

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

in

PREMODERN EURASIAN and MEDITERRANEAN NARRATIVES

Themed Section



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Chiara FONTANA and Ines PETA

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Natural Disasters and Political Catastrophes: Entangled Feelings and Landscapes in al-Andalus and Beyond

JAVIER ALBARRÁN (Universidad de Granada)

Abstract

In the year 456/1064, during a campaign described by historians as a proto-Crusade, a Christian coalition conquered the city of Barbastro, a Muslim frontier stronghold in the northern Iberian Peninsula. In his account of the event, the Andalusī historian Ibn Ḥayyān wrote that when news of the defeat reached Córdoba, the entire territory of al-Andalus trembled. A few decades later, in 548/1153, an earthquake struck Syria. The Egyptian chronicler Ibn Ruz̓ik interpreted this natural disaster as divine punishment, linking it to the loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders. This contribution focuses on the relationship between natural phenomena, especially natural disasters, and sociopolitical events such as military defeat and territorial dispossession. It seeks to examine why and how these two realms—natural and political—are intertwined in the historical thought, discourse, and imagination of medieval Islamic authors. Thus, I examine how processes of territorial loss—and the emotions and traumas they engender—are represented in historical sources through references to natural disasters, whether real or imagined. I also explore how and why the natural environment functions as a medium for generating and expressing emotional responses. In particular, I study how one form of response to territorial loss was articulated through a natural or ‘environmental’ imaginary, including the construction of an idealised landscape that stood in contrast to the catastrophic landscapes used to represent both natural calamities and military defeats.

Keywords: Natural disasters, feelings, landscape, eschatological fear, territorial loss, al-Andalus

In 455/1063, in the context of the advance of the Christian kingdoms after the disintegration of the Umayyad caliphate, Pope Alexander II preached a holy war against Barbastro, a Muslim town in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula that was under the control of Ibn Ḥūd al-Muzaffar (d. 474–5/1082–3).¹ Military contingents from various regions responded to the call to arms, including Franks, Normans, Burgundians, Aragonese and forces from the County of Urgell.² According to the fifth/eleventh century Andalusī historian Ibn Ḥayyān,

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² The source that provides the most detailed information about the Normans who took part in the attack on Barbastro is the *History of the Normans* (*Historia Normannorum*) by Amatus of Montecassino, a Benedictine monk writing in the late eleventh century whose chronicle offers one of the earliest narrative accounts of Norman activity in southern Italy and beyond (AMATO DI MONTECASSINO 1935, 13–15. See also BOUQUET 1904, 216–21; WACE 2004, 164).

the Christian host was under the command of the ‘captain of the cavalry of Rome’ (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:179–90).³ Meanwhile, the eighth/fourteenth century Maghribī historian Ibn ‘Idhārī refers to the *al-ardāmāniyūn*, a term that has been traditionally interpreted as denoting the Normans (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224). The city was conquered in Sha‘bān 456/August 1064, after forty days of siege (LALIENA and SÉNAC 2018).

Our knowledge of certain details of the siege of Barbastro derives from the accounts of several contemporary Muslim chroniclers, among them Ibn Ḥayyān, whose narrative is preserved both by Ibn Bassām (d. 542/1147) and Ibn ‘Idhārī (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:179–90; IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224 ff. See also ÁLVAREZ MASALIAS and CINGOLANI 2012, 86). Following the start of the siege, the attackers seized control of the suburbs, into which more than 5,000 knights entered. The defenders fortified themselves within the city, but thirst soon became a critical issue, compelling them to negotiate a surrender, which was accepted by the Christian forces. Resistance, however, persisted for several days within the citadel, although the remaining defenders eventually capitulated as well. The shortage of water appears to have been caused by a traitor, who revealed to the besiegers the location of the aqueduct supplying the city which they subsequently blocked. Ultimately, the population of the city was massacred. Barbastro thus fell under the control of Sancho Ramírez, King of Aragon (d. 1094), who appears to have entrusted the city to his brother-in-law, Ermengol III of Urgell (d. 1065) (UBIETO 1981, 53–67; FERREIRO 1983).

The fall of Barbastro provoked a profound sense of vulnerability within the Andalusī world. For Ibn Ḥayyān, it represented ‘the most grievous of the calamities to have afflicted this peninsula’. Upon the arrival of a messenger in Cordoba bearing news of the defeat, ‘the land of al-Andalus trembled (*zalzala al-arḍ al-Andalusī*), a phrase conveying the widespread shock and dismay that reverberated across the region (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 3:224).

This paper constitutes a first approach within broader, ongoing research into the various discursive responses—particularly those articulated through memory—to the gradual loss of al-Andalus (See, for example, GARCÍA-SANJUÁN 2024; LAPIEDRA 2018; DENARO 2020; ALBARRÁN 2024a). It focuses on the relationship between natural phenomena, especially natural disasters, and sociopolitical events such as military defeat and territorial dispossession in al-Andalus and the Islamic West, drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on historiographical sources.⁴ The study will also incorporate comparative examples from

³ See also ‘Les Normands en Espagne’, in DOZY 1860, 357–68.

⁴ On the relationship between natural disasters and political events, see, for example, RAPHAEL 2013; TRAVIS 2024. On the historical study of various aspects related to natural disasters and the environment in the Mediterranean and Islamic context, see, for example, AKASOY 2007; AKASOY 2008; AMBRASEYS 2009; CHALYAN-DAFFNER 2012; HANSKA 2015; ISSAR and ZOHAR 2004; POIRIER and TAHER 1995; RASSI 2011; SCHENK 2014; TUCKER 1981; TUCKER 1999. For the specific Andalusī case, see, for example, FORLIN et al. 2024; GHOURGATE 2011; MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2011; OLIVERA SERRANO 1995. Regarding the interest of medieval Islamic historians towards natural disasters, it should be noted that several Muslim historians wrote specialised books dealing with disasters (natural or otherwise), such as al-Maqrīzī’s (d. 845/1441) *Ighāthat al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma*, known as ‘The History of Famines in Egypt’ (al-MAQRĪZĪ 2022). Similarly, the historian al-Suyūfī (d. 910/1505) dealt with a different type of disaster in his book *Kashf al-ṣalsala ‘an waṣf al-zalzala* (‘The Unveiling of the Chain Regarding the Description of the Earthquake’ (al-SUYŪFĪ 1985). Likewise, the *Ṣifat al-maṭar wa-l-saḥāb* (‘Description of Rain and Clouds’) by Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933) focuses on the lexicon and poetic imagery associated

other regions of the medieval Islamic world, as well as from different religious traditions, with the aim of approaching the subject from a transcultural perspective. It seeks to examine why and how these two realms—the natural and the political—are intertwined in the historical thought, discourse and imagination of medieval Islamic authors. In particular, it will explore how one form of response to territorial loss was articulated through a natural or environmental imaginary, that included the construction of an idealised landscape which stood in contrast to the catastrophic landscapes used to represent both natural calamities and military defeats.

Connecting Natural and Political Disasters

Medieval Islamic sources, particularly historiographical ones, are replete with examples in which various natural phenomena—especially, though not exclusively, disasters—understood as sudden, unforeseen events that bring about significant changes in the circumstances of those affected,⁵ are closely linked to sociopolitical events. In some instances, these phenomena are presented as the cause or more or less direct antecedents of political occurrences. For example, the eighth/fourteenth century chronicler of Fez, Ibn Abī Zarʿ, notes that in the year 471/1078–9, a solar eclipse occurred unlike any seen before, coinciding with the year in which King Alfonso of Castile seized Coria, a city in West Iberia (IBN ABĪ ZARʿ 1972, 168). Similarly, Ibn ʿIdhārī, a chronicler from Marrakesh, recounts that toward the end of the sixth/twelfth century, a great flood occurred in Seville which contributed to an escalation of Christian attacks (IBN ʿIDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:212). On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Mamluk historian Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir (d. 692/1293) records the capture of the tower of Latakia from the Crusaders in 686/1287: an earthquake destroyed half of the tower, facilitating the Islamic conquest. According to the chronicler, the Franks were convinced that the Muslims were aided by both an angel and the earthquake (Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, in AMBRASEYS 2009, 352). Another earthquake, according to the chronicle of the Byzantine monk Theophanes the Confessor (d. c. 817), predicted the Islamic conquest of Palestine in the year 634:

At the same time an earthquake occurred in Palestine. And a sign appeared in the sky at midday, like a beam, foretelling the victory of the Arabs. It remained for thirty days, stretching from the middle of the sky to the Great Bear. It was in the shape of a sword. (THEOPHANES THE CONFESSOR 1997, 336)

with meteorological phenomena in Classical Arabic (IBN DURAYD 1981).

- ⁵ See, for example, RASSI 2011; SCHENK 2014. This definition corresponds to the Arabic concept of *kāritha* (plural: *kawārith*), derived from the root *karatha*, which means ‘to oppress someone’, ‘to grieve’, or ‘to worry about something’. The term *kāritha* thus refers to something that causes distress or sorrow. Another Arabic word that conveys a similar meaning—such as ‘accident’, ‘misfortune’, ‘calamity’, or ‘disaster’—is *al-muṣība*, which originates from the verb *aṣāba*, meaning ‘to descend’, ‘to strike’, or ‘to fall’. The sources also use the word *mashaqqqa*, which can be translated as ‘disaster’ or ‘calamity’. On concepts of disasters, see also BÜSSOW-SCHMITZ 2017; SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023.

