The Syriac Account of Dionysius of Tell Maḥrē concerning the Assassination of 'Umar b. Al-Khaṭṭāb*

Author(s): Sean W. Anthony


Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/595991](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/595991)

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The Syriac Account of Dionysius of Tell Maḥrē concerning the Assassination of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb*

SEAN W. ANTHONY, University of Oregon

Over a decade has passed since the publication of Andrew Palmer’s immensely useful work *The Seventh Century in West-Syrian Chronicles*. Generally, the product of Palmer’s ambitious undertaking met acclaim and praise, and deservedly so, for Palmer carefully compiled numerous diverse and widely dispersed materials into one accessible volume and presented each in readable English translations accompanied by informative and erudite annotations. Together, these texts cover a period spanning 582–718 A.D., a troublesome and inestimably transformative period in the history of the Near East, but also one notoriously difficult to penetrate due to the relative dearth of contemporary sources and to the historiographical conundrums presented by the later sources to which historians are inexorably bound. Among the various chronicles Palmer’s work includes, certainly the pièce de résistance is his reconstituted text of the lost secular

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3 The only complaint one might direct against the work is the fact that his bibliographic citations are quite sparse. This feature could be easily remedied in a second edition; for now, see the review by Schmidt and Brandes.
history of Dionysius of Tell Mahrē (d. 845), a text that constitutes by far the longest item included in the volume. Palmer ostensibly bases his reconstruction of Dionysius’s text on the anonymous Chronicle of 1234, which he assumes (the assertion is disputable) preserves “Dionysius faithfully, barring omissions and scribal corruptions.” This he does while simultaneously recognizing that large portions of Dionysius’s chronicle also appear in the universal history of the Jacobite patriarch Michael the Syrian. Palmer often includes those sections that do not appear in the Chronicle of 1234, but instead appear in Michael’s Chronicle, in the footnotes, although preferring the readings of the anonymous chronicler over those of Michael.

The following essay is concerned principally with a passage found in Palmer’s translation of this reconstituted text of Dionysius’s secular history—in particular a key pericope relating a brief account of the assassination of the second caliph ʿUmar b. al-Ḵaṭṭāb (r. 12–23/634–44). Palmer, I believe, has unfortunately mistranslated a key phrase in the passage. Insofar as no reviewer, to my knowledge, has commented upon this error, this essay shall address the passage in order to dispel any source of potential confusion. The aim of this paper is not to diminish the considerable value of Palmer’s contribution by focusing on a single blemish of his labors. It is, rather, precisely because of the misinterpretation of the second caliph ʿUmar’s assassination, one wonders why this has been the case. Dionysius’s account as presented here offers us a somewhat conventional narrative of ʿUmar’s death with one important exception: the text attributes a rather unconventional motive to the disgruntled slave who assassinates the caliph—namely, that ʿUmar neglected the slave’s pleas for intervention and protection against his sexually abusive master. While the Arabic historiographical tradition presents numerous details about this slave’s discontent and motives, none of the texts mention or give any indication of sexual abuse, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, the impression left by Palmer’s translation is that Dionysius offers us information (perhaps calumnious, perhaps not) unparalleled in the Islamic historiographical tradition.

This impression, however, is a false and misleading one, for the Syriac text actually contains no mention of the slave’s sexual molestation at the hands of his master. Insofar as Palmer’s translation actually abbreviates slightly the text of the Chronicle of 1234, I provide my own translation of the text in full below:

After a reign of twelve years ʿUmar was killed on November 4, a Thursday. The reason for his assassination was as follows. One of the Quraysh had a Roman slave whom he had several times sexually abused. The slave took his grievance to ʿUmar; but whether from absentmindedness, or because he was too busy with the affairs of the government, he did nothing about it. It was this slave who attacked ʿUmar while he was praying in the mosque. He ripped open his stomach with a knife and he died on the instant.

The exceptional amount of anecdotal detail dedicated by Dionysius to the reign of ʿUmar and his successor, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (r. 23–35/644–56) is rare and has been noticed before, but such notices have largely been only perfunctory rather than detailed. Given the manner in which Palmer has translated this account of ʿUmar’s assassination, one wonders why this has been the case. Dionysius’s account as presented here offers us a somewhat conventional narrative of ʿUmar’s death with one important exception: the text attributes a rather unconventional motive to the disgruntled slave who assassinates the caliph—namely, that ʿUmar neglected the slave’s pleas for intervention and protection against his sexually abusive master. While the Arabic historiographical tradition presents numerous details about this slave’s discontent and motives, none of the texts mention or give any indication of sexual abuse, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, the impression left by Palmer’s translation is that Dionysius offers us information (perhaps calumnious, perhaps not) unparalleled in the Islamic historiographical tradition.

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‘Umar the king of the Arabs,10 after reigning for twelve years, was killed on 4 November, a Thursday. The cause of his murder was that when a Roman slave of one of the Quraysh became distraught at the house of his master who mistreated him, he complained against him several times to ‘Umar (‘abdāhā bad rūmāyā ḍ-had men qūrayṣiyāyā kad ettīq lwāt māreh da-mtēleṣ lwā mēh zalmātā qali law lwāt ‘Omar). That king, whether due to forgetfulness or because he was occupied with the administration of the kingdom, disregarded him. Then, that slave attacked ‘Umar while he prayed in the mosque and struck him with a dagger [ba-skīnā] in the abdomen and ripped it open. In due time [‘edānā], he died.11

Most of the divergences between Palmer’s translation and my own are minor; however, one variant reading in particular ought to attract the reader’s attention. In agreement with translations prior to Palmer’s, my translation lacks any mention of sexual molestation,12 and it focuses on the nondescript mistreatment of the slave. The key words informing us of the slave’s condition vis-à-vis his master here are two: the passive verb ettīq, ‘to be grieved, distraught, straightened,’ and so on, from the root ṣ-ḥ-ŷ (approximately equivalent to the Arabic ḍ-ḥ-ŷ),13 and a passive participle metēleṣ, ‘afflicted, constrained, straightened,’ and so on, from the root ṣ-ḥ-ŷ (approximately equivalent to the Arabic ḍ-ḥ-ŷ).14 The syntax here is relatively simple, so the difficulty is mostly lexical. Palmer’s translation, however, finds no grounding in the standard lexica. Albeit a tad vague, the Syriac here is nevertheless certainly not capacious enough to accommodate Palmer’s reading nor, for that matter, to preclude any justification for this rendering. The Syriac certainly does not demand such a reading. It is mystifying, therefore, that Palmer does not provide so much as a footnote for his unconventional reading.

