

Dark Deeds, Broken Bodies: Medieval Islamic Narratives of Violence against Corpses

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Abstract

In the year 250/864–65, Baghdad’s governor Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir ordered the defilement of a prisoner’s corpse and grave site. The prisoner, Ishāq b. Jināh, had been a criminal magistrate serving the rebel leader Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar, who had led a failed revolt in Kufa against the Abbasid caliphate (132–650/750–1258). According to the fourth/tenth-century historian al-Iṣbahānī, the governor demanded that the deceased Ishāq b. Jināh not receive a funerary prayer, corpse-washing, or a burial shroud. Moreover, he ordered the corpse to be immersed in water in a grave and buried at a Jewish ruin. The governor’s intentional neglect of proper Islamic funerary rituals is shocking but not entirely surprising. Medieval Islamic political chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and social commentaries abound with darkly salacious reports of corpse neglect and even violence, shining a light on the efforts of the living to affect the dead. Why would anyone seek to “harm” a corpse? And what purpose did medieval Islamic historical narratives of necroaggression serve? This article addresses the narrative power of corpse violence in Greater Iraq during the mid-third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries, investigating the political meanings inscribed on bodies unmade by others. Viewing necroaggression as a type of performative political act, the article examines a vibrant polemical discourse that toyed with administrative concerns over coercion as well as popular anxieties over possible sensations experienced postmortem.

The desecration of the head of the Zaydī rebel Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar in 250/864–65 by Baghdad’s governor Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir repulsed many members of the Muslim Arab elite. Struggling to find anyone to perform the grisly task, the governor hired a butcher from the local prison to remove the rebel’s brain and stuff the skull with perfumes. The governor then sent the skull to the caliph al-Musta‘īn (r. 248–52/862–66) for public display in Samarra.¹ The populace, however, did not approve of the governor’s actions. A Ṭālibid rebel in Kufa, Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar had amassed a large following among the Zaydiyya and Arab tribes, and these erstwhile supporters criticized the flagrant disrespect shown to a descendant of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the fourth caliph and cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad.² Even more alarmingly, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s maltreatment of corpses did not end with Yaḥyā.

1. Miskawayh, *Kitāb Tajārib al-umam wa-ta‘āqub al-himam*, ed. Abū al-Qāsim Imāmī (Tehran: Sirvash, 2000), 4:329–30; al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, ed. ‘Abd al-Amīr Mihnā, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Alamī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 2010), 462–63; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1967), 9:266–70; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Kamāl Ḥasan Mar‘ī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 2005), 4:120–21.

2. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 4:327–29.

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The historian Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 356/967) tells us that after the death of Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar, the caliph al-Mustaʿīn pardoned all of the rebel’s imprisoned followers except for his chief magistrate (*ṣāhib al-shurṭa*) Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ. Yaḥyā had evidently installed a magistrate to help manage his newly forged base in Kufa, revealing a degree of administrative planning likely aimed at launching a fight against Abbasid forces. Unfortunately, al-Iṣbahānī does not supply any biographical information about Iṣḥāq, nor does he explain why the caliph did not release the imprisoned official. Perhaps the latter’s corruption of Kufan bureaucracy, and possibly criminal justice, was too egregious an act for al-Mustaʿīn to forgive. As a result, Iṣḥāq stayed in prison, and after he died,

Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir issued [an order] to bury the unclean abomination Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ with the Jews. [The command was] to not inter Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ with the Muslims and to not pray over him, wash him, or cover him with a shroud. By the grace of God, his clothes were removed, and he was wrapped in a garment immersed in water [and put] in a grave when they brought him to the site of a ruin. He was thrown under the ground with a wall cast around him; may God have mercy on him.³

The extent of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s defilement of Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ’s corpse and grave may appear shocking to modern readers, but these actions were entirely in keeping with medieval Islamic historical presentations of this notoriously competitive and irascible governor. From the perspective of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, this improper burial betrayed Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s enduring enmity for the rogue official. The numerous unconventional and omitted elements in the funerary rites—interment in a place of Jewish instead of Muslim burial, the absence of prayer, the replacement of a burial shroud with a garment soaked in water (presumably to compound and hasten bodily decay), the purposeful neglect of corpse-washing, and the placement of the grave at the site of a ruin instead of a cemetery—all serve to emphasize the perceived sinfulness of Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s thorough and intentional abandonment of Muslim funerary rituals prompts the question whether he viewed these measures as necessary to humiliate not only Iṣḥāq’s body but also his spirit.

Why would anyone seek to “harm” a corpse? By extension, what purpose did medieval Islamic historical narratives of postmortem maltreatment serve? To address these unsettling questions, this article focuses on three cases of necroaggression recorded in the works of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994), and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), in addition to Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s account of Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ. I also discuss several second/eighth- to sixth/twelfth-century Islamic legal manuals to contextualize these narratives, providing a cross-genre analysis to better display broad medieval Muslim attitudes and responses toward corpse defilement. The goal of the article is to address acts of postmortem harm carried out by and between members

3. Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, ed. al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, n.d.), 1:510. Al-Iṣbahānī reports this narrative on the authority of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ashnānī, whom he cites multiple times without providing any biographical information. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī briefly mentions this transmitter in *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, ed. Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2002), 2:543. The name Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ashnānī likely refers to the Shīʿī hadith transmitter al-Ashnānī al-Kūfī.

of the Abbasid administration; these manifestations of forceful behavior constitute a form of interpersonal antagonism and thus lie outside the realm of more public-facing forms of punishment implemented by government authorities. Taking place in Greater Iraq and spanning the mid-third/ninth to early fourth/tenth centuries, these three cases reveal more than just a salacious literary fascination with the macabre. These narratives of corpse violence indicate that medieval Muslims may have viewed the deceased not as inert, spiritless vessels of a previous life but as potential sufferers of postmortem injury.

A political critique filters through the body of narratives about the tormented dead, illustrating the potential for the medieval author to wield corpse violence as a literary tool to disparage government functionaries. The risks and failures of administrative competition, salted with a dash of moralistic reprisal, shape these stories to serve as a form of entertainment for a medieval Muslim audience. But they also convey a sober warning for political competitors: precisely *how* a person mishandled the dead mattered. Peeling back layers of historical meaning encased in the blood and bones of punished corpses, this article exposes a narrative project of postmortem violence that thrived on sensationalizing and unmasking political intrigue. Necroaggression was a highly effective political metric to display asymmetries in power that manifested either as distasteful acts by an abuser or as justifiable acts of retaliation, depending on the conduct of the recently deceased. By viewing the bodies of bureaucrats as repositories of political information seen through the marks of necroaggression, I show how medieval Islamic narratives pivot corpse violence to redefine the political and moral status of both the perpetrator and the dead in a measured, performative, and didactic way. Maimed and broken, the bodies of the recently deceased bureaucrats can best be seen as dynamic canvases on which were inscribed a range of political misbehaviors in the Abbasid administration.

Historiography on Corpse Violence

Corpse violence evokes a disrespect for bodily integrity, a degree of unrestrained animosity, a level of dehumanization, and a tantalizingly graphic narrative for medieval and modern audiences alike. Violence performed on the dead has a rich literary history according to Andrew McClellan, who, in his book *Abused Bodies*, seeks to resurrect the role of the dead body as a narrative aspect of Greek and Roman epics.⁴ McClellan argues that the literary convention of depicting scenes of bodily dismemberment and cannibalistic fancy serves as a larger marker of social change and decline. Katherine Verdery adds that “corpses lend themselves particularly well to politics in times of major upheaval.”⁵ A manifestation of moral and political misbehavior, brutalized corpses embody not only power differentials between the perpetrator and the dead but also momentous shifts in the broader political landscape. These blood-soaked vignettes appear in the medieval Islamic literary and social imagination, fulfilling the crucial role of educating readers on the moralistic lessons to be learned from improper care shown toward the deceased.

4. Andrew M. McClellan, *Abused Bodies in Roman Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

5. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 31.

Narratives of corpse violence pepper medieval Islamic historical chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and social commentaries and are often replete with political information as much as they are with morbid curiosity. Dark humor threads through these accounts, which play with reversals of political fortune: high-ranking administrators balk at the sight of the mangled corpse of a former political ally or opponent; junior officials hatch plans to corner, kill, and disfigure the bodies of senior officials who threaten their political designs; and the torturer becomes the tortured. Corpse violence was a powerful visual for the medieval author, actor, and reader, and it remains a potent reminder that certain methods of dehumanization can shape the perception of who a person once was and possibly even what a person can be.

Mirroring the robust literary and political depth of this deathscape, several contemporary scholarly works have delved into medieval Islamic attitudes toward corpse maltreatment and even mutilation.⁶ Analyzing the interplay between historical meaning and literary form in acts of torture and punishment enforced by the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279–89/892–901), Fedwa Malti-Douglas makes note of the diverse presentations of this ruler and his treatment of others in different Arabic literary registers—biographical dictionaries, historical chronicles, and works of *adab* (social commentaries and mannered customs). The acts of mercy and cruelty expressed in these narratives, Malti-Douglas contends, confront one another to produce a more nuanced historical vignette of the caliph and his exercise of social justice as well as a deeper impression of the worldview of the medieval author.⁷ Though less concerned with the historical subject of postmortem harm, her observations on the interrelationship between meaning and form—a discussion launched by the late Hayden White—in relation to the torturer and the tortured hold valuable insights for the consideration of the multifaceted political meanings found in the disfigured bodies of recently deceased government officials. I examine the same literary genres as Malti-Douglas does to better understand social and historical presentations of necroaggression.

Christian Lange’s work on justice and violence likewise offers a fruitful methodological approach for juxtaposing medieval Islamic legal texts with diverse Arabic literary genres. In particular, his book *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* exposes the political function of punitive public displays in the Seljuq era (ca. 447–575/1055–1180) and demonstrates, on the basis of sixth/twelfth- and seventh/thirteenth-century eschatological literature, that the literary fascination with such punishments reveals just as much about the

6. See Tilman Seidensticker, “Responses to Crucifixion in the Islamic World (1st–7th/7th–13th Centuries),” in *Public Violence in Islamic Societies: Power, Discipline, and the Construction of the Public Sphere, 7th–19th Centuries CE*, ed. Christian Lange and Maribel Fierro, 203–16 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Maribel Fierro, “Emulating Abraham: The Fāṭimid al-Qāʾim and the Umayyad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān III,” in Lange and Fierro, *Public Violence in Islamic Societies*, 130–55, 139; Maribel Fierro, “Decapitation of Christians and Muslims in the Medieval Iberian Peninsula: Narratives, Images, Contemporary Perceptions,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 2 (2008): 137–64; Emilie Savage-Smith, “Attitudes toward Dissection in Medieval Islam,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 50, no. 1 (1995): 67–110. For an analysis of punishment in the grave, see Leor Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 197–233.

7. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Texts and Tortures: The Reign of al-Muʿtaḍid and the Construction of Historical Meaning,” *Arabica* 46, no. 3 (1999): 313–36.

medieval Muslim audience as it does about the authors.⁸ Hellish imaginings enabled Muslim believers to observe parallels in their own society and, through this discursive dialectic, construct their own interpretations of their lived experiences in lieu of an imminent End. Lange's observations on public punishment as a performative political act carry similar analytical weight when applied to the corpse violence presented in diverse medieval Islamic historical reports. Both Malti-Douglas and Lange show that the performative nature of government-sponsored violence was meant to enhance the aura of the one carrying out the act, although this intended message was not necessarily well received if the punishment was viewed as too extreme. Despite the richness of these scholarly inquiries dealing with punishment and torture, the changing political role of corpses marred and unmade by others has received less attention.

This is in part because investigations into the medieval historical narrative project of necroaggression run into several obstacles. What exactly constitutes violence against the dead? And by the same token, how should we treat these accounts of violence against the dead? Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir's actions are salient to these interrelated questions, since the governor committed multiple different offenses against the bodies of both Yaḥyā b. 'Umar and Ishāq b. Jināḥ.

Diverse Forms of Postmortem Harm: Comparing the Cases of Yaḥyā b. 'Umar and Ishāq b. Jināḥ

The cases of Yaḥyā b. 'Umar and Ishāq b. Jināḥ force us to reconsider the potentially wide range of types of violation that can constitute acts of necroaggression. The differences in the postmortem treatment of Yaḥyā and Ishāq, with the former's body mutilated and partially redesigned while the latter's body remained largely intact though deprived of Islamic funerary rituals, point to an indeterminate flexibility in administrative handling of a criminal's body. Historians such as Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī and Miskawayh offer details about Yaḥyā's and Ishāq's unmaking, probably to embellish their anecdotal reports as well as to critique their death-dealers and death-handlers. Their narratives of postmortem harm and neglect can be seen as a representation of the social contexts of both the actors and the authors and as a type of commentary layered with social perceptions about political offenses, coercive techniques of governance, and Muslim attitudes toward criminal bodies and their associations, administrative and familial. Instead of merely trying to discern the factual value of these reports, I read them as social reflections—an approach that offers a more vibrant view of the contested politics of handling criminal corpses.⁹ For each broken or neglected body represents an easily accessible foil that the historians of the fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries mobilized to sharpen their critique of Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir.

8. Christian Lange, *Justice, Punishment, and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

9. For more on reading the historical process as a series of dramas, see Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52–53. For the role of fiction in constructing narrative histories, see Matthias Vogt, *Figures de califes entre histoire et fiction: Al-Walīd b. Yazīd et al-Amīn dans la représentation d'historiographie arabe de l'époque 'abbāsīde* (Beirut: Ergon, 2006), 22–34.

In addition, an analytical comparison of the cases of Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar and Ishāq b. Jināḥ draws attention to the degree of excessive bodily harm that warranted public intervention and subsequent amendment of the administrative protocol for handling criminal bodies. In Yaḥyā’s case, modifying his skull and stuffing it with perfumes were acts intended to mockingly showcase the rebel’s head as a trophy and thus to generate a more sensational, aromatic souvenir for both the Ṭāhirid governor and the caliph. Though Abbasid officials often crucified dead rebels and transported parts of their bodies to the caliph, governor, or criminal magistrate, many Muslim jurists would have condemned Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s alteration of Yaḥyā’s head as a form of mutilation.¹⁰ Denouncing the governor’s actions, several Hāshimites declared, “O commander, indeed you get enjoyment out of killing a man. If the messenger of God (peace and blessings upon him) were alive, he would have consoled him.”¹¹ The scandalous nature of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s offense was also confirmed by the outcry of members of the Samarran populace who, likely not unfamiliar with the varied punitive components of a well-choreographed *tashhīr* ceremony (a public procession of scorn), disapproved of the governor’s treatment of the rebel’s body. At this point, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir, under pressure to concede to the will of the public, took down the staked head and returned it to the family of the deceased Ṭālibid rebel instead of displaying it in Baghdad in accordance with his initial plan. The overwhelming popular displeasure demonstrates that there was a perceptible line up to which even the bodies of deceased political offenders, however excessive their offenses may have been and especially if they were members of the *ahl al-bayt* (descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad), deserved a modicum of respect, and that Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir had crossed this line. What is more, medieval Muslim historians such as Miskawayh, who records Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s grave misdeeds, displays an awareness of what constituted acceptable government treatment of criminal bodies, and he routinely reproduces the complaints of administrators regarding excessive acts of torture performed on political prisoners.¹²

Unlike the body of Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar, the corpse of Ishāq b. Jināḥ did not suffer dismemberment or modification. Rather, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir purposefully withheld the Muslim funerary rites, seemingly to damage Ishāq’s confessional identity and the physical integrity of his corpse. In further contrast, Ishāq was a municipal official overseeing law enforcement in Kufa, and though he served a rebel leader, he did not lead a rebellion himself. Ishāq b. Jināḥ’s position as a local functionary who had perhaps been corrupted by the rebel Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar may explain why Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir refrained from authorizing Muslim funerary services for Ishāq but made no move to display

10. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 154, 160. See also al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), *Kitāb al-Ḥāwī al-kabīr*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwaḍ and ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1999), 13:143.

11. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 4:329. Although washing and perfuming a body were components of Muslim funerary custom, excavating the head was not. Miskawayh’s narrative impresses upon the reader the seriousness of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s perversion of proper corpse treatment.

12. For an example, see the report of Muḥammad b. Dā’ūd about the excessive torture of the unfortunate calligrapher-vizier Ibn Muqla; Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 5:59–60.

his body publicly as he had tried to do with Yaḥyā. Regardless of the governor's reasons, al-Iṣbahānī presents the calculating actions of Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir and invites the medieval (and modern) reader to ponder the likely pitiable state of Iṣḥāq's decomposed body. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir's defilement of Iṣḥāq's body can also be read as part of al-Iṣbahānī's larger Shī'ī project in his biographical book *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyin* (The Ṭālibid martyrs) to narrate the experiences and unjust deaths of the *ahl al-bayt*. Considering al-Iṣbahānī's narrative purpose, the demise of Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ, a municipal official who appears to have died in prison without receiving a trial, was just another travesty against the Shī'ī community. Although the corpses of Yaḥyā and Iṣḥāq signal, quite literally, different manifestations of forceful behavior, both serve to put Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir's political misconduct on display.

The narratives about Yaḥyā's and Iṣḥāq's mishandled bodies remind us that the dead may impart more or less information and meaning depending on the nature of the violations committed against them. This insight points to the literary power of postmortem maltreatment, a motif and weapon that medieval Muslim historians harnessed to differentiate good bureaucrats from bad bureaucrats. When read as a type of performative political act, to take an analytical cue from Lange and Malti-Douglas, these necroaggressions expose an interdependent relationship between the violated dead and the violator that a medieval historical author leveraged to offer a more dramatic critique of Abbasid political elites. This hostile yet strikingly close connection between corpse and corpse offender reveals a political arena that, over time, became increasingly accommodating of the coercive excesses of political elites.

The cases of Iṣḥāq and Yaḥyā raise certain legal issues connected to the expected treatment of criminal bodies. The withholding of funerary rituals such as washing, prayer, and proper garments from Iṣḥāq b. Jināḥ demonstrates a concerted effort to intensify the decay of his corpse. The goal of a corpse-washer was to clean the deceased body in preparation for burial, a vital step for the fulfillment of social and religious dicta. A corpse-washer could inadvertently pollute the body of the deceased if certain conditions of ritual washing were not properly observed or if the corpse-washer did not meet the gendered, social, and religious expectations for the post. The identity of the washer, the time and place of the washing, the type of water used, the number of times the corpse was washed, and the material condition of the burial shroud mattered for preserving the body and satisfying religious norms.¹³ Ritual impurities could be exacerbated to varying degrees if the corpse-washer fulfilled his or her professional duties inadequately.

This indicates that the deceased was in more danger of being contaminated than of being a source of contamination. Leor Halevi, in his probing text *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, affirms that "Islamic law was concerned less with the effects of the dead on the living than with the effects of the living on the

13. For a description of corpse-washing, see Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid wa-nihāyat al-muqtaṣid* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2004), 1:240–45; Ibn Qudāma, *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā et al. (Cairo: National Library, 1969), 2:337–49, 390–93.

dead.”¹⁴ Contact with defiled substances posed only limited risk to corpse-washers; a more serious concern was the ritual danger for the deceased posed by the washer’s contact with the corpse. Marion Katz indicates that the possibility of a corpse being ritually impure bothered classical Muslim jurists and theologians, who grappled with the problematic view that when a believer transitioned from life to death, the body became polluted.¹⁵ This view meant that a corpse could possess a degree of inherent pollution that was both personal and permanent—a concerning thought indeed. However, as Kevin Reinhart explains, even if a corpse contained defiling substances and thus held the potential of ritual impurity, the impurity was not necessarily contagious.¹⁶ The more dangerous pollutants came not from the dead but from the living, who could affect the ritual status of the dead.

Ritual expectations based on Islamic ideas of purity applied also to funerary prayer services. In the case of Ishāq b. Jināḥ, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir denied funerary rites such as prayer to shame the rogue official publicly, underscore the threat posed by offenders like him, and display the religious superiority of the Abbasid regime. But however justified the governor may have felt in disregarding proper Muslim funerary care for Ishāq’s body, classical Islamic doctrine insisted that rebels, despite their acts of insurrection, nonetheless deserved some type of funerary prayer.¹⁷ On the other hand, whether those who had committed grave offenses such as rebellion (*baghy*) or innovation (*bidaʿ*) deserved a *Muslim* funerary prayer was a question debated by prominent legal scholars.¹⁸ Al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) emphasized that praying for the dead was an obligatory Islamic act and that only God could truly judge the merits of a purported unbeliever.¹⁹ Nevertheless, according to Saḥnūn (d. 240/855), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/796) argued that the privilege of the Muslim

14. Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 75.

15. Marion Katz, *Body of Text: The Emergence of the Sunnī Law of Ritual Purity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 157.

16. Kevin Reinhart, “Impurity/No Danger,” *History of Religions* 30, no. 1 (1990): 1–24, at 9–10, 14–15. Reinhart notes that “defiling things are merely dirty; they are ritually dangerous but not ritually impure.” S. R. Burge observes the difference between ritual and spiritual cleansing, on the one hand, and more mundane cleansing, on the other; see Burge, “Impurity/Danger!,” *Islamic Law and Society* 17, no. 3–4 (2010): 320–49.

17. See Fierro, “Decapitation of Christians and Muslims,” 158; Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 163–64. Certain circumstances may also prevent the full performance of funerary rituals. When famine struck Baghdad in the fourth/tenth century, a group of people were buried together in one grave without prayer or washing. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī taʾrīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), 14:6. Further, despite the general requirement for Islamic funerary prayer, certain individuals were not granted such a prayer. An example is ‘Īsā b. Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. ‘Āṣim (d. 241/855), who, after defaming noble companions and family members of the Prophet Muḥammad, was beaten one thousand times and left in the sun to die, and then his body was thrown into the Tigris without funerary rituals such as washing or prayer. See al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 9:200–201; al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:283–84; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 11:284.

18. Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*, 1:253; Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:416.