On the other hand, there are natural phenomena that are described in conjunction with political events, or which played a role in resolving political matters. For instance, in his work on earthquakes, the Egyptian historian al-Suyūṭī recounts that in 553/1158, Ibn Ruzzīk (d. 557/1161), ruler of Egypt, dispatched an army to halt the advance of the Franks. At this moment, a terrifying earthquake struck, leading to the defeat of the Crusaders, who fled (RAZANI 1972, 28). Similarly, the Andalusī poet and historian Ibn ‘Amīra narrates that after the Christian conquest of Mallorca in 628/1231, a group of surviving Muslims sought refuge in the mountains, turning their backs on the rest of the community (MAS I FORNERS 2013; ROSER 2018; ROSSELLÓ 2009). For this reason, God sent a storm that alleviated their suffering (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 143).

In his description of the Battle of Ager Sanguinis, which took place in Shawwāl 513/June 1119 between the forces of the Principality of Antioch, led by Roger of Salerno, and those of Il-Ghāzī, the Artuqid sultan (see MORTON 2018), the crusader historian and archbishop William of Tyre (d. 1185) explains how a tornado that formed in the centre of the battlefield precipitated the Islamic victory:

A terrible whirlwind came forth out of the north. Before the eyes of all, it clung to the in the very center of the battleground. As it writhed along, it swept with it such clouds of dust that men of both armies were blinded and could not fight. Then it soared aloft in circles, bearing a close resemblance to a huge jar ablaze with sulphureous flames. Because of this unlikely occurrence the enemy won the victory. The Christians were defeated, and nearly all of our soldiers fell by the sword. (WILLIAM OF TYRE 1943, 1/12:530)

And, of course, there are also natural disasters understood as consequences of political events. For instance, the Fatimid Ibn Ruzzīk asserted that the earthquake of 548/1153 in Syria ‘occurred because Islam had lost Jerusalem, the centre of revelation before the descent of God’s messenger [...] Pigs and wine dwell in it, and the cross and the bell reign there. If Christ saw it, he would not tolerate the deeds and sayings that they (the Crusaders) attribute to him’ (IBN RUZZĪK 1964, 63. See also DAJANI-SHAKEEL 1976). Similarly, the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols led to fires, floods and earthquakes in the Hijaz (HASSAN 2017). Likewise, according to the Egyptian polymath al-Maqrīzī, a major earthquake occurred in Granada in 835/1431 as a consequence of the arrival of the former sultan Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Aysar, who sought to reclaim the throne by besieging the city (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 4/2:856; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 594).

Further to these examples, in Constantinople in 557/1162, celebrations were held to welcome the Seljuk sultan Kilij Arslan II, an event that angered God:

Together with the sultan, Manuel entered Constantinople. There he proclaimed a magnificent triumph resplendent with exquisite and precious robes and diverse adornment cunningly wrought. But as the emperor, with members of the bodyguard, the nobility, the imperial retinue, and the sultan, was about to make his appearance before the citizens to receive their applause, God annulled the splendors of that day. The earth shook, and many splendid dwellings collapsed, the atmospheric conditions were violent and unstable and other such terrors took place so that one could not pay

heed to the triumph, and the mind swooned. (Nicetas Choniates Acominatus, *Chroniki Diigisis*, in AMBRASEYS 2009, 316)

A Manifestation of Divine Power

In this sense, behind this worldview, in which events are interconnected in a manner that appears to follow a divine plan, lies the belief that God is the cause behind every action (AKASOY 2007; HANSKA 2015).⁶ As the Damascene historian Ibn al-Qalānisi (d. 556/1160) stated in his *Dhayl tārikh Dimashq*, an earthquake was a tangible manifestation of divine power (IBN al-QALĀNISI 1932, 326). In this providential view of history, which has its roots in the Old Testament, natural catastrophes and military defeats were primarily understood as divine punishments. Premodern societies often regarded calamities as expressions of a justified divine wrath, serving as corrective measures for human sins.⁷ For instance, the *Muqtabis* of the Cordoban historian Ibn Ḥayyān—written in the fifth/eleventh century and arguably the most important source for the study of Umayyad Andalus—includes a letter sent by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (d. 350/961) to the governors of his provinces instructing them to offer prayers for rain in response to a severe drought. In the letter, the caliph exhorts them to repent for their misdeeds and beseech divine mercy, calling upon them to pray ‘humbly submitting to His glory and persistently pleading for what He withholds [the rain], with repentance for the sins that have provoked His wrath, drawn down His vengeance, and veiled the face of His favour—exalted be His purpose’ (IBN ḤAYYĀN 1979, 165).

Similarly, the Andalusī scholar al-Ṭurtūshī, in his *Mirror for Princes* (*Sirāj al-mulūk*), composed in Egypt in the early sixth/twelfth century after fleeing al-Andalus due to the advancing Christian forces, records a Prophetic tradition that conveys the same theological orientation: ‘Reptiles will die exhausted by the sins of men’. Al-Ṭurtūshī explains: ‘When many transgressions are committed by humans against the Lord on earth, the heavens withhold rain, the earth ceases to yield vegetation, and insects, vermin and reptiles perish’ (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 208). Likewise, according to al-Suyūṭī, the first earthquake in human history was caused by Cain’s murder of Abel (RAZANI 1972, 1).⁸ The sacred history shared by the Abrahamic traditions and its providential conception of causality also helps explain why numerous natural disasters were believed to last forty days in both Christian and Islamic

⁶ On the Islamic theology of catastrophes see SENIGUER and BELHAJ 2023.

⁷ This perception could lead to the dilemma of punishing the innocent for the sins of the guilty. To address this, the Islamic doctrine of martyrdom included as martyrs those who died as victims ‘of diseases such as pleurisy and dysentery, drowning, fires, or collapsed buildings ...’ (COOK 2007, 28–29). See also AKASOY 2007.

⁸ Al-Suyūṭī’s *Kashf al-salsala ‘an wasf al-zalzala* contains a collection of Islamic fables and stories related to the causes of earthquakes in which increased sinning and usury are blamed as the main causes. Nevertheless, al-Suyūṭī also gives a more ‘scientific’ explanation: earthquakes are a result of large movements of steam collected below the surface of the earth because of the heat produced by the sun. The trapped steam cannot be turned into water or dissolved. Thus, when the steam tries to break through the surface, the result is the shaking of the earth. On al-Suyūṭī’s work on earthquakes, see, for example, AKASOY 2007.

sources; for instance, the flood of Noah is said to have lasted ‘forty days and forty nights’ (TOTTOLI 2002, 22–23). In this regard, the Syrian scholar Ibn Kathīr (d. 775/1373) offers the following account of an earthquake that struck Mahdiyya in 370/981:

In that year, in Ifrīqiya, there was a volcanic eruption that cast a light like flames to the east and north. People rushed outdoors to supplicate God. This terrifying earthquake lasted for forty days. The inhabitants abandoned their homes and left behind their possessions. (IBN KATHĪR 1932–39, 11:277; IBN al-ATHĪR 1851–76, 8:647)

It is also worth noting that, according to Muslim chroniclers, the Christian siege of Barbastro—mentioned earlier—likewise lasted forty days.⁹

The *Annales Pisani* by Bernardo Maragone (d. c. 1186) follows the same pattern when he refers to an earthquake in Sicily that occurred in 564/1169, comparing it to the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorra:

In the year of Our Lord 1169, incredible and amazing prodigies occurred in the island of Sicily, such as had not been seen since the time of Sodom and Gomorra. For the day before the Nones of February [4 February], the eve of the feast of St. Agatha, the city of Catania was shaken to its foundations by an earthquake, and neither man nor woman was left [alive] there. Lentini was suddenly enclosed between two mountains and part of the city of Syracuse was destroyed by the earthquake, and from the said city of Catania as far as Plassa [Piazza Armerina] eleven castles, fortified settlements and other villages were destroyed, along with many people who were caught by the earthquake in the fields or streets. (BERNARDO MARAGONE 1936, 47; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 183)

William of Tyre also explains the calamities afflicting the kingdom of Jerusalem from this perspective:

In the same year, 1120 of the incarnation of the Lord, the Kingdom of Jerusalem, because of our sins, was afflicted with many troubles. In addition to the injury caused by the enemy (the battle of Ager Sanguinis), swarms of locusts fell upon the land, and a scourge of devouring mice, for four successive years, so completely destroyed the crops that it seemed as if the whole world would lack bread. (WILLIAM OF TYRE 1943, 1/11:535)

In a similar vein, al-Maqrīzī provides a compelling account of the earthquake that struck Egypt in the year 703/1303. He attributes the disaster to the celebrations held for the construction of the new citadel in Cairo, during which numerous sins were committed. Al-Maqrīzī observes that after the earthquake, anyone who saw the city thought that an enemy force had arrived and laid it to waste. According to the Mamluk historian, the event served

⁹ A Christian example can be found in the chronicle of the Armenian Movses Daskhurantsi (tenth century CE), referring to an earthquake in Vayocjor (Valley of Lamentation, in the upper course of the Arpa Çai, in the Siunikh province of Armenia) in the year 735: ‘and an impenetrable darkness came down over the territory of Mozu: the earth shook for forty days’ (MOVSES DASKHURANTSI 1961, 3:17).

as a divine sign to the faithful, who consequently renounced their excesses (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 1:942–45; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 354–57).

