CHAPTER 11

ARABIC BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Biography is one of the most extensive areas of Arabic literature. Its earliest, and characteristic form, is the biographical dictionary, although biographical writing early developed a variety of other forms.

Arabic has no single term for biography. The most widely used terms are sīrah (pl. ʿiṣyār) and tarjama (pl. ʿarājīm). The use of tarjama tends to be restricted to shorter biographical notices, while sīrah usually refers to biographies of substantial length. The term sīrah was first used in literature for the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, but this did not preclude its use for the biographies of less eminent figures. In both modern and medieval Arabic sīrah may also be found in the titles of works which are not strictly biographies at all, such as the traditional story Sīrat ʿAntar and Muhammad al-Maṭwi’s history of the city of al-Qayrawān entitled Sīrat al-Qayrawān. A less common term for biography is taʿrif (lit. “definition”), which makes its appearance in literary usage after the end of the ʿAbbāsid period. In addition there are a number of terms which are used for laudatory biography or hagiography. The most widely used of these is manāqib (virtues, feats, exploits), a word which frequently appears in the titles of biographies which are intended to present a portrait of a morally admirable person, together with a recital of his outstanding actions and achievements. This kind of laudatory biography early took on the character of hagiography.

Concern for the details of the biography of the Prophet led to the collecting by his followers of all available traditions about him and his Companions, and this naturally led on to an interest in the collecting by his followers of all available traditions about him and his Companions, and this naturally led on to an interest in the collecting of material on them being collected and used to assess their reliability, this area being collected and used to assess their reliability, this area

In turn this led to the collection of biographical material on other classes of persons important to the development of Islamic theology and law, and later to the collection of material on other categories of persons, such as philologists, poets and judges, and so on, but even when biography became a distinct genre in Arabic literature it never completely lost the characteristics linking it with the science of Ḥadīth.

The predominant form of biographical writing in Arabic became the biographical dictionary, but, as well as the Sīrah of the Prophet, other full-length biographies of prominent individuals came to be written in the ʿAbbāsid period. Autobiographies were also composed, although these are comparatively few in number.

BIографICAL DICTIONARIES

Greek and Roman biographers wrote collections of biographies of men belonging to the same category, but their scope and method were quite different from later Arabic works, and the genre of the biographical dictionary must be regarded as an original contribution of Islamic literature. It made its appearance some two centuries after the death of the Prophet, and has continued to flourish up to the present day. It developed in close association with the study of Ḥadīth, because it was important to Muslims to know who the transmitters of Ḥadīth were, and the study of the details of their lives would provide evidence of their degrees of trustworthiness. There was, more generally, a desire to gather and record as much as possible about the lives of men and women who had known, or at least met, the Prophet (i.e. al-ṣahabah), and the succeeding generation who had in turn known them (al-Ṭābiʿūn). The personal details regarding such men and women were the materials for the biographical notices brought together into biographical dictionaries.

The numbers of biographical notices included in these works are often very large: Ibn Khallikān in his Wafayāt al-djanān has over 800; Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqālānī, in his al-Durar al-kāminah, has over 5,000, while ʿIzz al-Dīn b. al-Athīr (d. 630/1235) in his Uṣd al-ghābah fi maʿrifat al-ṣahabah (“Lions of the Forest regarding Knowledge of the Companions”) has over 7,000, and some are even larger than this. Most of these biographies are of Muslims, but notices of non-Muslims are to be found in some dictionaries, such as those of persons from classical antiquity which are to be found in the works of ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Qīṭī and Ibn ʿAbī ʿUṣaybiʿah, and notices of Christian,
entries are the subject's date of death, his lineage, his education and travels, and anticipate the features of both

The length of notices varies widely. Some are very brief. 'Iyād b. Mūsa al-Yaḥṣūbī (d. 144/1149) in his Tartīb al-madārik wa-ṭaqrīb al-maṣālik li-ma'rīfāt al-ālam madīhib Mālik ("Regulation of the Perception and Clarification of Procedures for the Knowledge of the Leading Adherents of the School of Mālik") has the following notice on 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sindī: "He was well known among the companions of Saḥnūn. He was an upright man. He passed away in al-Qayrawān, 231 H."

Slightly longer notices may give some brief appreciation of their subject. 'Abd al-Rāhmān b. Muḥammad b. al-Anbārī (d. 777/1181) in his Nawḥat al-ahlībā 'fi ṭabaqāt al-udābā ("Recreation of the Intelligent regarding the Classes of Authors") has the following concerning Abū ʾl-Haytham al-Rāzī:

Abū ʾl-Haytham al-Rāzī was learned in the Arabic language, of attractive speech and a person of great discernment. Abū ʾl-Mufaḍḍal al-Mundarī said: "I was constantly in Abū ʾl-Haytham's company, and I found him an outstanding person, with a retentive memory, a sound knowledge of belles-lettres, a godfearing scholar, a frequent attender at prayers and of sound religious practice; and he was not mean with his learning and literary knowledge." He passed away in 226 H, in the caliphate of al-Muṭaṣim billah.

In contrast to these entries others are of considerable length: Yāqūt in his Ibrāh al-arīb devote twenty-five pages to ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiz, and over fifty to Abū ʾl-ʿAlī al-Maʿarrī (edition of D. S. Margoliouth).

In spite of such longer entries the Arabic biographical dictionaries are, in general, examples of prosopography, rather than biography in the strict sense. Biography seeks to understand the individual and those features of character which make him or her unique; prosopography seeks to record a group of individuals having certain features in common, and these individuals are viewed in relationship to the prevailing characteristics of the group. In their general scope the Arabic biographical dictionaries combine (and anticipate) the features of both Who's Who and works such as the Dictionary of National Biography. The most frequent matters included in the entries are the subject's date of death, his lineage, his education and travels, his appointments, descriptions of his intellectual and moral qualities and interesting anecdotes recorded about him. In addition one often finds philological notes on the form of the subject's name, a brief description of his physical appearance and, in the case of authors, a list of his books.

