

“Then He Stabbed Me with a Spear”: Aggressive Sacred Images and Interreligious Polemics

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Abstract

This paper studies Coptic communal identity in early Islamic Egypt by analyzing two hagiographical narratives from the Christian Copto-Arabic text *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. The narratives relate incidents of sacred images that become ‘aggressive’ when they retaliate against insults. Although the relation between religious violence and sacred art has merited much scholarly attention, the focus is usually on humans as the aggressors and sacred art as the victim. The reverse is scarcer, and its rarity means we miss an opportunity to rethink such narratives as communicative modes of rhetoric to be contextually interpreted. Here I argue that these aggressive sacred images were tools of power within a polemic religious discourse aimed at proclaiming divine truth, undergirding it with supernatural power, and ultimately shaping Coptic communal identity around this discourse.

Keywords

Christian-Muslim engagement – *History of the Patriarchs* – interreligious polemic – Islamic Egypt – sacred images

1 Introduction

In the Christian Arabic text *Siyar al-bay‘a al-muqaddasah*, written and compiled in Egypt between the fifth and twentieth centuries, and typically referenced in English as the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (HP hereafter), we find this narrative, describing an incident in the eighth century:

A group of the Orthodox [Christians] were in the church of St. Mary, about ten thousand men, and a youth from the Muslims saw the Lord Christ on a cross in an image upon the wall, and the spear holder stabbing him. To test (*yujarribahum*) them he said, "What is this on the cross?" They replied, "It is a sign of our Lord on the cross for the salvation of the world." He took a rod ... and stabbed him on the other left side with mocking words. Instantly, the man's image resembled that which he had stabbed, a great pain grabbed at his insides, his hand cleaved onto the rod, and he remained dangling, strung between heaven and earth. He remained thus all morning, shouting, I am stabbed in my side! The Muslims and Christians exclaimed in one voice, praising God who works miracles, and cried "Lord have mercy" numerous times. He did not come down until one of the Muslims said, "If you do not confess the Christians' truth, or that this is the image of Christ the Son of God, we will not let you go." So, he did so, and at once he descended among the people, went into the church, and was baptized there.

SEYBOLD 1912: 179–180

Thus goes an incident from the Life of Patriarch Khaël I (744–767 CE) of the Coptic Orthodox church.¹ One might be inclined to dismiss the narrative as eccentric or folkloric literary fiction, but a glance at the nature of the HP makes us reconsider. The HP – the major source for icon miracles in the Coptic tradition – is no fantastical text. It is a serious historiographical tradition in its own right, written and compiled over sixteen centuries as a record of the lives of the Coptic patriarchs from St. Mark until the twentieth century (Den Heijer 1990: 91). Today we only have the Arabic text, although its first parts were written in Greek and Coptic, and translated into Arabic in the eleventh century CE, while the remainder was written in Arabic. The compilation and translation were traditionally attributed to the tenth-century bishop of Ashmunein, Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', an attribution recently contested by Johannes den Heijer who demonstrated that it was the work of the deacon, Mawhüb ibn Mansür ibn Mufarrij. The work survives in two recensions, the so-called 'primitive' (*ca.* eleventh century) and 'vulgate' (*ca.* thirteenth century). Here I am

1 The Coptic Orthodox Church is the Christian church of Egypt, and it traces its tradition to Mark the evangelist who preached Christianity in Alexandria in the first century CE. The term Copt comes from *Qibt*, the Arabic transliteration of the Greek word for Egypt, *Aigyptos*. At the time of the Arab conquest, the term obviously referred to all Egyptians, and only later came to refer to its Christian population. Today, Copts represent the largest Christian community in the Middle East, and the term *Copt* has come to signify a certain theological, ethnic, and cultural affiliation. For further reference, see Davis (2004) and Van Doorn-Harder (2017).

mostly relying on the primitive recension, which is ascribed to the original translator and redactor, Mawhüb ibn Manşūr. Various authors continued to write the HP until the twentieth century. Although not without its share of problematic issues, the HP remains one of the lengthiest extant sources for Coptic church history and is considered its official source by both scholars and the Coptic ecclesial institution (Den Heijer 1989; Mikhail 2014: 5–8; Den Heijer 2015: 453). This only increases our wonder, perhaps, at the strange events recorded therein.