19. Al-Shāfiʿī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhri al-Najjār, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1990), 1:296–97. He cites the Qurʾānic verse “Surely the hypocrites shall be in the lowest depth of the fire, and none shall come to their help” (4:145). Muhammad Qasim Zaman also notes this in “Death, Funeral Processions, and the Articulation of Religious Authority in Early Islam,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 93 (2001): 27–58, at 30.

funerary prayer should not be extended to rebels such as the Khawārij.²⁰ Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) similarly held that the Muslim funerary prayer should not be performed for rebels.²¹ Even a person who committed suicide or a *ḥadd* (fixed punishment) offense deserved some type of funerary prayer according to Mālik b. Anas, though other jurists disagreed.²² Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), for instance, allowed exceptions to this rule. A fierce opponent of the *miḥna*, the theological campaign launched by the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–33) in 218/833 to enforce belief in the created nature of the Qur'an, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal reportedly refused to pray over individuals who had believed in the Qur'an's createdness.²³

Did withholding funerary prayers serve as a final humiliation or potential harm for the deceased? Funerary boycotts were not uncommon, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman demonstrates, and they prompted conflicting legal and theological opinions over the reasons justifying communal disregard.²⁴ Other practical concerns dictated whether a Muslim funerary prayer was to be expected in a given situation. Mālik b. Anas, for example, affirmed that prayer should not be performed for a hand, head, or leg if that was all that remained of the body.²⁵ Mālik's opinion is significant in the case of Yaḥyā b. 'Umar, a rebel whose body was taken apart and whose mutilated head was later returned to his family. Moreover, some legal authorities, according to the Mālikī jurist Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), believed that funerary prayers should be withheld from innovators (that is, people who introduced what were considered unwarranted religious innovations) because it was a “reprimand and punishment for them” (*al-zajr wa-l-‘uqūba lahum*).²⁶ Whether this “reprimand and punishment” reflected the immediate judgment of God or a final penalty carried out by legal authorities is unclear. Ibn Rushd's comment may reflect the legal and eschatological

20. Saḥnūn, *Kitāb al-Mudawwana* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1994), 1:258. For more on Mālik's stance, see Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence*, 138–40.

21. Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:417. See also al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥāwī*, 3:48, 51. For more on the Ḥanafī position, see Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence*, 146, 175. However, as Halevi observes, jurists “ultimately resolved most cases in favor of prayer, evincing a merciful tendency in Islamic law to integrate Muslim outcasts”; Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 164.

22. According to the third/ninth-century jurist Saḥnūn, Mālik made a distinction as to whether the imam or ordinary believers were obliged to pray for a dead criminal. See Saḥnūn, *al-Mudawwana*, 1:254. Ibn Rushd notes that according to Jābir b. Samura, the Prophet Muḥammad “refused to pray for a man who had killed himself”; Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*, 1:253–54. See also Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:415.

23. Zaman, “Death, Funeral Processions,” 35. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal also affirmed that Muslim prayer should not extend to the *rawāfiḍ*, a pejorative label applied to Imāmīs who rejected the authority of the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644), and 'Uthman b. 'Affān (d. 35/656); see Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:416.

24. Zaman, “Death, Funeral Processions,” 54.

25. Saḥnūn, *al-Mudawwana*, 1:256. Later Muslim legal authorities also took issue with praying over body parts and modifying the appearance of the dead. See Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Labbād al-Qayrawānī, *Kitāb al-Radd 'alā al-Shāfi'ī*, ed. 'Abd al-Majīd b. Ḥamda (Tunis: Dār al-‘Arab li-l-Ṭibā'a, 1986), 1:80.

26. Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid*, 1:253. According to Ibn Rushd, Mālik reportedly held this view, but I cannot find any earlier reports that he endorsed withholding prayer as a form of punishment. See Mālik b. Anas's observations as recorded by his student Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā al-Laythī in *al-Muwāṭṭa'*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1980), 1:228–30; Saḥnūn, *al-Mudawwana*, 1:258.

thinking of his time, since earlier Mālikī texts do not seem to associate the withholding of funerary prayers with punitive purposes. However, al-Shāfiʿī does consider the legality of prohibiting funerary prayers for dead rebels as a form of punishment and ultimately condemns such a penalty.²⁷ Even so, for Ibn Rushd, the absence of Muslim funerary prayer reflected more than simple disdain for a deceased offender; such neglect could constitute a retributive act. Accordingly, for Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir to forbid prayer services for Ishāq b. Jināḥ and to bury the latter's body at the site of a Jewish ruin as opposed to a Muslim cemetery represented targeted measures meant to publicly denigrate the religious identity of the prisoner.

Ishāq b. Jināḥ's burial at a Jewish ruin further points to a governmental effort to inter individuals believed to be hypocrites, apostates, or rebels in places distinct from the more respectable Muslim cemeteries. The presence of a non-Muslim body in a Muslim cemetery posed a spatial and spiritual threat to the community of the dead and the living who visited them. Such questions as whether a deceased Christian woman who had been impregnated by a Muslim man should be interred in a Christian or a Muslim cemetery were topics of delicate legal debate.²⁸ A cemetery constitutes an intermediary place connecting the world of the living with the world of the dead, and the political, religious, and eschatological stakes involved in the selection of a place of interment were consequently high.²⁹ The care devoted to the proper placement of bodies according to confessional identity reveals a legal and political effort to rigorously preserve the boundaries of Islamic sacred space, and this practice may have extended to accused criminals and rebels as well. The sixth/twelfth-century Sunni preacher and historian Ibn al-Jawzī divulges that a government cemetery on the eastern side of Baghdad housed the bodies of dead criminals such as Aḥmad b. Naṣr, who had launched an unsuccessful insurrection in the year 231/846.³⁰ Although there was no recognizable pattern in the arrangement of burial grounds in the early Islamic period, Ibn al-Jawzī's terse detail may indicate a nascent Abbasid policy to bury perceived criminals and rebels in distinct cemeteries.³¹ The placement of the grave was a further indicator of the social status of the deceased; typically, outcasts and criminals were buried in less than desirable locations, sometimes with the carcass of an animal, or placed in less than desirable positions in the grave itself.

The governor's doubts about Ishāq b. Jināḥ's membership in the Muslim community are apparent from the narrative, as is his attempt to prevent others from rallying around the corpse of the official. Al-Iṣbahānī claims that a wall was erected around Ishāq's grave, presumably to limit the visual field and/or distinguish his burial site from other,

27. See al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥāwī*, 13:143. See also Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence*, 154; al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Umm*, 4:235.

28. Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:420. See also Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 190.

29. See Sepideh Parsapajouh and Mathieu Terrier, "Cimetières et tombes dans les mondes musulmans à la croisée des enjeux religieux, politiques et mémoriels: Une introduction," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 146 (2019): 11–24. Consider also Galila El Kadi and Alain Bonnamy, *La cité des morts: Le Caire* (Paris: Institut de recherche pour le développement, 2001).

30. Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 11:165–68.

31. For more on early Islamic funerary practices, see Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 148.

neighboring graves, thus preventing people from gathering around and interacting with the grave.³² In addition, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir had Ishāq’s corpse wrapped in water-soaked garments, thereby speeding up the rate of its decomposition. Inundating a burial ground with water was not uncommon. The Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61) reportedly crushed and flooded the grave site of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 61/680), the third Shī‘ī imam, with water from the Euphrates several times.³³ It seems that a single inundation proved insufficient to deter Shī‘ī pilgrims from visiting the grave of the revered ‘Alid. Perhaps water played a more dynamic role at Ḥusayn’s grave than it did at other graves; several medieval Shī‘ī poets and pilgrims reflect on the sweet fragrance of the soil caused by water absorption.³⁴

How the living should preserve the dead, remove dead matter, perform funerary rites, visit the dead, and treat a grave site all carried social implications. After all, the maltreatment of a corpse served as a lasting insult to the family and community of the deceased. Although Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir’s refusal to perform a full Muslim burial for Ishāq b. Jināḥ serves as a literary device to portray the governor as an unsympathetic and spiteful authority figure, the significance of the story rests on a very real fear that eschewing the essential rites of burial could, in some small or large measure, blemish the body and perhaps the spirit of the dead.

Just Retaliation: The Case of Ibn al-Zayyāt

As gruesome as these medieval historical descriptions of necroaggression may seem to the modern reader, they convey key information about why certain coercive techniques proved more effective in shaping the short-term political alliances and persuasions of the bureaucrats who either witnessed, heard about, or perhaps even participated in the events described. For instance, soon after al-Mutawakkil became caliph after the death of his brother al-Wāthiq (r. 227–32/842–47), he ordered the arrest, interrogation, torture, and death of the three-time vizier Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik al-Zayyāt (d. 233/847), a decision

32. This was not the only time an individual was buried near or under a wall; see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:77. Legal scholars discussed the necessity of a wall as well as its proper placement either near or beside the grave site of the deceased; see, for example, the analysis of the sixth/twelfth-century Ḥanafī jurist al-Kāsānī in *Kitāb Badā’i’ al-ṣanā’i’ fi tartīb al-sharā’i’*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwaḍ and ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār Kutub- al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), 1:319.

33. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:185; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:110; al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akhbār al-mudhākara*, ed. ‘Abbūd al-Shālījī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995), 6:321–22; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kitāb al-Kāmil fi ta’rīkh*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2010), 6:130. Both al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Athīr specify that al-Mutawakkil sought to prevent people from visiting the grave. He also ordered that anyone who attempted to go to the site be arrested and put in Baghdad’s infamous Maṭbaq prison. For further analysis, see Khalid Sindawi, “Visit to the Tomb of al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī in Shiite Poetry: First to Fifth Centuries AH (8th–11th Centuries CE),” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 2 (2006): 230–58, at 236–37. Sindawi claims that al-Mutawakkil demolished and flooded the grave four times.

34. Sindawi, “Visit to the Tomb,” 237. When water flooded the tombs of figures with less spiritual authority, the results were not nearly as positive. Ibn Khallikān reports that according to al-Ṭabarī, the grave of the notorious Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj (d. 95/714) was obliterated by flooding. See Ibn Khallikān, *Kitāb Wafayāt al-a‘yān wa-anbā’ abnā’ al-zamān*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1968–72), 2:53.

that marked the beginning of a purge in the administration. The late third/ninth-century historian al-Ṭabarī, who offers the most detailed description of these events, tells us that while languishing in prison, “Ibn al-Zayyāt refused food and would not taste anything. He was extremely worried in prison, wept profusely, talked little, and pondered much. He remained [this way] for days.”³⁵ Despondent, Ibn al-Zayyāt sat in a cell until he was transferred to an iron oven (*tannūr*), a device that Ibn al-Zayyāt himself had invented and used on another government official. According to the testimony of al-Dandānī, an unknown figure in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative, for several days Ibn al-Zayyāt sat in the oven with iron spikes and experienced various physical and psychological abuses depending on the day.³⁶ “In the middle was a wooden board on which the tormented would sit when he wanted respite. He would sit on the wooden board for a time, then the overseer would come . . . and they would intensify the torture.”³⁷ A central impression conveyed by al-Ṭabarī’s account is the comprehensive scope of the torturer’s plan to heighten the suffering of the vizier.

