A MANICHAEAN ‘BLOOD-LIBEL’?

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Within the multi-volume *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (‘Book of Songs’) of Abū’l Faraj al-Īṣafahānī, there is preserved for us a curious anecdote featuring a sharp exchange of verbal barbs between the eighth-century litterateurs and satirists Baṣṣār b. Burd١ and Ḥammād ‘Ajrād.٢ Neither Baṣṣār nor Ḥammād were renowned for their orthodox piety, and both figures enjoyed a reputation for dissoluteness and irreverence that contemporaries and later commentators often branded as *zandaqa*. ‘Abd al-Jabbār numbers both of them among ‘the leaders of the dualists,’ a list of whom he found in al-Nawbāqti and al-Miṣṣār.٣ It remains unclear whether either hard merited such a charge in terms of an actual religious affiliation or sympathy,٤ but the allusions made by both interlocutors suggest they were not ignorant of dualist rhetoric. Here is the passage:٥


O Nabataean (?); one ‘head’ is (already) heavy for me; Carrying two ‘heads’ is an even weightier matter!

Charge someone other than me with the worship of two (lords), And I will occupy myself with the One!٦

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٤ Note however the statement found in *Kitāb al-Aghānī* 13.71: ‘Abū Nūwās said: I had thought that Ḥammād ‘Ajrād was accused of *zandaqa* only on account of the shamelessness of his poetry until (the time) when I was imprisoned in a jail with *zandaqa*. Then (I learned) that Ḥammād ‘Ajrād was an *imām* among their *imāms*, and that he had composed poetry which combined verse couplets (which) they would recite in their prayers!” Text translated from S.H. Taqīzādeh and A.A. Šīrāzī, *Māni va din-e ū* (Teheran: Anjoman-e Emeenātī, 1335 A.H./1956) 141 (§24); see also Vajda, RSO 17 (1937-38) 205; F. Gabrieli, “La «zandaqa» au 1er siècle abasside,” *L’habitation de l’Islam: Colloque de Strasbourg 12-13-14 juin 1959* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961) 25-26.
٦ Note the slightly variant texts supplied by Vajda, RSO 17 (1937-38) 205.
(Hammâd replied): By God, I do not care for this saying, for he truly irritates me with his ignorance of zandaqa. People who believe that the zandaqa worship a head are mistaken. He must think that fools do not know it, since this saying is spoken by the vulgar — there is no truth to it. What’s more, he, by God, knows zandaqa better than Manî knew it!

Of particular interest in this repartee is the deliberate wordplay involving the word ‘head’ (رأس) and its contextual association with an accusation of adherence to Manichaean dualism. On the one hand, the locution ‘heads’ is being used here in the connotative sense of ‘first principles’: Muslim thinkers were quite aware that Manichaeanism professed the ontological priority of the two ‘principles’ Light and Darkness. At the same time, Hammâd’s indignant retort invokes and then disdainfully dismisses a popular rumor that zandaqa, more particularly disciples of Mani, ‘worship a head’ (عَبَدَ رأسا). Whose head? From whence stems this latter allegation?

Some light is shed on this topic from two relatively early reports found in the Syriac chronicle tradition. The first account appears in the Chronicon Anonymum de ultimis regibus Persarum (‘Khuzistan Chronicle’), a work which focuses on events transpiring under the final Sasanian rulers, and it occurs immediately after an intriguing notice about a Jewish messianic disturbance in Mesopotamia:

Again, in the region of Bih Quwadh⁹ some Manichaean were caught in a town by the name of Șip (Shushâr)? They say that they (Manichaean) quarantine a man within an underground chamber for a year for the sake of his head. They feed him anything he wants for an entire year, and then they slaughter him (as) a sacrifice to the demons, and use his head for divination and magical spells during the whole of that year. Every year they slaughter such a one.

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Moreover they bribe a Jew to have intercourse with him so they immediately found it in a mortal shame, each of them and their adoration. All of them (in the student whom they were hung along) engaged in their nunnery.

A second, much simpler chronicle called Chronicle of ’Ala’ was found in the latter half of the eigth century, and its contextual association with an accusation of adhâr (‘blood-libel’).

At that time¹⁰ the Jews became an object of fear and hatred; they would not allow the Christian to have his share of the land in paradise, and celebrate in that portion of the land; they would refused to let them do anything. Manichaean went to the festival to celebrate in that portion of the land; they were found to be a member of the left hand, and they were hung along with the student whom they were hung along; that student whom they were hung along was a nunnery.

¹⁰ Chronica Minor a orientali, 33.14-16. Attenion was also drawn to the city of Palmyra and its association with the festival in question. See Brock, “Syria in the Time of the Caliphs,” 334-44.


¹² The year previously prefixed to the festival of the festival (th when they were found to be a member of the left hand). Due to the death of the student whom they were hung along, the polemics focused on the issue of adhâr (‘blood-libel’).