The earliest method of arrangement of biographical material was according to ʿṭabaqāt.8 The term ʿṭabaqāt originally meant "layer", but developed a technical meaning of "generation" or "class" to denote a group of persons who had played some role in history of significance from a religious, scientific, military, artistic or other point of view. There was no general agreement on the exact length of a generation, and consequently no agreement among biographers on which persons belonged to a particular ʿṭabaqāt. Ibn Saʿd, for example, divides the Companions and Successors into five ʿṭabaqāt, whereas al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) divides them into twelve.9 The ʿṭabaqāt arrangement did however produce a broadly chronological ordering of the material. With the increasing bulk of recorded biographies the ʿṭabaqāt arrangement was to some extent replaced by an alphabetic arrangement, although this never entirely superseded the earlier one.

In regard to the principles of selection on which the Arabic biographical dictionaries are compiled, three main groups may be distinguished: dictionaries which are devoted to persons notable in a particular field, such as Traditionists, rulers, jurists, poets, philosophers or physicians; dictionaries which are devoted to eminent persons resident in a particular city or country; and general dictionaries which do not confine themselves to any particular place or occupation, but take in eminent people from many different walks of life. A later development of the latter group is the centennial dictionary, which treats of different classes of persons who lived in a particular century of the Hijrah.

Some biographical dictionaries may however fall within more than one of the above groups, as for example ʿṬabaqāt fuqaha jībāl al-Yaman ("Classes of the Jurists of the Mountains of the Yemen") by ʿUmar b. ʿAlī al-Jāḍī (d. 586/1190), while within a particular group a dictionary may be limited in its scope by some arbitrary principle of selection, as with al-Muḥammadīn min al-shūr arādī wa-asbāb arumīm ("Poets whose Name was Muḥammad and their Poems") by ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Qiftī.

The above classification is perhaps the most convenient one, but it is not followed by all literary historians; ʿAbd al-Rāhmān ʿUṭbah, for instance, in his survey of the classic works of Arabic literature, Maʿa al-maktabah al-

8 Hafsi, "Le genre ʿṬabaqāt′", 229ff.
9 Ibid., 217. For an example of the continuing use of this term in this sense, see H. Muʿnis, Maʿālim taʿrīkh al-Maghrib, Cairo, 1980, 216, where reference is made to the two Spanish Orientalists "F. Codera and J. Ribera and those in their ʿṭabaqāt′".
Arabyyah, divides the biographical dictionaries into those which are "perpendicular" (i.e. arranged alphabetically), those which are "horizontal" (i.e. arranged according to centuries or tabaqat) and those which are "local".

The biographical dictionaries devoted to particular subjects fall into several broad categories: those concerned with persons who received, preserved and interpreted the message of Islam (such as the Companions of the Prophet, transmitters of Hadith, Qur'ān reciters and exegetes); those representing the mystical or Sūfi tradition in Islam;10 adherents of non-Sunnī sects; jurists and judges; Islamic rulers; literary figures (poets and philologists); scientists, physicians and philosophers.

In the first category is the Kitāb al-Tabaqaat al-kabīr of Muhammad b. Sa‘d (d. 230/845), which has already been noted in this History11 from the point of view of its importance in the development of the study of Tradition; here it is considered from the point of view of its being the earliest extant Arabic biographical dictionary (the earliest biographical dictionary in Arabic was the Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-muḥaddithīn of al-Mu‘āfī b. ‘Imrān al-Mawṣili, who died in 184/800, but no copy is known to have survived). Ibn Sa‘d’s book contains 4,250 biographical notices, 600 of them of women. The purpose of all these biographies was to provide information on people who were important for the transmission of Hadith, and who had contributed to, or taken part in, the development of Islam during its first two centuries. The space devoted to each person is broadly proportional to his or her importance in this latter regard. Thus over eighty pages are devoted to the famous ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, eight pages to the venerated Fāṭimah, daughter of the Prophet, and eight words to the obscure Muḥammad b. Aḥfā (Leiden edition).

Most of the basic features of the Arabic biographical dictionary, as they have continued from the third/ninth century to the fourteenth/twentieth century are already to be found in the work of Ibn Sa‘d. Among these may be noted, as especially characteristic, the interest in the descent of each individual, and the emphasis on the outer events, rather than the mental development, of a person's life. Thus two-thirds of Ibn Sa‘d’s short notice of Tha‘labah b. Ḥaṭīb is devoted to his descent, and to descents from him: Tha‘labah was the son of Ḥaṭīb, the son of ‘Amr, the son of ‘Abayd, the son of Umayyah, the son of Zayd, and his mother was Umamah, the daughter of ‘Amīt, Tha‘labah was the son of Hājib, the son of ‘Amr, the son of ‘Ubayd, the son of Tha‘labah b. Hafib is devoted to his descent, and to descents from him:

In his notice of Rayfah bint al-Harith, Ibn Sa‘d gives, in a few lines, the following information about her: Rayfah was the daughter of al-Ḥaṭīb, the son of Ḥaṭīb, who had contributed to, or taken part in, the development of Islam during its first two centuries. The genre of the biographical dictionary proceeded to extend to other classes of notable people, as in such works as Kitāb Wulat Misr wa-qudatiha ("Book of the Governors and Judges of Egypt") by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. 350/961), and Qudūṭ Qurṭubah ("The Judges of Cordova") by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥaṭīb al-Khuṣainī (d. 371/981).13

Among dictionaries of jurists are the Tabaqaat al-fuqaha‘ al-Shafi‘iyah ("The Classes of Shafi‘ite Jurists") of Muḥammad b. Ahmad al-‘Abbādī (d. 458/1066), the Tabaqāt al-Ḥanabilah ("Classes of the Ḥanbalites") of Abū ‘l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. abi Ya‘lā al-Farrā‘ (d. 526/1133), and the Tarīb al-madarik of al-Yaḥṣūbi (see above).

