

“Burning with the Fire of Martyrdom:”
Christian Identity and the Martyrs of Córdoba

Kyle Scripko

History

A small group of six local Christians make their way through the city of Córdoba, a major urban center of al-Andalus (Muslim-ruled area in the Iberian Peninsula) that is located approximately two hundred fifty miles south of Madrid. They quietly walk by the Great Mosque, possibly glimpsing the “Visigothic” arches built by Christians that punctuate the mosque, giving it its unique appearance. After passing through the dusty market stands, they find themselves at the threshold of the Cordovan Court with one thing on their minds: gaining their eternal crowns. They would soon arrive at the feet of the Muslim Judge (or *qadi*) of the Cordovan Court and begin their professions of faith. A typical Christian profession at this court during the mid-ninth century went as follows:

Confessing Christ to be truly God, we declare your prophet to be a precursor of Antichrist and the author of a profane dogma. We grieve, knowing the eternal torments that you, infected with the lethal venom of his prophecy and pledged to the virulent preaching of the devil, will presently suffer, and we bemoan your blindness and ignorance.¹

Insulting the Muslim prophet, Muhammad, was a direct insult to the ruling Muslim religion and community in ninth-century Córdoba. This act was deemed to be blasphemy and was not only considered illegal but also a crime that demanded the penalty of death. Although the circumstances varied, deliberate acts of blasphemy, as well as the “stroke of a raging sword [of decapitation] as a result of their testimony to the truth,” was the fate that thirty-three of the forty-eight Christian martyrs faced between 850-859 in Córdoba.²

These martyred saints present the Medieval historian with curious cases that call forth even more curious questions. How do we define martyrdom? Why go out of one's way to become a martyred Christian saint? If martyrdom is deliberate and provoked, can a victim be counted as a martyr? These are the types of questions that drove the initial focus of this paper to the topic of the Martyrs of Córdoba. However, as I explored the topic further, different questions arose from the story of these martyrs: What did their deaths mean? How did this event change the definition of martyrdom? What can this martyrdom movement tell us about being a Christian in ninth century al-Andalus? The story of the Martyrs of Córdoba beckons for explanations of self-understanding and identity. According to Brian Catlos, "religious identity was, in many circumstances, the most important way in which people conceived of themselves."³ Therefore, I strive to answer these types of questions by focusing on the concept of religious identity.

The Martyrs of Córdoba present a complex story with many of the individuals involved having their own motivations for being martyred, while also finding solace in each other when committing their actions. As religiously "inferior" people living under dominant Muslim rule, the death of the martyrs was just as much an expression of religious identity to them as going to Church, meeting with local Christians to discuss their faith, or taking up residency at a monastery. By surrendering themselves to the sword and dying for their Christian faith, the Martyrs of Córdoba were expressing their own religious identities, both to themselves and to the mixed Muslim and Christian community surrounding them. Although each expression had its own level of severity, the expressions of identity by the Martyrs of Córdoba did not showcase an event of blind radicals hoping to disrupt the system they lived in. Rather, their public displays revealed promising information about how people thought, lived, and interacted with one another in a religiously mixed community in ninth-century Córdoba.

This project is centered on the primary sources of a priest named Eulogius and an educated layman named Paul Alvarus. As the voices of the martyr movement, Eulogius and Paul Alvarus witnessed and interacted with many of Martyrs of Córdoba and were very close friends that often communicated with one another about the martyrs. Together, their writings make up the only surviving primary sources on the Martyrs of Córdoba. Eulogius' work on the martyrs include *Memoriale sanctorum*, the main document that outlines the deaths of almost every martyr; *Documentum martyriale*, the book that Eulogius wrote to Flora and Maria to convince them to follow through with their martyrdom; *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, the book that includes both one of the earliest known biographies of the Prophet Muhammad in Latin and outlines the martyrdom of Rudericus and Salomon; and *Epistolae*, three letters that Eulogius wrote to Paul Alvarus, Baldegotho (the biological sister of Flora), and the Bishop Wiliesindus of Pamplona, respectively. Eulogius eventually joined the group of martyrs and, under the request of Eulogius, Paul Alvarus took on the task of writing *Vita Eulogii* after his death. The *Vita Eulogii* describes Eulogius' life and martyrdom, as well as the martyrdom of Leocritia, the very last martyr. When Kenneth Baxter Wolf translated and pieced together the above-mentioned works of Paul Alvarus and Eulogius, he created *The Eulogius Corpus*. The book was published on 30 September 2019 and, due to the unbelievable timing of the publication of the book and its crossing with the start of this paper, this may very well be one of the first academic papers to engage with Wolf's English translation of *The Eulogius Corpus*.

