Wondering about Comparison

Enclaves of Learning in Medieval Europe and South Arabia —
Prolegomena to an Intercultural Comparative Research Project

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, doing comparative research seems relatively easy. Comparison, after all, forms the basis of many of our everyday observations. Any observation can thus be said to be implicitly comparative: against the backdrop of the observer’s individual perspective, previous observations and theoretical background, similarities and differences are brought to the fore, which in turn helps formulate an interpretation of what is seen or what is going on.¹ When such observations turn into a veritable research topic, into a qualitative comparative analysis of various phenomena, the

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comparison simply becomes more explicit, and turns the similarities and differences between phenomena into the main object of research. However, such an endeavour may become a different challenge entirely when the phenomena under scrutiny – or the researchers involved, for that matter – have such different backgrounds or operate in such different contexts that not just the objects of research become the subject of comparison, but the methods employed to study them as well.

This is one of the points where the SFB Visions of Community, the project within which both authors are working, is breaking new grounds. Many methodological commentaries written thus far have been based on the premise of comparative research within a single discipline, or on one researcher comparing different cases. Rather than looking at comparison as a method only, however, this article also explores the necessity to zoom out even further and look at the implications of having different researchers with different backgrounds and agendas come together in an interdisciplinary project where each of them brings one case to the table. The fact that the researchers themselves usually tend to be deeply entrenched into one side of the comparative watershed almost automatically leads to a willingness to explain differences and similarities using the terminology and discourse that comes to mind most readily, from the cultural and academic background of the disciplines involved. In turn, this engenders most interesting dialogues when attempting to communicate one’s findings to another, and makes comparative research a challenge not only on an individual level, but also from a trans-, cross-, or interdisciplinary perspective.

The contributions written for an upcoming Special Issue of History and Anthropology already allow us a glimpse of the challenges ahead, and provide some tentative answers, and the message is clear: when attempting cross-cultural comparative studies, we are not only comparing the subject of research – we are also holding our own expertise against the light.

This article should be seen as a first attempt to build upon these initial observations. More specifically, it aims to highlight the methodological challenges encountered in the course of a comparative analysis of religious communities in various cultures, and to present one of the methodological tools developed in the course of the project. After a short introduction, two case

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10 What P. Burke, History and Social Theory, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 2-3 has called a ‘dialogue of the deaf’, before offering several compromises in the rest of his book.


Networks and Neighbours

studies will be presented, each coming from the respective specialisations of the authors – one specializing in Early Medieval Europe from a historian’s perspective, and the other taking an anthropological approach to Medieval South Arabia. First, in order to present a ‘European backdrop’, the Lotharingian monastery of Saint-Mihiel between its foundation in the late eighth century and the composition of the *Chronicon Sancti Michaelis* about three centuries later will be described. Far from taking for granted the communal identity of Saint-Mihiel or the role played by monastic narratives in the construction or consolidation thereof, this section will highlight the role of learning in the self-representation of the community as a dynamic, permeable institution. Additionally, it came into its own at the height of the Carolingian dynasty, right around a time when worldly interests and religious ideas overlapped to a point that to exercise power meant to engage in a certain degree of self-reflection. This could, in short, be considered a time when monastic life and royal ideology were not diametrically opposed, but rather attempted to act in close concord.7 While not wholly representative for European monastic life throughout the Middle Ages, the fact remains that knowledge was indeed being fostered in a local context with a view towards supporting a larger social whole also served to delineate its boundaries and anchor the community in the world surrounding it. Then the focus will shift to medieval South Arabia, where we will take a closer look at a type of community that is decidedly un-monastic, and which has proven deceptively hard to grasp by modern researchers and contemporary observers alike. These are *hijras*, villages inhabited by those who claimed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammed, acting as centres of Zaydi Islamic religious and scholarly activity in the turbulent tribal context of medieval Yemen. Finally, it will be argued that, while it remains difficult to find common ground between the two fields, the alienation caused by comparative research and the dialogue between the disciplines does allow for the development of fresh perspectives on both types of communities highlighted.

The goal of these two case studies will not be to demonstrate how the communities studied are indicative of universal tendencies in the ideological or practical aspects of religious communal life.8 Rather, they are used to propose ways to ‘compare the incomparable’ without adhering too closely to a singular typology, and shed new light on the weals and woes of comparative studies.9 While neither case is wholly representative of their respective region or religion as a whole, wondering about the Carolingian situation will raise questions concerning the South Arabian context, and studying *hijras* will shed new light on the relation between monastic communities and the world

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When attempting cross-cultural comparison, a logical first step would be to look for phenomena that are at least superficially alike, in order to be able to start the comparative analysis on an empirical level. Even if the ultimate goal of such a research project is not merely to produce quantifiable results, it seems like a worthwhile opening gambit to do a simple side-by-side comparison first, if only to identify those criteria that seem most likely to yield qualitative results as well. Looks may be deceiving, however, and in an interesting case of a self-fulfilling paradox, the simple fact that one starts a comparative analysis from the notion of existing similarities could already lead to getting trapped in other, deeper preconceived notions – a difficulty that is especially palpable in projects consisting of many researchers with as many academic backgrounds and different conceptualisations of the question at hand.

Within each discipline, there often are fundamental differences in understanding the relation between theory and data. Furthermore, any model developed to make sense of the relations between ideal and reality is inherently artificial, as is the exact context in which each sense of community is used in the sources. The discussions and tensions over these ideals that we see in our sources and how to implement them is the object of the comparative approach attempted here, not the development of a reduced model of ideal-types of identities or communities.Choosing which ideals to represent as the important ones for the actors studied also necessitates an explanation of the ‘social logic’ of the sources through which we gauge these ideas and visions.

It is at this point that Verfremdung may prove to be helpful. It is a nigh untranslatable term, popularized by Bertolt Brecht in his work on epic theatre. In its most condensed form, it entails

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'zunächst einfach, dem Vorgang oder dem Charakter, das Selbstverständliche, Einleuchtende zu nehmen und über ihn Staunen und Neugier zu erzeugen (...) Verfremden heißt also Historisieren, heißt Vorgänge und Personen als vergänglich darzustellen.'

According to Brecht, this would be accomplished by, for example, commenting upon the plot as it unfolded, and by continuously reminding his audience that they were essentially spectators who were called upon to actively engage with what they saw. Verfremdung would thus be established by steering an audience’s perceptions based on an expectation of their preconceived notions, but all the while reminding them that the narrative is toying with their expectations, and not necessarily with their (f)actual knowledge.

Obviously, this is easier to accomplish in the controlled environment of the theatre than in the infinite complexity of real life; attempting comparative research through interdisciplinary dialogue would imply being author and audience at once. However, the establishment of a Verfremdungseffekt is possible in the controlled environment of a comparative study, and could help break through some of the methodological barriers thrown up by academic tradition and cultural background. Researchers should attempt to create a sense of wonder about their own subject as well as about that of others, by engendering a dialogue and by not taking anything for granted – remaining perpetually aware of what they are doing.