The Abbasid period saw the compilation of a large number of biographical dictionaries, some of the most important of which may be noted here. Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Ḥamīd al-Mawṣili, who died in 458/1066, the author of Jabaqat al-Hanabilah, produced his Kitāb al-Rajā‘ al-kabīr containing biographies of all those persons known to the author whose names appear in the ismā’ of the Prophetical Hadith.12 In the following century another important work on Hadith criticism was the Kitāb al-Jarh wa-l-ta‘dīl ("Book of Impugning or Confirming", i.e. the evidence of transmitters of Hadith) of Abū Muḥammad Abīl-Ḥaḍīm al-Ḥaḍīmī (d. 527/938).

Works on literary figures include the Yafṣmat al-dahr fi mūḥāsin abīl-‘aṣr fi sh‘i‘ara‘ abīl-‘aṣr ("The Unique Pearl of the Age on the Beauties of the People of the Time regarding the Poets of the Time") of Abīd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Thā‘alībī, a biographical anthology of poets, the dictionary of philologists by Ibn al-‘Anbārī entitled Nuṣrat al-‘alibbā (see above), and

10 For Sūfi biographies see ch. 5, above, 62–3. 11 CHALUP, 278.
the Irshad al-arib ila ma'rifat al-adib ("Guide of the Intelligent towards the Knowledge of the Man of Letters") of Yaqut b. 'Abdullah al-Hasawiy (d. 626/1229).

The first dictionary to deal with physicians and philosophers was the Ta'baqat al-atibba' wa-l-hukamah ("Classes of Physicians and Philosophers") by Abū Dawsūd Sulaymān b. Ḥassān b. Juljul of Cordova (d. 399/1009); this was followed much later by two important works in the same field in the seventh/thirteenth century, the Ikhhār al-'ulamā' bi-akhbār al-hukamah ("Informing the Learned of the Accounts of the Philosophers") by Jamāl al-Dīn abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Yūsuf al-Qiftī (d. 646/1248), and the Uyun al-anba' fi ta'baqat al-atibba' ("Sources of Information regarding the Classes of Physicians") of Muwafq al-Dīn abū 'l-Abbās Aḥmad b. abī Uṣaybī'ah (d. 668/1270). Ibn abī Uṣaybī'ah was a practising physician who had studied in Damascus, and, in writing his Uyun al-anba', he drew on earlier writers such as Ibn Juljul and al-Qiftī, as well as information gathered from his personal acquaintances. Uyun al-anba' contains some 400 biographies organized into fifteen chapters. It abounds in information regarding the teaching and practice of medicine and the various appointments enjoyed by medical men.

Biographical dictionaries were also devoted to more unusual groups than the foregoing: an example is the as yet unpublished work Ta'baqat al-mu'rabirtn ("Classes of Oneirocritics") by al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn al-Khallal (d. 532/1137), in which the author manages to bring together biographical notices of 600 exponents of the science of dream interpretation which, according to Ibn Khaldūn, is one of the sciences of the religious law.14

The urban-centred nature of Islam gave rise to a widespread interest in local history, and this led to the compilation of dictionaries containing life-notices of the worthies of particular cities, such worthies being mainly confined to the ranks of the religious scholars, jurists and poets. One of the earliest works of this type was written in the fifth/eleventh century, the Ta'rīkh Bagdād of Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī (d. 463/1071), known as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādi ("the Preacher of Baghdad"). This multivolume work consists of a topographical and cultural introduction to the city of Baghdad, followed by biographies of scholars who grew up in the city or settled there from elsewhere. This book was the model for most later biographical dictionaries based on a particular city, such as the even larger work of Abū 'l-Qāsim 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan b. 'Asākir (d. 571/1176), entitled Ta'rīkh Dimashq ("History of Damascus").

Examples of this type of work from the Maghrib and Spain are the Ta'baqat 'ulamā' Ifrīqiyyah wa-Tunis ("Classes of the Scholars of Ifriqiyyah and Tunis") by Abū 'l-'Arab Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Tamīn (d. 1333/945), and al-Haṭṭab fī akhbār Gharrātah ("Cognizance of the History of Granada") by Lišān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374). In the latter book Lišān al-Dīn adopts a method of procedure somewhat different from his predecessors, in that, while he uses an alphabetic order for his biographical notices, he puts rulers first, then military commanders and nobles, then judges, Qur'ān readers and ulema, then writers and poets, and so on, concluding with notices of mystics, "in order that the beginning should be monarchy, and the ending musk", as he puts it.15

The first general biographical dictionary which includes people of eminence in every branch of life and from every country after the age of the Companions and the Successors is the Wafayat al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān ("Obituaries of Eminent Men and Notices of the Sons of the Epoch") by Shams al-Dīn abū 'l-Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khallikān (d. 681/1282). It is arranged alphabetically, and includes over 800 biographies. This celebrated work has received high praise from both eastern and western critics. Abū 'l-Maḥāsin Yūsuf b. Taghibirdi (d. 874/1469) in his al-Manbal al-Ṣāfī called Ibn Khallikān's book "the acme of excellence" (ghayat al-ṣānī).16 Sir William Jones asserted: "Est certe copioso copia classicorum, eleganter Plutarcho, Laertio iucundior: et dignus est profecto liber qui in omnes Europae linguas conversus prodeat." Among modern critics Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ghanī Ḥasan refers to Ibn Khallikān's "splendid historical work" (ta'rīkhub al-jalāl),18 and Reynold Alleyne Nicholson characterizes it as follows: "It is composed in simple and elegant language, it is extremely accurate, and it contains an astonishing quantity of miscellaneous historical and literary information, not drily catalogued but conveyed in the most pleasing fashion by anecdotes and excerpts which illustrate every department of Moslem life."19

Nicholson compares the Wafayat al-a'yān with Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson, but a more striking comparison might be drawn between Ibn Khallikān's book and the Brief Lives of John Aubrey (d. 1108/1697). The resemblances between the two works are remarkable: both evidence the same indefatigable zeal in the collection of genealogical facts, personal details and telling anecdotes, and both have the ability to sum up the essentials of a person's character in a few words — although Ibn Khallikān nowhere quite reaches the brevity of Aubrey's notice of Abraham Wheelock, one of the pioneers of Arabic studies in the University of Cambridge: "Abraham Wheelock — simple man."