The analogy drawn by al-Maqrīzī between the destructive impact of the earthquake—understood as a divine act—and that of an enemy attack is far from incidental, as military defeats were likewise frequently interpreted in providential terms, as manifestations of divine intervention. In the medieval tradition, every battle was conceived as a test of souls. That God would permit the defeat of His own could only be explained as punishment for their sins. This providential view of history, encapsulated in the Christian tradition by the formula *peccatis exigentibus* ('because of our sins'), is rooted in the Old Testament and posits a direct correlation between the moral impurity of combatants and their military failure.¹⁰ A comparable logic is also evident in Islamic discursive and ideological frameworks, where battlefield defeats were often explained as divine retribution against sinful believers (ALBARRÁN 2020, 342–49). The battlefield thus became the ideal setting for God to chastise His erring faithful.

Al-Ṭurtūshī, for instance, explicitly states that the Muslims brought about their own defeat by transgressing divine law (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 691). Similarly, the epistle composed by the renowned Mālikī jurist Ibn 'Abd al-Barr following the fall of Barbastro (GARULO 1998, 141 ff)—a highly singular text preserved in Ibn Bassām's *Dhakhīra*, intended as a call to *jihād* to reclaim the city—identifies Muslim sinfulness, particularly the state of *fitna* (i.e. the fragmentation of the *umma*),¹¹ as the principal cause of the defeat (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:173–79; see also MARÍN 1992; GARULO 1998, 141–45; ALBARRÁN 2020, 177–83):

If it weren't for so many faults, His storm would not blow upon us. If we had been in harmony and our people in agreement, if we had been united as the limbs are to the body and the fingers to the hand, our arrows would not have gone astray, our star would not have hidden, our party would not have been humiliated, the edge of our weapons would not have been dulled, our community would not have been terrified, our water sources would not have been polluted, and we would have defeated them forever. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:178)

A similar view is expressed by the poet 'Abdallāh b. al-'Assāl (d. 487/1094) in reference to this same event: 'If the Muslims had not committed grave sins, none of which remained hidden, not a single Christian knight would have triumphed over the Muslims: it is the sins that have caused all the harm!' (al-ḤIMYARĪ, 1938, 40; MARÍN 1992; PÉRÈS 1990, 104–5; LALIENA and SÉNAC 2018, 111–12). Another example is the interpretation of the loss of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 492/1099 as divine punishment in the *Kitāb al-Jihād*, which

¹⁰ Although, as I have mentioned, similar notions appear in the Old Testament, in the Christian context they were fully present in late patristic thought, particularly in that of Gregory the Great. In the Iberian Peninsula, and with reference to Muslims, the idea already appears in the liturgical hymn *Tempore Belli*, likely contemporary to or shortly after the conquest of al-Andalus, and the formula is first found in Catalan and Aragonese documentation from the eleventh century, due to its significant popularity in the Carolingian world. See SÁNCHEZ SALOR 1982; CINGOLANI 2008; ALVIRA 2012, 132, 365 ff.

¹¹ In this sense, the fear of *fitna* is omnipresent in Islamic sources, and the Qur'an states that '*fitna* is worse than killing' (Q 2:191, BADAWI and ABDEL HALEEM 2008, 693). See, for example, SCALES 1994; TIXIER DU MESNIL 2022, 107–13, 121–26.

was written in 498/1105 by the Damascene scholar ‘Alī b. Ṭāhir al-Sulamī (d. 500/1106). He saw the catastrophe as the result of a broader moral and religious decline among Muslims, particularly due to internal fragmentation (once again, *fitna*) which had emboldened the enemies of Islam to launch their attacks:

The interruption in the performance of *jihād*, combined with the negligence of the Muslims towards the established norms of Islam [...] has inevitably meant that God has made the Muslims rise up against each other, has placed violent hostility and hatred between them, and has incited their enemies to seize their territories. (al-SULAMĪ 2015, 42–43)¹²

Another vivid example can be found in the case of the Almohad siege of Huete (567/1172, Cuenca), part of the Maghribī empire’s expansion into the Iberian Peninsula, where the Muslim defeat was interpreted as the result of a corrupted *niyya* (intention) (IBN ṢĀḤIB al-ṢALĀT 1964, 406–8; ALBARRÁN 2020, 343–44). War was thus increasingly portrayed as an ideal setting in which God punished the sins of believers while assisting their adversaries. In this instance, God reportedly answered the prayers of the besieged and thirsty Christians by sending rain. While this event is first recorded by the Almohad historian Ibn Ṣāḥib al-Ṣalāt (d. c. 599/1203), its overt providential interpretation appears slightly later, particularly in the work of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī (c. 621/1224) (2005, 177–78). Strikingly, a similar perspective is echoed in a near-contemporary Castilian chronicle, the *Anales Toledanos I* (c. 1219) (MARTÍN-CLETO 1993, 144–45). This convergence suggests that it was likely that rainfall did interrupt the Almohad campaign, and that both Christian and Muslim authors, shaped by comparable theological and ideological frameworks, interpreted this as divine intervention: assistance from God in the Christian account, and divine punishment in the Muslim one.

This is not the only occasion on which a Muslim author claims that God answered the prayers of thirsty Christians by sending rain. Al-Ṭurtūshī recounts a similar episode, in which Christian sailors besieging the North African coast turned to their Gospels in search of divine aid and were granted water. The Muslim defenders were both astonished and troubled by this apparent divine favour:

These impious ones, enemies of God and His Prophet, have turned to their Lord with sincere fervour, placed their trust in Him, and asked Him for water to revive their weakened bodies—and He aided them. Yet we are more entitled to raise prayers to the Lord and to address Him with humble supplications, and more deserving of His response. (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 664)

Al-Ṭurtūshī notes that the Muslims then began to implore God themselves, offering fervent prayers and supplications, asking to witness a miracle. In response, God ultimately sent a storm that sank the Christian fleet (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 663–66).

In this way, divine punishment could also be inflicted upon nonbelievers through natural disasters framed within sacred history. The Damascene chronicler Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) reports on an earthquake that devastated the region of Shaizar in 565/1170. Although it

¹² See also ALBARRÁN 2024b.

affected Muslims, it was especially destructive for the Crusaders, as it occurred on a feast day when they were gathered in churches, whose roofs collapsed upon them:

The unleashing of violence shook the earth with its inhabitants. It destroyed the solid citadels, justice overcame their [the Franks'] force and they were blasted by fate. All the high buildings were dashed down and the fortresses were razed. God had decided, and so it was accomplished. The polytheists were massacred, and this was a sign for the monotheists. The enemy suffered the same punishment as the people of 'Ād. (ABŪ SHĀMA 1884, 154)¹³

On other occasions, military defeats are represented explicitly as divine judgment, sometimes articulated through the imagery of a major natural catastrophe drawn from the register of sacred history. For example, the fall of Almoravid Saragossa in 512/1118 is described as a literal *ḥukm Allāh* (judgment of God), executed by an Aragonese army depicted as a plague of locusts and ants (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 163). However, this conception is perhaps most clearly expressed in accounts of the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (608/1212, Jaén), a pivotal confrontation between a coalition of Christian kings led by Alfonso VIII of Castile and the Almohad army, which marked a decisive turning point in the Christian conquest of the Guadalquivir valley (GARCÍA FITZ 2012; ALVIRA 2012). Although the sources assign blame for the defeat to one of Caliph al-Nāṣir's viziers, the loss had already been set in motion during the preceding campaign at the nearby fortress of Salvatierra (607/1211), where the Almohads' original intention of waging a legitimate *jihād* had become corrupted. Accordingly, the battle of 608/1212 is framed as a divine judgment. The Christian army is portrayed in Old Testament terms, as a swarm of locusts. When the outcome of the battle became clear, an Arab soldier is said to have turned to the stunned Almohad caliph and asked: 'How long will you remain seated, O Commander of the Faithful? The judgment of God (*ḥukm Allāh*) has been fulfilled, His will has been accomplished, and the Muslims have perished' (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 237–39).

As the one ultimately responsible for the conduct of his subjects, the caliph himself becomes the focal point of divine punishment. God is said to have brought about his defeat because the caliph had become arrogant due to the size of his army, had deemed himself invincible, and had come to believe he could achieve victory without the aid of God. Even more strikingly, despite this overwhelming demonstration of divine power, the Almohad sovereign is reported to have persisted in his sinful arrogance, ultimately dying from a cup of poisoned wine—an act interpreted as the culmination of his moral failure (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 240–41; ALBARRÁN 2020, 344).