Enclaves of Learning

In the course of comparing Christian and Islamic religious communities, it became clear to the authors that the term ‘monastery’ inherently skewed the debate towards a certain degree of Eurocentrism. The term is, after all, bound up with a European Christian tradition. As such, a first step towards Verfremdung would be to drop this as a concept denoting anything but European Christian communities, in order to avoid any sense of familiarity whatsoever. For instance, whereas the etymology of the Latin Christian concept of the monasterium carries with it the notions of isolation and seclusion, in practice they served a host of additional purposes in addition to their ostensibly religious functions.


understanding of a monasterium as an essentially secluded enclave.\(^1^8\)

Conversely, the word *hijra* is a combination of two almost similar words. Within the specific Islamic discourse where these communities were most prevalent, *hijra* refers to the act of emigration, away from an unjust ruler and the act of setting up an enclave where the religious law can be upheld and where a righteous religious ruler can be followed.\(^1^9\) In Yemen, towards the end of the eleventh century, we see the term being used for specific villages, towns or centres, and not just for the act of emigration. In the discourse of the local tribes, however, the very similar term *hajar* (and *tahjīr*) refers to the concept of neutral territory, which must be protected by the surrounding tribes. A market can be declared as neutral, as well as a town, or the house of a scholarly family or a local judge or mediator. Thus the concept of *hijra* has combined both these meanings, further embedding these communities in a context that was as influenced by local tribes as it was by over-arching religious visions of community.\(^2^0\)

Given these significant differences at both emic and etic levels, a logical next step would be to find a descriptor that distills these communities down to comparable proportions. If ‘community’ is too broad to use, and ‘monastery’ too specific or Eurocentric, a workable compromise could be to find a conceptualisation that encompasses both the form and (part of) the function of the communities we want to compare.\(^2^1\) In this case, ‘enclaves of learning’ would be such a concept, hard enough to take into account religious and ideological issues as well as practices within and between the communities in question, but soft and ‘fuzzy’ enough to allow for a low-threshold, common-sense approach to comparison.\(^2^2\)

In the social sciences and humanities, the concept of enclaves usually designates an entity that is spatially, temporally, and by other socially defined means and borders separated from its wider

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\(^{1^8}\) The wide-ranging functions a monastery could attain have been studied for the case of Redon by W. Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany* (London, 1988), more generally (but also restricted to one region), see M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley 400 – 1000* (Cambridge, 2000).


\(^{2^1}\) Although these communities are not necessarily ‘institutions’ as such, many ideas proposed by K. Thelen, ‘How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis’, in J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer (eds.), *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 208-40, at pp. 230-35 have been very useful for the current study as well.

Among the many commonalities between our enclaves, the way they guarded, managed, communicated and (especially) used knowledge necessary for their continued existence, as well as the importance of this learning for the religion they represented, gives us a clear ‘insider’s perspective’ of the tensions between ideal and reality they had to cope with. This, in turn, allows us to more fully understand the visions of community underpinning the existence of the hodgepodge of the – sometimes admittedly bizarre – people we study. As David Ganz has pointed out, studying learning and education highlights ‘the tensions between spiritual fulfilment and resistance to (…) authority’. Although the existence of monasteries in the early Middle Ages was often ideologically justified by referring to their mastery over the Power of Prayer, they also functioned as havens of education and managers of knowledge. This function connected their idealism to their more earthly concerns – and whenever tensions occur between the two, boundaries are drawn, communities grow together, and enclaves spring into existence. For the situation in early Medieval Europe, these tensions and their role in shaping and re-shaping monastic communal identities have been the subject of many multi-faceted studies, approaching this problem from as many angles as the source material would allow. This rich research tradition serves as a jumping-

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23 For example, see E. Vinokurov, A Theory of Enclaves (Lanham MD, 2007); even though his study is primarily based on a more political/territorial interpretation of enclaves (and exclaves) as part of a state (‘true enclaves’), his observations on their openness and functioning within a larger social whole are applicable to non-national enclaves as well.


25 The authors would like to thank Prof. Andre Gingrich for his helpful remarks on this matter, and his help in formulating this description.


off point for the current research project as well, which aims to expand the conclusions drawn from European studies by applying them in a multi-cultural setting – and *vice versa*. It is for this reason that knowledge, learning and tradition have been singled out here, and the role these play in the ideologies described by contemporary actors, we can attempt comparisons that transcend the boundaries of time and cosmology, between European monasteries and their cross-cultural counterparts. Looking at the ways the actors in religious communities communicated their ideals and practices to subsequent generations is one way to accomplish this.\(^{30}\) As will be argued in this article, this could be a fruitful, if challenging, avenue of comparison.

The lack of a clear definition for ‘enclaves of learning’ as a concept is as much a blessing as a curse in this respect.\(^{31}\) On the one hand, it does leave the object of research open to intuitive selection by the researchers involved, which requires intensive cooperation and a willingness on the part of everybody to familiarize him- or herself with the contexts presented by their colleagues and the ways data models and theories have been connected. ‘Learning’, after all, does not apply solely to the transfer of knowledge *per se*. It encompasses a wide range of interdependent aspects, such as the political or societal ideologies expressed in the knowledge possessed;\(^{32}\) the religious contents and ideas steering the learning itself;\(^{33}\) and of course the practices involved in both processing and using the knowledge gained.\(^{34}\) On the other hand, however, it allows for comparisons that go beyond notions that steer initial impressions, and opens up possibilities to include communities that defy a more classical, narrow ‘monastic’ definition.\(^{35}\) Maintaining a certain degree of abstraction, of

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Verfremdung, may complicate the acquisition of definitive results, but it does catalyse an ongoing discussion into the nature of the communities under scrutiny – and as we will see, it is from the discussions and tensions that the most valuable insights may arise.

**A SHINING EXAMPLE: THE MONKS OF SAINT-MIHIEL ON THE VIA REGIA**

To some extent, both types of enclave under scrutiny have been founded on a religious, ideological basis, and it is precisely such ideals that impinge upon our preconceptions when attempting comparative research at all. With all that in mind, it is now time to turn to the first case study, in which we will take a closer look at the self-representation of the monastery of Saint-Mihiel as an ‘enclave of learning’. Saint-Mihiel, situated in the north-east of present-day France, seems especially suited to the purpose of this study. Firstly, it was founded right around the time that the Carolingians took power, and more or less grew alongside the dynasty itself. Thus, although it could not boast a long and venerable history, such as, for example, the monasteries of Corbie or Fulda, it had to develop its communal identity in the context of the Carolingian reform movement. Conversely, unlike monasteries such as Aniane or Kornelimünster, Saint-Mihiel was not founded in the wake of this same reform movement, but became an intrinsic part of it all the same thanks to the writings of Smaragdus, one of its most important abbots. In his writings, he managed to describe his own ideals about monastic life – and Christian life in general – in such a way as to reflect upon the life in his own community and the empire within which it functioned. Studying these texts as well as their Nachleben will therefore not only enable us to probe deeper into the conception of monastic life of monasteries in the Carolingian age, but also give us a European example which may serve as a benchmark for a comparative look at the hijras of South Arabia.