How does one define a martyr? This question, as well as its answer, can have different meanings depending on the time, the context of the situation, and which religion the definition is pertaining to. In the Christian sense, martyrdom is an "inheritance from the early church, which regarded martyrdom as the perfect completion of a Christian life..." and is "suffering death for

one's religious beliefs."⁴ In early Christianity, the first martyrs were those who died as "witnesses for the faith." These "witnesses" were killed for their belief in the new religion of Christianity and thus laid the foundations for Christian sainthood as an institution of the Church.⁵ Public executions of Christians carried out by the Roman state in the first three centuries after Christ is often the context used by those defining Christian martyrs. However, as Paul Middleton argues, "it was the narratives describing particular Christian deaths, rather than the Romans ['] actions], that made Christian martyrs."⁶ In the case of ninth-century Córdoba, the careers and intentions of Eulogius and Paul Alvarus are very important to consider when studying the Martyrs of Córdoba. Just as those before and after them, Eulogius and Paul Alvarus used early Christian martyrs as a backdrop for the Martyrs of Córdoba and are often found drawing lines back to the first, second, and third centuries in their writings.

The "true" definition of a martyr is not so simple, especially when applied to the Martyrs of Córdoba. As Edward Colbert points out, whether these Christians fit into the definition of a "true martyr," or if they are exempt from the term, is an important problem facing any historian who studies the Martyrs of Córdoba.⁷ The definition of a martyr becomes even more difficult to grapple with when the idea of sanctity comes into play. According to Robert Bartlett, "Martyrdom always remained an ideal, the highest form of sanctity in most people's eyes."⁸ However, Eulogius faced much criticism after he deemed these martyrs to be saints of the Christian faith; he felt the need to adamantly defend their sanctity against those who disagreed constantly. Understanding the way in which the sanctity of the Martyrs of Córdoba was argued within the Christian community is essential to this story of identity.

Finally, what exactly is an expression of identity? Why use such a phrase? Here, an expression is an inner feeling about who one is, or one should be, that is displayed publicly.

Whether that display is blatantly stated or subliminally shown is up to the person crafting that display and the outside pressures they perceive themselves to be under. After reading the story of these martyrs, one gets the sense that their deaths meant more than a single protest against the ruling Islamic elite. Although many historians of the martyrs have pointed out that resistance and protest are important factors to consider, there is another layer to explore. In the case of the Martyrs of Córdoba, their actions, since they resulted in their deaths, were extraordinary acts of displaying one's religious identity.

In order to have a better appreciation for the identities that were expressed by these martyrs, one must first understand life as a Christian and as a Muslim in ninth-century al-Andalus. To begin, al-Andalus was operating under Islamic control since the conquest of the Visigothic Kingdoms in 711-720. Córdoba became the established capital of al-Andalus in 756 and remained so until 1031. The communities that inhabited ninth-century Córdoba are best understood as subsets in a religiously mixed community; a community of Muslims, Christians, and Jews that interacted with one another on a day-to-day basis at every level of life. Thomas Glick describes this community as something that needed to adapt to the "Muslim presence" and can be seen through the "emergence of new patterns of social organization and cultural expression in Christian Spain."⁹ These new patterns had their complexities and hardships but, as will be revealed in the example of the Martyrs of Córdoba, ninth-century Córdoba largely reflected an area of co-inhabitation that was more porous than strictly divided.

To be a Christian in Islamic Córdoba was to be a *dhimmi*, a Christian or a Jew who was both protected by and subordinate to the Islamic government. An important point to remember about *dhimmi*s is that they could never be superior to a Muslim. To be a Muslim in Islamic Córdoba was to be a part of a ruling religious minority interacting with a *dhimmi* majority.

Although there was more to their existence than this relationship, there is no denying its importance. According to Janina Safran, this system of relations under Islamic rule in al-Andalus was, from its onset, “integrally defined by coexistence with Christians and Jews and the concept of *dhimma* (protection).”¹⁰ Surrounding this idea of *dhimma* were Christian-Muslim relations that often resulted in interfaith marriage, conversions, and anxiety about the “other.” Although a *dhimmi* could almost never obtain a higher role than a Muslim in this society, many historians recognize that *dhimmis* were integrated into many parts of the Cordovan government, lived within close proximity of their Muslim neighbors, and received certain protections if they paid the annual *jizya* (tax).¹¹ However, as Jessica Coope would argue, the Muslim ruler had great power over *dhimmis* and could ultimately decide “when and how harshly laws discriminating against Jews and Christians would be enforced.”¹² This concept of *dhimma* was of vital importance to both Christian and Muslim existence in ninth-century al-Andalus.