¹³ A. Niemeyer, Die Juden in der Islamischen Welt, 1 (Stuttgart: Niemeyer Verlag, 1982)
Moreover they bring (to him) maidens who have known no man, and they all have intercourse with him. Any child who is engendered from one of these unions they immediately boil until its flesh and bones become as (soft as) oil. Next they pound it in a mortar and mix it with flour and make little cakes from it. They feed each of their adherents one of these cakes (so that) he might never renounce Mani. All of them (in this instance) were caught by divine providence when a certain student whom they sought to quarantine managed to escape from them. They were hung along with some whores who were sequestered among them and who engaged in their misconduct. They were in all about seventy individuals.

A second, much fuller testimony to this macabre practice is found in the so-called Chronicle of Zuqnin, a Christian report in Syriac which dates from the latter half of the eighth century, a period roughly contemporary with the activity of both Bassar and Hammad. The report reads as follows:

At that time the religion of the Manichaens in Haran, a city of Mesopotamia, became an object of scorn. (It transpired thusly): They happened to have a monastery to the east of Haran, removed about one mile from the city. They would celebrate in that monastery once every year a great and horrible festival... When their festival was coming near, they had a custom of kidnapping a man and sequestering him from year to year. At the time of the festival they would sacrifice him, sever his head, and place a coin in his mouth. They would put it (the head) in a niche, worship it, and practice divination by means of it. Now as the day of their impious festival approached, they wanted to bring a man whom they could prepare for quarantine so that he might serve as their sacrifice for the festival (the year) after the one which was approaching. The leaders of the Manichaens wrote a letter and went to the marketplace in Haran. When a man was found whom they wanted, they took hold of him and said to him: 'Whatever wage you want (you will) receive: go and convey this letter from such-and-such a monastery.'

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C. Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum (2d ed.; Halle, 1928; reprinted, Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1982) 320 offers options like 'window, shelf, recess, niche.'
to him, 'Come, enter (the compound) and relax for a short time: eat some food, and then you may take away an answer for your letter and depart in peace.'

When they brought the man in, they passed from one room into another, and a second, and a third, more than six or seven (in all), until they reached the man who had been previously quarantined since last year and who was destined to serve as sacrifice for the approaching festival. He (the leader) instructed him, 'Sit here next to this man.' And after he sat down, that man (the imminent victim) said to him, 'You poor guy! How unfortunate for you!' Then that (other man) responded, 'Why so?' That (first) one continued, 'I acted the same (as you), and when I came here I found another man who was seated (here). During their festival they sacrificed him, and his head is now in that niche, before which they light a candle. They worship it and perform divination by means of it. Now they are preparing to kill me at this festival, and then you will sit here in my place until the next festival, when you yourself will become the sacrifice. However, if you want to escape from here, listen to me and prepare yourself. Watch for when they are ready to kill me (and) stand by my side. When my head falls upon the ground, snatch it up quickly while scattering my blood and directing (it) toward the door. (Even) if they cry out to you, or if they plead with you, or if they promise you numerous gifts, do not set it down; and if you want to seize you, shake some of the blood at them and they will flee from you.'

The man silently received (this advice) and then did and performed (it) with a noble passion just like he had said to him without omitting anything. When they killed him, he grabbed his head and ran toward the door. They for their part were pleading and shouting for him to put (it) down, but that (man) was not willing (to do so) for any (of their) gifts or promises, nor did he lose his nerve out of fear of them. They were unable to get close to him.

With swift feet he took it (the head) and came before 'Abbas, the 'Emir of Jazira' at that time. When 'Abbas learned what had happened, he dispatched (police), arrested, and imprisoned all of them — men, women, and children. After subjecting them to various types of torture, he impounded everything which they owned, and (thereby) acquired from them more than four or five hundred thousand minas.

These peculiar allegations clarify the insults leveled by Baṣṣār and Hammād against one another. The 'head' which Manichaeans reportedly 'worship' was the product of a gruesome human sacrifice which supposedly took place on an annual basis. An unsuspecting victim, lured within a Manichaean temple complex on some false pretext, was held captive there until he could be ritually slaughtered. His severed head was then installed in a niche, candles were lit in the niche as the Blood Libel was symbolically reenacted by the Manichaean sect. The reason for this attentive service was that the head possessed divinatory powers which were highly valued by the Manichaean religion.

Moreover, Baṣṣār's worse charges were that the head possessed the ability to predict the future — a sacred object which Manichaeans supposedly worshiped. This allegation is particularly interesting as it reflects a common theme in Jewish and Christian anti-Semitism: the Manichaeans were accused of being anti-Semitic, even though they were a heretical Christian group. The 'head' which Manichaeans supposedly worshiped was said to foretell the future, a charge that was leveled against the Manichaeans by their Christian detractors.

The practice was reenacted by the man who was destined to serve as sacrifice for the approaching festival. He was instructed to sit next to the man who was about to be sacrificed, and when the time came, he was to snatch up the man's severed head and run away while scattering his blood. This was said to be a symbolic reenactment of the sacrifice, and it was believed to have divinatory powers.

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immense in which Harran was a place: eat some food, I depart in peace.'