Saint-Mihiel was founded by the Lotharingian count Wulfward in the early eighth century, after relics of Saint Michael had almost literally taken root in the region by attaching themselves to a tree. The monastery rose to prominence not only thanks to its central position in the Carolingian

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37 On these monasteries, see especially W. Kettemann, Subsidia Anianensia: Überlieferungs- und textgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Witiza-Benedikts, seines Klosters Aniane und zur sogenannten ‘anianischen Reform’ (Duisburg 2000); N. Kühne, Die Reichsabtei Kornelimünster im Mittelalter. Geschichtliche Entwicklung, Verfassung, Konvent, Besitz, Veröffentlichungen des Stadtarchivs Aachen 3 (Aachen, 1982).


Empire, close to the city of Metz, but also by its association with the court.40 This was already palpable in 755, when Pippin III donated the still-growing cell to the monastery of Saint-Denis in Paris, but only came to full fruition when Smaragdus, ecclesiastical advisor of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious, was made abbot.41 Through this association, as well as through the acquisition of some important relics, the monastery remained a favourite of kings, bishops and nobility, and persisted as a reasonably prosperous foundation until its dissolution in 1790.

The timing is important. From the second half of the eighth century onwards, in the wake of the Carolingian takeover of the Merovingian throne, the new rulers had embarked on a program of ecclesiastical reforms that was as comprehensive as it was ambitious.42 What was at stake was a complete re-definition of what it meant to be a good Christian in a good ‘Christian Empire’, from the top of the hierarchy all the way down to the lowliest parishioner.43 Kings and judges, abbots and bishops, monks and priests all found their positions appraised, and were called upon to reflect upon their own responsibilities and their function in the greater scheme of things. These reforms arguably reached their apex in the last decades of the reign of Charlemagne – set in motion with the issuing of the famous Admonitio Generalis of 789 – and the first half of the reign of Louis the Pious, who actually incorporated a considerable amount of monastic ideology in his ‘model for empire’.44 However, they should really be seen as a continuous process of negotiations between prelates and nobility, with the court setting itself up as the ultimate arbiter in the best tradition of the Christian Roman emperors of Late Antiquity.45 Needless to say, education, learning and knowledge stood at the centre of this improvement movement.

41 It was under Smaragdus, for example, that the monastery received an imperial immunity charter: A. Lesort, Chronique et Cartes de l’Abbaye de Saint-Mihiel, 4 vols, Mettensis: Mémoires et Documents Publiés par la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France 6 (Paris, 1909-1912), p. 320. On the meaning of such charters in the time of Louis the Pious, see T. Köhlzer, Kaiser Ludwig der Fromme (814-840) im Spiegel seiner Urkunden (Paderborn, 2005).
44 Noble, ‘The monastic ideal as a model for empire’.
The Carolingian ecclesiastical reform efforts did not leave Saint-Mihiel unaffected either. At a most basic level, the monks of this community, like the inhabitants of many other monasteries in the realms, were prompted to evaluate their position, construct their communal identity, and consolidate their place in the Carolingian Empire. Doing so also involved interacting with others who were in the same boat: the community of Saint-Mihiel was involved in large synods where the new world order would be decided, and Smaragdus, its most visible abbot, even weighed in on questions that affected the theological underpinnings of the empire as a whole. And, as explained above, each of their actions at each of these levels would have affected their vision of the community they lived in as well. Thus, one of the paths they followed to find their way in this bewildering world was to set themselves up as an exemplary ‘enclave of learning’ – a move that proved so influential that it was still tangible centuries later.

We can trace the history of Saint-Mihiel through a late twelfth-century cartulary, which contains documents (some falsified) going back to the eighth century, and a small Chronicle that is included in the cartulary, but which was written sometime between 1036 and 1050, during the abbacy of Nanterus. In fact, the chronicle reads more like a Gesta Nanteri, as almost two-thirds of the text is taken up by his abbacy, the furta sacra he undertook, and the miracles performed by the relics he procured from Rome. It is the story of a community that was no longer centrally positioned in the empire, but ended up in a contested border region, ruled by a count whose allegiance to the emperor was tenuous at best. Religious life was still in full development: the influence of the Cluniac model was making itself known, for example, and preludes to the Gregorian Reform were becoming tangible through the activities of people like Pope Leo IX – himself a Lotharingian. In this context, the actions of Nanterus were vital for the well-being of Saint-Mihiel. Apart from the relics he obtained, he also secured new lands by interceding with the emperor, and thus breathed new life into the community. In the process, he bridged the growing divide between Church and empire, by claiming spiritual support from Rome and material support from the emperor, Conrad II.

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48 Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, cc. 9-33, at pp. 82-86; cf. P. Geary, Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages, 2nd edn (Princeton, 1990), p. 150.


long history, though, and that is the narrative arc contained in the first chapters.

After calculating the date of foundation, the author tells how the sanctuary that emerged around the relics of Saint Michael was endowed with the possessions of Wulfoald, and how the monks are granted a royal immunity, first by Pippin, and later by Charlemagne. The author then states that ‘Concerning the abbots leading this place before the time of Charlemagne, we have found nothing written’, so the story picks up in the late-eighth century, when another relic is added to the monastery's collection. Conveniently enough, the author never mentions the charter of 755 in which Saint-Mihiel is conferred to the protection of Fulrad of Saint-Denis after Wulfoald had been convicted of treason (a charter that is only extant in the archives of Saint-Denis, for obvious reasons). A holy place is born, with prestigious relics demonstrating divine favour, and local and supra-regional power-brokers showing their support.

Then, Smaragdus, whose reputation and merits shine ‘like a precious gem’, was elected abbot. The author continues:

'It would be superfluous to sing his praise and glory, because, even if we remain silent, the books he edited are sufficiently eloquent, and they show with a bright light how ingenious he was in matters divine and secular. Above all, that book called the Diadema Monachorum shines as an example of his piety and sanctity. In fact, he could not have given such a lucid teaching on virtues if he had not himself had the experience of their practice.'