Palmer’s error could have easily been avoided if the passage had been viewed in the context of the Islamic historiographical tradition upon which Dionysius depends for his information; this contention is one that requires further elaboration. First, however, it would be fortuitous to examine the other redaction of Dionysius’s text. Michael the Syrian offers a version of Dionysius’s text that helps to illuminate the pericope found in the Chronicle of 1234, for although Michael abbreviates Dionysius’s text in places, his version exhibits details absent also in the text of the anonymous chronicler. Michael’s version reads:

‘Umar, the king of the Arabs, after reigning for twelve years, was killed in this way: A slave, a metalworker [saqālā] by trade, when mistreated by his Qurashi master [kad men māreh qūrayṣiyāyā metēleṣ lwā] went before ‘Umar and complained against his lord several times [wa-qbal ‘al rabbēh zalmātā]. Then, whether because he was busy with the administration of the kingdom or due to forgetfulness, he disregarded [him]. That slave became enraged with the king [etḥamat ‘abdā ba-skinā ‘al malkā], and while he [‘Umar] prayed, he struck him with a dagger [ba-skīnā] and he died.15

While Michael’s version and that of the Chronicle of 1234 clearly exhibit textual departures, the impression made by the striking textual affinities between the two texts confirms the dependence of both on Dionysius. Although Michael’s text gives a slightly more truncated version of the account, it also includes details omitted by the anonymous chronicler; all of these details fit organically into the narrative and in all

10 That is, malkā d-ṭayyāyē. Originally referring to the Arab tribe of Ṭayy (also Ṭayīy), as a result of their migration to the North, the name of the tribesmen in Syriac, Ṭayyayē, came to refer eventually to all Arabs; cf. Irfan Shahîd, “Ṭayy,” EI, 4 (1984): 89–124.
11 Chronicle of 1234, 1: 261.6–14.
12 Chabot translates the key passage as follows: “Hæc fuit causa caedis eius. Servus quidam romanus alcius coraishitae cum ab hero suo vexaretur et saepius affligeratur, de eo conquestus apud Omarem”; see Chabot, trans., Anonymous auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinentes I, CSCO 109/sc. syri 56 (Paris, 1937), 204.15–17.
13 Payne Smith, 2: 2838b; cf. Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 1: 1815–17.
likelihood derive from Dionysius’s original account, which seems to have been a bit longer than either of the extant recensions.16

Before moving on to a comparison of this account with the Muslim narratives, some comments on Dionysius’s putative text are in order. It has long been recognized that Dionysius’s account itself should be seen as built upon the template of yet another, earlier Syriac chronicle and, furthermore, as an expansion of this chronicle. The affinities between numerous passages relating events transpiring in the Muslim East between 580 and 750 attributed to Dionysius of Tell Māhre (gleaned from Michael and Chronicle of 1234) and passages found in the chronicles of both Theophanes (d. 818) and Agapius of Manbij (fl. 940s) have led many to postulate a common Syriac source shared by all three. The first to suggest this, although without access to either Agapius’s history or Chronicle of 1234, was E. W. Brooks, who vacillated between attributing these materials to John bar Samuel and Theophilus of Edessa.17 Later scholars, however, have been much more inclined to attribute the Syriac common source to Theophilus of Edessa, a chief astrologer to the Abbāsid caliph al-Mahdi.18 Hoyland has even ventured to reconstruct this source, although cautiously dubbing his efforts as an outline rather than a full-fledged reconstruction.19 Conrad, more recently, has vigorously argued for the attribution of these materials to Theophilus, demonstrating, moreover, that Dionysius often preserved extended accounts that in reality are attributable to Theophilus of Edessa.20 Given this body of scholarship, then, to what extent can one attribute the account above to Dionysius of Tell Māhre as opposed to Theophilus of Edessa?

If one looks to both Theophanes and Agapius, one finds numerous parallels to Dionysius’s account testifying to the presence of an account of ʿUmar’s death in the Syriac common source. Although the accounts of Theophanes and Agapius are much shorter, important details also occurring in Dionysius’s account occur.

Theophanes’ account reads as follows:

Oumaros, the leader of the Saracens [Σαρακηνὸς ἄρχηγός = malkā d-ṭayyāyē?], was murdered on the fifth of the month of Dios by a Persian apostate21 who found him in prayer and pierced his stomach with a sword, thus depriving him of life after he had been emir for twelve years.22

Generally speaking, the parallels between Dionysius and Theophanes are strong. The only discordance between the two authors’ accounts is Dionysius’s description of ʿUmar’s assassin as a Roman slave and Theophanes’ description of him as a Persian Muslim (Gk. μαγαρίτης)—more will be said on this below. The contradiction with Dionysius disappears in the case of Agapius, who relates ʿUmar’s death in the following fashion, although with considerably fewer parallels:

In the twelfth year of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, a man known as Abū Luʾluʾa headed for ʿUmar watching him while he stood praying. When he bent in prayer, he stabbed him numerous times.

16 Hoyland makes the argument quite succinctly: “At different times each will have a longer account than the other; since historical information about the seventh century and eighth century was scarce, it is unlikely that either was able to add new details, so they must be abbreviating” (Seeing Islam, 418 n. 101). It should be noted here as well that the presence of the account of ʿUmar’s assassination in Michael’s account and Chronicle of 1234 makes it very unlikely that this material derives from the Arabic materials the anonymous chronicle apparently utilized to supplement Dionysius’s account (see ibid., 419 and n. 105).


He killed him, and he died after ruling for twelve
years.23

One can see from each of these accounts a certain
shared structure; however, one also can see the obvi-
ous divergences between them. Insofar as the texts
of Dionysius and Theophanes maintain the closest
affinities in wording, despite one being written in
Syria and the other in Greek, one would be safe to
assume with regards to this passage that they pre-
serve Theophilus’s text more faithfully than does
Agapius. Agapius includes other details in his ac-
count of ʿUmar’s death not present in the others, too;
he knows the name of ʿUmar’s murderer to be Abū
Luʾluʾa and that the caliph died from multiple stab
wounds. If these details were original to Theophilus’s
account, then Dionysius’s account may ultimately be
yet another abridgment, albeit a slightly longer one,
of Theophilus’s text. This scenario, I believe, is highly
unlikely as none of these details is confirmed by either
Dionysius or Theophanes and none exhibits details
with regard to the slave’s name and the stab wounds
that are unparalleled in the Syriac accounts. Although,
as Hoyland asserts, “Agapius has almost no informa-
tion for the years 630–754 that is not drawn from
Theophilus of Edessa,” he has also noted that one
can also detect Agapius’s utilization of an unnamed
Muslim chronology.24 From this chronology, Agapius
presumably culled extra information on the details of
ʿUmar’s murder.25

