the concepts of literacy, authorship, and memory?

This book begins by reconstructing storytelling as a pietistic and performed practice in late antique Christianity in light of Greek, Latin, and Syriac hagiographic literature. The practice of narrating saints' stories, like the practice of writing them, needs its own analytical terminology. To this end, I have coined the term *hagiodiegesis* as a counterpart to *hagiography*—orally *narrating* saints' stories as an alternative to *writing* them. Similar to the term *hagiography*, which has provided us with a theoretical frame to speak about writings about saints as a distinct practice, *hagiodiegesis*, in my vision, provides a frame to analyze the practice of orally narrating saints' stories.

Hagiodiegesis is not simply the oral equivalent of hagiography. One of the differences between the two is that while one can speak about real or imagined audiences for hagiography, in the case of *hagiodiegesis* the audience is always real. Therefore, although a hagiographic text may have never in fact reached an audience, one must always consider the presence and participation of an audience when we imagine a session of *hagiodiegesis*.[14] Another difference between these two notions is that the dynamics of composition and authorship in hagiography do not overlap with those of *hagiodiegesis*. Despite the differences, however, oral narrations of stories were often in conversation with literary traditions, and such compositions in performance were rarely fully improvisational.[15] Narratives were flexible; the details of a story could change from one narration to another. Yet, this all took place within the boundaries of a familiar dossier. Each episode of *hagiodiegesis* presents and reinforces a part of the collective archival knowledge of the community within which the story is narrated.[16]

In modern scholarship, the practice of narrating saints' stories is often mentioned as a form of "storytelling" or "spiritual instruction."[17] *Hagiodiegesis*

is indeed a form of storytelling, an act of composing and presenting a narrative with the purpose of conveying knowledge to an audience. Every session of *hagiodiegesis*, like other forms of storytelling, is a new narration that reduces a story to an object—a group of textual symbols that partially encapsulate a historical moment, real or imagined. Still, the practice of narrating *saints' stories* merits a neologism, and should be studied as a distinct category of storytelling, for it was a pious practice that mediated the circulation and expansion of saints' dossiers, facilitating cultural transmission across vast geographies, time periods, and confessional boundaries.

This oral and embodied practice in antiquity can only be rendered visible through written texts. In the first chapter of this book, I reconstruct the narrators and audiences of saints' stories with the rich treasury of formal and contextual information that Christian hagiography reveals, and I point at potential analytical tools for the study of *hagiodiegesis*. For example, a close analysis of the language pertaining to listening, hearing, and speaking, as I will demonstrate, gestures toward useful possibilities for understanding this oral-aural phenomenon through its literary descriptions.

Focusing on performative storytelling also complicates our understanding of how literacy worked in antiquity.[18] Narrative literacy—the ability to refer to, expand on, and interpret sacred narratives, that is, being "literate" in narratives—was a significant form of cultural capital in antiquity.[19] Mike Chin refers to the skill set of parsing out and citing literature as "literary knowledge"; yet since the knowledge of stories could be acquired in various degrees of simplicity and sophistication, and, with the many symbols it encompasses, it was utilized to create further meaning, I prefer to construe it as a form of literacy.[20] Individuals who were knowledgeable in narratives of the divine past cultivated the social capital that accrued from this form of knowledge, and used it to navigate within and around the formal structures of religious authority.

By developing this concept across the chapters of this book, I contribute to the destabilization of social binaries like literate and illiterate, and by extension, learned and simple believers.[21] I posit that between the sophistication of the theologically educated and the simplicity of the everyday believer stood the authority and charisma of the "narrative literate." The importance of knowledge of biblical and extrabiblical stories in antiquity is, of course, highlighted in scholarship, and this book participates in that conversation by providing examples of how narrative literacy was utilized by individuals from

different communities, especially in cross-cultural spaces, in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

In this book, after describing the practice of *hagiodiegesis* in late antique Christianity, I focus on a particular confessional boundary across which numerous stories traveled, namely, the boundary between Christian and Muslim communities in the late antique and medieval Near East. Scholars are increasingly attentive to shared stories between Christianity and Islam. The stories of biblical prophets, for example, are well studied in how they are reiterated in the Quran and other Islamic literature.[22] A growing corpus of robust scholarship revisits the previously popular "sources of the Quran" arguments and, developing analytical tools for studying the Quran on its own terms, studies the literary features that reflect its orality.[23] For example, Sidney Griffith, Aziz al-Azmeh, and Angelika Neuwirth, among others, have pointed out that the broader *oral milieu* of Late Antiquity, rather than particular source texts, was behind much of the Quran's content.[24] This turn in scholarship, from searching for the literary sources of quranic narratives to exploring the early Islamic milieu as a participant in Late Antiquity, has opened exciting venues of inquiry. This book adds to the conversation by framing Muhammad as a late antique storyteller who narrated and interpreted biblical and hagiographic stories. The "illiterate" Muhammad's narrative literacy is an epitome of how stories traveled in Late Antiquity.[25]

SORTING STORIES

I analyze the early Islamic community as a religious community participating in and, in important ways, shaping the late antique world of storytelling.[26] While I study Muhammad as a storyteller through an analysis of the Quran, most examples I use are stories of biblical prophets. This method allows an exploration of the category of hagiography. It is now well accepted that hagiography is not so much a genre as it is a set of coordinates from which any number of different genres can be born.[27] It can be construed as a way of communication, which, through the example of saintly individuals and communities, exhorts, admonishes, sets examples for pietistic behavior, and creates memories of particular places and times. The definition of hagiography as a discourse not only complicates the use of the term, but also blurs the boundaries between the categories of "biblical" and "hagiographic" stories. I use both terms in this book, often interchangeably.

