Destruction, Renewal, and Environmental Melancholia: The Case of the Syriac *Life of John of Daylam*

Abby Kulisz, PhD (McMaster University) | kulisza@mcmaster.ca

INTRODUCTION

*Most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You’re holding a tombstone in your hands.*

*—*Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Edward Abbey, a mid-twentieth century park ranger who wrote of his experiences living in Arches National Park, laments the loss of the landscape around him. Though Abbey calls his book an elegy, it reads as a celebration of the diverse, rich, gritty, and particular landscape that he traverses. His portraits of natural beauty are matched by details of the industrial capitalism that began to invade the park by the 1950s. Like Abbey, pre-modern Christians wrote about the landscapes they inhabited; they envisioned their landscapes as vulnerable to human incursion, responsive to human damage, and even capable of memorializing pain.

This essay asks how pre-modern Christians conceived of harm to their natural environments with a focus on a seventh century Syriac hagiography, known as the *Life of John of Daylam*.[[2]](#footnote-2) The *Life* depicts John as both an aggressive saint who harms and exploits his landscape but also one who acts in harmony with the natural world. Taking a cue from theories of environmental melancholia, I suggest that the *Life* does not seek to forget John’s damage to the landscape nor abstract meaning from it; rather, it remembers and preserves these damaged landscapes as palpable, real, and receptive to the pain inflicted on them by humans. Ultimately, the *Life* gestures toward new possibilities that emerge from the very damage the landscape has endured.

JOHN OF DAYLAM

The *Life of John of Daylam*, which narrates the life of a Syriac saint, is preserved in Syriac, Arabic, Sogdian, and Ethiopic versions. The Syriac versions are the earliest and are likely to have been composed in the late seventh century.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not only is the secondary scholarship on the *Life* minimal, much of the material remains unedited and untranslated. For the purposes of this essay, I will use Sebastian Brock’s partial edition and translation (with some modifications) of the two sources of the Syriac *Life*, a West Syrian prose *Life* and an East Syrian verse panegyric.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The *Life* states that John (Mar Yoḥannan) was born in Ḥdatta, a town on the eastern Tigris and joined the monastery of Beth ‘Abe as a child under the tutelage of Shemʿon the Beardless. John and the followers of Shemʿon flee to the mountains of Beghash due to a famine; Shemʿon then dies and his followers also perish. Now alone, John is taken captive by Daylamite[[5]](#footnote-5) raiders who nearly succumb to thirst as they carry off John down the mountain road. As the Daylamites promise to release John in exchange for water, the saint manages to cause water to miraculously burst forth from the ground, but the raiders refuse to honor their promise. While in captivity, John performs other miracles in the presence of the Daylamites: he causes their children to die through his rage, defies a fire, and heals a child through a plant.

After the raiders release him, John journeys deeper into the Daylamites’ regions and becomes incensed by their worship of trees. He then cuts down 4,000 trees, and the Daylamites discover him asleep with his axe under his head in the morning. As a result, John baptizes thousands of Daylamites who now believe and proceeds to build them churches. John continues to journey further into Daylamite regions and encounters more pagans. To convert them, John strikes their spring of water with his staff, which causes it to turn into blood and poisons its fish. He then prays over the water and restores it to its original state. At this sight, John converts more people, and the spring water turns to blood for three days every year. John continues to ascend mountains and travel deeper into Daylamite territory. After healing the daughter of the Islamic caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān, John receives permission to build churches and monasteries wherever he wishes and dedicates a monastery to soldier martyrs, Sergius and Bacchus. The monastery, however, lacks a water source. But when the mountain it sits upon trembles, the monastery dislodges itself and resituates below a spring of water. As a result, the spring water flows into the monastery cells and nourishes the gardens and orchards. The *Life* concludes with John building another church, which he dedicates to Mary.

The *Life of John of Daylam* is rife with depictions of the holy man immersed in nature. More precisely, John’s encounters with the natural world often coincide with his conflict with the Daylamites, which are marked by aggression and even outright violence. John’s two mass conversions of the Daylamites occur through the destruction of the natural landscapes—that is, his felling of 4,000 trees and his transformation of a spring of water into blood, which in turn poisons the fish. John’s belligerent actions do not fit neatly into previous scholars’ analyses of ancient literature and the environment. For instance, in her recent study on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and eco-psychology,[[6]](#footnote-6) Amy Balogh traces Gilgamesh’s eco-guilt that begins with his demolition of the Cedars of Lebanon to his arrival at reparations with civilization and the natural world. Unlike Gilgamesh, John does not appear to undergo a psychological process of overcoming eco-guilt; rather, the *Life* emphasizes John’s sanctity throughout the entirety of the narrative. That is to say, John’s brutality toward the environment and people are taken as emblematic of his saintly status.