As subjects under the authority of the Muslim ruler, the Martyrs of Córdoba saw the reign of two different amīrs (lords) between 850 and 859. The first amīr of concern here is Abd al-Raḥmān II (822-852). In a letter to Paul Alvarus, Eulogius describes Abd al-Raḥmān II as a “raging tyrant” who prompted the martyrdom of so many Christians in such a short amount of time.¹³ Although Abd al-Raḥmān II did implement policies that punished those who looked to commit blasphemy in the same fashion as the first couple of martyrs, these policies are widely regarded by historians as a *reaction* to the martyrdoms rather than a cause for them.¹⁴ This interpretation is vital because it eliminates the possibility of this movement being defined as a single organism reacting exclusively to the oppression of the ruling Muslim elite. Although more than half of the martyrs were killed under Abd al-Raḥmān II, he receives lesser criticism from Eulogius than his son, Muhammad I (852-886).

In *Memoriale Sanctorum*, Eulogius describes Muhammad I as “an enemy of the church of God” and a “malevolent persecutor of Christians.”¹⁵ Although Eulogius may have had a severe hatred of the Islamic amīrs, one can see why Eulogius was most worried about Muhammad I. Historians of the martyrs, especially Kenneth Baxter Wolf, make sure to point out that Muhammad I “immediately began to apply pressure to the Christian community” when he purged the Cordovan government of *dhimmi*s, ordered “all newly constructed churches be destroyed,” and contemplated the idea of “killing all Christian men and dispersing their women.”¹⁶ However, in the end, not all of these policies were actually carried out by Muhammad I, due either to pragmatic reasons or advice from his advisors, and were rather meant to pressure the Christian community to control the “radicals” who were voluntarily being martyred.¹⁷

Since the voluntary martyrdoms occurred over one thousand years ago, the historiographical scope of the Martyrs of Córdoba is massive; nonetheless, there must be an attempt to give a general understanding of the recent scholarship of these martyrs. As the historian who gave life to this work and continues to be a main contributor with his English translation of *The Eulogius Corpus*, Kenneth Baxter Wolf and his writing on the Martyrs of Córdoba are essential to address. First writing about the Martyrs of Córdoba in 1988, Wolf’s book, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain*, gives the reader an analysis of Eulogius himself. Writing with a “history of mentalities” approach, Wolf believes that, before “any accurate understanding of the martyrs” can be achieved by historians, they must first understand Eulogius.¹⁸ He argues that, in dealing with the backlash by the surrounding Christian community and the criticisms that faced the martyrs, “Eulogius not only probed, in an unusually self-conscious manner, the definition of sanctity, but inadvertently provided a window through which we can observe how some Cordoban Christians justified their conciliatory attitudes toward

Muslim authorities.”¹⁹ Wolf’s approach of seeking to understand Eulogius was a useful start, but contains limits that other historians have directly responded to in their own research.

Jessica A. Coope contributed a different perspective to the Martyrs of Córdoba in her 1995 book, *The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion*. Coope states that an effective approach to studying the Martyrs of Córdoba requires the “creative use of all available sources,” including those in Arabic.²⁰ Coope believes that in order to fully understand the motivations behind the voluntary martyrs, they must be understood in the Islamic context. She argues that these martyrs were “responding to real changes” and “represented an attempt to resist assimilation and conversion to Islam and to strengthen Christian identity by invoking the heroic image of the Roman martyrs.”²¹ Coope’s book is useful not only because of her wider approach to the Martyrs of Córdoba, but also because of the way she addresses the questions of identity that people faced in ninth-century Córdoba. One of the ways she gets at this question of identity is by observing conversions. Coope argues that conversion to another religious community involved “practical changes in people’s social ties and cultural practices,” and that a “convert exchanged one community for another.”²² Although these conversions involved certain complications, Coope believes that they are very revealing about ninth-century Christian and Muslim identities.

A book that has gained recent attention from scholars of Christian-Muslim relations is Christian C. Sahner’s *Christian Martyrs Under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*. In his book, Sahner hopes to explain the early stages that lead to the transition of a dominant Christian Middle East to a dominant Islamic region through “the role of religious violence in the process of de-Christianization, as well as how Christians adopted the mentality of a minority through memories of violence.”²³ Sahner’s book takes on many questions and

problems that face most historians of Medieval Islam. However, the topic that holds the most significance here is Sahner's discussion of Christian-Muslim relations in al-Andalus and the idea of "tolerance." Although he recognizes that tensions between Christians and Muslims could come to a boiling point that resulted in violence, Sahner argues that "social and religious conflict usually took place against a backdrop of peaceful relations between communities."²⁴

Additionally, Sahner's book specifically addresses blasphemy. He argues that blasphemy was a set type of protest against Islam and that those most likely to commit blasphemy were those "who were closest to Muslims... [such as] the children of religiously mixed families, Christian officials of the Muslim state, and residents of religiously mixed cities."²⁵ Sahner's approach to understanding blasphemy and these mixed relations is essential for explaining some of the expressions of identity by the Martyrs of Córdoba.