Scholars refer to biblical stories or prophets in the Quran, which implies the category of the nonbiblical. Some prophets mentioned in the Quran and other early Islamic literature are in fact labeled as "Arabian," "local," and "nonbiblical," as opposed to "biblical." This categorization creates a certain hierarchy resulting in an understanding of Christian and Jewish superiority.[28] It also leads to a misconstrual of communal memory, since a sacred past was often not divided into biblical and nonbiblical components for communities in antiquity. Stories of piety, perseverance, and other exemplary behavior were not sifted according to canonicity, as biblical and nonbiblical, by the majority of their narrators and listeners.

Scholars of Judaism and Christianity have demonstrated the fluidity of such literary categories, and how thinking in terms of biblical canonicity ties to articulations of power structures, networks of authority, often with supersessionist undertones.[29] The reception and interpretation of biblical stories, expressed verbally and pictorially, created a lively scriptural universe in Late Antiquity.[30] Compartmentalization of this world into biblical, apocryphal, noncanonical, hagiographic, and other types of stories undermines the complex and subversive history of religious knowledge and authority. Furthermore, with Muslim communities' engagement with Jewish and Christian material, this scriptural universe was reshaped significantly. Before Muhammad, late antique stories of prophets, saints, and heroes were known in the Hijaz.[31] With and after Muhammad's prophetic career, even more stories from Jewish and Christian lore were transmitted into Islam, further complicating the boundaries of the collective knowledge of the divine past and its retellings.

In addition to the misleading nature of the superimposed categories of biblical and hagiographic, stories themselves present a challenging matrix of labels. The earliest examples of Christian hagiography appeared in texts titled *passio* (spiritual struggle), *acta/praxeis* (acts), *vita/bios* (life story), *diegesis* (narrative), *historia* (historical account), *apophthegmata* (sayings), and *enkomion* (praise), among other designations, in Greek and Latin.[32] In early Syriac hagiography, there is a similar abundance in terminology used to refer to the stories of sanctified persons—*tašʿītā* (narrative), *neṣḥānā* (heroic deed), *hūpākā* (manner of life), *dūmyā* (example), to cite a few.[33] In Arabic, as well, *ḥadīth* (report/anecdote), *khabar* (report), *sīra* (biography), *tadhkīra* (remembrance), and *manāqib* (wondrous feats) are only some of the genres in which stories of prophets, saints, and heroes circulated.[34] These and other genres made Christian and Islamic hagiography sort stories according to length, form, and

content, creating implied hierarchies of historicity, sanctity, and exhortative value. And this variety complicates our understanding of the reception of the divine past beyond the biblical-hagiographic axioms. Moreover, the comparability and translatability of these genres across religious traditions are highly debated.[35] Therefore, in this book I focus on the meanings stories create, rather than the literary conventions they fulfill.

Stories from the rich corpus of Christian hagiographic lore were reinterpreted for a variety of purposes by Muslims, arguably the most prominent of which is the elucidation of quranic passages.[36] Starting roughly in the eleventh century, scholars of the Quran reorganized this body of knowledge of stories into categories of literature such as *isrāʾīliyyāt* (narratives of cosmogony and biblical prophets from the Jewish and Christian traditions) and *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (stories of prophets and saints), arguing that some of these narratives were historically unreliable or theologically unorthodox.[37] As a result of this canonization process, while many stories stayed within the realm of quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), "unauthorized" stories of prophets and saints were peripheralized in categories like *isrāʾīliyyāt* and *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*; and their transmitters deemed untrustworthy according to the later standards of quranic interpretation. Despite such reassessments, Christian hagiography, broadly construed, continued to be a rich source Muslims often tapped into, debated with, and interpreted anew. Thus, while studying Muhammad and the early Islamic community, I highlight the fluidity between the categories of biblical, quranic, apocryphal, and hagiographic, and approach literature with flexibility and ambivalence toward canonicity.