They reached the man and who was destined to die, instructed him, 'Sit, eminent victim' said en that (other man) repeated the same (as you), and tore. During their festivity before which they lighted candles were lit deliberately and performed (it) with a ritual. They for their part were supplied above with the structure of the tale repeated by the first-century antiquity. One might compare the general outline of the Christian reports supplied above with the structure of the tale repeated by the first-century Egyptian anti-Semitic Apion regarding what the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV supposedly discovered when he entered the Jerusalem Temple. Therein, the tale relates, Antiochus encountered a Greek prisoner, who upon beholding the monarch piteously beseeched him and implored his aid. Responding to the king's request for an explanation, the captive informed him that he was a Greek traveler who had been kidnapped by the Jews and then held incommunicado in the Temple. Although treated to sumptuous feasts by his captors, he grew suspicious of their attentions and finally learned the purpose of his quarantine:

The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they...
One can easily discern that several details of the atrocities attributed to the Manichaeans by the Syriac Christian reports provided above are modeled on this Antiochus legend. These include the murder’s synchronization with an annual festival, the involuntary ‘selection’ of an appropriate victim, his sequestration within a ‘sacred’ precinct, and at least with regard to the excerpt from the ‘Khuzistan Chronicle,’ the sensory privileges accorded the victim and a communal consumption of human flesh.

J. Rives has lately supplied a convincing analysis of the ways in which classical and early Christian writers exploit the motif of ritual human sacrifice in their descriptions of social behavior. For Greek and Roman authors of the pre-Christian era, ‘human sacrifice’ serves as a marker of distance from what is accepted as ‘normative’ culture. This distance may be physical, as in the geographic separation of a certain people or tribe from the lands inhabited by Greeks or Romans, but it is more often than not conceptual and hence cultural in nature. From that latter perspective, those peoples or sub-cultures (e.g., Jews; Christians) described as practicing human sacrifice are quintessentially ‘other’: they share neither ‘our’ values nor even ‘our’ humanity, even though they may inhabit the same provinces or cities which ‘we’ do. Manipulation of the motif of ‘human sacrifice’ thus becomes a rhetorical strategy which highlights questions of identity and difference vis-à-vis the dominant (in this case educated Greco-Roman) social and cultural patterns of behavior.

Although emanating centuries later out of a different cultural milieu, the previously cited Syriac Christian testimonia to Manichaean atrocities clearly exploit this same complex of ideas. The identities of the primary actors in this drama change in tandem with the rising (or falling) fortunes and agendas of various political and religious bodies. The triumph of Christianity – and eventually Islam – provides fresh opportunities for an adoption and revision of the older ritual murder discourse in order to combat ideologies and practices perceived to be aberrant, such as Manichaeism. Even though Manichaeans may proclaim their identity as deviants within their communities by expounding the distance, even geographic, between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the denial of their humanity, this distance is most frequently described as physical.

The peculiar type of blood libel whose goal was the kidnapping of a ritual victim for use well attested within the ancient world; however, no specific sacrifice with the motif of some of the dominant sample presentations examined here.

The beleaguered community is eventually represented as the dominant category, its rally point against the Jews, as exemplified by the senses and, while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the gods of Greece, to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life and to deliver him from his miserable predicament.

The man whom they proclaimed as a Jew was cut in half. They suspected him as a Jew, and implored the gods of Greece, to defeat this Jewish plot upon his life and to deliver him from his miserable predicament. 26

The man mentioned was (in later understandings) the Jewish victim they believed to be a Jew, and the origin of their belief was the man's appearance and his self-reporting of his Jewish identity. They would do so, as well.

20 Theodore bar Kon
22 Theodore bar Kona
24 Text translated from the Arabic. For discussion above.
25 See the testimony of the Capuchins regarding the murder of the Syrian Christians in his preceding paragraph.
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proclaim their innocence of such charges, Christians and Muslims construct them as deviants whose very existence is odious to ‘civilized’ society. ‘All of the members of his (i.e., Mani’s) group are wicked: they sacrifice human beings and impudently fornicate during (their) demonic mysteries,’ says Theodore bar Konai, an eighth-century Nestorian bishop whose detailed discussion of the Manichaean religious system is otherwise one of the most reli-
able presentations extant.

The peculiar type of ritual murder allegedly practiced by Manichaeans, one whose goal was the procurement and preparation of the head of the unfortu-

nate victim for service as a means for divination, is one that is surprisingly well attested within both Muslim and Jewish literature of the early medieval period. However, neither the Islamic nor the Jewish sources associate this specific sacrifice with Manichaeans per se; rather, in both instances, the sacrific-
ing community is identified as the pagan inhabitants of Harrān, or as they are most frequently designated in Muslim literature, the Sābians.

