The Christian Martyrs of the Early Islamic Period: “Sectarianism” Between History and Memory

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Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis († 779/795; Greek):

For consultation:

Martyrdom of Rawḥ al-Qurashi († 799; Arabic):


Martyrdom of Cyrus of Harrān († 769; Syriac):
Zuqnīn Chronicle:

Chronicle of Michael the Syrian:
I. Martyrdom of Elias of Heliopolis

a. Conversion (Sections 6-7; PAPADOULOS-KERAMEUS p. 46)

So, coming with guilelessness and eating [with them], the saint continued serving. And certain guests, rising from the banquet, began to dance, and they grasped the saint, prevailing upon him to dance with them. And gathering around him, they loosed the belt of the saint and cast it from his side, at that time, so it would not easily hinder his body from being drawn to the dance. Then the feast of the evil preparation came to an end.

And when the night came to end, while all the revelers were still reclining together throughout the house, Elias, got up early in the morning and girded himself with his belt, according to the practice of the Christian community. And washing his face, he left the house, walking off to worship God. But one of those still under the influence of the evening’s intoxication said shouting [after him]: “Elias, where are you headed off to?” And the saint said in reply: “I am going to pray.”

Grasping him, that man said to the saint: “Did you not deny your faith late last night?” The saint, disdaining these words, and not even turning around to the speaker, walked out to pray. And then, returning from there, he went to his workshop and found the apostate.
b. Erasing all traces of martyrdom (Section 21; PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS p. 55)

Now, the judge ordered the body to be dragged and to be hung outside the gates in the garden, and to shut the gate of the garden, in order to guard the saint’s body, so none of the Christians, drawing near, would take away some blessing from him. Then, the executioners, washing the place where he was cut down, and gathering the soil, threw them into the great current of the river Chrysorrhoes [Baradā].

c. Destruction of the saint’s body (Section 25; PAPADOLOULOS-KERAMEUS pp. 57-58)

Then, the Arab went and secretly recounted this to Leithi, the eparch of the city. Having heard his report, he ordered that the body of the saint be brought down from the cross and to be burned with fire, before the vision spread, so that the Christians, seizing [the saint’s body] would not build churches nor celebrate religious festivals, praising his memory. Then the guards brought down the body of the saint, splitting the wood of his cross and laying [it] under. And placing [him] there and adding another piece of wood, they lit the fire. The flame rose up greatly, [reaching] the highest heavens, but the most holy body remained unburned.
II. Martyrdom of Rawḥ al-Qurashī

a. Rawḥ recounts his life as a Muslim (Section 11; DICK p. 126, BRAIDA & PELISSETTI p. 111)

Then the saint said: “In truth, you have granted me my wish today, for I have sinned against my Lord three times, and I do not think that they will be erased from me except by my decapitation. Then al-Rashīd said to him: “And what are these three offenses?” He said in reply: “As for the first, it’s that while I was a ḥanīf, I prayed in Makka at the Masjid al-Ḥarām many times. In truth, it is – as it itself is named – forbidden by God for those who believe in Christ. The second is that I sacrificed on (‘Īd) al-Adhā. The third is that I raided into Byzantine territory, and killed people who believed in my Lord Jesus Christ. And after all this, I pray that the Lord erases [these sins] from me through my decapitation and baptizes me with my blood.”
III. Martyrdom of Cyrus of Ḥarrān


A certain Christian by the name of Cyrus, apostatized on account of some illness/pain, and later repented. He was captured by ‘Abbās and tried, but he did not surrender to his will. So he cut off his head and then burned his body in the fire.

b. Zuqnīn Chronicle: Accidental conversion (Fol. 5v; HARRAK p. 320)

27. When he heard these from the deceitful ones, he captured the man and asked him with great anger (:)
29. […] to the Christian man […] (who is) summoned for the poll tax + Cyrus
30. told him the reason without any falsehood, and how he had been registered against his will
31. on the diptychs/rolls + Then the judge said: “It is impossible (for you) to have been registered
32. after you became a Muslim. But come up here and pray, and if (not) I swear
33. you shall suffer a wicked death at my hands + […]

c. Zuqnīn Chronicle: The Shahāda in Syriac (Fol. 5v; HARRAK p. 320)

37. But come up here and pray and confess that God is one and He has no companion
38. and Muḥammad is the servant of God and (His) messenger and prophet, and he is the seal of the prophets

d. Zuqānī Chronicle: Christians Flock to Islam (Fol. 6r; HARRAK p. 322)

11. Therefore, according to what you have said, everyone – even the elderly and the priests who were (once) Christians and are becoming Muslims – have destroyed their souls by their back-sliding
12. [...] them in books like you. Lo, many have converted to Islam,
13. [... ] they were destroying their souls, they would not have converted to Islam [...]
14. the young as well as the old. If only they had know that through their back-sliding
15.