16 Cited by MacGuckin de Slane, introduction to Ibn Khallikān's Wafayat, 1, xi.
17 Ibid., iv.
18 al-Tarjīm wa-l-siyar, 43. 19 Literary History, 412.
A continuation to Ibn Khallikân’s book, entitled Fawât al-Wâfayât, was written by Muhammed b. Shâkir b. Ahmâd al-Kutubi (d. 764/1363), and this in turn was followed by al-Wâfî bi-l-Wâfayât by Khâlîl b. Aybak al-Safâdi. The series was concluded with the book of Ibn Taghrîbiridî, al-Manhal al-sâfî wa-l-mustawfî ba’d al-Wâfî (see above).

The increasing abundance of biographical material led, after the ‘Abbasid age, to the production of general biographical dictionaries which were devoted to the lives of persons dying in a particular century, the first such centennial dictionary being al-Durar al-kâminah fi ‘ayn al-mî’ab al-thâminah (‘Hidden Pearls on the Notables of the Eighth Century’) by Ahmâd b. ‘Alî b. Hajar al-Asqalânî (d. 852/1449); this work contains over 3,000 biographical notices of persons who lived in the eighth century of the Hijrah.

The Arabic biographical dictionaries are essential for the study of Islamic civilization; they represent in fact the “greatest untapped source of information on the medieval Middle East”. Their potential contribution to narrative history is clear, but perhaps more important is the cumulative value of these thousands of life histories in reconstructing a picture of Islamic medieval society.

During recent years the biographical dictionaries have attracted an increasing scholarly interest for the new light they can be made to throw on the economic, social and demographic history of the lands of Islam, by using the facts they provide on each individual’s family connections, his occupations, his place of residence, his age at death, and so on, to reconstitute families, to trace the effects of epidemics and the fluctuations in the price of grain, population mobility (or lack of it), the average size of families, etc. In all this it is a question of using the biographical dictionaries, quite irrespective of their literary value, as though they were registers of vital data, and in this way they can be made to yield valuable information about the development of Islamic society in a way which would have been impossible to foresee by their authors.

The work of, among others, Richard W. Bulliet, Carl F. Petry and Charles Pellat illustrates the valuable results that can accrue from the analysis of the data of the biographical dictionaries. Studies of this kind are being furthered by the Onomasticon Arabicum, the international project based in Paris which has as its aim the classification and indexing, from the prosopographical and bibliographical literature, of all known persons in medieval Islam.

INDIVIDUAL BIOGRAPHIES

The earliest Arabic works devoted to individual biographies are of the manaqib type, that is they are laudatory or hagiographical, and seek to give prominence to the merits, virtues and remarkable deeds of the individual concerned. These biographies are concerned with scholars and mystics, rulers and war leaders.

An early example of an individual biography other than that of the Prophet is the life of Yâmin al-Dawlah Mahmûd of Ghaznah (reigned 388-421/998-1030), entitled al-Kitâb al-Yamâni, by Abû‘l-Nâsir Muhammed al-‘Uthî (d. 427/1036). The conquests of Mahmûd of Ghaznah were comparable with those of the celebrated commanders in the days of the first Islamic conquests, and al-‘Uthî, who witnessed Mahmûd’s campaigns, glorified the great ghaţî in his book.

Royal biographies were an important part of historical writing in the Ayyubid and early Mamlûk periods. Şâlâh al-Dîn Yusûf al-Ayyûbî (d. 589/1195) was the subject of several such biographies, which were devoted to describing his military campaigns and political triumphs, together with a presentation of his outstanding virtues. Among these biographers was Bahâ’ al-Dîn Yusuf b. Râfî‘ b. Shaddâd (d. 632/1234), Şâlâh al-Dîn’s judge of the army, whose al-Nawâdir al-sultânîyâh wa-l-maḥâsin al-Yusufîyâh chronicles the career of Şâlâh al-Dîn at its height: “In his account of Saladin, written in a simple and straightforward style, he presents Saladin to us as no ordinary chronicle can... Bahâ’ al-Dîn may perhaps be called uncritical, but he was no deluded hero-worshipper.” His admiration is more often expressed by a telling observation of Şâlâh al-Dîn’s habitual actions than by unsubtle panegyric, as in the following comment:

[Şâlâh al-Dîn]... may God have mercy on him... used to give freely in times of hardship just as he did in times of abundance, and the officials in charge of his treasury coffers used to take the precaution of concealing a portion of the money from him so that they should not be caught unprepared by a sudden call on the funds, being aware that if he knew the money was there he would give it away.

22 See above, ch. 1, 60f.
23 Cf. Holt, “Three biographies”.
25 Ibn Shaddâd, al-Strat al-Yammiyyah, Cairo, 1964, 17; for another biography of Şâlâh al-Dîn, see below, ch. 14, 222-3.
Of the Mamlûk sultan al-Ẓâhir Baybars (reigned 638/1240–676/1277) several contemporary or near-contemporary biographies have survived: those by Muḥyî l-Dîn b. ʿAbd al-Ẓâhir (d. 692/1293), Shâfî b. ʿAlî (d. 730/1330) and ʿIzz al-Dîn b. Shaddâd (d. 684/1285).27 ʿIzz al-Dîn’s arrangement of his biographical work al-Rawd al-ẓâhir fi sirat al-malik al-Ẓâhir ("The Brilliant Garden on the Biography of the Victorious King") resembles that of Xenophon’s Agesilaus, in that the outer events of the hero’s life are described first, while his virtues and exemplary traits of character are described in a separate section at the end of the book. In ʿIzz al-Dîn’s work each part of the final section is introduced by a passage in rhymed prose, a form often characteristic of Islamic laudatory biography.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF ARABIC BIOGRAPHY**