The HP episode of the Muslim youth integrates interreligious communal tensions and unequal power dynamics in a dramatic narrative that is only resolved by divine retribution. When human justice fails, the divine steps in and acts for the benefit of the wronged party. More compelling is the aggressive sacred image woven so seamlessly into the narrative. Naturally, sacred art and violence have both had deeply intertwined if often fraught relations; one need look no further than the Christian iconoclastic controversies spanning the seventh to ninth centuries CE, the deep suspicions of religious imagery in Sunni Islam, or the diverse forms of iconoclasm in Buddhist practice (Finney 1994; Elias 2012; Rambelli and Reinders 2014; Alhassen 2019). Humans and sacred art have a long history of committing violence against each other. The attack by art is more rare and raises numerous questions about the agency of objects, the negotiation of power among religious communities, violence as an expression of religious identity, and the communal identification between the divine and human in a religious community.

In what follows I will analyze two eighth-century incidents of aggressive sacred image miracles from the HP, including the aforementioned one. These are miracles where the sacred image is powerful, resents insults, and aggressively retaliates against those who attack or insult it. I speak here of sacred images rather than icons in specific. This is not to say that Coptic icons and other religious artworks are identical, or that scholarship on Coptic sacred imagery and art does not differentiate between them (Badawy 1978; Zanetti 1991). However, the two HP incidents I study do not specify whether the image is an icon, a wall painting, or a mural, but only to "the Lord Christ on a cross in an image upon the wall" (Seybold 1912: 179).

Coptic hagiographical narratives include images that heal, bleed, weep, and aggressively retaliate against personal or communal injuries. The HP narrates ten episodes of animate sacred images between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Six include punitive images: four directed against Muslims and two against defiant Coptic Christians (Den Heijer 1990, 92–96). In other Christian societies of the same period, punitive sacred objects mostly retaliated against personal insult to their images, protected church property, or humorously corrected Christians' faulty morality (Bartlett 2013: 401–409; Freedberg 1989: 309–311). In

the unique context of the Coptic community in early Islamic Egypt, I argue that these episodes of aggressive images communicated different messages than their counterparts in other parts of the early medieval world.

The two HP accounts of aggressive images I analyze here are directed against Muslims and written by one John the Deacon in the eighth century. I draw upon them to untangle the polemical relationship undergirding communal identity, power, and sacred images among Copts in early Islamic Egypt. I demonstrate that the episodes were polemical tools against the religious other – the Muslim rulers of Egypt at the time – designed to shape Coptic communal identity around the truth that the images forcefully exhibited.

2 Aggressive Sacred Objects, Coptic and Beyond

Animate objects have captured human interest since antiquity. Greek myth tells us about the statue of Theagenes of Thasos, the athlete so renowned for his extraordinary strength that numerous statues of him were erected after his death. An opponent of Theagenes would come at night and whip the statue on Thasos until one day, the statue fell on and killed him. The victims' sons brought the statue to trial for murder, found it guilty, and sentenced it to be cast into the sea. But the statue got the final say, for barrenness struck Thasos, and was not resolved until the statue was retrieved from the sea, restored, and reinvested with divine honors (Kindt 2016: 113–117).

Holy matter figured strongly in the lives of medieval Christians as well. Sacred objects not only signaled divine presence; the holy could dwell within matter. Saints' relics, shrines, possessions, and objects associated with them became points of contact with the saints themselves, sites of divine expression and of interaction between humans and saints (Brown 1983: 86–105; Bynum 2011: 125–176). These sacred objects could visibly express a range of emotions by weeping, bleeding, or retaliating. Examples abound; St. Foy famously beat a cleric to death for scoffing disrespectfully at her statue, and images of the Virgin Mary weep, bleed, or issue oil after being mutilated (Freedberg 1989: 310–312; Bartlett 2013: 401, 482).

Although to our modern sensibilities, these narratives may sound remarkably similar to each other and to the HP incidents, each is nested in a different social and religious context. In the theorist Bill Brown's words, each presents its own "object culture" or,

ways that inanimate objects mediate human relations and the ways that humans mediate object relations (generating differences of value,

significance, and permanence among them), thus the systems (material, economic, symbolic) through which objects become meaningful or fail to (2010: 188, quoted in Kindt 2016: 116).

The presence of animate objects in different cultures and times does not deny the cultural specificity of their interpretation. In other words, the meaning of animate matter – violent or not – to its religious community can differ drastically. Commenting on Theagenes’s statue and similar myths, Kindt (2016: 129–130) argues that it represents the ancient Greek preoccupation with the nature of divinity, and how divinity manifests itself in the human realm. Christianity’s approach to materiality, on the other hand, is exceptional and built into its very fabric by the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. These point to the fact that the holy can and does reside in matter. The breath of God gives life to dead clay, God can assume human flesh, and the human body is resurrected in the afterlife. Moreover, the divine acts through matter, extending protection, beneficence, and justice. In this context then, active holy matter blurs the boundary between the spiritual and material, the divine and human realms, and between subject and object. It demonstrates and confirms Christian beliefs (Freedberg 1989: 297–314; Belting 1994: 6; Bynum 2011: 256–265).