Virginia Burrus has recently shown how hagiography expands the contours of the human itself by envisioning saints as transformed by their natural environments. Burrus draws attention to how hagiography takes “landscape” not as something static nor flat but as “particular, relational, and ever emerging.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The bodies of saints who inhabit hagiographical landscapes become imprinted with their natural surroundings. For example, the *Life of Simeon the Stylite* portrays the saint in intimate continuity with his environment—he wraps a plant-made rope around his waist so deep that it embeds within his flesh and becomes infested with insects and worms. For while in Burrus’ account, saints such as Simeon test the boundaries between “human” and “landscape,” the *Life of John of Daylam* presents a saint firmly in control of the natural environment that surrounds him. In fact, John acts as an intruder who forcefully enters Daylamite territory, violently deforests it, and imposes conversion on the local inhabitants. In contrast to Simeon, John does not appear to be vulnerable to his environment nor open to natural forces implanting and inhabiting his body. Rather, John shapes, tames, and conquers both his environment and the people within it and thus separates himself from natural forces.

How, then, are we to understand the *Life of John of Daylam*? Neither Balogh’s model of eco-guilt and reparation nor Burrus’ emphasis on the transformative potential of hagiography resonates fully with John of Daylam, an aggressive saint who fells trees and spoils water. To be sure, I am not suggesting that John is a hagiographical outlier who embodies a militant, hyper-masculine orientation toward of the environment, namely one who exploits, extracts, and eliminates.[[8]](#footnote-8) Instead, I propose that the *Life* depicts John’s destruction of the environment but also the environment’s preservation and remembrance of the pain inflicted by the saint. Drawing upon insights from theories of environmental melancholia, I show how the *Life* imagines the environment as vibrant and responsive to John’s damage. Theories of environmental melancholia are valuable in that they emphasize how humans preserve the harm they wreck on the environment and refuse to forget this harm. Taken in this way, the *Life* portrays the environment as both vulnerable to John’s destruction and alive in its remembrance of this very harm. Ultimately, the *Life* envisions the saint’s violent destruction as ambivalent; environmental harm is preserved in its particularity but is also taken as a site of change and possibility.

ENVIRONMENTAL MELANCHOLIA

The concept of environmental melancholia emerges from eco-psychology, a subfield of psychology that explores the relationship between human subjectivity and the natural world. Specifically, environmental melancholia is indebted to Sigmund Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia. In his 1915 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,”[[9]](#footnote-9) Freud identifies both conditions as processes of grieving, but melancholia involves a pathological form of mourning where the individual’s ego identifies with a loss and does not let it go. In contrast to mourning where the individual seeks to overcome loss and eventually move on, melancholia is a condition that seeks the preservation of the loss and its incorporation into one’s psyche. Eco-psychologists have employed Freudian melancholia as a way to understand people’s *affective* and *felt* experiences of environmental degradation. Eco-psychologist Renee Lertzman, for example, calls for modes of understanding that are attuned to “the messier, complicated negotiations that can come with an environmental awareness.”[[10]](#footnote-10) For while environmental degradation is often framed as an issue of “value” or “care” (i.e., “why don’t people *care* about global warming?!”), a melancholic approach takes people as embroiled in fraught webs of conflicting desires and feelings that are not always apparent because they have no place in public discourse. It is precisely because the individual does not let go of a loss—due to confusion over what the loss means or lack public recognition of it—that causes feelings of ambivalence.

Melancholia also involves possibility for change and creative potential. Queer theorist Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands has drawn attention to melancholic engagements with the past in her analysis of writings of queer authors affected by HIV/AIDs in tandem with environmentalist writers who detail their experiences in denigrated landscapes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Mortimer-Sandilands shows how queer activists mobilize feelings of trauma and grief in the very construction of gay/lesbian cultures and publics. In this way, the past is not relinquished nor forgotten; instead, “melancholia suggests a present that is not only haunted but *constituted* by the past: literally built of ruins and rejections.” Both queer and environmental melancholia take the pain and destruction of the past as particular and concrete; they are to be remembered in their specificity and not forgotten nor idealized. Mortimer-Sandilands highlights how environmentalist writers cope with the loss of natural landscapes by welcoming new life that emerges from desecration and recognizing that one landscape arises through the death of another. An environmental melancholic approach does not idealize a landscape as “untouched wilderness” nor romanticize the loss of “pristine nature.” Put differently, environmental melancholia follows a “dialectics of loss” that takes our landscapes as real, tangible, and particular; they are shaped by violent degradation, which in turn engenders new life from death.