Attempts to describe and explain the Martyrs of Córdoba in a fashion that is both comprehensive and not weighted towards certain members of the movement is a challenge that faces many historians of the martyrs. Some feel the need to address each individual martyr; others believe that broader categories and themes are sufficient for explaining the movement. My approach will combine the two so that there is a comprehensive, if not exhaustive, explanation of the martyrs. All of the martyrs were accused of either blasphemy, the act of speaking sacrilegiously about sacred things, or apostasy, the renunciation of one's religious identity (apart from Eulogius who was accused of proselytization, the act of recruiting/converting someone to one's own faith); after reading about these martyrs, it was clear to me that their stories were more complex than blasphemers and apostates. However, both blasphemy and apostasy can serve here as broader vessels to position these individual martyrs into a clearer view in the hope that their expressions of religious identity can be recovered by the historian.

As the crime that most of the martyrs were executed for, blasphemy in ninth-century Córdoba meant that someone publicly spoke sacrilegiously about either the prophet Muhammad or the religion of Islam. Seen as the most effective way of achieving martyrdom, blasphemy was the charge that thirty-seven of the forty-eight martyrs faced. Of those thirty-seven, thirty-three were charged with deliberate blasphemy. The rest of the martyrs were either tricked into inadvertent blasphemy or were also charged as apostates. To get a clearer picture of how these blasphemers expressed themselves, it is particularly revealing to analyze a few specific individuals.

Isaac was the first deliberate blasphemer and is often referred to by Eulogius as the first “real” martyr of the movement. Before he found his “spiritual zeal,” Isaac worked in the Cordovan government as *exceptor reipublicae* (a secretary or notary, possibly with control over his fellow Christians and reporting to Muslim officials) and knew the Arabic language fluently. As mentioned above, Isaac’s status as a *dhimmi* allowed him to work in such a position in the government despite the fact that he was a practicing Christian. However, Isaac eventually left his position in the Umayyad government, turned to the monastic life, and went to live at the monastery in Tabanos.²⁶ Just over a year before Isaac sought out his own martyrdom, a priest named Perfectus was tricked into committing blasphemy by a group of Muslims who asked him how he felt about the prophet Muhammad. After swearing they would not report him, Perfectus told the truth about how he felt and was later beaten and arrested. After a few months in jail, Perfectus decided that, instead of taking back his words, he would commit to them; “I cursed your prophet before and I still curse him, that man of demons, that magician, that adulterer, that liar.”²⁷ Eulogius describes Perfectus as a “precursor to these martyrs” and seems convinced that

the image of Perfectus being “forcefully dragged to his passion” was enough to convince Isaac and the martyrs that followed to achieve their own martyrdom.²⁸

However, to see the martyrs that followed Perfectus as one domino lined up after another, waiting to be knocked down at the hand of the Muslim court, is to strip the martyrs of their agency and individual identities. In fact, it is likely that Isaac was not just simply reacting to the death of Perfectus. Sahner suggests that it is possible that Isaac had a sense of disgust with the system he had previously worked for, and that there may have been “personal disputes between the martyr and the Umayyad authorities” that existed prior to Perfectus’ execution.²⁹ When Isaac went to the court in June of 851 and told the judge, in Arabic, that “I have found both your prophet and you to be lacking [the zeal of justice],” Isaac was doing so with his own individual motivation and expression of religious identity as a former worker of the Cordovan government and a current monk of Tabanos.³⁰

The largest group of martyrs, with whom I began this paper, and that which Eulogius calls the “six-fold mystery,” was made up of Peter the priest, Walabonsus the deacon, and the four monks Sabinianus, Wistremundus, Habentius, and Hieremia.³¹ Their martyrdom took place only a few days after the execution of Isaac, and it is likely that the group was motivated by their relations to the monk of Tabanos. Wolf even points out in a footnote in *The Eulogius Corpus* that Hieremia was the blood kinsman of Isaac. “We abide by the same profession of faith,” they exclaimed to the judge, “under which our most holy brother Isaac... died before.”³² When they went to the court to express their own identities in front of the judge, they did so because they related to the religious identity that was expressed by Isaac before them.