Much of this will become clearer as our analysis
progresses below, but for now it would be useful to
enumerate what narrative elements originally belonged
to Dionysius’s narrative based on the two accounts
above. If one limits the potential contents of Theophi-
lus’s original account to the overlaps between the ac-
counts of Dionysius, Theophanes, and Agapius, then
one has the impression that Theophilus’s account
originally provided merely a skeletal narrative entry
on the caliph’s death, which Dionysius expanded into
his account using supplemental materials. Based on
a comparative reading of Michael’s text and that of
Chronicle of 1234, a list of the elements likely to have
been part of Dionysius’s account has been provided
below. Only those elements found in Chronicle of 1234
or Michael’s version have been noted as such. Sup-
plementing our reading of Theophanes and Agapius,
those elements of Dionysius’s account possibly present
in that of Theophilus as well, whether wholly or in part,
have been marked in bold type. Hence, Dionysius’s ac-
count likely included the following narrative elements:

1. the precise date of ʿUmar’s murder
(Theophanes and Agapius)
2. the slave’s origin (Chronicle of 1234 only;
Theophanes)
3. the slave’s trade (Michael only)
4. the reason for ʿUmar’s murder by the slave
5. the slave’s anger (Michael only)
6. ʿUmar murdered while praying
(Theophanes and Agapius)
7. the place of the murder (Chronicle of 1234
only)
8. the slave’s weapon (Theophanes)
9. the fatal wound to the abdomen
(Theophanes and Agapius)

More elements than these may have been present in
Dionysius’s original text but remain unknown to us;
however, our list above is likely to be largely complete.
The contents of Theophilus’s account are, by contrast,
more obscure. It will be argued below that each of the
key constituent elements of Dionysius’s accounts enu-
erated above derives from an Arabic source, which
provided the narrative outline and details imposed
by him upon the annalistic entry for ʿUmar’s death
penned by Theophilus. In what follows, each of these
elements will be analyzed in an attempt to identify
which Arabic account(s) Dionysius employed in the
construction of his own Syriac account.

The Dionysian Account and
the Islamic Tradition

As would be expected, the Islamic accounts of ʿUmar’s
murder and death amount to a vast corpus of reports
(Ar. ʾakhbār, sing. khabar) of diverse and often con-
tradictory contents. There are, nevertheless, a number of

8 (1912): 479.
24 Hoyland, Seeing Islam, 441.
25 Agapius’s naming of the assassin is, perhaps, the strongest
indication of this. The West-Syrian chronicles, in general, tend
to neglect naming ʿUmar’s assassin. Among the Syriac chroniclers,
the Nestorian metropolitan Elias of Nisibis (d. 1049) is the earliest to
mention Abū Luʾluʾa by name as the murderer of ʿUmar; see Opus
chronologicum, ed. E. W. Brooks, CSCO 62/scr. syri 21 (Louvain,
1962), 135.5, 10.
sources that provide enough information to enable us to make some general observations. These materials do not stand out as unique among the general trends characteristic of Islamic historiography and, thus, obviate the need to repeat the scholarly observations on this literature and the debates thereon. Suffice it to say that most of our information derives from second/eighth century accounts redacted and compiled together in works mostly dating from the third/ninth century onwards—a considerable distance from the events they ostensibly relate. While Islamic accounts do indeed exhibit their fair share of implausible, legendarily, and hagiographic literary elements, they are also united by salient events, persons, and circumstantial details.

One finds a striking number of *akhbār* that foreshadow ʿUmar’s imminent death with various literary tropes and schema, mainly in the form of scriptural prophecy, ominous dreams, cautionary admonitions, and even warnings of suspicious activity. One encounters with predictable frequency a portentous dream/vision of a red rooster pecking three times at ʿUmar’s abdomen. Different reports attribute the dream to different persons. Thus, one finds in some accounts that the dream comes to Khawla bt. Hakīm, who then tearfully reveals to ʿUmar his fate.27 More often one finds, however, that the caliph ʿUmar himself receives a sleeping vision of a rooster, inspiring him to announce the annunciation of his predestined moment of death (Ar. *ajāl*) in a sermon delivered in Medina.28 Other accounts further add that ʿUmar’s dream only became intelligible after being interpreted by Asmāʾ b. ʿAbī l-Faṭāmī, ʿUmayṣ (d. 39/659–60).29 Scripture too plays a role. As so often proves to be the case for major events in this period, the Jewish convert Kaʿb al-Aḥbār lends the caliph his knowledge of the Jewish scriptures to issue his own fey pronouncement foreshadowing the caliph’s fate, declaring:

“O Commander of the Faithful, make your testament for you will die this year!”

“What is it that you know, Kaʿb?” said ʿUmar.

He said, “I have found you in the Torah.”30

“I implore you, by God!” ʿUmar said. “Did you really find my name and *nasab* [patronymic] ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb?”

“By God, no, but I did find your description, your conduct, your deeds, and your time.”31

Not always are these warnings supernatural; often they are merely perspicacious. In one *khabar*, ʿUyayna b. Ibn Abī Shayba, 7: 437; Ibn Shabba, 3: 895; Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥān, 48. On seeing a rooster in one’s sleep as a premonition of death, see al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-bayānāt al-kubrā* (Cairo, 1978), 1: 496–97 (cited in Roberto Tottoli, “At Cock-Crow: Some Muslim Traditions about the Rooster,” *Der Islam* 75 [1999]: 143 and n. 26).


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Hisn, a chieftain of the B. Fazāra, warns ʿUmar to guard against the non-Arabs (Ar. aʿājim; sometimes Persians, al-ḥamrāʾ) who are increasing in number and even counsels ʿUmar to banish them from Medina. In some versions, he even indicates to ʿUmar the location of his fatal wound while prodding him in the stomach. ʿUmar, to his peril, fails to heed ʿUyayna’s advice and only later as he lies dying reckon the wisdom of ʿUyayna’s counsel.32 Ibn al-Zubayr, to whom an eyewitness account of ʿUmar’s murder is attributed,33 recalls in one account, “I was walking alongside ʿUmar, and one of the slaves [al-ʾilj] gave him such a look that I began to think that if it were my place, I would have pounced on him [right then].”34

All these embroidered details reflect the early Muslim community’s attempts to reconcile the perplexing imprint left by ʿUmar’s unforeseen, untimely death. ʿUmar’s murder inspired questions such as: How could such a seemingly random event have occurred? and What was the cause behind God’s inscrutable decree that such a treacherous death would befall the leader of the community of Muslims? For this reason, these narratives depict ʿUmar keenly aware of his inexorable fate, which he embraces with pious abandon. These are more theological interpretations of the history of the community of Muslims than dispassionate, purely factual accounts.35 Such being the case, it is hardly surprising that nonconfessional accounts of his death, like those of Dionysius and other Syriac sources, exhibit little interest in such materials, even if they ultimately derive their data from Arabic sources laced with such pious embellishments.