"Any biography is inextricably linked with the priorities and assumptions of the age which produced it,"28 the priorities in Islamic culture were theological, legal and literary, whilst among its chief assumptions was that the history of the Islamic community was “essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture... and that their individual contributions [were] worthy of being recorded for future generations”.29

Biographers went to great pains to achieve accuracy in the information they recorded. The problems connected with identifying people in the past arising through names written in an unvowelled script, or through different persons bearing the same name, had whole books devoted to them, such as the Kitâb al-Mustabhîb fi asmâʾ al-rîjâl ("Book of Names of Authorities Resembling Each Other") by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Dhahâbî (d. 748/1348), the author of the biographical work Taʾrikh al-Islâm wa-tabaqât al-mahshâbîr wa-l-âlam ("History of Islam and Classes of Famous and Eminent Persons"). Biographers often went to great lengths to differentiate degrees of certainty, near certainty and doubt. As an example of this Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ghâni Ḥasan mentions the method of Yâqût al-Ḥamâwî in his Ithbâd al-arîb: "He does not state something positively when he is not certain; in such cases he uses phrases such as ‘I think’, ‘I reckon’, and similar expressions indicative of mere supposition. If he is confident of some matter he says: ‘That which I know is’, ‘That with which I am acquainted is’ and similar phrases indicative of certainty.”30

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30 Al-Tarajim wa-l-siyar, 84; where accuracy in numbers is concerned, a cautionary note has however been sounded by L.L. Conrad, "Seven and the Tenth": Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, xxxi, 1988, 42–71.

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**CHARACTERISTICS OF ARABIC BIOGRAPHY**

Here one may note the contrast between the precision achieved in biographies of Muslims with a certain degree of vagueness which characterizes many of the biographies of non-Muslim figures (as in the dictionaries of scientists and physicians), separated as they were from Islamic scholars by barriers of language and remoteness in time and place. This is how al-Qifjî begins his notice of Pythagoras:

Pythagoras: the famous and celebrated Greek sage and philosopher. He lived some time later than Empedocles, and studied wisdom under the disciples of Solomon son of David the Prophet in Egypt, after they had emigrated there from Syria. Before that he had studied geometry under the Egyptians. Then he returned to the land of the Greeks and introduced geometry to them, a subject with which they had not previously been acquainted. He also introduced them to physics and theology. Through his own mental acuteness he worked out the science of harmony and the composition of musical sounds, and he arranged them according to numerical proportions. He claimed that he derived this from the lamp of Prophecy...

This may be contrasted with al-Qifjî’s account of an eminent Spanish surgeon:

ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-Ḥâmân b. ʿAbd al-Malik b. ʿAlî al-Kirmānî al-Qurṭubî al-Andalusî, Abû l-Ḥakam, who was well versed in mathematics and geometry, travelled to the East, where he stayed in Harrân, in the Jazîrah, studying geometry and medicine. Subsequently he returned to Spain and settled in the frontier town of Saragossa. He took with him the epistles known as the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity (Rasâʾîl Ikhwân al-Ṣafa’). It is not known that anyone brought them into Spain before him. His interest was in medicine, in which he had considerable experience and influence. He was famous for his skill in cautery, amputation, dissection, abscission and other operations of the medical art. He died in Saragossa in the year 458 H, having reached the age of ninety years or a little more.

Another aspect of accuracy in Arabic biographical writing is the universal interest in genealogy: a person whose family connections are known can be more readily identified, and his social status appreciated, than one whose family background is unknown or obscure. Nearly every Arab biographer is a genealogist, although some may emphasize a person’s lineage more than others. Ibn Sa’d, as noted above, on occasion gives a man’s agnate and cognate ancestry, together with that of his wives, as well as information regarding his descendants. Writers such as Ibn al-Anbârî may pay rather less attention to pedigree than this, but others may go considerably further: in his notice of Ishaq b. Râhwayh (d. 238/853), a Traditionist remarkable for his powers of memory, Ibn Khallîkân gives twenty-one generations of his descendants; in the case of the centenarian Abû Umâyyah Shurayh b. al-Ḥârîth al-Kindî (d. 87/706), a man who was born before the days of Islam, he gives ten generations of his descendants.

Biographical notices preserve much miscellaneous historical information. From Ibn abî Us̲aybî’ah’s notice of the physician ʿAbî...
Ibrāhīm b. al-Jazzār, for instance, we learn how much money could be made from the practice of medicine in the fourth/tenth century: Ibn al-Jazzār’s biographer records that when he died, over eighty years old, he left 24,000 dinars and twenty-five gīnārīs of medical and other books. In the short biographical notice of the lexicographer Abū Naṣr Ismā‘īl b. Ḥammād al-Jawhari (d. between 393/1003 and 400/1009) provided by Ibn al-Anbārī in his Naṣḥat al-ālibbā’, we have a record of an early attempt at flying: Abū Naṣr climbed up to the roof of the Old Mosque in Naysābūr, tied two panels on himself and announced that he was going to fly. He launched himself into the air, but hurtled to the ground and was killed. Other writers claim that al-Jawhari simply fell from the roof of his own house by accident, but one wonders whether he had been inspired by earlier attempts to fly, such as the allegedly partially successful one in the third/ninth century mentioned in the biography of ‘Abbās b. Firmās (recorded much later, in the eleventh/seventeenth century, by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Maqqari in his Naṣḥ al-ḥab min ḍuḥaṣ al-Andalus al-raṭīb).