Within this cosmological framework, the acknowledgment of sin, acts of repentance, and the performance of pious deeds and communal rituals constituted the only viable path to divine mercy. Since natural catastrophes were understood as signs of a rupture in the relationship between humanity and God, the resolution of such crises could only occur through the reestablishment, via specific cultural and religious practices, of the bond between

¹³ The 'Ād were a pre-Islamic people who settled in the eastern part of present-day Yemen and western Oman, and who, according to Islamic tradition, were destroyed by a storm as divine punishment for failing to heed the prophet Hūd.

the afflicted community and the Creator, the sole sovereign of the natural world. For example, when rainfall is withheld due to human sinfulness, al-Ṭurṭūshī advises: ‘Seek forgiveness from your Lord, for He is most forgiving; He will send you abundant rain from the heavens and increase your wealth and the number of your children’ (al-ṬURṬŪSHĪ 1990, 432).¹⁴

Likewise, collective expressions of penitence were considered the most powerful spiritual means of confronting natural disasters. Individual repentance was deemed insufficient; instead, communal forms of devotion—marked by continuous prayer, supplication and mass participation—were necessary to move and placate the Divine (HANSKA 2015, 48).¹⁵ Ibn Abī Zarʿ, for instance, reports that in the year 307/920, violent winds and darkness enveloped Fez. In response, the populace repented, became fearful, filled the mosques and corrected many of their transgressions (IBN ABĪ ZARʿ 1972, 98). A similar account appears in Abū Shāma’s description of a volcanic eruption in Medina in the year 654/1256:

People were all frightened by it, and all rose from their beds, and gathered asking God for forgiveness. They rushed to the mosque and prayed in it [...] People were afraid on account of their sins [...] It became larger and larger so that people rushed to the prophet’s mosque, confessed their sins, and prayed to the Lord, may He be praised. They took refuge by the side of His prophet; may peace be upon him. (SALIBA 2017, 150)

However, communal prayer and ritual alone were not sufficient to appease divine wrath. What was also required was morally upright behaviour—both public and private. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) documents a case of civil unrest in his native Mosul during the drought of 575/1179–80, further underscoring the deep connection between natural calamity, moral conduct and divine judgment:

In the year 575 people came forth to pray for rain because of the drought and severe famine and Sayf al-Dīn (Lord of Mosul) also did so, accompanied by his retinue. The people rose against him and targeted him with their protests. They demanded that he order the prohibition of the selling of wine. He agreed, so they entered the city and attacked the houses of the wine sellers. (IBN al-ATHĪR 1965–67, 10:462)¹⁶

In the face of military defeats and political disasters, spiritual renewal was deemed necessary (see ALBARRÁN 2024b). For al-Sulamī, in his *Kitāb al-Jihād*, the lesser *jihād* was of little

¹⁴ On reactions to natural disasters in the medieval Islamic world, see AKASOY 2007; HANSKA 2015.

¹⁵ For instance, in his work on earthquakes, al-Suyūṭī devotes the second section to the religious duties of a Muslim during and after the occurrence of an earthquake. In this sense, he detailed instructions about special earthquake prayers that any faithful Muslim must perform (SPRENGER 1843).

¹⁶ Responses in the medieval Christian world were similar. For instance, in 1427, a series of earthquakes occurred in Catalonia. On 20 March 1427, the magistrates of Cervera—after four weeks of intermittent tremors—prohibited swearing and blasphemy, as well as, during Lent, the playing of dice. Their counterparts in Manresa adopted an identical decree the following day. On 23 April, in Terrassa, due to the persistence of the tremors, swearing, blasphemy and the playing of dice and cards were prohibited. In early May, the *consellers* of Barcelona additionally banned swearing and all forms of gaming, as well as women’s luxury. On 14 June, the *jurats* of Manresa, after reaffirming the gaming ban, prohibited prostitutes from leaving the brothel, men from keeping concubines and work on holidays (RIERA I MELIS 1999, 699–735; see also BENVENUTI 2010).

value unless it was preceded and accompanied by the greater *jihād*, the personal spiritual striving of each Muslim along the path of God.¹⁷ In this framework, the just and pious actions of the ruling authority, particularly the sultan, could bring about significant benefit. Al-Ṭurtūshī, for instance, draws an analogy between sovereign power and rainfall, emphasising the dual nature of both:

This [authority] is, indeed, something that God sends, a blessing from the heavens, the life of the earth and all those in it. Yet, with it, it causes great inconvenience to the traveller, damages buildings, brings down lightning and causes torrents to overflow, leading to the death of people and animals, the destruction of supplies and the uproar of the seas, increasing the hardships of those caught in them [...] Nevertheless, this is no obstacle for creatures, when contemplating the signs of divine mercy on the earth that the rain vivifies, how it makes plants grow, how it multiplies fruits and spreads prosperity everywhere, to show deep gratitude for the piety of the Lord and thank Him from the heart, without considering at all the harm that, in some cases, it might have caused to certain people. And you should know that the people yearn for a just king with the same longing with which the people suffering from a prolonged drought long for rain. (al-ṬURTŪSHĪ 1990, 202)¹⁸

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A particularly illustrative case is found in the East, during the reign of Nūr al-Dīn, when a prolonged drought afflicted the region of Baalbek. Once the sultan arrived on the scene, the situation reportedly improved, and this was interpreted by contemporaries as a sign of divine mercy:

It happened by the predestined decree and celestial mercy that the heavens opened their fountains with rains, dew, outpourings, and heavy showers lasting from Tuesday, 3rd Dhū l-Ḥijja 544 (4th April) until the following Tuesday [...] The people clamoured with blessings upon Nūr al-Dīn, saying ‘This is due to his blessed influence, his justice, and his upright conduct.’ (IBN al-QALĀNISĪ 1932, 297)

Similarly, in contexts of political fragmentation and decline caused by Muslim sinfulness, such as the Taifa period in fifth/eleventh century al-Andalus, according to contemporary sources, God’s response was to send a righteous ruler as an act of mercy (ALBARRÁN 2024a). Abū Bakr b. al-Jadd, a scholar and secretary in the Taifa kingdom of Seville, described the Almoravid emir Yūsuf b. Tāshufin as a merciful rain sent by God to al-Andalus (IBN SIMĀK 1979, 46–48). A parallel account appears in the chronicle of Ibn Ṣāhib al-Ṣalāt, an Almohad historian writing in the late sixth/twelfth century, who narrates the response of the Amīr al-Mu’minīn, portrayed as a salvific rain, to the suffering of the Andalusī population due to the rebellion of Ibn Mardānīsh and his allies:

¹⁷ ‘The interruption in the performance of *jihād*, combined with the negligence of Muslims regarding the established norms of Islam [...] has inevitably meant that God has caused Muslims to rise against one another, has instilled violent hostility and hatred among them, and has incited their enemies to seize their territories’ (al-SULAMĪ 2015, 206).

¹⁸ The notion of the ‘rain of compassion’ is also often used to describe Muḥammad’s intercessory capacity. See SCHIMMEL 1985, 81.

Seville was encircled by uprisings; its inhabitants felt suffocated, trembling at the fear of being seized if they moved about, and they awaited divine relief and the reinforcements requested by letter, praying for abundant rain so that God might avert the harm [...] until God granted them the arrival of the response from the Amīr al-Mu'minīn, from the tent of his victorious camp near Constantine, dated to Rabī' al-Awwal of the year 555 [March–April 1160], in which he communicated the certainty of his return and the dispatch of the cavalry of God to that region, and the defence of those territories [of al-Andalus]. (IBN ṢĀḤIB al-ṢALĀT 1964, 77)¹⁹

The death of a rebel, according to medieval chroniclers, could prompt divine mercy in the form of rain, thereby alleviating periods of drought. Such was the case in the year 314/926, when the body of Sulaymān, son of the rebel 'Umar b. Ḥaḥṣūn who had posed a serious threat to the Umayyad emirate of Cordoba, was publicly displayed, crucified atop a wooden beam at the Bāb al-Sudda gate of the Cordoban *qaṣr*:

It was a great victory that rejoiced the Muslims and renewed their faith [...] That year, the drought had been severe, and scarcity widespread. The official in charge of prayers called for public supplications [...] On the day when the body of the rebel Sulaymān b. 'Umar b. Ḥaḥṣūn was hoisted and crucified at the palace gate, a saving rain fell upon Cordoba, about which the poets composed many verses, including the following:

From the clouds flows relentless rain,
And with it, in torrents, the enemy's blood.
Two forms of moisture are constant in their descent,
One impure, the other pure.
One, a liquid the earth itself will not receive;
The other, nourishing, that runs and soaks.
The first defiled the world, now purified
Inwardly and outwardly of its filth. (IBN ḤAYYĀN 1979, 132–33)

Here, the salvific rainfall, triggered by the Umayyad emir's triumph, symbolically purifies the afflicted land, cleansing it not only of drought, but also of the impurity embodied by the rebel.

