

Classical Arabic Biography

The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Ma'mūn

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The development of the genre

ANDREW: I want to return to this generation. I want to know about your life as a shaykh.

SHAYKH KHALAF: About me? About my life?

ANDREW: Yes.

SHAYKH KHALAF: Yes. At first there was [the tribe of] ‘Abbad. The shaykh of ‘Abbad back then was Kayid Ibn Khatlan. Shaykh of the shaykhs of ‘Abbad . . .

From Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*¹

Akhbār, Ḥadīth, and Sīra

Until recently, modern scholarship (following Otto Loth) has tended to assume that classical Arabic biography arose in conjunction with the study of Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth-transmitters.² Muslim scholars, we are told, set out to collect information on the reliability of transmitters. Eventually they extended their inquiries “to other groups – legal scholars, doctors, Sufi masters, and so on,” with the intention of showing “that the history of the Muslim community was essentially that of the unbroken transmission of truth and high Islamic culture.”³ This understanding of the genre is accurate in some respects: classical Arabic biography undoubtedly emphasizes the notion of transmission, and some of the earliest collections do list transmitters of Ḥadīth. Yet the genre itself did not originate among the Ḥadīth-scholars. Were this so, we would expect the earliest compilations to consist exclusively of entries about transmitters. But, as Willi Hefening was the first to note, biographical collections on poets, singers, Qur’ān-readers, and jurists are at least as old as the ones on Ḥadīth-scholars.⁴ Even older are the biographies

¹ Shryock, *Nationalism*, 12.

² Loth, “Ursprung.” Here and throughout I use “Ḥadīth” and “Ḥadīth-scholars,” not “tradition” and “traditionists,” for the reasons cogently expounded in Hodgson, *Venture*, I: 63–66.

³ Hourani, *History*, 165–66; see also Gibb, “Ta’rīkh”; Abbot, *Studies*, I:7. For a summary presentation of (to my mind) a more correct view, see Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 204–05.

⁴ Hefening, “Ṭabaqāt.”

(*maghāzī*, then *sīra*) of the Prophet, which had attained a substantial bulk even before the appearance of Ḥadīth-biography.

This precocious variety assumes greater plausibility if we acknowledge that biography originated among those narrators, transmitters, and redactors whom Ibn al-Nadīm (d. before 388/998) calls *al-akhbārīyūn wa 'l-nassābūn wa-aṣḥābu 'l-siyar wa 'l-aḥdāth*, “collectors of reports, genealogists, and authors of biographies and [accounts of] events.”⁵ These figures, most conveniently designated *akhbārīs* or “collectors of reports,” first rose to prominence at the court of the Umayyad caliph Mu‘āwiya (r. 41–60/661–80).⁶ They professed expertise in the pagan sciences of genealogy, poetry, and pre-Islamic tribal history. Some of them were also authorities on the life and times of the Prophet – that is, the corpus of reports from which both *sīra* and Ḥadīth proper were later to emerge. The *akhbārīs*’ earliest works – when there were “works” at all⁷ – exist only in later citations. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the ways in which they defined the directions early Arabic historiography, including biography, was to take.

Much of the information collected by the *akhbārīs* consisted of or included lists of names, often in the form of genealogies. Indeed, the citation of genealogies was almost impossible to avoid. This is because Arabic names typically contained a series of patronymics (expressions like “son of” and “daughter of”) going back many generations. As a result, practically every name contained a family history that could serve as the nucleus of a collective biography. When they mention a person, the early *akhbārīs* frequently pause to comment on the ancestors mentioned in his genealogy. Alternatively, they start at the beginning of a family tree and tell a brief story about some or all of the figures in the list, as Shaykh Khalaf does in his interview with Shryock.⁸ The utility of such performances, then as now, is to serve as an armature for narratives and poetry that support tribal claims to past glories and present rights. Unless the interlocutor is familiar with the reputation of one’s ancestors, an unadorned list of names is not an effective genealogy. The minimal and possibly the earliest sort of Arabic biography thus appears to have consisted of a genealogy accompanied by a narrative. Werner Caskel, and before him Ignaz Goldziher, noted the close association of genealogy (*nasab*) and narration (*qasṣ*) in premodern Arabic literature.⁹ More recently, Shryock has demonstrated the interdependence of the two forms in the oral histories of the Jordanian Bedouin.¹⁰ Plausibly enough, bare lists do appear when the narra-

⁵ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 131–67.

⁶ Abbot, *Studies*, I: 14–31; and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 43ff.; Schoeler, *Charakter*, 46–48.

⁷ See, e.g., Leder’s reservations on the “books” attributed to al-Haytham (*Korpus*, 8ff.).

⁸ See, e.g., Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, *passim*, e.g., 117; for contemporary parallels, see Shryock, *Nationalism*, e.g., 51–52.

⁹ Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 168, 170; Caskel, *Ġamhara*, I: 35.

¹⁰ Shryock, *Nationalism*, 65, 145, 319ff. On the relation between *ansāb* and early historiography see further Muṣṭafā, *Ta’rīkh*, I: 81–82, 98–99, 115; Khalīdī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 49–54.

tor does not wish to pronounce in favor of one or another tribe. In Jordan, Shryock found that tribal histories (that is, performances of *nasab* and *qasṣ*) inevitably challenge the claims made by neighboring clans and tribes. The tribal *‘ulamā’* (as his informants are called) were reluctant to relate their histories for fear of provoking a hostile reaction from neighboring rivals. After one eight-hour session with a tribal *‘ālim*, Shryock reports that he succeeded in recording only a bare genealogy: the narrative component had “collapsed under the weight” of participants’ efforts to “negotiate an acceptable version.”¹¹ In many cases, the bare lists we find in early Arabic sources may have been compiled by *akhbārīs* working long after particular disputes had been settled or forgotten. In other cases, they may be artifacts of a written history that strove to maintain neutrality.

Besides genealogies, the early sources contain lists (*tasmīya*) of persons credited with particular occupations or unusual feats or attributes. Some of these lists appear to date back to pre-Islamic times: they name tribal celebrities such as arbiters, trackers, and even “men whose big toes dragged on the ground when they rode.”¹² As Stefan Leder has noted, such lists, like genealogies, “give expression to the perception of closed and independently acting social units.”¹³ In the Islamic period, the *akhbārīs* applied a similar principle of classification to a wider range of persons. These persons included prophets, Companions, caliphs, Successors, jurists, Ḥadīth-scholars, Qur’ān-readers, transmitters of poetry and rare expressions, schoolteachers, participants in feuds, people who were the first to do a certain thing, and people afflicted with leprosy, lameness, and other maladies.¹⁴ Because the placeholders in incidental lists were not necessarily related in any other way, compilers frequently added identifying remarks (*akhbār*) like those appended to genealogies.¹⁵ Again, the bare listing of names is a theoretical possibility, occasionally realized. More commonly, however, we find narration, or at least description, appended to some or all of the items in the list.

As the genealogies and *tasmīyāt* indicate, the first Arabic biographers (i.e., the *akhbārīs*) did not confine themselves to collecting information about Ḥadīth-scholars. Heffening’s discovery of early works on poets, singers, and the like confirms this view. Still, the oldest extant collection, the *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, does appear to be a catalogue of Ḥadīth-transmitters. Compiled by al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) and Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845), the *Ṭabaqāt* contains entries of widely varying length on Muslims of the first six generations. In many cases, it offers assessments of its subjects’ reliability as transmitters. However, it also contains many reports that have little bearing on reliability, as well as a substantial biography of the Prophet. This genre, certainly, is older than Ḥadīth-biography: a substantial *maghāzī* is attributed to Ibn Ishāq, who died in 150/767. At first glance, then, it appears that the compilers of the *Ṭabaqāt*

¹¹ Shryock, *Nationalism*, chs. 4 and 5; citations on p. 108.

¹² Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar*, 132, 189, 233. ¹³ Leder, *Korpus*, 199.

¹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma’ārif*, *passim*. ¹⁵ E.g., Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, III: 87.

adopted the *sīra* as well as the list-form from the *akhbārīs*. Upon closer examination, however, it seems more accurate to suggest that al-Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd were *akhbārīs*, and that Ḥadīth-biography proper, while doubtless influenced by the example of the *Ṭabaqāt*, appeared later and under different circumstances.