The tenth-century Muslim encyclopaedist Ibn al-Nadīm provides the fol-

lowing curious account which is introduced by the editorial rubric ‘Tale about The Head’ (حكاية في الرأس):

The man mentioned formerly says that (this) head was that of a man whose ap-
pearance was (like that) of the planet Mercury, corresponding to what they be-
lieve about the appearance of the stars. When that man is found - the one whose appearance they think corresponds to that of Mercury - he is captured by the use of deception and treachery, and many things are done to him, among which is placing him in oil and borax for a long time until his joints soften. It would be that if his head was pulled, it could be pulled off without dismembering what was showing. And that is why one says that old saying, when one is under stress, ‘He is in the oil.’

They would do this each year when Mercury was in ascension. They believed that the soul of this man visited this head under Mercury’s influence. It (the soul) would speak with its (the head’s) tongue, and would recount what would come to pass and respond to what one would ask of it, for they believed that hu-
man nature was better suited and bore stronger resemblance to the nature of Mer-
cury than (the natures) of the other living beings, and was closer to it with regard to (the powers of) speech, discrimination, and the rest of those things which they believe it has. This is the reason for their glorification of the head and their deception using it.

As for how they prepared it prior to removing it from the corpse and after having done so, as well as what its corpse underwent after the head had been removed

22 Theodore bar Konai, Scholion (CSCO 69; ed. A. Scher; Paris: Carolus Puousielg, 1912) 2.313.4-6: حُكَيَتْ مِنْ نَحْرَانِ مَعْلَمَةٌ مَعْلَمٌ مَعْلَمٌ مَعْلَمٌ مَعْلَمٌ. For discussion about this group, see Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis 3/2 609-14.
25 Apparently the Christian writer Abū Yūsuf ‘Īsā al-Qāfī, who was cited by Ibn al-Nadīm in his preceding paragraph regarding Sābian customs.
26 See the testimony of Pseudo-Majārīf below.

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from it, this has been long established in their book entitled Kitāb al-Hāfīfī. In it are their marvels resulting from incantations, spells, knots, figures, pendants (?) made from the body parts of various types of animals like the pig, donkey, raven, and other such (animals), fumigations, and likenesses of animals engraved on the stones of their signet-rings, which in their opinion are held to work well for a variety of purposes. I myself have seen a number of them engraved on the stones of their signet-rings ... (?) and I have asked them about it, and they maintain that they obtain them in the ancient tombs of their dead and receive blessing through them.20

Although Ibn al-Nadīm strays rather quickly from the ‘divinatory head’ to other types of Sābiān sorcery, it is clear that this is the same ‘head’ which we met in the testimonies rehearsed above, here prepared and revered by the pagan inhabitants of Harrān. Confirmation for the intimate relationship of these curious accounts is supplied by two separate ‘recipes’ contained in the quasi-Hermetic Ghāyat al-hakīm (‘Goal of the Sage’) of Pseudo-Majrītī, an Arabic compendium of magic and occult lore allegedly excerpted from earlier Chaldean, Persian, and Indian sources which later achieved some renown in medieval Europe in its Latin guise as the Picatrix.30 The initial discussion of the Sābiān ‘head’ reads as follows:

They (the Sābiāns) do some odd things which were we to introduce them here would prolong the book. Among them is the head which some people believe can prophesy. This is what they do: they place it opposite the head of a boy (?). And for this (head) they use a fair-haired man with blue eyes (and) joined eyebrows (and) abundant hair. They trick him using something he craves until they can lure him into a chamber of the temple — there his clothing is removed and he is seated in a basin previously filled with sesame oil of sufficient quantity to come up to his throat. (The basin) is then covered with its lid — his head sticks out and they fasten down the lid and tighten the connection with lead. Only his head remains (visible), for his body is in the oil. Then they feed him a certain quantity of dried figs which have nose and his face is cutaneous without to drink, and while (he is) ready, cense, take hold c stretches with the rates from his sp: they situate it in residue of olives is incinerated, an incense, and that ticles will be exp and what will tail however, they no tions, (the hea things and inform question it about posing of the ren and obtain omen: hands and the po: do. They do not c head’s name. The ders to enter their them from the ter

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They (the Sābiāns) could not enter at which had been e the lion (i.e., the Cyprus, as we h: decorated, and n places where he and fragrant plan fell he was carried oil and received s them in a soup th peas, rice, Indian of the month Iy