Shared Images

In this way, the imagery surrounding natural disasters in medieval Islamic sources is closely interwoven with political symbolism. Common *topoi* appear across narratives of both natural

¹⁹ On Ibn Mardanīsh, see BALBALE 2023. Another Almohad caliph, in this case al-Manṣūr, also brought about rain, this time through his prayers and the presence of his army: 'The Commander of the Faithful ordered his troops to march that day in full armour, and when they passed before him, he was struck by the beauty of their equipment. He rose and performed two units of prayer in gratitude to God, and no sooner had he completed his prayer than a cloud arrived, and a generous rain fell, soaking the people' ('ABD al-WĀḤID al-MARRĀKUSHI 2005, 211).

and political catastrophes. One particularly relevant motif is the dishonouring of women, a rhetorical device employed to personify and dramatise the perceived collapse of Islamic society (FIERRO 2015; BARTON 2015). In an epistle written after the fall of Barbastro, the violation of Muslim women, who are left unprotected and publicly exposed, is portrayed as the epitome of the community's humiliation:

They encircled us as a necklace encircles the neck, subjecting us to the harshest punishments through various forms of warfare and assault, day and night, hurling their bolts upon us, striking calamities. Woe to what our eyes witnessed: the looting of treasured possessions, the dishonouring of veiled wives and well-guarded daughters, everything that modesty had concealed laid bare to public view. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:175)²⁰

Ibn al-ʿAssāl states: 'How many maidens kept in the harem were taken out of their dwelling without being able to hide!' (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 90–91). Similarly, a recurring motif in the description of natural disasters such as the great fire in Cairo in 721/1321 or the 703/1303 earthquake, is that women were compelled to appear in public without veiling themselves (VON HEES 2017). Al-Maqrīzī recounts that women emerged with their faces uncovered and that pregnant women gave birth prematurely; an anonymous source adds that women went into the streets unveiled, and since the people believed that the hour of the death of the living and the resurrection of the dead had arrived, they began to pray. As a result, God showed His mercy and stopped the earthquake (al-MAQRĪZĪ 1934–72, 1:942–45; GUIDOBONI and COMASTRI 2005, 349, 354–57).

In these narratives, women assume a central role, and are often portrayed as sexualised and passive victims of infidel conquest, or as the figures through whom the devastating and unexpected impact of a natural disaster upon the Islamic community is rendered visible. Women thus function as a powerful vehicle for expressing fear which is deeply connected to notions of honour, shame and authority. Violated women appear as an anonymous and desecrated collective whose inviolability has been breached; they are, therefore, emblematic of social disintegration and harbingers of impending catastrophe.²¹

Fear itself is another common *topos* shared by accounts of both natural and political disasters.²² Ibn ʿIdhārī writes:

²⁰ In another passage, which also highlights the abandonment of women and their lack of protection, the blood spilled by the infidels is compared to rainfall: 'If you had seen, Oh Muslims, your fellow believers, their wealth and families seized; the swords unleashed, and death reigned over them. Their bodies were covered in wounds as the tips of spears played upon them. The cries, moans and laments grew louder; blood ran down their legs as rain runs along the roads. They lost their reason, their hearts seemed to leap from their chests—there was no one to help them, no protector. Deaf were the ears to the cries of the young men, the laments of the women and the weeping of the children.'

²¹ Much has been written about honour in the Mediterranean, from F.G. Baily's classic (BAILY 1971), to more recent studies such as BARTON 2001.

²² On fear in the premodern world and beyond, see BOURKE 2005; DELUMEAU 1978; FORONDA 2013; LAFFAN and WEISS 2012; MCCANN and MCKECHNIE-MASON 2018; MEYERSON, THIERRY and FALK 2004; PLAMPER and LAZIER 2012; SADAUNE 2013.

In that year [332 AH], on the night of Monday, the 9th of Dhū l-Qa‘da [2 July 944], there was a violent earthquake in Cordoba, the like of which had never been seen or heard before. It occurred in the evening and lasted for an hour. The people of Córdoba were terrified and rushed to the mosques, weeping and praying. [God] came to their aid and turned the quake away from them. (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 2:227)

Likewise, after mentioning strange phenomena in the sky that terrified the population, Ibn al-Athīr reports a period of seismic activity that forced the residents of Mahdiyya to abandon their homes: ‘In that year [367 AH/19 August 977 – 8 August 978 CE] the sky took on a fiery red colour between East and North like flames, and people poured into the streets invoking the name of God. There was a dreadful earthquake at Mahdiyya which lasted for forty days’.²³

When it came to political disasters, such as the fear experienced by besieged populations, fear became intertwined with anxieties about death, social change and religious beliefs—both their own and those of others. These reactions are regularly documented in Andalusī and Maghribī sources.²⁴ For instance, when in 658/1260 the Muslim population of Saleh observed a Castilian fleet approaching by sea, ‘the people were shaken’. Subsequently, after the city’s assault, its inhabitants panicked and thronged at the city gate to escape, exacerbating the tragedy as ‘a number of them were crushed to death, known only to the Listener and Knower [i.e. God]’ (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:489 ff.).

The anxiety, fear and terror of the population, which led them to invoke God, frequently feature in these accounts, often localised in the heart. For example, Ibn al-Qalānīsī states that an earthquake that struck Damascus in 551/1156 ‘terrified people’s hearts’ (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:489 ff.). Similarly, Ibn Abī Zar‘ reports that, at the Portuguese conquest of Alcácer do Sal, ‘the hearts of the Muslims filled with terror’ (IBN ABĪ ZAR‘ 1972, 242–43), and Ibn al-‘Assāl states in his account of the loss of al-Andalus that ‘The Muslim hearts were terrified, and their best defenders showed cowardice when they fought battles’ (al-HIMYARĪ 1975, 90–91). In these emotional narratives, the heart plays a very important role, in both the Islamic and Christian sources. The ‘feeling heart’ is a transcultural iconic symbol in the medieval world, a key conceptual device related to emotions and emotional practices (see, e.g. BARCLAY and REDDAN 2019). And, of course, when the disaster came to an end, the heart was comforted. Thus, Ibn al-Qalānīsī says the following about an earthquake that occurred in Syria in the year 507/1114: ‘The earth shook with it, and the people were anxious, but as the tremors ceased, their souls were restored from palpitation and distress to tranquillity, and their hearts were comforted after disquiet and fear’ (IBN al-QALĀNISĪ 1932, 149).

Fear of both natural disasters and enemies is depicted in medieval sources in similar ways, often intertwining the two. Sometimes, terrifying Christian armies are even portrayed using

²³ Again, the earthquake lasted forty days. See IBN al-ATHĪR 1851–76, 8:510; IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 1:247.

²⁴ For a history of emotions in the Middle Ages and beyond, see BODDICE 2018; BOQUET and NAGY 2015; FREVERT 2011; REDDY 2001; ROSENWEIN 2018; SILLERAS FERNÁNDEZ 2024. In the case of medieval Islamic studies, the history of emotions has been developing in recent years (e.g. RIZVĪ 2017; TEKGÜL 2023), although there is still a lot of work to be done. See, for example, the special issue of *Cultural History* on ‘Arabic Emotions: From the Qur’an to the Popular Epic’ (BLATHERWICK and BRAY 2019), or the recent edited volume *Emociones nazaries* (JREIS NAVARRO 2025). On fear in the battlefield, see RÓZYCKI 2021, 61 ff.

imagery associated with natural disasters. For instance, Ibn al-Kardabūs describes the army of Alfonso VI of Castile during the Battle of Zallaqa (478/1086) as a formidable force, whose banners resembled black clouds flowing over the land (IBN al-KARDABŪS 1971, 92). Similarly, the *Tārīkh Mayūrqa* likens the Aragonese army that conquered Mallorca to a deluge, as if replicating the account of the prophet Noah (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 106). In this narrative, the providential vision is omnipresent: despite Mallorca’s wealth and favourable location, God had decreed its fall (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 66–67):²⁵ ‘In this way and by decree of Allāh, the greatest of cruelties was conceived’ (IBN ‘AMĪRA 2007, 132).

Eschatological Terror

In his definition of fear, Jean Delumeau pointed out its dual biological and emotional nature in that, strictly speaking, fear is an emotion-shock, often preceded by surprise, provoked by the awareness of a present and overwhelming danger which, one believes, threatens one’s self-preservation. In a state of alert, the hypothalamus reacts by means of a global mobilisation of the body, which triggers various types of somatic behaviours causing endocrine modifications. Like any emotion, fear provokes different effects depending on the individuals and circumstances, including alternative reactions in the same person (DELUMEAU 1978). Fear generates physical and physiological reactions in those who suffer from it, but it undoubtedly also has an important social component, and is a feature of wider, collective socio-cultural experiences undergone by members of specific societies at particular times. Fear is, thus, a dimension of human social life (SCRUTON 1986). In this sense, emotions like fear—and the ways that they are expressed—are the result of particular experiences (both individual or collective) that are articulated and embedded in a given historical and social context and make sense in terms of specific affective norms and within the framework of a particular ‘emotional community’, as defined by Barbara Rosenwein (ROSENWEIN 2006). In this regard, one of the most recurrent sources of anxiety during the Middle Ages, resulting from its dominant socio-religious systems, was fear of sin and the eternal condemnation that could ensue upon one’s death (see DELUMEAU 1990); that is, what Fudgé has called ‘eschatological terror’, describing a state in which the anxieties of religion spawned fear of apocalypse, damnation, hell and the uncertain fate and suffering of sinners in the afterlife (FUDGÉ 2017).²⁶ Because of this facet of fear as a social emotion, different communities create different intelligible conceptual frameworks through which to express their anxiety. In the Middle Ages, in both Europe and the Islamic world, and due to this ‘eschatological terror’, the apocalyptic imagination constituted a conceptual framework through which to narrate—or provoke—fear (COOK 2002; KUBERSKI 2013; see also FINGAROVA 2022). In the cases of both natural and political catastrophes, medieval sources often interpreted events through an

²⁵ The future recovery of Mallorca was also part of this providentialist vision and depended exclusively on the will of God. Thus, when Ibn Abī Zar’ gives news of the fall of the island, he adds ‘God will return it to Islam’ (IBN ABĪ ZAR’ 1972, 275). On the idea of the recovery and reconquest of al-Andalus in the Islamic sources, see ALBARRÁN 2019.