In most cases when a sacred object commits a violent act, such as the aforementioned ones in ancient Greece and in the Christian west, its impetus seems to be avenging insults to itself or the divine figure it represents. It is possible, and indeed correct, to interpret the HP incidents in the same way, as Den Heijer (1990: 96–98) did when he posited such events as demonstrations of divine power against human insolence. However, it is possible to uncover other layers of cultural specificity in these incidents, of social and political tensions embedded within the text. In fact, these aggressive sacred images functioned as polemical tools to demonstrate the true divine power around which Coptic communal identity should coalesce.

In certain aspects, Coptic sacred images operated similarly to their counterparts in other Christian traditions. They fostered a connection to the divine figures they depicted, sacralized space, and interacted with their communities in numerous ways. Accounts of punitive aggression, however, are significantly fewer than in medieval western Christianity (Bartlett 2013: 401–409). The Coptic church boasts a long tradition of sacred imagery, as early texts indicate. An apocryphal second-century text found in Egypt attests to the tension around whether saints should be depicted, and their images venerated, among early Christians. In the sixth century Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria, spoke of an icon of the Virgin Mary that wept blood after a Jew had tried to destroy

it (Langen 1990: 56–57). Notably also, the Coptic church was not embroiled in the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries CE; it was confessionally and physically distant from the Byzantine church and the controversy's center in Constantinople (Chaillot 2016: 108). Sacred images have enjoyed a continued presence and reverence in Coptic history up to the present, forming a significant part of Coptic spirituality and haptic connections to the divine (Van Doorn 1990; Chaillot 2018).

The HP records numerous episodes of sacred images. Animate ones are dispersed throughout the text, bleeding, weeping, and retaliating. But whereas bleeding and weeping images have received some attention from HP scholars, violent ones have only merited a passing glance. Otto Meinardus's (1999: 99, 121) survey of sacred images in the HP ignores aggressive objects, though he speaks of weeping and bleeding miracles. Den Heijer's (1990: 89–100) classification of HP miraculous images does not focus on aggressive miracles but posits them as accounts of divine wrath against human disrespect of its sacred image.

But the recurrent, though infrequent, appearance of aggressive sacred images in the HP merits more consideration. Consider this incident from the Life of Patriarch Alexander II (704–729) – the second narrative to be analyzed here:

'Abdul-'Aziz, king of Egypt, had a son, his eldest, named al-Aṣḡagh, who was thought to be next in line to rule after his father. He made him governor and tax collector ... and he was a hater of Christians, a shedder of blood, a ferocious lion ... an infidel. [He entered the church on Bright Saturday and seeing a decorated image of Mary and the child, he] filled his mouth with spit, spat at her face, and exclaimed, "if I am granted enough time, I would empty this village of Christians. Who is Christ that you should worship him as a God?"

That night the Lord God, the King Jesus Christ sent his revenge upon him, and he awoke and came to his father, who was sitting among many Muslims and Christians. And it was the Day of Passover,² and he sat and recounted to his father: "My lord, demons have tormented me this past night ... I saw a man on a great fearful throne whose face shone brighter than the sun, and around him were scores of armor bearers in white garments. You and I were bound in chains behind him, and I asked, 'who is this who has taken the land from my father and myself?' He told me, 'Do you not yet know who this is?' I said in my sleep, 'and who is he?' He replied and said, 'This is Jesus Christ the king of the Christians who is

2 Easter Day.

greater than all the kings of the earth! This is who you mocked and spat at, and now in your sleep he has shown you your weakness, O wretched one, and made you behold his glory and majesty. As he said this, one of the armor bearers came upon me, and I was naked, and he stabbed me with a spear and would not let go till I gave up the spirit.” ... His father was greatly grieved to hear this. His son came down with a great fever ... at the second hour of the night he died ... His father would not be consoled, and after forty days the father too was taken, even as his infidel son had foreseen.

SEYBOLD 1912: 134–135

Numerous themes of this narrative resemble the first one. Again, the Copts perceive themselves as a persecuted minority being taunted by the powerful religious other, and a sacred image subverts political and social realities by punishing a Muslim on behalf of the beleaguered Coptic community. And again, it is the Muslim antagonist who explicates the actions of the image. These recurrent themes hint that the texts aim to communicate not only divine wrath against human disregard, but a contextualized and culturally specific message to their readers. They are not only curious stories, but a form of polemical discourse.