REMEMBERING STORIES

Muhammad's communication with his audiences has been partially preserved in a late antique text—the Quran. Building upon the reconstruction of late antique storytelling, I discuss Muhammad as a storyteller through a narratological reading of the Quran. The narratives in the Quran and their possible connections to late antique literary and oral traditions have a long history of scholarship, as mentioned above. An important turn in scholarship has been to focus on how the Quran and other Islamic literature recontextualize narratives for new audiences and for new semiotic purposes. Neuwirth, for example, argues against source-critical analyses and states that the quranic narratives instead should be assessed in their new *theological* context.[38] And

this is an exciting starting point, for theological refashioning of biblical narratives was only one aspect of Muhammad's communication with his community. Here, revisiting the resonances of "preaching" in the assessment of Muhammad's fit within the community he anchored, I present the multifaceted nature and functions of Muhammad's storytelling, from exhortation to mythmaking.

Moreover, Muhammad was not the only preacher in the early Islamic community; ascetics, slaves, early converts, and Muhammad's Companions were among the public narrators of stories.[39] Highlighting this multivocality in early Islam is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of how saints' stories, religious concepts, and broader cultural expressions were transmitted between different religious communities in Late Antiquity. This approach also sheds new light on religious authority, redefining it as stemming from the contested, persuasive, and subversive power of narrative, a type of power that Muhammad shared with others in his community. This reconstruction is based on my reading of various works from medieval Islamic literature that remember Muhammad and his community—works including but not limited to historiography, exegesis, biography, and others. In this, while I find helpful the historical-critical method of the revisionist school of Islamic studies, I acknowledge that Islamic material should be approached on its own terms.[40] Thus I approach Islamic sources with a balance of criticism and trust in order to gain a glimpse of the community around Muhammad.

How did the transmissions of prophets' and saints' stories between Christianity and Islam continue *after* Muhammad? Why were particular saints' stories transmitted into Islam, while many others were not? There is a growing, rigorous body of scholarship dedicated to answering these questions. As mentioned above, the early Islamic community often turned to Jewish and Christian literature in order to elucidate the quranic passages that speak about prophets and saints. Scholars have identified other contexts and dynamics for transmission of stories as well, from theological polemics to ritual practice, spiritual formation to entertainment.[41] Such encounters in literature and orature, however, are often construed as onetime exchanges between Christianity and Islam. Although it is now well known that Christian saints' stories were transmitted to Islam, the life of a story after interreligious transmission is rarely considered within the frame of the ongoing Christian-Muslim interaction. Muslims continued to engage with the broader literary and oral traditions of the Near East in the Middle Ages, negotiating the meaning and

authority of the stories they shared with non-Muslims. This continuity in hagiographic transmissions, and the changing dynamics of remembering and forgetting of the divine past, are among the highlights of this book.

Diachronic articulations of memories inevitably retain, add, and drop different details of stories.[42] I am interested in how such changes in stories create new meanings, and for that, I problematize the very definition of "narrative transmission" itself, as well as its various forms. In a world in which stories traveled in oral and written forms, how can one define transmission of narratives between Christianity and Islam? Narrative transmission can be conceptualized as a tool for creating new memories of a sacred past through the medium of the story. With the many literary, oral, and nonverbal articulations of saints' stories, remembrances of a divine past were perpetuated, while new meanings of that past were woven into Christian and Muslim communities' historical moments.

How do memories differ in shared cultural milieus? Islam emerged in the context of the late antique Near East, where Christian monasticism and asceticism were deeply woven into the texture of society.[43] Therefore, early Islamic literature and orature, themselves participants and products of Late Antiquity, partook in a shared vocabulary of symbols to present Islam's own foundation stories and holy personas.[44] Several Companions of Muhammad, for example, were represented in Islamic literature through the extensive use of tropes familiar from Byzantine hagiography.[45] Where themes and topoi are thus shared among multiple religious communities, one can expect many stories to *sound similar*, even in the absence of any direct intertextuality.[46] Like the myriad combinations in a kaleidoscope, the possibilities around narrating a saint's story were virtually limitless, given the numerous tropes that were combined into different narrations. So, when tropes are shared between various traditions, we can only speak about a loose transmission of literary expressions facilitated by the everyday economy of cultural encounters. While this book does not specifically study shared tropes, it contextualizes saints' stories within this broader world of common expressions.

If generic tropes are at the one end of the transmission spectrum, narrative sits at the other end. We have a number of instances where a story written in the Christian tradition was transmitted into Islam with a few changes. For example, the Syriac story of Paul and John analyzed in chapter 5 was transmitted into Islam in a recognizable form. Diachronically analyzing the authors, contexts, and audiences of the various reiterations of such stories greatly

contributes to our understanding of how narrative transmission worked in antiquity to reorient memory. What changed, what is left out, and what is added in such renarrations of a story tell much about the various semiotic horizons toward which the story was turned, and about new articulations of sanctity the story enabled.

Most hagiographic transmissions taking place between Christianity and Islam happened between the two poles (the trope and the narrative), at the level of *persona*. When a hagiographic persona is transmitted from Christianity to Islam, the hero's name, either as a transliteration or as a translation, is recognizable. The hero's hagiographic representation as well is recognizable in broad strokes. The story that is narrated anew in Islamic literature, however, has significantly different details in its new context. For example, I analyze an Islamic representation of Antony of Egypt (d. 356) in chapter 4. Antony is recognizable in the Islamic text for anybody who has heard the basic hagiographic attributes of Saint Antony of Egypt. Yet, the holy man has a whole new story in the Islamic context.