However, as mentioned above, the movement of the martyrs is not as simple as following a linear line of those motivated by the deaths of the martyrs before them. A look at the monks

Rogelius and Servus Dei (“slave of God”) is revealing of the complexities of the blasphemers. Eulogius describes the two monks as bound together by a pact under which they would “fight to the death on behalf of God’s justice.”³³ This pact brought Rogelius and Servus Dei to a local mosque where they not only “forced themselves into the assembly,” but “preached the gospel, mocked the sect of impiety, and sentenced the crowd [to damnation].”³⁴ If there ever was a way to rank the intentionality of the martyrs, the actions of Rogelius and Servus Dei may have been the most blatant and extreme expressions of religious identity among those in the movement. The severity of their expressions was correlated to the severity of their punishment. Both had their arms and legs amputated, were decapitated, and then “affixed to gibbets and taken to the other side of the river,” where they were placed on display next to some of the martyrs who were recently executed before them.³⁵

The motivations of these two martyrs and why they chose a mosque to express their identities are unclear. Many of the Christians living in the community argued that their actions were blatant, antagonistic, and committed with radical blindness. However, there is some speculation by historians that this may have been an act in response to the dying amīr Abd al-Raḥmān II. Eulogius claims that, when brought to the judge, Rogelius and Servus Dei “continued preaching and prophesying” and predicted “the pending death of this tyrant [Abd al-Raḥmān II].”³⁶ Abd al-Raḥmān II was very ill at the time and died only ten days later. Regardless of the ambiguities that lay behind their motivations, their example serves a purpose here. The actions of Rogelius and Servus Dei should not be written off as those of radical Christians looking to disrupt the Islamic order, or as Eulogius’ exemplary Christians in a divided community. Rather, they should be cast in a different light. Historians should attempt to understand the actions of Rogelius and Servus Dei as responses to their uncertain surroundings in a religiously mixed

community. For these martyrs, their expressions of religious identity reflected their understanding of the surrounding community, had a specific meaning to themselves, and needed to be heard in the religious space of a mosque.

Apostasy in ninth-century Córdoba presents the historian with interesting displays of identity and self-fashioning. Apostasy was the *public* rejection of Islam and the acceptance of Christianity. Although the crime was considered severe by the court, apostates in the movement were treated differently from blasphemers as they were often given a second chance to revoke their misgivings in front of the judge. It was as if the apostates were given another chance to set up their own display in front of the court and express their identification with Islam over Christianity. Whether they chose the “correct” identity was up to the individual in that moment. What makes this category even more complex is the fact that many of these apostates came from religiously mixed families where one’s identity was undoubtedly a difficult concept to grapple with. There are a few specific individuals from *The Eulogius Corpus* that demonstrate how apostates expressed themselves in ninth-century Córdoba.

The story of the “holy virgins,” Flora and Maria, is a very telling example of how apostasy was treated in the movement, especially since Eulogius gave them so much attention in his work. Flora was raised with a Muslim father and a Christian mother; she was legally born a Muslim but was secretly raised a Christian. Although Flora identified as a Christian, her brother was a Muslim and actively tried to convince Flora to remain a Muslim. However, he became frustrated that he could not reach his sister and eventually brought Flora to the court, announcing that “the Christians... made her deny our prophet... enticing her with a certain kind of seduction to believe that Christ is God.”³⁷ Flora denied what her brother had said and expressed her own religious identity. She denied ever following Islam and stated that “I have known Christ since my

childhood. I was instructed by his examples, and I decided to have him as God.”³⁸ After expressing herself, Flora was met with “a cruel lashing... until her scalp was torn and naked bone was visible on her neck.”³⁹ However, unlike the blasphemers, Flora was not immediately sentenced to death. Rather, the judge ordered her to be taken away to reconsider resuming her legal Islamic identity. Before she could be taken to the court for a second time, Flora escaped her brother’s custody and went into hiding for six years.

As for Maria, she was born to a Christian father and a Muslim mother, an occurrence that was prohibited under Islamic law but seemingly occurred nonetheless. Unlike Flora, Maria was raised in the monastery of Cuteclara after her father had placed her there as a child. Maria also had a brother; however, he was not only just a Christian, he was Walabonsus, one of the six martyrs who died in June of 851. Eulogius describes this as the determining factor for Maria to become “ignited with a love for martyrdom... [and she] longed for martyrdom with impatient intensity.”⁴⁰ Maria eventually left the monastery, with intentions of acquiring “the crown of martyrdom” and headed on her way to the church of the martyr Acisclus, where she found Flora.⁴¹ At this point, Eulogius is convinced that the two created and shared an unbreakable bond; a bond formed from a common religious identity and purpose.