How might we read a seventh century Syriac hagiography as emblematic of environmental melancholia? Here I suggest that the *Life*’s depiction of John’s destruction of his landscapes is a form of melancholic remembering. Not only does the *Life* preserve John’s environmental destruction, it depicts the landscape as vibrant and responsive to the pain inflicted on it. John’s life—as well as the very Christian community he establishes—is constituted by the loss of the landscape.

A NEW READING OF THE *LIFE OF JOHN OF DAYLAM*

The *Life* frequently depicts John in a domineering, often antagonistic, relationship with his landscape. From the beginning of the narrative, John’s fellow monk was devoured by a wolf, and his cohort exploits the landscape for food when their town faces a famine. John further demonstrates extraordinary command and control over his landscape when he miraculously produces water, resists fire, and heals a child through a vegetable. Perhaps the most striking instance of John’s aggression toward the landscape is his felling of 4,000 trees. In a flurry of rage against the Daylamites’ tree worship, John cuts down the trees in one night with a single blow of his axe to each tree. In the morning, the Daylamites find “the holy man asleep, the axe under his head.” The image of a saint asleep with the axe he used to ravage a forest is an unsettling one. That the *Life* includes this scene exemplifies a melancholic preservation of environmental damage in particular detail. John’s felling of trees is not abstracted for meaning but is presented straightforwardly in disquieting detail.

Despite John’s control and aggression, the *Life* portrays a dynamic and receptive landscape that does not act as a passive receptacle. An old monk relates how John made a hut, plastered with vines and mud, outside of his first monastery. Long after John’s death, as the old monk recounts, the fingerprints of the saint are still visible in the mud. Here the *Life* imagines an animated environment that holds onto the memory of persons who traverse it. John’s fingerprint imprinted in the mud from a time long ago not only testifies to the human mark on the landscape but also how the landscape itself responds, preserves, and remembers this mark. The *Life* then lays bare a landscape that is interwoven with human traces and impressions. The mud does not convalesce to its original state but exists in a new state, which now includes human imprints. Mortimer-Sandilands points out how a melancholic approach to the environment resists metaphor and treats “each loss as particular, irrevocable, and concrete.” The *Life* does not extrapolate on the meaning of John’s fingerprint, but leaves this grainy detail without explanation. In the absence of metaphor, John’s fingerprint is left as part of the texture and composition of the landscape.

John’s transformation of a water spring into blood similarly demonstrates the *Life*’s portrait of a dynamic environment that is receptive to pain. It is not only the water that John spoils; he poisons the spring’s fish who die from thirst and cry out in anguish as their life-source is contaminated. For the *Life,* the spring and its fish are affected by John’s abuse and suffer the pain he inflicts. Although John restores the spring to its original state, it does not move on from its contamination:

Each year, corresponding to the [time of] the saint’s miracle, the spring is turned to blood for three days, [starting] on the day when the saint had [first] changed it. All of the Arab merchants who go there tell of that spring which they had seen become blood with their own eyes; and they give praise to God for this.

Again, the *Life* depicts the environment as capable of experiencing pain and even of preserving it. The spring refuses its uncontaminated state and changes itself into blood as a testament to the suffering that it has endured. From a melancholic perspective, the spring does not overcome nor move past its suffering but instead insists on repeating this suffering; it resists being healed or made “whole.” The Arab merchants who watch the spring’s annual transformation bear witness to the landscape’s suffering within a “dialectics of loss” that involves both death and creation. At the sight of the spring’s damaged state, the merchants “give praise to God.” It is not the spring’s restoration that causes the merchants to praise God but precisely the sight of its corrupted state. In this manner, the *Life*’s landscape is imbued with beauty and life that arises through damage and death.

The *Life* further depicts a dialectics of loss—braiding together damage and new life—in its portrait of John’s eventual harmony with his landscape. The narrative concludes with the reconstitution of the monastery above a spring of water that allows for irrigation of the orchards and vineyards. It is the mountain that the monastery sits upon that initiates this change in location; it “shook and trembled to its foundations” and moves the monastery to its new place. Here the landscape as dynamic and alive; the mountain shakes, trembles, and in its rupture provides a new place for John’s flourishing monastery. Through the mountain’s quivers—that are so intense that they cause the mountain to shudder to its very foundations—the monastery is able to flourish and receive water. The *Life*, therefore, illustrates life and demolition in intimate connection with each other; the mountain’s eruption makes space for the monastery and its inhabits to thrive.