Of a slightly different character, however, are those outwardly more straightforward accounts more pre-occupied with narrating the events leading up to and simultaneous with ʿUmar’s murder. Our distinction here should not be taken too rigidly, for Muslim historians, like their counterparts in other traditions, sometimes treat the non-Arabs (Ar. aʿājim), sometimes Persians, al-ḥamrāʾ) who are increasing in number and even counsels ʿUmar to banish them from Medina. In some versions, he even indicates to ʿUmar the location of his fatal wound while prodding him in the stomach. ʿUmar, to his peril, fails to heed ʿUyayna’s advice and only later as he lies dying reckon the wisdom of ʿUyayna’s counsel.32 Ibn al-Zubayr, to whom an eyewitness account of ʿUmar’s murder is attributed,33 recalls in one account, “I was walking alongside ʿUmar, and one of the slaves [al-ʾilj] gave him such a look that I began to think that if it were my place, I would have pounced on him [right then].”34

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Narrative Elements 1–2

Given that the first literary component of Dionysius’s account—that is, the date of ʿUmar’s death and the length of his reign as twelve years38—probably belonged to the earlier account of Theophilus upon which Dionysius’s account was based, one can safely assume that Dionysius did not depend upon Muslim narratives for this date. Rather, this first element represents the first skeletal entry on ʿUmar’s death penned by Theophilus that served as the basis of Dionysius’s expanded account.

Beginning, then, with our second narrative element, one immediately encounters one of the most problematic and puzzling portions of Dionysius’s text. Dionysius describes ʿUmar’s assassin as a Roman slave, in this case, a slave captured from Byzantine territories. Properly speaking, this assertion finds no parallel in our surviving Arabic accounts. Although one may deem this designation a reflection of the tendency of some Arabic traditions to identify him as a Christian,39

36 Ibn ʿAbbās, 3: 893.
37 A particularly extended version of ʿĀʾisha’s account of ʿUmar’s death can be found in Abū l-ʿArab, K. al-Muḥāsan, 58–60.
38 Syriac sources contradict Muslim ones on this matter which state ʿUmar’s reign lasted 11 years. The error, as speculated by Palmer, most likely derives from an improper conversion between the lunar and solar calendars. See Palmer, Seventh Century, 257.
this is by no means certain, as many Jews were Byzantine as well. Dionysius, it seems, does not simply describe the slave straightforwardly as krīṣṭyānā, because the slave’s religion was not his principal interest. It is nigh impossible to be certain in this matter, for the Islamic tradition also offers incompatible, contradictory data with regard to the slave’s religion. Although many Muslim accounts identify the slave as a Christian, others simply affirm that he was a captive from Nihāwand in eastern Iran while not mentioning his religion. Others state his origins but further specify that he had been a Zoroastrian (Ar. mājūsī) from Nihāwand, and still others are more minimalist, unassumingly describing the assassin as “a man from the non-Arabs” (rajīl min al-ʿajam). The Persian identity of the slave-assassin resonates even in versions of ʿUmar’s dream in which occasionally the rooster pecking at him appears red (dīk āḥmar)—clearly playing off the designation in Arabic of Persians as red-skinned (ḥamrāʾ). Sayf b. ʿUmar (d. ca. 170–93/775–809), citing al-Shaʿbī (d. ca. 370/980), following Caetani, asserts that Abū Luʾluʾa was a Muslim convert at the time of the assassination. Syriac and other non-Muslim chroniclers are equally contradictory on the matter. The anonymous Chronicle of 819 oddly describes ʿUmar’s murderer as an “Indian slave” (ʿabīdā hindīwīyāt), which may reflect the claim that he was said to be from Nihāwand in the east (but which admittedly lies quite far from Hind proper). Theophanes, who like Dionysius likely utilized a chronography of Theophilus of Edessa, claims that a Persian convert (Gk. Πέρσης Πέρσης μαγαρίτης) stabbed ʿUmar.

That Theophanes, who like Dionysius also depends on Theophilus, gives different information than Dionysius with regards to the slave’s origins raises some interesting questions with regard to the original content of Theophilus’s entry on ʿUmar’s murder. Given that Theophanes’ designation of the slave as Persian corroborates more perfectly the claims of the mainstream Arabic accounts, does Theophanes therefore offer a better-preserved version of Theophilus’s text? Could the version of Chronicle of 1234 be a corrupt text? It is not difficult to imagine the ʿAbbasid caliph of Persia, whose authority, not too convincingly claims that ʿUmar’s assassin “was a Nihāwandī whom the Romans had taken captive during the wars with Persia, but the Muslims took him captive thereafter [from Byzantine lands?] so he was known by the name of the place where he had been taken captive.” There seems to be scarcely any grounding for Abbott’s and Caetani’s assertion that Abū Luʾluʾa was a Muslim convert at the time of the assassination. Syrian and other non-Muslim chroniclers are equally contradictory on the matter. The anonymous Chronicle of 819 oddly describes ʿUmar’s murderer as an “Indian slave” (ʿabīdā hindīwīyāt), which may reflect the claim that he was said to be from Nihāwand in the east (but which admittedly lies quite far from Hind proper). Theophanes, who like Dionysius likely utilized a chronography of Theophilus of Edessa, claims that a Persian convert (Gk. Πέρσης Πέρσης μαγαρίτης) stabbed ʿUmar.

The reality of the matter may be that the geographic origins of the slave and his religious identity had been unknown after this knowledge passed into oblivion and that the contradictory assertions of the Muslim historians merely represent the results of educated guesses.