To justify this assessment, we must look more closely at the circumstances under which Ḥadīth-studies emerged as a discipline distinct from the collection of *akhbār*. In the Umayyad period, “Ḥadīth” – that is, *akhbār* about the Prophet – had yet to attain the status of a distinct body of texts. Of the *akhbārīs* active in Medina and Damascus in the early third/ninth century, we find several who claimed expertise in subjects that included, without special distinction, the corpus later codified as Ḥadīth. For example, the Damascene *akhbārī* Muḥammad b. Muslim al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741) is credited with knowledge of the Prophet’s campaigns (*maghāzī*), post-prophetic history, and “Ḥadīth.”¹⁶ The sweeping nature of this declaration suggests that his contemporaries had yet to enforce any strict classification of *sīra*-related topics.¹⁷ Al-Zuhrī himself was reportedly the first to use *isnāds* (lists of transmitters) to check the genuineness of Ḥadīth. G. H. A. Juynboll agrees that the systematic examination of authorities began at that time (c. 130/747, with Shuʿba b. al-Ḥajjāj). However, he places the “structured collection” of Ḥadīth rather later: the two earliest compilers of *musnads* (books of Ḥadīth arranged by transmitter) both died in 228/847.¹⁸ The tardy but seemingly abrupt appearance of Ḥadīth proper has been corroborated by Joseph Schacht, who notes that the Iraqi jurist Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) commonly cited historical reports of juridical import without *isnāds*, while his younger contemporary al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820) differentiated between Prophetic biography and “legal traditions” (i.e., Ḥadīth) because only the latter had good *isnāds*.¹⁹ The implication is that the strict division between Ḥadīth and other kinds of history, that is, *sīra*, *maghāzī*, and *akhbār*, came late but took hold, in this case at least, within a single generation.

The new insistence on Ḥadīth as a distinct category, and on the *isnād* as a necessary concomitant of historical narration, evidently caught the *akhbārīs* off guard. One of them, ʿAwāna b. al-Ḥakam (d. 147/764–65 or 158/774–75) is reported to have said: “I gave up Ḥadīth because I couldn’t stand the *isnād*.”²⁰ Even in the middle of the third/ninth century, by which time the *akhbārīs* had given up Ḥadīth, the scholars insisted on denouncing them. Al-Bukhārī and Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn, for example, called Ibn al-Haytham a liar, and al-Dāraquṭnī labeled Ibn al-Kalbī *matrūk* “abandoned” as a transmitter.²¹ In some cases, the critics appear to be condemning the *akhbārīs*’ ignorance of Ḥadīth proper, and in other cases deploring their failure to apply Ḥadīth-standards to the

¹⁶ Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 157–58; cf. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 146–159.

¹⁷ Hinds, “*Maghāzī* and *Sīra*,” 189–92. ¹⁸ Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 9–23.

¹⁹ Schacht, *Origins*, 75 and 139. ²⁰ *MU*, IV: 513; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 134.

²¹ *MU*, V: 606; 5: 595.

Prophet's biography and other historical narratives. Either way, it is clear that the Ḥadīth-scholars were the newcomers, and that their professional self-definition required condemnation of the older *akhbārī* tradition.²²

Most misleadingly for us, the Ḥadīth-men also retrojected their criticism upon *akhbārīs* of previous generations. Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), for example, was regarded as an authority by his contemporary al-Zuhrī. A century later, however, he was censured by Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) for "leaving things out and changing them" in his recitation of the Prophet's campaigns.²³ Similarly, the so-called "Ḥadīth" of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774) was declared "worthless" by Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/847).²⁴ This pattern of retrospective condemnation has created the false impression that the early *akhbārīs* were sloppy Ḥadīth-scholars, and indeed that such a thing as "Ḥadīth" existed as a disciplined canon in the early period at all.

Ironically, however, it was precisely the formalization of Ḥadīth-criteria that left the Prophet's *sīra* and the allied biographical and historical genres in the hands of the *akhbārīs*. By the early third/ninth century, the Ḥadīth-scholars had committed their texts to compilations arranged by transmitter or by theme.²⁵ In either format, the Ḥadīth was now severed from the sequential narrative of the Prophet's biography. Admittedly, a given Ḥadīth remained formally identical to a report in the *sīra*: both consisted of a listing of transmitters culminating in a first-person eyewitness account, often in multiple versions. Yet the Ḥadīth-reports were now arranged by transmitter or by subject (e.g., prayer, inheritance, contracts, etc.), while the reports in the *sīra* remained a sequential set of narratives.²⁶ With these boundaries in place, the *akhbārīs* could produce Prophetic biographies without falling afoul of the Ḥadīth-scholars.²⁷ Thus al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822) was called "an authority on the Prophet's biography (*al-maghāzī wa 'l-siyār*), the conquests, and disputed matters of Ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and *akhbār*." Not surprisingly, "a number of Ḥadīth-scholars considered him weak," a typical reaction – as we have seen – to such broad expertise. Yet even those who questioned his knowledge of Ḥadīth were willing to concede his authority in other fields. "As far as biography (*akhbār al-nās wa 'l-siyar*), jurisprudence, and the other sciences are

²² See also Robinson, "Study," esp. 206.

²³ Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIṭal*, I:17 and I: 22; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136; *MU*, V: 220; Abbot, *Studies*, I: 87–91. Ibn Ishāq was condemned in his own time, but not for his *isnāds*: his major contemporary critic, Mālik b. Anas, did not always use them himself (Robson, "Ḥadīth"). Although some later authorities spoke approvingly of Ibn Ishāq (Guillaume, *Life*, xxxv–xxxvi), such assessments were often arbitrary (Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 163–90), reinforcing the sense that we are dealing with collective self-assertion through *akhbārī*-bashing rather than strictly individual assessments of transmitters. ²⁴ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 136–37; *MU*, V: 29.

²⁵ The first *musnads* are credited to Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, Musaddad b. Musardad (both d. 228/847) and Nuʿaym b. Ḥammad b. Muʿāwiya (d. 229/848). Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 22 (on Musaddad see also Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II: 139, note 3).

²⁶ See further Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 77ff.

²⁷ On the mutual respect eventually established on the basis of this division of labor, see Schacht, *Origins*, 139, and note 6.

concerned, he is a reliable authority by consensus.”²⁸ Similarly, his scribe and successor Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845) was called “an expert in the *akhbār* of the Companions and Successors,” not a Ḥadīth-scholar.²⁹ Admittedly, the *Ṭabaqāt* the two men produced is well supplied with *isnāds*, indicating that Ibn Sa’d, at least, had mastered the evidentiary protocol of the Ḥadīth-scholars. However, as Juynboll has pointed out, the book contains “hardly any” material that falls into the category of Ḥadīth, not even in the biographies of Companions in whose entries one would expect to find it.³⁰ The contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* thus illustrate the extent to which the earliest biographies, even of the Prophet, were the work of *akhbārīs*, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper.

As the contents of the *Ṭabaqāt* indicate, the *akhbārīs* had assumed authority over the biography of the Prophet as well as the lives of the Companions and Successors. It is clear why: in the beginning at least, the compilation of a Prophetic biography required expertise in pre-Islamic genealogy and history, fields that had long been the acknowledged province of the *akhbārīs*. In later periods, the closest parallel to the contents of the *sīra* does not appear in the writings of the Ḥadīth-scholars, but rather in the works of *akhbārīs*, particularly al-Madā’inī (d. 225/839–40). Al-Madā’inī is clearly an *akhbārī*: his works deal with the history of Quraysh, the conquests, caliphs, poets, and such odd subjects as wedding parties, coinage, and persons famous for their propensity to flatulence.³¹ To him are also attributed twenty-seven works on the Prophet, covering his physical appearance, his sermons and letters, his enemies and detractors, his military campaigns, the delegations he sent to the tribes, etc. The subject matter of the latter works thus corresponds to the contents of the earliest known recensions of the Prophet’s biography (those by Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Sa’d). These topics include pre-Islamic Arabian history, the Prophet’s mission, the resistance to Islam, the emigration to Medina, and Muḥammad’s negotiations and military campaigns.