29 Compare the translation of Dodge, Filistis 2:753-54. For further texts and discussion, see Chwolsohn, Sabiāb 2:130-32, 137-55; de Goeje, Mémoire posthume 13-16; Green, City of the Moon God 178-80.
31 See de Goeje, Mémoire posthume 85 n.2. A better reading is perhaps ‘facing the head of the Dragon’ (النمر, i.e., the lion): see W. Hartner, "Notes on Picatrix," Isis 56 (1965) 448-49.
32 908-932 CE.
fics which have been soaked in sesame oil every day and burn incense near his nose and his face (for the group terms it ‘incense’) and they utter their verbal incantations without ceasing (these actions) for forty days. They give him no water to drink, and whatever he excretes remains in that oil. (He remains in this condition) while his sinews soften, his joints are loosened, and his veins swell, and due to his ‘softening’ he can be shaped like wax. Then on the day when he is (deemed) ready, they gather there, recite their verbal incantations, burn their incense, take hold of his head, and pull it away from his first vertebrae. It (the head) stretches with their (tugging) and the veins adjacent to it until it completely separates from his spinal column, while all his torso remains behind in the oil. Then they situate it in a window-niche on a pile of cinders which they prepare from the residue of olives mixed with the ashes produced from when the rest of his corpse is incinerated, and they drape it with a fluffy cotton cloth. They then burn their incense, and that head communicates to them (information regarding) whether articles will be expensive or cheap, whether there will be a change of government, and what will take place in the world. Its eyes do not lose the power of sight; however, they no longer blink. Should they sometimes neglect some astral devotions, it (the head) will demand restitution from them. It rebukes them about things and informs them about what is enclosed in their minds. Sometimes they question it about science or technology, and it answers them. When they are disposing of the remains of its body from the basin, they extract its liver, dissect it, and obtain omens from it as to what they need to do; similarly, the bones of its hands and the position of the joints furnish evidence regarding what they need to do. They do not cut their hair, nor do they eat or drink anything except in its (the head’s) name. They were exposed during the reign of Muqadir:32 he issued orders to enter their temple, and inside it they discovered the head. After expelling them from the temple, he saw to its burial.33

The second description of the Sâbian ‘head’ in the Ghâyat al-ḥakîm reads as follows:

They (the Sâbi ans) had a ‘serpent-chamber’: it was a temple which the public could not enter and into which no one could come. In it there was an artificial pit which had been excavated and made empty. When the sun entered (the sign of) the lion (i.e., the constellation Leo), they would procure a fair-haired youth from Cyprus, as we have described, for the making of the ‘head.’ He was clothed, decorated, and made to enter and wander about within it (the temple) among places where he could enjoy himself, as there were present there trees, flowers, and fragrant plants, and he could drink until he became intoxicated. When night fell he was carried to that temple and placed in that pit. He was soaked in sesame oil and received some dried red rose petals which were picked for him, being fed them in a soup that combined within it seven ingredients: mustard, lentils, chickpeas, rice, Indian peas, lupine, and wheat. And when it was the twenty-eighth day of the month Iyyâr, they made him sniff and sneeze; afterwards, he was blind-

32 908-932 CE.
folded and they brought him out at night to a deserted road and severed his head from his body. They buried the body, carried the head to Dayr Kūdī,24 and set it on top of an idol, where it would emit an unpleasant howl. From its howl they derived information as to whether the number of Śâbiāns would increase or diminish, and whether they would enjoy favorable fortune or not. This (practice) was prescribed for them by a certain sage known as Barham al-Barhāmi. He died in the land of India, and this name now designates a clan in India; namely, the Barahīmā.25 They have very many practices which were we to introduce them here would prolong the book and carry us away from our purpose.26

It seems obvious that the testimonia surveyed thus far, whether directed against Manicheans or Śâbiāns, exploit a common formula. They feature a number of stock components: the ‘head’ allegedly revered by the sect is an actual human head; it is procured by deception from a ‘foreigner’ (i.e., stranger to the sect); its preparation for cultic use is usually coordinated with the sect’s festal and/or astral calendar; the head supposedly ‘prophesies’ by emitting certain sounds or even intelligible speech; and it is customarily housed in a secret place of honor where certain prescribed devotional practices are rendered to it. On at least three separate occasions27 the government intervened in order to put a stop to the horrible practice. Government interest in the suppression of the gruesome rite is also signaled by the eleventh-century Muslim polymath Brūrīnī within his own otherwise exemplary and sober discussion of Śâbian religiosity: ‘Likewise the Christian ‘Abd al-Maṣūḥ b. Iṣḥāq al-Kindī in his response to the book of ‘Abbālāh b. Ismāʿīl al-Ḥāšīmī reports that they are famous for sacrificing human beings, but that they are unable today (to do so) openly.’28 Does this last clause imply that the Śâbiāns persisted in doing so in private? The notion of conspiratorial activity

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24 See Ibn al-Nadim above.
26 Text translated from de Goeje, Mémoire posthume 58.2:17; compare the text of Pseudo-Maṣūḥī, Das Ziel des Weisen (ed. Ritter) 228.7-20 (text); Ritter-Plesner, “Picatrix” 240-41 (translation).
27 Assuming the sources are relatively accurate in their chronological notices, the Chronicle of Zuqqūn and Pseudo-Maṣūḥī name specific officials who can be dated to the late eighth and early tenth centuries respectively. While the Khustain Chronicle does not name a particular figure, the compilation of the Chronicle itself is not likely to be later than 680 CE, and if its narrative juxtaposition alongside the aforementioned Jewish messianic disturbance can be used for relative chronological sequencing, then the alleged attempt to decapitate the student transpired during the seventh century. With regard to the messianic disturbance, see S. W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews (2d ed.; 18 vols.; New York and Philadelphia: Columbia University Press and Jewish Publication Society, 1952-83) 5.184; 375 n.46; also S. M. Wasserstrom, Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 22, although it is unclear why he dates the uprising “around the year 720.”
28 Brūrīnī, Akhārī (ed. Sachau) 205.7-9.9; and also Ḥasan ibn Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Masāʿī on the subject of the notability of the sect’s festal observances, see 3.10.1 (2000) 1-19.
and severed his head Dayr Khādī, and set it on. From its howl they would increase or di-
or not. This (practice) māl al-Barāhī. He died in India; namely, the we to introduce them purpose.50

ar, whether directed nula. They feature a red by the sect is an a 'foreigner' (i.e.,edly 'prophesies') by nd it is customarilyl devotional practices he government inter-
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and sober reports that they are unable today (to do persisted in doing so