At the *Life*’sconclusion, John builds a new monastery, which he dedicates to Mary. This conclusion stands in distinct contrast to the first monastery John built and dedicated to the soldier martyrs, Sergius and Bacchus. From one vantage point, the *Life*’s conclusion could be taken as reparative: John’s story began as one riddled with a hostile and militant masculinity as a man who dominates the environment and concludes with the saint in gentle harmony with the natural world, as evidenced by the monastery’s symbiosis with the water spring. John’s transition from militant to meek could also be seen in the juxtaposition between the soldier martyrs and Mary. Just as John abandons his steely-eyed orientation in favor of a reparative one, the transition from the soldier martyrs to Mary signals a shift from hostile masculinity to life-giving femininity. This perspective resonates with Balogh’s interpretation of Gilgamesh through the lens of eco-guilt, wherein Gilgamesh reconciles and overcomes his guilt from deforesting the Cedars of Lebanon and embraces a move toward reparation. While it might be possible to read the *Life* as a transition from ecological guilt to reparation, I suggest that a melancholic reading is more apparent in the narrative itself. The *Life* is clear that John does not move from his previous monastery to his new one but rather maintains both of them. The monastery of soldier martyrs and the monastery of Mary exist side-by-side, and the former is not replaced by the latter. It is this maintenance and preservation of the past that embodies a melancholic interpretation; the past is not overcome but retained in its completeness—not a completeness equivalent to “wholeness” nor a return to an original, pure state but a completeness that embraces the dynamic spectrum of damage, ruin, growth, and new life. In the end, the *Life* resists a teleological trajectory that overcomes the damage and wrongdoing of the past and welcomes a landscape rife with the full array of forces that have shaped it.

CONCLUSION

The lens of environmental melancholia helps us to understand how the *Life*, a late ancient Syriac text, contends with damage and loss of the natural world. Not only does this approach illuminate how a historical community may have imagined a saint and his treatment of his landscape, it may contain some possibilities for our present day condition. Melancholia occurs precisely when a loss is ungrievable either because it is not understood or because there is a lack of public recognition of it. In this way, a melancholic approach resists the capitalist impulse to “move on,” forget loss, and find a new object of attention or commodity as a replacement, which will eventually be lost and replaced too. In the modern world, we are so accustomed to mass loss—climate change or the pandemic, for example—that we become numb, overstimulated, and feel incapable of acting. The stunning absence of public recognition of such extreme loss makes taking action feel impossible, as there seems to be no means to *actually* take such action. A melancholic approach then is valuable in its resistance to the politicized pressure to “get over it”; it demands that pain be remembered, memorialized, and kept alive. In this vein, the *Life* does not suppress John’s damage but shows how the natural world keeps it alive; it preserves John’s *particular* damage instead of only featuring his virtuous deeds. Ultimately, melancholia helps to point the way forward by proving that destruction and creation are interconnected and new possibilities are always just beyond the horizon.

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1. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hereafter referred to as the *Life*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Little is known about the dating and provenance. For one of the few studies on the *Life* that includes some information regarding dating/provenance, see Jonas Karlsson, “The Arabic Lives of John of Daylam,” in *Patristic Literature in Arabic Translations*, ed. Barbara Hjördis Roggema and Alexander Treiger, Arabic Christianity: Texts and Studies 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 129–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Sebastian P. Brock, “A Syriac Life of John of Dailam,” *Parole de l’Orient* 10 (1982 1981): 123–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Daylamites were a group of people who originated in the region of Daylam, which is located in the northern part of modern-day Iran. In medieval Islamic sources, the Daylamites were often described as fierce warriors and skilled seafarers, who were able to establish a powerful state in the Caspian Sea region. They were also known for their resistance against the Arab caliphates and the Persian Samanid Empire. However, the Daylamites are not extensively mentioned in Syriac sources. One Syriac reference to the Daylamites can be found in the *Chronicle of Seert*, a historical work written in Syriac in the ninth century. It briefly mentions the Daylamites as a people who lived in the mountains of Gilan and who were ruled by a king named Daylam. According to the text, Daylam was a friend of the Assyrian patriarch Timothy I, and he helped the patriarch to rebuild several churches that had been destroyed by Arab invaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amy Balogh, "Mapping the Path to Ecological Reparation: An Ecopsychological Reading of the Epic of Gilgamesh and Its Implications for the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2020): 988-1020. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Virginia Burrus, *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics: Cosmologies, Saints, Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Sizgorich has explored the role of militancy in medieval Christian and Islamic asceticism. See *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 245-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Bruce Erickson and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)