Reports diverge over the manner of the vizier’s death. After removing Ibn al-Zayyāt from the iron oven, the caliph’s agents beat him viciously and, according to one report, continued beating him even once he was dead. “He was thrown down and struck on his abdomen fifty times with a cudgel, then turned over and likewise struck on his posterior until he died under the beating without the torturers knowing.”³⁸ Reportedly unaware that Ibn al-Zayyāt had died at some point during the beating, the unnamed torturers continued to strike his corpse. Al-Ṭabarī also notes that they forcibly twisted Ibn al-Zayyāt’s neck and plucked out his beard when he died. By contrast, a second report states that “he died without being beaten.”³⁹ Disregarding this alternative version of the events, many medieval Islamic narratives of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death affirm that he endured immense suffering before his death.⁴⁰

35. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:159.

36. The name al-Dandānī may have been an editorial error. See Joel Kramer’s comment in al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 34: *Incipient Decline*, trans. Joel Kramer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 70n245. On the other hand, the name also appears in a much earlier account of the death of the caliph al-Amīn (d. 198/813), when al-Ṭabarī indicates that Quraysh al-Dandānī, a non-Arab client of the Abbasid general Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, had been commanded to kill al-Amīn. Unfortunately, the historian does not offer further detail about this *mawālī* nor about the other al-Dandānī hired to oversee Ibn al-Zayyāt’s torture.

37. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:159. Al-Isfahānī, when discussing al-Jāḥiẓ’s reflections on Ibn al-Zayyāt, remarks that the vizier’s punishment in the *tannūr* resembles hellfire. See al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb Muḥāḍarat al-udabā’ wa-muḥāwarat al-shu‘arā’ wa-l-bulaghā’* (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, 2009), 1:337. See also the brief mention of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 3:594–95. According to this account, the high-ranking commander Itākh, charged with overseeing the torture, delegated the supervision of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s daily torment to two officials and guards. But the location of his death is unclear: he remained in a *tannūr* either in Itākh’s palace or in the Hārūnī palace. Itākh was a powerful figure in the administration: he controlled the regular army, the Mughāriba (free soldiers from the Islamic West), the Turks, the non-Arab clients (*mawālī*), the postal and intelligence services, the chamberlain’s office, and the guards of the caliphal palace.

38. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:159.

39. *Ibid.*, 9:159–60.

40. Al-Ya‘qūbī notes that the caliph al-Mutawakkil punished Ibn al-Zayyāt until he died but does not offer further details. See his *Ta’rīkh*, ed. ‘Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-A‘lamī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt,

Other historical reports add an element of intra-administrative intrigue when discussing the demise of Ibn al-Zayyāt. Disliked by many of his colleagues, Ibn al-Zayyāt was, according to the historian al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 294/897), “a man of intense severity and little compassion,” traits that he manifested in his treatment of people.⁴¹ The historian al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) adds that Ibn al-Zayyāt and Ibn Abī Du‘ād (d. 240/854), a chief judge and inquisitor during the *miḥna* controversy whom al-Mutawakkil favored early on in his reign, were bitter enemies. Sometime in the year 229/843–44, Ibn al-Zayyāt had conducted an investigation of Ibn Abī Du‘ād, which later led to the imprisonment of several officials.⁴² Aware of the factional discord between the two men, al-Mutawakkil manipulated their rivalry: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī tells us that the caliph “goaded him [Ibn Abī Du‘ād] until he seized Ibn al-Zayyāt and demanded the properties belonging to him.”⁴³ Although Ibn al-Zayyāt’s imprisonment was overseen by the Turkish military commander Itākh (d. 235/849), Ibn Abī Du‘ād appears to have been involved in the vizier’s interrogation and was easily persuaded to seize the latter’s property. Just before presenting this report, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī indicates that Ibn al-Zayyāt had been overcome with love for a singing girl he had purchased from a Khurasani man.⁴⁴ In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s portrayal, Ibn al-Zayyāt was too preoccupied with his own personal affairs to pay attention to the plots being hatched by his rivals.

In addition, Ibn al-Zayyāt’s familiarity with the iron oven, a device he had used earlier on Ibn Asbāṭ al-Miṣrī, an unknown government functionary, disturbed his political competitors. According to al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Abī Du‘ād claimed that Ibn al-Zayyāt took everything from Ibn Asbāṭ al-Miṣrī when torturing the latter in the iron oven.⁴⁵ Ibn Abī Du‘ād’s critique of the heavy-handed punishment of Ibn Asbāṭ al-Miṣrī appears immediately after a description of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s dark musings and profuse weeping inside the oven, and this juxtaposition of the two men conveys a certain retributive kismet: Ibn al-Zayyāt suffered what he had made another suffer. Other medieval Muslim historians also use the iron oven as a

2010), 2:447. For other reports on Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam*, 11:189; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-‘ayān*, 1:478–79; Ibn ‘Abd al-Rabbihi, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1983), 2:38; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 5:2102; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:72–73; Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. Aḥmad al-Arna’ūṭ and Turkī Muṣṭafā (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), 4:26; Ibn Ṭiḡṭāqā, *Kitāb al-Fakhrī fī al-‘ādāb al-sulṭāniyya wa-l-duwal al-islāmiyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad Māyū (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam al-‘Arabī, 1997), 1:233. See also D. Sourdel, “Ibn al-Zayyāt,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1954–2009).

41. Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:447. Al-Jāḥiẓ describes Ibn al-Zayyāt’s cruel nature in *Kitāb al-Rasā’il al-adabiyya* (Beirut: Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 2002), 1:342–43.

42. For more on this dynamic, see J. P. Turner, “The End of the Miḥna,” *Oriens* 38 (2010): 89–106, at 90–91.

43. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 3:595. The Damascene hadith scholar and historian al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) preserves a similar version of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s report; see his *Ta’rīkh al-islām wa-wafāyat al-mashāhīr wa-l-a‘lām*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2003), 5:924. See also al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, 4:27.

44. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 3:594.

45. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:159. Aḥmad b. Khālid (otherwise referred to as Abū al-Wazīr) also recalled Ibn al-Zayyāt’s treatment of Ibn Asbāṭ al-Miṣrī.

literary signpost to spotlight intra-administrative hostility. The historian Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) reports that upon leaving the deathbed of the caliph al-Wāthiq, Jaʿfar b. Muʿtaṣim overheard Itākh and Ibn al-Zayyāt hatch a plan to assassinate him. “We will kill him in the *tannūr*,” Ibn al-Zayyāt whispered. “Instead,” Itākh responded, “let’s leave him in cold water until he dies, so no one will see the cause of death.”⁴⁶ In this seemingly private conversation between Itākh and Ibn al-Zayyāt, both display their awareness of murder tactics that might not leave evidence of intentional bodily harm. More importantly, this narrative offers a justification for why Jaʿfar b. Muʿtaṣim (soon-to-be al-Mutawakkil) chose the iron oven for Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death, a punishment reciprocal to the method of assassination that the latter had intended for Jaʿfar. It may also be significant that the caliph al-Wāthiq himself died in an oven, a detail that J. P. Turner speculates may hold literary value in relation to Ibn al-Zayyāt’s torture device.⁴⁷ Apparently foreshadowing Ibn al-Zayyāt’s demise, Ibn Khallikān’s report draws on suspense and irony in its depiction of these officials plotting to execute Jaʿfar b. Muʿtaṣim, who would become their own executioner.

Although Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death took place without a large audience, medieval Muslim historians give the impression that reports of his torture circulated widely. Reports of known but unseen courtly violence conveyed a political and moral lesson for both members of the administration and medieval readers. By describing Ibn al-Zayyāt’s anguish, medieval Islamic narratives expressed the powerlessness of the vizier coupled with the limitlessness of al-Mutawakkil’s vengeance, no doubt generating unease among the caliph’s subordinates. The unease was justified, for soon after becoming caliph, al-Mutawakkil captured, imprisoned, whipped, and interrogated several high-ranking members of the previous administration who were said to have initially favored a different heir after the unexpected death of al-Wāthiq.⁴⁸ Rumors and reports of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s agony in the oven, a fate sealed by iron walls and concealed from the semipublic venue of a *majlis* (council room), were powerful historical and literary testaments to the political alliances that the caliph easily created and just as easily severed.

Even after Ibn al-Zayyāt’s death, his buried body suffered maltreatment. Ibn al-Jawzī, who relies on al-Ṭabarī’s account, indicates that Ibn al-Zayyāt was placed in “a shallow grave,” and at some point “dogs dug him up and ate his flesh.”⁴⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī uses the passive

46. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, 1:478, citing al-Ṣūlī. Itākh’s suggestion to use “cold water” also conveys dramatic irony since he reportedly died of thirst while in prison. See al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 9:170.

47. Turner, “End of the Miḥna,” 93.

48. Ibid., 94. For example, the vizier ʿUmar b. Faraj was detained alongside members of his family, imprisoned, and pressured into giving up his numerous properties. See al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 9:161.

49. Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 9:159–60; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 11:202. Interestingly, there are several accounts that mention canine exhumation and consumption of a buried individual. For example, the vizier Fakhr al-Mulk met a similar end at the caliph’s hands: “He imprisoned him, then killed him by the foot of the mountains near al-Ahwāz on Saturday, saying it was the third day in the third week of the first of the month of Rabīʿ in the year 407[1016]. He was interred there. . . . The dogs unearthed his grave and ate him.” See Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, 5:126. In a case involving another animal making off with the body parts of a deceased person, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī claims that a rat scampered across al-Wāthiq’s deathbed and removed his eye; Tayeb El-Hibri, “The Image of the Caliph al-Wāthiq: A Riddle of Religious and Historical Significance,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 19 (2001): 41–60, at 55–56.

voice and thus does not specify who dug the shallow grave, whereas al-Ṭabarī names Ibn al-Zayyāt's two sons, Sulaymān and 'Ubayd Allāh, as the overseers of their father's funerary care. Referring to their father as a "dissolute sinner," the sons purposefully dug a grave for him that was not deep enough.⁵⁰ The shallowness of the grave allowed dogs to consume Ibn al-Zayyāt's flesh. This outcome shows a conspicuous disregard for the appropriateness of the burial site, which, according to Islamic legal precedent, should have had a ground depth permitting the deceased to face Mecca while lying on the right side.⁵¹ Ibn al-Zayyāt's postmortem maltreatment—including extreme beating, the plucking out of his beard, the forcible twisting of his neck, and the eating of his corpse by dogs—betrays both the caliph al-Mutawakkil's deep animosity toward the vizier and the sons' shame of their father. The brutality of the caliph's agents and the neglect of Ibn al-Zayyāt's sons manifest a degree of physical and possibly spiritual violation of the integrity of the corpse that was clearly intentional.