What is more, Smaragdus, ‘prudent and discerning’ as he was, considered that the hilltop sanctuary would be too difficult to reach, and established a second monastery in the Meuse valley, the place we now know as Saint-Mihiel, although the relics of Saint Michael remained on their hilltop. ‘However’, the author justified the decision, ‘this change of scenery was not contrary to the archangel's will, (...) because, although his angelical purity usually chooses high places for his veneration, (...) we reckon he would not deem it unworthy for humans who require places more apt for their condition, so that

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51 Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, cc. 3-4, at p. 80: ‘De abbatibus autem qui loco praefuerunt ante tempora Caroli Magni nihil dictum reperimus’.
54 Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, c. 5, at pp. 80-81: ‘Qui Smaragdus revera praeagio se sui nominis conformans, inter celebres sui temporis viros ut pretiosa gemma meritis et fama resplendit...’.
55 Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, c. 5, at pp. 80-81: ‘... de his laudibus et gloria nos alid garrirre superfluum est, cum eas nobis tacentibus libri quos edidit sufficienter eloquentur – in quibus luce clarius apparat, quam perspicaci ingenio in divina et saeculari claruerit – praecipuque liber ille, quem Diadema monachorum intitulavit, religiositatem sanctitatatemque eius evidentissime declarat. Non enim tam lucidam de virtutibus doctrinam dare posset, nisi ipsarum in sese naturam exercitorum experientia persensisset’.
they may implore the intercession of the angels in heaven’. According to his epitaph, Smaragdus had in effect made Saint-Mihiel ‘suitable for humans’, and created a place from where they could learn how to reach the city on the hill only six miles away.

In this sense, it is interesting that the author picked the *Diadema Monachorum* as the quintessential work by Smaragdus. His entire corpus was actually much larger, and also included a treatise on the *Ars Grammatica* by Donatus, a Commentary on the *Regula Benedicti*, explaining how the (re)implementation of the ‘original’ *Regula* and the accompanying Carolingian reforms should be incorporated into local monastic traditions; and a work commonly seen as an early example of a *Fürstenspiegel*, the *Via Regia*. Of these, the last two, together with the *Diadema Monachorum*, form something of a trilogy on monastic life – or even on Christian life in general.

First, the *Via Regia* uses the road as a metaphor for the education of people in a position of authority. The *Via Regia* ‘is called holy by the prophet [Isaiah]’, and would enable those taking heed of its teachings to ascend towards Heaven. As also used in several other moral treatises at the time, the Biblical *Via Regia* was a road through enemy territory that the people of Israel wished to use (peacefully) – it is not a road for kings exclusively, but a road that is kept safe through the ability to govern one’s self, which one may accomplish by following the ‘way, truth and life’ represented by Christ.

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56 Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, c. 5, at p. 81: ‘Non enim videtur nobis vir prudens contra archangeli voluntatem egisse, qui priorem sibi locum in monte delegit, quia angelica puritas, etsi alta veneratione succurrere soleat ac se a terrena conversatione remotam significet, non tamen indignatur mortalibus, si competentia loca sua conditioni requirant, dummodo angelica suffragia in altis sibi exspectanda cognoscant’. 
57 Epitaphium Smaragdi, Chronicon Sancti Michaeli, c. 5, at p. 81: ‘Qui locus humanis quod erat minus usibus aptus / Haud procul hinc sedem transtulit ille suam’. 
63 Smaragdus, *Via Regia*, Epistola nuncupatoria, 954D: ‘Via etenim regia est, quae per prophetam vocatur sancta [Isaiah XXXV.8]’.
As such, the *Via Regia* was not so much a mirror for princes *per se*, but rather a reflection on the perfect Christian life, the life of those walking on the ‘king’s highway’ as a metaphor for the difficult road to perfection made accessible through the *Regula Benedicti*. It is therefore hardly surprising that similar imagery was used as a recurring motif in the *Commentary* to show how the *Regula* is a road, a ‘narrow path to life’, a ‘*via sancta*’ that enables monks to ‘climb swiftly to the golden realms’. The *Rule*, according to Smaragdus, was called a ‘*via regia*’, which ‘regulates the monk’s mind’.

If the *Commentary* was composed as a way of showing how the regular life ought to be lived in individual monasteries, and the *Via Regia* was meant to demonstrate how all Christians have a responsibility to themselves to become worthy of walking the King’s Highway, the *Diadema Monachorum* continued this train of thought by showing how it is the internalization of Christian teachings that allowed more experienced monks to acquire a *diadema* – a symbol of spiritual authority conferred upon people who are able ‘to feel invisible, spiritual joy about the chastity of the body and the cleanliness of the heart’ just as ‘we rejoice externally about the consecration of an altar in a house of God’. Although it is clear that this work was aimed primarily at a monastic audience, Smaragdus seems to continuously imply that this *diadema* was not exclusively meant for monks. It was meant for all good Christians – but monks had the opportunity to live in circumstances where they could truly aspire to live a perfect life, and thus serve as an example to those around them. One way to accomplish this was through prayer, described as a ‘matter of the heart, not of the lips’ – which might in turn be accomplished by constant (self-) education.

In the Prologue to the *Regula*, Benedict characterized monasteries as ‘Schools for the Lord’s service’, and Smaragdus comments that:

‘...just as boys in a school learn – and are disciplined – what is necessary for them and grasp


Smaragdus, *Diadema Monachorum*, c. 100: ‘Et quomodo visibiliter de templi altaris consecratione gaudemus, sic invisibiliter de corporis castita e vel animi puritate spirituale gaudium habere mereamur’.

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what profits them in the future, so monks in the school of a regular monastery must learn both what enables them to live uprightly in the present, and what may make them happy in the future; and they must put this into practice.\textsuperscript{69}

As he further explains in his \textit{Diadema}, the understanding thus gained can be deepened by praying and reading, which opens a dialogue with God. ‘When we pray, we speak to God’, Smaragdus states, ‘but when we read, God speaks to us’.\textsuperscript{70} And so one continues to learn a ‘well-ordered way of right living’, ‘because sacred scripture in some way grows with its readers: it becomes familiar to its unskilled readers, and yet the learned always find new things there’.\textsuperscript{71}

Taken together, these three works represent Smaragdus’ reaction to the tensions experienced by the Carolingian ecclesiastical reform movement, thanks to which monasteries could no longer simply rely on their status as Christian communities \textit{par excellence}. They would have to bring more to the table, and it was up to Smaragdus to show how monks, through learning and education, should become enclaves unto themselves, with their ‘internal cloister’ strengthened by the purity of their demeanour.\textsuperscript{72} As if living up to a strictly monastic idealism was not difficult enough, they would now have to carve out a place as Christian communities in a thoroughly Christianized empire – which had in turn partly modelled itself on the ideal represented by the monasteries upon which it was founded. It is hardly surprising that these tensions still echoed through the Meuse Valley two centuries later, and that the author of the \textit{Chronicle of Saint-Mihiel} singled out the work of Smaragdus as one of the cornerstones of his community. In fact, between Smaragdus and Nanterus, no one abbot seems to be worthy of his particular attention – he merely lists their names. To the author, it was Nanterus who ushered Saint-Mihiel into the new millennium, but the true strength of the monastery was within the community of monks, and the heart and soul of that community was shaped thanks to Smaragdus. His role in the \textit{Chronicle} was a vital step towards Saint-Mihiel’s development into an ‘enclave of learning’, which, as Smaragdus explained, need not be limited to one single person or one individual community:

‘…if the dwelling of one person is properly called a monastery (...) we must ask why the dwelling of many persons established in one place is also called a monastery, unless perhaps


\textsuperscript{70} Smaragdus, \textit{Diadema Monachorum}, c. 3, at col. 597D: ‘Nam cum oramus, ipsi cum Deo loquimur, cum vero legimus, Deus nobiscum loquitur’.