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al notices. The Chronicle led to the late eighth and not name a particular fig-

160 CE, and if its narraturbarulence can be used for ate the student transpired see S.W. Baron, A Social phosphadelpia: Columbia Uni-

it also S.M. Wasserstrom, 'am (Princeton: Princeton around the year 720.)

وذلك حكي عبد السلام بن في جواهار عن كتاب عبد الله.

in private? The notices examined thus far expose precisely this kind of secret, conspiratorial activity on the part of both Ṣabians and Manichaeans!

It is of course absurd to suppose that either religious community engaged in ritual murder for the sake of a divinatory 'head'. As we have seen, accusations of this sort serve a rhetorical purpose in establishing the social boundaries among the constituent groups of a particular culture or civilization.59 What is most intriguing about the present case is that an identical unusual and abhorrent practice is ascribed by both Christian and Muslim writers to two very different yet contemporaneous Mesopotamian religions. This perplexing circumstance is surely related to the apparent synonymity between the labels 'Mani-


can (s)' and 'Ṣābi'ūn' for a number of post-ninth century Muslim authors. For example, a recently discovered tractate from the tenth-century Ḫarṭī theologist al-Māturīdī flatly states that 'the doctrine of the Ṣābiūn is the same as the doctrine of the Manichaeans'; 40 a similar assertion is made by Abū l Ma‘ālī in his eleventh-century Bayān al-Adyān.41 Birūnī remarks that the Manichaeans living in Transoxania 'were known as Ṣābiūn'.42 Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī,43 apparently following the lead of the early Ismāʿīlī authority al-Nasafī, considers the Ṣābiūn to be the disciples of Mani, Bardašan, and Marcion,44 the preeminent representatives of dualist theology in the Islamicate realms.45 However, S.M. Stern has persuasively shown that the key determinant for this synonymy is not an identity of doctrinal or behavioral substance (as some scholars have mistakenly concluded) but rather an identity of ideological relation: Manichaeism and Šābānism, viewed through the spectacles of the sanctioned Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), are simultaneously 'polytheist' aberrations and deviant heresies. Stern has also sug-

39 In addition to the important article of Rives cited above, see now D. Frankfurter, "Ritual as Accusation and Atrocity: Satanic Ritual Abuse, Gnostic Libertinism, and Primal Murders," HR 40 (2001) 352-80.


44 S.M. Stern, "Abū Hātim al-Raḍī on Persian Religion," Studies in Early Ismā'īlism (Jerusa-


45 On the archetypal status of this dualist triumvirate which was taken over from Christian writers like Ephrem, see F. de Blois, "Dualism in Iranian and Christian Traditions," JRAS series 3.10.1 (2000) 1-19.
gested a plausible cultural locale for this particular development. According to historical sources, it is in the city of Harran in northern Mesopotamia where the name ‘Sābian’ acquired its association with polytheist paganism. It is surely not accidental that the same city serves as the most common setting for the testimonies about human sacrifice, whether Sābian or Manichaean, examined above. The toponym ‘Harran’ would thus seem to be of some importance in the generation of a matrix of intertwined images involving ritual murder, talking ‘heads,’ and pagan depravity.

Confirmation for the crucial significance of the locale of Harran in this chain of imagery is supplied by a series of Jewish sources whose dating is roughly contemporaneous with the first two centuries of Muslim hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean world: i.e., the seventh and eighth centuries of the Common Era. These sources are concerned with the exegetical explication of a peculiar term occurring in one episode within the narrative cycle of the biblical patriarch Jacob. According to the biblical text, when Jacob suddenly effects his unannounced departure from his father-in-law Laban’s estate in Harran, his wife Rachel seizes that opportunity to steal ‘her father’s teraphim.’

The Hebrew word teraphim, usually glossed in early translations and commentaries as ‘idols’ or ‘images,’ apparently denotes some type of material accessory to cultic activity and would seem to have a function in the context of divination. At this point in the Genesis narrative, it is exceedingly unclear why Rachel would take these objects. Although there are other biblical references to teraphim, the precise meaning of the term remains unknown, and hence later interpreters are not shy in suggesting possible explanations of the enigmatic word and motivations for Rachel’s theft. One group of these exegetical sources is particularly pertinent for the present investigation.