3 Polemics, Community, and Sacred Images

To consider these accounts as polemical, we must take a deeper look at the prevalent forms of Christian-Muslim polemics in the medieval Near East. The term *polemic* here does not necessarily imply that the religious other, Muslims in this case, read these accounts. The Christian polemics that arose against Islam aimed some genres at a Muslim readership and others at an insider Christian audience. The former was mostly comprised of intellectual discourses, in treatise or dialogue genre. The latter included apocalyptic, hagiographical, and martyrdom genres. Christians wrote much about Islam to their insider communities – mostly one-sided and antagonistic – beginning in the mid-seventh century in Coptic, Greek, Latin, Syriac, and later in Arabic, in genres that were “both a discourse of accommodation and a discourse of resistance” (Griffith 2008:17). The discourse of resistance, like the HP accounts discussed here, mainly targeted the insider community (Thomas et al. 2009–2013).

Texts, particularly polemical ones, allow imagined interactions to subvert existing power dynamics and political realities. This is especially true when subjugated communities both produce and consume the text, making it a

space of social imagining where ultimate triumph – evasive in reality – can be achieved. In that, they operate as “social spaces in which two fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction” (Fairclough 1995: 6). In her analysis of medieval Copto-Arabic hagiographical texts, Maryann Shenoda focuses on those that include “fantastical, miraculous, and unthinkable stories” and imagine an Egypt re-converted to the Coptic faith. She argues that these narratives juxtapose Coptic Christianity’s truth with Islam’s falsity and represent a social imagining where transforming political and social realities was possible (2015: 414).

As Islam first arose, Christians did not classify Muslims as adherents of some new ‘religion,’ but initially as some deviant Christian group, and more importantly, as military invaders. Early representations of Muslims, among Copts and other Christian groups in the early Islamic empire, varied from the positive to the apocalyptic. It was later Christian polemics, starting in the late eighth century with the ‘Abbāsīd era, that built on frequent Christian-Muslim encounters and actual debates. They addressed new intellectual questions that Islam brought forth, such as reinterpreting the Trinity in conversation with Islamic monotheism, the interplay between possessing the truth and acquiring political ascendancy, and the means of identifying a true prophet. Such issues had previously been irrelevant to Christian polemics with Jews and pagans (Hoyland 1997: 18–20; Thomas 2009: 9–14).

Polemical Christian genres about Islam sharpened as the centuries went by, reflecting the complexity of hostile encounters on the ground. In Egypt, the eighth century was a tumultuous time for the different non-Muslim groups, including Copts, as the influence of the Islamic conquest was beginning to be felt in all echelons of society. Earlier, during the seventh-century Islamic conquest and expansion, the Arabs had been a ruling class that did not mingle with the Egyptian, mostly Christian, population. Conversions to Islam were still isolated cases and not a mass phenomenon. But in the eighth century new regulations appeared. By decree Arabic replaced Greek as the official language of administration, coins minted with Islamic epigraphs replaced Christian Byzantine ones, and more Arabs replaced Christians in governmental positions. Non-Arabic speakers frantically scrambled to learn Arabic to retain their positions in government. The caliphate implemented various policies aimed at Islamizing Egyptian society and an obvious othering of non-Arab, non-Muslim populations (Hoyland 1997; Mikhail 2014: 107–135).

Most prominent among these was the restrictive *dhimmī* status imposed upon them if they refused to convert to Islam. It accorded Jews and Christians fewer ‘citizenship’ rights, more taxes, and subjected them to their Muslim overlords. The financial burden of *dhimmī* tax alone was often sufficient reason for

non-Muslims to convert to Islam across the centuries. Yet, though Jews and Christians in Egypt were officially *dhimmīs* from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, *dhimmī* regulations were not implemented with consistent rigidity, and certain dynasties were more benevolent to *dhimmīs* than others. Still, *dhimmī* status would ultimately determine Copts' status as a religious minority subject to discrimination and sometimes persecution, and Copts would increasingly conceive of themselves as a separate community from Muslims (Griffith 2008: 15–17; Thomas 2009: 8–10; Tolan 2010: 2).

This separation materialized on various fronts, but the example of language will suffice here. Before the Arab conquest, Egypt was multilingual; Egyptians used Greek and Coptic, and Greek remained the official language of administration throughout Egypt's first Islamic century. Non-Muslim Egyptian communities adopted Arabic at varying paces, latest among whom were the Copts, whose Arabization was complete only in the thirteenth century. This formed an ideological Coptic imaginary of Arabic as the language of Islam and led to a pronounced antagonism with it. For example, the tenth-century *Apocalypse of Samuel* denounces priests who pray the liturgy in Arabic, and Christians who teach their children Arabic and give them Arabic names, as sinners. Although Copts ended up producing the largest body of Arabic literature of all Christian, Arabic-speaking communities, Copts would come to associate liturgical and theological decline with Arabic and authentic renaissance with Coptic, a tension that continues to this day (Mikhail 2014: 79–135).