Biography, then, originated among *akhbārīs*, not Ḥadīth-scholars proper, who in the early third/ninth century had barely come into existence as writers of books. By the third/ninth century if not earlier, scholars exclusively interested in Ḥadīth had begun to condemn the *akhbārīs*, including those of older generations, for failing to uphold the newly emerged rules for Ḥadīth-transmission. At the same time, they conceded to their *akhbārī* contemporaries the right to compose biographies, including those of the Prophet. This entente appears to have succeeded in part because many *akhbārīs* had acquired competence in the evidentiary protocol of Ḥadīth.

Professional specialization and collective biography

The history of *akhbār* after c. 200/800 becomes the history of the diffuse fields of specialization that emerged from it. These include not only Ḥadīth but also

²⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 144; *MU*, V: 392–93. Note that *fiqh* in this period did not necessarily entail knowledge of Ḥadīth. ²⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 145.

³⁰ Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 24–27. ³¹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 149–52.

the various branches of *adab* (the literary and linguistic sciences) and of *ta'riḫ* (history). Many of these branches developed their own biographical traditions. Common to all the traditions was the notion of descent, now understood as a metaphorical rather than a literal genealogy. An examination of early biographical writing, whether by *akhbārīs* or Ḥadīth-scholars, bears out one element of Hourani's contention that biographers intended to establish "unbroken transmission." However, this transmission did not always have to do with "truth," as Hourani proposes. More exactly, it had to do with knowledge, an attribute of poets and singers as well as of Ḥadīth-transmitters. As we have seen, the Ḥadīth-men insisted on evaluating transmitters as well as (or instead of) the reports they transmitted. Similarly, biographers of musicians, poets, and grammarians felt the need to compile a catalogue of experts in their respective disciplines. In the apologetic prefaces they attached to their works, the *adab*-biographers made explicit what was implicit in Ḥadīth-biography, namely, the notion that professional legitimacy derived from the documented transmission of knowledge.

Rijāl-works and Ḥadīth-biography

The earliest biographical tradition particular to Ḥadīth-studies is the *rijāl*-collection, which consists of a list of persons named as authorities in the transmission of reports.³² One of the oldest extant examples confirms Heffening's suggestion that the genre represents a "special application" of techniques of composition already in use among *akhbārīs*. This is the *Ṭabaqāt* of Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854–55), which groups transmitters by generation, tribe, and place of residence. Khalīfa also compiled a chronological history, and may therefore be considered an *akhbārī* of sorts. However, neither his history nor his *Ṭabaqāt* contains much *akhbār*. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, the information most important for Ḥadīth-purposes – namely, where and when the transmitter was active – must be inferred from the placement of that transmitter's name in the generational, tribal, and regional classes.

Much more detailed is the *ʿIlal wa-maʿrifat al-rijāl* ascribed to Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). However, its compilers evince little awareness of the organizational techniques in use among *akhbārīs*: the imam's comments on transmitters and texts are placed in whatever order they happened to be spoken during Ḥadīth-sessions. A roughly contemporary work, the *Ta'riḫ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) takes the transmitters' names as the unit of organization and lists them alphabetically for easy reference. Al-Bukhārī's entries are invariably brief, mentioning only the subject's teachers and students, e.g.: "Ismāʿīl b. Saʿīd b. Rummāna al-Yamānī; he heard Ibn ʿUmar; Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Ṣamad related on his authority."³³ The fragments of *rijāl*-criticism ascribed to al-ʿIjlī (d. 261/875) are only slightly more forthcoming: one transmitter, he says, was "a harsh and ill-natured man, but he knew the *sunna*."³⁴ As these examples

³² For a list of *rijāl*-works see Juynboll, "Rijāl."

³³ Bukhārī, *Ta'riḫ*, I: 1: 356; no. 1126.

³⁴ Cited in Muryani, "Entwicklung," 61.

indicate, the *rijāl*-critics had little interest in *akhbār* as such. Their comments are ascriptive rather than narrative, and almost always bear on the subject's reliability as a transmitter. This does not mean that the tradition could not grow: on the contrary, the contentious nature of Ḥadīth-criticism produced a farrago of judgements, pro and con, that had to be appended to the entries on individual transmitters. This process eventually culminated in the massive compilations of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449). However, it did not result in anecdotal biography of the sort found in Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt*. Even the long entries in late *rijāl*-books favor laconic assessments (albeit a great many of them) over extended narratives.

With the appearance of distinct schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*) came dictionaries devoted to their affiliates, who were often transmitters as well as jurists.³⁵ Such compilations, unlike the *rijāl*-books, are not concerned with weeding out unreliable transmitters. Rather, the compilers were intent on demonstrating the distinctive attainments of their school. To the extent that such a project necessitated praising affiliates and criticizing rivals, some biographers collected anecdotes with as much enthusiasm as any *akhbārī* (for the Ḥanbalī tradition, see chapter 4). Others, however, were still interested only in the transmission of Ḥadīth – not Ḥadīth in general, but the sequence of teachers of which they formed a part. As a result, their works consist of name-lists supplemented with such minimal facts as death-dates, teachers, and students.

In a study of one such collection, Rudolf Sellheim suggests (following Ibrāhīm Madkūr) that the brevity of the entries is due to the “abashedness and humility” of the compilers.³⁶ But this remark strictly speaking applies only to autobiography (and as it happens, is not true there either).³⁷ I would argue rather that long entries on Ḥadīth-scholars are only needed when membership in the group is being contested: that is, in *rijāl*-books. Lists of one's own teachers, on the other hand, document a figurative genealogy back to the Prophet. Instead of parentage, the relevant relationship is the equally successive one of hearing and transmission. The implied narrative of succession to the Prophet, not the idiosyncrasies of any of the men named in the list, makes the best argument for one's own authority to transmit Ḥadīth. An endless series of nearly indistinguishable entries does not therefore fail to take account of individuality. Rather, it succeeds in excluding it.

Musicians

A more explicit example of collective self-assertion comes from al-Jāḥiẓ' (d. 776/868) compilation on musicians.³⁸ The ancient philosophers, al-Jāḥiẓ states, divided knowledge (*ilm*) into four arts (*ādāb*). Of the four, Muslim scholars

³⁵ On the early history of *madhhab*-biography, see Melchert, *Formation*, esp. 145–46.

³⁶ Sellheim, “Izzaddīn.”

³⁷ See *Edebiyat* VII: 2 (1997; special issue on Arabic autobiography).

³⁸ Jāḥiẓ, “Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn”; cf. Muṣṭafā, *Ta'rikh*, I: 140 and I: 176.

quickly attained a precise knowledge of three: astronomy, geometry, and chemistry. Yet the fourth art, music (*luḥūn, ghināʾ*), suffered from neglect. People grasped its principles only by intuition, or by hearing of Persian and Indian ideas on the subject. Then al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad derived a metrical system for poetry and music. His system came to the attention of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, who, with his greater experience as a performer and auditor, perfected it and made it into a science. Since then, every age has had its generation of musicians who learn from those before them, and who along with their musical skill cultivate various refinements of character. Unfortunately, biographers have not yet written about the celebrated musicians of al-Jāhīz' day. To give his contemporaries their due, he has composed an account of "their characteristics, their instruments, and the styles they attribute to themselves and pass on to others," and arranged his account by *ṭabaqāt*, here meaning "categories of comparable excellence."³⁹ The biographies themselves have not survived, so the second part of al-Jāhīz' project – the narration of individual lives within a master-narrative for the musician class – cannot be studied. Nevertheless, his introduction provides a relatively early and complete instance of the etiological narrative, that is, the story a biographer tells to legitimize his category of subjects and lay the groundwork for his exposition of the virtues of individual exemplars within the category.