Midrash Tanhuma. A homiletic collection of scriptural interpretations keyed to the weekly Torah readings, will serve as our first example of this current. The text is cited as it is rendered in the standard printed version examined by the present author do not differ substantially from what is given here:

50 Midrash Tanhuma
51 Due to censorship
52 Note also HUC
53 Da’at Zekenim
54 Also translated as Harran. Text cited from seum Add. 27051 (Jerusalem: Ktav, 1971) 320 (Hebrew section). Mann uses primarily a manuscript from the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in conjunction with previous publications of fragments by Pozanski and Wertheimer and another manuscript in the Sasso Collection in London (ibid. 270).

... and how did Rachel slaughter him a family of unclean sacrificed (appropriate) in a niche in (the corpse) would speak falsehood on uproot...
... and how did they make (teraphim)? They would bring a first-born man and
slaughter him and treat him with salt and spices. Then they would write the name
of an unclean spirit upon a golden (piece of) sheet-metal and place the sheet with
(appropriate) incantations beneath its (the corpse’s) tongue. They would deposit it
in (a niche in) the wall and burn candles before it and offer it worship, and if (the
corpse) would speak to them in a low voice, as Scripture attests: ‘for the teraphim
speak falsehood(s)’ (Zech 10:2). Therefore Rachel stole them; moreover, she was
intent on uprooting pagan worship from the household of her father.\footnote{Midrash Tonhuma, Waye'el §12: ...}

Note also the similar material in the older versions of Pirqé de-Rabbi
Eliezer,\footnote{Note also HUC Ms. 75 fol. 55a.} here cited from a version preserved in the medieval commentary
Da‘at Zeqenim mi-Ba‘aleh ha-Tosaphot:\footnote{Da‘at Zeqenim mi-Ba‘aleh ha-Tosaphot to Gen 31:19: ...}

It says in Pirqé Rabbi Eliezer: ‘What are teraphim? They would slaughter a first-
born man and sever it (the head from the rest of the body). They would treat it
(the head) with salt and spices. Then they would write the name of an unclean
spirit upon a golden (piece of) sheet-metal and place it beneath his tongue. They
would put it (the head) in (a niche in) the wall and burn a candle before it and offer
it worship, and if (the head) would speak, as Scripture says: “for the
terahmin speak falsehood(s)” (Zech 10:2).\footnote{Da‘at Zeqenim mi-Ba‘aleh ha-Tosaphot to Gen 31:19: ...}

Finally, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan recounts the identical tradition in Ara-
maic garb:

... and Rachel stole the images (רלמין). For they would slaughter a first-born
man and cut off his head and treat it with salt and spices. Then they would write
incantations on a golden (piece of) sheet-metal and place it beneath his tongue.
They would install it in (a niche in) the wall and it would speak with them. These
are those things her father would bow down before.\footnote{Note also HUC Ms. 75 fol. 55a.}

A sober consideration of these Jewish sources – sources which find no par-
allel in pre-Islamic midrashic or talmudic discussions of the meaning of
terahmin - results in the indisputable recognition that they are intimately inter-
twined with the aforementioned Christian and Muslim accusations of ritual
murder and decapitation directed against the Manichaens and the Sâbians.

\footnote{J.C. Reeves}
Yet these latter sources display no discernible interest in either Manichaean or Sábiân as avatars of a sinister Mesopotamian underworld of religious depravity. Instead, their primary intent is to shed light on the nature of the enigmatic teraphim appearing in this biblical narrative. The crucial equation effected by these Jewish sources between the divinatory teraphim of Laban and the disembodied heads allegedly revered by Manichaean and Sábiân hinges upon the cultural valence of the toponym Harrân. 'Pagan' Harrân (cf. Josh 24:2) after all is the locale where 'Laban the Aramaean' (לֵבַן הָארָם)55 lived and from which Jacob wished to flee. Harrân's stubborn allegiance to its 'pagan' roots assumed a legendary status in the textual universe of late antiquity, and it is ultimately responsible, as Stern has shown, for its inhabitants' eventual (post-ninth century) identification with the cryptic 'Sábiân' of the Qur'ān (Q 2:62; 5:69; 22:17). Finally, as signaled above, Harrân is the city most prominently associated with both the Manichaean and Sábiân veneration of the 'head.' It is thus hardly surprising that Laban, one of the two biblical characters traditionally typecast as exponents of foreign idolatry,56 should be eventually associated with this ancient slur and also portrayed as a devotee of the 'head.'

One final issue which will require further careful investigation involves the establishment of a plausible sequence of sources and influences for the ancient construction and application of this 'blood-libel' in its various stages. Rumors about ritual murder within exotic eastern cults are already circulating during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but precisely how and under which circumstances does this unusual form of the 'blood-libel' emerge? Why a disembodied talking head?57 From the literary-critical standpoint, our extant sources are thoroughly interlocked and yield ambiguous answers. Nevertheless, the peculiar motif of a 'head' which 'talks' and offers guidance to a religious community may point to a possible resolution of this conundrum.