These intercommunal tensions manifested themselves in the polemical literature – especially insider genres – being produced in Egypt at the time. It is important to note, however, that communal identification between seventh-century Christians and Muslims was not spontaneous or immediate. Rather, boundaries were gradually erected, negotiated, transgressed, and reinforced over centuries. As Jack Tannous puts it, communal boundaries “are *socially established conventions* that are only as good as the religious and catechetical institutions that exist to tell people they are there,” often in the shape of literature (2018: 108, my emphasis). Hagiographical literature in the Coptic language was copied and circulated with great frequency from the eighth century, and it was especially rich in martyrdom accounts, reflecting Copts' perceived sense of injustice and powerlessness (Thomas 2009: 9; Swanson 2010: 24).

Hagiography can be subversive, something evident in the two HP accounts I analyze here. The biographies of Alexander II (704–729) and Khaël I (743–767), from which the episodes come, were written by a certain John, whom Mark Swanson identifies as John the Deacon. John was a contemporary of Patriarch Khaël I, a deacon, monk, and eventually bishop who wrote two other HP biographies as well: Cosmas I (729–730) and Theodore I (730–742). Throughout them

all, John demonstrates the Christian God's triumph over human oppression. Events occur in a predictable plot line, illustrated by familiar tropes. Oppressive Muslim governmental policies are patiently borne by the Copts and ultimately avenged by God. Unjust Muslim rulers are overthrown or die by disease after humiliating the Coptic patriarch, laying heavy financial burdens upon the Copts, or invading their worship space and mocking their sacred objects. John attributes the fall of the 'Umayyad caliphate, and the rise of the 'Abbāsids, to the Christian God who punishes the former for their misdeeds. And when the 'Abbāsids implement oppressive policies themselves, their governors also experience God's wrath. In Khaël's Life, John uses the Nile trope, where the waters only rise to the desired levels when the Copts pray, thereby averting drought and famine throughout Egypt. In John's narrative, the Copts, Jews, and Muslims gather round the Nile to pray for the waters to rise. The waters only do so, however, at the Copts' prayers, and especially after the Muslim governor desperately pleads with the bishop to pray. The waters rise, and the governor consequently becomes more lenient with the Coptic population. The Nile trope was prevalent in late antique Christian polemics against pagans and Jews, but John was the first to use it in an Islamic context (Swanson 2010: 15–26; Mikhail 2014: 241–254).

Another trope is public speech. John subverts the dynamics of voice in both incidents. The Copts remain silent except when responding meekly to Muslims' mocking questions. Their deafening silence is eventually countered by the Muslims' declarations of Christianity's truth and its God's power. It is also juxtaposed by the text's detailed vocalizing of the Muslims' suffering. The Muslim youth remained hanging the whole morning, "shouting, I am stabbed in my side" (*tu'intu fi janbī*) (Seybold 1912: 179), and the onlookers' voices were raised to supplicate God's mercy. In the other account, al-ʿAṣbagh was threatened at night by a terrifying angel who articulately detailed his misdeeds and threatened him with just retribution. Al-ʿAṣbagh himself then verbosely recounted his ordeal to his father and audience before dying of fever. If Muslims claim public speech for themselves in John's narratives, they will use it to declare the *true* power of the Christian God.

These HP accounts demonstrate how the insider polemics, written and consumed by the Coptic community, functioned. Like earlier one-sided Christian polemic against Jews and pagans, and contemporaneous Greek, Syriac, and Arabic Christian polemic against Islam, these narratives served as religious propaganda to discredit the religious other. They depicted polarized notions of truth and falsity reinforced by supernatural power. By identifying truth with Christianity and falsity with Islam, these accounts attempted to erect a Coptic

communal identity around the divine truth demonstrated by the images' power, and hence demarcate Coptic Christian boundaries from Muslim ones.