Poets

Early *akhbārīs* took a particular interest in poetry, which like music soon found its apologists.⁴⁰ The early Islamic view of poets and poetry was preponderantly hostile. Although poetry survived the advent of Islam, it perforce renounced its claim to supernatural inspiration.⁴¹ Not surprisingly, the earliest biographers of poets do not adduce an etiology for their subjects. Instead, they argue for the importance of being able to identify good poetry, something mere amateurs cannot hope to do. In the earliest extant biographical work on poets, Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (d. 232/846) begins with a complaint about declining standards. "Much of the poetry one hears is contrived and fabricated," he says, "no good at all, and no proof-text for correct Arabic." This is because "people have passed it from book to book without taking it from the Bedouin and without submitting it to the judgement of scholars."⁴² In response to a man who declares that he could appreciate a poem perfectly well without asking an expert, al-Jumāhī replies: "If you like a coin but the money-changer tells you it's false, what good does your appreciation do you then?"⁴³ His attitude parallels (but does not necessarily derive from) that of

³⁹ Jāhīz, "Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn," III: 133; cf. Hafsi, "Recherches," 107–8.

⁴⁰ On poetic biographies, see Tarabulusī, *Critique*; Sezgin, *Geschichte*, II: 92–97.

⁴¹ See Qurʾān 26: 225–8, and further Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, I: 40–97, esp. 56; Kister, "Sirah"; Amidu, "Poets"; and Heinrichs, "Meaning," 121. ⁴² Jumāhī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 5–6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

the Ḥadīth-scholars: antiquity and authenticity confer authority upon a text, the content of which cannot stand on its own merits without the imprimatur of the experts.

As in Ḥadīth-studies, too, the requirement of authenticity requires a foray into biography in order to establish the names and works of the most reliable authorities. Al-Jumāḥī explains that he has “classified the poets of the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and transitional periods, and ranked them.”⁴⁴ The result is “ten classes of four poets of equal skill.”⁴⁵ Unlike Ibn Sa‘d and Khalīfa, al-Jumāḥī constructs his *ṭabaqāt* on the basis of excellence, not geography or age. Excellence, in turn, depends on the twin criteria of authenticity and quality. Some poems and poets are more authentic than others: ancients more than moderns, and desert-dwellers more than urbanites. Within each category, moreover, some poets are better than others, and here explicitly aesthetic considerations play a role. Imru’ al-Qays, for example, is superior to other equally authentic (i.e., old) poets because “he invented things that no one had said before, things that the Arabs considered beautiful.”⁴⁶ Any biographical elaboration beyond these minimal facts is not necessary for a critical discussion of the verses. Most of the entries, accordingly, contain citations of poems rather than anecdotes.

A biographer of the next generation, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), offers a more explicit justification for his work. Cultivated people, he says, refer to poetry when discussing “usage, grammar, the Qur’ān, and the Ḥadīth.” Like al-Jumāḥī, Ibn Qutayba conflates this philological standard with a literary one, for which he regards the ancients as the highest model. Provided they respect convention, however, some modern poets may attain parity with the ancients:

I do not consider the ancient poets any more favorably because they are old, nor do I think any less of recent poets because they are new. Rather, I consider both groups without bias, and give each its due. I have seen scholars who approve of, and anthologize, poor poetry just because the person who composed it lived a long time ago. I have also seen them denigrate solid poetry only because it was composed in their own time, or by someone they have actually seen. But God has not restricted knowledge, poetic talent, and eloquence to one age as opposed to another, nor has He made it the special property of one people while denying it to another. Rather, He has divided it and made it the common property of all His creatures in all ages, and made everything ancient modern in its time, just as every noble line has a humble origin. After all, Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, al-Akḥṭal, and others like them were once considered modern.⁴⁷

This bold statement has the effect of extending the biographer’s field down to his own time and then leaving it open for his successors. Indeed, Ibn Qutayba’s chronological arrangement permits future compilers to append biographies

⁴⁴ On “ranking” see Khalidi, “Biographical Dictionaries,” 57.

⁴⁵ Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 21–22. The actual arrangement is somewhat different, due perhaps to later interpolations (see Shākir’s introduction, 20–21). ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Ibn Qutayba, *Shi‘r*, I: 76, I: 62–63.

without disturbing the structure of the work, something al-Jumaḥī's *ṭabaqāt*-scheme makes impossible. Moreover, by using the poet's death-date, not the quality or ancientness of his verses, as his axis of organization, Ibn Qutayba foregrounds the poet as the subject of interest. Unlike al-Jumaḥī's entries, which contain little more than verses, Ibn Qutayba's include information on "the poets and their times, their abilities, their modes of composition, their tribes, the names of their fathers, and those who were known by nicknames or honorifics," as well as the events that prompted the composition of their poems.⁴⁸ Mere names, he says, convey little unless accompanied by "a tale, a historical event, a genealogy, an anecdote, or a verse deemed good or unusual."⁴⁹

Ibn Qutayba may have opened the pages of biography to the modern poets, but it was another biographer, Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908), who treated them as subjects worthy of commemoration in their own right. In his *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā' al-muḥdathīn*, Ibn al-Mu'tazz treats only the poets of the Abbasid period, and goes even further than Ibn Qutayba in citing biographical reports as well as verses. In the anecdotes, he pleads the cause of the "modern" poets by suggesting a continuity between them and their ancient predecessors. Like the ancients, the moderns were given to strange mannerisms, debauchery, and the flouting of convention. The poet Abū al-Hindī, for example, died by falling off a roof in a drunken stupor, Abū Nuwās composed verse while intoxicated, and Abū Dulāma went carousing instead of accompanying his patron on the pilgrimage.⁵⁰ In his critical comments on the verses, Ibn al-Mu'tazz does not refer to "ancientness" or "authenticity." Instead, he repeatedly praises *badī'*, the characteristic literary device of the moderns.⁵¹ In another work, the *Kitāb al-badī'*, he argues that *badī'* appears in the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth, and ancient poetry, and modern critics have no right to repudiate their contemporaries who employ it. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, he points out examples of *badī'* and praises the work of poets known to have favored the technique.⁵² Distributed as they are throughout the biographical entries, his comments add up to a practical characterization of the technique, an endorsement of it, and by extension, a vindication of his subject, the modern poets. Evidently his project was successful: by the time Abū al-Faraj composed his *Kitāb al-aghānī* (d. 356/967) it was acceptable to treat the ancients and the moderns together as subjects of biography, and in no particular order at all.

Grammarians

Like Ḥadīth-studies and poetical criticism, the sciences of language crystallized as a distinct discipline at a relatively early date. The first known

⁴⁸ Ibid., I: 59–60. For an example see Leder, "Frühe Erzählungen."

⁴⁹ Ibn Qutayba, *Shi'r*, I: 59–60. ⁵⁰ Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt*, 56, 91–92, 138, 195.

⁵¹ See further W. Heinrichs, *Istī'ārah*; S. P. Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām*, 5–37.

⁵² E.g., Bashshār b. Burd (21–31), Muslim b. al-Walīd (235–40), and Abū Tammām (283–87).

biographical works on grammarians are nearly as old as the early works on Ḥadīth-scholars and poets.⁵³ Among the earliest extant is that of al-Marzubānī (d. 368/979 or 384/994), transmitted in an abridgement by al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Yaghmurī (d. 673/1274). The original reportedly contained biographies of genealogists as well as language scholars, but the work as it stands is dominated by a concern for grammar and grammarians.⁵⁴ On the assumption that its abridgement omits rather than adds material, al-Marzubānī's work performed two signal services for the grammarians. First, it justifies grammar by characterizing it as a guardianship of the Arabic language, the medium of God's Revelation to Muḥammad and of the Prophet's Ḥadīth. Second, it documents the founder's transmission of this trust to his successors. Just like Ḥadīth-scholars, poets, and musicians, the grammarians could lay claim to a distinctive *ʿilm* conveyed intact through the generations.