\textsuperscript{71} Smaragdus, \textit{Diadema Monachorum}, c. 3, at cols. 598A: ‘Scriptura sacra aliquo modo cum legentibus crescit, a rudibus lectoribus quasi recognoscitur, et tamen a doctis semper nova reperitur’.

WONDERING ABOUT COMPARISON

(…) it is because there is one faith, one baptism, one heart and one soul [cf. Ephesians IV.5] in all monks who are living good and upright lives, just as there was earlier in the religion of those who believed rightly and lived good lives.73

His lucid teachings allowed these monks to remain unified and thereby become a beacon in these turbulent times. To retain this status, they would have to learn and keep learning, and thus be able to guide others along the via regia as well.

The religious and educational function of monasteries in Medieval Western Europe has long been established in modern research. More work still needs to be done to fully comprehend the place of Smaragdus in the history and historiography of his community, and of the purpose of his writings – and the use he makes of his patristic source material – in the wider context of the Carolingian correctio-movement. However, the author of the Chronicle of Saint-Mihiel seems to have wanted to stress it was Smaragdus who formulated the importance of monasteries as part of the sacred foundations of the Carolingian Empire. As such, while it remains to be seen to what extent Smaragdus was representative for the Carolingian ecclesia as a whole, he did give his own community a clear sense of purpose that tried to steer a course between conservatism and reforming zeal by focusing on the learning that allowed the monks to become good Christians. Their function as ‘managers of knowledge’ has in a way disconnected the works of Smaragdus from an a priori (Christian) monastic identity that would be inextricably bound up with the (Christian) ideology of the Carolingians.74 Having done so, it has become possible to use the case of Saint-Mihiel as a background to an attempt to further our understanding of a type of community that is altogether more difficult to define. These are the hijras of medieval South Arabia – and it is to these hijras that we now turn.

MANAGERS OF KNOWLEDGE: HIJRAS IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH ARABIA

‘A place in which there is something like a convent (khānaqāh) inhabited by worshippers and scholars (ahl al-ʿilm).75

73 Smaragdus, Exposītio, c. 3: ‘Monasterium enim, ut praedictum est, etiam unius monachi habitation dicitur. Sed quaeendum est, si unius habitatio proprie monasterium vocatur, propter idem Graecae linguae, qua dicitur monas unum, cur multorum habitatio in uno positum monasterium dicatur, nisi forte, ut arbitror, propter quia unam fides, unum baptisma, cor unum et anima una est in omnibus bene et iuste viventibus monachis, sicut prius in religione recte credentium et bene viventium fuit’.

74 On this ideology, see, in addition to Noble, ‘Monastic ideal’, also M. de Jong, ‘Sacrum palatium et ecclesia: L’autorité religieuse royale sous les Carolingiens (790-840)’, Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales 58.6 (2003), 1243-1269.

Starting from this explanation of what a Yemeni *hijra* is by the geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī written sometime between 1212 and 1229 for his contemporary readership in the Levant, the following section will present a comparative case focusing on the institution of the *hijra* in medieval South Arabia (ca. 900-1300 AD) and how it was represented by some of their inhabitants.\(^{76}\)

Far less research has been done on *hijras* than on monasteries in Europe. For our purpose, this is not necessarily a disadvantage, since it allows us to maintain enough distance to discuss how to actually conceptualize and understand what a *hijra* is. It is a case that is sufficiently different from the European one and can serve the purpose of *Verfremdung*. Thus it is highly comparable in the sense that it can provide us with new alternative understandings of ‘enclaves of learning’. The aim is not to study one specific *hijra*, but rather to provide a generalized and representative overview of *hijras* in the medieval period with a focus on the management of knowledge in a way that is useful in a comparative perspective. The historical anthropological case has been written after having interacted with scholars of European medieval history and medieval monasticism and although the case may seem exotic for a Europeanist readership, it is intended to be clear also for historians in general and historians of European monasticism in particular.

The mountainous and slightly barren landscape of the highland plateau in the north western part of today’s Yemen favoured religious communities and networks who operated within the existing tribal political landscape and who cooperated with various fragments of tribes or with local lords. The institution of *hijra* is thus distinctively tribal in that it could only exist in the form we know it in a tribal context, even though the inhabitants of the *hijras* saw themselves as fundamentally different from the tribal elites and communities. Similar ‘enclaves of learning’ in the Sunni lowlands of Yemen were rather called ‘schools’ (*madrasas*) or *ribāṭs*\(^ {77}\), and tended to be situated inside urban centres like Zabid. The actors in the *madrasas* did not depend on a genealogical defined community in the same way as did the Zaydis in their *hijras*. The Zaydi *hijras* also had a separate identity representing the Zaydi tradition or branch of Islam, while most schools in Lower Yemen were Sunni, thus being more integrated into the form of Islam followed by a majority of the people in the Islamic world at the time.

According to tradition, the first person to introduce Zaydism to the highlands of Yemen was Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn in the year 897 AD. He came from the area around Medina in northwest Arabia, and

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\(^{76}\) This explanation if what a *hijra* is was found under Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī’s [1179-1229] entry of ‘Waqash’, which was the main *hijra* of the Muḥarrifiyya in their mature phase before they were declared to be heretical and put down. Ismā’īl al-Akwa’i (ed.), *Al-Buldān al-Yamanīyya ḳinda Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī* (Beirut, 1988), p. 301; Madelung, ‘The Origins’, p. 26.

claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. He initially settled as a mediator among the Khawlān tribes in the northern part of Yemen, but soon claimed to be the leader of the community of believers and took the imamic title ‘al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaq al-Mubīn’ (‘The Guide to the Clear Truth’).

He set up a mosque and established an enclave of learning just outside the market town of Ṣa‘da. He took most of the northern highland south towards Sanaa through military campaigns, uniting some of the previously conflicting tribes in the process, if only for a short period.

