

The Incorruptible and Fragrant Corpse: Muhammad's Body and Christian Hagiography

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Islamic traditions (*ḥadīths*) repeatedly refer to the fragrance of Muhammad's corpse and its incorruptibility, mostly when discussing the preparations for his burial. Many variants of these traditions appear in genres of Islamic literature that depict Muhammad's life, including *sīra* works, *ḥadīth* collections and historiography. A small number of Islamic traditions, however, describe his body as putrefying before burial. Several sources tell about the uproar caused by one of these *ḥadīths* when a Muslim scholar taught it in Mecca in the early ninth century.

My paper argues that the motifs of the sweet smell and the incorruptibility of Muhammad's corpse represent eighth-century additions to the Muslim lore on Muhammad's life. More precisely, they are the outcome of the encounter between the Arab conquerors of the Fertile Crescent and its native religions, especially Syriac Christianity, the majority religion in the territories where early Muslim political and intellectual centers were established. My paper suggests that the adoption of these motifs took place as a result of a century-long exchange of ideas between those Muslims who viewed Muhammad as a rather ordinary mortal, and those Muslims who preferred his image to resemble Christian holy men.

I derive my arguments, on the one hand, from a comparison between the fragrance and incorruptibility motifs in Muhammad's biographies and similar motifs in saints' lives that belong to the Syriac tradition and were written before the Arab conquest or in the early Islamic period. On the other hand, my paper relies on the analysis of the *isnāds* (transmission chains) of the *ḥadīths* which enable me to trace where and when such *ḥadīths* circulated.