Al-Marzubānī begins with a series of statements attributed to the Prophet and other prominent historical figures exhorting believers to cultivate good pronunciation and grammar. Then he recounts one anecdote after another showing Muslims, notable and otherwise, committing solecisms. After the last anecdote – in which Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 155/772) deplores the miswritten sign-boards of the cotton-traders – al-Marzubānī brings in his hero Abū al-Aswad al-Duʿalī (d. 69/688). Abū al-Aswad, he reports, learned the principles of desinential inflection from ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Later he was commissioned by the governor Ziyād b. Abīhi to teach people the vowel-markers “because their speech had deteriorated.” Abū al-Aswad ignored the commission until, one day, walking along the river-bank in Basra, he overheard a Qurʾān reader mis-vowel a word and thus invert the meaning of a verse (Qurʾān 9: 3). He then said to himself, “It is no longer permitted me to neglect the people!” and forthwith invented a transcription-system for the inflectional endings ʿAlī had taught him. “He made the nominative, the genitive, and the accusative; and people flocked to him to learn pure Arabic.”⁵⁵ This origin-tale, which occurs in several variants, displays a conspicuous constructedness.⁵⁶ Abū al-Aswad refuses to teach grammar, or is forbidden to do so. This prohibition serves merely to set the stage for what happens next, namely, that he overhears a particularly flagrant error and reverses his position, thereby rescuing a community on the verge of inglorious collapse due to its members' ignorance of case inflection. Of course, he cannot really have done so, because several of the figures accused of committing solecisms lived long after his time.⁵⁷ Yet this inconsistency serves the biographer's purpose as well: had Abū al-Aswad succeeded in eradicating error once and for all, there would be no need for more grammarians.

⁵³ Hafsi, “Recherches,” 87; Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I:222. ⁵⁴ See Makdisi, *Humanism*, 165.

⁵⁵ Yaghmurī, *Nūr*, 4–5; also Ibn al-Anbārī, *Nuzha*, 4–7; Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 60; Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, 12: 4463–65; *MU*, III: 436–37; Makdisi, *Humanism*, 122.

⁵⁶ On *awāʿil* see Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*, 104–8; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, 10ff.

⁵⁷ Abū al-Aswad died in 69, while e.g. Abū ʿAmr b. al-ʿAlāʾ, who deplored the traders' signs, died in 155.

Having described the origin and utility of prescriptive grammar, al-Marzubānī sets out to establish that Abū al-Aswad's knowledge was transmitted to subsequent generations (*yantaqilu 'l- 'ilmu min ṭabaqatin ilā ṭabaqa*). He thus reports that “the most outstanding of [Abū al-Aswad's] disciples, and the most retentive, was ‘Anbasa b. Ma‘dān al-Fīl. When Abū al-Aswad died, the people flocked to ‘Anbasa. When he in turn died, people studied with his best-trained pupil, Maymūn al-Aqran.”⁵⁸ Each of those named will have an entry later in the book, and each entry will name the students who carried on the tradition in their turn. Sometimes, too, al-Marzubānī adds a story about how a particular figure came to join the class. The celebrated Sībawayh, for example, took up grammar when his Ḥadīth-teacher rebuked him for misusing the negative particle *laysa*. Like Ibn al-Mu‘tazz with his poets, al-Marzubānī enjoys stories that illustrate his subjects' oddities. Even these stories, however, reinforce the distinct endowment of the grammarians. Abū ‘Amr b. al-‘Alā’, for example, was happy to learn that al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf had died, not only because al-Ḥajjāj had been pursuing him, but also because the death-announcement illustrated the correct pronunciation of a difficult word. Another grammarian, ‘Īsā b. ‘Umar, was punished for refusing to return some clothing left with him for safekeeping; even as he was being caned, he used two unusual diminutives to protest his chastisement.⁵⁹

The early biographical compilations on Ḥadīth-scholars, musicians, poets, and grammarians illustrate the formation of what Leder has called *literarische Personengruppen*, a “secondary theme” of early historiography (to apply Noth and Conrad's terminology) which reflects the increasing professionalization of Muslim scholarship after the second/eighth century.⁶⁰ The Ḥadīth-scholars compiled lists of transmitters in quasi-genealogical chains going back to the Prophet, hoping thereby to affirm the authenticity of their reports. Al-Jāḥiẓ reached back to pre-Islamic times to dignify musicians. The biographers of poets and grammarians sought to justify their subjects' privilege by invoking the connection between language and the Revelation. In each case, biographers insisted that the *ṭā'ifa* met the dire need for experts in one field or another. By making a list of these experts, the biographers also made a case for their authority as critics. In *adab* as well as in Ḥadīth, the biographers considered their intervention a necessary concomitant of establishing new, self-defined fields of expertise.

The *ṭā'ifa* model

Of all the reformulations of group identity that arose with Islam, the most productive one for biographers proved to be that of heirship to the Prophet.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Yaghmurī, *Nūr*, 87. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 95, 30, 46.

⁶⁰ Leder, *Korpus*, 197ff; Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*.

⁶¹ For the early development of this notion as a political and religious idea, see Nagel, *Rechtleitung*, to whom my debt will be obvious, especially in ch. 2 below.

The caliphs appear to have been the first to assume this mantle. This maneuver required suppressing the corresponding claims of Muḥammad's family, claims that were to resurface in the Shiite argument for heirship. However, not all the interpretations of Muḥammad's mandate were so absolute. Among the most influential was that of the Sufis, who proposed various plans for dividing the Prophet's functions among his heirs. The most detailed plan is that of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988–89), who divided “those who know” into three groups: Ḥadīth-scholars, legists, and Sufis. Each group (*ṣīf*) specializes in a particular area – Ḥadīth, textual interpretation, and mysticism respectively. Each has its methods, technical terms, and exemplary practitioners. Furthermore, each group defers (or should defer) to the expertise of the others.⁶² Since al-Sarrāj was not a biographer, we cannot use his works to see how he would have applied his system to classify or write about historical individuals. But a similar blueprint for dividing religious practitioners into categories appears, at approximately the same time, in the work of another Sufi, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), who based his scheme on a Prophetic Ḥadīth that divides the early Muslims into generations of forty years each.⁶³ According to Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), Abū Ṭālib “built upon” this Ḥadīth by listing the leading caliph, legist, Ḥadīth-scholar, Qurʾān-reader, and renunciant (*zāhid*) in each generation. The scheme appealed to subsequent scholars, who continued to fill in names for the later generations. The resulting catalogue covers fourteen generations, each forty years long, and names the outstanding practitioner in each of the five “aspects of religion” in each generation. In the fifth, for example, “the caliph . . . was al-Maʾmūn b. al-Rashīd; the legist was ʿAbd Allāh b. Idrīs al-Shāfi ʿī; the Ḥadīth-scholar was Yaḥyā b. Maʾīn; the Qurʾān-reader was Yaḥyā al-Ḥaḍramī; and the renunciant was Maʾrūf al-Karkhī.”⁶⁴ Abū Ṭālib's appropriation of the Prophet's Ḥadīth presents the classical Arabic biographical project in microcosm. First, Abū Ṭālib proposes a division of religious practitioners. Unlike al-Sarrāj, he does not describe these groups as “heirs of the prophets,” but the principle of functional division is the same. Then, in the manner of al-Haytham b. ʿAdī, Ibn Ḥabīb, Ibn Qutayba, and other *akhbārīs*, he names representatives in each division. Organized by generation, the resulting catalogue is open ended, and can be (and indeed was) kept up to date by later transmitters. Such explicit divisions of religious practitioners into separate but complementary lineages may very plausibly have originated among Sufi theorists eager to carve out a place for themselves in a hierarchy unselfconsciously dominated by Ḥadīth-scholars and legists.⁶⁵

Whatever its origins, the division-of-labor model eventually became the most productive paradigm for collective biography. The most common term

⁶² Sarrāj, *Lumaʿ*, 4–11. See further Mackeen, “Ṣūfī-Qawm,” esp. 220; and Melchert, “Transition.”

⁶³ Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, no. 4058; cf. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 5:60–61.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talqīḥ*, 382–84.