After meeting each other and sharing their stories, Flora and Maria realized that their intentions were similar. Eulogius claims that they were “instantly connected by an indissoluble pact of love, never to be separated from one another.”⁴² Following their meeting, the two virgins decided to travel to the court and express their religious identities together. Flora made it clear that this was not her first time partaking in such an expression, “I confess with the same determination as before that Christ is truly God, and I bear witness that your sinful dogmatist is a false prophet, an adulterer, a magician, and a sorcerer.”⁴³ Maria followed with a similar

expression, and let the court know that her brother was one of the “magnificent confessors” who was martyred earlier in the year.⁴⁴ Although outraged, the judge once again did not immediately execute Flora and Maria; he sent them to prison instead.

It was in prison that Flora and Maria met Eulogius, and where Eulogius convinced the two virgins to complete their martyrdom through his writing of *Documentum martyriale*. In this short book, Eulogius writes to the virgins that they should not fear what will come to them at the hands of the Muslim judge and urges them that they must “treat all temporal punishment as nothing.”⁴⁵ In each paragraph, Eulogius stresses that their deaths should be welcomed and rejoiced. After taking the advice of Eulogius, Flora and Maria were given a final chance to “correctly” express themselves or be executed in the forum. The two virgins persisted with their original expressions of religious identity and were executed, left to be “eaten by dogs and torn apart by birds,” and then thrown into the river.⁴⁶

While Flora and Maria were in jail, Aurelius, Sabigotho, Felix, and Liliosa were preparing for their own martyrdom. Similar to Flora and Maria, these four were from religiously mixed families. Aurelius was raised by his Christian aunt, but his father was a Muslim and his mother a Christian. Sabigotho, who eventually married Aurelius, had both a Muslim father and mother. However, after her biological father had died, her mother married a man who secretly practiced Christianity and had Sabigotho baptized as a child. Felix, on the other hand, was born a Christian and converted to Islam. However, he soon regretted his choice and chose to return to his original faith and married Liliosa, who was legally a Muslim by birth.

In *Memoriale Sanctorum*, Eulogius states that the drive for martyrdom for these couples began when Aurelius witnessed John, a merchant who was accused of insulting the prophet Muhammad, was “whipped practically to death” and carried away “backwards on an ass.”⁴⁷

Eulogius describes Aurelius as being “suddenly struck with a love of martyrdom” and went home to tell his wife, Sabigotho, about what he had witnessed.⁴⁸ From that moment on, the two decided to renounce all of their worldly possessions, committed themselves to lives of fasting and prayer, and lived as brother and sister rather than as husband and wife. Throughout this story, not much is said about the motivations of Felix and Liliesa. However, George, the monk from Bethlehem who joined these four on their quest for martyrdom, noticed that Felix and Liliesa had “already sold all of their things and distributed the money among the holy places and to the poor,” and describes them as “prepared to receive every kind of torment.”⁴⁹ It is clear that the practices of Aurelius and Sabigotho influenced the lives of Felix and Liliesa.

Aurelius and Sabigotho ended up visiting the prison where Eulogius, Flora, and Maria were being held, and it was at this prison that Eulogius gave Aurelius the advice that he should give up his children; “the love of daughters is not to be placed before the company of saints.”⁵⁰ While Aurelius was receiving advice from Eulogius, Sabigotho was visiting Flora and Maria in the hope that they too had words of encouragement. However, their encouragement came to Sabigotho in her sleep when she was visited by Flora and Maria following their executions. According to Eulogius, the two martyred virgin saints assured Sabigotho that “martyrdom has been divinely preestablished and predestined for you from the creation of the world.”⁵¹ Following the advice of Eulogius and the newly executed martyrs, Aurelius and Sabigotho gave away all of their possessions, surrendered their two daughters to the nuns of Tabanos, and sought out their goal with new enthusiasm.

The group decided that, in order to accomplish their martyrdoms, they needed to get the attention of the court. They did so by sending Sabigotho and Liliesa to church with their faces unveiled. This surely caught the attention of local officials and, when the women were arrested,

Aurelius and Felix publicly professed their faith. The act was immediately reported to the judge and the four soon found themselves being arrested. George, realizing he had done nothing wrong, quickly insulted the prophet Muhammad so he would not be left behind. Eulogius describes the group of would-be martyrs as “overjoyed” as they were taken to prison, “you would have thought that they, who would have nothing but torments, were about to come upon some treasure in the presence of the judge.”⁵² When the group was finally brought before the court, like Flora and Maria before them, they were given a last chance to express their “correct” religious identity; “riches were held out to them and honours shown to them, all of which they could enjoy if they would only believe.”⁵³ The group, taking comfort in one another, publicly expressed their religious identities one last time, refused to embrace their official religious identities, and obtained their eternal crowns.