Why did al-Mutawakkil impose such torture and necroaggression on Ibn al-Zayyāt? According to al-Ṭabarī, when al-Wāthiq died in the year 232/847, Ibn al-Zayyāt favored al-Wāthiq's son Muḥammad as the next caliph instead of al-Wāthiq's brother Ja'far b. Mu'taṣim. Al-Ṭabarī claims that Ibn al-Zayyāt's choice was what led to his demise.⁵² But several reports also aver that al-Mutawakkil had planned to seize and kill the vizier once he ascended to the caliphate in retribution for a humiliating experience he had endured just weeks earlier. Ibn al-Zayyāt had made the fateful mistake of insulting Ja'far about his "effeminate fashion [and] long hair" (*zayy al-mukhannathīn lahu sha'r qafan*), which prompted the caliph al-Wāthiq to hire a cupper to shear Ja'far's hair and hit him in the face with it.⁵³ Although al-Ṭabarī does not elaborate on what made Ja'far's fashion particularly "effeminate," he emphasizes the extremely offensive nature of Ibn al-Zayyāt's comment.

Rage over this indignity consumed Ja'far, according to the reports of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Dāya (d. ca. 330–40/941–51). "Never was I so distressed by anything as I was when my

50. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 9:160.

51. For more detail on funerary customs, see Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 188. The canine consumption of corpses placed in shallow graves is also a literary device addressed by scholars of European society and folklore; see Paul Barber, "Forensic Pathology and the European Vampire," *Journal of Folklore Research* 24, no. 1 (1987): 1–32. Interestingly, Barber makes the case that the ground itself can reject a corpse if it is buried too superficially (p. 13).

52. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 9:157–58. Al-Ṣafadī also mentions that Ibn al-Zayyāt believed in the createdness of the Qur'an in *al-Wāfi*, 4:27. For Ibn al-Zayyāt's conduct after the death of al-Wāthiq, see al-Tanūkhī, *Kitāb al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda*, ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālji (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978), 2:259–64.

53. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 9:157. Ibn al-Dāya also preserves a missive written by al-Wāthiq to Ibn al-Zayyāt, instructing him to "cut the head hair of Ja'far, and clean his dress and make him look agreeable!" Ja'far "left furious, and the agent struck him." From Ibn al-Dāya's account, it is unclear how Ja'far was struck (and with what). Ibn al-Dāya adds that Ja'far sat in a confined room (*maḥbis*) for weeks. See Ibn al-Dāya, *Kitāb al-Mukāfa'a wa-ḥusn al-ʿuqbā*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1940), 73. For more detail on Ibn al-Zayyāt's death, see al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:72–73; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 11:189; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yan*, 1:477–79; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh Baghdād*, 3:144–46. See also Sourdel, "Ibn al-Zayyāt."

hair was sheared on the new black garment.”⁵⁴ The forcible shearing impacted Ja‘far deeply, al-Ṭabarī explains, because he had worn a special garment intending to curry al-Wāthiq’s favor and instead found himself humiliated. Ibn al-Dāya, a municipal official living in Egypt who wrote a collection of moralistic tales, similarly uses the topos of undignified shearing to explain why Ja‘far b. Mu‘taṣim harbored such ill will for Ibn al-Zayyāt. Expressing shock over Ibn al-Zayyāt’s insult, Ja‘far defensively declared, “I have been raised with an abundance [of hair] that should not be removed from me, for it is well groomed.”⁵⁵ Ibn al-Dāya adds that Ja‘far reportedly confessed, “I told myself that I would not spare him a moment once I attained the caliphate.”⁵⁶ Al-Ya‘qūbī confirms that once Ja‘far ascended the throne, he waited precisely forty days—the required period of mourning—after al-Wāthiq’s death to torture and kill Ibn al-Zayyāt.⁵⁷ This detail conveys a sense of anticipation on the part of al-Mutawakkil, who seemingly delayed the killing of the vizier to accommodate Islamic ritual. From Ibn al-Dāya’s perspective, the caliph had several reasons to kill Ibn al-Zayyāt, but this hairy incident proved the most decisive. The involuntary shearing to which Ja‘far had been subjected likely explains why several narratives say that Ibn al-Zayyāt had his beard plucked out when he died, an act that mirrored the humiliation experienced by Ja‘far. Perhaps al-Mutawakkil sought to restore his dignity by punishing Ibn al-Zayyāt in a way that matched the perceived offense.

Although shaving or shearing head hair constituted a temporary penalty, since hair has the benefit of growing back, the forcible removal of another’s head and facial hair was a shamefully visible and deliberate injury that carried a great deal of social scorn. “Beware of the mutilation of the punishment of shearing the head and the beard,” the Umayyad ruler ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Azīz (d. 101/720) intoned.⁵⁸ The judge Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), who records this report, reminds the reader that involuntary hair removal was a serious penalty and not to be taken lightly. Indeed, Ibn Qutayba classifies forcible hair removal as a type of mutilation (*muthla*), and Muslim legal authorities debated whether this form of punishment was too extreme to be allowed as a type of *ta‘zīr* (discretionary penalty). The Basran litterateur al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868) reportedly said that “there was no worse punishment for a civil servant in Baghdad than to have his beard shaved off.”⁵⁹ To add insult to injury,

54. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:157.

55. Ibn al-Dāya, *al-Mukāfa’a*, 73. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī quotes the opinions of several administrators about the fate of Aḥmad b. Naṣr, a figure killed during the *miḥna* controversy, and inserts a comment made by al-Mutawakkil about Ibn al-Zayyāt. Though al-Mutawakkil agreed that the death of Aḥmad b. Naṣr was unjust, he remarked that he would “burn [Ibn] al-Zayyāt with fire.” See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 6:403. For more on the literary style of Ibn al-Dāya, see Arie Schippers, “‘Tales with a Good Ending’ in Arabic Literature: Narrative Art and Theory of the Arabic World,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 4 (1986): 57–70.

56. Ibn al-Dāya, *al-Mukāfa’a*, 73.

57. Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:447.

58. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb ‘Uyūn al-akhbār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 1:141.

59. See Petra M. Sijpesteijn, “Shaving Hair and Beards in Early Islamic Egypt: An Arab Innovation?,” *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 9–25, at 24. In medieval Arab Islamic culture, head and beard hair were social representations of virility, manliness, and religiosity. A tangible reflection of the individual, hair served as an effective and

Jaʿfar b. Muʿtaṣim was a member of the Abbasid imperial elite, not a low-ranking municipal servant; thus, the forcible removal of his hair may have had a more severe impact on his reputation at the Abbasid court. The shearing of Jaʿfar and, in response, the plucking of Ibn al-Zayyāt’s beard after he died demonstrate that involuntary hair removal was viewed and feared as a type of bodily injury.

The connection between the forcible shearing of Jaʿfar’s hair and Ibn al-Zayyāt’s postmortem beard plucking also evokes a sense of just retaliation. In his narrative of the torture of Ibn al-Zayyāt, al-Ṭabarī does not condemn al-Mutawakkil’s actions. Rather, he offers a personal justification for the caliph’s behavior and then transitions to discuss how al-Mutawakkil dealt with other viziers. From this angle, the demise of Ibn al-Zayyāt can be read as an event that betrayed more about the caliph’s character than it did about his vizier’s. Al-Masʿūdī’s narrative likewise presents al-Mutawakkil’s anger over Ibn al-Zayyāt as fully warranted, for the latter had attained too much authority during the reigns of al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–27/833–842) and al-Wāthiq and had even harmed the populace (though al-Masʿūdī does not elaborate further on this detail).⁶⁰ Both historians stress that Ibn al-Zayyāt had been the first to use the *tannūr* on other administrators.⁶¹ Their reports indicate that the caliph had no choice but to subdue a powerful official who had taken advantage of his political position.

While al-Ṭabarī and al-Masʿūdī present the death of Ibn al-Zayyāt as a justifiable act of retaliation by the caliph, at other times violence against a corpse spelled certain political disaster. For example, when the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 169–93/786–809) killed one of his most trusted advisers, Jaʿfar b. Yaḥyā b. Khālīd b. Barmak (d. 187/803), he hung

immediate way of distinguishing between different social, cultural, and religious groups. The health and condition of a beard could also indicate sociopolitical status. Reflecting on the inefficient work of the Baghdadi administrator Ibn Shīrẓād, the Buyid prince Muʿizz al-Dawla (r. 334–56/945–67) reportedly said, “When I saw his beard, I said [to myself]: This man is better suited to be a cloth merchant than a clerk.” See Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 6:120. Whether self-imposed or forced, the removal of head hair could mark changed social status, exclusion from or inclusion in a different religious community, the engendering of the body, ritualized acts, and personal tastes. The beard was a symbolic feature of the face, the person, and perhaps, in certain Islamic contexts, even the spirit. For more literature on removing facial hair, see Chase F. Robinson, “Neck-Sealing in Early Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 3 (2005): 401–41, at 410. Robinson includes an early account of a man named Abraha who, when threatened by another, shaves his hair to present himself as enslaved. Robinson also describes the punitive measure of cutting off the forelocks of non-Arabs who failed to make *jizya* payments. See also Christian Bromberger, “Hair: From the West to the Middle East through the Mediterranean (the 2007 AFS Mediterranean Studies Section Address),” *Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 482 (2008): 379–99; Simonetta Calderini, “Two Radical Hair-Cuts in Medieval Egypt: Gendering Politics in Times of Trouble,” *Al-Masāq* 20, no. 1 (2008): 17–28; Ingrid Pfluger-Schindeck, “On the Symbolism of Hair in Islamic Societies: An Analysis of Approaches,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 1, no. 2 (2006): 72–88; Robert Bartlett, “Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994): 43–60; Marion Katz, “The Shearing of Forelocks as a Penitential Rite,” in *The Heritage of Arabo-Islamic Learning: Studies Presented to Wadad Kadi*, ed. Maurice Pomerantz and Aram A. Shahin, 191–206 (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Lloyd Ridgeon, “Shaggy or Shaved? The Symbolism of Hair among Persian Qalandar Sufis,” *Iran & the Caucasus* 14, no. 2 (2010): 233–63; Geert Jan van Gelder, “Rebarbative Beards in Classical Arabic Literature,” *Al-Masāq* 30, no. 1 (2018): 56–70.

60. Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:72–73.

61. Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, 9:159; al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:72.

the latter's dismembered body on a bridge in Baghdad.⁶² This act of excessive violence against the dead cost the caliph dearly: according to the historian Bal'ami (d. 363/974), it tarnished his honor and triggered political unrest.⁶³ Examining historical narratives of the meteoric rise and fall of the Barmakid family, Julie Scott Meisami acknowledges this motif and, though less concerned with the subject of postmortem harm, illustrates the lasting damage caused to the caliph's reputation by his disrespectful abuse of the body of an official. More importantly, these accounts reveal a somewhat simplistic tendency among some medieval Muslim historians to attribute dramatic political change to a singular transgression committed by members of the Abbasid ruling elite.