40 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 370–74; Ibn Shabba, 3: 936; Tabari, 1: 3632. 41 Caetani, Annali, 5: 41; Abbott, Studies, 1: 83. 42 See Ibn Saʿd, 3: 936. 43 Chronicon anonymum ad annum Domini 819 pertinentes, ed. E. Barsaum, CSCO 81/ser. syri 36 (p. 12 in Chronicle of 1234, i, 3–22). 44 Caetani, 477 (de Boor, 343). 45 Agapius, PO 8 (1912): 479. 46 Abbott (Studies, 1: 83), following Caetani, asserts that Abū Luʾluʾa had also been considered a Sabaen (Ar. ṣābiʾī), a designation of uncertain meaning (cf. François de Blois, “Sabians,” EQ, 4: 511–13) by which his undetermined, but certainly non-Muslim, religious identity is meant. Caetani himself makes this assertion citing a passage from the Aḥbānī, which records an elegy for ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb recited by ʿĀʾisha but often attributed to a jinnī who had witnessed the caliph’s death. The pertinent line reads: “mā kuntu akhūdā an takūna wafātun bi-kaffāy sabānātī azaqī ṣubāhī tāʾayn marrijī” (Aḥbānī, 9: 159). Caetani apparently misreads sabānātī for sūḥī, translating the entire passage, “Io non avrei mai potuto temere (pensare) che la sua morte avvenisse per mano di un audace—sabaita—dagli occhi azzurri e dale palpebre divaricate” (Annali, 5: 204–5, §387). Often attributed to al-Shamākhī or his brother al-Muzarrah b. Durār (see GAS, 2: 239–41), this line and its companions appear in numerous sources: e.g., Ibn Saʿd, 3: 333–34; Ibn Shabba, 3: 873–77; Balîdhuri, 5: 470; al-Safadī, al-Wafī bi-l-wafayāt, vol. 12, ed. Ramūz Baʿalbakī, Bibliotheca Islamica 6v (Wiesbaden, 1983), 365 (with helpful annotations on variants). As the numerous transmissions of the verse suggest, however, sabānātī is indubitably the correct reading; it is a word, although somewhat obscure, mentioned
name is given as Abū Luʾluʾa; it is a nickname and certainly not his original one. Those accounts that do give him a non-Arab name inevitably call him Fērūz, likely informed by traditions that assert he was Persian.

Although the religion of Abū Luʾluʾa remains obscure, our sources do illuminate his native origins indirectly, albeit not definitively. That our sources, for example, identify his master as al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba—‘Umar’s disgraced former governor of Baṣra who, once deemed rehabilitated after repenting of his scandalous, adulterous affairs during his prior post, went on to become governor in Kūfa—significantly increases the prima facie plausibility of the assertion that the origins of Abū Luʾluʾa are to be located in the eastern rather than western frontier. While governor of Kūfa, al-Mughīra memorably distinguished himself among the armies that captured Nihāwand in 21/642. The historicity of al-Mughīra’s role in the capture of the city, however, is by no means beyond doubt. It is also fascinating to note that the respected Medinan traditionist, Abū l-Zinād (d. 130/748), was reputedly the son of Abū Luʾluʾa’s brother Dhakwān. Our sources variously state that Abū l-Zinād and his father Dhakwān were the mawālī (non-Arab clients) of either the Banū Tamīm or Ramla bt. Shayba b. Rabīʿa (a wife of ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān) although our sources the account. Michael, who takes great pains to identify his source material, is unlikely to have possessed or utilized any additional accounts from which he could have culled the extra narrative details. Moreover, the dual roles of the slave’s occupation and anger find a perfect parallel in the Arabic accounts, providing the first concrete evidence for the dependence of Dionysius’s account on an Arabic precursor.

Beginning with the slave’s occupation, one notices that, although the Syriac accounts state the slave’s occupation in more laconic terms, the assertion that the slave had been a metalworker, or a skilled artisan of some sort, agrees entirely with the Arabic accounts. According to Zuhrī, to cite an early example, the slave had been a metalworker, or a skilled artisan of his master (Dhakwān is an Arabic, not Persian, name), and being that Abū l-Zinād was fetched given the relations of Tamīm with Iran prior to the coming of Islam; see Werner Caskel, Gambarat al-Nasab: Die heute noch erhaltenen Quellen zur Genealogie der Umayyaden (München: 1969), 118 (1968): 276–96; see A. Noth and L. I. Conrad, The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study, trans. M. Bonner, SLAEI 3 (Princeton, 1994), 209–10.

Narrative Elements 3–5

Regarding components 3–5, both elements 3 and 5 appear only in Michael’s recension of Dionysius’s account. Michael’s text, as noted above, states that the slave was a metalworker/artisan (Syr. sqālā) and that the slave was angered—two details not appearing in the text of Chronicle of 1234. That Michael’s additional details represent elements originally found in Dionysius’s text can be partially gleaned from the nonintrusive quality of the information as it appears in the account. Michael, who takes great pains to identify his source material, is unlikely to have possessed or utilized any additional accounts from which he could have culled the extra narrative details. Moreover, the dual roles of the slave’s occupation and anger find a perfect parallel in the Arabic accounts, providing the first concrete evidence for the dependence of Dionysius’s account on an Arabic precursor.
Other accounts, such as those attributed to al-Miswar b. Makhrama, ʿAmr b. Maymūn, Ibn al-Zubayr, and so on, state the same with similar wording.⁵⁶

This leads us to the component shared by both the version of Michael and of Chronicle of 1234: Dionysius’s depiction of the slave’s oppression by his master and his petitions to ʿUmar. Michael’s account (and likely Dionysius’s too) names the occupation of the slave with such casual brevity that one may mistakenly receive the impression that the mistreatment the slave’s master inflicted upon him and the slave’s craft were two unrelated pieces of information. However, a reading of the major Arabic accounts reveals that both items are related. In fact, as the Arabic accounts inform us, the slave’s profession acts as a backdrop against which the complaints he presents to ʿUmar are to be comprehended and serves as the reason behind the oppressive tax exacted from him by his master, al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba.

Although stated in no uncertain terms by numerous accounts, among all of those that one might cite Zuhrī’s (d. 124/742) stands out from the rest as being of particular importance for Dionysius’s account. First, it is only Zuhrī’s account that, after informing us of the slave’s trade, moves on immediately to mention that al-Mughīra extorted an excessive tax from him, that it was ʿUmar’s intention to meet with al-Mughīra and to tell him “it was ʿUmar’s intention to meet with al-Mughīra and to tell him ‘does this perhaps correspond to Dionysius’s description of ʿUmar’s neglect of the slave’s complaints? It is difficult to be certain, but the higher preponderance of parallels to the Zuhrī account in Dionysius argues against the influence of Abū Raḥf’s account. Yet another distinguishing feature of the Abū Raḥf account, and certainly the most striking, is its explicit assertion that Abū Luʾluʿa had consulted and planned the murder of ʿUmar with Hurmuzān—an assertion that may be suggestive of the late date of its composition. Based on this and other factors, I would tentatively suggest that the Basran tradition attributed to Abū Raḥf is a rather late adaptation of Zuhrī’s Medinese tradition. The account can be found in Abū Yaʿlā, Munsad, 10: 116–18 (no. 2731) and Ibn ʿAsākir, 53: 350–52; the latter source provides two versions of the tradition.