⁶⁵ Mackeen, “Ṣūfī-Qawm”; Reinhart, “Transcendence,” 9–10; and ch. 5 below.

for the collectivities themselves is *tāʾifa*, “group entrusted with an exclusive body of knowledge or characteristic activity.” Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) applied the term to literary scholars, and Ibn Khallikān (d. 621/1282) to “scholars, kings, princes, viziers, and poets.” The longest catalogue is probably that of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), who lists forty categories of persons about whom biographies have been written. They range from prophets and kings to lovers, lunatics, and gamblers. His younger contemporary al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362) lists ten: Companions, Ḥadīth-scholars, caliphs, kings, officials, judges, Qurʾān-readers, scholars, poets, and a miscellaneous category that includes allies of God (*awliyāʾ*), preachers, physicians, astronomers, grammarians, theologians, and litterateurs. Al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who represents the culmination of the classical tradition, mentions sixteen groups. They include prophets, Companions, exegetes of the Qurʾān, memorizers of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, grammarians and philologists, legal theorists, holy men, inheritance calculators, rhetoricians, legists, Qurʾān-readers, judges, and caliphs.⁶⁶ As these examples show, a *tāʾifa* could be an actual occupational group as well as an abstract category of biographical subjects. Some (e.g., “judges”) corresponded to contemporary professions, while others (e.g., “prophets”) were retrospective. Others again are sometimes retrospective and sometimes descriptive, e.g., “Sufis,” a group whose earliest exemplars did not always designate themselves as such. Conversely, the biographers did not write about every occupational group: no one to my knowledge ever composed biographies of prayer-callers, midwives, or garbage collectors, all of whom may have possessed a sense of communal solidarity similar to that ascribed to members of the more celebrated *tāʾifas*.

Al-Sarrāj identified the members of each of his three *Personengruppen* as “knowers” and heirs of the prophets. However, not all groups could claim descent from Muḥammad or any connection with religious scholarship. Of al-Suyūṭī’s sixteen groups, for example, three (scribes and essayists, calligraphers, and poets) have only a tangential relationship with prophecy, or none at all. Biographers of groups like these nevertheless endeavored to legitimate their subjects’ field of interest. A common tactic was to insist that their work, however far afield, had as its ultimate purpose the clarification of some aspect of the revelation. Yāqūt, for example, describes his literary scholars as experts in Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, even though many of them had nothing to say about either. However, they did know Arabic, knowledge of which “is religion itself.”⁶⁷ Another strategy was to expand the definition of knowledge. Interpreted loosely, the Ḥadīth about heirship to the prophets suggests that the possession of any kind of *ʿilm* qualifies a *tāʾifa* for heirship and a place in biography. Introducing his compilation on physicians, Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa

⁶⁶ *MU*, I: 33; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, 20; Dhahabī in Sakhāwī, *Iʿlān*, 84–86, tr. Rosenthal, *History*, 388–91; Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, I: 51–55; Suyūṭī, *Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ*, 1.

⁶⁷ *MU*, I:32. He still worried, though: “I do not deny that it would have been worthier for me to have spent my time at the mosque and at my prayers” instead of writing biography (I: 31–32).

declares that “the practice of medicine is among the noblest and most lucrative trades, and is mentioned extensively in Scripture and legal injunctions.” Therefore, “the knowledge (*‘ilm*) of bodily ailments has become linked with that of religion.” From this follows the necessity of writing about those “whom God has privileged with this knowledge,” pagans and Christians as well as Muslims.⁶⁸

Like members of a lineage, members of a normative *ṭāʾifa* have their single ancestor: the first person to gain the knowledge or perform the characteristic activity of the group. Moreover, just as each generation of a lineage gives birth to the next, members of a scholarly or occupational *ṭāʾifa* pass their mandate on from one generation of practitioners to the next. Finally, like individuals of common ancestry, members of the *ṭāʾifa* are theoretically interchangeable. All of them know or do the same thing, and their prestige derives from the degree to which they uphold the mandate conferred by the first generation. In his discussion of the exclusivity of biographical dictionaries compiled by the *‘ulamāʾ*, Tarif Khalidi affirms that biographers “made an explicit or implicit appeal to a doctrine of the elite, by whose labors and in whose lives religion subsists and is transmitted from one generation to the next.”⁶⁹ Of course, such a vision of the past necessarily resulted in a certain distortion of the historical record. Discussing the manifestations of self-awareness among intellectuals of the fourth/tenth century, Wolfhart Heinrichs notes that scholars used *awāʾil*-tales and back-projection to “create the impression that the same kind of compartmentalization with which they were faced already obtained a hundred or more years earlier.”⁷⁰ In many cases, it was the biographers who lent the early history of their *ṭāʾifa* whatever coherence it later appeared to possess, often by extending its history back into early Islamic times and sometimes even beyond. Typically, biographers used the introductions of their works to present programmatic expositions of the venerability of their *ṭāʾifa* and its indispensability to the community. They also used their subjects as mouthpieces for such expositions, or, more commonly, let their subjects’ words and deeds affirm the *ṭāʾifa*’s claim to authority. The case studies in this and the subsequent chapters will illustrate each of these processes in detail.

Despite its failure to correspond exactly to historical and social reality, the *ṭāʾifa*-model was no biographer’s fancy either. Rather, it corresponded to an important structure of self-presentation and self-perception. At the broadest level, as Roy Mottahedeh has shown with reference to Buyid society, medieval Muslims professed membership in a complex combination of kin groups, patronage institutions, professional associations, regional factions, and racial collectivities. The Buyid polity thus comprised numerous semi-independent and often overlapping social groups (referred to variously as *ṭabaqa*, *ṣinf*, and *jins*) held together by relationships of mutual loyalty among differently privileged members. These networks of loyalty operated at all levels of society,

⁶⁸ Ibn Abī Uṣaybīʿa, *ʿUyūn*, 7–8.

⁶⁹ Khalidi, “Islamic Biographical Dictionaries,” 64.

⁷⁰ Heinrichs, “Contacts,” 255.

from the men of the regime down to food sellers, rag dealers, and cobblers.⁷¹ In Buyid society as elsewhere, however, only certain social groups – the literate classes and particularly the scholars – left substantial testimony about their perceptions of themselves and of other groups. These perceptions were strikingly schematic, as is evident from the scholars' self-classification into categories of specialization. In his study of classical Islamic "humanism" (*adab*), George Makdisi shows how scholars distinguished in practice as well as in theory between practitioners of the religious and the literary sciences, and within each of these broad categories, among numerous sub-fields. Each set of experts claimed exclusive possession of a body of knowledge deemed desirable for others to learn or necessary to the community at large. Although an individual scholar might attain expertise in more than one field (and many did), representatives of the two super-groups, the *'ulamā'* (religious scholars) and the *udabā'* ("humanists," in Makdisi's translation), often asserted their *differentia* forcefully enough to provoke mutual antagonism.⁷²

To this survey of the evolution of classical Arabic biography one development must be added: the compilation of biographical works embracing subjects of different *ṭā'ifas*. Modern scholarship usually credits Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282) with the first catholic biographical dictionary, but this sets the date about two centuries too late. Arguably, the first move back to comprehensiveness was the compilation of biographical dictionaries that took some criterion other than *ṭā'ifa*-affiliation as their basis of inclusion. For example, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) included in his *Ta'riḫ Baghdad* anyone of importance who had spent time in the city of Baghdad. The work therefore contains biographies of subjects from a variety of *ṭā'ifas*, including "caliphs, descendants of the Prophet, dignitaries, judges, legists, Ḥadīth-men, Qur'ān-readers, renunciants, righteous men, littérateurs, and poets."⁷³ A century later, Ibn 'Asākir followed the same procedure for Syria in his *Ta'riḫ Dimashq*. A century later again, Yāqūt (681/1282) moved toward comprehensiveness in a different way by merging some of the *ṭā'ifas*. He collected biographies of "grammarians, lexicologists, genealogists, famous Qur'ān readers, chroniclers, historians, well-known stationers and scribes, epistolographers, eponymous calligraphers," and the like. All these he placed together in a work on a super-*ṭā'ifa* called *al-udabā'*, "people of culture."⁷⁴ Only after all this did Ibn Khallikān compose his *Wafayāt al-a'yān*. This work includes prominent Muslims from a wide variety of periods and classes. It organizes the entries alphabetically, a format which "entails mixing up the ancients and the moderns, and mixing up subjects of different categories,"⁷⁵ as the author says. Similarly broad policies of inclusion eventually resulted in such titanically comprehensive works as the *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and the *Wāfi bi'l-wafayāt* of al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362). Both compilers

⁷¹ Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*, 97–174. ⁷² Makdisi, *Humanism*, 1–200.

⁷³ *TB*, I: 227 (= old edn. I: 212–13). ⁷⁴ *MU*, I: 29.