What sets these two episodes apart from other religious polemic, though, is their violence – textual and rhetorical, suffered and inflicted. Religious violence was rampant in the late antique and medieval Near East, both among Christian communities and later between Christians and their Muslim conquerors, as they negotiated “the frantic semiotic universe they and their [religiously proximate] neighbors inhabited” (Sizgorich 2008: 48). Suffered, inflicted, or preserved in communal memory, violence was an inherent characteristic of constructing and maintaining communal boundaries that were often religiously defined. Community narratives revolved around members' past endurance of persecution and martyrdom as constitutive of communal identity. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, which split the Christian church into yet another faction, Christian groups attacked Jews, pagans, and other heterodox groups. Such zealotry – often committed by Christian monks and ascetics – presented a vision of strong faith in certain communities, in contrast to others which sought to live in peace with religious others. Violent religiosity was an integral part of the late antique Near Eastern social habitus and an influential marker of communal identity (Sizgorich 2008: 131–143; Tannous 2018: 111).

This was no different in early Islamic Egypt. By the eighth century, Copts felt that their community was significantly weakened. Their positions in state administration were under continuous threat, their social status was diminishing, and their language was in danger of disappearing. Even the eighth- and ninth-century Bashmūrīte revolts against increased taxation, in which Egyptian Christians and Arab Muslims joined forces against Egypt's rulers, were brutally suppressed (Mikhail 2014: 106–135).

Consequently, some Coptic polemics transposed the power to retaliate onto the supernatural realm and mediated it through hagiographical texts. As Hans Belting and others have shown for Christian saints, the sacred image functioned as a perpetrator of violence within similar circumstances in Byzantium and the Christian west (Freedberg 1989: 309–310; Belting 1994: 42–44; Bartlett 2013: 401–409). As agents of supernatural power in a society where the spiritual is very much real, the written histories of these sacred images' violent retaliations served two purposes: a textual, institutional attempt to maintain the community's fast-eroding power and a sharp demarcation between the Coptic community and the Muslim other.

According to Den Heijer, “punishment miracles” in the HP represent the dynamics of a divine-human confrontation, “condemn[ing] human arrogance towards divine power” regardless of religious difference or sectarian

strife (1990: 97). He is right to point out that the images' victims are not always religious others but also Christian offenders, including Copts. In the Life of Khaël I, from which the first incident comes, John the Deacon narrates how a Nubian Orthodox king, a "wicked drunkard," defied his bishop and demanded that the patriarch remove him from office. Khaël ultimately had to appoint another bishop to appease the king, and told the deposed bishop:

"If this matter is not from God, then you shall see its consequences and [you will] return once again to your seat. For we did not remove you from your seat for any purpose except to allay the king's wrath and his [wicked] intentions." Upon that statement, an image of St. John Chrysostom fell off its hanging place on the wall behind the patriarch's seat three times and kept rolling around the room. The newly appointed bishop returned to the Nubian kingdom and until his death there was no rainfall, and the country was visited with plague every year.

SEYBOLD 1912, 176–177

The image upheld the patriarch's misgivings and punished both the Nubian king *and* his new bishop for defying the patriarch and illegitimately forcing him to recall the rightful bishop. Another account, from Mark III's (799–819) biography, narrates the incident of an insubordinate and jealous Coptic superintendent who attempted to slander the (righteous) patriarchal secretary. The patriarch rebuked him:

There was near them a picture, in which the glorious Lady Mary was painted with the Lord Christ in her lap; and it was set up in the chamber where the patriarch sat. So that superintendent looked upon it, and, stretching out a finger of his right hand, he said, "By her power, if I have told a lie in that which I have related, may this picture take vengeance upon me!" Now hear the bitter fate that befell this wretch according to the denunciation of that holy prophet, who spoke with authority ... *that wretched man fell at the patriarch's feet upon his right side, that being the side of his right hand, which he had stretched out towards the picture with evil intent; and he was struck with paralysis of one side, which lasted to the day of his death.* Therefore, when men saw this miracle and this terrible occurrence, they all feared the patriarch's words, which were like the words of the prophets.

EVETTS 1915: 420–422, my emphasis

In these two incidents, the victims of vengeful images are Copts who have defied ecclesial Coptic authority. For this reason, I have to question Den

Heijer's suggestion that *all* aggressive sacred images in the HP merely represent a divine and human confrontation. The images also served as ecclesial tools of power within a purely Coptic polemical discourse about divine truth, power, and communal identity.

The power to inflict, and not only suffer, pain in these episodes expresses communal identity and dignity. The HP narratives project punitive power onto the inviolable sacred image, and the image's retaliation – upon both the community's unworthy members and upon religious others – allows the community to resist the humiliations it should patiently bear. The author of these episodes meant to remind readers of the dignity due the image and the divine power operating through it. The episodes also insisted that the entire Coptic community that venerates the image must never be disrespected. Within the text, the images consistently vindicate the Copts as a community, uphold their faith rather than other faiths, and affirm the authority of their ecclesial hierarchy. Within these episodes, the images' punitive power elevates the Copts in the eyes of their Muslim overlords by demonstrating their inviolable Christian truth. It also warns the Copts themselves against forgetting where divine power *really* lies – and who controls it.