After al-Hādī’s death in 911, Zaydism was mainly confined to the area around Ṣa‘da where his descendants lived, and it was not until several centuries later that politically strong Zaydi charismatic rulers (‘imams’) appeared, along with a whole new class or stratum in society. Most of the Zaydi elite claimed to be descendants of the Prophet and therefore had a naturally elevated and authoritative role in terms of managing the Zaydi Islamic tradition of knowledge. Most explicitly, they were the only group out of which the imam could be recruited. At first, they were called Ashrāf (sing. Sharīf), sharaf originally meaning honour – although in modern times they are called Sāda (sing. sayyid). One can say that they formed an elite in terms of religious knowledge, partly based on idealised genealogies of religious authority – something made all the more visible by the fact that they did not allow their daughters to marry into the local Yemeni population.78

However, this form of elite Zaydism with strong political ambitions was not the only form that emerged after its initial introduction to the Yemeni highlands. In the years around 1050, or even before, we also see the start of a populist movement, largely consisting of local Yemeni tribesmen or low-status individuals.79 Seeking protection from local wealthy landowners, they set up their own enclaves of learning where they engaged in scholarly activities, discussions and rituals. Some of them were part-time members, and only came to visit certain times of the year.80

Those participating in the formation of these hijras were also represented as men of honour and personal quality (fadl), not because they were related to the Prophet by descent, but because of the merits they had earned by showing generosity and hospitality towards their fellow Zaydis/Muslims and because of their love for God, knowledge and fellow community members. At least, this is how they are presented in one of the main historiographical/hagiographical works written about their

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sect, composed around 1150 by one of the most prominent Zaydi scholars of his time, Musallam al-Laḥjī.\textsuperscript{81}

The branch of Zaydis described by him was called the Muṭarrifīyya after its alleged eponymous founder Muṭarrif b. Shihāb, even though the movement had probably already existed in an early form before his appearance.\textsuperscript{82} These Muṭarrifis usually called themselves Zaydis, probably to invoke the orthodoxy of their tradition, something that was often disclaimed by the Ashrāf-Zaydis, whom the Muṭarrifis called al-Mukhtariʿa, after a theological concept much discussed at the time.\textsuperscript{83} It was the Muṭarrifīyya who first set up enclaves of learning explicitly called hijras, especially after 1100.\textsuperscript{84} Most of these were located in the areas west of Sanaa at a distance from the Zaydi imams who usually controlled the areas further north, especially after 1150. This explains how they were able to continue their activities, while opposing the Ashrāf-dominated Zaydis (al-Mukhtariʿa) in doctrinal and theological matters. Eventually, however, the conflict between the Muṭarrifīyya and the Imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza (d. 1217) escalated to the point that he, after having them declared heretical in 1215-6, sent in his army to destroy their enclaves, and stop their activities altogether. After this decisive historical event, hijras were places only inhabited by Zaydi Ashrāf, and from then onward a hijra became synonymous with an enclave of ashrāf population in an otherwise tribal context.\textsuperscript{85} Towards the end of the medieval period, several of these hijras increasingly became involved in the administration of the Zaydi theocratic state, although many of them also remained quite independent or even centres of opposition.

Most hijras had the term ‘hijra’ in the name, like Hijrat Waqash (meaning ‘the Hijra of Waqash’). However, many of the early hijras were not explicitly called a hijra, and therefore it is problematic to define them as such. This especially applies to Ashrāf-dominated villages in the early period under scrutiny here. In those cases, one would have to look at other criteria, such as the presence of scholarly activities and the presence of protection agreements with the surrounding tribes to see if we can categorize them as hijras even if they are not called so in our sources. To complicate matters further, some hijras were hijras for a generation or two, but then took the appearance of a regular village of farmers populated by Ashraf. Oftentimes, the name-element hijrat would be dropped, whereas other villages called hijra today may not fit to the ideal type of an enclave of learning as defined in our comparative project. Again, contextualization as well as awareness of time, place and

\textsuperscript{81} Idem.

\textsuperscript{82} Heiss and Hovden (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{83} The name al-Mukhtariʿa comes from the theological concept of ikhtirāʿ, (creation ex nihilo). See ʿAlī Muḥammad Zayd, Tayyārat.

\textsuperscript{84} This point is elaborated by Madelung in The Origins.

\textsuperscript{85} The exception to this are hijras inhabited by Zaydi scholarly families not descending from the Prophet, the so called fuqahāʿ or qudāḥ (‘jurists’). Examples of this are well known from more recent periods.
circumstance is of the essence.

From this short historical overview, at least four criteria or characteristics for a *hijra* emerge:

1. A village as a protected enclave in agreement with surrounding tribes

2. Inhabited by Ashrāf/Sāda (but not so for the *hijras* of the Muṭarrifiyya)

3. Centres of religious-scholarly activity

4. That such settlements were explicitly called a *hijra* at a point of time, for example ‘Hijrat Waqash’.

Not all of these four criteria would always be fulfilled in the period under scrutiny. Some historians, such as Ismāʿīl al-Akwa’, tend to emphasise aspects of learning and managing knowledge when writing about the history of *hijras*86, while for other historians the Zaydi identity is a more important feature. Moreover, the idea that the inhabitants of a *hijra* set themselves outside the tribal system by establishing a ‘de-militarized’ zone devoted to scholarly activities exclusively is also problematic; many *Ashrāf* settlements were not neutral enclaves, and many were involved in local armed conflicts. A tribal meeting ground, market, scholar, mediator or *shaykh* can also be declared to have *hijra* status of protection, but this phenomenon would only partly fit with the phenomenon we want to describe here.87 Thus, the limits of our proposed definition are not absolute. Depending on which phenomena we are want to represent, we can and should keep the definition open and flexible, with several alternative ideal types in the middle.

Using ‘Enclaves of Learning’ as a tool, even more questions can be raised about life in these *hijras* and the visions of community the inhabitants promoted. One of the most central notions was the focus on (Islamic) learning and the study and upkeep of this vast written culture. Inhabitants of *hijras* engaged in a wide range of scholarly and religious activities. Some of these were institutionalised through foundations (*waqf*), which offered salaries for teachers and scholarships for students.88 But probably, most of these activities were informal and based on loose networks, and on

86 Ismāʿīl b. ʿAff al-Akwa’, *al-Madāris*.

87 See Puin, *The Yemeni Hijra Concept*.

88 So far, we only have few examples of endowments and foundations (*waqf*) from the early medieval period in the Zaydi areas of Yemen, only much later, from the Ottoman (after around 1550) and following Qāsimī period do we know with certainty that *waqf* was common. The important Yemeni historian Ismāʿīl al-Akwa’ only found two schools (*madāris*) in the northern Zaydi areas referred to as ‘schools’ in his seminal work on *madrasas* in Yemen, namely Madrasat al-Shāhil and Madrasat Raḥbat al-Sād. He relates that the important scholar Ḥumayd b. Ahmad al-Muḥallī donated foundations of land (*waqqafa amārā*) for these two schools and that he died in 1254, *al-Madāris* pp. 135-6. Perhaps his father was the al-Faqīḥ Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Muḥallī who, on the order of the imam al-Manṣūr ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza, was sent to teach
patronage from wealthy individuals, especially in the early history of the Mutarrifi-Zaydi hijras of the mediaeval period. Some of the scholars were local inhabitants living with their families; others were travelling around to various hijras. When a hijra was a village of Ashrāf population, we must also assume that most of the individuals were not experts in religious knowledge but rather engaging in agriculture, not to mention their families including women and children. From ethnographic evidence from more recent periods we know that within or near hijras there could also be low status individuals and families who performed work considered demeaning for the Ashrāf. The internal social sphere in most hijras was thus much larger that the circle of student and teachers active there: a hijra was often more of a full-scale village, including activities and institutions of learning, rather than the school only.