According to several sources, Manichaean as part of their annual Bema-festival commemorating the death and ascension of their founder would install an icon or portrait of a 'head.' Thus their communal practice seems to have been recovered.58 Also the internal ritual function of 'Mani-heads,' if you will, in the context of a festival where other ritual acts are also ritualized, is a familiar motif in the Muslim historian Ma'ād al-Band, who was committed adherents of the 'pagan' and so worship them with incense and images. Images of Manichaean veneration, as the following are the results of our investigation, with which we began:

'Alā'ī b. al-Band, who was advocating the to spit upon idolaters. See, for example, Zohar 3:207b-208a and the lengthy list of citations supplied by P. Partner, The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth (Oxford, 1982; reprinted, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 34-35, 77-78, 138-44. I am grateful to Mr. Tudor Sala for calling this item to my attention.

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55 See Gen 25:20; 31:20; 24: cf. 28:5. The gentilic 'Aramaean' eventually functions in Jewish literature as a semantic marker for 'pagan.' See T. Nüdeke, "Die Namen der aramäischen Nation und Sprache," ZDMG 25 (1871) 113-31, esp. 115ff, where a number of examples are provided. Compare also the Hebrew text of Deut 26:5 with its Aramaic renditions in the targumim: note also Gen. Rab. 74.7.

56 Laban and Balaam are frequently linked in medieval Jewish literature as malevolent sorcerers and idolaters. See, for example, Zohar 3:207b-208a and the lengthy list of citations supplied by P. Partner, The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth (Oxford, 1982; reprinted, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 34-35, 77-78, 138-44. I am grateful to Mr. Tudor Sala for calling this item to my attention.

57 The idol 'Baphomet' (an apparent distortion of 'Muhammad') allegedly venerated by the medieval Knights Templar is sometimes described as a skull or a human head. See P. Partner, The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and Their Myth (Oxford, 1982; reprinted, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993) 34-35, 77-78, 138-44. I am grateful to Mr. Tudor Sala for calling this item to my attention.

58 See M. Tardieu, Le manichéisme (Collège de France: Gallimard, 1979); cf. also A. Adam, Texte zu den Arabischen Forschungen 12 (1934-36) 69, 72, 74.

The crucial equation hinges on Albeck: (Colloge de France, 1952-1972)." in idem, Sur le manichéisme et autre essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) 257-58; 389-94, esp. 391. Puech therein calls attention to Eusebius's report about the adherents of Simon Magus who similarly 'prostrate themselves before pictures and images of Simon himself and of Helena, who was mentioned with him, and undertake to worship them with incense and sacrifices and libations' (Hist. eccl. 2.13.6; translation cited is that of K. Lake of the Loeb Classical Library edition).


61 The caliph Walid II (743-744 CE).


This seeming proliferation of 'Mani-heads,' whether produced for the purposes of adoration or of legal entrapment, perhaps points us in the right direction.

an icon or portrait of Mani upon the festal dais to serve as the focal point of their communal praise and adoration. A few portraits of Mani have in fact been recovered, although it is unclear whether these surviving images had an internal ritual function. At any rate, what is certain is that portraits of Mani — 'Mani-heads,' if you will — had a role in the Manichaean cult within the context of a festival which was celebrated just once a year. 'Mani-heads' were also ritually manipulated by his community's opponents. The tenth-century Muslim historian Mas'ūdi informs us that in order to escape execution by the state, prisoners arrested under the suspicion of being Manichaean were compelled to spit upon a picture of Mani, a reputation calculated to expose the committed adherent who would presumably recoil from committing such impiety. Images of Mani were even employed for the purposes of proselytization, as the following anecdote recounted by Abū'ī Faraj al-Isfahānī, the tradent with whom we began this investigation, demonstrates:

'Abā'ī b. al-Bandār said: Al-Walīd was a zindaq. There was a man from Kaḥb who was advocating the doctrine of dualism. I visited al-Walīd one day and that Kaḥb was with him, and between them there was a basket whose top was fastened with what appeared to me to be green silk. He (i.e., the caliph) said, 'Come closer, O 'Abā'ī,' and so I approached and he lifted up the silk. Inside the basket was a human image. Because mercury and ammonia had been applied to its eyelids, it would blink as if it were moving. He said, 'O 'Abā'ī,' this is Mani! God sent no prophet prior to him, nor has He sent a prophet after him!' I replied, 'O Commander of the Faithful! Fear God and do not allow this charlatan to mislead you from your faith!' The Kalbi said to him, 'O Commander of the Faithful! Did I not warn you that 'Abā'ī could not tolerate this tradition?'

This specimen of 'Mani-heads,' whether produced for the purposes of adoration or of legal entrapment, perhaps points us in the right direc-
tion for uncovering the origin of the Manichaean 'blood-libel.' Descriptions of the ritual attention annually lavished on portraits or busts of Mani by his devotees during the Bema-festival, after being maliciously distorted by the religion's intolerant opponents, become fanciful tales of idolatrous service, criminal mischief, and ritual decapitation.
MANDAEANS AND MANICHAEANS

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