In these cases, searching for a mediating text that presumably acts as a bridge between the known Christian version of a story and the Islamic version is sometimes misguiding. Such a source-critical approach often falsely presumes that there was a hitherto unknown mediating text that enabled direct textual transmission, which can account for the differences between the two known versions of the story. Alternatively, source-critical analysis concludes that the later, new version of the story was a misattribution, and thus a "foreign" addition to the dossier of the saint, a defiance of the authoritative Christian text. However, transmission of a persona is a mode of transmission that entails the writing of a story of a hero, whose previously known story is used in broad strokes for framing the new narrative. In hagiography, where it is misleading to speak about canonicity, this form of writing is a significant contributing component to the development of saints' broader dossiers. Through such writing, Muslim authors became hagiographers of Christian saints albeit narrating the stories for their Muslim audiences. And they, like Christian hagiographers, became vicarious disciples of saints.

In presenting the recontextualizations of Christian saints' stories, I converse with a flourishing field in which the new contexts of stories are highlighted instead of their origins.[47] My analysis will show that stories were often not labeled as Jewish, Christian, or Islamic while crossing these porous confessional boundaries. They were translated, altered, interpreted, and muted, but not

rigidly labeled in the everyday economy of storytelling. This is an often neglected dynamic in the study of narrative transmission in antiquity. Surely, the modern categorization of a story under the rubric of a religious tradition is helpful in reconstructing the trajectories of transmission. Describing a story as "a *Jewish* or *Christian* story placed in *Islamic* literature" gives the modern scholar a useful discursive frame. Yet, these labels, like the generic labels discussed above, risk projecting a rigid grid upon the fluid world of storytelling in antiquity. Moreover, such expressions of interreligious transmission, often used in studies on shared stories, build a discourse of influence, neglecting the creativity involved in transmission processes. Although the authors of texts often acknowledged the religious backgrounds of their sources, they did not present *the material* they transmitted in those terms. A story of a saint was a continuum that manifested in different times and languages.

This cross-confessional continuum complicates what we mean by authority and authorship. The concept of authorship is, of course, well studied especially in the context of European literary history.[48] Thinking with this rich body of scholarship, I explore the relationship between authorship and entwined histories of hagiographic transmissions in the early medieval Near East. The concept of storytelling often comes with the connotation of fictionality.[49] Although this binary of fictional versus nonfictional has been challenged,[50] various other aspects of authorship in the context of writing and narrating saints' stories remain underexplored.

This book shows that variations in a saint's dossier, within and across linguistic boundaries, complicate our understanding of authorship in relation to translation, interpretation, and intertextuality. In this, I follow Derek Krueger in conceptualizing authorship as a technology of self-formation.[51] Muslim authors, by reshaping Christian saints' stories, joined the collective authorship of those stories and fashioned themselves as devout subjects of the sacred past. Such reassessments of authorship help us see the dynamics of literary and cultural transmission beyond establishing authority, pointing out the intricate negotiations between the producers of texts, their sources, and later narrators.[52]

With the above questions in mind, *Stories between Christianity and Islam* presents oral and literary narrations of saints' stories in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Chapter 1 reconstructs the practice of storytelling in late antique Christianity through an analysis of Greek, Latin, and Syriac hagiography. Examining the literary forms and content of saints' lives, I lay out the

contours of the practice of orally narrating saints' stories beyond monastic and liturgical contexts. This chapter reconstructs *hagiodiegesis* (orally narrating saints' stories, as theorized above) and situates this neologism within the broader conversation about the oral aspects of Christian hagiography and storytelling. Among the several contexts of pietistic storytelling, the chapter highlights local and long-distance pilgrimage, as well as the household, as prominent contexts in which laypeople, clerics, and monks shared stories.

In chapter 2, I bring the early Islamic community into the reconstruction of late antique storytelling and analyze Muhammad as a narrator of prophets' and saints' stories. With a narratological reading of the Quran, and interweaving it with later literary representations of Muhammad, I study the different aspects of Muhammad's storytelling: its content, form, functions in the community, and the reactions to his narrations. I conclude the chapter by pointing to the other storytellers in the early Islamic community, contextualizing Muhammad's preaching within this multivocal environment.