⁷⁵ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, I: 20. On the work, see Fāhndrich, "Man and Men."

apparently tried to include every Muslim of importance (according to a certain definition of importance: the prayer-callers, midwives, and garbage-men did not make it in). In a sense this trend signals a return to the original impulse of Ibn Sa'd and his colleagues, who took all important Muslims as their proper subject. In another sense it anticipates the aspirations to all-inclusiveness of such modern works as the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

History and biography

Authors of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries do not oblige us with discussions of the genre within which their works should be classified. Even so, many works bear titles suggestive of an interest in life-stories rather than events.⁷⁶ These titles include *sīra*, “account of conduct,” *manāqib* “virtues,” *mathālib* “vices,” *maq̄tal*, “death-tale,” *ṭabaqāt*, “generations,” *ta'rikh*, “listing of death-dates,” and most broadly *akhbār al-nās*, “accounts of notable persons.” In later periods, we find *manāqib* and *sīra* used for single-subject biography, and *ṭabaqāt* used for collective biographies arranged in chronological order. The term *ta'rikh*, confusingly, refers to annalistic histories as well as to biographical collections that mention the death-dates of their subjects. Similarly, the term *akhbār* applies to works that narrate historical events, but not by year; and thus also to collections of biographical anecdotes, usually about a single subject.⁷⁷

Perhaps because of these terminological ambiguities, later compilers often write as if history, or at least the history that mattered to them, were simply a collection of biographies.⁷⁸ Thus al-Subkī's famous guidelines for the historian (*adab al-mu'arrikh*) are actually instructions for writing biographies (*tarājim*).⁷⁹ Similarly, al-Ṣafadī's eulogy of *ta'rikh* is actually a description of the benefits of reading biography. But these examples are misleading: in theory and in practice, the historians and critics of the late-classical tradition also evince a clear awareness of the distinction between the two genres. For al-Ṣafadī, the distinction arises from their respective arrangement of material:

Mu'arrikhūn have customarily organized their works either by year, which is more appropriate for history (*ta'rikh*) because events and occurrences thus appear in order; or in alphabetical order, which is more appropriate for biographies (*tarājim*) because the entry on a particular person will bring together in one place events that befell him in various years, either in summary fashion as is more common, or, less usually, in detail.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ In this connection it is noteworthy that the poet Abū 'l-ʿAtāhiya (d. 211/826) describes himself as reading a copybook (*daftar*) containing instructive accounts of historical figures (*Dīwān*, 439: rhyme *zāwiya*). ⁷⁷ For examples see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 131–67.

⁷⁸ Gibb, “Islamic Biographical Literature”; Hamad, “History and Biography.”

⁷⁹ Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 22–25 (quoting his father ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-Kāfī); cited in Sakhāwī, *Iʿlān*, 132, tr. Rosenthal, *History*, 372.

⁸⁰ Ṣafadī, *Wāfi*, 1: 42; see also Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 56.

This definition implies that the two genres overlap in content, and indeed they often do.⁸¹ For example, even a cursory look at al-Suyūṭī's biographies of the caliphs reveals that he took much of his material from annalistic histories. Yet he evidently felt it necessary to extract this material and repackage it as biography. In his introduction, he explains why. Chronicles, he says, jumble together individuals from different occupational groups (*tawā'if*), making it difficult to find out about members of any one group. To provide this information, one must compile their *akhbār* separately. Al-Suyūṭī emphasizes the distinction by dividing his sources into two types: books on history (*al-ḥawādith*, "events") and books on "other material" (*ghayru 'l-ḥawādith*). The first set consists of annalistic histories (e.g., those by al-Dhahabī and Ibn Kathīr). The second set contains biographical compilations (e.g., those by al-Khaṭīb, Ibn ʿAsākir, and Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī) as well as a number of *adab*-works (e.g., al-Mubarrad's *al-Kāmil* and Thaʿlab's *al-Amālī*). For al-Suyūṭī, then, biography performed a function distinct from that of annalistic history. As a genre, moreover, it fell into the same category as literary and philological writing.

What then were the distinct functions of biography as opposed to annalistic history? A convenient illustration comes from the *ṭāʾifa* of caliphs, who seem inextricably positioned between the two. The narrative histories follow their activities in detail, and even the most laconic annals perforce mention them frequently. At the same time, we find biographical entries devoted to them as individuals, listed either in order of reign, or mixed in with entries on other notables.⁸² The caliphs therefore make the ideal test case for any proposal about differences between historical and biographical representation. More broadly, they also pose a challenge to the notion of *ṭāʾifa*-biography. The caliphate is the archetypal instance of heirship to the Prophet, and should lend itself readily to the *ṭāʾifa* model I have outlined. Formally, caliphal biography does conform to the model: one of the earliest extant compilations on caliphs, the *Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ* of Ibn Yazīd, presents them as placeholders in a list that begins with Muḥammad,⁸³ while one of the last ones, al-Suyūṭī's work of the same title, treats them as a *ṭāʾifa* defined by Qurashī descent and the establishment of *de facto* power.⁸⁴ Even so, caliphal biography differs in one important respect from the other traditions surveyed so far. Those who documented the lives of Ḥadīth-scholars, grammarians, and the like were usually themselves members of the group, or at least advocates of its claim to knowledge. However, Ibn Yazīd, al-Suyūṭī, and all the caliphal biographers in between

⁸¹ See further ʿAbbās' remarks on the interplay of the two in the work of Ibn Khallikān (*Wafayāt*, VII: 65–81).

⁸² For the titles of early works on caliphs and the caliphate, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 134–63; Abbot, *Studies*, I:80ff; Muṣṭafā, *Taʾrīkh*, I: 122, 132, 162, 164, 210, 214, 220, 221.

⁸³ Ibn Yazīd (? = Ibn Māja, d. 273/886–87), *Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ*.

⁸⁴ The work thus covers the Rāshidūn, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids down to al-Mutawakkil II (d. 903/1497), omitting "those who claimed the caliphate as secessionists and were unsuccessful, e.g., a good many Alids and a few of the Abbasids." The Fāṭimids he excludes on the grounds that their Qurashī descent was falsified (Suyūṭī, *Taʾrīkh*, 4ff).

were not themselves caliphs, and only rarely display a programmatic intention to shore up the caliphal claim to authority.

As Noth and Conrad have shown, even the earliest treatments of the caliphs can be divided into two types: historical and biographical. Historical treatments mention the caliph whenever he plays a role in the event being described; but the event, not the caliph, is the focus of the narration. Biographical treatments of the caliphs, on the other hand, deal only with them, and consist of programmatic listings of vital statistics and sometimes anecdotes.⁸⁵ A comparable division holds true for later works as well. The histories, like those by al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 284/898) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), proceed in chronological order, often year by year. They record the accession and death of each caliph, and record the events of his reign. Frequently, the caliph plays no role in these events and is therefore absent from the narration. The biographical works, on the other hand, consist of entries on individual caliphs, and tend to adduce *akhbār* in thematic rather than chronological order. Occasionally, historical and biographical presentations do co-exist in a single work. In such cases, however, they appear in separate sections. Al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh*, for example, contains an annalistic section for the narration of events and a separate section for caliphal biography (*sīra*).

Looking more closely at the biographical treatment of a single caliph, ‘Abd Allāh al-Ma’mūn (the subject of chapter 2), we find two works that appear to blur the distinction between annalistic history and *akhbārī* biography. These are the *Kitāb Baghdād* of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893) and the *Murūj al-dhahab* of al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956). By Noth and Conrad’s criteria, nevertheless, both works function as biographies, not histories. In the *Kitāb Baghdād*, al-Ma’mūn is at the center of the action. Frequently, he is the protagonist of the anecdotes. When he is not, he is often mentioned or described by others. Even when the text digresses into *akhbār* about his courtiers, the subjects chosen are precisely those dictated by the progress of the caliph’s career. In the *Murūj*, similarly, the focus often wanders away from al-Ma’mūn, but his reign is the unit of organization that frames all the reports in his entry. Moreover, many of the reports are adduced specifically to comment on historical events mentioned only later, or not at all.