Al-Akwa⁹ writes that few Zaydi madrasas (schools) existed, or at least that this term was not employed at all that often. For him and for many other historians, a madrasa came to mean a Sunni institution while in the Zaydi areas the scholarly activities took place in hijras. One example of the few Zaydi madrasas was Madrasat Sharaf al-Dīn at Kawkabān which was built shortly after 1500. However, this madrasa was not like the grand and elaborate schools founded by the elites of the Rasūlid or Tāhirid dynasties in Sunni, Lower Yemen; this was more a local mosque that happened to be called a madrasa, according to al-Akwa⁹.⁸ In Lower Yemen, we know of madrasas being founded already from the time of the Ayyubid occupation of 1197-98 and onwards.⁹⁰ Some few Zaydi madrasas were later built in cities and urban areas such as Sanaa and Dhamār by Imam Sharaf al-Dīn (r. 1506-55).⁹¹ Still, scholarly activities in the rural Zaydi north was mainly confined to numerous small hijras where there was usually no specific building or institution called madrasa, but where schooling probably mostly took place in the local mosque or reception rooms, supported financially by donations from wealthy families and/or through foundations (waqf) for that purpose, and probably managed by the guardian (mutawwallī) of the local mosque.⁹²

at the madrasa in the Mutarrifi hijra Hijrat Qā’i in the year 1206-7. Aḥū Firās b. Dī’tham, Al-Sṭrā al-sharīfa al-Mansūriyya: Sīrat al-Imām Aḥū Bakr b. Ḥanẓa 393-614 H (ed.) Aḥmad Ḥanjū Māhīwīd Aḥū al-Ṭāfīrī (Beirut, 1993), vol 2 p. 965. In the coastal Sunni areas, however, related to the madrasas, we can see foundation documents (waqfīyyāt) being made with very specific stipulations concerning how the school should be equipped and managed. A mere example of an elaborate foundation document is the waqf document from 1545 for the foundation of the Madrasat al-Nīẓārīf in the town of Manzil Ḥassān, near Ḥūṣn al-Ḥabb in Ba’dān north east of Ibb. The text of the waqf document is edited by al-Akwa: Al-Akwa’, al-Madāris al-islāmiyya, pp. 351-57.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 6.
⁹¹ For the al-Madrasa al-Shamsiyya built in 1544 in Dhamār , see al-Akwa’, Ibid., p. 370. The Madrasat Sharaf al-Dīn in Sanaa was built in 1554-55, see Ibid., p. 365.
⁹² Schmidtke also mentions that the Imam al-Mahdi Ahmad b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 1258) when he was young, was enrolled in the Madrasat Mislit (or Maslit jīn Banū Qays (probably Banū Qays in today’s Banū Ṣuraym, Ḥāshid. This is one example of a school being called madrasa at that time that al-Akwa’ did not mention. Sabine Schmidtke, ‘The literary-religious tradition among 7th/13th century Yemenī Zaydīs: The formation of the Imām al-Mahdī li-Dīn Allāh Ahmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-

Networks and Neighbours
Most students in the *hijras* probably only learned how to read and write, to recite the Quran and the basics of Islamic law. Only educated individuals engaged in high-level discourses of philosophy, theology, history and wrote legal and exegetical commentaries. Sometimes this high-level discourse took political dimensions when different political elites supported various fractions of theologians and these theological differences were re-moulded into populist slogans and made more generally understandable, as for example during the many debates around the years 1150-1200 on the topic on natural or divine causality.94

Important historical sources from this time are biographies of various Zaydi imams, in addition to the already mentioned biographically arranged history of the Muṭarrifiyya sect written by one of its main leaders, Musallam al-Lahjī (probably died in 1150). His work describes various members of this local, bottom up form of Zaydism, which started roughly a century and half before his writings.95 Of course, he did not claim that this sect only started then: in the first volume95 he begins with the first Zaydi imams in Yemen, al-Hādī and his two sons and throughout his work he emphasises that the ‘Zaydis of Yemen’, as he called his own sect, were founded on Zaydi orthodoxy, especially in the doctrines of the first imam who introduced Zaydism to Yemen in 897, al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqiq. The *hijras* mentioned in al-Lahjī’s work are places where pious individuals, students and teachers of the religious sciences, and worshippers could meet and stay together, but without the strict laws and rules we know from European monastic culture. For al-Lahjī, personal piety, hospitality and sharing of wealth were the first order personal qualities (*fadil*) originating, and manifesting themselves in, love for God, love for knowledge and the fellow Muslims. According to him, living together in confined *hijras* was not the only way of being a good Muslim, but it was a good place to practice and engage with the faith and to keep contact with the fellow believers.

By describing the sect members in this way, al-Lahjī also created a counter-discourse to the genealogy based (*nasab*) honour of the Ashrāf Zaydis and their imams. For instance, through his use of narratives attested by chains of transmissions and sect members, he ‘documented’ that the earlier members of the Muṭarrifiyya had the piety, hospitality, wisdom and knowledge to exist in their own right, based on individually achieved merit rather than on descent from the Prophet. Especially

94 For a description of the doctrinal ‘battle’ between the Muṭarrifiyya and the Mukhtari’a Zaydis, see: Jan Thiele, *Theologie in der jemenitischen Zaydiyya: die naturphilosophischen Überlegungen des al-Hasan ar-Rasāṣ (Leiden, 2013); Zayd, Tayyirāt; ‘Abd al-ʿĀfi, al-Ṣirāj fī-l-fikr. For an example of a story of such a ‘populist’ version were the arguments are made understandable for others than experts, see the story about hail in al-Sirr al-sharf al-Manṣūriyya vol. 2, pp. 852-53.
95 al-Lahjī, *Akḥālāt al-Zaydiyya*. The most important of his extant works is the fourth volume, in which he describes members of the Muṭarrifiyya and their lives and acts since around 1000 until his own time.
radical was his assertion that low-status individuals with demeaning jobs could have good personal qualities. Thus, he gives us a unique insight into the social history of that time – especially so in the vivid descriptions of the ‘enclaves of learning’ that were so important to his sect.