⁵⁶Abd al-Razzāq, 5: 374 (Zuhrī); Ibn Saʿd, 3(1): 250 (Zuhrī); Ibn Shabba, 3: 887–88 (Zuhrī); Ibn ʿUmar; Baladhurī, 5: 480 (Zuhrī); Tabari, 1: 2,722 (al-Miswar b. Makhrama); Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, al-ʿIqd, 4: 272 (al-Madāʾinī); Masʿūdī, Muruj, 3: 64. The text, found in Ibn ʿAṭāʾ al-Rāfiʿ’s Futūḥ, in which it is stated that the slave “was a merchant skilled and knowledgeable in all sorts of trades” (kāna tājir raqīq ḥāriz bi-jamīʿ al-aʿmāl) (2: 84.7), is probably corrupt; one should likely read najjār instead of tājir. An account of Zuhrī recorded by Ibn ʿAsākir simply dubbs him as a “craftsman” (ṣanaʿ) (Ṭaʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq, 53: 383.18). Yet another describes him in more specific terms as a manufacturer of mills (Az. arīḥ); see Abū Yaʿlā al-Mawsili, al-Musnad, ed. Husayn Salīm Asad (Damascus, 1984–94), 5: 116–18 (no. 2731) and Ibn ʿAsākir, 53: 350.23 and 352.7.

⁵⁷An interesting exception may be found in the Basran account of ʿUmar’s assassination related by Thābit al-Bunānī on the authority of Abū Raḥf Nuʿayf al-Saʿigh (the goldsmith) who is said to have been the mawlā of a daughter of ʿUmar. A tāḥīṭi who lived most of his life in Medina, Abū Raḥf settled in Basra only late in life. His fate and social status as a mawlā seems to mirror that of Abū Luʾluʿa rather precisely. See Ibn Ḥajar, Taʾrīkh, 10: 472–73. The account of Abū Raḥf nicely matches Dionysius’s account in nearly all respects, much in the fashion as that of Zuhrī. The account contains a number of idiosyncratic details that distinguish it from Zuhrī’s account, however. One idiosyncratic detail is the claim that “it was ʿUmar’s intention to meet with al-Mughīra and to tell him to lighten his tax” (wa-min niyāt ʿumār an yakhfīf ʿanhu). Does this perhaps correspond to Dionysius’s description of ʿUmar’s neglect of the slave’s complaints? In the Arabic sources, state the same with similar wording.
heavy burden” (ṣiddat khbarājihi wa-thiqilihi). Zuhrī’s account continues (quoting the version of Ṣāliḥ):

ʿUmar said to him, “In what trade do you excel?” So (the slave) mentioned to him the trades in which he excelled. And ʿUmar said to him, “Your tax isn’t much considering the sort of work you do!” Then he departed annoyed and grumbling [fā-inbārafi sākhiṭin yataddhāmmanu].

The scenario repeats itself again as the account moves on to the second meeting with ʿUmar. The caliph asks Abū Luʾluʾu’a:

“What have I not heard you say that, if you wished, you could build a mill that would grind by wind-power [law ashāʾ la-ṣanaʿtu raḥt taṭṭanhu bi-l-rīḥiḥ?]” Then he turned to ʿUmar annoyed and frowning [sākhiṭin ʿābīsīna] while a group of men [raḥt] were alongside ʿUmar and said, “I will surely make you a mill that the people from East to West will talk about!”

Although the accounts agree that ʿUmar interpreted al-Miḥan, ʿĀʾisha. Abū l-ʿArab, b. Abī Makhrama); Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, 4: 272 (Madāʾinī); Zuhrī, 51–52. Cf. Ṭabarī, 1: 2722 (al-Miswar see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥāq's version, see Abū l-ʿArab, al-Miḥan version see ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–75. For Ibn Isḥa
It must be admitted that here, as on many points, the Muslim accounts are not in agreement as to the precise details. Elsewhere, ʿUmar relents on his policy not at al-Mughira’s prompting, but due either to the pressures of the inhabitants of Medina or to the advice of a notable individual from among the Prophet’s companions. According to the Baṣrī Ibn Sīrīn, ʿUmar only permitted prepubescent slaves (Ar. ṭayyib fī ṭayyib) to be brought to Medina until the inhabitants of Medina complained that the upkeep of Medina required backbreaking labor unfit for anyone but chattel (Ar. al-ʿulūj). Not rarely, accounts depict the caliph, as he lay dying from his wounds, censuring the Medinans for overturning his prohibition, thus affirming the righteousness of his edict. This tradition undergoes some significant transformations in its transmission. In several versions attributed to an array of early authorities, ʿUmar indirectly blames, rather than the Medinans collectively, the Prophet’s uncle al-ʿAbbās and his son Ibn ʿAbbās for his death by averring that ʿUmar’s rebuke of al-ʿAbbās and his son as originating in third-/eighth-century denunciations of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty’s preference for Persian functionaries. One must be cautious, however, not to follow Goldziher too far in his observations. Even if ʿUmar’s imputation of the blame for his murder to Ibn ʿAbbās and his father derives from the surge in anti-Persian sentiment during the ʿAbbāsid period, ʿUmar’s alleged prohibition of mawālī from residing in Medina cannot be dismissed using the same reasoning. Rather, the attestations of ʿUmar’s anti-ʿajami sentiments are equally echoed, for instance, in the immediate context of ʿUmar’s murder in the accounts of ʿUbayd Allāh’s violent reaction to his father’s death. ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿUmar, in the words of one medieval historian, “was a man of unyielding temperament (kāna rajūt dha dukākinā),” and, lacking the reserve and judgment of his betters, he flew into a rage, murdering three victims: the daughter of Abū Luʾluʾa, Hurmuzān, and Jufayna. After this carnage, ʿUbayd Allāh subsequently threatened to kill all the mawālī in Medina. Encouraged by his sister Ḥaifa, and by the dubious claims of ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAwf (or ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Abī Bakr) to have seen the murder weapon in the possession of Hurmuzān and Jufayna, ʿUbayd Allāh’s actions may have been guilefully directed by these individuals to eliminate those deemed as outsiders with too much power and influence over the caliph, but who, in reality, had nothing to do with his death. Although Abū Luʾluʾa’s daughter appears to have been merely the hapless victim of ʿUbayd Allāh’s rage, it is significant—especially from the viewpoint of those individuals, such as Abī Tālib, who expressed the most vehement outrage at his murders—that she had converted to Islam. Hurmuzān and Jufayna, furthermore, are particularly conspicuous for their prominence. Hurmuzān, once a ʿajami sentiments are equally echoed, for instance, in the immediate context of ʿUmar’s murder in the accounts of ʿUbayd Allāh’s violent reaction to his father’s death. ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿUmar, in the words of one medieval historian, “was a man of unyielding temperament (kāna rajūt dha dukākinā),” and, lacking the reserve and judgment of his betters, he flew into a rage, murdering three victims: the daughter of Abū Luʾluʾa, Hurmuzān, and Jufayna. After this carnage, ʿUbayd Allāh subsequently threatened to kill all the mawālī in Medina. Encouraged by his sister Ḥaifa, and by the dubious claims of ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAwf (or ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Abī Bakr) to have seen the murder weapon in the possession of Hurmuzān and Jufayna, ʿUbayd Allāh’s actions may have been guilefully directed by these individuals to eliminate those deemed as outsiders with too much power and influence over the caliph, but who, in reality, had nothing to do with his death. Although Abū Luʾluʾa’s daughter appears to have been merely the hapless victim of ʿUbayd Allāh’s rage, it is significant—especially from the viewpoint of those individuals, such as Abī Tālib, who expressed the most vehement outrage at his murders—that she had converted to Islam. Hurmuzān and Jufayna, furthermore, are particularly conspicuous for their prominence. Hurmuzān, once a
menacing Sassanid general who commanded the Persian armies against the Muslims, had procured a seat as 'Umar’s advisor concerning Persian affairs following his capture by Muslim forces. Commensurate with his skill and usefulness, Hurmuzān also acquired a pension amounting to 2,000 dirhams per annum. The Christian Jufayna lived as a writing tutor (Ar. ẓiʾr) in the service of the family of the prominent companion Sa’d b. Abi Waqqās, in whose house 'Ubayd Allāh was later imprisoned, teaching his children writing and arithmetic. One finds echoes of past relations between Jufayna and Hurmuzān in an account where both are said to have survived a shipwreck during a Muslim naval operation off the coast of Syria, which may indicate why the two were murdered together.