Thus, when a similar fate seemingly befell Ibn al-Zayyāt, he likened his political downfall to what had happened to the Barmakids. The fourth/tenth-century judge-historian al-Tanūkhī informs us that just before his death, Ibn al-Zayyāt sat inside the iron oven and bemoaned his fate to a jailer: "Do you see me doing more than what the Barmakids did? How useful were they, when they fell into the same situation as me, for Islam of the age and the injustice of the ruler?"⁶⁴ However unlikely its actual occurrence,⁶⁵ the reported conversation conveys an overt critique of al-Mutawakkil's decision to punish Ibn al-Zayyāt. Ibn al-Zayyāt presents himself as the victim and warns the jailer of the injustice of al-Mutawakkil's reign, insinuating a declining moral ethos in the caliph's administration. This warning carries political clout given that al-Mutawakkil had attained the caliphate just weeks before Ibn al-Zayyāt's imprisonment. Caliphs often replaced officials of the previous administration with individuals loyal to them at the start of their reigns, but for al-Mutawakkil to begin his rule with the torture and killing of Ibn al-Zayyāt, a high-ranking vizier who had served two earlier caliphs, was a bold political decision. Al-Tanūkhī gives voice to Ibn al-Zayyāt's sense of unfair treatment and, in doing so, criticizes the abuses ordered by the caliph. It may also be reasonably assumed that al-Tanūkhī recounts this anecdote as a lesson for other administrators, for the report about Ibn al-Zayyāt's complaint is placed between two stories about the generosity of the Barmakids, one from 'Ubayd Allāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān (d. 262/876), a minister who worked for both al-Mutawakkil and al-Mu'tamid (r.

62. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 8:296.

63. Julie Scott Meisami, "Mas'ūdī on Love and the Fall of the Barmakids," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 121, no. 2 (1989): 252–77, at 260–61. For more on the relationship between Hārūn al-Rashīd and Ja'far b. Yaḥyā, notably the death of the latter and the consequences of his death, see al-Jahshiyārī, *al-Wuzarā' wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqā, Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, and 'Abd al-Ḥafīz al-Shalabī (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938), 233–35, 237–38, 241. On the role of fiction in the story of the Barmakids' fall, see Philip Kennedy, "The Fall of the Barmakids in Historiography and Fiction: Recognition and Disclosure," *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 3 (2016): 167–238. Bal'ami was not the only historian to critique the caliph's execution of the Barmakid family. For more on literary depictions of their fall, see A. Hāmori, "Going Down in Style: The Pseudo-Ibn Qutayba's Story of the Fall of the Barmakīs," *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies*, no. 3 (1994): 89–125.

64. Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara*, 1:17.

65. Although the conversation recounted by al-Tanūkhī is improbable, other historians preserve similar material—namely, a few lines of poetry reportedly recited by Ibn al-Zayyāt while he was inside the iron oven. See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, 3:595–96.

256–79/870–92), and the other from Abū Makhlad ‘Abd Allāh b. Yaḥyā Ṭabarī, a commander under the Buyid prince Mu‘izz al-Dawla (d. 356/967).⁶⁶ Read with the benefit of hindsight, these accounts amplify the kindness of the Barmakids and convey a crucial message about their undue fate. By intertwining the fall of the Barmakids with the demise of Ibn al-Zayyāt, al-Tanūkhī reminds the reader of the endemic risk of having too much political ambition, the importance of rivalries and alliances within the administration, and the abruptness with which one’s fortunes can irrevocably change.

Ibn al-Zayyāt purportedly compared his fall to that of the Barmakids, but his death and postmortem fate did not completely parallel those of Ja‘far b. Yaḥyā. Several reports claim that Ja‘far was dismembered, although al-Tanūkhī contends that the corpse was instead set on fire.⁶⁷ Despite the fact that cremation was prohibited in Islam (except, according to the Qur’an, if the deceased was a sorcerer), Abbasid authorities used it to dispose of the bodies of rebels, murderers, heretics, and other criminals.⁶⁸ Thus, incinerating the body of a member of the political elite served to stress the seriousness of the victim’s bureaucratic missteps and to convey a warning to their peers.⁶⁹ Cremation prevented the full performance of Muslim funerary rituals, which undermined the social reputation and political status of the family of the deceased. The rise of the Abbasid dynasty, which rested on the charred remains of the disinterred corpses of earlier Umayyad caliphs such as Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 96–99/715–17) and Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 105–25/724–43), points to an Abbasid proclivity for fire as a method of postmortem harm and even expulsion from the Muslim community.⁷⁰ What is more, in the case of Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik, the individuals hired to exhume the corpse of the Umayyad caliph also struck it eighty times *before* setting it ablaze.⁷¹ Al-Mas‘ūdī adds anatomical details about the beaten and burned remains of the Umayyad caliph’s unearthed body, lending this report an air of verisimilitude.

66. Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara*, 1:15–16, 18–19.

67. Ibid., 8:196. Al-Tanūkhī implies that the wealth of the Barmakids attracted the caliph’s attention. Al-Jahshiyārī similarly records that the caliph burned Ja‘far b. Yaḥyā’s corpse after it was displayed on a bridge in Baghdad; al-Jahshiyārī, *Al-wuzarā’*, 237.

68. Q. 20:74, 20:79.

69. In the case of Ja‘far b. Yaḥyā, several factors (acquisition of wealth, release of an ‘Alid prisoner, arrogance, intrigue with the sister of Hārūn al-Rashīd, and more) seemingly contributed to his death. See Meisami, “Mas‘ūdī on Love,” 252–57. Consider the similar case of the governor Afshīn Khaydar (d. 226/841), who, after being charged with conspiracy and heresy, was killed by caliphal agents. Afshīn made the mistake of challenging the authority of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir, who set up a tribunal against him and managed to recover evidence of his “heretical affiliations.” After he died, his body was set on fire, and his ashes were then thrown into the Tigris. See al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2:439; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, 9:114; Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 4:272.

70. Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 3:171–72; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a‘yān*, 6:108–9.

71. Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 3:171–72. “We passed by the grave of Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik, and we removed him completely—[that is,] what was left of him except for his nasal septum. Then ‘Abd Allāh struck him eighty times and burned him. Then we removed Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik from the ground in Dābiq [in Syria]. We did not find a thing on him except his spinal column, ribs, and skull. We burned him, and we did so with others beside the two Banū Umayya. Their graves were in Qinnasrīn [a province in northern Syria].”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such irreverence for the dead or, in the case of Ibn al-Zayyāt, soon-to-be-dead was not an unusual feature in medieval Islamic narratives addressing the capital punishment of political offenders. A morbid intrigue dances through these medieval Islamic narratives, intended to excite and warn the reader of the ways in which the ruling authorities harmed others. Ibn al-Zayyāt's torture underscores the peril of administrators making the fatal mistake of offending those who will soon outrank them and reveals a political arena in which bodily debasement was both stimulating and didactic. Beaten and consumed, the corpse of Ibn al-Zayyāt accrued political meaning with each act of necroaggression.⁷² The postmortem violations of Ibn al-Zayyāt's body convey a macabre sense of dramatic irony and a message that punitive retaliation for perceived wrongs can continue even after an individual has died. The reports of Ibn al-Zayyāt's political rivalries, as recounted by al-Ya'qūbī and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, present the vizier as a despised aggressor who deserved his demise. The narratives of al-Ṭabarī and al-Mas'ūdī also provide a legitimate explanation for al-Mutawakkil's ire and suggest that Ibn al-Zayyāt's death was not necessarily undeserved. Conversely, Ibn al-Zayyāt's introspective confession while inside the iron oven, reported by al-Tanūkhī, paints the vizier as a hapless target of both the unreasonable anger of al-Mutawakkil and the inscrutable vagaries of political fate.

When read together, these contrasting depictions of al-Mutawakkil and Ibn al-Zayyāt yield several key insights about the descriptive function of necroaggression. Although gratuitous damage to the body of the deceased did not necessarily injure the social reputation of the perpetrator, it could hurt the political legacy of both. But making an example of Ibn al-Zayyāt, a prominent figure who held immense sway among leading bureaucrats in Samarra and who had initially preferred a different heir after al-Wāthiq's untimely death, helped al-Mutawakkil tackle the difficult challenge of controlling the various political factions emerging at the Abbasid court, most notably within the Turkish military elite.⁷³ As an offense committed against the sanctity of the body of the deceased, necroaggression constitutes an overt polemical tool for a performative show of force and a visceral transfer of power. Indeed, necroaggressions performed between differently ranked political actors were inextricably tied to the transfer of power, and medieval Muslim historians such as al-Ṭabarī, who offers the most detailed account of the violations of Ibn al-Zayyāt's corpse, recognized the destructive and productive potential of this descriptive device.

72. Because individuals and groups give meaning to death, a body can also manifest a society's collective values. Loren D. Lybarger fleshes out the role of death and burial in the narrative of Adam found in *qiṣāṣ al-anbiyā'* (stories of the prophets) literature, relying on Verdery's discussion of the political role of dead bodies as a kind of symbolic capital highly effective in connecting existential and transcendent concerns. Although Lybarger's analysis of Adam does not consider corpse desecration, his use of Verdery's analytical frame enriches discussions of corpse violence in the Abbasid administration. See Lybarger, "The Demise of Adam in the 'Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā': The Symbolic Politics of Death and Re-burial in the Islamic 'Stories of the Prophets,'" *Numen* 55, no. 5 (2008): 497–535.

73. For more on this political arena, see Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200–275/815–889 C.E.)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 75–85.

Intra-Administrative Harm and Objectification: The Case of Mūsā b. Khalaf

How a body was handled from the moment of death to the burial mattered, since elements of the spirit could survive in the corpse. Certain perils confronted a sinner's spirit and body before and after death, for punishment did not end with life and could continue in the grave. Fear of punishment in the grave (*‘adhāb al-qabr*) inspired an Islamic eschatological discourse centered on the retributive sufferings that could harm the dead.⁷⁴ Drawing on the Qur'an, several eschatological traditions specify that to return to God, the soul must pass through the throat, which is where it resides at the moment of death.⁷⁵ But the soul's precise location *after* the moment of death—whether trapped in a different realm, being judged by God, or waiting somewhere (such as in *al-barzakh*)—was unknown.⁷⁶ The indeterminate location of the spirit was a matter of intense theological contestation and concern. Since the spirit of the individual could conceivably linger in the dead body, might postmortem violence affect the deceased or the deceased's spirit?

The early fifth/eleventh-century bureaucrat-historian Miskawayh records an act of corpse brutality that followed the death of Mūsā b. Khalaf after intense interrogation in the year 306/918–19. Depicted as an old man, Mūsā b. Khalaf was a loyal client of the influential fiscal adviser Ibn al-Furāt (d. 312/924). According to the admiring description of the bureaucrat Hilāl al-Ṣābi' (d. 448/1056), Mūsā was “trustworthy with keeping Ibn al-Furāt's secrets.”⁷⁷ He was subjected to increasingly harsh interrogation by the secretary Abū Aḥmad Ibn Ḥammād (d. 311/923–24) and the vizier Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās (d. 311/923), who sought to force him to reveal the location of Ibn al-Furāt's riches. This type of extortion (known as *muṣāḍara*) was common practice.⁷⁸ Miskawayh, himself a bureaucrat at the

74. See Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 31. See also al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Umm*, 1:316–17. Even the narrowness of the grave, which could harm the deceased interred inside, was a matter of discussion. Al-Shāfi'ī also discusses the “spirit in the grave.” For more on the spirit in the grave, see also the questions and responses recorded in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Kitāb Masā'il Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1981), 1:84, no. 298. See also al-Bayhaqī, *Ithbāt 'adhāb al-qabr*, ed. Sharaf Muḥammad al-Qudāt (Amman: Dār al-Furqān, 1983).