²⁶ Kathleen E. Ebbs has called this the ‘emotional regime of Hell’ (EBBS 2022).

eschatological lens, reflecting the pervasive influence of religious beliefs on emotional responses (on this issue see, for example, LERNER 1981; HANSKA 2015, 112 ff.). These interpretations highlight how fear was not only a personal experience but also a collective one, and was deeply embedded in the social and religious fabric of medieval communities.

In both the Qur'an and the *sunna*, natural disasters such as earthquakes were understood as signs of the end of times.²⁷ The sources also provide examples of natural disasters represented as such. For example, al-Suyūṭī mentions that in 549/1154–5, there was a strong wind after sunset in Baghdad, and the people were frightened, thinking that the Day of Resurrection had come (RAZANI 1972, 19). Similarly, Ibn al-Athīr mentions how a sandstorm devastated the Iraqi region in 575–6/1179–80:

This year a dark black wind blew in the Jazīra lands, in Iraq and elsewhere. It occurred generally throughout the lands from midday until a quarter of the night had passed. It remained so dark that a man could hardly see anyone he was with. I was in Mosul at that time. We prayed the afternoon, evening and late-night prayers by supposition and guesswork. People turned to submissiveness, repentance and seeking forgiveness. They thought that the Day of Judgement had arrived. (IBN al-ATHĪR 1965–67, 10:460)

There are also numerous instances in which military defeats were interpreted in eschatological terms. For example, in the chronicle of Ibn 'Amīra concerning the loss of Mallorca,²⁸ the entry of the Aragonese forces into the city in 1229 is described in the following terms: 'It was one of the most agonising days for achieving salvation, and its terror most closely resembled the Day of Resurrection' (IBN 'AMĪRA 2007, 130). Anguish, terror and the Resurrection are three elements that are frequently employed to articulate a conceptual framework for expressing fear. Moreover, in this instance the author adds that 'the commotion created was similar to that which will occur during the first moments of Judgment Day' (IBN 'AMĪRA 2007, 132). This eschatological rhetoric, which is marked by images of nursemaids, pregnant women and men acting as if they are drunk, reappears across sources that address such events, including the epistle on the fall of Barbastro mentioned earlier in this article.²⁹ In that text, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr draws explicitly on two Qur'anic verses that refer

27 For example, al-BUKHĀRĪ 1997, n. 1036: 'The Prophet said, 'The Hour (Last Day) will not be established until (religious) knowledge will be taken away (by the death of religious learned men), earthquakes will be very frequent, time will pass quickly, afflictions will appear, murders will increase, and money will overflow amongst you''. In the Qur'an, Q 99, *al-Zalzala* ('The Earthquake'), is interpreted as being associated with the end of times. See SENIGUER AND BELHAJ 2023.

28 On this issue, see MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2021.

29 'The brother did not care for his brother, nor did the son call upon his father, nor did the father approach his children—"on that day, each man will be concerned only with his own affair." The wet nurse did not protect her suckling child, nor did the wife weep for her bedfellow, as if they were in a day similar to that which the Almighty mentions in the Perfect Revelation: "On the Day when every nursing mother will forget her suckling child, and every pregnant woman will drop her load, and you will see mankind as if they were drunk, yet they will not be drunk." How do you think it was, Oh Muslims? Women and children were taken, some naked, others clothed, from here to there, as animals are led by the halter, sometimes dragged, other times pushed; the elderly were bound with ropes, shackled with chains and manacles, without the slightest consideration. If they asked for compassion, they were not shown mercy; if they asked for food, they were not fed; if they asked for water, they were not given to drink; their reason lost,

to signs of the impending end times, thereby framing the military defeat in apocalyptic terms: ‘On that Day, every man among them will have enough concern of his own to make him indifferent to others’ (Q 80:37) and ‘The Day you see it, every nursing mother will forget her nursling, and every pregnant woman will deliver her burden. And you will see people as if they were intoxicated, though they are not; but the punishment of God is severe’ (Q 22:2).³⁰

These fears had another dimension, one that must be directly linked to the providential discourse through which political and natural disasters were interpreted, and which was closely connected to the notion of sin: fear was considered an emotion of value for the spiritual lessons it could teach (SCOTT and KOSSO 2002, xi-xxxvii). For instance, certain medieval theological treatises maintained that fear of divine judgment stemmed from a lack of spiritual preparation and should be addressed through intensified religious commitment (ATKINSON 1977, 22–28). In this framework, fear of God’s wrath could lead to sincere repentance and the adoption of proper religious conduct through acknowledging a sinful past (RIVERS 2002). As previously noted, repentance for sin is frequently described in the sources as a common response to catastrophe. In the case of the volcanic eruption in Medina in 654/1256, for example, Abū Shāma remarks that ‘people were afraid on account of their sins’ (SALIBA 2017, 150). Similarly, in the face of possible death at the Battle of Alarcos (591/1195), which pitted the Almohads against Alfonso VIII of Castile, a particularly noteworthy ‘ritual’ moment occurred: the Almohad caliph asked the Muslim combatants to forgive one another, perhaps in the hope that they might die at peace, having repented of their faults and sins. He also commanded them to calm their souls and purify their intentions toward God (IBN ‘IDHĀRĪ 2009, 4:289–90).

The Landscape of Fear Versus the Landscape of Consolation

As Jussi Hanska states, it has become customary to separate man-made disasters from natural disasters (HANSKA 2015). This was not the case during the Middle Ages, when it was believed that all tribulations ultimately originated from God. Many medieval sources view wars in the same context as floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters; they were explained and understood as very much similar processes. Natural disasters and defeats, or territorial loss, were part of the same epistemological framework, the same cosmovision, and the same way of understanding existence and history. This is why the sources reflect the construction of a shared landscape of anxiety, terror and distress that encompasses both phenomena—both experiences. It is a landscape of catastrophe and loss, a *locus horribilis*. In this context, ‘landscape’ is understood not merely as the physical environment but as a mode of perception, following the approach of Michael Bintley and Kate Franklin in their volume *Landscapes and Environments of the Middle Ages* (BINTLEY and FRANKLIN 2023). Landscape, in this sense, is not simply the world as seen; it is a culturally constructed way of seeing the world. Landscapes are imaginaries that mediate the experience and interpretation of the physical environment. In the premodern Islamic imaginary, both military defeats and

stunned, their eyes red from weeping, their colour changed’ (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:176).

³⁰ On the interpretation of these verses, see al-QURṬUBĪ 2005–13, 6:202 and 10:106.

natural disasters belonged to the same symbolic landscape, articulated through a common language. This convergence is evident in a *ḥadīth*, for instance, in which these two threats—feared by the Prophet Muḥammad for his *umma*—are represented together:

Indeed, Allāh gathered the earth for me so that I saw its east and its west. And surely my *umma*'s authority shall reach over all that was shown to me of it. And I have been granted the two treasures; the red and the white. I asked my Lord that my *umma* is not to be destroyed by a universal drought, and that He does not overcome them by enemies outside of them, reaching to their heart of power. My Lord said: 'Oh Muḥammad! When I issue a decree, it is not reversed. I have granted for your *umma* that they shall not be destroyed by universal drought. And that they are not overcome by enemies outside of themselves reaching to their heart of power—even if they gather against them from all the regions'. Or he said: 'Among the regions'. But some of them will destroy others, and some will capture others. (al-TIRMIDHĪ 2007, n. 2176)³¹

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As has been stated, the loss of Saragossa was read by Ibn Abī Zar' as a judgment from God implemented through a Christian army represented as a plague of locusts and ants (IBN ABĪ ZAR' 1972, 163). Similarly, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, in his *Risāla* about the loss of Barbastro, describes the territorial retreat of al-Andalus using images of natural disasters and calls for the defence of the frontier, in this memorable paragraph:

On guard, on guard! This is the first thing to be protected from a volcano whose fiery sparks fly in all directions, from a deluge whose terrible rain falls without rest—one is seldom safe from that fire, or from this flood; awake before they awake you, fight them before they fight you in your houses [...]: look at our frontiers, how they are battered; our regions, how they tear them apart; our booty, how they divide it; our goods, how they tear them from us. Our blood remains without vengeance, and our weapons dull; and you abandon us and forget us in the difficulty, as if we were not part of you, as if we were not the barrier that defends you, the protection that stands before you. (IBN BASSĀM 1979, 3/1:178)

Facing this landscape of catastrophe, loss, and fear, the Andalusī authors, as a form of resistance to the Christian advance, constructed a landscape of consolation, comfort and memory—a landscape in which, primarily through the image of a garden and of Paradise, and also through the remembrance of past victories in contrast to defeats, al-Andalus was idealised. This *locus amoenus*, this 'pleasant place', ultimately derives from Biblical and classical representations of idealised and controlled 'natural' landscapes, particularly the Garden of Eden (BINTLEY and FRANKLIN 2023, 18). This lush environment contains that which delights the human senses. In the conceptualisation of gardens and green spaces within the broader medieval Islamic tradition, a parallel allegorical and symbolic link was made between lush garden spaces full of greenery and flowing water and the landscape of Paradise.