Narrative Elements 6–9

The final components of Dionysius’s narrative offer anecdotal details concerning the time, place, and means of 'Umar’s murder. Four details are important: that the slave murdered ‘Umar while he prayed; that the caliph was in a mosque; that the weapon employed was a dagger; and that the fatal blow was to the caliph’s abdomen. As observed for components 3–5 above, components 6–9 parallel the details and the order in the Zuhrī accounts as well. This further confirms Dionysius’s dependence on an account by Zuhrī for filling out the original skeletal entry of Theophilus. However, this evidence is also complicated by the fact that components 6, 8, and 9 appear in the accounts of Theophanes and Agapius, suggesting that they may have appeared in the account of Theophilus too. Does the presence of these details in Theophanes and Agapius thereby obviate the need to refer to Zuhrī as exerting influence upon the account of Dionysius?

It is worth repeating that these literary components as one finds them in Dionysius’s account are construed in an exceedingly laconic form, much as one would expect from Theophilus’s earlier, more skeletal account of ‘Umar’s reign. However, just as Michael’s text contains two details absent from the redaction of the Chronicle of 1234, so in this section the Chronicle of 1234 contains two details absent from Michael’s redaction of Dionysius. Each of these point to a significant expansion of Theophilus’s account, and, furthermore, all of these added details confirm Dionysius’s dependence on Zuhrī’s account. The first of these is the remark that ‘Umar was “in the mosque” (b-masgādā), and the other is that after the slave pierced ‘Umar’s abdomen with his dagger, “he ripped it open” (tarzeh). Inasmuch as Michael preserved more details in the previous section, one may safely assume that Chronicle of 1234 preserves the longer version of this section. The arbitrary nature of the respective abridgments of Michael and the anonymous chronicler speak only to the unsystematic nature of the assimilation of the text into the two later chronicles, as a broader survey of the different redactions of Dionysius’s text would bear out. What ought to be emphasized here, though, is that expansions of the text present in the longer version of the anonymous chronicler correspond to the Zuhrī account likely employed by Dionysius for the expansion of Theophilus’s text.

When reading the Dionysius text as an integrated whole, the most conspicuous impression left is the perception of a transference of the Sitz im Leben constructed by the Arabic accounts of ‘Umar’s death: thus, the mosque and the time of prayer play a key role in both accounts. The murder weapon is also named as a knife, or a dagger (Syr. skīnā). Muslim accounts variously describe the weapon of Abū Lu’lu’a as “a knife with two blades” (sakkīn dhāt tarafayn) or “a double-bladed dagger with a handle in the middle” (khanjar dhā ra’ayn niṣābuhu fi wasaṭihi). Some even claim that the blade had been laced with poison (Ar. māṣmūm). One unique account describes the murder weapon as a hatchet (Ar. fās) used in the slave’s trade. Only Michael neglects to mention that the fatal blow was to the abdomen—the latter half of his redaction of Dionysius’s account seems rather truncated.


72 Ibn Sa’d, 5: 8; Balādhurī, 2: 263; Tabarī, 1: 2795–96. According to Sayf, Jufayna was from the Arab Ibāḍīs of al-Hira (see al-Ridda, 8). As Goldziher notes: “Even before Islam it was mainly Christians and Jews who were the teachers of the Arabs in schools where the latter learned to read and write” (Muslim Studies, 1: 106 and n. 8 thereto).

73 Ibn Sa’d, 5: 62; Balādhurī, 5: 399–400.

74 Ibn Sa’d, 5: 144.10 (ʿAmr b. Maymūn); Abū ʿAmr, al-Mīban, 494.

75 ʿAbd al-Razzaq, 5: 478.8; Ibn Sa’d, 3: 250–51; Balādhurī, 5: 490; Ibn ʿAṭham, 2: 88.3.

76 See al-Yaʿqūbī, Taʾrīkh (Beirut, 1960), 2: 159.

77 Al-Zubayrī, Nasab Quraysh, 237.13.
The further detail that the knife had ripped ʿUmar’s abdomen open may be a reference to the description of the wound given in the Zuhrī accounts. The following appears in Ṣāliḥ b. Kaysān’s version of Zuhrī’s account:

ʿUmar said, “Send for the doctor to examine this wound of mine.” So they sent for an Arab doctor, and he gave [ʿUmar] nabīḍḥ,80 and the nabīḍḥ resembled blood as it exited from the stab wound below his navel. Then they called for another doctor from the Ṭanāʾ. He gave him milk [labān] to drink, and it exited from his stab wound the color of white. Then the doctor said, “O Commander of the Faithful, make your testament.”81

Above, the severity of the wound inflicted upon ʿUmar improbably causes the drinks to exit from his stomach through the wound; thus, ʿUmar’s abdomen was, as Dionysius worded things, “ripped open.”

Finally, one may draw attention to the phrase “he died in due time” (w-bahi b-ʿedānā mīt), which appears only in the version of the anonymous chronicler. In the Syriac, the phrase is somewhat vague and could also be translated as denoting an instantaneous death. Muslim accounts vary, some claiming he lived for three days, and others claiming seven days, perhaps to allow enough time to appoint his famous shūrā (consultative assembly).82 Some versions of the Zuhrī account, such as that of al-Madāʾinī, mention this interim period between ʿUmar’s assassination and his inevitable passing, and thus may be echoed here in the Dionysius text. The indeterminate character of the Dionysius account, however, could equally reflect the usual silence of the majority of the Zuhrī accounts on the matter.