**CONCLUSION: A SENSE OF WONDER**

The two case studies presented in this article not only demonstrate the differences between, for instance, Arabian and European ‘enclaves of learning’, but also the different approaches and methodologies used by each of the co-authors – which in turn showcases the advantages of a comparative approach involving multiple specialists in their respective fields. The broad approach to the study of *hijras*, necessitated by the fact that these communities and the texts they produced are still a largely untapped phenomenon in the field of South Arabian studies can be streamlined by observations made from the study of European monasticisms, where cultural familiarity and long-standing academic traditions allow researchers a relatively high level of sensibility towards questions of community formation and consolidation, as well as regarding the interplay between idealism and pragmatism as evidenced by the sources. On the other hand, the *Verfremdungseffekt* created by the comparison with the South Arabian enclaves presented here have caused helpful creative tensions which enabled the researchers to re-evaluate their own preconceived notions both on an emic and an etic level.

The comparative process may teach participants not only about the object they study, but also about the methodologies they employ. The fact that the community Saint-Mihiel, and especially its abbot Smaragdus, had its roots in a context where learning and self-reflection were seen as important qualities for their sort monastic endeavour further emphasise this point. Rather than considering Saint-Mihiel to be an enclave of learning representative for the general intellectual climate at the time, however, the insights that Smaragdus – and, more importantly, his representation in the *Chronicon* several centuries later – first and foremost elucidate ways in which the community was aware of itself as an enclave of learning. More research is definitely needed to extend these observations to a larger early medieval European context, by comparing these initial observations to depictions from other cases in the same cultural sphere.

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97. W. Pohl, ‘History in Fragments: Montecassino’s Politics of Memory’, *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001), pp. 343-74 for both a methodological approach and a case study showing how this functioned on a pragmatic, communal level.

The description of the *hijras* in the second case study relies on generalised hypotheses and models of how we can see the Yemeni medieval *hijras* in a comparative light. These generalisations have, in turn, been guided by ‘learning’ as a theme. The problem of how to define the medieval *hijras* and classify them could only be touched upon briefly here and indeed much more research is needed before one reaches the level attained by researchers of European medieval monasticism. For now, however, a level of abstraction and generalisation was unavoidable. Still, once a certain point of *Verfremdung* is reached, we can study *hijras* as ‘enclaves of learning’. The questions posed by European medieval scholars of their sources may help guide further research into the question what *a hijra* was, and how it was understood and communicated by various authors and actors at the time as well as in subsequent centuries.

The discrepancy between the levels of community in the case studies presented may hamper our ability to draw conclusions applicable to both cases. It is, after all, difficult to identify commonalities and differences based on a close reading of the source material emanating from a single monastic community on the one hand, and a contextualized overview of the developments of regional religious communities and their institutions on the other. However, this ought not to be the ultimate aim of cross-cultural comparative studies. Any similarities that do occur, as far as they have not served as the basis for the comparison in the first place, should be the basis for further questions in the specific fields rather than the start of a search for the lowest common denominator, which would lead to conclusions that are so broad as to become meaningless. If anything, multi-angled, qualitative comparative research should make people more sensitive to the vicissitudes of contextualization and generalisation, and sharpen the edge of local social logics instead of grinding them down.

The goal of our enterprise has not been to define ‘enclaves of learning’ in a way applicable to all cultures, and it should also be noted that this conceptualization has been tailor-made to suit the needs of this particular comparative study.\(^99\) As a soft concept, it has proven useful to bounce ideas off and formulate new questions concerning the many ‘shades of meaning’ involved in explaining the existence and function of the communities studied in Europe and Arabia.\(^100\) For instance, the concept has proven useful to re-appraise the function of monastic communities in Europe in the face of ever-changing religious reform movements throughout the early and high Middle Ages, which in turn led to a bewildering diversity of different communities hidden under the guise of ‘orders’.

\(^99\) D. Rueschemeyer, ‘Can One or a Few Cases Yield Theoretical Gains?’, in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (eds.), *Comparative Historical Analysis*, pp. 305-36 points out the weaknesses of using only a limited number of cases, which according to him leads to ‘virtually insurmountable obstacles’ to obtaining usable comparative results. However, his underlying assumption is that comparative research should ideally lead to ‘a universally applicable social theory’, whereas the goal of this article is to make more theoretical gains and possibly prepare the way for a more substantial comparative analysis of our ‘enclaves of learning’.

'monasticism' or other broad and abstract concepts. Using the idea of an 'enclave' to make them comparable also helps bridge the gaps between the ideology they represented in the sources they produced and the pragmatic considerations they had when inscribing them. Conversely, describing these communities in terms of guarding, fostering and communicating knowledge and teaching(s) will allow students of *hijras* to regard them as the permeable enclaves they were, and not merely as a network of teachers. More generally, it has allowed participants to go beyond the dichotomy of communities either reacting against or acting in conformity with their surroundings. It has created a more acute sensitivity to the possibilities and shortcomings of the sources used, which were themselves the product of compromises – they were part of negotiations between the different levels of community that come together in enclaves of learning. Like the comparative method itself, they show the fluidity and multiplicity of the concepts that have acquired a much more static, high-threshold meaning in individual disciplines operating in isolation.

On a methodological level, 'enclaves of learning' represent the need for a certain awareness required for every trans-disciplinary comparative enterprise. Awareness of the starting point of the research, for example – whether to begin from a community within a larger framework of conflicting ideologies and practices, or to start from an ideal type and see whether individual communities measure up to it.\(^1\) Far from attaining a compromise, it is important to allow for a concept that enables researchers to look in either direction. Additionally, it should also help to remind all those involved that every discipline is inherently idiosyncratic and relies on long and valuable traditions.\(^2\) In order to reach a situation in which the comparative researchers can communicate on an equal footing, a dialogue must be established. At its most basic level, ‘enclaves of learning’ is not an answer to the question of what is being compared, but part of the question itself, intended to spark debates about what is studied in the first place.\(^3\) In the process, the idea is to lower the walls between disciplines instead of erecting a conceptual labyrinth.

The point is to not look at borders around our (and our subjects’) categories, but to try to see how these borders are constantly breached and crossed in pragmatic ways often contrary to the ideal. This is why we need etic and analytical terms to describe what we see, which does not fit with what should have been seen in the first place. *Verfremdung* consists of the language of analysis and etic descriptions we use to make our study of objects comparable, and it is through interdisciplinary debates and discussions that researchers may keep the distance to their study objects that is


necessary to compare them. As such, a comparative project such as this, which almost forces its participants into a state of Verfremdung, is also about rediscovering one’s own subject, reappraising one’s own discipline, and re-establishing a sense of wonder about the world behind the sources. The authors strive to be sensitive to similarities without taking them at face value, and acquaint themselves with different discourses before starting our mission. ‘Enclaves of learning’ still have something to teach us.