As already remarked, one of the characteristics of medieval Arabic biography is its emphasis on the outer events of a person’s life. This concentration on names, dates, education, writings and assessments of orthodoxy and reliability as a witness tended to narrow the biographer’s view of his subject, and to lessen the possibilities for describing the development of personality. Nevertheless this shortcoming must not be overemphasized. Effective characterization of the subjects of biography often emerges from the recorded incidents in which they play a part, and clear pictures of personalities can often be discerned by implication from the anecdotal information which the biographer provides.

From the time of Aristoxenus, as Arnaldo Momigliano points out, anecdotes have been considered the “natural condiment of biography”, and Arabic biography has agreed both with ancient Greek and later western opinion in believing that a good biography is full of good anecdotes. Anecdotes may be used by the Arab biographer to show up the weaknesses as well as the strengths of a person’s character. Ibn Khallikān writes of Rabi‘at al-Ra‘y:

[He was the great jurisconsult of Medina and] in his youth he met a number of the Prophet’s Companions ... Rabi‘ah was a great talker, and he used to say that he who keeps silent should be classed between him who is asleep and him who is dumb. Whilst he was one day speaking at one of his public conferences, an Arab, fresh from the desert, came in and stood for a long time before him, listening to his words; Rabi‘ah, who thought that the stranger was struck by admiration at what he heard, said to him: “O Arab! How do your people define eloquence?” The other answered: “Brevity combined with precision.” “And what is faulty speaking?” “That which thou hast been engaged in all day.” This answer covered Rabi‘ah with confusion.

(De Slane, adapted)

In the Irshād al-arīḥ, a more spirited reaction to a verbal assault is recorded by Yāqūt in his notice of the author Abū ‘l-‘Alā‘ Šā‘id b. al-Ḥasan b. Ḥūṣain (d. in Sicily in 417/1026):

He migrated to Andalusia and became acquainted with al-Manṣūr b. ‘Abī ‘Amīr, who honoured him and treated him with excessive kindness, and eventually appointed him vizier. He composed a number of books for al-Manṣūr, among them a book which he entitled al-Fu‘ṣūq, after the manner of the Kitiab al-Nawādir of Abū ‘Ali al-Qālī. This book suffered a strange accident. When Abū ‘l-‘Alā‘ had completed it he gave it to one of his servants to forward it by hand, but the latter’s foot slipped as he was going over the bridge across the Guadalquivir, and he fell into the river together with the book. Ibn al-‘Arīf, who had had a number of rancorous disputes with Abū ‘l-‘Alā‘, commented on this with the following verse:

The Kitiab al-Fu‘ṣūq has been submerged in the sea; thus is every heavy thing submerged!

Al-Manṣūr and those present laughed at this, which did not please Abū ‘l-‘Alā‘, and he uttered the spontaneous retort: It has returned to its source; pearls are only found at the bottom of the seas!

Other examples of the apt retort are recorded by Ibn Khalilikān of Ibn Mihrān al-A’maš (d. 148/761), a learned and somewhat irascible Traditions of Kufa:

Some students having gone to him one day to learn Traditions, he said to them on coming out of his house: “Were there not in the house a person [meaning his wife] whom I detest more than I do you, I should not have come out to you.” . . . It is said that the Imam Abū Ḫanīfah went to see him during a fit of illness, and having sat by him for a long time, he said, when about to retire: “It seems to me that my presence is irksome to you.” “By Allāh!” replied the other, “you are irksome to me even when you are in your own house.” . . . [the caliph] Hishām b. ʿAbd al-Malik wrote to al-A’maš requiring him to compose a book on the virtues of ‘Uthmān and the crimes of ‘Ali. When al-A’maš had read the letter, he put it into the mouth of a sheep, which ate it up, and he then said to the bearer: “Tell him that I answer it thus.”

(De Slane)

One of the least-noticed areas of biographical writing generally is the relationship between men and animals, a relationship which often throws light on human personality (cf. the very different attitudes of Johnson and Boswell towards Hodge). Arabic biographical literature contains many animal anecdotes, and as in other literatures these show up interesting facets.
of man's ambivalent attitude towards the animal kingdom, now seeing non-
human creatures as something to hunt and herd and eat, now seeing them as
companions and friends. A remarkable incident in the life of the grammar-
ian Abū l-Ḥasan Ṭahir b. Ḥamd b. Bābashāh, recorded by Ibn Khal-
līkān, shows that an animal might provide a moral example to a Muslim:

Being one day on the roof of the mosque at Old Cairo with some other persons,
eating a collation, a cat went over to them and gave them a bit of meat. The animal
took it into its mouth and went off, but soon returned again, on which they threw
another morsel to it. This it carried off also, and it kept going and coming a great
number of times, at each of which it received from them another bit. Struck with
this singularity, and knowing that no single cat could eat all that they had given,
they suspected something extraordinary, and followed the animal. They then saw it
clamber over a wall on the roof and go down into an empty place like an abandoned
room. There they found another cat, but blind, eating of the food which had been
brought to it and set before it by its companion. They were much struck with this,
and Ibn Bābashāh said: "Since God has caused this dumb animal to be served and
fed by another cat, and has not withheld from it its nourishment, how could he let a
human being such as I am perish of hunger?" He immediately broke off all the tis
which bound him to the world; he gave up his place, renounced his salary and shut
himself up in a chamber, where he pursued his studies in the full confidence that
God would provide for him. His friends then took care of him and supported him
till he died.