Conclusion

Dionysius of Tell Mahre’s account of the assassination of ʿUmar b. al-Ḵaṭṭāb can be demonstrated to have utilized two principal sources: (1) the common Syriac account employed by Dionysius, Theophanes, and Agapius, which is most likely attributable to Theophilus of Edessa, and (2) an Arabic account originally derived from or to be identified with a transmission of Zuhrī’s original. In the case of the former Syriac account, Dionysius considerably expanded the text from a skeletal entry on the caliph’s death to a full-fledged narrative; in the case of the latter, Dionysius considerably abridged the account, mostly mining it for additional details, which he grafted onto his extended version of Theophilus’s account, while essentially reproducing the narrative structure.

Although the vagaries of textual transmission have complicated the task—none of the accounts of Theophilus, Zuhrī, or Dionysius are accessible to us save in later and often partial redactions—the evidence is, in fact, rather straightforward. Particularly striking are the affinities in terms of narrative structure and even wording between the accounts of Zuhrī and Dionysius, despite the language gap. The correspondence and affinities between the accounts occur not merely on the factual level, they permeate the stylistic and structural elements as well. The absence of such stark affinities between the narrative of Dionysius and other Arabic accounts of ʿUmar’s assassination such as those attributed to ʿAmr b. Maymūn, ʿĀʾisha bt. Abī Bakr, etc., greatly lessens the likelihood that the affinities between Zuhrī’s and Dionysius’s account are simply coincidental or even the result of informal knowledge of the general details of ʿUmar’s murder. The case of Dionysius’s account of ʿUmar’s assassination, as demonstrated by the work of scholars such as Conrad and Hoyland, is certainly not unique. The Syriac and Arabic historiographical traditions are not hermetically sealed by barriers of language and religious identity; rather, their relationship is a dialectic one. Critical
The Assassination of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dionysius's Account Reconstructed</th>
<th>Madāʾinī's Account</th>
<th>Zuhrī's Account</th>
</tr>
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| ʿUmar, the king of the Arabs, after reigning for twelve years, was killed on 4 November, a Thursday. The cause of his murder was that when a Roman slave, a metal-worker by trade, of one of the Quraysh became distraught at the house of his master who mistreated him, he complained against him several times to ʿUmar. That king, whether due to forgetfulness or because he was occupied with the administration of the kingdom, disregarded him. That slave became enraged with the king and attacked ʿUmar while he prayed in the mosque and struck him with a dagger in the abdomen and ripped it open. In due time, he died. | Al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba had a Christian slave named Fayrūz Abū Luʾluʾa. He was a fine carpenter whose tax was heavy, so he complained to ʿUmar about the heavy burden of the tax and asked him to speak to his master for him to lighten the burden of his tax. He said to him, “How much is your tax?” He said, “Three dirhams every month.” “What is your craft?” he said. “Carpenter,” he said. He said, “I don’t consider this a heavy burden given your sort of craft.” He left infuriated and grabbed hold of a double-bladed dagger. ʿUmar had seen in a dream a red rooster pecking him three times, and it was interpreted as a man from the non-Arabs stabbing him three times. Then Abū Luʾluʾa stabbed him with that dagger of his during the morning prayer three times, one of them between his navel and pubic region that penetrated the abdominal wall (al-ṣifāq). It was the one that killed him. He was stabbed in the mosque alongside thirteen men, seven of whom died. . . . As ʿUmar was heading out at daybreak to stir the people awake for prayer, he passed by him; then he rose up next to him and stabbed him three times, one of them under his navel. It was the one that killed him. Twelve men were stabbed from the people of the mosque. Six of them died, and six lived. Then he slew himself with his dagger and died. . . . Then a doctor came to him and poured him nabīdī to drink. It came out from him; and the people said, “This is the redness of blood.” Then another (doctor) came to him and poured him milk to drink and the milk flowed out untainted (kharaja al-labanu yaṣlidu). The man who poured it for him said, “Commander of the Faithful, make your testament.” | ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb used to not allow any non-Arabs to enter Madīna, but al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba wrote to ʿUmar, “I have a slave who is a carpenter, artisan, and smith who could be of some use to the people of Madīna, so if you deem to allow me to send him, I shall do so.” He allowed him to do so, and exacted from him two dirhams per day. He was called Abū Luʾluʾa and was originally a Zoroastrian. He remained as God willed, then he came to ʿUmar complaining to him about the large amount of his tax. ʿUmar said to him, “In what type of work do you excel?” “A carpenter, artisan, and smith,” he said. ʿUmar said, “Your tax is not great given the degree of skills in which you excel.” He departed grumbling. Later he passed by ʿUmar while he was sitting, and he said, “Did you say that if you wished to fashion a mill that would grind by wind, you would?” Abū Luʾluʾa said, “Indeed, I shall fashion you a mill about which the people will converse!” He departed and ʿUmar said, “That slave, he just threatened me with scorn!” When he resolved to do what he resolved to do, he took a dagger, wrapped it up, and sat for ʿUmar in one of the corners of the mosque. . . .
scholarship working with these traditions must take into account these textual interactions if it is to reap the full harvest of these historiographical traditions. In table 1, Dionysius’s account is reconstructed from the redactions of Michael and the anonymous chronicler, with Michael’s additional details marked in bold type. Alongside Dionysius’s account are two versions of Zuhrī’s account that set the textual parallels into stark relief. These two versions are selected in order to accommodate the problem of the slave’s identity. As noted above, the Syriac accounts prefer to mention the slave’s origin, whereas the Arabic accounts prefer to focus on his religion. Taking into account the possibility that Dionysius’s identification of the slave as Roman corresponds to his being Christian, I have translated the Zuhrī account transmitted by al-Madāʾinī, a contemporary of Dionysius who also offers us the sole attestation of a redaction of Zuhrī’s account identifying the slave-assassin as a Christian. Given the possibility that Dionysius’s text originally identified the slave as a Persian, I have also included the version of Maʿmar b. Rāshid as it appears in the Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq in a slightly abridged form, which has the prestige of being the earliest extant redaction of the Zuhrī account. Finally, figure 1 summarizes in a simplified form the composition and transmission history of Dionysius’s account of ʿUmar’s assassination.

83 As found in Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, ʿIqd, 4: 272–73.
84 ʿAbd al-Razzāq, 5: 374–76.
85 For this table, I have adapted and used as a template Conrad’s excellent diagram in his article, “The Conquest of the Arwād,” 248.