There is one final martyr to consider here: Eulogius. He was not only the sole hagiographer of the Martyrs of Córdoba, but he was one of the last martyrs to be killed in 859.⁵⁴ As a hagiographer and a martyr, Eulogius both displayed his own religious identity and reworked the definition of martyrdom to cast the martyrs as saints. Addressing Eulogius is important here because his work contributes to the collective Christian memory of identity in ninth-century Córdoba. As Elizabeth A. Castelli points out in her book, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, the collective memory of martyrs is important to recognize. She argues that martyrdom is the “product of commemorative interpretation, and it provides a comprehensive fame for interpreting a wide array of historical encounters between Christians and the dominant imperial culture.”⁵⁵ Eulogius’ influence on how some of the martyrs expressed themselves, as well as how they were viewed following their deaths, is an important factor to consider.

Paul Alvarus describes the life and work of Eulogius in *Vita Eulogii* and claims that, through his hard work and dedication, Eulogius “obtained perfection.”⁵⁶ Throughout *Memoriale sanctorum*, *Documentum martyriale*, and *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, Eulogius explains his closeness with some of the Martyrs of Córdoba. Eulogius personally met many of these martyrs and played a major role in the decisions of Flora and Maria and Aurelius and Sabigotho to seek martyrdom. He also spends a good amount of time describing Columba, one of the only Martyrs of Córdoba who came close to achieving the classic picture of an early Christian saint. However saintly she was in her virginal dedication and devotion to an ascetic life, Eulogius believed that Columba still wanted reassurance for a “direct path” to the “heavenly kingdom,” and that “holy Columba actually inflicted more torture on herself [through her daily routines]... than a savage executioner would have.”⁵⁷ Yet, as more and more people voluntarily became martyrs, Eulogius encountered many difficulties with his own interpretations of the martyrs and their displays of identities. The surrounding community was faced with a very important divide: many Christians did not believe that the people who were deliberately seeking out martyrdom were legitimate martyrs.

As mentioned above, the typical view of a martyr for ninth-century Christians was the Christian who was a witness of the faith and *unwillingly* executed by the Roman state during the first three centuries. Many Christians in ninth-century Córdoba argued that, since most of these people were not dragged to their deaths and did not produce miracles, they could not be considered martyrs of the Christian church. In *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, Eulogius takes the time to consciously address the definition of martyrdom. He states that he believes it “worthwhile to resist those ignorant ones who, disparaging with their blasphemous mouths the martyrs of these present times, do not want them to be regarded as similar to the martyrs of

old.”⁵⁸ He continues on in *Liber apologeticus martyrum* to state that the tortures and miracles of the saints of old are not required for someone to become a martyred saint:

How could it matter whether one dies as a result of extended tortures or by means of a sudden death, when the same thing crowns both of them, that is, the desire for God and the love of the eternal kingdom? ... The crown is not promised to the one who suffers for a long time, but to the one who conquers, awaiting the culmination of that holy struggle with a cheerful pertinacity, motivated specifically by the hope of eternal salvation... It is of no significance at all whether... the witness of God shine with miracles or... they prepare for their blessed contests without such prodigies... the only thing the heavenly Creator expects from them is that they consummate their struggle in a manly fashion, maintaining the determination of their hope up to the very end, as a result of which, once they are added to the catalogue of saints for all eternity, they rejoice in the perpetuity of their salvation...⁵⁹

Fitting the Martyrs of Córdoba within the frame of sanctity was one of the most important goals of Eulogius’ work on the martyrs. By intervening with the movement of martyrs through meeting them, writing about them, and eventually becoming a martyr himself, Eulogius actively participated in expressing his own religious identity and attempted to reshape the definition of martyrdom itself.⁶⁰

Whether an individual burned “with the fire of martyrdom” or passively expressed themselves through every day routines, expressions of religious identity were a crucial component of everyday life in the religiously mixed community of ninth-century Córdoba. These expressions took on symbolic meaning and could be as simple as a woman purposely unveiling her face in public or as complex as someone barging into a mosque to preach one’s Christian beliefs. However complex these expressions were, one thing is clear: there was no single identity expressed by the Martyrs of Córdoba. One cannot place the deaths of these forty-eight people on a single motivating factor. In this context, the Cordovan court should be seen as a formal stage where the martyrs were given a chance to publicly perform who they were: they were religious

minorities or *dhimmis*; they were relatives of someone who was martyred before them; they were fellow members of a local monastery; they were former members of the Cordovan government; they were Christians looking for reassurance and redemption; they were children of religiously mixed families. Their deaths stood as symbols of the religious identity they expressed before the Cordovan court and, to borrow from Robert Darnton, the symbols were multivocal; they conveyed “multiple meanings and that meaning... [was] constructed in different ways by different people.”⁶¹ The actions of each martyr varied, meant something different to each individual, and represented an expression of who they were religiously. The Martyrs of Córdoba were not just radicals who participated in a series of outbursts working to complicate the working relationship of Christians and Muslims in ninth-century Córdoba; rather, they were individuals of a complex religiously mixed community expressing their own religious identity.