4 Rethinking Aggressive Sacred Image Miracles

Let us now return to the two incidents of HP vengeful images that are the focus of this study. As in stories of Coptic offenders who tangled with images, events in these episodes also occur at the intersection of communal identity, the sacred image's power, and religious polemic. Similarities in the two incidents are striking. Both accounts take place inside a church, explicitly marking the physical boundary between Copts and Muslims. From the start, the Muslim antagonist trespasses the space, and the Copts are forced to quietly acquiesce to violent taunts that they are unable to verbally or physically counter. The onlookers include both Copts and Muslims, most of whom are unnamed. The only protagonist who defends the space against violence and retaliates against offenders is the sacred image, which, powerful and unforgiving, does not stand for insults to its depicted subject or injustices to its community.

A crucial difference between the two episodes is the scale of retaliation against the crimes of stabbing an image and spitting on one. One might expect that stabbing a sacred image merits at least as much revenge as spitting upon one, if not more. Yet John the Deacon's polemical accounts scaled revenge according to the offense committed against the *community* rather than the images. The HP account describes al-Aṣḅagh, who spat upon an image of Mary, as a hater of Christians, a shedder of blood, a ferocious lion, and an infidel

(Seybold 1912: 134). Spitting upon the image may signal his dramatic downfall, but it only symbolizes the peak of his crimes against the Coptic community. As Maged Mikhail (2014: 66) points out, al-Aṣḡagh is historically credited with animosity to the Copts and with leading one of the few attempts at forcible mass conversions to Islam during the eighth century. In revenge, the image not only caused his and his father's deaths, but also tormented al-Aṣḡagh with a terrifying vision of being chained in front of an enthroned Christ, armed angels, and a ferocious stabbing. Within the vision, the malefactors had to undergo the humiliation of hearing, "this is Jesus Christ, the king of the Christians, *who is greater than all the kings of the earth!* This is who you mocked and spat at, and now in your sleep *he has shown you your weakness, O wretched one,* and made you behold His glory and majesty" (Seybold 1912: 135, my emphasis).

Here John draws on Scripture to emphasize the magnitude of al-Aṣḡagh's offense and the form and scale of the image's revenge. He makes a point of stating that the whole incident took place between Bright Saturday and Easter day (using the same Arabic word for Passover, *fiṣḡ*). According to the Hebrew Bible account, the final plague inflicted upon the Egyptians had been the death of all the Egyptian first-born, by which the Hebrew slaves were finally freed from Pharaoh's tyrannical hold. "At midnight *the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt,* from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon ... Go, worship the Lord, as you said!" (Exodus 12: 29–32, NRSV, my emphasis). The Passover was the Hebrew celebration of that freedom.

John makes this connection between the liturgical feast and al-Aṣḡagh's (the king's eldest) imminent death twice: once when he states the spitting incident itself took place on Bright Saturday, and once when al-Aṣḡagh narrates his dream to an assembly of Christians and Muslims gathered at his father's palace on Easter day. In both the Exodus and HP narratives, a tyrannical monarch persecutes a minority and divine power acts on behalf of the oppressed by violently bringing on public and tragic death to the ruler's firstborn.

By contrast, the scale of revenge is less severe in the first account, which took place during the reign of a tolerant Muslim governor and where the antagonist who stabbed the image was only an unnamed Muslim worker. The youth's derision of the image ended in a public spectacle that combined serious pain and ridicule, and his own public conversion to Christianity at the prompting of his Muslim coworkers. His offense merited a public spectacle that testifies to the truth and power of the Copts and their saints, nothing more. Thus, the one who spat died alongside his father, while the one who stabbed the image was ultimately forgiven and promptly baptized. The images avenge the humiliations of the entire community. Their ire is meted out according to what the community, rather than the image, has suffered.

The type of retaliation the images choose for both Muslims antagonists is also noteworthy: stabbing by spears. The Muslim youth cries that he has been stabbed in his side after mocking the crucified and stabbed Christ, while al-Aṣḡagh dreams of an angel stabbing him to death with a spear. The spear is connected to the narrative of Christ’s death, when “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (John 19: 35, NRSV). The narratives invert the spear’s function. By using a weapon that ensured Christ’s death as a tool of Christian vengeance, the spear signifies that real power is the domain of the Christian God. The texts thereby signal a shift in perspective; with God on their side, the Copts shift from being victims to victors. By presenting a spear as the weapon of divine justice, the text subtly emphasizes where rightful power and justice lie.