With chapter 3, the book transitions from the investigation of oral performative storytelling in Christianity and early Islam to narrative transmission in the Middle Ages between Christianity and Islam. This shift in focus highlights the multifaceted afterlives of Christian saints' stories in Islamic literature and orature. Focusing on one Quran chapter, Q18 *the Cave*, I first demonstrate how a group of hagiographic stories appear in the Quran; then I turn to the ways later generations of Muslims interpreted them. This in-depth analysis enables us to zoom in on the intricacies of late antique storytelling, narrative transmission, and its medieval afterlives

In Q18, there are four narratives: the first one is the story of the Companions of the Cave, an abbreviated version of the late antique story known as the Youths (Seven Sleepers) of Ephesus; the second is a parable of a rich man and a poor man, which might be an allusion to the biblical story of the Rich Man and Lazarus; then, the story of Moses and his servant; and finally, the story of the Two-Horned (Dhū al-Qarnayn), who is identified as Alexander the Great in medieval and modern scholarship. I revisit the voluminous literature dedicated to the study of these stories and demonstrate the Quran's engagement with the broader late antique hagiographic lore. As I analyze these quranic narratives, I demonstrate Islamic communities' uses of Christian hagiography for the interpretation of these passages. With chapter 3, I show how the incremental knowledge of Christian hagiography in Islam changed

the memories of not only the divine past but also Muhammad's place in the late antique world.

The exegesis of the Quran might have been the largest literary corpus in which biblical-hagiographic stories were transmitted from Christianity to Islam. But exegesis was by no means the only context for hagiographic transmission. In chapter 4, I discuss the four other major functions of Christian saints' stories in Islamic literature beyond exegesis. Christian saints and their stories were utilized in Islamic literature: (1) for encomiastic purposes, to vaunt the excellency of towns and regions; (2) as etiologies for Islamic practice and material culture; (3) for didactic purposes, as examples of universal piety and wisdom; and (4) to confirm saints as members of the eternal Muslim community. Christian saints' stories were thus used for a variety of meanings, or, to follow Elizabeth Clark, socioreligious logics, in Islamic texts.[53] These categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive; in fact, they mostly overlap. A story of a Christian saint could both comment on a quranic event *and* praise the sanctity of a specific place. Moreover, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. The use of saints' stories for polemical purposes in interreligious dialogue, for example, is not treated in this chapter. Nevertheless, my categorization demonstrates the complex relationships between hagiographic traditions of Christianity and Islam and underlines the multiplicity in authorships and audiences (perceived or real) of stories.

While chapter 4 presents the complexities of transmission through four different examples, chapter 5 focuses on one story. It presents the transmission of the fifth-century Syriac story of Paul of Qenṭos and John of Edessa into the Islamic tradition and the diachronic reinterpretations of this story across multiple time periods, geographies, and genres of Islamic literature. I trace the reception history of the story from the fifth until the thirteenth century, demonstrating the ways in which it was reinterpreted by Muslim authors. Such a comprehensive analysis enables us to take the discussion on transmission out of a binary model (as exchanges between two traditions at a point of contact) and shows the ongoing conversations between religious communities even after a story was transmitted into Islam.

With a broad array of stories, chapters 4 and 5 raise a number of important theoretical questions regarding narrative transmission in antiquity, and I summarize these discussions in chapter 6 as a way of conclusion. I bring together the examples analyzed in the previous chapters around three discussions central to the book: the role of Christian saints in the formation of the

Islamic notion of sanctity; authorship and its relation to storytelling across confessional boundaries; and the role of the household in the preservation and transmission of saints' stories.

Al-Naḍr used the story of Rustam and Isfandiyār to challenge Muhammad's authority and skill to narrate about the divine past. Later Muslim authors reiterated the story of Rustam and Isfandiyār, orienting it toward new meanings for new audiences.[54] Following the cross-cultural trajectories of such stories, this book investigates the memories of a sacred past shared between Christians and Muslims. The increasing knowledge of Christian saints in Islam became a form of cultural capital through which Muslim communities formed their local identities, and a tool for formulating their own religious concepts. *Stories between Christianity and Islam* is a study of this ecumenical economy of narrative and the dynamics that shaped these exchanges in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Storytelling in Late Antique Christianity

I do not venture to dismiss in silence those narratives about the saint which I received from my fathers, for I fear lest the Lord should justly torture me in His great and terrible day for not having given into the bank the talent, through His will entrusted to me for the edification and profit of the many. Being thus fortified by your prayers I will put down truthfully everything I heard from the men who were the saint's disciples before me, and I will also truly relate all the things I saw with my own eyes. For it is certain that the Lord "will surely destroy them that speak lies." I therefore beseech you lovers of learning to cast aside all thoughts of this present life and grant me your favorable hearing.

This passage comes from the opening of the *Life and Works of Daniel the Stylite*, the renowned fifth-century pillar saint in Constantinople.[1] One can easily imagine someone delivering these exact sentences to an audience gathered at the column of the holy man. The language pertaining to speaking and hearing is prominent in this passage, and the narrator offers glimpses into the oral contexts of his hagiographic process. He requests the favorable hearing of the audience for the stories he received from his fathers, the saint's disciples, and from his personal encounters with the holy man. The story is for the edification and profit of the many, he says; therefore, he does not dare to lie. Perhaps the above words were never actually uttered before the column of Daniel the Stylite. Yet, the narrator still wanted to establish his authority as a live witness of the holy man's pious deeds for his fifth-century readers who were familiar with listening to stories of saints. This familiarity renders the above passage a glimpse into the late antique world of public storytelling.