 Endnotes

- ¹ Eulogius, *Memoriale Sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 212-213.
- ² *Ibid.*, 211.
- ³ Brian Catlos, *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 4.
- ⁴ *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, volume 8, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 159.
- ⁵ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 174.
- ⁶ Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 13.
- ⁷ Edward Colbert, *The Martyrs of Córdoba (850-859): A Study of the Sources*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1962), 413.
- ⁸ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 175.
- ⁹ Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*, (Boston: Brill, 2005), xiii.
- ¹⁰ Janina M. Safran, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 9.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89-90.
- ¹² Jessica A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 33.
- ¹³ Eulogius, *Memoriale Sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 148.
- ¹⁴ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 14-15.
- ¹⁵ Eulogius, *Memoriale Sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 264.
- ¹⁶ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 15-17.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ¹⁸ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁰ Jessica A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family in an Age of Mass Conversion*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), xii.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 81.
- ²³ Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs Under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.
- ²⁶ Eulogius, *Memoriale Sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 209-210.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.
- ²⁹ Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), 152.
- ³⁰ Eulogius, *Memoriale Sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 156.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 212.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 256.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 257-258.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

-
- ³⁸ Ibid., 224.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 224.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 227.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 227-228.
- ⁴² Ibid., 228.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 228.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 228-229.
- ⁴⁵ Eulogius, *Documentum martyriale*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 307.
- ⁴⁶ Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 230.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 234.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 234.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 249.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 238.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 240.
- ⁵² Ibid., 251.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 253.
- ⁵⁴ Paul Alvarus can be considered another hagiographer of the martyrs as he documented the executions of both Eulogius and Leocritia.
- ⁵⁵ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 6.
- ⁵⁶ Paul Alvarus, *Vita Eulogii*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 125.
- ⁵⁷ Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 284.
- ⁵⁸ Eulogius, *Liber apologeticus martyrum*, trans. by Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Eulogius Corpus*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 326.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 327-331.
- ⁶⁰ Eulogius' martyrdom came about because of his involvement with Leocritia, an apostate and the very last martyr in this movement. Leocritia was found hiding in the home of Eulogius after her location was anonymously revealed to the judge. The two were both arrested and Eulogius was charged with proselytization (recruiting Leocritia). The judge threatened to beat Eulogius to death with rods, but Eulogius suggested that they should not waste their time and to just execute him instead. After continuously preaching about his faith, Eulogius was brought before the court to be executed. Paul Alvarus specifically states that, "rejecting this world, Eulogius extended his neck toward the sword and found life with one quick stroke." Following his execution, the body of Eulogius was thrown into the river where a white dove landed on his body, thus signaling his status as a saint.
- ⁶¹ Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 330

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Eulogius Corpus. Translated with introduction and commentary by Kenneth Baxter Wolf.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019.

- Alvarus, Paul. *Vita Eulogii*.
- Eulogius. *Documentum martyiale*.
- Eulogius. *Epistolae*.
- Eulogius. *Liber apologeticus martyrum*.
- Eulogius. *Memoriale sanctorum*.

Secondary Sources

Bartlett, Robert. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the*

Martyrs to the Reformation. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Buol, Justin. *Martyred for the Church: Memorializations of the Effective Deaths of Bishop*

Martyrs in the Second Century CE. Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2018.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. New York:

Columbia University Press, 2004.

Catlos, Brian A. *Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain*. New York: Basic Books,

2018.

Colbert, Edward P. *The Martyrs of Córdoba (850-859): A Study of the Sources*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962.

Coope, Jessica A. *The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

- *The Most Noble of People: Religious, Ethnic, and Gender Identity in Muslim Spain*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017.

www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.9297351.

Darnton, Robert. *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.

Dictionary of the Middle Ages. Volume 8. Editor in Chief: Joseph Strayer. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987.

Glick, Thomas F. *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*. Boston: Brill, 2005.

Middleton, Paul. *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*. London: T&T Clark, 2006

Safran, Janina M. *Defining Boundaries in Al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2013.

- "Identity and Differentiation in Ninth-Century Al-Andalus." *Speculum* 76. Number 3. (2001): 573-598. Accessed October 2019.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.2307%2F2903880>

Sage, Carleton M. *Paul Albar of Cordoba: Studies on His Life and Writings*. Washington, D.C.:

The Catholic University of America Press, 1943.

Sahner, Christian C. *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the*

Muslim World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Wolf, Kenneth Baxter. *Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain*. New York: Cambridge University

Press, 1988.