Another element that becomes obvious in both accounts is the publicity and swiftness of both offense and retaliation. Al-Aṣḡagh spits upon the image in full view of the whole congregation on Bright Saturday. He then narrates the result, his own humiliation, in front of his father’s court and assembly of Copts and Muslims the next day, which is swiftly followed by his own death and then his father’s. In the other account, the offender’s coworkers are present, and “the Muslims and Christians exclaimed in one voice, praising God who works miracles, and cried ‘Lord have mercy’ numerous times” (Seybold 1912: 179–180). The image’s retaliation against al-Aṣḡagh is not immediate, unlike the stabbing incident where the culprit’s coworkers are present on the scene. It seems that the image ensures an adequate audience of Copts, but more importantly *Muslims*, as witnesses before it displays its power and demands its honor’s restoration.

Underlying both accounts is an identification between the images and the Coptic community; the images are powerful members of the community who defend its identity. In the text, the image and the community belong together and face humiliations together: the Copts by suffering persecution and the image by retaliating against the persecutors. The images and community are bound by, as Robert Orsi puts it, “a web not of meanings but of relationships between heaven and earth ... which have all the complexities ... of relationships between humans” (2013: 5). This identification between image and community takes precedence over traditional Christian values, such as loving one’s enemy. These sacred images have no qualms about maiming, making public spectacles of, or even killing, their offenders. Similar to their counterparts in the west, as Caroline Walker Bynum writes, “[t]he politics of holy matter were ... complicated and sometimes indeed sinister” in early Islamic Egypt (2011: 171). Christ and the saints in these HP episodes, through their material manifestations, become fully embroiled in their communities’ struggles. As in other Christian communities, Coptic saints in medieval times

were called upon to subvert oppression and injustice. United together in communal bonds with a living community, they fiercely demonstrate unreserved loyalty not only to the Coptic faith but also to the institutional Coptic church. Indeed, in these exciting records of the eighth century, in Orsi's words, "[h]oly figures get caught up and implicated in struggles on earth. They bear the marks of history" (2013: 4).

In both narratives, the aggressive image identifies with a community where an ever-present communal past of religious violence and persecution denotes true faith. Religious vision is often conditioned by previous socialization and recognition of the cues of a particular religious tradition. The past of the community affects its present, as Lisa Bitel points out (2015: 3). The power of the image, within a world where material objects can manifest sacrality, ensures its inviolability and hence its power to jealously and violently avenge wrongs against it and, at the same time, to protect its community.

The two episodes written by John the Deacon argue that, contrary to appearances in early Islamic Egypt, genuine divine power is the domain of the Christians and their God rather than their Muslim oppressors. The Copts can sustain injustices up to a certain point, but when their sacred image is humiliated, the image wreaks its vengeance strongly, swiftly, and very publicly. If the antagonist is not shamed instantly, he is forced to recount his terrifying dream to an audience of Muslims and Christians at his father's court before suffering a painful death. Indeed, even when Copts themselves pray for mercy for the antagonist, the image insists on a full enactment of justice. Naturally, the hagiographer then harnesses the image's power to proclaim the powerful truth of Christian belief, in an attempt to shape Coptic identity around it. To draw again upon the exodus narrative, "the Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Exodus 14: 14, NRSV).

5 Conclusion

I have argued that John the Deacon's two HP narratives of sacred images retaliating against Muslims are polemical tools, produced and consumed by the insider Coptic community in the eighth century. The powerful images uphold the institutional Coptic notion of divine truth and protection. The episodes are designed to shape the Coptic narratives of oppression, power, and salvation that continue to inform the community's sensibilities, imagined realities, and lived experiences.

Many questions remain. For example, I have not discussed the success or failure of these insider polemics in creating a cohesive Coptic identity in real

life beyond John's imagined textual community. Nor have I addressed the messy social reality of shifting confessional allegiances in early Islamic Egypt, and of multiple forming and reforming communal identities beyond the textual polarity of truth and falsity. But that is for another paper.

Read as messages from the Coptic leadership, these aggressive sacred images will appear as emblems of power able to bring justice to the oppressed and injured, comforting believers by their presence and might, and striking the fear of God into their enemies. The Copts' inability to retaliate against humiliation is avenged by the images' supernatural power. Christ himself and the saints, through their images, protest and reject indignities directed against their community. The more fantastic and public the spectacle of punishment is, and the higher the social status of the offender is, the more justice and honor returned to the Coptic community when its saint's righteousness prevails over the scorn and derision of the religious other. The image asserts communal boundaries anew as it sets truth apart from falsity. The triumph of the sacred image is the triumph of the community.

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