³¹ A similar perspective appears in the Bible with reference to the events preceding the Apocalypse. 'Then he said to them: "Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there shall be great earthquakes in diverse places and pestilences and famines and terrors from heaven; and there shall be great signs"' (St Luke 21:10–11).

The garden also formed an important element in the daily life of al-Andalus, and was a metonym for an al-Andalus that has been idealised (See, for example, DICKIE 1968; DICKIE 1992; RUGGLES 2000; RUGGLES 2008; TITO ROJO and CASARES PORCEL 2011; ANDERSON 2013; FORCADA 2019). This can be observed in the depictions of al-Andalus produced particularly after its territorial decline, since gardens not only emerged in the literature as leitmotifs to represent human cultivation of the earth in concert with the divine, but also as defensive boundaries to ward off environmental and cultural violence (PUERTA VÍLCHEZ 2017). One example can be seen in the poetry of Ibn Khafāja from Alcira (d. 533/1138), who describes the Andalusian people as blessed and al-Andalus as Paradise:

Oh people of al-Andalus! You are blessed by God
with your water, shade, rivers, and trees.
There is no Garden of Paradise
except in your dwellings.
If I had to choose, this is where I would stay;
do not think that tomorrow you will enter the eternal fire:
one does not enter hell after living in Paradise. (IBN KHAFAJA 1960, n. 88)³²

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Another example can be found in the epistle on the fall of Valencia by Ibn ‘Amīra, who refers to the city in the following terms: ‘What has become of those meadows and their rich vegetation, the streams and greenery of their banks, those humid, perfumed refuges; the rivers and their meanders, the zephyrs and their mild caresses, the sunsets and the enervating breezes?’ (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). Regarding Alcira, his hometown, he writes: ‘The place of my birth has since seen its star fall and its misfortune surge because of this cruel affliction. Let us weep over a paradise through which Allāh has caused a river to flow’, a reference to the Qur’anic description of Paradise (Q 2:25; Q 18:31) (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.).

In these narratives, memory also provide comfort through the creation of a counter-present as a strategy of rhetorical resistance (ASSMANN 2011, 62 ff.).³³ That is, faced with the problems of the present, memories of a past—usually taking the form of a golden age to be recovered—are evoked. Memories, thus, become expectations. In the same text, and as part of this landscape of consolation in the face of defeat, Ibn ‘Amīra also recalls past victories. He laments that Islam is oppressed and that ‘it is as if one had never heard of the victory of Ibn Nuṣayr, the fruitful advance of Ṭāriq³⁴ [...] As if the Marwanids and their summer expeditions had been forgotten,³⁵ and the hero of Ma‘āfir,³⁶ who put down in the dust

³² Here, the poet takes the paradisiacal metaphor to the extreme, suggesting that life in al-Andalus surpasses that of the promised Paradise—a notion which, according to al-Maqqarī, led the Marinid sultan Abū ‘Inān Fāris (d. 759/1358) to regard the verse as a blatant transgression of religious dogma and to reprimand the individual who recited it to him (al-MAQQARĪ 1988, 680–81).

³³ The concept of ‘counter-present’ has already been applied in some studies of Islamic history. See, for example, HIRSCHLER 2006, 78 ff; ALBARRÁN 2020, 47–51.

³⁴ Mūsā b. Nuṣayr and Ṭāriq b. Ziyād, conquerors of al-Andalus.

³⁵ The Umayyads.

³⁶ Almanzor, Andalusī military leader, chamberlain of Caliph Hishām II, and effectively ruler of al-Andalus until his death in 1002.

those idols and those who worshipped them' (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). In this way, the author points to the possibility of the presence of Islam in al-Andalus being forgotten, so as to remember those past glories—all of them examples of victories against Christians, with Almanzor being regularly cited—thereby offering the comforting existence of an alternative end. This constitutes another particularly fertile sphere for the articulation of historiographical narratives full of emotion: those linking the political community with the territory in which it developed,³⁷ and with its past (ALBARRÁN 2024a).

In this same vein—connecting the socio-political community with the territory in which it developed and its past—emotional narratives, through their use of memories and landscapes to confront the fall of al-Andalus, reflect an attachment to the land. This sentiment intensified due to the traumatic process of loss, the fear of change it entailed, and the need to emigrate, a condition also caused by natural disasters. This awareness was manifested through concepts such as *jamāʿat al-Andalus* (the community of al-Andalus), as exemplified by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) in his epistle in praise of al-Andalus. This text, titled *Risāla fī faḍl al-Andalus wa-rijālihi* ('Epistle on the Excellence of al-Andalus and its Men'), was a genuine work extolling the merits of al-Andalus and is also known as *Faḍā'il al-Andalus*. In it, he does not present a sacred topography of al-Andalus but highlights all its landmarks in various fields of knowledge (WILK 2010; PUERTA VÍLCHEZ 2017). That is, he underscores Andalusī cultural excellence within the broader framework of Islamic history, thereby creating an idealised genealogy and a space to be reclaimed. Undoubtedly, the production of such works is linked to a form of resistance and memory in the face of the territorial setbacks experienced from the fifth/eleventh century onward, akin to the *faḍā'il al-Quds* (merits of Jerusalem) works that were composed in the Holy Land after the arrival of the Crusades.³⁸

Such feelings of dismay and helplessness are evident in the text of Ibn 'Amīra, who observes with resignation the necessity of abandoning both homeland (*waṭan*) and country (*bilādunā*, our country) (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.). In the same text, the Andalusī scholar questions the meaning of this catastrophe, asking whether the Day of Judgment has already arrived. From a markedly providentialist perspective, he further reflects on what sin al-Andalus as a whole might have committed to justify such a state of agony. His conclusion, which implicitly challenges the very notion of divine justice, is unequivocal: 'None of that! On the contrary, it has upheld the *sunna* and has served as a bulwark against religious innovations' (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 97 ff.).

³⁷ See GARCÍA-SANJUÁN 2015. For a literature of nostalgia in the medieval Islamic context, particularly in the Islamic West, see, for example, STETKEVYCH 1993; ELINSON 2009; GRANARA 2021; HERMES 2024.

³⁸ Another consequence of the arrival of the Crusaders was the revival of the sanctity of this territory—that is, a re-sacralisation of the Holy Land as a form of resistance. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in the growing popularity after the Crusades of *faḍā'il al-Quds* texts, a genre that enumerates the various spiritual benefits a pilgrim could attain by visiting the Holy City and the broader Syro-Palestinian region. Although this literary genre predated the period under discussion, its circulation increased significantly following the loss of Quds. See HASSON 1981; ELAD 1995, 6 ff.; MOURAD 2008; LATIFF 2017, 30 ff.

Final Remarks

This study has examined how natural disasters and political catastrophes such as territorial loss and military defeat were not only chronicled together in Islamic historiography but were also emotionally and theologically entangled in the construction of collective memory. Through a close reading of sources from al-Andalus and the broader medieval Islamic world, the article demonstrates that the experience of natural calamities was often interpreted as a divine response to political failure, moral corruption or communal disunity. Earthquakes, floods and other environmental upheavals were thus situated within a providential framework that offered both a diagnosis of crisis and a call for repentance and reform.

The sources analysed reveal a shared narrative strategy: the alignment of cosmic disorder with socio-political decline. Authors mobilised natural imagery not simply as metaphor, but as an affective device capable of generating emotional resonance, moral urgency and a sense of divine accountability. The resulting textual landscapes are not passive reflections of geographical space, but emotionally charged terrains—‘emotional landscapes’—where feelings of loss, fear, nostalgia and hope are spatially and rhetorically encoded. In this sense, two complementary types of landscapes have been identified: the landscape of fear, shaped by images of ruin, trembling earth and divine wrath; and the landscape of consolation, in which the memory of al-Andalus is reimagined through paradisiacal gardens, flowing water and the aesthetic of a lost golden age. These landscapes function as narrative mechanisms through which trauma is articulated and community identity is reconstituted. They also provide a moral geography that situates the righteous, the repentant and the guilty within an emotionally legible spatial order.

Likewise, by placing the Andalusī and Maghribī material in dialogue with Eastern and even Christian traditions, this research reveals a broader Mediterranean pattern of narrating catastrophe as divine pedagogy. The recurrence of themes such as communal punishment or eschatological longing points to a shared medieval epistemology in which the natural, political and moral orders are inseparably linked. The disasters described in these sources are thus not only historical events, but also emotionally encoded episodes of cultural self-reflection, theological commentary and moral imagination, foregrounding the entanglement of emotional experience, environmental perception and historical narration, and inviting us to rethink the ways in which communities process trauma and inscribe meaning onto space and time.

Finally, I would like to conclude by quoting the following excerpts in which the ninth/fifteenth century geographer al-Ḥimyarī describes al-Andalus—a depiction in which many of the elements I have discussed can be discerned, including the paradisiacal image of the Andalusī territory, as well as the looming threat of natural and political disasters:

The name of al-Andalus in Greek is Isbāniya. Al-Andalus is an excellent, fertile territory that produces fruits in abundance. Its natural wealth is permanent [...] Al-Andalus is similar to Syria for its fertility and the purity of its air; like Yemen, for its temperate climate; like India, for its aromas and the fineness of its products; like al-Ahwāz, for the importance of its fiscal revenues; like China, for its mines of precious stones; like Aden, for the benefits obtained from its coastline [...] It is said that the first men to take possession of al-Andalus were the sons of Tubal, Japhet and Noah.