75. Q. 56:83. See the analysis by Fernando Rodríguez Mediano in “Justice, Crime, and Punishment in 10th/16th-Century Morocco,” in Lange and Fierro, *Public Violence in Islamic Societies*, 179–200, at, 191, 200.

76. See Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 208; Leah Kinberg, “Interaction between This World and the Afterworld in Early Islamic Tradition,” *Oriens* 29/30 (1986): 285–308. *Al-Barzakh* was imagined as a realm between the world and the hereafter in which spirits lingered. But it was deemed a matter that could only be truly known by God, who alone has the power “to make the dead live” (Q. 75:40). Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal cites a report about the spirits of the dead residing in the stomachs of birds that transport them to paradise in *Masā'il Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 1:145–46, no. 546. For early analysis, see Thomas O'Shaughnessy, *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death: A Thematic Study of the Qur'anic Data* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); Alford T. Welch, “Death and Dying in the Qur'an,” in *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh, 183–99 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977). For more on *barzakh*, see Tommaso Tesei, “The Barzakh and the Intermediate State of the Dead in the Quran,” in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, ed. Christian Lange, 31–55 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

77. Hilāl b. Muḥassin al-Ṣābi', *Kitāb Tuḥfat al-umarā' fi ta'rīkh al-wuzarā'*, ed. 'Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Cairo: Maktabat al-A'yān, n.d.), 262.

78. Whether or not the Abbasid authorities viewed torture for this purpose justified, they clearly engaged in it, for the administrative usefulness of this tactic outweighed the hadith reports opposing coercion and

Abbasid-Buyid court, uses the example of Mūsā b. Khalaf to underscore the need for greater checks on administrators who blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable forms of interrogating lower-ranking government functionaries.

Mūsā b. Khalaf was nearly ninety years old and afflicted with an illness. He could not survive physical coercion (*makrūh*), so Ibn Ḥammād scolded him. After this, Ibn Ḥammād repeated his cross-examination of the companions of Ibn al-Furāt, but this did not yield anything. He had Muḥassin [the son of Ibn al-Furāt] suspended from a curtain rope, but he did not verify anything from him either. When Ibn Ḥammād saw this, he asked to be excused from them and was dismissed. Then Ḥāmid [b. al-ʿAbbās] summoned Mūsā b. Khalaf and commanded him to reveal the properties of Ibn al-Furāt. “You know of them; do not make us apply coercion that will be your downfall.” The old man replied, “I swear by any oath that I do not know a thing about his deposits.” Ḥāmid ordered him to be slapped, which continued until ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā [Ḥāmid’s de facto superior] intervened and beckoned the male servant [to stop] with the hand.⁷⁹

Miskawayh’s attention to Mūsā b. Khalaf’s advanced age, failing health, and devotion to his patron in this first part of the anecdote conveys discernible sympathy for the wizened official as well as a censure of his maltreatment. Ibn Ḥammād’s decision to scold Mūsā rather than beat him reveals his awareness of the need to match the level of coercive force to the victim’s physical condition. Such attention to bodily limits indicates a degree of thoughtfulness on the part of the inquisitor, who must inflict ever so precisely the proper amount of physical and psychological harm to injure but not kill the accused.

Miskawayh goes on to report that the exasperated vizier Ḥāmid b. al-ʿAbbās had no such scruples: after several unsuccessful attempts to gain information, he subjected Mūsā b. Khalaf to beatings, which proved fatal.

Ḥāmid repeated the torture, and one night he summoned the old man and beat him in his presence until he died under the beating. Ḥāmid was told, “Indeed, the old man has died,” but Ḥāmid forced the servants to beat him seventeen more times after he died. When Ḥāmid was sure of the old man’s death, he ordered him to be dragged by the foot, but his ear caught on the hinge of the door and was pulled off. He was carried to his home dead. The loyalty of Mūsā b. Khalaf was exemplary, for he knew of the monies that his patron had deposited with a group of people. He did not confess to it but instead chose death.⁸⁰

humiliation as measures to procure confessions as well as Sunni jurists’ view that judicial torture was an unreliable and illegitimate way to gain information. See Baber Johansen, “Signs as Evidence: The Doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1352) on Proof,” *Islamic Law and Society* 9, no. 2 (2002): 168–93, at 170. See also Mohammed Allehbi, “It is Permitted for the Amīr but not the Qāḍī: The Military-Administrative Genealogy of Coercion in Abbasid Criminal Justice,” *Islamic Law and Society* 30, no. 1–2 (2022): 65–95.

79. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 5:118–19.

80. *Ibid.*, 5:119.

This account presents Ḥāmid b. al-ʿAbbās as a cruel, unprincipled individual who ordered the beating to continue even after Mūsā's death and then commanded his underlings to drag the corpse in an irreverent manner that ultimately caused Mūsā's ear to be torn off. The subject becomes an object here, as Mūsā's body is transformed into a material, voiceless thing. Like Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar's excavated and perfumed head, discussed at the beginning of the article, Mūsā b. Khalaf's body loses its humanity in this transformation. By prolonging the scene beyond the moment of death, Miskawayh reveals the degradation of the deceased and forces the reader to witness Ḥāmid's abuse of Mūsā's body.

The inadvertent postmortem amputation of Mūsā's ear constitutes an act of bodily violation that Muslim legal scholars condemned. Classical Muslim jurists affirmed the inviolability of specific parts of the body—the head, the face, and the sexual organs—and decreed that any damage inflicted on these body parts could warrant financial compensation (*diyya*). Even if an individual deserved corporal punishment for a crime, these body parts should not be injured in retribution.⁸¹ The Abbasid administrator Qudāma b. Jaʿfar (d. 337/948), a contemporary of Mūsā b. Khalaf, confirmed that mutilation or beating of a person's ears constituted a type of injury that merited financial redress.⁸² Qudāma was admittedly referring to such treatment of a living person, not a dead one, but people under arrest were supposed to be granted certain rights and protections, which included no unnecessary physical maltreatment.⁸³ Legal scholars also considered the possibility of inordinate harm or even accidental death caused by authorities in the course of meting out a lawful punishment.

The Shāfiʿī jurist Ibn al-Qāṣṣ (d. 335/946) contemplates this scenario in his *Adab al-qāḍī* (Judicial protocols) in a section addressing liability and compensation for judicial errors. He reports that according to al-Shāfiʿī, “if the imam [ruler] struck a man forty times with a sandal on the borders of [his] clothing for the crime of drinking wine and the man died, his blood was spilled in vain”,⁸⁴ that is, the death was unfortunate but justified, since the man expired while receiving a lawful beating. However, if the man was struck forty-one

81. “Punish according to the crime but spare the face.”; see Christian Lange, “‘On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black’ (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in Arabo-Islamic Tradition,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 4 (2007): 429–45, at 439n85. See also Ibn Wahb al-Kātib, *Kitāb al-Burhān fī wujūh al-bayān*, ed. Ḥifnī Muḥammad Sharaf (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Risāla, 1969), 1:100–101; Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 8:466.

82. Qudāma b. Jaʿfar, *Kitāb al-Kharāj wa-ṣināʿat al-kitāba* (Baghdad: Dār al-Rashīd, 1981), 1:69. See also Saḥnūn, *al-Mudawwana*, 4:560–61. Drawing on al-Shāfiʿī's views, the jurisconsult Ibn Qudāma similarly holds that injury to a person's appearance may warrant financial compensation. See Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 8:467, 481, 484–85.

83. See the section on criminal law enforcement in the anonymous fourth/tenth-century manual *Siyāsāt al-mulūk*; J. D. Sadan, “‘Siyasat al-Muluk’: A New Source of the Buyid Period,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 9 (1979): 355–76, at 367–72. Even if a prisoner fell sick, he was entitled to proper care and treatment according to al-Ṣadr al-Shahīd (d. 536/1141–42), *Sharḥ Adab al-qāḍī al-Khaṣṣāf*, ed. Muḥyī Hilāl al-Sarḥān (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Irshād, 1977), 2:374–75.

84. Ibn al-Qāṣṣ, *Kitāb Adab al-qāḍī*, ed. Ḥusayn Khalaf al-Jabūrī (Taʾif: Maktabat al-Ṣadiq, 1989), 2:392. Ibn al-Qāṣṣ also considers a similar scenario in the case of a thief who, after receiving the prescribed punishment (limb amputation), died an infidel (2:391–92).

times and then died, financial compensation would be merited, because he was subjected to lashes beyond the number warranted by his sentence. In addition, the mention of sandals and clothing suggests that both the type of device used to apply the penalty and the part of the body on which it was inflicted were factors relevant to the legal assessment of *diyya*. Ibn al-Qāṣṣ adds that if the disciplinarian had used a whip, financial compensation would be obligatory.⁸⁵ Ibn al-Qāṣṣ notes differences of opinion between al-Shāfi‘ī and Abū Ḥanīfa over the number of lashes required for the offense of imbibing as well as the obligatoriness of *diyya* for judicial error, but he does not question the intentions of the disciplinarian.⁸⁶ Moral probity was a characteristic expected of someone authorized to carry out a punishment, although this trait is notably absent in Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās, as depicted in Miskawayh’s anecdotal report. Legal discourses on the sanctity of the body and the acceptable degree of force to be used on individuals who deserved punishment highlight the unwarranted brutality of Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās’s abuse of Mūsā b. Khalaf’s body and convey important information about the seriousness of Ḥāmid’s misconduct.

In addition to constituting a legal violation, Ḥāmid’s disrespect of Mūsā’s bodily integrity was an overt moral offense. Al-Shāfi‘ī, for example, explicitly condemns the separation of parts of a corpse. He cites a hadith narrated by ‘Ā’isha, a beloved wife of the Prophet Muḥammad, who reportedly said, “Breaking the bones of the dead is like breaking the bones of the living.”⁸⁷ Al-Shāfi‘ī explains that the wrongdoing denounced in this hadith was the detachment of body parts in the course of exhuming a grave (*nabsh al-qubūr*), which is an illicit act since “it constitutes a sin if bones were removed from a dead [individual]. I would prefer that the bones be returned and buried.”⁸⁸ Al-Shāfi‘ī concentrates on the moral dangers of disturbing a body, buried or otherwise, however long the person in question has been deceased. Medieval Muslim exegetes and eschatological writers shared his concern with preserving a cadaver intact. Their insistence raised the issue of the potential self-awareness and even sentience of the deceased. Prohibitions against whitewashing graves (*tajšīṣ al-qubūr*), for instance, demonstrate a perceived fear that environmental threats such as the heat of the sun might injure the buried body. Early pietists weighing in on the practice of wailing as a funerary ritual considered how the actions of the living could spiritually impact the dead.⁸⁹ Beyond the physical harm that could affect a corpse, jurists

85. Ibid., 2:392.

86. Ibid. Ibn al-Qāṣṣ also includes the legal opinion of Abū Ḥanīfa, who prescribed eighty lashes for the crime of drinking wine and for whom a death after the eighty-first strike would make *diyya* obligatory. Al-Kāsānī adds that if an official intended to punish a criminal by striking lightly, but the latter died under the beating, the death would “resemble” an intentional act but would not be categorized as an accidental homicide; see al-Kāsānī, *Badā’i‘ al-ṣanā’i‘*, 7:233.

87. Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Umm*, 1:316.

88. Ibid.

89. See Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 125. See also Leor Halevi, “Wailing for the Dead: The Role of Women in Early Islamic Funerals,” *Past & Present*, no. 183 (2004): 3–39. For theological arguments against wailing, see Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1955), 2:644, no. 934: “If the wailing woman does not repent before she dies, she will be made to stand on the Day of Resurrection wearing a garment of pitch and a chemise of mange.”

expressed a distaste for treading, sitting, or reclining on a grave.⁹⁰ These anxieties convey a continued exegetical, legal, and moral preoccupation with defining the boundaries of what constituted acceptable Islamic funerary practices given popular apprehension of punishment in the grave.

Fear of unknown sensations potentially experienced after death compelled social commentators such as Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894) to expound on the remarkable phenomena that may occur in a cemetery, a liminal site at which the mysteries between life and death materialize.⁹¹ Addressing popular uncertainties about deathly encounters, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's moralistic anecdotes are cautionary reminders to remain alert and open to the possibility of continued interaction between this world and the next.⁹² To be sure, God could command the body of the dead to come back to life, for "God brings the dead to life and shows His signs so that you may understand."⁹³ Did the Muslim community of the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, as represented by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, believe that a dead body could sense and experience mistreatment? Leah Kinberg argues that the deeds of the living, such as grave visitation and prayer, were thought to have the power of lightening the suffering of the dead in the grave.⁹⁴ But if the living could assuage the agony of the dead, then a transgression against the body of the dead could heighten the punishment of the deceased in the grave. While Muslim jurists sought to stamp out such innovations as whitewashing and wailing, which were considered pre-Islamic practices, the unknowns of corpse sensation inspired writers such as Ibn Abī al-Dunyā to explore potential excitement and dread experienced in the grave.

90. Al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Umm*, 1:316: "I consider treading, sitting, and reclining on a grave hateful." He goes on to cite a report from Abū Hurayra, who likens sitting on a grave to sitting on coals. See Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Masāʾil Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 1:144, no. 536. He adds that even reading on a grave is an innovation (1:145, no. 544). Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal reportedly sprinkled water on graves (1:144, no. 539), a disputed practice that could indicate a desire either to cool the deceased or—more acceptably—to prevent the dispersal of soil after burial has unsettled it. Unfortunately, he does not explain his rationale. Ibn Qudāma also preserves a report about Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's views on praying at grave sites; see Ibn Qudāma, *al-Mughnī*, 2:422. But there are also other ways to disrespect a grave site; al-Tanūkhī, for instance, offers a satirical report about a man peeing on another's grave in *al-Faraj*, 2:28.

91. See Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Qubūr*, ed. Ṭāriq Muḥammad Suklūʿ al-ʿAmūdī (Medina: Maktabat al-Ghurabāʾ al-Athariyya, 2000), 1:47, 51–52, 55, 99.

92. Kinberg, "Interaction." Jane I. Smith argues that sleep was perceived of as a type of communion with the spirits of the dead, who could talk to, reprimand, and reveal knowledge to sleepers. See Smith, "Concourse between the Living and the Dead in Islamic Eschatological Literature," *History of Religions* 19, no. 3 (1980): 224–36.

93. Q. 2:73. This is the story of Moses and the cow. Consider another Qurʾānic verse (23:35): "He warns you when you have died and become dust and bones that you will emerge once again." For narratives about the "punishment in the grave," see various reports by the fifth/eleventh-century judge Ibn Abī Yaʿlā al-Farrāʾ in *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiḳī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 2016), 1:19, 55, 242, 312, 330.

94. Kinberg, "Interaction."

How does the popular anxiety surrounding both punishment in the grave and the possibility of postmortem experience help us understand the death and corpse violation of Mūsā b. Khalaf? His beating “seventeen more times after he died” and the dislocation of his ear after he was “dragged by the foot” were transgressions against the sanctity of Mūsā’s body that, even after the moment of death, could have affected his soul. According to a late antique view that is not unlike the literary and eschatological worldview of third/ninth-century writers such as Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, the soul may still be entwined with the body after death.⁹⁵ Another important takeaway is that the offense committed against Mūsā b. Khalaf was seen as an unlawful and immoral act that was becoming dangerously typical of the intra-administrative intrigues of the Abbasid court. Just as Miskawayh articulates a larger critique of the punitive excesses carried out by bureaucrats against bureaucrats, other historians also observe this development in relation to the story of Mūsā b. Khalaf.

According to ‘Arīb b. Sa’d (d. ca. 370/980), after Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās seized both Mūsā b. Khalaf and the son of Ibn al-Furāt, Muḥassin, he “demanded their property and exceeded all bounds by slapping them, beating them, and abusing them.”⁹⁶ Mūsā reportedly cried out, “Do not act in this manner against the sons of the vizierate, for they are your sons!”⁹⁷ His reproach infuriated Ḥāmid, who intensified the torture until Mūsā expired. Afterward, the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32) ordered Muḥassin’s release. ‘Arīb b. Sa’d accentuates Ḥāmid’s lack of restraint and wanton disregard for his peers.⁹⁸ In his narrative, in contrast to Miskawayh’s, Mūsā b. Khalaf openly chastises Ḥāmid for his unwarranted aggression. Although ‘Arīb b. Sa’d does not mention any postmortem maltreatment of Mūsā’s corpse, he claims to preserve the latter’s voice and plea for some measure of decorum, even during a heated interrogation.

The violations committed against Mūsā b. Khalaf’s body in Miskawayh’s report adumbrate the dangers of corpse violence, appealing to the anxieties of other government functionaries who might have worried about the seemingly expanding repertoire of aggressive tactics used during interrogations. Despite enjoying governmental sanction, Mūsā’s lengthy interrogation reveals that there was a point at which torture became needless. For Miskawayh, drawing attention to the collapse of Mūsā’s body likely had as much to do with the physicality of the violation as it did with historical criticism of the harsh treatment. Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās had served as a tax farmer in Fars and Wasit before being offered the post of vizier in Baghdad—a position for which he did not have the necessary qualifications, according to several sources.⁹⁹ Having been an affluent businessman before

95. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, 5:119. For more on the close connection between the body and the soul, see Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 81; Adam Bursi, *Traces of the Prophets: Relics and Sacred Spaces in Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 133–34.

96. ‘Arīb b. Sa’d, *Ṣīlat Ta’rīkh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1967), 69.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. Hugh Kennedy, “The Reign of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32): A History,” in *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)*, ed. Maaike van Berkel et al., 13–47 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 29.

his appointment, he was able to flex a great deal of wealth, which probably factored into his political appointment. According to Hugh Kennedy, Ḥāmid resented his inability to sway political affairs and the fact that his nominal deputy, ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā, wielded a greater degree of authority in the administration.¹⁰⁰ Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās had also gained a reputation for poor court etiquette and was subsequently dismissed from office. A high-ranking eunuch named al-Mufliḥ subsequently convinced the caliph al-Muqtadir and his mother, al-Sayyida, to permit the torture of Ḥāmid. He was beaten in 311/923 in the presence of none other than Ibn al-Furāt, Mūsā b. Khalaf’s patron.¹⁰¹

According to ‘Arīb b. Sa‘d, both al-Muqtadir and his imposing mother recognized that Ḥāmid b. al-‘Abbās had exceeded the bounds of administrative propriety. They allowed Ibn al-Furāt to oversee Ḥāmid’s interrogation and Ibn al-Furāt’s son Muḥassin to perform the torture.¹⁰² Money also factored into al-Muqtadir’s decision to allow Muḥassin to torture Ḥāmid: the caliph was eager to amass more wealth, and he was willing to employ the common administrative practice of *muṣāḍara* to remedy financial loss in the imperial treasury. An unmistakable sense of vengeance and dramatic irony permeates ‘Arīb b. Sa‘d’s account, since Muḥassin, who had been questioned and brutally beaten by Ḥāmid, became the latter’s torturer. Ḥāmid’s actions and resulting punishment reflect more than just petty interpersonal rivalries between Abbasid administrators. His maltreatment of Mūsā b. Khalaf, as shown in Miskawayh’s account, speaks to the narrative power of bodily debasement as a strategy to critique excessive administrative force and to the ways in which humiliation and harm can be inscribed on the body, dead or alive.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Postmortem neglect and harm, as depicted in these examples, represent an embodied political expression laced with significations of just reprisal, objectification, and moral decay in Abbasid administrative relations in the mid-third/ninth to early fourth/tenth centuries. Drawing on a range of medieval Arabic literary sources, this article has shown how historians such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas‘ūdī, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Miskawayh, and Ibn al-Jawzī used necroaggression as a descriptive tool for political polemic. To provide a more nuanced view of corpse defilement, the article identifies intersections between these literary depictions and legal texts that address juristic and judicial judgments about funerary care and corpse treatment. This cross-genre analysis gives us a broader understanding of the political values and meanings attached to bodies violated or unmade by others. The cases of Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar, Ishāq b. Jināḥ, and Mūsā b. Khalaf draw attention to lapses of judgment on the part of administrators who, seeking to maintain their position on or ascend the political

100. Ibid.

101. ‘Arīb b. Sa‘d, *Ṣīlat Ta’rīkh al-Ṭabarī*, 98.

102. Ibid. According to Miskawayh, Ibn al-Furāt’s son reportedly poisoned Ḥāmid.

103. Visible marks on the body served as a yardstick for measuring whether torture had been excessive, and the dismantling of the corpse of Mūsā b. Khalaf represented an extreme dishonor. By the mid-third/ninth century, the medical community of Baghdad was reportedly performing autopsies and even placing bodies on ice to delay the process of decomposition. See Emilie Savage-Smith, “Attitudes toward Dissection.”

ladder, harmed the bodies of the recently deceased and thus contravened a self-imposed code of appropriate administrative conduct. As a result, the reputations of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭāhir and Ḥāmid b. al-ʿAbbās suffered. In contrast to these cases, the torture, death, and postmortem harming of Ibn al-Zayyāt appear measured and even justifiable. This difference tells us that certain acts of necroaggression performed in a retaliatory and calculated way had productive potential to educate those involved—whether that included active or passive participants or spectators—and to empower the perpetrator, in this case al-Mutawakkil. A common thread that runs through all the examples is the descriptive function of postmortem harm as a performative political device that dramatically pivots the rise and fall of officials for a medieval Muslim audience.

These anecdotal accounts track a discernible decline in Abbasid political affairs and thus identify necroaggression as a symptom of administrators' inability to perform their professional duties adequately. Accounts of postmortem harm represent a sardonic literary push to simplify political opposition, deriding the ineptitude of some members of the Abbasid administrative elite by showing the broader social consequences of their political and moral failings. These dead bodies unmade by others also marked the interpersonal antagonisms of members of the administration who added necroaggression to the expanding arsenal of coercive tactics that could be used to terrorize rivals.

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