(De Slane)

Love for a domestic creature might even ensure for it a Muslim funeral. In
his little biography of al-Yaḥṣūr, his father's falcon, Usāmah b. Munqīṭh
tells us that this bird was given its own coffin and that its obsequies were
attended by Qur'ān readers and mukabbirīn.33

Legal biographical anecdotes fall into a class of their own, since here the
interaction of personalities must develop within the artificial constraints of
the juridical situation. Works such as Qudāt Qurtúbah by Muḥammad b. al-
Ḥārīth al-Khusrawī are rich in legal anecdotes, and have much to say
regarding the reactions of different characters faced with the responsibili-
ties of judicial office. The reader is able to compare the reaction of such
jurists as Muṣṭab b. ʿĪmrān, who defied the wrath of ʿAbd al-Rāḥmān b.
Muṣāwiyyah in persisting in his refusal to accept the judgeship of Cordova,
with the unruffled demeanour of such judges as ʿAmr b. ʿAbdullāh b. Layth
al-Qābāh. Two litigants once appeared before the latter, one of them
flourishing a document which he then proceeded to conceal on his person:

ʿAmr told him: "Produce the document." The man refused. ʿAmr insisted sharply
that he should produce it. Eventually the man angrily extracted it from his sleeve
and threw it at the judge, hitting him in the face. ʿAmr's face turned so pale it was
drained of all colour. Everyone thought he was going to give an order concerning
the man, but his self-control asserted itself and he refrained from doing so. He
examined the document, and then said to the litigant: "Is it not preferable to do
things like this?"34

MEDIEVAL ARABIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Although there exists a fair number of medieval autobiographies (classical
Ar. tārīḥ; modern Ar. tarjamah dḥātiyyah) in Arabic, when measured against
other areas of Arabic literature their number appears small. A certain
degree of Greek and Persian influence may be detected in the beginnings of
Arabic autobiography.35 The two bibliographical works of Galen (AD 130–
200 or 201) listing his compositions (written in Greek but known in Latin as
De libris propriis and De ordine librorum suorum ad Eugenium) contain much
autobiographical matter, and these were well known to Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq,36
who himself compiled a list of his own (translated) books. He did this in
response to a request for details about his works, and like Galen he included
information about himself.

The scientist Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan b. al-Haytham (d. c. 430/1039) was
certainly influenced by Galen, as he makes clear in his autobiography which
Ibn abi Uṣayбиbā inserted in ʿUṣūn al-anbāʿ. Ibn al-Haytham remarks on the
similarity of his experience to that of Galen, and in this it is evident that he is
referring to Galen’s De libris propriis. Truth, for Ibn al-Haytham, lay in the
study of Aristotelian philosophy; truth was the supreme aim of scientific
endeavour, and was attainable by only a few of mankind, a view to be found
in Galen’s De pulsibus dignoscendis.

A Persian work composed in the time of Khusraw Anūshirvān also had
some influence on Arabic autobiography. This work was the pessimistic
personal record which the physician Būrzhō attached to his Pahlavi
translation of the Sanskrit Pancabhatantra, and which Ibn al-Muqaffāʾ included
in his Arabic translation of the same work, the celebrated book Katilah
wa-Dimnah.37

It is true of Arabic autobiography, as of Arabic biography, that the outer
events of the subject’s life stand in the foreground; there is less concern with
the personality than with the external circumstances in which the person
finds himself and his interaction with them, and many a surviving Arabic
autobiography is little more than an extended curriculum vitae.

A number of autobiographies have been preserved in the biographical
dictionaries, the compilers having obtained such personal records from

33 Memos of an Arab-Syrian Gentleman (trans. by P.K. Hitti of Kittāb al-ʾībah), Beirut, 1964, 232–3 (for
al-Yaḥṣūr's biography); 233–6 (for the funeral).
34 Qudāt Qurtúbah, Beirut, 1982, 130–1.
36 Ibid., 5.
37 Ibid., 10, and see also CHAL/ABL, 50–2.
various sources and inserted them in their own work in the form in which they found them. Thus in the 'Uyūn al-anbū' of Ibn abi 'Uṣaybi'ah we find autobiographies of Abū 'Ali al-Ḥasan b. al-Haytham, as already mentioned, and also of 'Abd al-Lāṭīf al-Baghḍādī (d. 629/1231) and Ibn Sinā. In Yāqūt’s Iṣrāḥ al-ṣarīf there are also a number of autobiographies, including the short summary of his life and career by ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-Dānī (d. 444/1053), and the longer autobiographical account of a philologist who was descended from the caliph al-Ma‘mūn, ʿAbd b. ‘Ali b. Ma‘mūn (d. 386/1190). Not content with his caliphal lineage, ʿAbd traces his descent from Adam. Yāqūt states that he obtained this autobiographical notice from the subject’s son. It records the main outlines of the career of ʿAbd b. ‘Ali, including a credible episode in which, in order to establish his claim to the post of qādī of Dujayl, ʿAbd wrote a letter emphasizing his own qualifications and denouncing as stupid and immature his own nephew, who had claims to the same post.

Occasionally authors add their own autobiography to one of their own books, either as a preface or as an insertion within the book. Thus Zāhir al-Dīn abū ‘l-Ḥasan ʿAbī b. al-Qāsim Zayd b. Funduq al-Baghḍāqī (d. 505/1119) included his autobiographical notice in his work Māshārīb al-TaJārīb. This was later included by Yāqūt in his Iṣrāḥ al-ṣarīf, and begins with the subject’s lineage, after which al-Baghḍāqī continues:

I was born on Saturday, the 27th Sha‘bān, 499, in the city of Sabzawār in the district of Bayhaq, a town built by Sāsān b. Sāsān b. Bābak b. Sāsān. My father sent me to the elementary school. Then I travelled to Shashtamadh, one of the towns of that region where my father had estates. As a boy I learned by heart the [here there follows a list of books memorized]. In the course of the year 514 I came to the school of Abū Ja‘far al-Muqri’, imam of the Old Mosque in Naysābūr...

Some years later he was troubled by gaps in his knowledge of philosophy, and dreamed that he should betake himself to Qūṭ al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Marwāzī al-Naṣīrī. This he did, and studied under this scholar for two years, “and I expended the dinars and dirhams I possessed, and with this I sought the way of salvation for my own soul. Then I found that the way of salvation consists in cleaving to the fear of God, and the fulfilment of what he has ordained... and the service of God for his own sake alone, and in taking his Apostle as a model.”