Saints' stories were, in many contexts, transmitted orally in antiquity. Narrating stories of holy men and women was often a pietistic practice, as was listening to them. To narrate, in a religious context, is an action-generating verb, since it exhorts the audience to imitate an example or reflect on a lesson.[2] In this devotional space, with the mobilization of narrators' and listeners' common knowledge of narratives, stories of exemplary figures of the past functioned as conveyors of religious concepts, ritualistic instructions, and future aspirations, among other forms of knowledge. In this chapter, I aim to reconstruct the practice of orally narrating saints' stories, that is, *hagiodiegesis*, by building on examples from Greek, Latin, and Syriac hagiographies from the fourth to the seventh century. After briefly revisiting the vivid conversation about the relationship between hagiography and orality, I analyze the contexts, agents, and methods of oral narrations of saints' stories.

HAGIOGRAPHY AND ORALITY

A story of a saint lies within a discursive, oral continuum punctuated by instances of written texts. It cannot be fixed by writing or depicting.[3] When we read hagiography, we capture a moment in the life of a living, changing story, one that has mostly stayed in the sensorial space of speech and hearing through its life in antiquity and beyond. For late antique stories, that oral-aural space can only be partially captured by written and pictorial texts.[4] Despite this ephemerality, written texts that preserve saints' stories still offer valuable gateways into the birth, circulation, and transformation of those stories in antiquity.

Going back to the opening example, the narrator of the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* writes that he does not want to pass in *silence* the *narratives* about the saint that he *heard* from the latter's disciples (or things he witnessed himself), and that he will *narrate* them truly, asking for the readers' favorable *hearing*. The author is certainly complying with the conventions of late antique hagiography. These conventions include, based on biblical models, the use of oral language to create an imagined, oral phase of a story, as a way to claim authenticity. So, we may not presume that the above vocabulary is a relic from an oral narration of the story. The question of how separate the language of *speech* was from the language of *text*, however, presents a false ontological binary that assumes a stark distinction between the oral and written forms of a story.[5] Ancient texts both captured and mimicked speech, since the latter is not an

out-of-text experience; it is a form of writing.[6] "Residual orality," in Walter Ong's words, "can envelop even a highly developed textuality," even in contexts where writing was at the service of orality.[7] That is to say, in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, which can be characterized as non-text-based time periods within the history of literacy,[8] the language of texts was often inseparable from the language of speech. Here, I am not interested in discovering the oral origins of stories, nor in exploring the rhetorical formulas that oral tradition provided for hagiography in antiquity. Rather, I seek to understand the ongoing relationship between oral performances of saints' stories and hagiography.

Although many illocutionary, paralinguistic, and prosodic elements are lost when a story is put in writing, hagiography is replete with linguistic features that indicate that the written stories were performed "experiences reduced to objects."[9] These experiences, one must emphasize, did not cease after the stories were put in writing.[10] Stories about saints continued to be narrated orally even after they were written down and "authored." Conversely, oral traditions about saints were often reintegrated into texts. That is, hagiographic texts were embellished transcripts of oral narrations, which in turn were informed by those embellished records. This interlaced relationship between text and orality left its imprint on other media as well, such as ritual practice, epigraphy, iconography, and architecture.[11] In this continuous and intertwined relationship, I reconstruct oral narrations by analyzing the written story.

Hagiography provides two types of information relevant to the question of orality. The first type is the "oral residue" embedded within the rhetoric of texts.[12] Scholars have discussed the following four categories to trace the "tradition of oral performance having been encoded in rhetorical formulae" in Christian hagiography: the use of simple language, titles of texts such as "narration," use of verbs indicating speech within the text, and address to an audience together with discourse pertaining to hearing and listening.[13] Other features can also be added to this list, such as questions posed to the audience, extensive use of direct speech and dialogues between characters, and fabulous and fantastic elements described with vivid details. One can also consider repetitive, parallel, or appositional phraseology (creating emphasis and euphony), poetry, and prayers among the oral features of hagiographic discourse.[14] These literary features make texts *sound like* transcripts of oral performance.

Although the oral features of texts have often been studied as literary conventions,[15] they can also be approached as guidelines for performance. Since hagiography was usually consumed aurally in antiquity, narratological features of these texts, one may assume, point at the language and style used during oral performances. This is not to argue that the exact wording of hagiography was used each time a story was orally narrated, nor that there was no distinction between the oral and the written language. Yet, the vocabulary pertaining to speech, hearing, and listening found in hagiographic texts shaped the language and style of oral performances, if in varying degrees. Let us look at some examples to reconstruct how oral narrations of saints' stories might have been formulated in antiquity.