They inhabited this land at the beginning of time. Their kings numbered one hundred and fifty. According to what is told, later, al-Andalus was ruined and impoverished, and its population was forced to emigrate because of a famine that struck it. The land remained deserted for a hundred years [...] Al-Andalus is a territory where one fights for the faith and a place of *ribāṭ*: indeed, various infidel nations surround it to the East, to the North, and partly to the West. (al-ḤIMYARĪ 1975, 32–33)

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Notes on Contributors

Javier ALBARRÁN – is Tenure-track “Ramón y Cajal” researcher at the Department of Medieval History of the Universidad de Granada. He focuses his research on the medieval Islamic West, particularly on issues related to religious violence, the history of jihad, the figure and veneration of prophet Muhammad, the creation of sacred memory and spaces, and encounters between religions, topics on which he has published extensively. His last edited book, *Violencia Interconfesional. Realidades y percepciones en la península ibérica*, has been published by the Universidad de Granada Press (2024).

Abdessamad BELHAJ – is a senior researcher in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Religion and Society (UNPS-Budapest). He holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from Mohammed V University (Rabat, 2001) and a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2008). He worked as a researcher and visiting lecturer at UCLouvain between 2012 and 2024. His latest book, published in 2023, is entitled *Authority in Contemporary Islam: Structures, Figures and Functions*.

Massimiliano BORRONI – is a senior team member of the ERC project *Science, Society, and Environment in the First Millennium*. He is a researcher at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, where he teaches in the Master's program in Environmental Humanities. His work initially focused on the Iranian calendar and its New Year during the Abbasid period, examining fiscal and cultural dimensions. He later turned to the study of traditional irrigation techniques and the conceptualization of water, with particular attention to premodern thought on the water cycle, the role of the sea in creation, and the physical behavior of water. He recently published a monograph titled *Connecting Water: Environmental Views in Premodern Arabic Writings*, which explores these themes.

Ilaria CICOLA – has been Adjunct Professor at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna since 2017. Her research focuses on Arabic language and linguistics, with particular emphasis on specialized terminology, corpus linguistics, and computational linguistics. Her interests range from medieval Arabic alchemical vocabulary to the lexicon of non-normative sexualities in classical and modern texts. She is currently investigating the semi-automatic annotation of digitized corpora. She also works with the Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino, where she contributes to the creation of a digital index of names and toponyms for the historical journal *Oriente Moderno*. She has additionally collaborated with the Department of Languages and Literatures at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna as a Research Fellow within the PRIN project “Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century.”

Marco DEMICHELIS (PhD) – is Assistant Professor in History of Islamic World and Islamic Thought at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. He has been Berenson Fellow (2022-2023) at the

I Tatti (The Harvard University Center for the Study of Italian Renaissance), Senior Research Fellow in Islamic Studies within the ICS at the University of Navarra (2019-2021) after having worked as Marie Curie Fellow (IF 2016) in the same and post-Doctoral Research Fellow within the Dept. of Religious Studies at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan (2013-2016). Among his last monographs, *Violence in Early Islam. Religious Narratives, the Arab Conquests and the Canonization of Jihad* (IB Tauris, 2021) and *Salvation and Hell in Classical Islamic Thought: Can Allah Save Us All?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). His last edited Special Issue is *The Qur'an in History. The History of the Qur'an. From Canonization to Critique and Semantic Hermeneutics* (mdpi.com).

Nahyan FANCY – is the Al Qasimi Professor of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK. He examines the intersections of medicine, philosophy and religion in post-1200 Islamic societies. His first book, *Science and Religion in Mamluk Egypt: Ibn al-Naftī, Pulmonary Transit and Bodily Resurrection* was published by Routledge (2013). He is currently working on a follow-up monograph, *In Ibn al-Naftī's Shadow*, which examines eight medical commentaries produced on the *Canon of Medicine* and its abridgment between 1160 and 1520 CE. He has also published on and is currently working on understanding the onset of the second plague pandemic and its impact on Middle Eastern societies from the 13th to the 14th centuries. He has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment of Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, British Academy and the Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton for his work.

Chiara FONTANA – is Assistant Professor of Arabic Literature at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. Her studies focus principally on Islamic eloquence (*balāgha*), the evolution of Arabic literary theory and canon over time, specifically emphasizing *al-balāgha* as a cognitive framework to understand reality creatively. Her recent works include, *Poesie di Najīb Surūr. Studio critico e traduzione*, AMSActa, 2025; “The Name of the Key: al-Sakkākī’s Literary Craftsmanship and Pragmatic Poetics in Miṭṭāḥ al-‘Ulūm”, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 25, (1), 2025: 57-87; “Craftsmanship in Literature and Literary Craftsmanship in 9th Century Baghdad: Ibn Abī ‘Awn’s (d. 322/934) *Kitāb al-tašbīḥāt* [The Book of Similes] as a Case Study”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 20, 2025, 1-39; “Arabic Poetics and Prosody in Practice: Najīb Surūr’s Experimentalism in ‘Kalimāt fī-l-ḥubb’ [Love Words],” In R.R. Gould, H. Rashwan, N. al-Askari [Eds.] *Arabic, Persian, and Turkic Poetics. Towards a Post-Eurocentric Literary Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024: 304-338.

Nahid NOROZI – is Associate Professor of Persian language and literature at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. She is the director of “Ferdows: Collana di Studi Iranici e Islamici” (WriteUp Books), and is the co-founder of “Quaderni di Meykhane”, an e-journal of Iranian studies. Her research focuses on medieval Persian epics and verse romances, as well as Arabic-Persian mystical treatises. She has published extensively on contemporary and medieval Persian authors, including Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Sohrāb Sepehrī, Khwājū Kirmānī, al-Sahlaḡī, Aḡmad Shāmlū, Sīmīn Behbahānī, and Gorgānī. Her latest monographs include *Esordi del romanzo persiano. Dal Vis e Rāmin di Gorgānī* (XI sec.) al *Ciclo di Tristano* (2022), “*La mia spada è la poesia*”. *Versi di lotta e d’amore nella poetessa persiana Sīmīn Behbahānī* (2023), and *Amori e demoni nel Libro di Sām. Storia di plagi, riscritture e collage in un epos persiano cripto-mazdeo dal XI al XVII sec.* (2024).

Muhammad OMAR – is a PhD candidate in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. His research explores the social history of scholarly communities in the early Islamic period, examining

them within the broader religious and cultural dynamics of Arabia and its peripheries during Late Antiquity. He is currently completing his dissertation, *Genesis and Development of the Social Substrate of the Early Arabo-Islamic Scholarly Traditions*.

Ines PETA – is Associate Professor of Arabic Language at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna. She has participated in several research projects promoted by the Oasis International Foundation (2014, 2015, 2017) and is currently the Bologna team PI of the EU-funded project *Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th century* (PRIN 2022). Her research interests focus on the religious lexicon, particularly theological, philosophical, and mystical terminology. She has worked on Muslim–Christian polemical literature, the thought of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and, more recently, the writings of Aḥmad Amīn (d. 1954). Her publications include *Il Radd pseudo-ghazālīano: Paternità, Contenuti, Traduzione* [*The Pseudo-Ghazālīan Radd: Authorship, Contents, Translation*] (OSM, 2013) and *L'alba, il mattino e il meriggio dell'Islam di Aḥmad Amīn* [*The Dawn, The Morning and The Noon of Islam by Aḥmad Amīn*] (IPOCAN, forthcoming).

Andrea PIRAS – is Professor of Iranian Studies at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna and Visiting Professor of Iranian Philology at the Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. Member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton). Directeur d'études invité at École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section de Sciences historiques et philologiques). Specialist in writings, languages, texts and cultural history of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia. Among his research interests: Zoroastrian texts, Manichaean texts and images; contacts between Iran, Greece, Rome, Byzantium and Turan; religious history of the Iranian world (myth and ritual, eschatology, soteriology, asceticism, ecstasy, apocalypticism); phenomena of interaction and shared textualities between Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Among his books: *Hādōxt Nask II. Il racconto zoroastriano della sorte dell'anima*, Roma 2000. *Verba Lucis. Scrittura, immagine e libro nel manicheismo*, Udine-Milano 2012. *Manicheismo*, Brescia 2015.

Emmanuel PISANI – is an Islamologist, Director of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, and Associate Professor at the Vice-Rectorate for Research at the Institut Catholique de Paris. A Doctor of Philosophy and Theology, his research focuses particularly on the thought of al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), the question of otherness in Islam, and a Muslim theology of religions. A member of the Scientific Council of PLURIEL and the Network of Centers for Christian-Muslim Relations (NCCMR), he has held the Anawati Chair, “Fighting Extremism through Interreligious Dialogue,” since October 2023. He recently published *Hétérodoxes et non musulmans dans la pensée d'al-Ġazālī* (Vrin, 2022) and co-edited *Dynamiques de l'islamologie en Europe* (Cerf, 2023).