Abū Ḥaḍīd al-Ghazālī made a close study of the Wasiyā of al-Muḥāsibī, and in his autobiographical work al-Munqidh min al-dalālī he uses similar phrases to those of al-Muḥāsibī in describing some of his own spiritual difficulties and experiences. An example of a didactic apologia pro vita sua is the short work Kitāb al-Sīrah al-falsafiyah (“Book of the Philosophic Life”) of Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā‘ al-Rāzī. Some unnamed persons had reproached al-Rāzī with not living up to the philosophical conduct of his mentor Socrates. He commented on this:

We ourselves fall far short of him... and readily confess our failure perfectly to practise the just life, to suppress passion, and to be in love with and eager for...

38 Cf. below, ch. 12, 231, where autobiographical writings by al-Malik al-Nāṣir Dāwūd and Sa‘īd al-Dīn Juwashī are also mentioned.

39 Shihāb al-Dīn abū ‘l-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Raḥmān abū Shāmah (d. 665/1268) included an autobiographical notice in his Kitāb Dhayl al-Rawdatayn (“Book of the Supplement to ‘The Two Gardens’”) under the year of his birth; this autobiography is the first example in Arabic of one written in the third person.

40 Samaw‘al b. Yahyā al-Maghribī (d. 570/1174), a Jew who was converted to Islam, included an autobiographical memoir in his polemical work written against Judaism, the Iḥām al-Yaḥūd.

41 Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb added his autobiography to al-Iḥām fi taʾrīkh Gharbāt (see above), and Ibn Khaldūn included an autobiography in his Kitāb al-Iḥām.

42 Medieval Arabic autobiographies written as independent works include several of a confessional type, which seek to record the writer’s spiritual struggles, the process of conversion and the deepening of religious faith. An early example is the account of his spiritual experiences given by Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) in his Kitāb al-Wasiyā or Naṣīrī ‘diniyyah:

I began by casting passion out of my heart, and I considered the schisms in the community... and I was careful not to come to a hasty conclusion without proof, and thus I sought the way of salvation for my own soul. Then I found that the way of salvation consists in cleaving to the fear of God, and the fulfilment of what he has ordained... and the service of God for his own sake alone, and in taking his Apostle as a model.

43 An Early Mystic of Baghdad; see below, ch. 424.

44 See also below, ch. 21, 570–1.
knowledge... and if we confess ourselves his inferior we do not thereby demean ourselves; for that is the plain truth, and it is always nobler and more honourable to acknowledge the truth.\textsuperscript{45}

Travel literature inevitably has a strong autobiographical element, and this applies to the books of celebrated medieval travellers such as the Riḥlat al-Kinānī of Muḥammad b. Jubayr al-Kinānī (d. 614/1217) and the Tuhfa al-nuṣṣār fi gharā'ib al-amār wa-ṣafā'ib al-asfār of Muḥammad b. 'Abdullāh b. Bajūṭah.\textsuperscript{46}

The most remarkable autobiographical work in medieval Arabic literature is generally allowed to be the Kitāb al-I'tibār ("Book of Learning by Example") by Abū ʿl-Muẓaffar Usāmah b. Murshid b. Munqidh (d. 584/1190). Usāmah's life was centred on his ancestral castle of Shayzar on the river Orontes, which he was obliged to defend against both the Assassins and the Crusaders, and his autobiography was written at the end of a long life when he was nearly ninety. The author intended his book to present a series of exempla, as is indicated by his title, and he reiterates time and again that whatever vicissitudes to which a man's life is subject, whatever plans he makes, whatever the height of his hope or the depth of his despair, all is predestined and predetermined. This message provides a connecting thread for a book which is otherwise loosely organized, and where reminiscence is mixed with reflections and anecdotes reported by others. Usāmah's main occupations throughout his life were intermittent war and incessant hunting - in this he was perhaps not so very different from the European nobility of the same period - and his pages are frequently spattered with bloodshed - beasts, birds, Franks and francolins, all are to be hunted down and slain.

There was, however, a more attractive side to Usāmah, who apart from venery was devoted to poetry and the delights of literature. In relating how his family en route from Egypt to Syria had been robbed of their money and valuables and Usāmah's library, he recalls:

The safety of my children, my brother's children and our harem made the loss of money which we suffered a comparatively easy matter to endure - with the exception of the books, which were four thousand volumes, all of the most valuable kind. Their loss has left a heartsore that will stay with me to the last day of my life.\textsuperscript{47}

Usāmah greatly admired his father, Majd al-Dīn abū Salamah Murshid, who renounced the lordship of Shayzar in favour of a younger brother, and in the course of incidental references Usāmah gives a memorable biographical sketch of his father's extraordinary character. Majd al-Dīn spent his days in killing animals in innumerable hunting expeditions, or in fasting, and in the evenings when it was too dark to hunt, he copied out the Qur'ān, of which he transcribed forty-six complete copies. Yet the patience required by this exacting task did not extend to other spheres of his life. He was a man of foul temper who could not brook tardiness in his servants. Usāmah describes how once when his father's groom was slow in bringing his father his horse, Majd al-Dīn hit out at the unfortunate servant with his sword, which was still in its scabbard:

The sword cut through the outfit... which the groom had on, and then cut through the bone of his elbow. The whole forearm fell off. After this he (may God's mercy rest upon his soul) used to support him, and his children after him, because of that blow.\textsuperscript{48}

Usāmah records many extraordinary events, not only from his own experiences, but also from those of his contemporaries. Among these is his account of the astonishing escape from a dungeon in Cairo of Riḍwān b. al-Walakhshi, who dug a tunnel fourteen cubits long armed only with an iron nail.

Biography not only attained a prominent position in Islamic historiography as a whole, but eventually became so extensive that Arabic biographical literature exceeds that of any other culture in the ancient and medieval periods. Moreover in a number of ways, as in the cases of the prosopographical reference work and the biographical dictionary, it anticipated by many centuries similar developments in western biography.

\textsuperscript{46} See below, ch. 17, 323-4.
\textsuperscript{47} Arab-Syrian Gentleman, 61.