Narrators likely used phrases that describe their speech in the manner in which authors wrote while telling stories of saints. In the fourth-century *Life of the Man of God*, for example, the author laments that "the story of such a person is beyond us and is inadequately told by us."[16] The hagiographers of the Syriac *Life* of Simeon the Stylite (d. 459) ask, "What mouth or tongue could possibly relate anything without awe and fear about a man who, while clothed in the body, showed among humans works and deeds of spiritual beings?"[17] The rhetoric of weak, simple speech is of course a well-known trope in early Christian writings, biblical passages being the earliest precedents, and hagiographic texts extensively use this language.[18] Yet, in light of these phrases, one can imagine that during oral performances narrators commented on how their speech falls short in narrating the grandeur of the heroes of their stories. Written rhetoric of the simplicity of the author most likely impacted the way storytellers spoke about their skill and ability to narrate.

Addressing listeners, we may safely assume, was also common in oral performances. Dramatic addresses, such as "o brethren," "o beloved ones," "o believers," found in hagiographic texts likely were parts of public performances.[19] These addresses are among the more straightforward indicators that stories were aimed for public audiences, and narrators possibly took such literary public addresses as guidelines in addressing their listeners in similar ways. Other phrases found in written works also give clues as to how oral narrations might have been enhanced. In the Greek *Life of Simeon the Stylite* by Antonius, for example, separate episodes of miracles are connected with phrases like "hear another mystery" and "another mystery, if you want to hear."[20] If a narrator wanted to extend the story, they could add another miraculous episode to the loose structure of the narrative and invite the

audience to hear one more mystery. Such formulaic repetitions, signposting nonsequential episodes in stories, throw certain images into high relief and fix the hero in the memories of the audiences.[21] In oral narrations, storytellers, similarly, could add many episodes to the stories they narrated before their audiences. This likely reminded their listeners that the story was a growing, boundless source of knowledge, the limits of which were in the hands of the storyteller.[22] This flexibility, in written works and by implication in oral narrations, points in the direction of curious possibilities: Were there mechanisms for audiences to check the authority or the authenticity of the narrations, or to control the length of the storytelling session? We will turn to such forms of audience participation below.

Narrators asked questions of their audiences, similar to the hagiographers of the *Life of the Man of God* asking, "How could they recognize him in a man clothed in shameful rags and begging?"[23] "What had happened to the senator's son?"[24] Such questions, when asked during oral narrations enabled the narrator to engage with listeners within an interactive storytelling session. Moreover, lengthy quotations from heroes and prayers for the audience, which are common narratological features in hagiographic texts,[25] contributed to the liveliness of narrations. Again, such usages were engrained features of ancient biography that found reverberations in early Christian literature.[26] Still, it is safe to assume that such direct quotations from heroes were common during oral narrations.

When we consider these direct quotations in an oral performative context, we can imagine the occasional conflation of the narrator and the hero. Swift changes between pronouns (the narrator's first person and the hero's first person in direct speech) and shifts between different temporalities in the story (the narrator's present and the hero's past) likely blurred the distinctions between the narrator and the hero in some oral narration sessions. The quiet text on parchment thus gives us linguistic and narratological clues of lively, dramatic moments in which stories came to life before audiences.

The second category of information for orality in hagiographic texts comes from representations of oral narrations. We have numerous literary descriptions of instances where a story of a holy man or woman is narrated to an individual or group, examples of which we will see shortly. Of course, these individual texts do not necessarily describe real-life events. A comparative reading of a group of texts from a certain geography and time period, however, can highlight general social norms, practices, and values of that place and time.

In Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey's words, "[Hagiographic stories] had to be true to the thought world of their time, as well as to the ordinary manner of people's lives, their way of doing things and seeing things. So, these stories reveal not the individuals of their day but something of the world in which they lived and moved. From this view these stories offer us a rich harvest of historical depth."[27] According to this understanding of hagiography, with a certain balance of trust for and critical distance from textual representations, one can catch glimpses of who were expected to narrate saints' stories in antiquity, how, and in which contexts.

There were three different modes of oral performance through which saints' stories circulated in late antique Christianity: public reading, encomiastic (homiletic) preaching within the context of the liturgy, and orally narrating stories of saints outside liturgical contexts. As discussed in the introduction, I refer to the last practice as *hagiodiegesis*. It is through this particular form of storytelling that many, especially lay, Christians in Late Antiquity acquired some of their knowledge of the events and persons that made the divine past. These interactive oral narrations of saints' stories reshaped communal memories, establishing and destabilizing religious authority. Hagiographic literature is replete with examples of *hagiodiegesis*, where a solitary ascetic, monk, cleric, or a layperson narrates stories of saints for the spiritual instruction and edification of the listener in a variety of contexts. The listener could be a fellow monk, a cleric, or a layperson. The following example comes from the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* of John of Ephesus (d. 586), specifically the chapter on the lives of Thomas and Stephen:

> But he used to go down into that pit and come up again, that he might not put force upon his body all at once and faint and be overcome, while the blessed men who were the occasion of his going out to that place supplied his necessary requirements. And so in that pit he laid great and grievous labors upon himself, and was, without ceasing, continuously occupied in weeping and sorrow and mourning for his sins, and these blessed men (since these also were very perfect in their manner of life) used to relate to me, "Whenever we see the blessed Thomas, we find him beating his face, and saying, 'Woe to me, my brethren, since I have consumed my days in vanity [. . .].' As often as he saw us" (these blessed men used to say to me), "by reason of the sound of his sobs and his weeping and mourning for his soul he would make us also weep [. . .]."[28]

In the above passage, a group of men describe to John of Ephesus (the author of the text) the pit where the holy man Thomas lived, and his ascetic practices.