To understand how this sort of treatment differs from that of the annalistic histories, it will be useful to make a more specific comparison. As a model for the annalistic treatment, we may take the historical section of al-Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh*, which contains the most detailed and most commonly epitomized account of al-Ma’mūn’s reign.⁸⁶ The text consists of documents as well as narrative reports. The documents include the Mecca protocol, by which the caliph al-Rashīd divided the rule between his sons al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn. They

⁸⁵ Noth and Conrad, *Historical Tradition*, 37, 76–96, 138–42.

⁸⁶ *TRM*, VI: 527–650 (annals of al-Ma’mūn’s reign; related material appears in the preceding section on al-Amīn), 650–51 (summary *sīra*), 651–66 (anecdotal *sīra*); tr. in Tabari, *War and Reunification*.

also include the correspondence exchanged between the half-brothers as their relationship deteriorated, and the letters by which al-Ma'mūn commanded assent to the doctrine of the created Qur'ān. The narrative reports include an account of the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn; brief notes on the designation and subsequent death of al-Ma'mūn's Alid heir apparent, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā; and a blow-by-blow account of the factional strife in Baghdad before al-Ma'mūn's resumption of authority there. Other reports mention official appointments and provincial insurrections. A particularly long sequence describes the interrogations carried out to determine the allegiance of the scholars to the doctrine of the created Qur'ān. The listing of events for the year 218/833 ends with a report on the caliph's death, followed by the separate *sīra* or biographical section.

Instructive as it may be in some respects, particularly in its citation of documents, the annalistic part of al-Ṭabarī's account is neither a complete biography nor even a complete history. It tells us almost nothing of al-Ma'mūn's life before he became caliph. He appears briefly when he is named as one of his father's heirs, and again only when the civil war breaks out. Even when it treats his years in power, the annalistic account confines itself to the outward course of events. It is preoccupied with dissension, conflict, and war, and gives the impression that al-Ma'mūn's reign, like the reigns of the other caliphs, consisted of one armed struggle after another. Moreover, it eschews commentary, discussion, and presentation of evidence for or against any explicit interpretation of al-Ma'mūn's behavior.⁸⁷ Admittedly the text includes such documents as Ṭāhir's famous "mirror for princes" and the caliph's Inquisition-letters. But we learn almost nothing about the intellectual and literary preoccupations that prompted the composition of these documents. Nor is there any mention of developments in the religious and secular sciences, of art and architecture, or social and religious movements, except when their representatives resort to violence.

The biographical sources, including al-Ṭabarī's own *sīra*-section, provide a very different picture of al-Ma'mūn's reign. For present purposes, however, the best example comes not from al-Ṭabarī but rather from al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*. One day, the caliph al-Qāhir (r. 320–22/932–34) summoned Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-'Abdī, an *akhbārī* who possessed expert knowledge of the "characters and dispositions" (*akhlāq wa-shiyam*) of the Abbasid caliphs. Brandishing a lance, al-Qāhir demanded to hear about his predecessors: "Don't hide anything from me," he ordered, "and don't improve the story, or make it rhyme; and don't leave anything out!" Al-'Abdī agreed to speak only after receiving a promise that the caliph would not harm him. He then related brief biographies of the Abbasids from al-Saffāh to al-Mutawakkil.⁸⁸ The report on al-Ma'mūn runs as follows:

⁸⁷ The only explicit assessment I find concerns the civil war: al-Ṭabarī says that removing al-Ma'mūn from the succession "was not something al-Amīn thought of or resolved to do; in fact, he had intended to be faithful to the agreement and to his brother" (VIII: 374).

⁸⁸ *MDh*, IV: 313–14.

At the beginning of his reign, when he was under the sway of al-Faḍl b. Sahl and others, he made use of astrological predictions and felt compelled to heed their dictates. Following the practice of the ancient Sasanian monarchs such as Ardashīr b. Bābak, he devoted himself to the reading and intense study of ancient books, and attained expertise in understanding them. But when you-know-what happened to al-Faḍl b. Sahl and al-Ma'mūn came to Iraq, he dropped all that and adopted the doctrines of divine transcendence and human free will. He held sessions with theologians and cultivated experts in disputation and speculation, including Abū al-Hudhayl and Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Sayyār al-Nazzām. Some of them he agreed with, and others not. He also made a practice of meeting with religious and literary scholars, whom he brought in from provincial cities and supported by regular stipends. Thus he stimulated interest in speculative reasoning. People learned how to discuss and dispute, and each faction wrote books defending its point of view. He was the most clement, forbearing, able, generous, and freespending of men, and the farthest from frivolity. His viziers and courtiers emulated him and imitated his conduct.⁸⁹

This report illustrates three distinctive functions of biographical as opposed to historical discourse. First, al-ʿAbdī assumes al-Qāhir's familiarity with the events of history: hence the reference to the "you-know what" that happened to the vizier, al-Faḍl (meaning his assassination in Sarakhs).⁹⁰ This presumption of knowledge on the reader's part is typical of biography, whether of caliphs or anyone else. Of course, not all biographical anecdotes require familiarity with the historical context. Witticisms and citations of poetry, in particular, often require only minimal knowledge of the persons involved, and no knowledge of specific historical events. Moreover, when a historical fact is particularly important, a biographer or his source will supply a summary account of the event in question.⁹¹ In general, however, biography tends to assume a knowledge of context, and this knowledge tends to be identical to the content of annalistic history.

Second, biography, operating as it does on the margins of history, serves as a repository for expressions of opinion.⁹² Al-ʿAbdī's report includes an assessment of al-Ma'mūn's character, a history of his intellectual development, and a characterization of philosophical activity during his reign. Such judgements are the special province of biography, which can offer them without worrying about the year in which they should be placed. As we have noted, the biographers of caliphs were not themselves caliphs. Indeed, they were often members of *ṭāʾifas* whose claim to authority contradicted or competed with that of the caliphs. When writing annalistic history, a Ḥadīth-scholar like al-Ṭabarī could include materials that suggest disapproval of a particular policy or a particu-

⁸⁹ Ibid., IV: 318–19; also Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 77ff.

⁹⁰ Similarly, the remark about astrological predictions may be an allusion to al-Ma'mūn's nomination of an Alid heir in expectation of the apocalyptic end of the Abbasid dynasty (as suggested in Madelung, "New Documents"). That al-Ma'mūn sought signs in the heavens is confirmed by the "Risālat al-khamīs" (Ṣafwat, *Jamhara*, 3: 379; Arazī and Elʿad, "Epître," 67: 49). ⁹¹ See, e.g., *TRM*, VIII: 665–66.

⁹² I am indebted here to Wallace-Hadrill, who argues that the Roman biographer Suetonius set out to supplement, not replace, the historical account of Tacitus (*Suetonius*, 8–22).

lar dynast. Yet this judgement remains implicit. In biography, on the other hand, the caliph's critics could praise and condemn him, seek explanations or excuses for his behavior, and even take a position on the legitimacy of his dynastic claims. A similar propensity for interpretation is evident in the biographies of lesser figures as well. Indeed, it is often only by consulting the biographies of the persons named in the annals that the modern reader can discern the texture of lived experience that lay behind the events the historians recount with such dispassionate concision.

Finally, al-Mas'ūdī's report suggests that biographical narratives derived their authority from appearing to be anecdotes in the literal sense, that is, undissemated reports (from the Greek *anekdoton*, "not given out"). Al-Qāhir assumes that al-'Abdī is aware of family secrets that he has prudently kept hidden, even from those most entitled to hear them. He also suspects that al-'Abdī will rhyme, leave things out, and otherwise alter the story to suit his audience. To force him to speak, the caliph must threaten to punish him for silence in the same way that he would punish him for slander. For his part, al-'Abdī must persuade al-Qāhir of the accuracy of his account, which he does by reporting scandals. As he appears to have understood, only when al-Qāhir hears unpleasant things about his predecessors will he believe that he is hearing the real story. By reporting secrets, biography assumes an air of veracity.⁹³ In fact, the "secrets" al-'Abdī relates were hardly secret: they appear in al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj*. Even so, al-'Abdī's report commands interest, and exudes authority, because it offers (or purports to offer) insights into "character and disposition" that were missing from annalistic history.

⁹³ On the connection between secrecy and "true history" in modern Jordan, see Shryock, *Nationalism*, 109–10, 189, 237.