Although this is John's literary representation of a narration, the passage points to various dynamics of *hagiodiegesis* in antiquity: local pilgrims as narrators, a solitary ascetic as the subject, a bishop as a listener to (and recorder of) the story. Such representations offer invaluable pieces of information to place under the rubrics of pietistic storytelling, namely, its contexts, narrators, and audiences, and to these I now turn.

A WORLD OF STORYTELLING

Late antique pilgrimage to the Egyptian desert, to the Holy Land, and to other sacred landscapes of the Near East was often a journey full of storytelling for the traveler.[29] The diary of the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria, for example, highlights pilgrimage as an important context for the narration of stories of prophets and saints in antiquity. When her guide in Charra spoke to her about the deeds of holy monks and ascetics, dead and alive, Egeria observed that monks' conversations were always about either God's Scriptures or the deeds of the great monks.[30] In fact, her diary is replete with notes about bishops and monks narrating biblical and hagiographic stories while guiding her during her long travels to the Holy Land, the Egyptian desert, and many cities and towns of the eastern Mediterranean.[31]

Written slightly after Egeria's travel journey, the Syriac *Life of Simeon the Stylite* also presents pilgrimage as a context for storytelling. For example, Antiochus, prefect of Damascus, publicly narrates a story about Naʿman, the king of the Arabs, at the holy man's shrine.[32] In this episode, Naʿman states during a feast that the "reports of the saint reached them, and some Arabs began to go up to him."[33] He first ferociously forbade venerating the saint, but then had a vision in which he was chastised for prohibiting believers from going up to Simeon. The authors of the *Life* say that whoever heard Antiochus relating the story of Naʿman gave praise to God.[34]

Around the same time, Palladius (d. 430), the bishop of Helenopolis in Bithynia, traveled to the Egyptian desert and collected anecdotes of ascetics in an account known as the *Lausiac History*.[35] His work can be categorized as historiography or collective biography embedded within the frame of a travel account, and thus its historicity is critically assessed in scholarship.[36] Still, this and similar works of Christian travelers to monks and ascetics likely reflected what one could expect from pilgrimage: hearing stories of holy men and women, past and present. To give another example, the abovementioned

John of Ephesus, in his chapter on Mary (who travels to Jerusalem and lives an ascetic life at Golgotha), says the ascetic practices of the holy woman became a story for pilgrims in the Holy Land, while the woman herself became a spectacle. Those who saw her, John says, "told many about the perfect manner of life of the blessed woman from her childhood to her old age."[37]

Pilgrims narrated the stories they heard and the spectacles they saw after returning from their journeys to the holy. Abba Arsenius in the Egyptian desert knew this well, when he shouted at his visitor, a noble woman from Rome, "Is it so that on returning to Rome you can say to other women: I have seen Arsenius?" "Spiritual tourism," in Peter Turner's words, "by such figures as Palladius and Egeria can only have bolstered these traditions by disseminating these stories about monks not only beyond but also further within and around the desert world."[38] Stories traveled far and wide with pilgrims.

Late antique pilgrimage did not always entail long journeys. In John of Ephesus's account, a group of men visit Sergius, an ascetic living near the Mesopotamian city of Amida. During this visit, Sergius speaks to his visitors about the holiness of another recluse, named Simeon:

> "But what, my sons, do I for my part really know? and wherefore did you come to my wretched self? If you are from the north of Amida, wherefore did you not go to the pillar of light which stands in the northern country, who today has been serving God in his saints for forty years, and has not grown tired or weary, nor is yet satiated with so doing? Wherefore, my sons, did you not go to this man, who has refreshed God in the persons of the weary, who has also caused the savior of his practices and of his purpose that is good and acceptable at all times to reach to the heavens of heavens?" But these men on hearing these things from the saint fell on their faces and continued entreating him and saying: "Who, sir, is he of whom you have said these things to us?"[39]

The above passage shows that visitors to local pilgrimage centers did not learn only about the holy man or woman they visited, but also about other saints. This phenomenon created broader networks of stories and sacred space that connected constellations of holy men and women. As depicted by John of Ephesus, the holy man Sergius, through his narration, connects the visitors' experience at his cell to another recluse far away.

Pilgrimage often included healings and exorcisms, and visitors and disciples of saints narrated stories of such miracles. Literary episodes about such narrations of miracles highlight how often laypeople became storytellers. Simeon the Stylite's hagiographers give an extensive and lively account in which a